

DAMN THE SOURCE

by

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A decalogue of short stories

fit for the 21st century

Edited by Samuel Taradash

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Ten stories, a dozen Poles, labourers, aristocrats, dealers, all living in the UK. One last day before Christmas. Each life somehow changed by a blade. A surgeon's scalpel. An artist's knife. An antique bayonet. Each tale based on a true story, each one revealing something about the experience of modern exile.

The final, 11th text is a non-fiction autobiography I wrote for the Penguin Decibel Prize in 20047 – it was published by Penguin that same year.

MJ Kazmierski

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THE ANIMAL QUIXOTE

Serge gave me the knife a whole month before Christmas. Typical of him, the old dandy. Dropping pointless gifts any time of year. Said it was once habit, that he used to do it for all his trophy fucks, especially the older he got and the rarer they became. But with me it had turned into a deeper kind of generosity. I see it in his eyes every time he hands me an unexpected gift, that joy, and I worry for him. From seeing it in the mirror once, I know what it can do, and I worry. I guess the age difference between us is an issue, and hate the Hampstead queen crew he fits into so well, the giddy shrieks and fumbles I'm greeted with every time we enter his scene. But I think he is starting to realise I am not who he thought I was going to be when he had me at first, and it is that which is starting to trouble everything.

Still, this gift was a particularly strange surprise. Wrapped in his usual, delicate way, metallic blue paper, matching ribbon, a hand-made label. As always, a shame to actually tear the thing open. But then, inside, a heavy-weave canvas pouch; black, mean looking. Inside that, a gun-metal grey handle, small enough to hide in my clenched fist.

I held it there for a moment, along with my embarrassment. What to say? I'd never seen a knife like it, a file-pattern grip carved into the sides, cold and infinitely tough. I pushed the rubber button set in a recess of the grip. The blade swung out, locking in place. I folded it shut, pressed the button once more. Like some razor-minded genie, the blade reappeared instantly, the blink of an eye too slow to follow its trajectory, trying to launch itself from my hand.

I sliced through the torn wrapping, the sigh of parting paper clearly audible in the now curious silence of our airy Hampstead flat. Still didn't know what to say, suddenly feeling like a kid who'd been given a grown-up toy by mistake.

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

Later, over a pint at the Swan, Asbo Andy asked if I liked the gift. His smile said he had something to do with it, and if he had something to do with it the knife was dodgy. Like Serge, Asbo was another product of posh home and public schooling. However, unlike Serge, who made his London fortunes teaching French in a school across the Heath, Andy had strayed. Along with his little crew of toff dropouts, he sidelined in B-class and fenced goods brought in off the Continent. Silly stuff, like antique watches, designer furniture and now toy-sized weapons.

Didn't quite know what to say to him either. I don't do adventure sports. Commute through central London on a push-bike. Smoke a little. That's all the danger I like to invite on myself these days.

But you try telling them that. They love the scars on my arms, from the days I ran gang gauntlets on my post-communist estate in Torun. Slashing the top of the forearm like a loaf of freshly baked bread was a sign of strength, not dumb weakness. But then, in that hopeless little medieval town, I found Stefan and we moved to the capital to study philosophy and kiss in the right bars without fear of being spotted by mates and exposed to families or worse. Warsaw was nothing like London, no Soho, certainly no Hampstead there, but it was good while it lasted. Good until Stefan disappeared one night too many and I dropped out of my masters and let myself get dragged into the army. Draft as self-harm. I knew it might be the death of me. Trying to make it as a uniformed cocksucker in the most conservative Catholic country in Europe.

The queenie crew here like that bit of my past most of all. My crew cut. Muscles toned running gun packs, not treadmills. And especially all the things I don't tell them about, the things they read into my scars, my silences, things always best left for their little imaginations to fill all by themselves. Which is fine, most of the time. Fine when most of the tabloids mentioning us over

here the past few years talked about Czech doctors cleaning toilets and Polish academics pulling pints. Smart losers, just like me. Managing a rainbow-friendly pub in Victoria for pricks too cheap to hire door staff, every day I'm called on to pre-empt flare ups or pick broken glass from between pissed punters. A little hardcore rep goes a long way in this walk of life, even without a switch-blade in a belt-loop pouch.

I never did like the idea of being a typical pity-me intellectual tale, a Slav smart ass slumming it on the mean streets of the calmest capital in the world. Though now I do. Now that the tide is turning. Europe dumbing itself down. Tabloids starting to attack again. Calling us scroungers, thieves, asylum seekers again. Which, again, is fine. Who gives a fuck? Never thought of myself as Polish until I came here and found everybody else thought of me that way. But when it comes home, this sort of perception, you worry.

The knife, Serge admitted, was a kind of joke. At my expense. I sharpen blades every time I use them, even when cooking at home, like any half-decent chef. And it turns my little Parisian intellectual on too, I noticed. But then a while ago he showed me an article in some local rag, Sussex's chief of police publicly challenging Polish males recently moved onto her patch to stop carrying knives in the streets. "As is the custom back home...", she was quoted as saying. Serge thought it was funny. I thought it was racist. He said relax. I did, but now the gift had me riled again. I know he did it to send up a stereotype, and that the commissioner was told to publicly apologise some days later, but every time I looked at the closed knife, I thought its curved handle was grinning at me. Amused at our ignorance about ourselves.

There was something niggling about it, a hint of Tolkien's ring of power. A predatory, animal sense made me think of it as a living thing. Every few days or so, it came out and sat in the palm of my hand, when I was still and musing and didn't feel like a cigarette.

Although the blade was about an inch too long to be carried legally in the street, I took it to work one day. Didn't want Serge to find it just lying around our rented home, hurting his little feelings. I always seemed to find some use for it, opening letters, stripping wire, picking my nails. It made an impression, pressing that button, on me as well as others. Something snapped in mid-air, some tension which hadn't been there a second before, then crackling, tickling me pink.

I ended up taking it to the model train and weapons shop I pass on my way to work each day. The dried-out fella behind the counter wanted to know where I'd got it from. Something in his stare made me tell the silly-sounding truth. He looked both unimpressed and disgusted, asked how much I wanted for it. No, I said, it really was a gift. All I wanted to know was where I could buy another. For a friend. He shrugged, told me it was Belgian special forces issue, a self-sharpening blade, matt-grey to stop it reflecting light on night-time missions, then fell silent again, staring me out, as if I wasn't worthy of the tool or full disclosure about its nature.

Someone else came in, in need of a crossbow, the shopkeeper happy to forget all about me. I looked around, through display cases full of blades of every shape and size, everything from key-ring penknives to knuckleduster machetes. Nothing quite like my little weapon, though. Not there or in the pile of specialist magazines on the counter, titles on guns, knives, every kind of killing utensil. I flicked through shiny, glamorous layouts, the faces of dead heroes, Wayne, McQueen, Heston, advertising new brands.

Later that same night, I recounted for Serge what the man in the shop had told me, embellishing the story with phrases from the hobby mags. Special ops. Single purpose. Silent kills. He finished washing up without comment, then, passing me in the kitchen door, said with a smile "You can cut my undies off in bed later."

Somehow, he didn't look too happy when I sliced his underpants in half as he undressed for

sleep. From the back, the blade down between the buttocks, sharp edge towards me, one old pair of weekday boxers now consigned to history. He said nothing, but I could see it had given him a humourless fright. A cool question formed itself between us as he stood naked before me, afraid to look up. Nudging him down to our bed, feeling no resistance, was mildly arousing. At least for me, standing there, fully clothed, staring as his slight flesh waited for my next move. Comic book pornography. Cowboy erotica.

Afterwards, sweat cooling slowly under the duvet, he asked again about some of the scars on my hands and arms. Again, I said fuck all. Though we've been together a year now, it crops up between us sometimes, this mystery of unshared pasts. Since I moved to London, since our meeting and settling down, I've learnt pretty much everything there is to know about his upbringing. Gotten high with his straight brother. Played tennis with his father, when he visited a few months ago. But going the other way, there are gaps, lacunae. I've told him a little about the vast Torun housing estate of my childhood. The years of fighting off my older brother and his gang of local goons. Not sure, even now, whether he didn't know about me, or if he did, does, and is just waiting for the right moment to use it against me. Then the compulsory draft I gave into and the eventual move to London, the wild months which followed before we met and everything calmed, for the first time ever. It's a romantic story of cross-continental communion. Of the power of things that don't always need mapping between lovers. Regardless of what chiefs of police might say.

Then he asked about the shop. About the toy trains. Started telling me about the sets his father had built when he was little. How he dreamt of having an attic filled with mock-up villages and hills and kilometres of miniature train track running all round it. Looking at the lines cutting across my arms, I asked whether he thought the knife had actually seen real action, had killed before being smuggled out and sold on. He lifted his head, bit gently down on my arm, letting me know he didn't think I was being even remotely funny.

The knife did nothing more for our sex life after that. Don't remember its subject ever coming up again. But I liked having it close to me, sleeping shut in the pocket of my pressed work trousers. It felt loaded, the sprung scalpel not quite at rest in its housing. Under constant pressure.

I used it every day, even when something less extreme would have done, to cut open a parcel or peel a label off of something. I know knives lose their keenness if left unused for long. You can't leave a good blade dormant without it going soft. Without inviting doubt.

Then, in the last few shopping days before Xmas, during a pre-booked function at the pub, the knife finally spoke out loud.

Overdue invoices meant I was too busy to sort food coming out cold and late to a table bossed about by a muppet getting louder and louder with each seasonal pint, his voice bubbling up through the floorboards of my office. I went downstairs and watched from a distance. Out of it luvvies, high on something other than designer lager, squealing swearwords loaded with something else I did not like. Sure, the young kid running tables and clearing glasses did have a big ass, but calling him on it made me wince, then step in.

The loudest bastard, my height and strength, but twice my age, turned. Furiously drunk and outraged about this place, the service, and then me. Once he heard the twang of Polska in my voice, he definitely wouldn't leave it there. Maybe one of "us" had fucked him over in some club. Could even have been me those first few dark months of London landings. But now he was Customer and I was cunt. Literally spitting in my face, he howled, blaming the world's worst on me, heat and pissed breath violating my space.

Mindful of the CCTV, I stepped forward and said something meant for his boiling blue eyes only. Then he hit me. In the ribs, hard. Braced for a punch in the face or a head butt, off balance for the low blow, I fell back and landed on my arse. Right where the knife was resting in my back

pocket. Winded, I waited a few seconds, then shouted for Dan the barman to call the law. I knew it would take between four and eight minutes. Depending on how busy they were elsewhere. It was enough, I felt. To smile. Take off my tie. Invite bad boy into my beer garden.

But the knife was smiling too. Not with, but at me, and through the red mist I knew, I knew it was laughing, so I somehow stayed sitting there, like a child on the ground, an old pain exploding the space my eyes and nose. I thought about the weapon. And what would happen if I moved. Thought about all the knives I had ever held. And the books, all lost now, as he stood over me screaming, daring me to get up. Thought of the joy of action, followed by arrest and a full search and then the awful aftermath.

Don't know how long I stayed sitting there, musing. Red mist falling does that to time, twisting it into strange shapes. Long enough for nasty fuck there to find a glass of lager and toss it all over me. Just as the doors behind me banged open and officers swarmed around us, lifting me off the floor and shoving the thugs out of harm's way.

Back in my office, scanning through security camera footage on the computer, I shared a post-incident fag with an ageing copper from Victoria nick. Totally disinterested in the video, he mentioned Scotland Yard had recently discovered Jack the Ripper too had been a Pole. Born Aaron Kosminski, date of birth unknown, deceased 1888. The date stuck in my mind. Lucky or not? Three sixes, definitely not. Three sevens, sure enough. But all the eights?

As he was talking, I took the knife out of my pocket and the train set I had bought Serge out of my cycling bag and tried to get on wrapping. The knife cut through bits of sellotape and cheap Santa wrapping paper, but before I could finish, the officer picked up the hand-painted, limited edition toy locomotive and started cooing over it like a little boy.

Disgusted by the hollow cheeks shaking with excitement, the Adam's apple bouncing up and down between the tendons in his grey neck, I looked down at the knife lying on the desk between us and frowned. How long had it been since I had last discussed with Serge the opening of my own rainbow bar in Warsaw? And, having made a success of that, opening another in Torun, maybe right across from my brother's house? About a chain of such pubs all over the most Catholic country in Europe? How long since he had laughed at my idea of women-only nights, when both the customers and the staff would be safe from each other? Or ridiculed me running self-defence classes for young gay kids, based on techniques I had picked up in the army, the pink worms turning?

Eyes aglow with recollections of Christmases past, the copper put the train set down, extinguished his cigarette and waved me a playful goodbye. Already putting this case to some dead-end bed.

I lit another, nodding as he left, spitting smoke at the door as it shut behind him. A scene from the earlier clash was paused on my computer screen, the knife lying open on my desk. I flicked the blade with my fingertip, watched it spin on its axis, the ends of the half-moon handle curved towards me like the corners of a frowning mouth. I picked up the train set and the knife and continued trying to wrap it in tiny little Santas. Folding neat corners. Making it all pretty and tidy and nice. But somehow the sellotape kept sticking in all the wrong places, the frail wrapping not folding right. My hands still shaking from the fight. My heart stammering. I threw the knife down, tore the paper off the train set and lit up just as soon as the last cigarette was done. The ends of the half-moon handle now pointing upwards, just resting there until I started, smoke seeping through clenched teeth, smiling back.

ELVIS AND THE THIRD SEA

“My name is Zofia, but you can call me Zosia. This is soft name, in my language. But if I say something stupid, say Zocha. That is what I am when make people mad. Zocha is for me the usual.

Yes, I am sorry. I will be fine for a minute. Thank you for seeing me. Doctor say you are very good. Good to be so quick, and last day before Christmas too. She say you are busy always, but yes, I need talk.

No. Never before... you want I show you. Don't know what I do next. I keep skin under clothes, not touch the blood, but I can't stop. Now, hiding is not so easy at work, is more and more and in every day is more and more...

Sorry, I speak fast. No, I know myself. I am sorry. Polish people very like talking. But after the accident and all other things, I need speak. Before it, before I...

Yes, okay, I am thirty two, here in England only six years now.

No, I am never sick. Not like this. Not crazy... but you have my history from doctor? Okay. So, two year anti-depressant. And tablet for sleep. Is enough. For now.

Yes, mother, four years old boy. Karol. He is born here, but I am from Leba, which is small village in Pomerania, meaning “besides the sea”, just like where I live now, Newhaven, by cliffs, Seven Sisters, you know place. I choose move from Poland to the sea again, in England. It is for me... is in me, you understand?

My father, yes, butcher. This is when communism, I was born, and in shops is empty. Ration cards, but even with this nothing for people to buy. Not so long ago. Everything sent to Soviet Union, so in our shops nothing. Only flour and vinegar, which is why I still not like things here. Your chips and your fish and your boiled egg in it. But my father, from butcher family, he always have meat to sell. Know right people. Pay right people. Like little criminal.

No, our family is always safe. No one ever touch us. I have the jeans, Sindy doll, you know, all things was not in the shops. Trainer with velcro. Nice wool sweater. Always imported, from black market. My father have dollars. Corrupt. But I never good with all this. Other girls, in school, jealous. I understand then... about people.

Yes, I always like more reading, book, encyclopedia, and going out to the nature. I do a lot of time alone. Where I grow up first, little place, was very close to beach, but we have cliffs there too, not white, chalk, but of sand. Many square kilometres. Is like desert, in centre of Europe. No one know here. You not expect this, a white desert, by the sea in Europe, but I bring you pictures next time.

Yes, this I do like. And trees are everywhere. Oak. Birch. Alder. And the animal. You English like watching birds. Black swan and black stork. Mute and whooping swan. Teal. Mallard. Honey buzzard. Sparrow hawk. Yes. This I really like. The name. I make this translation for my friends in English college. But I also like the Latin. Anas penelope. Anas crecca. Mergus serrator. They sound better. Less like people give the name. More like a god.

Really wild, all around. But then we move to town. When my father have too much money. Leba. Ugly there. I work in father shop, with meat, and people. We make more dollars then. I meet there my husband, Antek. He drive delivery truck. A really good man, but we marry later. Much later.

I don't know why. Everyone in Leba, school, then make marriage and babies. But... not me. I do not want. Maybe not yet. Antek not happy, but he accept. I think. He is like little boy, to look at. Always sit at home, play computer game, or with friends in pub. But good man. Always bring me flowers Sunday. Or did... Yes, so we go like this for maybe ten years, and then I am twenty seven already. Crazy the speed of time, and it is decade of our anniversary. Then maybe my pain start.

Maybe before. This life is no good. Six every morning, every day get up, take meat from freezer, have delivery, open shop, cut meat, saw bones, throw innards out. Wear same things. Think same things. My friends have all baby and watch TV and maybe go little crazy when nobody know. Drinking. Smoking joint. So I say to Antek we will have baby, but not there. Not Poland. Not for child. Antek do not mind. Always want to come Great Britain. He like the English clothes. Fred Perry. Ben Sherman. And the other things, you know, Arsenal. Sting. Mr Bean.

Yes. I find job in the café in Seaford. For me, work is no problem then. Antek, no. He is without work a long time. Not good to drive here, on the left. But he has no different knowledge. And no English. So this is a problem. Which he drink. Many Polish men like him here. In Seaford. Newhaven. Lewes. They meet, they drink, they fight. But my Antek is little. Many times I have to pick him up from pub or beating. So I make the money and we make the baby. I think maybe child make him grow into man more, take responsibility. But this is not happening. Not like I think. Not let me stay at home, more him. He love the boy, really love the boy, but make no difference to himself.

I feel in between. Because now, maybe we have everything in Poland, the new cars and the full shops and the freedom, but we still have Germany to left and Russia to right. So we can never be sure. No one speak our language, no one visit. Only stag boys. People think we maybe Siberia, with white bear in streets, or communism is still, you know, concrete factory in everything. No one know Chopin, Copernicus, Conrad, that they is Polish. In my school, we learn about world, even this is back in communism, teachers open our mind. You cannot go abroad, no passports, but we travel in books, in what we think. But in Karol school today, is so different. No new language for them, no big maps, no names in his memory. No bird or tree or people. I try teach him, home, but all he want is fight on the Playstation, like his father and his friends.

Yes, I make some in the college I go to learn English. The teacher is nice. And some students. Colombia. Sri Lanka. Lithuania. Not so many Polish. I like this mix. Because I do not feel at home here really. This town. This thing in England you have to put your old people to the seaside, in bungalow, to retire, to watch the sea come in to take them in the end. It is grey. The sky is not moving. No winds from Siberia, from Arctic. And no sand. Only stones on the beach. No forest. No wild animal. Only bungalow and old people and concrete under the cliff to stop it all from the end.

Karol is born two year after we come here. Karol is boys name in Poland, meaning like Charles in English. We name him after your Prince, you know, I think this is good name. But sometimes children laugh, because Carol, you know, is here for the girls. And he is a lot like Antek. Small boy. Quiet. I think he is happy. Or maybe was, before accident.

This is last year. I am in work. And Antek he walk with Karol. Where the big ferry sail in. You know the Dieppe ship, with the big tail, with the water behind, on the horizon. You see this before? Beautiful. Karol like this so much. See it from our cliff. And every day they race ship from cliff into port. Running. Man and boy. Every day is okay. And then I am at work and the phone rings. And Elvis, he answer.

Elvis, yes. He work with me there, in Bluebell. From Sri Lanka. His name is not Elvis, but he call himself this, to sound like he is from Europe. And he look a lot like young Elvis. Dark, dark hair. Dark skin. Beautiful smile. And voice. Like Elvis with his Hawaii movie, always singing. Soft, Sri Lanka songs. He work for me. In kitchen. I get him this job, when we meet in college. Yes, and the phone is ringing and he answer it and maybe he does not understand everything because he comes out of kitchen and is so strange. And he tell me my son is in accident. In the water. I do not remember if this was good grammar or not, but his face tell me it is bad. Maybe I panic. Maybe this is English problem. But I think I am in hell. I am in hell because I love and it kills. I don't know why.

It is... it is because of how I feel. When I hear. You see, Elvis is also the problem. But before. We like each other. He is special. So smiling. So quiet. Nice. His skin. Maybe the first time

ever I want this. I feel like this. And this is bad. He has his family in Sri Lanka. Woman. Baby. He come to England to make money. And escape too, like me. But like I, he is not happy. He tell me about his home. I see his skin every day. This is so strange. So clean and soft, even if he so younger than me. Antek is always angry. And Karol always sad. But Elvis, he is always smiling. And with him every day I am smiling too. Not talking much. Quiet a lot. This, like this, I never feel before. In the café kitchen. Smoking sometimes outside. Then sometimes go for walk after work. Along beach. In other cafe, pub maybe. The wind taking all the bad smells from our clothes. You feel the summer and the autumn in the breath. The seagulls sing. And without English too you can talk. Like children, say a lot. Or maybe just the correct thing. I say to him I am old and he just smile at me and I feel not so. I say to him I am dead and he look at me. And I feel... And then I am going to the hospital and I am thinking of everything. And feeling so very very bad. So ugly. Because I am there with Elvis and we are alone and I... He take my hand. In back of cab. Take my hand and the whole of me shake. Like blow up. He hold my hand, then kiss it. And when he kiss it, I know. I look at him and he is so sad and also so... You know, there in me. His eyes so full. Then we get to hospital. What happen is Karol fall in the water, near the ships. And Antek jump in and save him. But this takes a long time, for people to take them out of the water. You see, Antek is good swimmer, but he is all the time drinking. At the hospital, the doctor is telling me they will be okay, after shock, they can go home, and I am happy, but not happy. With Antek drinking with my boy. And with Elvis all alone.

But after this is when I start. Only with the small knife. Just a little. Antek still in shock, and drink. Nothing but drink. And Karol not want to go to school. I make him. And maybe then good news, when I am back in the Bluebell, one customer, he is ex-lawyer, he help me. Explain. In harbour there is no life ring. They never check. And this, if Antek is no good in swimming, maybe killed them. So Stephen, the lawyer, he help me get compensation. Well, then they put signs and life rings and everything in the docks, so this is good for everybody, and many months later we get the money. It is a lot. Maybe I have not to work for one year, two. But I keep at the Bluebell. Say nothing to nobody, but people know. Talk. Behind back. Why I do this. Keep working. Keep with benefits, for house, for Karol. Maybe first time I hear bad things for Polish people. How we steal. Scrounge. But I have to stay there. Be with Elvis. We are all the time never looking at each other, this is not possible, to feel this look, but so close. All the time. So close. Not saying nothing, but touching... Antek want to go back home. Buy car. I say to him, go. I give you money. But he not want to go alone. And I want to be alone. With Elvis. But he not go. Only take money for drink. Which I give. For him, for his friends. I do not care. He say he will drink to death, but I say nothing. He do not understand when I am little I see one thousand cow and pig and chicken die. So this dying is no problem. For me. But this life, without possibility. This is why I cut. I start small. One year ago. After accident. It begin once, twice a week. Now every day. Cut on the leg. The hand. I do not go kitchen any more. I worry I take knife and do something bad. To me, or maybe Antek.

Yes, it now worse. I cut maybe every day. I think about Elvis. Gone from my Bluebell kitchen. He is flying, you see, to Sri Lanka. I give him money, from compensation. He never ask. I say this. I offer. He was not back home for four years. Not see his wife, his child. He say goodbye, to them he want to say goodbye...

I am sorry. Yes. Oh, Jesus, this is so not good. All this three month ago. And for this time, he email and message me every day. He say he miss. Me. England. Me. He finally speak. Say he want me to go visit him. Tell me about everything there, pulling me. The sea, warm water, palm tree and jungle everywhere. He know me. Know what I love. Tell me about the mountain and the Buddhist temple and the elephants. He knows I cannot say no to all of this. Antek know nothing. He is just drinking all the time. A lot now. Really a lot. And I give him the money. And Karol. He is problem too. Want more and more things. His boys in school bully him, I think. He is little. And angry. What can I do? Give him knife, because he is small? Like his dad? And Elvis is gone. I don't know what now.

No, I know. I know. I want Antek go home. I want break. Never have this. No time for walking, for nothing. Since accident, I am always watching Karol, watching Antek. I cannot go kitchen any more. We eat take out, drink Coke. I cannot cook. I want to cut off my fingers. Cut off my hand. I am afraid I kill my husband. And Karol, he cannot see this. Be in this. I sit in the night and look on photo of Sri Lanka on computer. Elvis, he tell me of this place. Send me photo with me, me cut out, Photoshop from picture of me he get from Facebook. You can imagine? Me on white sand. Me in trees. Me in water. He say I must visit, I must visit. The sky is so big. Like here and my country all put together. Mountains in the sky, the clouds, and the animals and the butterflies and the language, so nice. But here, I cannot go out of the house. Even when they are both sleeping. There is the sea. There is the cliffs. At night, is not so far to walk.

I do not want to go back. I want ahead. I want to see that ocean. Not some Baltic any more. Not English Channel. I want Pacific. I like this name. Peaceful. I am here six years and I not go to swim for so long now. In the sea. I cannot remember. There is only chalk here. Chalk is dead bones, from so many of years. No forest, no berries, no mushrooms picking. Only old people drinking grey tea.

I am not here. Not me. And he is not here either. Other side. How can I be this very stupid? He is only pretty boy. Bloody Elvis. In Bluebell Café. So, so stupid. Without him.

Sorry? I don't know. I think Christmas will be bad. I will have to go cook. This is afraid for me.

Yes, I try. Put up tree. Have the pizza. Not check emails all the time.

Yes, I think so... There is. Maybe not for Christmas, more new year wish? A ticket. Maybe I buy it for me... You believe God? No, I know, is okay, but you have legends, with Arthur and Robin Hood and the Ness Monster? In Poland we have legend, miracle, because of Jesus in stable, that animal speak on Christmas Eve. I feel like this. Like tomorrow I say something and give this gift to me. I buy nothing yet, with the money, the accident. For others yes, but not me. So maybe I can click on the internet, you know, then flying is easy. Over the water. And the Himalaya. I see this on maps, on google, watch it every day. The roof of the world they call it. I see, every day, the planes. No hawk or sparrow or swan, only airplane going all around the world. They make lines in the sky. White, like my old cuts. Then they are gone. Maybe like me too.

BARBARICS

Sorry Rom, been offline of late cos padre took my internet cos I got grounded from school cos I got caught packing a switchblade in class. But it's Xmas time tomorrow so I been let loose with emails for just an hour to send greets to everyone back in the motherland, tho I am only writing you cos I have a plan which will make lords of us in half a year flat, my little Robin Hoodie, so read hard.

You safe? And the rest of the Gidzbark crew? You gonna have to visit here soon. On business AND pleasure. London is nothing as bad as I thought it was, food from all round the world, as is the talent. Irish, Indian, Jamaican, flesh you just don't see back home, so I am crash coursing my English rapido. Padre ain't learning jack, he's plastering and painting on that new Olympic site with a bunch of other Polaks, while Mum's at home all day and then punishing his sorry ass by going out to work her pub job every night. He's jealous as hell and I don't blame him. Finally, she's off the hook and getting loads of attention and rubbing his nose in it every time she comes home. Makes him even madder than he is already, which just lands on my head, but what the hell, don't call him old man for nothing.

This place is dream time. The West End, boy, all them trainer stores and the Emirates stadium and the skunk on tap and the wheels, damn, the wheels around the place! Kids our age driving Lexes, M-Bemmers, the lot. London teaches you to aspire. Or to kill. If I don't rub padre out in the next three months, I will get churchgoing cos it will be a fucking miracle. When we got off the coach 6 months ago, we got us a room in some old Polish biddy's mansion in a place called Ealing. Almost rich end of town. Not like the battleship tower blocks back home. Nobody like us pounding woofers out into the night on the estates. Silver saloons parked in driveways, choccy box gardens, everyone behind their doors by nine. But once she saw Padre was a vodka sponge and Ma an amplified slapper, Grandma chucked us out. Which is why we's now living above a shitty laundrette in a dead bit of town where the streets smell of curry and the curry houses stink of smack. GOT to get out. Old man's got no pride and Ma no shame. Blokes from her pub job keep calling her at all hours. No wonder he's going mental, but its his own limp dick fault for fucking up in the first place. If he hadn't got cocky and kept on with the bribes when he knew the anti-cop cops were about, we wouldn't had to exile ourselves here and he wouldn't be the mute one now, sitting there, moping, while she's out getting her kicks. Leaving us alone in this fucking flat, with broken beds and baked bean stink and mushies on the walls. Rubbing it in now she the force and he the furniture.

Anyways, it's kind of his fault I had to take that blade in to school. See, some Polish kid got shoved around a few months back by a Somali gang, right by the school gates. Nothing bad, kid got hit for a phone and change. But all the Polak parents, Padre included, got a committee together to bitch about this and whine on that, saying the Somalis were the problem. So the Pole Position Parents Party go complaining to Heads who then has some sort of fit, comes down hard on the Somali kids, who then of course comes back down hard on us. Dominos going avalanche. So I had to borrow the old man's blade for protection. Anyway, the Somali kids were actually impressed when they saw me flip it there just before class. We had a little stand off, then a little banter, and that was that. Teach got wind tho and I was bust. Woman personally dragged me out of class and called the feds. Said she was gonna make an example of me. The disco lights drove right into the school, rather impressive if I do say so myself, getting that kind of lift home to meet mum. And what did they find when they spun the place? Apart from lots of fifth-hand furniture and some hard core porn under padre's bed? His "piece". When they went to see him on the building site, he tried to explain he was an ex-cop and that it wasn't real, not even a replica, but a pistol-shaped pepper spray which is legal

back home even if not so much here, but they wasn't listening, just took us both down to the local nick for a little bbq. Heads came down there too, wanted to bump me as example but guess what - some senior school governor types pull rank and I get forgiveness for being a migrant minor! They said kicking me out only makes it easier for me to go bad. Said my grades were shit hot considering my attitude and my English and getting rid of yours truly would only be making the street thug problem worse not better.

All in all, I got was 2 weeks. 2 bare weeks, for bringing weapons to school! The old man was less impressed – he got a caution, his toy gun took off him and now has to crawl down the nick every Thursday just to show he's being a good little immigrant. Before all this, he used to go on about how Brit pigs were the most stand up filth in the world. Now, he's not a fan. Went mental when they finally let us loose that night. Bust my nose again when we got home. So I bust 2 of his teeth. That shook him. Especially when he found out how much it was gonna cost him to get them put back in at a local dentist. Now he's waiting for a coach home to get his smile stuck back on, teeth rattling in a tin box like you get for fruit drops, sore cos he looks like one of them prison trannies. Banned me from leaving the house, calling anyone, even watching TV. Mum says cos it's xmas I might get to play a little Grand Theft Auto, if I help her wash windows, clean the kitchen, all that infant stuff. What she don't realise is that I am done playing games. Tired of being a dirty pig's son. Never wanted to come here, leave you and the crew for fucking London, but you know how hard it was to walk down the street or go school with everyone laughing. When I got here, all of yours bad influences left far behind, I thought I might try it straight, going uni, proving to the old shit that I am better than him. But that was prime time stupid. No grades, no girls, nothing I pull impresses the old shit, so now is time for pig son to turn pirate.

See, I'll be man in three weeks time and in England that means everything. You're of age at 16, so if your folks say you're free, you're free. You can take driving lessons and marry and work and all that big boy shit but you can't buy booze or fags until you is 18. So, I gets to thinking, if I can't buy here, how about back home? I know Mietek is still minting on the boosted spirits from Kaliningrad and the contraband Marlboros, and strange shit comes to mind when there's just you and endless hours locked in one fucking bedroom. There's not even anything outside the window to look at, you get me? A grey brick wall and rain for curtains. But I also just had a wee chew of khat, this leaf shit Abdi brings me when visiting. Abdi is one of the Somali kids comes round, pretending he is delivering homework, but really he is looking after me, gansta style, making sure tho I'm bust, like I was behind bars, that I am sorted. Like with this khat shit. It's kind of like hash and kind of like mushies. Hard to describe. Tastes like mud when you chew it, but it's the effect that counts. Blanks things out for while, then wires you up. All tense, and ready for something. Cos I tell you, this home jail time is driving me mental. What do they expect me to do? Sit here for 2 weeks and roll out holy at the end? Abdi's just about the only thing keeping me from killing the old man and doing a runner back to yours. I'm serious. If I had a piece I would do the crooked fuck right now, sitting there on the sofa, watching me typing this with one eye on his Sekonda.

Since Abdi's become my study buddy, I been learning. Listening to his stories. You heard about all the pirate action? How Somalis hijack 1000 ton ships on these little boats? Make millions in ransom? Shit, when I got here first and saw these cocofaced beanpoles in school suits I thought they was just chickens. Ripe for plucking. Took a few fights to realise the hard ones were hard enough and the soft ones not worth bouncing off of. Coming home with another ripped blazer harder still, facing the the old man and his pissed temper. Can't take this parenting bullshit no more. Or the uniforms. Can you imagine having to go school in a bloody funeral suit every day? Drives us all mad. Me and Abdi already talked about life the other side of that birthday. He has some hard core contacts here, I'll tell ya. Big smiling kid but kind of bad with it. Can feel it right off. You know our

crew, we always thought we had it. In Gidzbark a few NY baseball caps and some graffiti covered estates passes for East Coast stylin', but out here I must look such a white-man-can't chump. All them lyrics we spat, all them rides we took in your '94 Beemster, all those girls so impressed with our hip hop ways – next to these black beasts we is whitewash. Eminem did it and then? Abdi has his crew, and though they don't make music like us, they listen and listen large – brand new Audis, flash clothes, serious dollars. And you know why? They grew up playing with real kalashnikovs, not pepper spray reps.

See, when Abdi first came round to tell the old man he's brought me homework, padre sees this black beanpole staring him down on his own doorstep and just lets him through. Carrying all that khat in for yours truly. What a dumb ex-cop. And what a smart boy Abdi is. Smart enough to ask – how did Padre get that replica? And what if we had more of them? On the streets of Southall they would be BIG money. In England cops don't carry guns so you get caught with a real piece they panic and it's right inside for five years. And every bullet gets you another calendar on top of that. You get me? Twelve months off-road just for a fucking shell!!! Abdi said even replicas can get you time, seeing they can be rebuilt again to take live rounds. Gun shaped pepper sprays can't. So, if we get our hands on some more of our import reps, Abdi's boys could walk around and hit places, shops, petrol stations, and even if they get busted penalties are less because it's just spray and not ammo! You get me? These boys don't got no problem getting pistols, enough back room supplies of them, but no one's started importing dummy weapons yet. Not yet.

You got the goods the other side of Europe, we got the customers here. How to get the gear across without getting spied? Remember padre and his date with a dentist, thanks to yours truly? Well, it gave me THE idea. Cross Europe coaches. They brought me here and they'll get us rich real fast. Get this – our shit rides alone. Free of charge. You, pretending to be a passenger, get yourself over to the coach station. The moment some London bound bus pulls up, a crowd wraps round it and you get in there. Seats are never marked in advance so everyone is shoving to get on first. In all that mess, you sneak a suitcase into the hold, making like you're with someone. Brother seeing his sis setting off or son waving old folks goodbye. Everyone's always so busy squeezing on, trying to get their window seats as far from the shitter as possible, no one ever checks what bags go where. Then, a sleepy 30 hours later, I play the same game this end. Show up at Victoria, making out like I am there to meet granny, grab the bag, get the hell. There is a coach a day from most big towns. Even if some shipments get busted, we're hundreds of miles away, innocent as. Anyway, we lose some shipments this way, so what? They can lock up whole coach loads of Polaks, torture them, we're sound asleep in our beds, counting cash in our dreams, you get me? Only thing we got to check is it don't happen often. Else they will start really scanning them holds. And I want the pirates on our side not our backs. Just imagine the first load! Some replicas, a kilo of amphetamines, weed, whatever. Maybe even some straight fags, just for the hell of it.

Anyway, last time Abdi came round, I sold him the plan. He didn't believe it could be so easy so I sent him to Victoria to watch. Came back today, all smiles. Saw at least three Polak coaches arrive in an hour. Passengers off, bags everywhere, drivers just keen to get the hell back home for Xmas. Mayhem. Perfect fucking mayhem. And our money making dream. Abdi needs us that end to sort supplies. We need him this end to sort sales. We do this right, bruv, keep a line like this open for twelve months max, we make enough to open a fucking Beemer shop in Gidzbark next year. Show them all. I want to ride back into town looking large. I want everyone to know I ain't a loser like the old man. I want them all to see and come buy from me. And not just cars either. We need a front. Always gonna need a front. But brothers here like our skinny ass Polish and Russian and all them East End girls and if we don't get in on that action we can shoot ourselves right now for being too stupid to see gold when roads ahead are lined with it.

See, for now Abdi's boys trust us enough to front £5k. I'll wire it over, you know, counter to counter transfer. You buy a case of them spray reps, half a kg of chalk off of Waldek and a few cartons of fags, pop a selection in a holdall then into some London bound ride. Remember to text me the details. What the bag looks like, the licence plate, the schedule. So I know what to look for and where. Then, 30 hours later, Abdi gets his first taste of Eastern commerce, we get a cut, talk next shipment. You get me? Next, talk to Bejerowicz, tell him to line up some serious gear. Just don't tell him what it's for! They'll cut us out. We'll run with Abdi a few times, then on our own, once we have enough stake. We either cut loose or have it out with them. These pirate boys look good at first, but I want to be my own boss, not dead in the ground for nothing by Easter. You hear me? They got guns. We got replicas, and they know it. Think about it. That's why that first bag needs dirty little extras riding in it. You know the revolver old Mietek has hidden in his flat? Have that off him and pack it with that first shipment. Just for me. Think Szary also has some ex-army firepower he took with him when he got kicked off the draft, get it and dump in that there too. We need real security to run this right. Padre the pig plays gets busted for toys, he needs to know I'm watching.

A fucking disgrace back home, a fucking liability here. I see him now, pointing at his cuntung watch. My hour up, his time full-stop. Look at him. Sitting there, making like he understands a word that telly is telling him. Fat fuck not even his own woman will let him near. The big boys in blue come in here like they own the place and take his little toy. Laughing in his stupid Polak face. See, they all make noises like they respect us new faces round here, but it's bull. I see the way the cops, teachers, kids look down their fucking noses. Taking the piss. Saying we're taking their jobs, blah, blah, like this country belongs to them. Any of them. Even the Somalis feel they own the place, though they got invaded years ago and proper fucked. We never got proper fucked. Not us. Took the Germans, the Russians, will take the Brits and the Africans too. They think us scum, let's show them scum. First, I do the old man. Somalis is Islam, they don't do rotten pigs like him. So I off padre, show the Abdis of this world we mean business, then get busy delivering proper gear across the old border. Get girls into the trade. Anything anyone needs. Supply, demand. Then wipe them all out. The pirates, the pigs, everyone. They think we're barbarians from the East, let's give them barbarics. Fucking grenade the school. No one fucking treating me like a boy. Think they own the place. We'll sell them shit they'll shoot up their own veins, then arms they'll shoot each other with, then stand back and reap what's right.

My time is up, the old man says. What he don't know though is gonna kill him. I got a plan, Rom. Not the sort of thing you put in an email, but it won't be hard to get him out of the house with an offer of drink. A walk down to the pub. Celebrating my coming of age. Leaving home. Putting him well behind me. A group of "accidentally passing brothers" taking a disliking to his face, or, better yet, a canal path, you know, no witnesses. No mistakes. I'm pressing send on this email, Rom, you send me back what's what, then have yourself a merry little Xmas. Then let pirate hell break loose.

ROUND A ROUND TABLE

“Mum, Dad, I have something to tell you... When I graduate, I'm becoming a priest.”

Ignacy stopped slicing the tiny turkey Helena had roasted for their pre-Christmas dinner and stared at his daughter. She was standing by the window, looking out at the late December sun descending over Oxford's Wellington Square gardens, still far brighter than the lines of Christmas lights sagging between down-cast lamp posts. Monika was the first to respond.

“What did you just say?”

“I've decided to join the church, Mum.”

“Dear god...”

“Iggy! Don't be pathetic,” Monika shot her husband a dismissive glance. “Darling, Helenko, sit down. Now, can you explain what it is you mean by ‘become a priest?’”

Helena remained standing.

“I mean, lead mass and marry people and baptise their babies and then bury them all afterwards.”

“Oh, no! Impossible!” bellowed Ignacy, the carving knife trembling in his hand.

“Dad, in England they let women in too.”

“We know that, dear...” Monika shut her eyes against the developing scene. “But why exactly do you intend to become a priest? Why on earth would you do such a thing?”

Helena turned to look out from her tiny halls of residence out over Oxford's darkening spires. Her dry, mousy hair was in her eyes, as usual, something to hide behind as her father kept on shouting.

“Is this what I drove a thousand miles to hear? Is it?!” His greying eyebrows did their classic porcupine act. “We get you into a half-decent university, drive all this way to spend a few relaxing days buying you presents, alcohol even, and this is how you repay us?”

“Darling,” Monika interrupted him again. “We are about to start heading back. A long drive ahead. Don't spoil things now.”

“Me, spoil things?”

“Yes, you. We've had a lovely couple of day's rest...”

“I said nothing when she got her piercings! Nothing when she decided to do this whole lesbian thing! I even kept my mouth shut when, of all the things she could take here, she chose media and bloody gender studies! But this” he turned back to Helena. “This, this... I don't know the hell to say!”

“Hallelujah,” Monika quipped.

“Though I do know what's going to happen next. Kid, get your bags.”

“What?!” Helena raised her voice at her father, for perhaps the first time in her life.

“I said pack!”

“I knew this would happen,” Helena sighed. Ignacy held the knife pointing in her direction, even though she was still seeking solace in the view outside.

“This was meant to be your first Christmas away from home. Well done on failing that one simple test...”

“Iggy, she is not our child any more,” Monika intervened. “Though it takes one to know one, I guess... Let's talk. Helena, sit down. And you, stop waving that knife around. You're not in surgery now.”

“Oh, very funny.” Ignacy dropped the knife and pushed the roast bird away. “Both of you, get your bags. Tomorrow, we'll be having proper Christmas dinner, together, in Krakow. In peace. In holy bloody peace! Personally, I just can't wait to tell the boys back in home how, for all my evident multitude of sins, I got me a priest in the family for Christmas. And my youngest daughter

as well.”

Helena walked over to the table and took a cigarette from her father's packet, staring at him as she lit up and the first nervous puffs of smoke escaped her lips. Monika watched the performance with disbelief.

“Helenka, please! You want your first funeral service to be your father's? And you,” Monika turned to her husband. “Stop ordering everyone about. She's not going anywhere. What about her studies?”

“If you can talk some sense to her by New Year's, we can think about letting her come back. If not, well, we will save ourselves ten thousand Euros a term.”

“You're a callous man when you're sober.”

“Dad, I am not going anywhere.”

“Oh really? You want to take orders instead? Well take this one: start packing, kid!”

“You see what he is like?!” Helena cried. “No wonder all his offspring have buggered off to the furthest ends of the world! Aleksa in Washington. Maks still in Chile. How far do I have to go to get some freedom in my life? Join NASA?”

“Maks is on assignment, for god's sake!” Ignacy howled.

“He's always on assignment. And don't take the Lord's name in vain, Dad. It's bad karma.”

“Karma?!”

“Helena, talk to me.” Monika didn't have to reach far to put her fine, manicured hand on her daughter's. The student digs were tiny, the round table they were sitting at barely big enough for three plates and the roast bird. “Sit. Please. You've always been so fragile. So... contrary. You serve us meat for Christmas Eve supper, and yet you want to be a priest? Have you thought about this? Talked to anyone? Is it time to call our doctor again?”

“The bird is tradition round here, Mother. And I've thought about this long and hard. And prayed. And I've decided. Once I finish my studies, I want to-”

“Join a fucking cult?!”

“Igs! Watch your mouth!” After thirty years of being a wife, a mother and a district judge, Monika knew how to silence any man, her husband best of all. “Now, finish this lovely meal our daughter has prepared for us and let the child speak. Helena, when did you start praying? As far as I know, you've never been inside a church.”

“Only because you never took me.”

Shaking his head, Iggy lit two cigarettes, handing one to his wife. Monika accepted hesitantly, keeping one eye on her daughter. Helena was now sitting at the table, head bowed, cigarette smouldering in her hand. Speaking slowly and quietly, Monika tried to tame the situation.

“Well, you know how I feel about religion. How we feel about organised religion.”

“Dad used to go to church when we were little.”

“Oh, the sins of the father,” Ignacy fumed. “Why is no one packing? Why is no one listening to me?”

“Helenko, your father used to go to church because that was the only place they could go to safely discuss politics. And to drink. Those were different days, darling. Very different. Try to understand.”

“I do. And I am trying to forgive you.”

“Forgive us for what?” Iggy raised his hands aloft, staring at the ceiling in a pose of saintly suffering.

“Iggy, will you pick up that knife and cut us some supper? Helena. Tell us more. What awful actions will you be absolving us of now?”

Helena stared at her mother for a studied while before answering.

“Well, I've always been interested in spirituality, though I was always too afraid to say anything. I know how... obsessed you both are with... certain appearances. Dad is meant to be a committed atheist, and that being anti-Church is so damn cool right now, but you Mum, you have

your New Age beliefs.”

“Thank you, darling, for the pithy character assassination. Please continue.”

“Pack your bags!” Ignacy screamed, but no one moved. Helena stared into her mother's pale green eyes, trying to read them for reaction.

“I've always wanted to go to church, but neither of you let me. I felt banned. Denied. And yet, since I came here, yes, it's only been three months, but I have felt such a surge, such a powerful wave of... relief, of freedom, to be myself.”

Iggy was now trying to stage laughter, though it sounded more ridiculous than ridiculing. Smoking with one hand, carving fresh slices of bird with the other, he stopped nibbling and puffing to comment.

“We've given our kids everything, everything, and this is the kind of gratitude we get. Bravo, Monika! You've always been overprotective. This is why she is like this. Always bloody helpless. Baby fat on the outside, baby food for brains. Helena, will you start your damned packing?”

“Dad, take your wrath and...”

“Helena, please!” Monika gave her daughter one of her low-brow looks. Helena held back, watching her father cutting strip after strip of flesh from the turkey. “Let him be. He's just desperate for a drink. I can never work out whether I hate your father more when he is totally smashed or totally sober.”

Ignacy stared at his wife with semi-contained contempt, the knife bouncing around in his hand. It seemed as if no one had the energy or the necessary ideas to keep the fight flaming. Then Ignacy spoke, turning his gaze to the shredded bird.

“Sure. Fine. You're the judge. Why should I have anything to say that is critical of my children's choices in life? Why should I be anything other than a wax effigy for you to stick your little sarcastic pins into?”

“Iggy, I'm tired. We're trying to reach some sort of understanding here. Before we get going. It's a long drive. Your daughter has found faith. Is that such a bad thing?”

“Yes, it most certainly is! My little baby serving false idols is a big thing in my book, darling!”

Monika pursed her immaculately painted lips.

“Well, you were keen enough to kneel and sing hymns and partake of communion in your Solidarity days.”

“That was different. A political act. This is just juvenile.”

“Maybe my act is political too,” Helena said, but her parents were not listening.

“You always were a chameleon, Iggy. Ready to change spots to fit in with whoever and whatever was convenient at the time.”

“Don't confuse your metaphors.” Iggy's lip curled away from the words. “And chameleons don't change colour to match surroundings. They change to show mood. In this I will always be honest.”

“Thanks. I've had thirty years of your honesty. Not counting all your trips abroad... Anyway, Igs, we have to get going. Can't we at least finish this supper without arguing around histories?”

“Oh, so you can ridicule all those times I had to leave my family, travelling half way round the world to labour with these surgeon's hands, carrying bricks and slapping on mortar, building a better America, but I can't? Sure! Sure, season of good will, of good news. A priest, for goodness' sake! Helena, get your things!”

“I am not going anywhere.”

The two women smoked and nibbled at the bird between them, Ignacy leaning back in his chair, blowing smoke in their general direction.

“Why are none of you witches listening to me?!?”

Monika shot him a dismissive look.

“How about you talk to her as if she were a grown up, instead of acting the pope?”

“Helena, do you have any idea what you are getting into? I know you're studying your bloody media, but how about learning something about the history of the cartel you're about to enlist in? Yes, it's true, I used to go to church. Used to sit with priests, drink with them, demonstrate. But that was when times called for sacrifice. What do you have to sacrifice, kid?” Helena's eyes were finally filling with tears, but the rant continued. “We had our decades of censorship, of rationing, of watching the world outside carry on while we were locked in, Soviet tanks always on our doorstep. If we didn't bury our own on hallowed ground, if we didn't collaborate with the clergy, the communists would have taken the tortured bodies and dumped them in our rivers. Like they did with Popieluszko-”

“Iggy, please, less drama. I doubt, apart from a few of your early operations, that you've ever seen a dead body.”

“Ouch, says the wax doll.”

“Well then, let's keep a sense of perspective. You were never tortured or kidnapped or any of that. Others were. In the provinces. You got yourself arrested with your university pals, paid in dollars for vodka to be smuggled in, and had a better quality of life that we did on the outside. You were heroes of the movement. We had to queue. Nothing heroic about queuing, darling, not with a baby on each arm and ration cards running out.”

“What are you talking about now? So all of a sudden I'm the bad guy?”

“Iggy, all I am saying is let's not rewrite history.”

“No, let's not! I had my years in jail, but that does not make me a criminal. And so, by the same token, just because I went to church a few times-”

“That does not make you a saint. So quit going on about the ‘years in the gulag’ and have a drink, will you?” Iggy stopped ripping shreds of dry flesh from the carcass and stared at his wife. She stared back mockingly. “Just because you quit theatre school in '68 and switched to medicine, doesn't mean you quit playing the little star.”

“I switched to medicine to be of use.”

“You switched to medicine because that was the easiest way to get your hands on pure alcohol in the days when even vodka was rationed.”

Monika punctuated the last sentence by grabbing the bottle of wine from the sideboard and ripping the black tinfoil from its neck. Ignacy was about to spit something back at her, but the sight of the wine being uncorked stopped him. Helena watched with disbelief as her father's crybaby act was silenced by the sight of his precious bottle.

“Mum, what are you doing? You have to be off soon.”

“He'll sleep it off on the ferry. I will drive into France, he can take over later. One glass is all he's getting, as long as he stops with his outrageous performance and agrees to leave you here.” Monika poured her husband a generous helping of red. “Have a drink, Igs, and quit pretending it's your daughter's life choices which are twisting your mood right now. Two days without booze and you turn unbearable.”

“Oh, yeah?”

“The only reason we're leaving our daughter alone this Christmas is so you can be with your Krakow cronies, hiding from your families down whatever basement bar will take you while everyone else is off to midnight vigil.”

“That's not true-”

“Then why are we driving back? Another day and night in the car alone with you? Tell me why? Why not stay with our daughter, right here?”

“We are driving back to see Mother. And our friends. And to be home. As we agreed. A plan is a plan. Tradition's tradition. We have not missed a Christmas at home for thirty years.”

"Not counting those you were labouring abroad, or the one when you were interred. Remember?"

"When we were interned, we promised ourselves we would get together and drink. Every Christmas, no matter what. For all those who never got out."

"Oh, please," Monika giggled. "What a noble cause for boys to give to their boozing."

"How long were you in jail, Dad?"

"Ah, I don't remember."

"I remember," Monika interrupted. "Thirteen months. You were born after the regime fell, kitten, but Maks and Aleksandra, they had to be dragged with me behind those bars. One visit a month. Thirteen bribes. Thirteen queues at the prison gates. Over a year of waiting."

Iggy stabbed the knife into the side of the turkey and left it impaled there, cigarette smoke pouring from his fine, pointed nose.

"You make it out like it was my fault I was arrested. Like it was some kind of adventure."

"Dad, the Church still does a lot of work with prisoners of conscience around the world. That is what I want to do."

"To win your father's love, darling, you will have to steal some of it from the hero he became besotted with long before you were born: his own highness."

Iggy sniggered, his face serious, as he took his first sip of wine. Helena watched his lips turn an instant red.

"I don't need his love. The world is love. You taught me that, Mum. All those hippy books you made me read. All that talk of energy and chakras and stuff."

"Yes, darling. That is true," Monika whispered, staring at her husband as he absorbed himself in the drink. "The universe is made of energy, of light. But it still takes that light a long bloody while to reach some of its darkest places."

Monika drew the abandoned knife from the bird and carved pieces of the lukewarm meat for her daughter and herself. Ignacy's voice now sounded wounded, child-like.

"Yes, since you've had your visions, you have just been a ray of sunshine in my life. A grown woman with ashrams and joss sticks and chakras. I'd love to see you go into court with dreadlocks and tribal tattoos all over your hands, like your Buddha buddies. Like your 'sista' Olga."

"Lay off my friends, will you! Drink your juice, be a good boy, and let your family enjoy their meal in peace. Just because you never grew out of your boozing and your boyfriends and your babes, don't blame the rest of us for evolving."

"Oh, you're a Buddha, my daughter is going to be a priest, what do you want me to do? Join a monastery?"

"Hardly, Dad. You remember when I found all those pictures of you and Mum?"

"What?" Monika's hand paused over the bird, mid-slice.

"When I was seven or something. We never told you. Those black and white photos of you and Dad and some of your friends."

"Iggy!"

"Iggy what?! What was I meant to do? She was seven, for Christ's sake. And you were having one of your crises. I never told you, so what? Not like we hid them well in the first place. And they were artistic. Or at least arty, anyway."

"Christ, what a Christmas," Monika mumbled, stabbing at the turkey, Helena smiling meekly.

"I talked to my therapist about that. He thinks your hedonistic abandon was caused by a mixture of political oppression, post-World War Two trauma and fear of nuclear annihilation. I missed out on all that, but I guess if I was living in such times, I would be sleeping around too."

"Helen! What we did in bed was one thing. Escapism perhaps. But the rest of it..."

"The rest of what?" With each sip, Iggy was taking on bitter confidence. "What is it you

want to feel guilty about now? Nothing worse than an ex-Catholic Buddhist. You have your liberation from desire, you just can't stop feeling guilty about your past selves."

Helena nibbled at her bird, watching her parents intently.

"My therapist also said something else."

"Pray tell, Father Helena."

"He said I live... live in fear of you both. Of your pasts. All that disaster. Politics. Prisons. And that I should stop. That I should have more fun with you. Somehow."

"Fun. Fun is good. Fun is fun when you drive a thousand miles to have your youngest daughter tell you she is going to join the bloody Church!"

"I was kidding about that."

Silence fell over the small room, the Christmas tree lights wrapped round the fireplace winking merrily. Helena kept nibbling at the bird and the hard-boiled veg, waiting for the next strike. Monika, having put the carving knife gently down on the table, was the first to speak.

"Helena?"

"Mum?"

"Don't 'Mum' me. What do you mean, 'I was kidding about that'?"

"My therapist said I should, I should test you. Gauge your ability to listen... And to forgive." Iggy stared into his wine. Monika put her hand to her lips, trying to cover up the smile now manifesting itself involuntarily.

"I hope this is not a therapist we are paying for."

"No. The university has its own counselling service. I just wanted to see how you would react. If you could stop arguing with each other for five minutes and argue with me for a change."

"And we failed." Iggy looked up at his wife, then lit a cigarette. Helena tried another smile.

"By about fifty seconds."

"Iggy, we are eating." Ignacy ignored his wife, blowing smoke in the direction of the darkening window. Monika watched him in silence, then turned to her daughter. "Why don't we stay another night? I guess when your child outwits her parents, it means she has come of age. We should celebrate."

"Celebrate what?" Iggy spat. "Religion, politics, sex. Young people these days think it is all just material for psychoanalysis... Or video game story lines."

"Iggy, I think you owe your daughter an apology."

"You do, do you? Well yes, I suppose I do. For all those years of struggle, of incarceration, of working abroad just so you would have blue jeans on your arses, of trying to make a country out of a wreck?! Yes, you are right, for all that I am deeply sorry. Worthy of ridicule, of having the piss out taken out of me, and of course deeply penitent. When we get home tomorrow, instead of the pub, I shall go to the nearest church and confess all my sins. The ogre that I am."

"Stay, Dad. I only meant it as a joke. An experiment."

"Experiment. Yes, that is all I am to my kids now. A specimen from history to be dissected and prodded about, like a bloody turkey."

"A self pitying fool who left his sense of humour at the barricades of '68," Monika cut in, smiling gently. "Stay. We can have a real Christmas tomorrow, instead of driving through the night. And I can finally have a drink with my daughter."

"No. My friends are waiting. My mother."

"Your mother is in a home. Your friends, well, every year there is one or two less at your Christmas Eve piss ups. Maybe there will be no one there to drink with you tomorrow."

"I will be there."

Monika chewed the cold meat in a moment of silence. Helena couldn't bear the tension of waiting for who would attack next.

"Dad, we're having a refugee Christmas tomorrow. With all the students who couldn't go home. Chinese. American. Even Israeli. We're going to a kids' home first to take some presents.

You could meet all my friends. Tell them about Poland. They know so little. I know so little.”

“Where will we stay? We've checked out of the hotel. They are full anyway. Enough tourists in this bloody town. I want to go home.”

“Go then.” Monika said coldly. “Have a kip, sober up, drive. Twenty four hours behind the wheel, alone, just so you can have a glass of vodka in your own backyard. Or better yet, fall asleep at the wheel, somewhere past Berlin. At full speed. Blaze of glory. How you always wanted to go out, isn't it? Drama queen. All your heroes went young. Hlasko. Cybulski. Dean. Only you, old codger, greying, fading, scared.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Nothing.”

“No, say it!”

“Say what? While you drank and demonstrated and got yourself arrested to be with your mates, someone had to be home, hiding all the printing materials, all your moonshine making equipment, taking care of your mother, your children, your home. Queuing for hours just so I could bring you a piece of ham or cheese. Which you always handed back, preferring the heroic gesture to normal nutrition. How did you get vodka into those cells, tell me?”

“What are you talking about?”

“All your scene strutting. Your political games. Always in the right place at the right time, just never quite centre of attention. Always second fiddle. That made you mean, Iggy. You never did it for the cause. The cause was you, which is fair enough, everyone else was the same. But we are now old enough to be honest about some of that. Or at least should be.”

“You had your men. And your own reasons.”

Monika stared at her husband, silent for a noticeable while, as if pondering the most important question of her life.

“Thanks, Igs. I did what was necessary to survive. My mind was not always what it should have been. And those years you were away. Bothering to send parcels once in a blue moon. You think it was easy to cope, while you were screwing around on the other side of the globe? You even grew a moustache like Walesa, for goodness' sake! One hell of an aphrodisiac...”

“Let's go.”

“I haven't finished my meal yet. Neither has your daughter.”

Iggy watched as Helena struggled to find more meat to cut from the bird.

“Give me the car keys. Time we went, before our child hears anything else she shouldn't.”

“You've had half a bottle already, and eaten next to nothing.”

“Give me the keys!”

Monika looked at her husband as she would a criminal.

“Behave. Else we will be going nowhere today.”

“You've already gone too far! You always have to do this, get me drunk then twist me any way you want. Your little pawn! What was I meant to do, play house-husband while your career took off? Take care of the kids while you made your name?”

“You know how much I gave away. To Solidarity. How many years of internal exile for advising you all. And now you dare test me? Fine. Time will tell.” Monika put down her cutlery, unable to finish the fresh portion of bird her daughter had laid on her plate. “Well, what ever I have done wrong, I will pay for it having to drive you home for the next day and night, listening to more bile. That's karma.”

Monika hugged her daughter, standing outside as the car warmed up, Iggy already in the passenger seat. The sky overhead was clear, but just at that point where the blue was turning luminescent grey.

“The first star will be visible soon,” Monika whispered into her daughter's ear as she hugged her tight. “I wish, I wish, I wish we could all just grow out of this stupid contest. Why can't we,

darling? Hmm?” Helena let out a sob, and Monika held her even tighter. “I loved the joke. ‘Mum, Dad, I’m going to be a priest’. I will tell everyone back home.”

“Thanks.”

“No, thank you. The meal was lovely...”

Suddenly, the engine in Monika's Volkswagen estate started revving loudly. They both turned to see Ignacy's head sticking out of the driver's side window.

“You want to stay,” he shouted. “So stay!”

Monika and Helena held on to each other as the car roared out of the driveway, onto the narrow street which wrapped itself round the central green.

“He's on the wrong side of the road,” Helena whispered. The women waited for the car to make the lap of the green. As it passed them for another round, they could hear Iggy forcing laughter through the open window.

“I need to take a younger lover,” Monika mused into the chill air, her voice utterly flat.

As the silver estate completed another lap, she suddenly stepped out into the middle of the road, blocking its way. Helena screamed, but it was too late. Ignacy veered onto the pavement, the car making an awful crunching noise as it cleared the kerb, stopping inches from the steel garden fence. The engine howled wildly before being cut.

Ignacy extracted himself from the cabin, stumbled round to the front of the car, inspecting it for damage, then turned to scream at his wife.

“What the hell have you done?”

Monika was standing in the middle of the street, shaking a little in the cold air, too much of her life having just flashed before her eyes.

“You were on the wrong side of the road, you prick! You could have killed someone.”

“Jesus! Are you mad?”

“Damn right! Can't you see? Can't you fucking see?!”

Ignacy ignored the tears he knew were about to start running down his wife's face.

“The tyre burst. Help me fit the spare!”

Monika stood her ground, hands folded across her chest. Ignacy raced to the back of the car, fiddling with the boot lid, before extracting a thin emergency spare and offering it to Monika. She didn't move a muscle.

“Go to hell.”

“Darling, I will, but first we have to get going!”

“I'm calling the law. You are in big trouble, little boy...”

Iggy dropped the wheel on the ground and ran his fingers through his greying hair, howling at the darkening sky. The stars did not answer, the street around them completely empty.

“Moniu, this is not a joke...”

Monika looked back at her daughter and winked, the gesture was something secret between them. Monika forced a split second smile, her tears quickly drying, then once again fixed her face into a hard mask.

“You had your fun and games, Iggy. Now I'm calling the police.”

“What?”

Monika put her hands on her hips, swaying at the waist, ever so gently.

“You broke the law. Drink driving, you old fool! Now it's time for justice. You were always a champion of that sort of thinking. Solidarity boy-”

“No, stop messing about and help!” Iggy's face was that of a pleading schoolboy.

“A couple more months in jail is exactly what you need.”

“Stop kidding!”

“Kidding? Kidding?! You just tried to kill me!”

“I did not! I swerved! Darling!”

After a few seconds' silence, Monika turned to her daughter, shivering in the falling

darkness.

“If you become a priest, am I going to have to call you Mother?” Helena looked confused for a second, then seemed to get the joke and smiled. “Mother, should I call the law on our God?” Helena nodded, half-smiling still. Monika winked at her and turned to Iggy, her voice perfectly stern.

“You could have killed someone!”

“What? I know, but-”

“In front of your own daughter!”

“No, I know, I'm sorry-”

“How sorry?”

“What?” Ignacy's arms were down by his sides, the palms open in a gesture of absolute surrender.

“However much... Never mind. Take the bags back inside. We are staying.”

“What?”

“Unpack the car! Tonight, you sleep on the floor. But first, take the bags inside. And wait. Your daughter and I are going to the pub. For a Christmas knees up. You better have the washing up done by the time we get back. Else you sleep in the back of this wreck.”

“You are kidding...”

“Karma, kurwa...”

Monika shoved her handbag round her shoulders, grabbed Helena by the hand and pulled her gently towards the pub they had passed the night before. As her daughter's arms wrapped round her waist, holding on as they walked on past the disabled car, Monika realised she was crying again. Tears of complete surprise. Helena's long hair flew into her face, sticking to her wet cheeks, smelling of citrus fruits and cinnamon and fresh grace. They were good tears. High tears. The kind that cleansed right through and would be gone by the time the pub door swung open.

WOLF TO A WOLF

Sitting at his desk, a single light bulb hanging from a far-off ceiling, Artur stared at the carnage that was their home. Everything hollowed out by the almost total absence of furniture. Nothing other than his desk and pile upon pile of cardboard boxes. Big. Small. Spilling clothes, toys, electrical goods all over bare floorboards, as if caught in the act of fleeing. Windows covered with more cardboard. To stop anyone sensing their presence here. Their “activities”. Three storeys of London emptiness, buried in a garden grown beyond wild, and now, on the middle floor, in the heart of the abandoned mansion, where once there must have been families, parties, warmth, Dawid on his knees before him, clutching his stomach, head hanging inches from the floor.

Artur forced a laugh. The effort hurt. His lungs hadn't yet recovered. He could hear Dawid breathing hard too. Artur's tiny hands plucked a Marlboro Light out of a pack lying on the floor, his fingernails, bitten beyond the skin, hurting with that gentlest of efforts. Lighting up, he kept his eyes fixed on Dawid who stayed kneeling, arms wrapped round a heaving belly in what looked like a pose of ultimate self-pity. Or prayer. Artur tried to look away. Feigning disinterest. His wild blond hair reflected in the bottle of red lying on the desk. He picked up the wine, uncorked it and stuck the nozzle to his mouth.

The sound of ringing coming from inside Dawid's hooded jacket cut the silence between them. Neither man moved.

“Help me, you little shit,” Dawid's voice seeped through gritted teeth.

“Come again?”

“I need my phone.” Dawid's moan was followed by a sharp intake of breath. When he exhaled, the phone was still ringing. “Call a fucking ambulance.”

“Why don't you do it? Or get one of your babes to do it for you?”

“Call fucking anyone!”

They sat in silence for some minutes before Artur replied.

“The gate is opening soon.”

“What?”

“The gate.”

“What fucking gate?”

“My flight. Tonight. Things not good with you, Dawid? Years of partying and snorting and spinning all that vinyl done your brains in?”

“Call for fucking help...”

Artur chuckled, took a swig of the wine, too quickly, choking a little.

“Nothing they can do for you now, old friend. Nothing anyone can do for you. I am going home, and you...”

“Get me my phone,” Dawid growled.

“Just because it's Christmas, don't be counting on charity. Not tonight. Not after what you just did.”

“Christ...”

“Christ, exactly!” Artur was almost bouncing in his chair, recovered adrenaline charging his movements. “The man who died for our sins. Let's just sit here, or kneel, in silence, no phones, no police, musing on his fate. Contemplating tomorrow's coming of our Saviour. When is the last time you went to mass, Dawid? Grandma back home would be most unhappy with your sinful ways.”

“Shut your mouth and call for help!”

“Not making sense now, Dawid. Not making any sense at all...”

Artur then fell silent, as told, staring into the neck of the bottle, thinking about the journey ahead, the thousand miles between London and Gruzno and his mother and teenage brother and

how all of this would be over soon. He'd get home in time to help wash windows, chop firewood, bring in the tree, dress it and the thousand things needed doing on Christmas Eve. All the chores he had hated as a boy. All the motions he could not help dreaming of now, having not been home for the Holidays in three long years.

"Call someone," Dawid was now pleading, but instead, Artur got up and began moving towards him. A lit cigarette hanging from his mouth, Artur imagined himself looking cool, but his frail body moved awkwardly, meekly towards the other man. Dawid's head sunk even further down into his chest, cowering before the edging steps. Artur lowered himself to a crouch, resting both hands on Dawid's broad shoulders. His right hand reached in between the kneeling man's tightly twisted arms. They struggled against one another for a few seconds. Then Artur pulled back. The knife handle was warm from having Dawid's arms wrapped round it. Blood on the blade almost black. A little grey in it. Artur paused, wondering what it could have pierced. Anatomy was not his strong suit. He wiped the blood off on the left shoulder of Dawid's jacket, and walked back to the desk. Swapping the knife for a pen and some scattered pages of blank paper, he sat down and tried to steady his hand.

Struggling to place his lines, Artur monitored the sound of breathing behind him. Dawid was motionless throughout, but that could be an act. Artur picked up the knife with his free hand and gripped as hard as he could, still writing with the other.

"Call ambulance..."

"Let me read something to you." Artur replied, calmly. "I'm not saying it will be good, but then obituaries are not the sort of thing I usually write in English... *Dawid. Twenty five. European. East Central Unspecified.*"

"Artur..."

"Shut the fuck up!" Artur exploded. "How long has it been? How long? Since you've seen me write? Now you shut up. Now you listen. *Dawid. Twenty five. East Central Unspecified...*"

After several minutes and two more cigarettes, Artur scanned what he had written, but, unhappy with the results, he kept on scribbling. His hand was already sore from gripping the pen. Was it tension? The stress of writing in English? Jesus, how long had it been since he'd written anything by hand? A word. A line. A stanza. Jesus. It didn't matter, he supposed. It was aimed at cops, not literary critics, but once it was finished he did his best reading the ob out loud back to Dawid.

"From his emigration, Dawid is making clever, bad business in England. Living in squat, he want live like Robin Hood. Make con artist money, live like artist later. He has charity scam. Knocking on house, nice, rich places, saying he is helping for orphans in East of Europe, take things people not want. TV. Furniture. Toy for the children. But Dawid then sell things for profit as opposed and keep the money. The scam so good, he need help of another. One day he make friend from same country, young poet from small town, from village. Not like Dawid the Boss, from capital. Big City Shot. But poet speak good English, which the Boss need badly. So Dawid use Poet and together they grow bad business. Poet not write no more, only work hard. Print leaflets, build website. For fake charity. For fake orphans. Make ID. Buy van, do all documents..."

"You bury us." Dawid's voice was cracking.

"...do all dirty work. Dawid happy. He have drug, girls, enjoy himself. Party all the times. But then his friend who do all the work and have nothing, just this money, decide enough is too much and wish to go home. He buy the ticket and pack and try say goodbye, for Christmas, but Dawid try and stop him. And his friend then, in accident, kill him with knife. Not mean to, but in wrestling. In accident. Now Poet gone. Far far where no one know any language. And so, Amen."

"Madman," Dawid squealed.

"Shh... save your breath. Or at least savour what little of it you got left... You hear me? You

hear my English? Three years of this place. This damned island. And this scrap heap is all we got. Look around you. Thieves. Even our home stolen... I want to write again. I want my tongue back."

"You kill me."

"You're the one!" Artur kept exploding. "You pushed me around! For years! Today! Well, now you pay. And I, I get to go home, for Christmas."

"Ambulance."

"Always thinking of yourself. Little Artur takes care of business while Dawid runs around town, dancing, snorting, cavorting. I stay here, saving. Saving so a time like this I am free. Free to go. To fly. Only you. You think only of you. Well, get the hell."

"Chicken."

"What?"

"Chickening."

"What did you say?"

"Home? Gruzno?" Dawid forced a silent laugh. "Village people."

"Or what, another Christmas of coke and speed and birds and tequila? With you? In a house of nothing but bare brick? No. No more nothing for me. I want to go home."

"Stay..."

"You what?"

"Stay."

"Seat booked. Big bird be taxiing soon." Artur stood up and went over to the old fabric suitcase lying on the floor between them. Dawid was starting to whimper, something Artur did not want to hang around and listen to. Holding the knife in one hand, he unzipped the suitcase and started picking through his handful of possessions. A few clothes. Some books. Dawid's pocket started ringing again. Artur's blue eyes turned cold. Once the muffled ringing subsided, Artur spun the open suitcase so it was right beneath the wounded man's nose. A few chapbooks lay on top of a pile of worn clothes, Artur's name proudly displayed on each one.

"I want to write again, Dawid. My old life back. No one here I can talk with. Read with. Poetry... I am mute."

Dawid's back straightened suddenly. It made Artur flinch. Dawid exhaled deeply, raised his head a little, eyes firmly fixed on his opposite.

"Nothing there."

"What?"

"Poland. Bollocks. Stay here." Dawid gave a long moan, caught his breath, his back as stiff as a rod. "We will make it... This place."

"We already have. We've made it into a tomb."

"Before... Didn't have the means."

"Didn't what?"

"People. Connections."

"You're drowning."

"You read. I spin."

"On what? You sold your decks ages ago!"

"Vinyl dead. CDs dead." Dawid's eyes shut. He bit his bottom lip, blood draining from it. Then his eyes opened again. Slowly. "All I need is my Mac."

Artur was on his feet, circling Dawid, his wiry body animated.

"Don't you get it? After so many years of trying? They don't want us here!"

"They do-"

"Who? In Berlin, Grenoble, but here we are just white trash... No one is listening, Dawid. My tongue. My fucking tongue is dying." Artur returned to the desk, grabbed the knife in one hand, spread the fingers of the other on the desktop and started stabbing between them. Slowly. Slowly. Then a little quicker. Fear of pain made him forget everything for a second. The blade heavy in his

hand. The action of poking it between his digits bringing him energy again. Though he could still hear Dawid whisper.

"We take their guilt... Their goods. We dispose. Recycle."

Artur stopped moving and weighed the weapon in his hand.

"Three years of sending money back home. That's me. Three years of a life shipped away. What have you got to show for it?"

"I play gigs."

"For smack."

"I know people now. Promoters."

"Dealers. Pimps."

"Old stars. New names."

"Old hat. Same old games."

"Always the poet... Gruzno? Nothing there."

"Sure."

"You ran once."

"Now I want to run back."

"Into nothing."

"Not planning to stop long. Just enough to catch my breath. Then I will head out east. To the steppes. Ukraine. Georgia. Write. Send poems home. Write where I don't know the language at all."

"Stay here."

"They breed real poets, the Russians. Feed them on blood and offal and ice. That is where I need to go. Away from this show home. Away from this farce."

"Help me... turn it around."

Artur stared at all the cardboard boxes which had been upturned during their recent struggle. All sorts of bric-a-brac poking from them, clothes, toys, luggage, records. He turned to look at Dawid, then began moving the boxes, setting them around the bowed man.

"Back to you, is it? Always back to you... Tell you what. I will build you a home. A temple. A pyramid. And you know what those were for." Artur kept the boxes moving, the wall around Dawid getting taller. "No more vamping for me. Living off of the blood of fake orphans."

"Artists. Orphans. Polaks." Dawid made no move to stop being surrounded by the slowly rising battlements. "All same."

Artur stopped working for a second, breathed out, then looked straight into Dawid's fading brown eyes.

"Then let my Christmas gift to you be that orphanage we've been telling everyone about. An orphanage for one."

Artur spent some minutes trying to build the tomb, but quit before it was even half-done. The boxes were all of different shapes and weights and his heart was not in the metaphor. He sat down, counting the last few drops of wine, when the noise of someone hammering at the front door downstairs disrupted the silence. For a few moments no one said anything, but when the intruder kept on trying to batter the door down, Artur took a step back and asked,

"Who is that?"

Dawid snorted, quietly, then whispered,

"Answer it."

Artur stood over him without moving.

"Did you tell anyone about this place? We had a deal. Secrecy..." The banging started again, Artur looking down at Dawid with exhausted disgust. "Whoever it is down there, if they come through that door, I will take this knife and stab them too. Then, I'm going to get some petrol from the van and I'm going to torch this place. With both of you in it. Still breathing. Watching from that plane as you all burn to hell."

Artur sat down to another cigarette and another dribble of wine, Dawid watching. When the banging stopped, his eyes began to slowly shut. Artur got up, flicking his lighter theatrically, but before he was able to cross the room, the sound of a sash window crashing open downstairs was followed by the loud rattle of footsteps running up the stairs. Then a voice, an angry female shriek calling out in Polish,

“Dawid! Dawid! Where the hell are you?”

Artur span round, grabbed the knife off the desk, concealing it in his blazer, then sat back down again, shouting invitingly,

“In here!”

The door opened slowly, then the head of a pretty young woman poked in, her metallic make-up, raven-dyed hair and angry eyes all sparkling.

“What the hell are you two... Dawid?”

“Help, Nat.”

The girl opened the door wider, stepped in and stood over the kneeling man.

“Baby?”

“Ambulance.”

“Jesus,” Nat fell towards Dawid, trying to pull his hands away from his body, but the blood seeping down his side onto the bare floorboards set hers poised equally stiff. “What the fuck...”

“Ambulance.”

“What...”

“Ambulance.”

“Artur?”

“Get help.”

“Artur!? What the fuck?”

Artur was standing as far back as the large room allowed, keeping an eye on Nat's panicked gestures. He noticed she hadn't come alone, but the stocky, plain blonde standing in the doorway, motionless, did not appear to present a threat.

“Nothing,” he mumbled.

“Fuck nothing, what did you do?!”

“I have to go.”

“Go where?” Nat shrieked.

“He tried to stop me.”

“Stop you?!”

“I have a flight to catch. He tried to stop me. Taking the piss. Same as always. Artur the Poet. Artur the Pussy.”

“What's wrong with him? What did you do?”

“A knife.”

“Call an ambulance, now!”

“You get the medics down here, you know who else will follow.”

“Is he hurt?”

Dawid groaned. The pain shooting through his body was silent, but everyone in the room flinched as his back straightened and froze there. Nat sat back on her heels, reeling. The blonde girl took a step into the room. Where Nat was short, skinny, her black hair long and greasy, this girl was tall and plump, a long, pale coat concealing as much flesh as Nat was exposing with her mini and tight little leather jacket.

“Nat, what's going on here?,” the girl asked in a hushed, careful tone. Nat ignored her, focused solely on Dawid.

“Jesus, baby, I was trying to ring. I knew something was wrong when you didn't answer. I should have known.”

“Who is your friend?” Artur asked. Nat jumped to her feet, pulling a mobile phone from her

jacket.

"I have to call Stan. He will know what to do."

Before she could dial, Artur stepped towards her, one hand brandishing the knife, snatching her phone with the other.

"Nobody is calling anybody. Now, get Dawid's phone. In his inside jacket pocket." Seeing the blade, all the fury seemed to go out of Nat, tiny pupils focused on the gleaming metal. "Move!"

Nat did not do as ordered. Her eyes, locked on the knife, started to run with tears, the rivulets lined with mascara. The suddenness of this involuntary reaction made Artur freeze too. Something about seeing the blade seemed to steal the life out of her. Moving around her, Artur stepped forward, reached into Dawid's jacket and pulled the mobile out himself.

"Friend." Artur addressed the blonde girl directly, "What's your name?"

"Maja," she whispered.

"Pleased to meet you, Maja. Now, give me your phone."

"No." The refusal was frightened, yet firm.

"Give me the phone or I will fucking do you like I did him."

Artur squared up to the girl. She must have weighed at least as much as he did. The odds were stacked against everyone, but eventually she took a few hesitant steps across the room and handed him her little white and pink handset. All three phones in his hand, Artur blinked nervously, then dumped the lot on the bare floor and stamped them into loud slivers of broken plastic.

"Why did you do that?" Maja asked.

"Cos you is too stupid to use it wisely." Artur mimicked her Silesian accent, knife hanging limply in his hand. "I have a plane to catch and now... Now I can't."

"Fuck home," Dawid mumbled.

"Yes, indeed," Artur said. "Can't leave you here alone, now that you have these two fine whores for company, can I?"

"Whores? What are you talking about?"

Artur looked up, considering Maja's rebuttal. She looked genuinely shocked.

"How long have you been in London?"

"What's that got-"

"Where are you from?"

"What business is it of yours?"

"Let me guess," he said, nervously lighting a fresh cigarette. "You're from some small town, or maybe a big town, from the suburbs. Some housing estate, probably, doesn't matter. First generation big city dwellers. You finished school, not sure what to study next, family not rich enough to let you fuck about, go to uni just for the hell of it, right?" Maja was silent, Nat kneeling next to Dawid, arms wrapped round herself. "So you thought you would come to England, for a year or two. Save some money. Meet some nice people. Go back, your English all improved. Horizons broadened."

"What is wrong with that?"

"What are your life plans, Maja? Dentist's assistant? Travel agent? Does it matter?" Artur seemed to be getting into his inquisitor role. "Anyway, you got off the coach this morning? Tired, stiff? Twenty four hours of motorway takes its toll, right? Victoria International Station. Sounded so good, looked so grotty. First time in England? Tired and lost? You sat down to have a drink in the first café you came across and there was Nat. Chit-chatting, life and soul, such a sweet girl, right? You shared a coffee, maybe even a bit of cake? Then Nat took you to the pub opposite. Bought you a double, to relax muscles after all that sitting, said there were some friends who might help you find a job? A home? Show you round? Take you places? Nice places. Shopping. Drinking. Eating. Am I right?"

"And?"

"Jesus, the girl doesn't even know when she's being groomed." Artur stared at Dawid. "I told

you when you got involved with Nat, didn't I? Told you it was too heavy. We were just two idiot hustlers. Piss artists."

"Shut it," Dawid whispered.

"But no, you had to get all gangster about it. Start shagging the big man's girl. Thinking you were going to steal her away too." Now Nat looked up at Artur, mascara running down trembling cheeks. "I know, Nat. I know you are fucked, like all of us. But this can't go on. I have to get the hell out of here."

After a few silent moments, Maja looked at Artur.

"My sister is waiting for me. She's expecting-"

"Must be nice for her. Her first, is it?"

"Expecting my arrival."

Artur looked at her with disdain.

"Your sister live in England?"

"Yes."

"Where?"

"I am not telling you."

"You're lying."

"I never lie."

"You did just then."

"She's going to come looking for me."

"Your sister have this address?"

"No, but she can trace me... through my sim card, my phone. Even if it's switched off. Even if you take out the sim card. Or break the handset."

Artur sniggered.

"No, you can't. The police can order traces, if they get a judge to OK it, but your sister can't lift a pinkie to help you."

"I read about it in the papers. Anyone can just log on-"

"Do you know what we do here, Maja? Dawid and I? We run a scam. Going round people's houses, collecting donations. Ripping them off... I've done my homework. I know what the cops can and can't trace. You think the English are dumb? You think their cops are dumb? Anyway, fuck all that. Now I have a problem. I have to get to the airport. But then again, I got you two angels of mercy here. Witnesses. And what do smart thieves do with witnesses?"

"Go," Maja said. "We won't tell anyone."

"Tell anyone what? That there is a Polak guilty of murder on a plane to Krakow right now? Sure, you will keep all that to yourself. Honest."

"He needs help."

"He got it. He got three years of me babysitting him. And look what a fine job I done." Artur took the last swig of wine and threw the bottle across the room, where it thudded off a wall and landed in the thick of the boxes. "We were going to convert this place into a pop-up theatre. Have performances, readings. Gigs. But that is all a dream. All a big mystery. How did we fuck up? How did we manage to make three years rot without us noticing the stink? How... Now, how the hell to get away from all this." Artur looked up at Maja. She was trembling, but holding his gaze. "I just want to go home now. Christmas, you know... Then go travelling. But not west. East instead. Belarus. Ukraine. Georgia. People think differently there. Harsh, but honest. A man can write strong verse in such conditions. But now, I have to consider. Have to work my way out of all of this."

Maja watched Artur fidgeting, rubbing his face, running his hands through his hair, doing everything but look like a man planning his next complex move.

"What time is your flight?"

"Soon enough."

Maja scanned the room, her eyes coming to rest on Nat's back, propped up against Dawid.

"You think we will call the police the moment you leave us."

"I'm not leaving you."

"Why would we call the police?"

"Because Nat will want an ambulance and when you call an ambulance in situations like this, the law arrives first."

"We'll be gone by then."

"Who?"

"Me and Nat. We will leave him here, then call for help. From a payphone. You took our mobiles."

"Then he will tell them."

"He won't tell anyone a thing. Look at him."

"I'm not taking that chance. Dawid, you hear me? I am not giving you that much!" Artur was twiddling the last cigarette from the packet of Marlboros. "We were supposed to be the good guys. Taking from the comfy classes, turning profit into art. But we've done nothing. None of that! Well, Dawid here has. Just drank and snorted his way through our fortune. I sent money home. For medicine. My uncle. Pancreatic cancer. Doctors took all that money, and nothing. He's still sick. I want to see him one last time, this Christmas."

"Why don't you go? Catch your plane."

Suddenly, Artur jumped up, started rifling through the cardboard boxes.

"Got loads of packing tape here."

"What for?"

"I could tie both of you up."

"What?"

"Hands, feet, chatty little lips. Then, when I get to the airport, when I am through the gates and have a rum and coke or something in my hand, I will call and tell the law where you two are. Or better yet, I will call Stan. Yes. Tell him where his lost property is."

Maja put her hands out in a pacifying, open-palmed gesture and asked,

"Listen. What is your name again?"

"Scum," Artur spat out.

"What?"

"My name is scum!" Artur screamed, still trying to find the tape.

"This is like one of those tests," Maja's frightened voice filled the penetrating silence.

"Those puzzles. With the river and the chicken and the wolf and that."

"What?"

"You know, like in maths classes. Systems thinking. You have to get the animals across the river in a boat, but you have to do it so they don't eat each other."

"What animals are you going on about?!"

"No need to shout," Maja contered. "Only trying to help."

Artur stared at her, sensing he was starting to lose authority.

"How is that?"

"You want to catch your flight. Right? Nat wants to get her man to help. And I want to get to my sisters for Christmas. Now we have to work out the sequence. The order of things. Like in the puzzle, where the man has one boat and three animals to get across the river. A chicken, a wolf and... something that eats wolves."

"Nothing eats wolves."

Maja forced calm steadiness into her voice.

"I bet I can find a way to get you to that airport."

"I bet I have some very strong packing tape round here somewhere. Strong enough to shut you up."

“What time is your flight?”

“A few hours left. Lots of time.”

“What if I go with you?”

Artur stood still, lost among all his boxed possessions, staring at the bloody mess in the middle of the room. Time was running out. Cigarette and wine all gone. Folding his thin arms over the chest, Artur drummed his fingers against his bottom lip, little jolts of nervous tension running up his spine, making him blink uncontrollably.

“What are you talking about? Why can't I find the bloody tape?”

“I could come with you. You could get on the plane, see I don't do or call anyone.”

“Why are you here?” Artur countered.

“What do you mean?”

“Why aren't you home? With your parents? Your loved ones?”

“My sister...”

“Your sister is abroad! In exile! This is a time for being where you belong. Not crossing continents. Not adventuring... You think I don't know what would happen the moment we got to that airport?”

“What do you think will happen?”

“What are you, some kind of shrink?”

Maja stared at Artur, crouching on his chair, with genuine concern.

“I teach in a school. A special school. Kids with bad backgrounds. Didn't come here looking for work. Only to spend Christmas with my sister.”

“Right.”

“Let me help you.”

“You worry about yourself. That's what you need to start doing.”

“I promise, I won't...”

“I promise, I won't,” Artur teased back. “What am I going to do when I get to confession tomorrow? Tell me that. Say I stabbed my best friend? My compatriot?” Artur's gaze was now focused on some far off place. Maja took a step back, slowly edging towards the door.

“It was an accident. You said so yourself.”

“Maybe...” Artur closed his eyes. “No one will ever know. No one will care. What some lousy little alien did to another in an old, abandoned mansion.”

“Let us go,” Maja's voice was trembling, but she was keeping it strong.

“Can't,” Artur's refusal sounded weak, his hands unsteady, his eyes darting everywhere but at the others in the room. “I should tie you all up. Cut you all up.”

“I have nothing to do with this...”

“No.”

“My sister.”

Maja realised tears were running down Artur's cheeks.

“I've been listening to everyone else tell me what I it is want since I was little. All of you. Telling me what I am and ain't. Parents. Teachers. Priests. Critics. Well, I'm tired. I just want to sit! And write!”

Maja was still walking slowly backwards, towards the open door. Artur looked up, but though Maja kept moving away from him, he did not budge.

“Shit...” He had meant to say something else, something dark and convincing, but instead he watched Maja take a few more steps back towards the door, then vanish. He could hear the sound of her suitcase being dragged back down the stairs, then his own sobbing. Which was OK. He had earned himself a good cry.

The pile of phone debris lay silent on the floor. Nat settled next to Dawid, the room still. Artur did not know how long he had been sitting at the desk, the blade and the bottle dry, his pen

too.

“I don't know...” he said quietly, but had no idea how to finish the sentence. He wanted to act, take charge, lock them all in here, run for the road, for the taxi which should by now have been waiting for him, soon enough, but his body refused to move. Out of the corner of a water-filled eye, he noticed Nat had risen to her feet. She was trying to say something, but he couldn't hear her. Then, she was screaming right at him. Screaming her heart and lungs and fear out, but all he could do was smile. Silently. Because of all the choices left him, all the things he could still think of doing, he too just felt like howling.

I'LL SEE YOU IN THE DARK

It was the smell that woke her each morning. Kinga could shut her eyes against the mansion, mute noises with expensive earplugs, but there was nothing she could do about breathing in. Burnt bread, burnt mushrooms, burnt tomatoes, all burnt in burnt butter. Though of Polish descent, Countess Lucja shallow fried her breakfasts true English style, and the worse her mood, the worse her cooking. There would come a day, Kinga thought, when the Countess' angst would set half of Kensington on fire, and hoped the smell, as awful as it was, would at least serve as warning before the flames reached her bedroom.

She had once again overslept. The echo of champagne and scotch on her tongue, mixed with the smell of scorched food and guilt for waking late yet again, turned her stomach. Pulling the plugs from her ears, she listened to the thumping of Chopin from the reception room beneath her bed, waiting for the world to spin. Somehow, the hangover hadn't arrived yet. She felt curiously fine, a bad omen for the afternoon, considering how many shots Patty had stood her during their pre-Christmas Piccadilly pub crawl the night before.

Still half-wrapped in her quilt, she forced her eyes wide open and glanced at the orange curtains. They covered the window completely, but by the quality of their colour each morning she could tell what the sky would be like on the other side. They were bright orange today, and made Kinga breathe a little easier as she looked around a bedroom which appeared to be covered in snow already. Cupboards painted ivory, shelves vanilla, the wardrobe-style washroom in the corner glistening white. Only the oriental rug flamed beneath her bed with lush, organic reds and golds.

Sitting at the top of the stairs, arms now wrapped round a heavy bannister, she watched the Countess hobbling around downstairs. From the kitchen to the reception. From the reception to the dining room. From the dining room back to the kitchen. The old woman's bones and memories would not let her sleep for more than a few hours a night. Kinga was on hand to provide the appropriate medication, but she could do nothing about the pills' effectiveness. Apart from the stench of burnt food, the suburban mansion had an odour all of its own – dull, sweet, ancient. Every piece of carpet, every lampshade, every inch of skirting board and picture rail and sculpted coving sweated the smell of a true suburban English home. She couldn't trace it to any cleaning products or pot pourri or human influence, but all of the neighbouring houses smelt the same. Regal. Alien to her.

Seeing the Countess rush from the dining room to the kitchen with a huge carving knife, Kinga stumbled down the stairs to stop the old woman hurting herself. By the time she caught up, the knife had been discarded on the worktop and the Countess was locked in the small side toilet, bowels making all sorts of unearthly noises. Kinga looked at the carnage of the morning. Everything had been dragged out of the designer fridge, most of it fried, next to nothing eaten. “Big breakfasts are the key to a fine figure” the old woman kept telling her, even though neither of them ever ate much, or had an ounce of spare body fat between them.

Kinga had not been hired to clean the house or shop or cook for the Countess, but she always did it anyway, out of simple generosity and boredom. Having tidied up a little, she turned to the cupboard which housed her landlady-cum-patient's medicines. As she was measuring out the morning dose, the Countess reappeared.

“Model for me this morning.” Countess Lucja stared at Kinga with watery, fading eyes, her dark clothing already streaked with clay dust. Since her eyesight had started fading, she had switched hobbies from painting to sculpture, convinced what her eyes could no longer communicate to canvas her fingers would mould into existence.

“Good morning. Medicine time, your highness.”

The old woman held her cupped hand as steady as she could, accepted the half-dozen pills,

then washed them down with a glass of Chablis.

“Stop making fun of me and make yourself useful. That stupid Hungarian rugby player cancelled again.”

Half a century ago, Kinga thought, the top of the Countess' head might have reached her shoulders. Today, she looked down at the old woman as she might a child.

“Your tea party is tonight. We have the tree to dress, food to prepare.”

“Caterers will take care of all that, and Ewa can make herself useful putting up the tree. Yes, that will teach her. Wrestling needles, ha! Come along girl, don't be a prude.”

Hands drowning in a sink full of suds, piles of food still waiting to be put away, Kinga paused to consider. She had seen other people come and go, posing for the Countess, and had felt sorry for them all. The large conservatory at the back of the house, filled with light from the all-glass extension, was always cold. The artist herself had kept it so, boasting about the frozen nipples and shrivelled cocks she liked to inflict upon her subjects. Kinga tried to imagine herself naked in front of the old vamp, exposed before anyone who could see into the conservatory from neighbouring houses, and shook her head.

“No, thank you. And those.”

Without looking up, the old woman scooped the rest of the pills from the counter and swallowed with a violent jerk of her silver head.

“Do it, child, or I will find someone else to look after me.”

Kinga looked down at her employer and felt ridiculous, like a parent being patronised by their own insufferably rude offspring.

“I am a fully qualified nurse, not a cleaner. Or a stripper.”

The Countess returned her stare, a nasty grin playing on her lips.

“Twenty pounds an hour. On top of your wages. That is what I pay the others. And don't you bloody dare ask for more.” Kinga held the Countess' gaze. “All right. Thirty. It is Christmas, after all...”

Kinga shut her door, fell back onto the unmade bed, trying to stop her head from spinning, then opened the brand-new laptop her parents had sent her to make up for the hurt her first Christmas away from home was going to cause. The computer started up and hunted around for available networks to leech onto. Yawning wide, without covering her mouth, just the way her mother had always told her not to, Kinga dragged her bare feet to the so-called walk-in toilet. You opened a door and there it was – a mirror and a narrow washbasin fixed to the wall. Nothing to walk into, as such. She thought about pulling the curtain back, letting all light in, but didn't. Couldn't quite yet face herself in the mirror. Though the fear was not strong, she worried that living alone with a woman sixty years her senior might be ageing her too.

She let the hot tap run through, scrubbed her pale skin with a little more force than it needed, then rinsed with cold water to close the pores and keep her skin protected against winter elements. She then stumbled towards the window, shoved the curtain aside, threw open the heavy sash window and thought of her parents' little house on the outskirts of Lodz, where snow had already fallen and the tree had already been cut and presents long ago prepared.

The actual sun before her this morning had cleared the roofs of the vast suburban homes whose backs were turned against the faded greys of the Countess' designer orchard. It tickled her forehead, then brows, then blinded her a little, but she squinted and breathed heavily and let it sneak down to her lips. Good God, how drunk am I still, she thought to herself, both cold and strangely feverish at the same time. She wanted to kiss the sun, and ask it to pull her free of this horrid house, sail her over the winter air and home for Christmas tomorrow. She would then shop with people she cared about, cook for those she loved, eat Christmas Eve supper and exchange presents and sing midnight carols among faces she had not seen for half a year.

She glanced at her mobile. No calls. No texts. She didn't want to feel like her life back in

Poland was fading and her life in England failing to start, but that's how it was every time she looked at the little screen and saw no handset and no envelope icons flashing. Kinga reached for the golden packet of cigarettes on the night table and lit up. Then exhaled relief. Icy blue smoke twisted art-nouveau trails across the orange and the white around her and she delighted in this moment of selfish weakness. The Countess could go to hell, if she wasn't there already.

A hopeful glance at the computer screen. A dozen Christmas greetings on Facebook. A few emails with digital cards attached, including one from Patty. Did that woman have nothing better to do? Kinga was about to delete it without reading, but it came with an attachment. A photo. It opened slowly. The two of them dancing, champagne glasses in hand, in some club off Shaftesbury Avenue last night. Celebrating six months of what they both, semi-jokingly, referred to as "exile". They had travelled to England together in search of professional nursing work, both cheated by Polish work agents into accepting home care placements as a necessary step into proper nursing. Patrycja, or Patty, as she now liked to be called, had it even worse than Kinga, working long hours in an old people's home in a grim part of South London. Kinga had her Countess and the Kensington mansion and dresses the old woman let her borrow. Vintage designer gowns, shoes and accessories. In the photo, Kinga was wearing a light blue silk number, tied at the waist with a peach shawl, and felt she looked happy. Dancing always helped lift her mood, as did champagne, and although they couldn't afford such expensive nights out, men always swarmed round her to pay for drinks and watch her dance. She was so free, so graceful on the dance floor, few ever tried to partner her, preferring to stand back and watch. Something she was always too shy to admit to liking.

But now the year was ending, it was time for a little honesty. She knew she was beautiful, but that wouldn't last forever. She knew she was poor and needed the money the Countess would pay her for modelling, if only to spend it on others. And she knew the Countess didn't expect her to rise to the challenge, was only inviting her to pose because she hoped Kinga would feel guilty about refusing.

She walked into the icy studio wearing a bra and knickers as close to flesh colour as she could find, then stepped onto the dusty white platform set up in the middle of the room. The Countess, carrying the massive carving knife, took one look at Kinga and shrugged.

"What, too bashful to go all the way in front of an old woman?"

"It's always cold in here. I'd rather not..."

"I am not sculpting a lingerie catalogue," the Countess complained, dropping the knife next to a lump of fresh clay, circling Kinga, stepping around a mess of pots, spatulas and sketches which littered the floor. "You should eat more, girl. Though these days skinny is sexier than slim, eh? Your flesh could use some light too."

With each word Kinga grew more tense, stretched out on the wicker sofa set upon the white platform.

"What time are the caterers arriving?"

"Hush, child. Ewa said last night they'd be here by twelve. We have plenty of time. And anyway, so what if they get here early. Those boys would not mind seeing what I am seeing now." Something in the old voice caught Kinga's attention. The Countess was coarse, but her compliments were somehow worth more to her than those of a hundred drunk businessmen. "Now, get undressed."

Kinga suddenly remembered the legend of Princess Potocka, who bathed in the blood of murdered virgins in order to preserve the beauty of her own skin. There were other details to the myth, something about torture and live blood-letting and other things Kinga did not want to pursue through memory right now. Instead, she steeled her nerves against the gaze which pored over her. The Countess pulled up a rickety stool and perched herself atop it, sipping from her glass of early bubbly. Kinga steadied her voice, which rang clear in the cold air.

"I'd rather not."

"I am paying you to model, not argue with me."

"Well, then don't pay me at all. You are sculpting, not making a skin flick."

The old woman smiled, then again approached and stared at the young flesh before her. Silent. Kinga felt the anger inside her was suddenly visible and blushed. Then felt even more angry for the reaction. The Countess' pale eyes did not seem to register. Certainly did not care. They dug into Kinga with strange hunger.

"Where did you go last night? Meet any nice men?"

"Pardon?"

"Don't think I haven't noticed. You've been here since September and not once have you stayed out. Or brought any men back with you."

"I didn't think I was allowed to."

"You never asked."

"Countess, please. I am not up to mind games this morning."

"Hung over? Or did the search for Prince Charming turn up nothing but frogs last night?"

The Countess lit one of her little cigars and stared straight through Kinga. "You have the body of a gymnast. It could bag a socialite husband at the drop of one of my pretty hats. I could introduce you, you know. This afternoon. At the tea party. I know plenty of wealthy mothers with sons to marry off."

"No, thank you."

"Don't you like pleasure, girl?"

Kinga straightened her back and tried to project as much pride into the pale room as her semi-naked flesh allowed.

"I do, but I there are more complex things in life I'm after."

"Like what?" The Countess sounded genuinely surprised.

"Well, I became a nurse for a reason."

"The sexy uniforms?"

"The chance to help people."

"Rich men are people too, you know."

"I came here to do something new with my skills."

"And nothing else?"

"For the experience. And the adventure. But yes, work mainly. Mrs Ewa's website promised me a nursing placement, in a hospital, within three months. It has now been six."

"Ah, yes. The heartbreak of the exiled young."

Realising she was being stripped naked, whether she liked it or not, Kinga shot back,

"You too were exiled once..."

The Countess got up and took a few steps back, exhaling dragon smoke and letting her faded eyes drift over Kinga.

"That was a long time ago and, as far as I am concerned, none of it true anyway."

"But you came here after the War?"

"I survived. Just. And not by saying no to men of means."

"How old were you then?"

"Not old enough... Once the slaughter was over, I seduced the first English diplomat stationed in Warsaw I could, married the idiot and came here. Then found more upper class twits to charm. That is why I have what I have. This house, this attitude, and my title. When I was your age, I was a pretty little nothing too. You want to ask yourself, girl, as time starts to fly by, whether being nice is the best way to brave a world like ours."

Kinga returned the hard gaze, trying not to flinch, too tired not to argue.

"Had you... never cared for any of the men you were with?"

"There was one. Left behind. In all that rubble. A real man. Though he was still just a boy

back then... Stupid. Heroic... He was never going to last.” The Countess had started chopping lumps of clay using the carving knife, her tiny body shaking with the effort. “If you were cute and without too many scruples back then, you could live in relative peace. All soldiers are interested in the same thing. But then the idiots, on both sides, had to go out with bang. Warsaw before the War was like Berlin. A pleasure dome. It's been nothing since.”

The Countess fell silent. Kinga started to ease into her semi-exposed flesh, imagining herself to be a queen of the past, a goddess painted and sculpted over and over again and exhibited in the palaces and mansion houses of her pre-War homeland. Then she heard the Countess give a surprised gasp. She opened her eyes to see the old woman's back trembling.

“I... think it's time you did a little nursing.” The old voice was firm, if a little hollow. Then the tiny body folded and fell to the floor, without any sound whatsoever.

Twenty minutes later, a friendly ambulance crew, in emerald green uniforms and standard issue latex gloves, were walking Kinga long the corridors of the local A&E department, helping her push the wheelchair carrying the Countess and her two semi-severed fingers towards reception. They had spent the journey comparing hospitals in their respective countries, Kinga feeling more at home after five minutes in that mobile lab than she did after six months in the old woman's mansion.

The waiting room was large and strangely full. It seemed Kinga and the Countess were not the only ones suffering from the aftermath of pre-Christmas boozing. She could hear Irish, Cockney, Caribbean and Scottish accents. There were also faces which were not of the Commonwealth. East Europeans, the men in their baggy jeans, the women in tight skirts and impossibly high heels. Arab migrants, children lying quietly in their mothers' arms, the men chain smoking outside. African couples, the men tall and distant, the women watching everything closely, big, bright eyes peeking from beneath scarves and long eyelashes. The staff floating about were just as diverse: Asian nurses, Arab doctors, Indian nurses, South American doctors. Kinga watched the crowd with silent delight. The only type she could not see among the professionals were her own, Slav kind.

“Jesus and Mary,” the Countess whispered under her breath in Polish, loud enough for Kinga to hear. “Where did all these worms crawl out from?”

Two tall policemen came in to interview an elderly Irishman about why he had been found asleep in the middle of the road some hours back. As they were trying to conduct their inquiry, a drunk, middle-aged Englishman and his tiny, mixed-race girlfriend kept butting in, making jokes about all Irishmen doing such stupid things. The police officers ignored them, but the couple only laughed louder at their own jibes. Kinga watched as the policemen, hands dug into their stab-proof vests, turned and politely asked them to keep quiet for the sake of others waiting. When the request went unheeded, they turned to the Englishman and asked to have a word outside. His face turned blood red as he started shouting, mouth foaming, spit flying at the two officers. Joking this, fucking that, pricks and ain't done nothing and go catch some proper criminals. The room went quiet, everyone captivated. Everyone except the two coppers who didn't twitch a muscle, simply waited for the bile to boil off and let the man walk himself outside. None of them returned.

“What a disgrace. Glad I have private healthcare for all my other needs,” the Countess seethed. “Even Churchill was a liberal to start with. He soon learnt.”

“Learnt what?”

“Empires were not built on political correctness. The horror of this place. Conrad was right. Our own Count Korzeniowski.”

“Conrad was horrified by the likes of you, not the likes of them.”

The Countess turned her grey head to look at Kinga, who did not return the gaze.

“Keep your pretty mouth shut and your opinions to yourself, child. What you will yet know of the world might surprise you. In time. Have same adventures. Have some children. Then you will

know its darker linings.”

Kinga focused on the immense variety of faces around them. Wondering what their different skins must feel like to touch, to wrap in bandages, to measure and pierce with needles and stroke to make the pain go away again. What they smelled like, what their laughter sounded like, what light their children's eyes shone with.

“Have you seen how many women nurses there are here, and how few women doctors?”

“We are emotional creatures. Men are ruthless. Leave the scalpels to them.”

“Pardon?”

Perhaps weakened by shock or blood loss, perhaps simply too disgusted by what she was seeing around her, the Countess did not elaborate. Instead, she went into an evident sulk, edging away from Kinga on the hard metal bench.

Mrs Ewa suddenly rushed into the waiting room, shouting into her mobile. Kinga closed her eyes, unable to look at her dumpy little employer. The woman who had conned her into taking this “nursing position”, her multi-coloured perm, her battered Prada handbag, forced her way to the Countess' side, fat eyelids squashed with fake concern.

“Countess, how awful. How awful! How are you? And Kinga, why are you not dressed?”

Kinga's eyes opened, but she did not have the strength to explain. Or the desire. So she was sitting in A&E reception wearing a pair of white trainers and a bathrobe. So what? Seeing the look of patronising disgust in Mrs Ewa's eyes, Kinga suddenly felt very comfortable in spite of the cold.

“Stop fussing, Ewa.” The Countess' voice was unforgiving. “Thankfully, I wasn't strong enough to cut through bone. It doesn't even hurt much.”

“Oh, what a disaster, what a disaster! And just one day before Christmas. How can that be? Kinga, I want you to take the Mercedes, go back to the house and wait for the delivery. You will take my bank card, take out five hundred pounds and pay whatever the delivery man wants. But get a bloody receipt! And when you park by the bank, make sure you pay for the space. If you get a ticket, it is your wages it is coming out of, not mine.” Still slightly hungover, Kinga kept a subtly ridiculing gaze fixed firmly on her employer, the round little woman now kneeling on the lino, holding the Countess' bandaged hand in a loving grasp. “Take the keys from my purse. I will stay here and watch over the Countess.”

Kinga nodded, her long hair falling over her face, concealing her amusement.

“What time is the food arriving again?”

“Twelve, like I told you. Though the idiots are usually late, so don't let that fool you!”

“Well, will you believe it? Four, four and a half hours!” Mrs Ewa was right at the top of her vocal range, theatricals fuelled with an excess of post-lunch Baileys. “An eighty...” she caught herself, “an elderly woman, a war veteran, being kept waiting that long! What on earth have we come to?”

Having left the hospital earlier, Kinga had driven the Merc around for an hour, then left the food the delivery men had dropped off packed and unsorted, followed by a long bath with a cigarette and her first glass of champagne around noon. Mrs Ewa had tried bullying her into preparing and serving food, but Kinga had not let her into the bathroom, safely submerged in the Countess' vast, cast-iron bath. While Mrs Ewa rang around, desperately trying to find staff for the party, Kinga had taken her time dressing, selecting a most elegant black chiffon dress and a pair of vintage high heels. Sitting opposite the Countess, she knew she had the eyes of everyone at the table constantly stealing glances her way, though she tried to ignore and not let them make her blush.

Kinga stared down the vast conservatory which stretched far into the garden behind the Countess' mansion. A dining table long enough to sit thirty, but accommodating at least fifty, had been set up. The sun hadn't quite descended yet and already the plates were almost empty, the dishes set in the centre, an hour ago filled with meats, salads and other traditional Polish cuisine, now dishevelled and fading quickly. The guests, served regular helpings of frozen vodka, were

either laughing or mumbling sadly along with Ewa, depending on the response required. The Countess, sitting at the far end of the table, had said little all evening, infecting the atmosphere with deep and distinctly un-Christmas-like gloom.

The seating arrangement could be cut four ways. At the far end, the head of the table, the Countess and her sherry-fuelled grief. To her left, the old, “upper class” guard of London's Polonia population, the Majors and the Colonels and the Ladies who had gone West during the War and could not go back behind the Iron Curtain. Opposite them, the emigre “middle class”, either born to those on the left or escaped from communism, now comfortable with their plum accents and German cars and kids in private schools. They had just one thing in common – a shared distaste for what they saw as the hoi polloi among them, those most recently arrived, not running from the Nazis or the Stalinists – in this case, represented only by Kinga, sat at the opposite end of the table to the Countess.

There was the odd English person brought along, appearing to politely enjoy the remains of the meal, while all of the conversation around them took place in Polish. Kinga shut her tired eyes against the glare from the crystal chandeliers and the glitter of tinsel tied to every feature and fitting, distancing her mind from the words still spilling from Mrs Ewa's mouth, trying to absorb herself in the music being gently played by a young violinist seated in the studio next to the conservatory. However, another loud Polish voice disturbed her listening pleasure.

“Every Christmas, the Jewish BMW salesman in Golders Green makes me an offer I cannot refuse.” Cezary, the owner of a chain of cut-price delicatessens had been hitting on Kinga for some time and was now boasting to those less well off than himself. “Why would I need a new car every year? It's them who seem to need the sales. But, they take the old car in and give me a shiny new one every year, so who am I to complain?”

Kinga shoved her chair back away from the table, its metal legs scraping against the marble floor, and went out into the side study where the young violinist was playing. She stood in the doorway, sipping champagne, shocked at how sober she felt. These last few weeks she had drowned thoughts of her parents back home in all sorts of booze, but today none of it seemed to be working.

“Would you like a drink?” Kinga asked in Polish.

The bearded musician could not have been much older than her, floppy hair falling over his round-framed glasses as he smiled and shook his head, never interrupting his playing. Kinga walked up to the hi-fi system in the corner of the study and selected something from the Countess' Chopin collection, upping the volume slowly until it drowned out the real music.

“Do you smoke?” she asked, offering her packet of imported lights. The musician smiled and nodded. She gestured for him to follow her outside.

“Kinga.”

“Bartek.”

The young man shook Kinga's hand, trembling a little in the cold of the darkening garden, then let Kinga light his cigarette for him.

“Did you study violin here or in Poland?”

“Both. First in Katowice, then I came here to do some busking in the summer.”

“You live from that?”

“No,” Bartek laughed, the ice between them melting. “A passing lecturer from the Northern College of Music heard me playing at Manchester train station. Had me audition that same week.”

“Wow.”

“Yes. Scary. It was during holidays, but they opened the school just to hear me play. I think they liked me. Paid full scholarship, so...”

“So, you are here, playing for the Countess.”

“For the cash. I finished my studies two years ago. Still haven't found a job with any orchestras here.”

“And back home?”

“All the musical seats taken. And I have a baby to feed, so...”

Kinga watched the young man shaking in the cold. Her bare arms were pale too, but somehow she didn't seem to feel anything today.

“You should at least have a shot of vodka then. On the house. Perk of the musician's job.”

“I can't. I'm driving back tonight.”

“Back to Manchester?”

“No, we live in London now, but tonight we're driving home. For Christmas. My son hasn't been there yet. Born in the summer.”

“Congratulations.”

“We wanted to stay here, but our folks refused to hear it. So we are driving out tonight. If we hurry, we should be there in time for supper tomorrow.”

“Wonderful.”

“And you? What do you do?”

“I was a nurse, back in Poland. Now I am a nanny... Would you take me with you?”

“Where?”

“Home.”

“Tonight?”

“Yes. I will pay you.” Kinga wondered whether she could sound sober enough to also sound serious. “I mean it. I can't stand another night in this house. I want to come with you... if possible.” Bartek did not look remotely keen.

“Where do you need to go?”

“Lodz. I too want to see my parents.”

“I am driving to Gdynia. Other side of the country.”

“Oh. Well, maybe I could get a train.”

“Christmas. Everything will be shut.”

“Yes. True.”

“Besides, we only have a tiny little Volkswagen. And it will be loaded with presents, and the baby in the back.”

“I understand.”

“My wife is stressed enough as it is, driving through the night, and she's still breastfeeding. Going to be a marathon if we're to make it on time. We should have left this morning, but this gig came up and the Countess pays in cash.”

“Don't worry.” Kinga turned her eyes to the darkening skies. “It would just have been nice to see home.”

“No one else in there driving? Lots of Poles I know do it. Maybe you should ask.”

Kinga knew almost no one inside. No one she could ask. In a moment, the first star would appear in the sky. Tomorrow, that first star would be the sign that they could all sit down to proper Christmas Eve supper. Could she steal Mrs Ewa's Merc? Stupid. Or buy a last minute plane ticket? With half a million Poles in the UK, the few hundred seats going would have sold out months ago. Trains would take too long. She might get half way across to Germany and then find all the trains to Poland booked out. Christmas in Berlin seemed like a romantic idea, but not alone while trying to get home.

Bartek seemed even sadder in the silence which fell between them. Kinga smiled and rubbed her hand along his arm for warmth and assurance.

“I hope you get home safely. Will you be playing for your family tomorrow?”

“Yes. Of course. Brings back the magic of my father playing when I was little. He passed away last year. A conductor. Young, but he liked his drink.”

Sat back at the head of the table, Kinga had not made eye contact with anyone for some

time. She had tried to listen to the violin playing next door, but the noise of voices and clinking cutlery and stupid laughter kept overwhelming the strings. Now, only one thought mattered.

"Is anyone here driving home for Christmas?" She had stood up and made her voice more than loud enough to be heard by everyone, including Mrs Ewa and the Countess, both at the far end of the table. "Home, meaning Poland."

"Me!" A few people had put their hands up, but the only one to answer out loud was Cezary. Kinga looked down to see his moustachioed, porcelain grin. Refusing to give in to despair, she smiled, shoved her chair his way, then sat back down beside him.

"Take me with you." Without making eye contact, she realised she was playing with her champagne flute and her voice, making the request a demand, a seduction.

"Sure. I can just see my wife approving of that."

Kinga waited for Cezary's own laughter to die down. Then forced herself to look into his sky blue eyes. Hers were brown, but she now imagined them black, charcoal black, hypnotic and irresistible.

"What has your wife got to do with anything?"

"Well, I can tell you've never been married, young lady. She would not be approving of a sweet little thing like you driving those twenty-odd hours in my lap, and her in the back."

"What sort of a car did you just say you bought?"

"A Seven series. V-twelve. Lovely machine."

"Sports car?"

"No, saloon. Engine from a Lamborghini, though."

"Well then, big enough for little old me. I will pay for the petrol. And all food bills along the way..."

Cezary smiled, but this time without looking at anyone, staring into his cup of black tea.

"Young lady. We are leaving in a couple of hours. I have no idea how long it would take you to pack, but I know my wife has been at it since November."

"Five minutes. My bags are upstairs."

"What, here?"

"Yes. I've been staying with the Countess, but my father is sick and I need to get home."

Sick with longing, sick with stress, sick with worry, Kinga thought to herself, justifying the lie. Cezary frowned, hand playing with a silver dessert fork on the table before him.

"Sick, you say."

"Which part of Poland are you driving to?"

"Warsaw."

"Perfect! I'm from Lodz. Not out of your way at all. Please say yes. I will be forever and ever grateful." Cezary still hadn't looked up. For the first time in her life, Kinga felt like someone else, a femme fatale from the crime thrillers she loved reading in the evenings, a seductress from a wartime movie. "Pretty, pretty please. I will do anything. When we get back after Christmas, I will make it up to you."

Cezary stared at her.

"You are coming back, aren't you? Not planning to clear off with the Countess' silver?"

"I love it here, and no, I haven't stolen anything. You can check my luggage before boarding," Kinga smiled, enjoying the deceit. She would be taking a few of the vintage dresses the Countess had no more use for, substitute for cash she was owed and would now never see Mrs Ewa part with. And yes, she would be back, but only when a real job came up, one which guaranteed she would not have to say a word of Polish to anyone as long as she was here. Thinking back to that waiting room today, she couldn't wait to hear all those accents, take in all those skin smells, all those stories again. But for now, she had to keep lying. And smiling.

"Well, five minutes, you say?" Cezary looked up, possibility firing his eyes. "Why not. We live for adventure... And to wind up the old lady, of course. Can't wait to see her face when she sees

you.”

“I love adventure. And fast cars. And fast packing.”

Kinga glanced across to the far end of the table. The Countess was staring at her plate, her glass full of blood red sherry. Mrs Ewa was glaring at Kinga with panicked disgust. They were nowhere near close enough to be able to hear what she had said to Cezary, but the look of calm triumph Kinga shot them was clear enough. She knocked back her champagne, patted Cezary's hand gently, and stood up. This time she had nothing to say to the room, which had suddenly fallen silent, all faces turned towards her, confused and cross in places. She stared back for a few more seconds, swaying gently to the sound of the violin next door, letting herself realise what had just happened, whose table she would be surprising tomorrow night, how honestly loving the faces round it would be, and beamed the baffled through a rich, Christmas red smile.

WARHEAD

Satellites streamed images of the old General's demise from the other end of Europe straight into Adam Staropolski's North London living room. Slow-mo, constant repeat, pixellated blow-ups on all Polish news channels. The same ghastly scene of a bald, speckled man of eighty, thick dark glasses slipping from his nose, breathing his last on trial for high treason.

After a whole night of watching and drinking, Adam's failing eyes were having a hard time focusing. He had seen enough of General Jaruzelski, his old childhood friend, in the dock for the supposed crime of crushing Solidarity and declaring martial law those thirty years ago, to know his demise had not been accidental. Someone must have slipped something into his prison breakfast. Or his customary glass of water. Or even the little microphone pinned to his lapel. Death injected or vapourised or swallowed. None in their game cared about traces of evidence, not since Litvinienko and his execution in that little sushi place in the heart of London. A radiation pill in a cup of black tea, flown over all the way from the Kremlin. The insane cheek of it. Litvinienko been ex-secret police too. FSB, KGB, and so what? With his Putin-backed killers still at large, nothing and no one could think themselves sacred or safe.

The sound of envelopes crashing through the letterbox in the hallway jolted him. Christmas was almost here, but was it too early for the real post man? Could it be a set up? Sarin in a greetings card? Even an old-fashioned letter bomb, pretending to be a seasonal gift?

Swaying, Adam rose from his armchair and walked through a forest of empty Guinness bottles towards the window and the old television set stood by it. Early light streamed through the lace curtains, piercing the low crowd of brown glass all around his slippers. During the weeks of hearings, as he had got drunker and drunker and the number of empty bottles grew, he had stopped taking them into the kitchen and simply let them collect on the living room floor, entertaining himself in breaks between hearings by arranging the little brown soldiers in various patterns. Simple military parades at first, lined-up regiments of empties, in honour of the old general. Then more complex arrangements, a detailed map of Britain, stretching out across the carpet, and now a large eagle, the Polish national emblem, cut in half by the path he had left to the TV.

Now there was nothing more to see. No need for further distractions. He turned off the screen, but the old tube held on to the image of the former head of state slumped in the dock. Or perhaps Adam was only imagining it? Having watched the dictator, the demagogue, once Poland's most hated man, dying in full view of a thrilled public a hundred times over, it dawned on him, what they had done. The media. The stations. Maybe even the new secret services. Mocking that historic day in '81 when, in full uniform, the General had put himself on national TV reading out his martial law decree. On all channels. Constant repeat. Followed by tanks and arrests and killings. And now they were getting him back. Screening the footage of the old man expiring a thousand times over again and again, an act of the most modern vengeance.

Adam felt giddy. If they could do that to the General, mock this publicly, this viciously, they could easily come for him. Even here, in London, a thousand miles distant. He walked back through the glowing glass bird, stopped beside some fading pictures scattered on the coffee table next to the armchair. Teenage Adam and the twenty-something Jaruzelski outside of occupied Warsaw in '44. A year later, both of them riding a captured Tiger tank through the rubble of Berlin, Adam beaming, Wojtek poker-faced. Official photos from the Fifties and Sixties, two old friends now serving a Communist Poland. Jaruzelski climbing the army ranks, always in uniform, loyal from word go. Adam, then still called Aron, in a sharp, dark suit, part of the new political police force set up to scour the People's Republic of Poland, hunting down the last of the partisan freedom fighters left over from the real war.

Adam gathered up the photographs, the only evidence he had left of his old life, then drew himself straight, staring out the window, expecting surveillance or even snipers to be waiting across

the street. In that one moment of fear in his own house, he chose: no more waiting – he would strike before being struck. He would demand protection from the Polish embassy. Though he had not stepped through those doors since 1989, once he explained his past, showed them the photos and the papers, code words, letters, negatives, they would have to offer him sanctuary. Ship him to Poland, probably. Under another new name. One last chance to start over again.

Adam turned to look at his old living room. Everything perfectly English. Immaculately staged. The furnishings, the books, the piano, just like his accent. No pictures of any family. No evidence of tedious passions or hobbies. Nothing to show the unnatural machinery under the surface.

He caught himself looking in the massive mirror in the hallway. The ever dapper, ever tall, ever devastatingly handsome devil. At seventy something, he still could charm the pants off anything. That smile, teeth gleaming their porcelain lie. The baritone that melted thought and turned the stupidest remark into the wittiest come-on. And now the panic in the eyes as the front door rattled and another batch of junk mail dropped onto the hallway floor.

Hurriedly, he slipped on some shoes, grabbed his long overcoat, stuffed the photos in its inside pocket and left through the kitchen. On his way out, he pulled a long bayonet knife from the hiding place behind the fridge. The final souvenir from the battlefields of Russia, Poland and Germany. He secured the custom-made leather scabbard on a belt across his chest, concealed beneath his mac. It felt good, the weight of the weapon against his rib cage. Felt like the best and the last of him.

The unkempt garden had a gate at the bottom, leading to a narrow alleyway. Adam unbolted the latch and used the mirror mounted above the gate to see if the coast was clear. He waited a few moments for footsteps or any other tell-tale rustling to reach his ageing ears. When nothing happened, he opened the wooden door and left the house which had been his home for the loneliest and dullest years of his life.

Stumbling down the street, thoughts raced him along the uneven pavement. Had he locked his own front door? How had he managed to put on two non-matching shoes? Why had he forgotten his hat? This was Golders Green after all. The Jewish quarter. One blended in here wearing a wide-brimmed trilby. Though the district was as much Japanese now as anything else, all these little immaculate people driving their BMWs and Mercedes, evidence who the real winners of all wars were.

Once upon a time, he had spied on Poles exiled in London, feeding information back to Warsaw and sometimes even directly to the Kremlin. Impressing everyone with his new name, Staropolski, selected for its nationalistic echoes and for its lack of typically Polish consonant clusters which could have been enough to slow his entry into polite London society. “Star” sounded promising and “polski” patriotic enough and so everyone warmed to his tales of wartime daring-do, his noble roots, dating back to the Russian royal courts, and now his tragic “exile”. The Russians had paid for information on Polish émigrés. The British for information on the communists. The Americans for anything on anyone, the greedy primitives. But now the Brits were not interested, the Yanks had forgotten him, even his own freshly and freely elected government cutting him off. His savings would not last forever, and he was now too old to gamble his way back into affluence. The taxi rank near the tube station called to him with memories of times when he could still afford black cab rides in and out of the West End. When he could afford to play politics and casino tables and the stock markets and not worry about money running out on him. Adam Staropolski had seen too much not to matter, and yet...

Stumbling towards the Tube, he tried to remember how he had come by that name, exactly. Was it invented or had he actually taken it off someone who had died on the way to Siberia, that long march where anyone who fell would instantly be picked clean of valuables and clothing and

any ID that might be worth something in some post-War dream? Had he invented it himself sometime after his enrolment in the Polish branch of the Red Army? Or did that come later, after the fighting stopped and the Wall went up?

He was finding it impossible to remember all the things he had once been paid to forget. Still, if he couldn't recall its origin, no one else would ever know. Of course, the real Adam Staropolski might one day yet show up. His doppelgänger. His nemesis self. Would he then have to go back to being the boy he was before the war? The blond child running from mass graves, from burning fields, into the arms of more soldiers?

He shuddered and flew, the bright red wall of a bendy bus passing inches from his face. No horns, no shouts, his thin, frail body tossed aside by the slipstream, landing on the pavement, almost breaking his hip on the edge of a stone kerb. The pain a warning. But he could handle it, he thought, taking deep, forced breaths, putting the shock to good use, as he had been trained to do. He rose slowly, resting his hands on the ground a second, his breath catching up. Some passers-by tried to help, but he waved them away angrily, afraid they would touch him, steady him, find the weapon strapped to his chest.

The woman selling tickets at the Tube station had to be Polish, with a name badge like Bożena. She spoke fluent English, at least, sold him a little orange travelcard with a magnetic strip on the back. All he had to do to get through the gates was feed it into an electronic slot. Paper talking to metal, electricity, computers, all registering the trail of his movement through space. Could they follow him this way? He thought not, tried to keep the panic at bay, but as he turned the corner of the narrow tunnel leading towards the platforms, he came face to face with a man holding a giant, silenced machine gun. His heart almost stopped, though there was also a split second of joy, of feeling up for it, for the heat of the bullet.

But all it was was a damned film poster. James Bond again. As if there hadn't been enough of the same old, same old three generations ago. Adam remembered reading Fleming's original four decades back. Remembered the sweet ache of recognition. But now, staring at the film star before him, jaw locked, gaze frozen, fake gun cocked, he couldn't even manage disgust. Ian Fleming must be turning in his grave, he thought. At least the old boys of the big screen, the Bogies and the Marvins and the Coopers had fought in real wars, shot real people with all the real guns. The 21st century now, you would have thought the world would have wised up. Dumped the overpaid and oversexed civil servants with licenses to kitsch. He felt like spitting at the size of the gun on the poster. An automatic rifle with that massive silencer. Bloody guaranteed to overheat and jam. Bloody poseurs. Bloody traitors to the true art of killing.

Standing on the empty platform, knowing it was covered by cameras, he felt a little safer. They were unlikely to try anything here, with a lens on every corner. Still, he wished he'd left himself at least one gun to see retire with. A small Smith and Wesson, or his old PP5. As naive, as easy to detest the Home Army partisans had been, at least they knew how to knock up a gun or two. Weapons made in small workshops or garages, not factories, by men who would fire the damn things themselves. Those guns never broke, never jammed. And it was such stupid pleasure shooting the blasted idiots with their own, home-made machinery.

Boarding a tube carriage, having to bend down to get his head through the doors, Adam thought with distaste about the weapon the new Bond carried. Any rifle could be used to hunt from a distance. Handguns were special. They did the devil's work. Only good for killing men, at close range. Sitting down and staring at his fellow passengers, as they read their thrillers or played with their high tech phones, he savoured the truth of the chosen few.

He woke as the train pulled into Elephant and Castle. Literally snapped to attention, his injured hip making him wince. The carriage was now full. People made way for his elderly,

imposing frame. He instinctively checked for the knife and the photographs and his wallet, all seemingly in place, then, barking requests to get past, shoved his way towards the door.

Once the train was gone, he approached a Tube map. He had meant to get off at Waterloo, but after a whole night of sleepless mourning, he had to forgive himself for succumbing. Still, safer here than anywhere else. The brightly coloured spaghetti twirled before him, but his eyes wouldn't focus. He needed air anyway. Narrow tunnels led on and on, arrows pointing towards exits and fire escapes and emergency staircases. He was starting to shake again. Not wide awake yet, not anywhere near sober, his blood tense.

His shoes rang strange, irregular clicks bouncing off the porcelain walls of tunnel after tunnel. Eventually, he came to the lifts. Dangerous things, lifts, but he had no choice. Waiting for the numbers to descend, he stared at a poster for a new television show. "You have no idea how far I am willing to go" said the blurb, another fair-haired Bond-alike sticking a Beretta into thousands of commuter faces.

The lift doors opened and he noticed, among ads for gay musicals and herbal supplements, another blood-stained poster, drilled with fake bullet holes, advertising a new Patricia Cornwell paperback. It made him smile, patting the scabbard beneath his mac. People still had sin inside them. All of them angry and wild and weak.

Out on the surface, he navigated the electronic gates and found himself outside. This was Elephant and Castle? He could still remember it from 1968. Dirty, but uniform, at least. Houses all of a kind. The faces all white. Now, everything a mess. Thirties, Seventies, Eighties architectures all mixing in rows of dumb chaos. What had happened to good old fashioned British conservative sense and taste? Who was responsible for this town going to the dogs this badly?

James Bond flew by him again, giant now, stretched across the side of a double-decker bus, but Adam was no longer laughing. Not amused. A sign pointed him in the direction of Westminster. Would he cab, bus or walk it? The sun was low in the sky, but that was just winter. He stumbled past black face after black face. How ghastly the human race looked close up, in all its diverse, poor, pedestrian glory. Paki. Chink. Polak. Stinking scum. Everyone with class had left long ago, moving out to Surrey, Kent or Sussex.

Breathing hard, he stopped and propped himself up against a railing. A young Indian woman approached, asked if he was OK. But he was not OK. Violence was exploding inside him, deep in his veins, in his aching joints, in his tired heart. As she kept talking, her hand resting on his shoulder, he clutched at his chest to feel the scabbard, then looked up, read the poster visible over her shoulder on the Salvation Army building. "Is there light in the darkness? We think so!"

"Stupid, stupid scum," he whispered to himself, smiling weakly.

"Pardon?" asked the woman. Adam took his eyes off the poster and focused on her face.

"I've been to Bombay. Karachi. Bengal. Wherever you are from, child, go back there. What do you know about light and dark?"

"Excuse me?"

"What do you know about salvation? I was in the army. Proper army..." The shock and confusion in her pale brown eyes delighted him. He accentuated each word, tuning his upper-class vowels to cause maximum offence. "I had a girl like you once. A gyppo. Found her in the woods. Gyppos come from India, did you know that? She begged. For mercy. Army? Army, child? Come with me. Come and I'll show you death." The Imperial War Museum, his favourite London haunt, was at the end of the street, but even though he tugged at the sleeve of her woollen blazer, he was not strong enough to overcome her resistance.

The woman pulled away, stumbling on high heels, looking back, then rushing off. He realised, the heat in his veins cooling, that he had got something wrong. Some wire crossed. She was not from the church. In fact, she might be about to scream or call the police. He sneered. Yes, she was like that very one. When they were rounding up the partisans. Mostly Home Army

heroes. How many had they tortured and killed? How many girlfriends and wives taken on the promise that their flesh would secure release? He remembered the gypsy girl they'd found in the woods near Lodz. Spitting image of this city girl. She had begged him not to take her virginity. That would mean she would be dirt and disgrace to her clan, that she would be killed upon return. He fucked her in every way imaginable, except for that once sacred place. That he had left for the lads that followed him. He had honoured her request, but could not be held accountable for the actions of his men. They were still at war, after all. A war over the soul, if no longer the body, of Europe.

Those had been the best times. That decade after the War. While the future General got busy climbing official ladders, Adam had, with his best friend's patronage, set to work. The hours after the battle are always the most interesting. When real profits are to be made. When no one is accountable, no noise registers, only the gods watching. He'd been in his teens then, without any kind of mercy. Had the strength for it.

Later, the real politics took over. Real human nature. Wojtek had used the anti-Semitic purges of '68 as an excuse to get Adam out of Poland, but in truth there was nothing left for him to do. The fighting had stopped. The dull grey monolith of actual communism in place. With his talent for performance and languages, Adam left Aron behind and steered himself towards freedom.

As he stumbled on towards the Imperial War Museum, he realised it would not look good if that girl did call the law and they stopped him here, a twelve-inch bayonet strapped to his breast instead of medals. He thought of sneaking into a pub, hiding out an hour or so, but pubs were lonely places at this sort of early hour. Dangerous. He needed a drink, but heartburn was already piercing a hole in his chest. Besides, he didn't like the name of the only one in sight. The Prince of Wales. Adam could only mourn over what old Elizabeth must have thought, every single day of the many long years since that fool had been born. They had all hoped Diana would turn him around, provide the spine the throne needed, but she turned into a Pandora in Paris.

He stopped at the end of St George's Road, stared at the church across the traffic lights, a stunning Gothic castle flying a dirty, torn St. George's Cross. It only now occurred to him that the English and Polish flags shared the same colours, only the former was inappropriately more religious in sentiment. How strange. And shameful. The colours of the King and Queen flapping like dirty washing in the wind of the cold morning.

Outside the museum, two giant marine cannons pointed to the sky. Churchill's two-fingered salute made manifest. But now there was something else in the courtyard – a chunk of the Berlin Wall, graffiti screaming "CHANGE YOUR LIFE".

Change it for what? What life? Inside, noise. A thousand kids clambering over tanks, cannons, staring up at fighter and bomber planes suspended from the ceiling like Airfix models. At the back of the mezzanine, a life-sized model of Little Boy sat perched in the middle of the floor. Bigger rockets and missiles surrounded it, but nothing had the simple, honest power of that final lump of killing. Schoolboys were messing about in the cut-up cockpit of a Lancaster bomber next to it, those waiting to go in leaning against the nuclear grenade, slouching in ignorance.

He took the lift to the basement and the archives of the last, true Great War. Walking down a long concourse, he had to work hard to focus on the photos. One of a child, battered, in a hospital bed, next to it the legend "War is a part of God's creation". Hello me, Aron thought. This boy, this patient, clinging to a fluffy toy he never got to have before the NKVD grabbed and turned him into a front line scout.

Another picture, a teenage boy, the Red Star crowning his forehead, handgun held aloft, the caption screaming "The essence of war is violence and moderation in war is imbecility".

Yes and yes and yes, as he stumbled on into the tight corridors filled with display cases of murderous mementoes. Uniforms, decorations, newspapers, weapons, bags, photos. Silent crowds milling, edging past each other; taking half an hour, and covering a half century of a world at war

with itself.

The Soviet section welcomed him with red, velvet lined warmth. This he remembered. This he knew. His old gun, the Bolo, in a glass case, just like the one he had once stolen from a Soviet officer's tent. He tried to count how often he'd fired, how many kills, but couldn't recall. How many had died by his hand while the War raged? And after? He couldn't say. Was his mind failing him? Or had he never actually involved himself that far? Had he ever killed, or was it always the quiet, charmless others? He could now not, in his heaving heart of hearts, say either way.

Himmler's smiling death mask, locked in a glass cabinet, chased him back out to the upper floors. All seemed taken up with Holocaust exhibitions. He stumbled through whitewashed corridors without looking up at the photos and the model camps and the piles of shoes and glasses. What did he care for this mock up? His family left behind in Siberia, exterminated by the forces apparently trapped in these displays, while he had made his escape. Headphones here, video screens there. Such awful spectacle. He, a blond Jew. A survivor. Only that mattered.

He rushed out of the entrance hall, past the kids and the weapons of mass destruction, out the door, beneath the long shadow of those giant cannons and into the nearest pub. It looked dark and decent enough from the outside, a good old fashioned boozer. But it turned out to be crammed full of students. Art students. He couldn't remember the name of the college, but had some recollection of Feliks Topolski and his crew of painters and hangers-on drinking around here in the Sixties and Seventies.

A young black woman approached.

"You all right, gramps?"

He stared at her, wounded by the past and the present simultaneously.

"Look in the mirror, will you, dear? We're not exactly of the same breed," he spat out in perfect Queen's English, then shoved what was left of his strength back against the door.

Westminster Palace eventually towered over him, but he just sneered back. No wonder the Empire had fallen. Resting on such meagre laurels. He would never forget the first time he had visited the Kremlin. Now, there was a seat of power. None of the subtle finery of fairytale English gothica. No, the Kremlin towered vast above all and rightly so.

Churchill. Wojtek. Stalin. All the immaculate greats, dead. Adam felt like crying as St James' Park glowed with cool winter light. His old haunts were near by. Claridge's. The Connaught Rooms. But cash was tight and his lines of credit expired long ago.

He stumbled into the nearest pub on Whitehall. Didn't even clock the name over the door. His body thirsted for alcohol and rest. The Guinness took forever to pour. Stout was the only drink he could take now without gagging, but he ordered a double scotch to go with it, just for old times' sake. He took a seat at the back of the beer lounge, as far as he could get from a party of suits drinking themselves into early oblivion. One of them wore a giant Stetson on top of a ridiculous yellow wig, tinsel wrapped round the brim. Christmas jollies. Nobody seemed to mind.

Some middle aged American tourists disturbed his rest, taking up a dozen seats on the table next to him. The wives shtum and the men bursting with bravado. Once everyone had settled, they started talking ailments. Ear this, tooth that, back the other. Adam, with at least twenty, thirty years on all of them, had suffered prisoner of war camps, labour camps, round-ups, starvation, the bowels of all triumphs, yet you would never hear him complain about his lungs and mind and pumping heart.

Refreshed by the booze, he managed to stumble as far as the National Gallery. There was silence here, and security in every room, and such sensible crowds to hide him from harm. This too was the one place you really could bet on finding beautiful women in London. They could be from anywhere in the world and all of them luminous. Was it the place which graced them with such

light? Or was it aesthetic sensibility, the need to admire and be admired? He lost count of how many he had picked up here, got drunk and fucked in various hotels and student digs. He had amassed no friends or hobbies in his four London decades. Those fleeting moments of rape had been his only sport, and he cherished the ones who screamed and resisted and did not take his violence in bed for granted, following all the wining and dining and posh talk.

Adam positioned himself behind a beautiful, raven haired woman, almost as tall as him now. Hands in his pockets, he began to play with himself, eyes focused only on the dark waterfall of her hair and its smell of pines and ginger and lime. He came in an instant, soiling his underpants, pale trousers thankfully hidden under the long mac. Was that it? So few seconds? Ah, the body fell away but it was not pleasure and not grace; only panic and the cold dawning of a definite end. This was not what he had lived for. This was wrong and a crime, and the way the woman's hair now fell away and shunned him with some horrid distance, it broke him in half. Instead of going all the way downstairs to clean up in the toilets, he slumped in a leather sofa set before an El Greco and the woman and for the first time in decades wished for a cigarette.

One of the gallery attendants woke him, smiling meekly, asking if he was OK. Mumbling something to placate the old biddy, he shuffled on the bench of hard burgundy leather, every part of him jarring, the ghost of dreamless sleep still hovering over his shoulder.

Eventually, he rose, stretching to his full height, in spite of the pain. Hands in pockets, he staggered towards the revolving doors.

London streets were too full, too bright. Languages, Christmas lights, shadows everywhere. He was not safe. Sneaking north towards the embassy, he turned down Cecil Court and stumbled upon a tiny shop buying and selling memorabilia. He stared through the window display into a time he wanted back. Old prints, furniture, a transistor radio up on a white-painted shelf. Cork notice boards decorated with medals. Symbolic shrapnel attached to gaudy bits of coloured ribbon. A WWI German Next of Kin Cross, £10. A Polish Cross of Valour 5th Class WWII, £75. More expensive than an Iron Cross at £50, though perhaps only so because it was so much rarer, given out to so few compared to the Third Reich's marks of glory.

The skies over Portland Place were turning dark by the time he rang the doorbell. The intercom asked his name and he gave it, the door eventually buzzed open.

The silver-haired doorman in the grand hall enquired in Polish about his reason for calling round. Adam stated, back erect, that he was an old soldier, an old serviceman in danger, and needed to speak to the ambassador. The doorman looked sceptical, but eventually nodded and led him through to the ground floor reception room, a vast space of tall ceilings and gaudy Roccoco décor. Adam took a gilded chair, watched the doorman disappear and busied himself studying his surroundings. The furnishings disgusted him, especially the out-of-place contemporary wall hanging of the Polish eagle, a golden crown on its head, its eyes strangely sad, mourning past tragedies. How many decades since he had been in here, and even then only ever sneaking in round the back? He had made up for it in other grand halls and ballrooms of the land, but if this was to be a return home, he felt a tinge of disappointment at the antique theatricals.

Adam prided himself at having the patience of a rock, but it felt like an age before a thirty-something man, in a suit of cheap charcoal fabric, tie knotted in some frightful fashion, entered and sat down on the opposite side of the dining table.

"My name is Pawel Brocki. I am the deputy consul here in London. What is it I can do for you?"

"Adam Staropolski. I require protection."

"I know who you are, sir. What is it you need protecting from?"

"My real name is Aron Majer, I am a former..."

"I know that name too. I've studied your file, along with a few other 'ghosts' such as yourself. You keep haunting London, but I'm not sure what it is you want from us."

"If you know my history, then you understand if I say I am in danger."

"Danger? What sort of danger?"

"Assassination. Assault."

Brocki's plump face twisted in dismissive fashion.

"And who do you think might want to kill you, Mr Majer?"

"The same people who killed General Jaruzelski yesterday."

"Killed? I had no idea he'd been killed. I thought the old man simply snuffed it in that dock."

Adam felt the air in the room turn cold.

"Snuffed?"

"Heart attack, Mr Majer. That's all it was. What is it your paranoid past is leading you to believe? That someone assassinated the old devil? And might be after you next? Hardly."

"You know who I am and you know what I know. I suggest you listen..."

"I'd rather not. And frankly, if I weren't a civil servant, Mr... whatever you choose to call yourself these days, I would throw you out onto that street myself." The air between the two men had turned solid. Adam watched as the young apparatchik's face tensed and turned pink. "If I could, I would go further. I have read your file, and let me tell you, my grandfather was in the Home Army. I never met him, only had the privilege of holding his medals, the buttons from his uniform, because someone had killed him long after the War was over. Someone hunted, tortured and then murdered him, for the crime of fighting for a free motherland. Someone like you, Mr Majer. And it doesn't matter to me if it was you who had signed the order or loaded the gun or even pulled the trigger. In his name, sir, in his name I would dearly love to put my hands around your fucking neck and squeeze until your eyes popped out of your evil head. You are scum, sir, the kind of scum I am charged with protecting my country from."

"Ah."

"Ah, that is bloody right, ah. So now leave, Mr Majer, because there will be no refuge, no protection for the likes of you on our soil today."

Adam was now smiling. To conceal his own self-disgust. How stupid it had been of him to come here. The booze and the grief were part responsible, but were no excuse. The consul's eyes were on fire, while Adam looked right back and calculated. He had the knife. He could take this childish fool hostage, but somehow he lacked the energy to unbutton his coat.

"How old are you, boy? Twenty? Thirty?" Adam made sure his voice pierced with the ruthlessness he had just been charged with long ago. "What have you seen? What do you know? You know my name from a file. I know the Queen. Lords and ladies and heroes." Adam stood up, adrenaline helping him straighten his sore back. "But these words mean nothing to you. Because you know nothing. And nobodies. You only know nobodies, boy..."

Outside, Adam wanted to scream obscenities at the tall windows, but his breeding and his training held him back. Still, he was having a hard time breathing. The world around him dark, tiny spots of mineral in the pavement slabs shimmering under the street lamps. He bent double, clutching his chest. This time not to check for the knife or his wallet, but to still his own heart. In the past, self-restraint, the swallowing of pride and walking away instead of killing sheep such as that consul, would have cost him nothing. Today, it felt like crucifixion.

Head spinning, he knelt on the pavement, then rested against a slim tree planted right outside the embassy door. He felt sleepy, but knew the third nap of the day might be his last, and so calmly started taking deep breaths, whistling to keep himself awake on each exhale. Groaning a little any time his hip twisted and hurt with the effort.

“Hello, uncle. You all right?”

Adam looked up to see the round, brown face of a pedal-cab driver staring down at him, concerned.

“Fine.”

“You not look it. You want lift somewhere?”

“No. Off you bleeding well go.”

“You looks pale, Uncle. Maybe I give you free ride somewhere.” Adam could not place the accent, nor gather the strength to repel the boy. “I go back to base. Waterloo. You want, I take you St Thomas’ Hospital, uncle.”

Adam looked up at the windows of the consulate. Blinked a few times, ran the leathery palm of his hand down his face. No sweat. No sweat ever. Cool as damned hell.

They rolled down Regent’s Street, towards Piccadilly Circus. The rickshaw had no suspension, rattling and shaking on every awful pothole, making the ride agony. Adam let his head roll a little to the side, the bright lights of the dark city flashing past. Christmas decorations were ablaze everywhere, but all he could think of was the history beneath the wrapping. Trafalgar Square. Villiers Street. Waterloo. All the military names, all the fighting. The past formed of blood. Shaped by minds such as his. He could hear his joints creaking. Feel his bones turning to dust. But the anger against it all rising within him, as young as ever, as fierce.

They rolled past Nelson’s lions, Adam silent, feeling like what strength he had just used up he would never get back. He dreamt of falling asleep, of never waking again, surrendering in the wake of his old friend, but the night was shut tight against his wishes. Though he hadn’t had a drink since lunch, his head spun as if loaded on gin and vodka. He gasped for breath and once regained, started whispering. Almost silent. Polish. Russian. German. Obscenity after obscenity. Curse upon curse. All those harsh, foreign-tasting consonant clusters. He wanted now, just once more, to call words into action. Not to be a cripple, a forgotten keeper of faded secrets, an unnecessary file ready for the pyre. Wojtek had had his moments of public glory, the ass. The ass! Where were his? Where the hell...

His voice fell to the street, then down to the river they were crossing, ripped to nothing by whirling spokes. Bruce was singing an alien song, somewhere far above, the warm voice floating off across the Thames. Adam’s chest felt tight. Worried this might be it, he clutched at his breast, but instead of an irregular heartbeat, his hand found the concealed scabbard. As the rickshaw bounced on across Waterloo Bridge, Adam smiled. Remembering the maze of arches beneath Waterloo East, where he imagined they were heading. Where it was dark and quiet and perfect, he thought, staring at the broad back and shoulders perched over the handlebars before him, for one last little bit of action.

JAIL FLOWER

“The smiling screw is talking three tongues at once. None of which I understand.” The ceiling, a couple of feet above Flower’s top bunk, was covered in spots of dried toothpaste. Blue-tack was forbidden to stop cons pressing copies of prison keys, Colgate used instead to stick pics of their loved and fancied ones to the heavens of their lives. “English isn’t my strong suit, even after three years all over these islands, but I would try to follow this fucking chain-rattler if it weren’t for her crazy accent. Like, I know she is wants to help, but with her Belfast twang I am getting none of it. And then there’s all this prison induction talk, ‘remand’ this and ‘parole’ that, you know what I mean? Forked tongue? Trident, more like.”

Flower could hear the bellows inside her pad-mate’s vast chest huffing in the bunk below, an engine of immense power trapped in a room the size of a train compartment. Bronia was built like no gypsy Flower had met before. A real eater, a woman mountain, though one who rarely used her mouth for speaking.

“What colour is your skin? Is you lesbian? If you want to top yourself, you want the priest or the imam? I thought she was having a laugh. Then she asks me if I am hungry. Hungry? What sort of a nut wants to eat a minute after being locked up in a place like this?” Flower, tiny, like all the women in her family, always ate like a good one, but the past week had seen her off her food. Most of hers went into Bronia, a gesture her cell mate, a big, soft lug by nature as well as stature, appreciated, then instantly forgot as soon as she was hungry again.

Their tiny TV cast a final few flames of colour about the grey walls. The sound was off. All electric would be cut in an hour or so anyway, except for those cells holding privilege level prisoners. Not that they could enjoy the extra TV time in peace anyway. Window warriors would keep shouting abuse, at the VIP’s as well as each other, long past lockdown. The prisoners in the men’s unit next door at the women here. The women screaming and laughing back. The distance between them too great for anything other than animal calls to get across.

“But that bloody screw smile. That really threw me. There she is, actually really proper bloody smiling right at me. Meaning it. And looking like she’s waiting for me to give back in kind. Like, smile back. Jesus, I thought to myself, this is it. I am dead and gone to heaven and hell both, at once, for all the mad and crazy shit I have done to get banged up in here.”

The very first night Flower had been dumped in this tiny, doubled-up cell, on the last shopping weekend before Christmas, she had told Bron her whole life story.

The next night, the dark-skinned teen had asked her to repeat it all again. Seeing as Bron couldn’t read and the TV was dull in “foreign”, Flower obliged. It helped the big bear of a girl sleep. Flower didn’t say that it also helped turn her life, especially its recent months, into something akin to a fairytale. Dark, but essentially painless. She retold it, night after night, hoping that the gypsy spell would hold.

“The moment that stinking van dropped me off in here, I get handed some old Polish newspapers and they shove me in a big room with a TV and a remote. With teletext and everything, so I can even get subtitles. I never was much of a one for telly, though. Why would you be, especially behind bars? Torture, watching the world outside going about its business like nothing was wrong. Then a screw comes in, this older guy, smiles and says ‘Dzien Dobrrrry’. In that pratty accent of theirs. What am I going to do? Just says ‘Dzien dobry’ back and watch him retreat, beaming like he’d just scored an injury time World Cup winner. Christ knows who taught him that, the little show off. Wasn’t you, Bron? No, didn’t think so. Anyway, I have my plastic TV dinner getting cold there, keeping one eye on old Big Brother replays, when they ask me to follow them to that other room, that one with sofas and photos of rivers and deserts on the walls supposed to keep you calm.”

Flower had been told by her duty lawyer that there were three ways the court hearing, first thing in the morning, the very last before they shut up shop until the new year, could go. If the judge felt like making an example of her, she'd spend the next however long behind these walls, eating pap, reading month-old Polish newspapers and wondering if now was the time to finally go beyond the girl-kissing stage. If she bust case, she'd be back on road Christmas Eve. Probably back in the nearest boozer within minutes. And back in trouble within minutes of those. But if she was lucky, they'd dig up the car theft business back home and repatriate her. That was what she needed now. A few months in a motherland nick. Cold showers, colder grub, sub-zero accommodation. All that would wake her up, straighten her out. This place was too cosy. Her head and liver needed sorting and she knew she could only do it in the dark days of a proper pen.

"Then another smiling uniform comes in. Tells me we're waiting for an interpreter. Has some teas brought in and when I see that mine has milk in it too, I start laughing. Tea with cow juice. Been here three years, Bronia, and still can't stomach that."

Apart from helping Bronia doze off, Flower had another reason to practice the monologue. If they sent her back to a Polish prison, a good version of her life story would come in useful. In cells of four or six, with no television, those whose tales made long nights scoot by were treated with real respect. Moving cell to cell, night after night, rewarded with gifts of food and baccy and kept under the protection of the tough girls. But if she told hers wrong, it could get her killed. There were things she could say about her past and things she'd far better not. Flower hoped these nightly repeats in Bronia's honour would help her feel the way between the two, should the prison-to-prison move happen.

"Anyway, the interpreter arrives. Panicked lass. I had to talk to her for a while to calm her down. From Poznan, a big city, big perm girl, shaking like a January calf. The screw had a third white cup of tea brought in and she drank that without complaint and I kind of suspected her then of being a traitor, but I think they might have put a jug of that poteen before her and she'd have drank that without complaint either, she was so nervous... Anyway, the screw starts asking and the Poznan lass translating and I'm sitting there starting to get tired of playing along like a dumb lamb. What's your name? Flower, I tell them. In English. That's my nickname, not from me being a wall flower or nothing, but from Kwiatkowska, translated. Everywhere I've been in these forsaken islands, that's what people have called me. Flower. A good nickname. Good cover. Makes them think you is petite and sweet even when sweet business is the last thing on your mind... Where are you from, the screw then asks. I say Belfast, beaming. He beams back, not getting angry at all. Which is starting to worry me, which is why I'm taking the piss. Then he asks where I came from before that. So I say London. And now the muppet apologises."

Bronia was laughing as hard as she had that first telling. Not the brightest of lights, Flower had thought to herself within seconds of their first meeting. But that was good. Stupid in a pad-mate was better than smart. Not always watching for profitable angles. Bronia was nicknamed Teddy Bear, and the nickname fit because she was big and dark skinned and had the strangest blue eyes, another rare thing for a gypsy. The fifteen violent street robberies she had been locked up for, a means of financing her heroin addiction, had not made her any less cuddly. Or dumb. Not in Flower's eyes.

"What's he apologising for, I think to myself. What are they all always apologising for around here? Fucking slave trade? Fucking us over during the War? He says I don't understand him, but I do and I'm taking the piss which is what he doesn't understand and what is starting to fuck me off somewhat. I don't mind a cruel screw, them's easy to hate, but one that apologises for locking you up and force feeding you muppet tea?"

Flower had to speak a little louder now, covering the noise of night patrols walking the landings, slamming the odd observation panel shut, brushing off last minute shouts for burn and matches.

“Anyway, now they got my guard down with all their grinning, I tell him the truth. Gubin, Warmian District. The interpreter has no fucking idea where that is or how to spell it either, so I take the pen and jot it down for them. On the form. The basic details, mother, father, place of birth, easy-peasy. But then these other questions come up. What is your race? Have you recently buried anyone close and were you now considering topping yourself too? I ask the Poznan lass what this strangely intimate line of questioning is meant to get them, but she says she don’t know and don’t bother translating my question. I pretend to be upset, just to piss her off. The screw buys it. Takes the forms back and says we can complete them later. Says he is sorry if they upset me. And asks if I know why I’m being detained. Now, I may be a young one, but I’ve had my fair share of interviews with uniforms so I keep shtum and say, No, you tell me, ‘officer’, in the best English I can manage. So he tells me I’m in for racially motivated assault. I look at him. For a little while. Until he stops smiling, finally. The prick.”

Bronia was laughing so much now, Flower worried about the state of their welded-together beds.

“You should have seen the Poznan girl! She was kind of pale looking before, but when she hears that she turns bright red, a proper national display of colours, what with her bleach blonde barnet. So I explain that I had overheard a bloke in a pub in Berrickmouth tell a racist joke. About Poles. And that that was all right, I’m not unforgiving of racist shits most days, but that the man telling it was a Pole himself and the people he was telling it to were Irish and they were all laughing along and that was what had upset me. Not the locals taking the piss. Our own putting our own down in front of the hosts. So I threw whatever I was holding in the damn Polak’s face. Pint of Guinness, think it was. Anyway, everyone’s all upset and all I am is just Kurwa this and Kurwa that and I hadn’t said Kurwa in a long time to anyone, not in anger, and I was enjoying it really, but angry too, and then the fucker slaps me! Hard. Right in the face, bitch-slapped by a racist prick! Not having that, not ever, so I grab the switchblade which I always carry in my back pocket and stick it in his face. Which shits him right up, though the knife never even marked that limp chin.”

“Damn right!”

“And so I say to the screw, how can it be racially motivated if I threaten one of my own? After he told a racist joke and he called me names and then hit me? But the off-duty cop drinking in the pub at the time just sees the knife and that’s that. No one got hurt, well, not apart from me and my feelings, and that prick probably truly shat himself when I stuck the blade in his face, but I feel, rather than punished, I should be rewarded for standing up against discrimination, which is exactly what I’ll be telling the judge in the morning.”

The door to their cell, heavy steel painted in chipped gloss red, rattled on its hinges. Night patrols were walking round, kicking every door with their work boots, making sure all were locked as well as shut to.

“Good night, you starched pricks!” Flower shouted in her native tongue, but no response came from the other side. Without warning, the mains electric was cut off, the room plunged into darkness. Bronia rolled off the bottom bunk and got up to turn the bog light on. It was the only bit of power the cells had until morning. As Bronia forced her bulky flesh back into the cot beneath hers, Flower listened to the minute’s silence which always descended at midnight. The end of another day of incarceration. Everybody in the jail felt that first moment of absolute darkness, heard the silence as loud as Big Ben, but the shouts started up again almost instantly, meaning Flower could continue her story.

“That was how I got myself thrown in jail before. Back in my army days, for fucking about with weapons.”

“You was in the army, Flower?”

“Didn’t I say?” Each night, she told the story a little differently.

“Maybe. I don’t remember... What did they lock you up for?”

“I shot my commanding officer.”

“No!”

“Well, no, not really. I shot at him, or thereabouts. He was such a prick. Though it was my fault really, now I think about it, for joining up in the first place. My boyfriend, Aleks, he’d always gone on about how, when he got conscripted, the year he spent in uniform had sorted his shit out. The camaraderie, the discipline, how healthy it all was and how it would be the best thing for me and my drinking. For a girl! But he kept on, reminiscing about his army days, so eventually, when things got too mad between us, too dangerous, just to piss him off, I went and signed up.”

“No...”

“I did. They gave me a secretary job, of course, in the barracks, the corporal eyeing me up from the moment I climbed into that stupid uniform. Stupidest thing of all the stupid things I’ve ever done. I thought you could just quit when you wanted to, or get into a spot of bother and get yourself discharged, but it don’t quite work that way. Don’t know what was worse, being stuck in that office, leered at all day, or having to go out on the odd bit of manouvre, learning how to support marine landings and all that shit. Mostly we just worked on our tans, seeing as the landing craft were always out of petrol, canteen officers selling the diesel on the black market. But in the winter it was proper miserable. Every once in a while the boys built a pontoon bridge on a local river and that was that. Not much effort when it’s frozen over. Stuck in them barracks twenty four seven, with no money and no equipment and nothing much to do but drink and bully and be bullied and drink. So, after some six months of this stupidity, to try and get myself discharged, I shot our sergeant.”

The bed was once again shaking beneath Flower, Bronia still laughing, although quieter now.

“Nice enough kid, that Sarge, young, shouted louder and louder each time we did our basic weapons training. He wanted us to work. At being killers. I’m no killer, me, but I know one when I see one and so one day I just told the Sarge straight when I couldn’t take his textbook drills any more – in a gun fight, he’d shit his pants instead of shooting anyone, no matter how many years practice of popping paper targets he’d put himself, and us, through. Something strange happened to his voice. Being talked to like that by a tiny girl in a grunt’s uniform. It went up fifteen octaves. Hurt me ears. He screamed that he was ordering me to shoot so I would shoot and that was that. Well, that then proper wound me up. Our previous Sarge was an alcoholic asthmatic who didn’t give a fuck what we did all day long as long as we were all accounted for every morning and night. This guy though... I told him he could fuck his orders and that I wouldn’t do any more shooting at cartoon bad guys until I got a taste of proper action. I told him I thought he was a junior lump of shit and couldn’t teach me a thing about soldiering seeing as he’d never shot a living thing in his life. He screamed at me to keep shooting so I got up and started walking away, but my gun was in my hand so I turned around after a few steps and pretended we were having a duel. Like in cowboy films.”

“Cool!”

“Not cool. Don’t know what came over me. Playing High Noon with Kalashnikovs. Truth was, I couldn’t take a second winter in uniform. Summer time, it was bearable. But in winter... Christ. Nothing to do. Just sit indoors. The food. Old rotten potatoes right until spring. Nothing fresh. Nothing soft. I was not in a mood to sit through another barrack freeze... Missed my mother’s soups. Dill. That’s what did it. The taste of fresh dill sprinkled on the broths, plucked straight from our garden. After a year of bullshit practice, that’s all I dreamed about. Really didn’t care if I shot or got shot. I just wanted out, so I could get some decent home grub in me.”

Bronia said nothing to fill the moment’s silence Flower now left in the space between them. They lay back without words, salivating until Flower felt it right to continue.

“So I screamed at the Sarge in front of everyone, threatened him, my ranking officer, and so he, in line with all the rules and regulations, had full rights to open fire. And... did he fuck. So I pulled the trigger. A few times... Shot straight into the ground. Never aimed the gun anywhere near

the kid, though the military court didn't quite see it from the same angle. They charged me with attempted murder, among other things, a capital fucking offence, but because Sarge didn't have the balls to press charges and all the witnesses just laughed at the prosecutor, they could only do me for insubordination and discharging my weapon in anger. I got twelve months, a guilty plea cutting that down to six. To be fair to the Sarge, he quit the army soon after. If you can't shoot, you should at least be able to fire yourself with dignity, innit?"

"Damn right."

"Damn right is bollocks. I soon wished I'd kept my mouth well shut. In a straight nick at least the screws only whip you when you ask for it. In a military joint, pain's on the menu breakfast, lunch and dinner. I mean, what kind of a fuck-up works in a military prison? That's like two wrongs making a mega-fucking ultimate devil-in-a-fucking-uniform-wrong. Still, the grunts made up for it. Real brotherhood. I was the only woman in the stocks and they treated me like their little queen."

"How was the grub?"

"Evil. Especially in winter. I went in late summer, so heat was mostly my problem, but I'd only been in for a few weeks and the windows had no glass in them so you wouldn't smash and cut yourself up. Imagine what that was like with minus twenty outside. And they made you wear these godawful shirts. Raw wool things with collars and long sleeves and you could not open or roll up or do anything but be muster ready every goddam minute of every day or night."

Flower stretched out on her starch-crisp sheets, comfy in standard issue grey tracksuit top and bottoms. Even if her mind was weak and had buried all that past somewhere she couldn't feel it much, the flesh was less forgiving. Her skin itched with memory of a place where everything was designed to hurt.

"They let me out early because of cut backs. They couldn't afford to hire more military police to staff their own joints. This is, what, three years ago now? First thing I did was steal one of their cars. From the officers' lot, right outside. Someone's stupid fault for leaving a spare key hidden under a floor mat. Dumb uniform fucks, thinking it was their turf, sacred. I drove a few kilometres, but because I didn't know the area, I got lost on one of the new motorways they were building around Lodz. A four lane dead end. I sat there for a long, long time, thinking. The car was a Volvo, estate, lots of room to stretch out in the back. I thought about driving back to Gubin, then thought about driving round Poland, then thought about heading West, for the border, cowgirl style, which sounded coolest. A stolen car. Army discharge grant burning a hole in my pocket. Home getting smaller and smaller in mirrors I never checked anyway."

It all felt proper small now. With every telling, ever more so. At the time, Flower promised herself to never forget how it felt to be driving that turbocharged diesel to freedom, how perfectly light, but now, no matter how hard she tried, she couldn't re-ignite the sense of euphoria.

"I'd heard that since we'd joined the EU you could go anywhere in Europe on just your driving licence or ID card, with no need for passports. So I drove to the border crossing in Swiecko, thinking it would be like in the movies. A shack, two guards, five minutes and Europe here we come! Ended up in a three hour traffic jam, cars and lorries and coaches trailing kilometres from the bloody checkpoint, getting more frightened with each passing minute, thinking this thing with the ID is bullshit and they'll check the car and know its nicked and from one of their own too and I'll get battered there and then and go straight back into that barrack shithole. But somehow I couldn't chicken out. Wasn't anything to chicken out to. I wanted something to come home with, you know, some kind of story. My Ma and Pa, schoolteachers, had always dreamt of travelling, but all they ever did was drive around the local lakes and villages, studying local folk music, recording it all so it wouldn't be forgotten, always dreaming of going further. Anyway, after all that stressing, when the checkpoint charlies saw young little me in that old Volvo putt-putting along, I fluttered my eyelashes and flashed a little cleavage, and they waved me through with just a glance at my ID. And suddenly there was me in Germany with England a thousand k's ahead.

"One of my old school mates had gone out there to work in a beauty salon, kept boasting

about how wicked it was any time she came back to Gubin, so I thought I would put her story to the test. Anyway, first I had to get across Germany, and you know what that's like. The motorways scared me shitless. No speed limits. Jesus. All these Beemers and Benzes flying past at two hundred kph and me in my ancient Volvo, trundling along in the slowcoach lane. Eventually I shot off and just kept to the back roads. All the way to Calais. Best days ever. Sleeping in the back, rolling along with the direction of the setting sun. Little Bavarian towns, straight off a chocolate box lid. Belgium too was beautiful, all mountains down south. I had never seen mountains. But I would avoid Luxembourg. It's all motorways. Had my first crash there, a turn off I took too fast. The Volvo just bounced off the Armco, righted itself, dumped the end bit of the left hand bumper and rode on. Magic. France was lovely. More like home. Things ageing, rotting, you know, proper farm machinery, steel, iron, made with human hands. Not German or Chinese robots. But be careful with the food, especially in the small towns, they see your plates is from elsewhere, they will serve you microwaved burgers. Forget all them legends about French cooking. It stinks, same as our cuisine, when made by inbred locals. Then the ferry. My first time sailing the seas, me and my Volvo. Sheesh. I swallowed sea air and drank duty free whiskey and laughed all the way across Channel La Manche.

"And of course first thing I did in England was crash again, straight into a roundabout. Stupid left hand drive set up. A patrol car was passing, helped me reverse the Volvo, checked I was good to go and waved me on. Must have seen European arrivals do that a dozen times a day. Didn't even breathalyse me. Proper civilisation, I thought! Drove to London rather slowly after that though. Back to the back roads. And guess what? I thought it would look different again to home but it didn't. Kent was just like Warmia. Some hills. Some woods. Lots of fields and big skies. I sang at the top of my voice all the way to the capital, which took two days just because I kept getting lost. If not for money running out, I would have gone on getting lost some more. But I had to think of food, so I got unlost and found my mate from Gubin, but she had become a right cunt. Pretending to be making millions, but refused to lend me cash or let me sleep over, so I said screw you and went my own way."

Flower felt the bunks shake and saw Bronia's heavy hand appear, holding a rolled ciggie. Slim, but better than nothing. Flower took it and waited for the lighter to follow. Rollies were tough to keep from extinguishing themselves, not like factory rolled fags you could smoke hanging upside down, so she sat up and stared at the little window set in grey brick. Solid bars this side. Chicken wire the other. Dirty glass in the middle. Some light, mostly darkness outside.

"I spent a year in London, but I'm not sure if I could ever say I lived 'in' it. I slept in every part of town, but always in the back of the Volvo. Kept myself in money by delivering pizzas. Sushi. Shit like that. On Polish number plates I could work the Volvo without tax or insurance. Just petrol and oil. I decided when to start work each day and where I wanted to drive to and what I did when I got there. Pure freedom. If I was taking food to a party and felt like staying, I'd stay. Invited, gate crashing, whatever. It pissed off the pizza places to lose a driver like that, so many nights out of the week, but what were they going to do, fire me? They liked having a pretty Polish girl running their errands for them. I learnt to make extra money adding booze and fag orders to the food stuff. Found someone who drove long distance coaches from Warszawa got me Marlboros for a quid a pack, and I sold them for a fiver, so you get the exchange rate. Lush."

Flower had failed to include the other things she'd sold. The stickers she'd slap on lampposts in areas where lots of young Poles congregated that read "White, Green, Pills - Cheap" in their own tongue, plus her untraceable pay-as-you-go mobile number. Then, at the pizzeria she met someone who dealt. That someone then introduced her to the Source. The Source had her piggy back deliveries to street dealers onto the food drops. At parties, she sold shit on the side. Not one bit of trouble from the law that whole year. Flower felt no guilt about it at all, but admitting to having dealt drugs could spell trouble, both from the authorities and other prisoners. So she said nothing about it to Bronia. Though quiet most of the time, the big girl might spill the beans when least

expected.

"I worked in the Volvo. Slept in the Volvo. Fucked in the back which I'd done up a little with a mattress and some curtains and which the boys loved, especially when I lied about it being an old Polish hearse. I could only speak a few words of English, what I'd learnt from movies as a kid, but it was enough. Nights, I drove. Daytimes, I walked around, the free museums, the parks, and of course the pubs. I met all kinds of boys, Japanese, Indian, Colombian, Finnish, Albanian, Irish, Australian, South African. Everybody in one place, everyone the same. Oh, maybe their cocks varied a little, maybe their skin smelled strange, the lips tasted different, but in the dark they all made the Volvo's suspension shake the same."

"Only been to London twice. Bad food, bad smack."

"Well, I fucking loved it. Kebabs, shisha pipes, rastas, hash, reggae, rich boys, Harrods, Chelsea, students from all over the world wanting to get stoned and fucked, Royal Parks, Rolls Royces, musicals, Ministry of fucking Sound... Jesus, it was THE ride."

"But then you left, right?"

Flower was ready to lie without hesitation, but didn't. Bronia was just her remand padmate. Days from now, they'd never see each other again. But every lie you told did something. Tore something somewhere.

"Got too close to someone. Great guy. Albanian. Loved him to bits. But he wanted me out of that car and in his steady life. Me, I was party cavalry. Work and play every night, park wherever, sleep a little, find the nearest baths, swim, shower, walk, eat, then get back on the circuit. After a year, I could've done the black cabbie test, no bother. So I ran away. For the sake of living some more. Rather than become some wideboy's bloody gangster moll."

Bronia's laugh was low and dreamy. Flower was grateful. It was better than lots of things, this business of confessing all your graces and sins, night after night, but it was strangely tiring.

"So I thought, fuck it. If you get the hell out of town, get as far as you can. I drove all the way to Edinburgh. I'd heard it was a grand city. Lots of Polaks too and lots of takeaway joints needing drivers with their own wheels. Made some extra dosh helping compatriots move. Didn't need a van or truck as what the hell do most exiles own? Maybe a folding bed or table or lamp. All that I could get in the back no problem. And they moved all the time. Rented room to rented room. Fucked over by lousy landlords all over town."

Flower heard someone shout something rude about Pakistanis outside their window. A moment later, a similar voice started insulting Protestants and then the British and then someone else joined in on the Irish and after that Flower stopped listening altogether.

"Ended up turning my Volvo into a brothel of sorts. People didn't really order take out as much as in London, and everything cost less, so I couldn't earn the same dollar on pizzas as down South. Instead, I get the idea to hang around nightclubs, the big ones on the edge of town, the ones all the country kids would come to at the weekends, and rent out the Volvo as a fucking spot for those who couldn't wait to get home with whoever they'd just pulled. Drugs were everywhere, so everyone was fucking everyone. Poles too. Everyone mad for it, every weekend. Ten quid for fifteen minutes use of the mattress had them queuing up. Then I'd whip the plastic sheets off it and do a kind of taxi run with as many people as I could fit in the back, all around the local area. The car stank of shagging, but no one ever complained. As long as I was sober, the local cops didn't mind if I had ten pissed-up clubbers loaded up. They got home safe that way and were less hassle for them too. Civic service of sorts."

There were, of course, more drug sales and more heavies to deal with, but Flower didn't want Bronia to get the shakes listening to dope stories. All the money she'd saved she'd invested in plastic Airfix kits. It was the safest form of banking she could think of. Buy a toy Messerschmit or Spitfire, open the box, slip some notes inside, reseal and post it home. She'd always been a tomboy, always preferred to play with guns than dolls, so she hoped her parents wouldn't think to open the boxes. At the last count, she had sent 53 such kits, half a grand in each one. Each one had made it

home safely. She would have plenty of fun playing with the damn things when she got home.

“Then another winter was coming and up North they are best spent indoors, not in the back of a car. Besides, I never felt safe, never felt at home. Too many Americans and not enough other skins in that weird little city. All of it running on a strange vibe. I’d had to pull my trusty little switchblade a couple of times. Boys getting lairy. Thinking I was small and foreign and easy pickings. That blade saved me a few times from being dragged down a side street, I tell you. Besides, I felt like heading South for the winter. Didn’t get far. Decided to drive down through Wales. Heard it was beautiful. Snowdonia. Never seen black mountains before but that’s what it is there. This evil looking slate. Maybe I should have known what would happen next, maybe not. Needing a drink, I stopped in a town called Rhos-on-sea. Dead through and through, but at first glance it had a certain quiet charm. Felt like nothing would ever happen there.”

It was getting late. Bronia was clearly dozing off, but with each sentence, the tale was getting darker, and it was an effort keeping the tone evenly sweet. Flower decided to take a risk, tell the story straight.

“Got signed up with a local minicab firm. Shit money. Boring. Then I met these golfers. There was a club not far inland, all the local business types in with this little gang. I ended up just driving for them. They liked me, cocky little Polak could drink the lot of them under the table. But golf wasn’t their only sport. Up in the hills and miles from town, from their wives, their kids, their other lives. Once the sun set and the buggies parked up for the night, the after-parties began. Members only. I would run hash and coke for them from town. And girls too. Some just out for a good time. Some from brothels. Awful gig. I was drinking a lot again. The Volvo too, burning oil and diesel at a scary rate. I knew the engine needed an overhaul, but didn’t trust anyone local to work on it and not ask questions about why the car wasn’t registered in my name. Paranoid, maybe, but I was scraping the bodywork driving down these narrow country lanes all the time. In Scotland, it had been all good roads and open hills. There, the car was ageing fast. One of the blokes took pity and gave me a black Beemer from the collection he had stored in this barn.”

“Cool.”

“Not cool. Being in some stranger’s debt. Plus, I couldn’t sleep in the back, forced under normal roofs again. Any other time, I’d have loved a Bee Em all to myself, but now the police were watching. Everyone watches when you drive a black limo each night, chauffeuring totty and smack from Bangor or Colwyn Bay.”

Flower slid off her bunk. She knew Bronia was starting to doze off and nothing, not even sudden silence, would wake her. She pissed crouching over the all-steel bog, washed her hands in the tiny sink and dried them carefully before going over to the little corner table where they kept the burn and papers. Rolling the last smoke of the night, she thought about her Volvo, still rusting in a place she would never revisit. Behind an old barn, overlooked by hills that had been reshaped by machines to fit the whims of lazy, badly-dressed men, killing the calmest moments of their easy lives trying to fill holes that meant nothing. She knew now as well as she knew then that when the car had died was the very moment she should have headed back. But she was drunk all the time. Weak. Under grey skies which never seemed to smile on anyone. Surrounded by the red faces of the locals, eating bad and feeling worse. Little poisoned village life. Like a western, but without the Indians to blame and the guns to make things interesting. And those girls who never said a word, on the way there or being taken back. She felt guilty, too guilty to speak of, focusing all her grief on that stupid car, stolen at first, but becoming part of her. Her lost turtle shell.

She might still be there now, in that fairyland hellhole, if someone hadn’t asked her to drive a package to Dublin. Some kind of favour, money being run across the Irish Sea. Standing by the little barred window, spitting smoke through a spinning steel vent, she winced thinking about the men she might have been making the run for. Drug runners. Corrupt councillors. Sex traffickers, brining girls in from Asia or New Europe to satisfy local demand.

She had dropped the bag off at the correct address, but then, instead of heading back to

Wales, drove on into Northern Ireland. Stopping for petrol, she found herself in a small town called Berrickmouth, a few miles from Belfast. The fuel tank filled, she went into the nearest pub. The boy behind the bar was pretty and clearly thought the same of her. Polish, of course. She stayed there till closing time. Felt a little at home, for the first time in months, years maybe. He was called Maciek. A nice name. She slept on his couch that night, dreamt of dragons and flights and danger, then crawled into his bed in the morning and had the first warm, comfortable sex in what felt like a million miles.

Flower stared through thick plastic glass at indefinite shapes, the odd orange light here and there in the courtyard, but for once the window warriors did not interrupt her thoughts. Maciek's flat had been cosy, full of flowers and books and other paraphernalia of safety. The balcony overlooking Berrickmouth Bay almost always covered in mist, no chance of Wales or Scotland or England being visible. No foreigners around, except a few token Poles making sandwiches and pulling pints. Maciek wasn't a drinker, but he never said anything about Flower's escalating habit, or her decision to just move in. She spent most days in his pub, popular with the punters, flirting like a bad one but always faithful to Maciek. He offered her a job behind the bar. It made sense, considering how much time she was spending in the place anyway, but she needed the drink, not the income.

Of all the places she had seen in past three years, Ireland was closest to home. And the people closest to who she felt she was. Even more melancholy than Poles, just as good at downing dark stouts and piss-coloured spirits, making her feel better about her own predicament. Nobody ever looked cross when she staggered about the pub, the way they had done in Edinburgh or Rhos. Having had their own millennium of wars, starvations and Catholic oppression, they knew all about the need to drown oneself a little. And in the end it was no Englishman, Scotsman or Irishman but a Polak who had ended her trip and got her locked up. An unfunny end to a story which seemed to be ending sadly.

Yet, now, behind bars, far from the nearest source of booze, Flower did not feel thirsty. Just keen to get back home. Her parents were waiting, terrified of what those foreign courts would do to their daughter. She wanted them to know she was all right. Maciek had been to see her already, even though she hadn't called or asked him to visit. She felt angry. At herself. As if there was a debt she owed him, one she felt too poor inside to pay. He said he would come and see her again, once Xmas was over. She hoped she would not be here by then, though she found herself running her fingers across her lips, the flesh missing his. What would she do if she did walk from court? She'd left some money and clothes at his place, but had more than enough cash hidden in the Beemer to get her all the way back to Gubin and all those Airfix kits.

As she pushed herself away from the window, her mind expanded beyond the cell, far past the confines of the razor wire around her. She imagined Maciek at the gates, going through bag search, being given a plastic ID card, told the rules of engagement. They could touch during the visit, but not kiss, which she now realised was making her a little moody again. Thinking about him now, she realised he had got under her skin. Quiet, unassuming, but with masculine power, both in his daytime silences and in the wild noise he made when they were in bed. She could feel the heat in her limbs as she climbed onto the top bunk, but tried to push thoughts of what would happen to them when she got out well away.

Whichever jail she would be walking from and when, she would head straight for Gubin, stay a week, laugh along with her parents' stories, get bored again, then open her toys and think. Decide whether to settle, have kids, put these past three years behind her. Or move on to new places. Maybe buy another bedroom with a turbo-charged engine and come back here to find Maciek. Then they could travel. Round Europe. Or drive to Morocco. Maciek was the kind of journeying type who could serve pints in fifteen different languages in any end of the world, just to pay for the next ticket onwards. All with the same generous smile. Which, now she herself was trapped in a place where cheer was in short supply, she realised she really liked.

As she began to drowse, Bronia snoring gently a few feet beneath her, Flower smiled, slipped one hand into her tracksuit bottoms, the other over her breasts, and moaned quietly at the wild way another year of her life was about to end. She could see his eyes in the dark. Looking at her with that strange light which, in the past, had always told her to move on. But this time she did not feel scared. The wheels of her old life had come off, but now she could shed all that and move along. Lighter and calmer. One of her own had got her locked up, but then another had made her feel free. And strangely enough so far less alone.

STATIONS OF THE WASTED

Doctors desperately tried to re-attach a man's penis after he burst into a crowded London restaurant on Sunday, dropped his trousers, and hacked his own organ off in front of horrified diners. The man, thought to be Polish, ran into the Mezzi Italian restaurant in King's Cross at about 9pm on Sunday night, when it was crowded with people who had travelled to watch the England vs. All Blacks rugby match earlier in the day.

Associated Press

1

"Who wants to read about a man who cut off his own cock?!"

Beata tried to hand the AP clipping back to Jurek, but he stood his ground. They were momentarily alone, sharing a breakfast fag on the seventh-floor staircase which served as their illicit smoking room.

"Half a million of us over here not enough for you?"

Beata shook her blonde power mane, simultaneously stubbing her cigarette out in a barren flowerpot.

"We're meant to be the quality Polish weekly, for fuck's sake."

"I'm the editor and I want to run this."

"Not worth a page of your precious time. Not if I'm paying for it."

Beata shoved the clipping into his hand, turned on her stilettos and went back into the New Era offices.

Left alone to smoke and stare across the capital, Jurek could see Big Ben, London Eye and rest of the city's postcard platitudes. Far below their windows, the dull autumn arch of Hendon Lane wrapped itself round their building, surrounded by industrial estates and railway lines and other lifeless jetsam of an area long spared its busy past. In the staff car park, next to the newspaper's rented delivery van, Beata's metallic blue Merc sparkled in the cool December light. At thirty, she could have been his older sister, if not for the fact that he'd been born to two impoverished teachers in Lodz, while his boss was first-gen BritPol, a silver spoon permanently stuck up her arse.

The walls of their open-plan offices were all windows, either side of the building, emphasising the endless space around the desks. Jurek remembered, not that long ago, them being home to at least ten full-time staff, plus a small army of freelancers. Today, most were empty. Those still occupied were rented out to Beata's business associates, managing on-line orders of canned hams imported from the motherland or overpriced insurance services for those Poles still left in England, several years into a seemingly endless recession.

At least the desk-renters looked busy. His crew were anything but. Marysia, the art student who still thought working endless hours on New Era layouts would at least boost her CV, was reading a rival free Polish language paper. Pawel, the permanently stoned and depressed photo editor, sat motionless, staring at his computer screen. And then there was Jurek. The Editor. Holding down a throne nobody else wanted.

Friday morning. The day the double pre-Christmas edition went to print, a time they should have been resting, joking, thinking about the coming holidays, but no one was in the mood for celebrations. Most of their copy was now ghost-written, filed by hopefuls typing away in Poland,

excited by the idea of seeing their words in print overseas. None of them certain if the paper would last another month, much less a year.

2

Abid, the printer's assistant, didn't get paid extra for helping Jurek load the van he had to rent every Friday, but he always lent a hand anyway. Today, his honey-coloured eyes paused every time Jurek launched another bundle of warm newspapers into the hollow hull.

"You all right, man?"

"No, man."

Jurek didn't even look up, trying to pull double his weight. Marysia had worked her magic on the front page layouts, but their new logo turned him off and he didn't want to think about the rest of the words behind it. Abid handed him the final parcels.

"How come you do this every week?"

"Do what?"

"Drive the delivery round. I see your name inside. You the editor, right? Top man. How come you also the paper boy?"

"Long story, Abs. I have boss. Bad woman. Call me editor, but she make decision, you know?"

Abid frowned as he held up his lighter to the cigarette hanging from Jurek's trembling lips. The cold was severe this winter.

"I work for my pops, 'course I know... Wish I spoke Polish. Then I could read what it is you print in this thing."

"Same old every week. Bitch about recession. About the English. About us and home."

"Same as my people then. Anyway, wish you a Merry Christmas, man. See you back here next year."

"Yes. Maybe. Maybe no. We see."

Jurek spat smoke through clenched teeth, feeling bad he couldn't afford to pay Abid anything in the way of seasonal bonus, but Beata was already two weeks behind with wages and he only hoped she had settled the printing bill. He shook Abid's heavy, ink-stained hand and slammed the van doors shut on the papers.

3

The dull misery of north-west London rolled steadily past, but he wasn't sure what he felt about it any more. There were plenty of European capitals under his belt already and this place, though furthest from home, felt closest to who he was. He'd passed through Prague, enjoying the food and the hidden depths, but the tourist to traveller ratio chased him off. A year in Berlin had taught him that being part of the alternative scene there was obligatory, but that the scene had its own rules, its own codes of belonging, and none of them fit. Paris had been just as regimented, its galaxy of cliques impossible to map and penetrate. But he had been seduced by the absolute elegance of the place, and was sorry to leave after six months of breaking his back on squat floors and busking against immense competition. Barcelona had been fun for a few weeks, then too got repetitive all of a sudden, hot and narrow in the range of flavours on offer. But that's where he'd met Weronika, a young painter from Krakow, and together they decided to try taking on London. You could be anyone there. Intellectual one night, lovejoy another. Hermit today, hedonist tomorrow. It fitted them like they fit each other.

And Fridays he loved London the best. The weekend would be the usual mess of running

round openings, conferences and other non-events he'd trap in his digital voice recorder, only to replay and transcribe them all at his desk Monday morning. Yet a whole Friday of solitude, floating about his favourite city, listening to the radio and smoking and watching people pass by, should have been heaven. Only this was December, the next to last shopping day before Christmas, and he knew all of the roads through London were going to be hell.

4

In the grey light of morning he parked the rented van back at the foot of what looked like an eleven-storey tombstone. Staring up, he considered his other weekly ritual – riding upstairs, tearing open the plastic binding on a virgin bundle, smelling the damp ink. It was always special. A little to do with ego, seeing your own name in print, but more than that, a sense of being part of a serious mission. Always on time, thousands of words where they were meant to be, typo-free and somehow so much more substantial than they looked on the screen of his computer the night before. They were keeping people informed, connected, entertained. And of all the Polish language titles churned out by printing shops all over London every Thursday night, New Era prided themselves on being the intelligent, discerning choice. Even if they were just as disposable as the others.

But now, still sat at the wheel and staring up at the scene of his most recent professional engagement, he had no appetite for humble triumphs. Lighting a cigarette, he picked his mobile off the dashboard and dialled. The battery almost died waiting for an answer.

“Hello, New Era, how can I help?”

“Marysia, I'm putting the mags in the lift now. Catch them your end.”

“Wait! Jurek, are you all right?”

“Why?”

“Beata's been in a mood since you left. Jesus, what did you two argue about this time?”

“Ah, a little thing. Don't worry about it.”

Dragging a bundle of papers in each hand, he walked into the lobby, dumped fresh mags in the lift, stabbed button 7 a couple of times and jumped back, out of the closing jaws.

The Balkan security guard made eye contact as Jurek was walking back out. Stopped by this habitual instant of silent communion, Jurek pulled out his little tin of pre-rolled ciggies, mumbled a weak Merry Christmas and dropped a couple of smokes into the man's open palm. The guard smiled through missing teeth, and though Jurek was grateful to see someone even lower down life's food chain than him, he didn't have what it took that day to smile back.

5

Half an hour later, his van rolled to a halt outside S. Walberg's, the oldest Polish-language bookshop in Britain. Jurek stared through the narrow, dust filled interior as Mr Walberg stepped outside to talk.

“Hello, boy... He signed the contracts on Tuesday.”

“Who signed what, Mr W?”

“Joe, my son. Three fucking days before Christmas. Property papers. They are tearing down this whole block.”

“When?”

“Soon enough... It's a good paper, you know.”

Mr Walberg was flicking through the latest edition, but Jurek could see the old man's reading glasses were still sitting on top of his shiny head.

“My boss, she's only in it for the money. Christ only knows what I'm in it for.”

“You know how much this place has cost me to run over the last four decades?”

“What do you mean?”

“You think standing here talking to you is making me rich? It’s been a damn headache. A forty year headache.”

“Your shop? It’s the only place in London makes me feel homesick.”

“Ah, shut up.”

“It’s true. Hell knows if I will even have a paper to go back to in the new year. Maybe I will go back to Poland anyway. Start running those yoga courses Weronika is always on about. You know, out on her dad’s farm.”

“Go back. Why not. I was born in Lvov. That’s Ukraine now. No home for me but this hungry monster. Eaten all of my savings. Still, it’s good that it’s over now. You come by a few weeks from now, take your pick. We thought about auctioning the stock off, but who in London wants a truck full of Polish hardbacks?”

“At least all those books are solid. Permanent. My words are pulp every week. Because they are free, people just flick through them on the bog, then wipe their asses with the ad pages.”

“You know how much Joyce has been read by people having a shit? Don’t be so hard on yourself, boy. People want their news. Give them what they deserve.”

6

A year back, his Friday route wouldn’t end until around ten, hands tired from endless gear changes, fingernails sore from prising up the plastic binds on bundle after bundle of newspapers. These days, the job was done at a decent hour. The route barely skimming his London. He had the capital cut up four ways. The West clean, but dull. The South dirty, yet cool. The East both dirty and dull. Then the North, both clean and cool. He always started his round in the centre, dropping the first few copies off at the Consulate and the Cultural Institute, then various grotty East European delicatessens as far east as Barking, down through Blackwall Tunnel and out to Greenwich, speeding south for the White Eagle Club in Balham, before hitting the west and the plethora of Polish churches and centres and mini-markets in Ealing and beyond. The route always ended north, both his reward for a week’s hard work and home since around the time he’d started at New Era. It always drove him on, the aim of making it back to Weronika, to their little Church End flat on payday, where a little cheap hash and plenty of slow sex made the previous week’s worth of hustle worth while.

But today, pulling out into traffic, he felt none of the usual pre-drive excitement. Instead of turning left for the Circular that would take him East, he swung right and decided to reverse his route.

7

He stopped in Putney for his weekly serving of secrecy. Weronika had turned him veggie when they met, but just the once, each Friday, he dropped by an award winning Cypriot kebab shop and ordered the largest doner on the menu. No chips, no Coke, just meat and bread, with a salad garnish for the guilt. He was sure Weronika could always smell the transgression when he got home, seeping through his skin, but hoped her silence equated forgiveness.

Just as he was wiping his hands clean of lamb grease, his mobile rang, “Weronika” scrolling across its screen. He pulled it off its dashboard charging cable and swallowed hard before answering.

“Hey, babes.”

“Hey, boy. You all right?”

“Crap. Had another run in this morning.”

“Beata? No news your end, then. I thought the year would end on a bang...”

“Yeah.”

“When can I expect you home for a little curry?”

“A while yet. Might as well get all this ink off my hands. Anyway, I’m close to something.

A new piece.”

“I’ll have dinner done by six.”

“Can’t promise six. Told you I’m working on something.”

“On what?”

“A story. Something different.”

“Different sounds good... Just be careful out there, hon.”

“I won’t.”

“Then Beata will print your obituary, my love.”

8

Driving his route backwards had had the opposite effect to what he had intended. What should have calmed his fuming spirits was winding him right up. Normally, the further he drove, the more of the previous week he left behind him. Today, the further he got, the more the city poisoned his mood.

An hour later, having survived two near-crashes and three roll-ups, he walked into the lobby of King’s Cross Hospital, hoping Weronika had been right about the whole luck thing. Both the receptionists were almost perfectly black, their skin seemingly radiating warmth. He lied about looking for his friend, making his accent as elegant and soft as possible, hinting at the embarrassing nature of the patient’s self-inflicted injury. One of the receptionists frowned with honest sympathy. She pushed the visitors’ book his way without asking for credentials and told him to take the lift to the sixth floor.

9

He passed room after empty room on his way to finding it. What was all this he’d heard about waiting lists for hospital beds in the UK? All his friends preferring to bribe doctors back home whenever sick, rather than surrender themselves to local services? This place was ghostly quiet, half the rooms unoccupied, miles of pretty tinsel draped down the corridors helping to make it a little less eerie. If he ever imagined himself in any kind of clinic, he wanted one like this. Single rooms, with electrically powered beds. Mini colour TV sets in each one. Walk-in showers.

Two Chinese-looking nurses walked towards him. He smiled, but they didn’t seem bothered. It was only once he’d passed them that they called out.

“Hello! Sir!”

“Yes?”

He tried his best angel-eyed smile, but the nurses seemed unimpressed.

“You need coat. This post-op floor.”

“Sorry?”

“Coat. Here.”

They escorted him back the way they came. One of the nurses took him inside a small room and pulled a lab coat from a pile of starched linen. He reached for it, but she nodded at the small sink next to him. He washed his hands carefully, reading multi-lingual instructions pasted around it,

musings on the fact that in all the miles he'd covered today he hadn't yet spoken to a native Londoner, or a Brit even.

10

The nurses walked him as far as 672 and left him facing the closed door. He knocked and waited and when nothing else happened, went inside, holding his breath.

A blond, muscular man stared at him from the bed. The press reports were wrong about his age. Thirty at most. Pale skinned, strikingly handsome. A perfectly shaped head on a solid, sculpted neck. Light blue irises surrounded by a lattice of red.

"Hello," the blond man said in English. Jurek closed the door and smiled meekly. The man before him did not fit his light blue hospital gown, torso covered by a thin bed sheet. The arms, as bare as his calves, just as muscular. The bandages on the forearms seemed to hold flesh closed over bone. The voice was barely audible.

"How are you?" Jurek asked in their native tongue.

"Are you a Polish doctor?"

Jurek stared down at his stiff white coat and smiled meekly, noticing the crucifix hanging over the patient's head.

"No, I trained as a therapist, but I'm now considering taking the orders. Father Szymon sent me to see you. From the Church of the Holy Scripture. In Shepherd's Bush."

Lies poured from him with ease. Seeing the young man smile, he hoped they were helping. Then the blue eyes dropped to fingernails picking at themselves.

"I've not been to church for weeks."

"Well, I can't hear a full confession, but I am here to help... To listen."

Jurek stared at the photo of the former Pope someone had cut out of a newspaper and pasted between the top of Radek's head and the feet of the crucifix. He remembered that he shared a second Christian name with the benevolent figure in the tiny clipping. It felt right to only semi-lie this time.

"My name is Karol."

"Radek."

"How are you feeling?"

"Feeling?"

"How are things? Post-op?"

Radek breathed in and held the air in his lungs.

"Don't know."

"You don't know?"

Radek was still not looking up.

"No one here tells me anything."

"Oh."

"No one speaks. I've no one to talk to."

"That's OK. I'm here now."

"They got an interpreter, but she wasn't much help. It's all secrets round here."

"How old are you, Radek?"

"Twenty six."

"They think you're thirty five."

"I don't know why. I tried to tell them. I'm in all the magazines they brought me to read. None got it right."

Jurek noticed a few Polish language rags on the floor, New Era among them, and tried to swallow his shame. Tears started trickling from the inner corners of Radek's eyes, then stopped. For

a second, Jurek had the impression he was talking to a religious icon.

“You OK?”

“I’m sorry. It’s the pepper spray. From Sunday. The police. My eyes still not right.” Radek’s blue eyes released a fresh trail of tears. Then the sobbing started. Jurek realised he wasn’t the only one straying from the truth. “I’m sorry. Really, I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. Relax.”

“I’ve no one to talk to.”

“No one’s taken an interest? The consulate? The embassy? No, what am I saying? They don’t open their doors even if you knock.”

“I’m sorry.”

Radek was wiping tears into the bandages wrapped round his wrists.

“Stop saying that. You’re sounding like an Englishman.”

“Sorry,” Radek snorted along with a boyish laugh, then fell silent. It seemed he was focusing all his energy on reining in tears. Jurek tried smiling, but that was one lie he always found hard to force from himself. “Doctors probably told you everything anyway.”

“I’ve not spoken to anyone here. Well, some nurses maybe, but I don’t speak Chinese, so it wasn’t much of a consultation.” Radek smiled again, so faintly Jurek couldn’t tell if it had happened or if it was just wishful thinking on his part. “Now, I’m going to sit on the stool here, without a word, and you speak. Tell me anything you like.”

“Like a confession? Like a... rehearsal for a confession?”

“Perhaps.”

“But you’re not a priest?”

“No. I’m always one to talk though, so I could do with some listening practice. Think of me as the next best thing.”

11

“I haven’t been to confession in months. It’s... it hurts. Well, I’m no saint. I’ve always known that. Just a boy. I like fun. Dancing. Nice clothes. Sex. You don’t know, you are a spiritual person, educated. I come from a tiny town. Nothing there. What can you do when the girls are pretty and the interesting things in the world a million miles away?

“I’m from Andrzejowki, near Plock. Twenty houses in all. Six kilometres walk to the nearest school. I just about graduated at the third go, but that was just so they could get me to stop embarrassing the other students. The size of me, stuck in a classroom, repeating year after year. Stupid. Father died when I was young. Drink. Mother and younger sister raised me. We got on, you know? Things were hard, but we had fun. Toys. Sports. Girls. I’m not a businessman. Never going to go to university and all that.

“Then Aga happened. My sister’s best friend. I was nineteen when she turned sixteen. After that, we just partied a lot. Married when she was old enough, to keep the folks happy. We were happy already, or at least I was. Wild thing, my Aga. Maybe too wild, but I love her, so what do you do?

“She wanted a child, but nothing worked. I mean, my “thing” was fine, but somehow, she never conceived. We did it all the time, everywhere, and nothing. Chernobyl, the doctors said. That muck still in the water table, messed up my sperm. Tried all kinds of remedies. Creams. Lotions. Folk stuff. Doing it in the woods at full moon, in a bath full of these strange oils. I’m a religious man, prefer praying, you know, lighting candles, didn’t like all that witchcraft, but she insisted. And I couldn’t afford proper treatments. Really expensive, you know... I was afraid too. She is like that, is Aga. Tiny, but can hurt you with one look. So when we joined the EU and all the stories of streets of gold started coming back from the West, I said we should go. She told me to go alone. She’s wild

on the outside, but weak inside sometimes, you know what I mean? She would stay and watch over our home. Said I would make more money without her in tow. And she was right.

“First I got into construction. Hard graft. Got cheated out of all kinds of money. Polaks, Chapattis, Brits. Everyone out to turn others to shit. Once a week though I went dancing. At a club in Ealing Broadway. I love dancing. Really. I’m good too. Big, but good. Self-taught. Anyway, they asked me to dance on the podium, for money. I knew my luck was in then. Getting paid for something like that? In London? Aga was jealous, but I said it was for us. For our kids.

“Then they asked me to strip at all-girl events. Hen nights, office do’s, you know? I know it was wrong, unclean, but I did it for the right reasons, if you know what I mean. God’s will we couldn’t have kids to start with, so I thought it might be His way out of that hole. After all, all I was was naked. Nothing more. These weren’t children I was exposing myself to. And some of these women. You just wouldn’t believe, Father. How they reacted. No shame. Got close to a few. What bloke wouldn’t? Married or not... Ealing, lots of Asian girls, so graceful. And Black and Chinese and everything. I never had full sex. That way I could always tell Aga the truth, that I’d been faithful. And I went to confession every week, even if some Sunday mornings I was too wasted to go sober. But I always went and always did my penance before anything else happened, just to have that clean sheet again.

“After a year, I was loaded. And feeling so good. Working scaffolds daytimes, building up muscle, going to the gym too, then dancing. Hard work, sure. I took a few pills to help. Nothing major, just a little stimulant. To help me make enough money to go home and make my wife happy. Bought a second-hand Merc, a silver 280 C-class, with alloy wheels and sports trim and Blaupunkt stereo, and went home for Christmas. Hadn’t been back for a year. She’d said she would miss me, but this way we’d save money on tickets. Only when I got there, she was cold. She had told my mum and sis what I’d been doing, the stripping. The shame that brought on Andrzejowki. They threw me out of the house on Christmas Eve. Can you believe it? And Aga wouldn’t have me in her home either. Even Father Lech disowned me when I showed at midnight vigil. My mother had told everyone. The whole congregation knew. I spent that night alone in the car. It was raining. No snow. Cold, wet, black. Nothing to do or say to anyone. I could have gone to my friends, but I was being punished. So I stayed proud, sleeping in the car. Outside her house. She wouldn’t come out, wouldn’t even answer her phone. That sports Merc got a small battery, to keep things light. Kept the heating off, else it wouldn’t start in the morning. Thought I was going to freeze to death.

“Then, day after Christmas, she told me she had someone else and wanted a divorce. He was older, had money, and kids already. I couldn’t blame her, really. Life is life, you know. And the womb empty for a reason.”

12

“I drove my Benz all the way back to London. Well, what else was I going to do? Only scaffolds and stripping left. But it wasn’t so good this time. The devil made me lazy. Without Aga, without the dream of a child for us, there was no reason to work at anything. I was angry too. Didn’t want to give her the divorce. That was a church wedding, you know, and our love was holy to me. I’d said for life, for better and worse and all that, and I meant it. I still do.

“So the drugs again. Mostly steroids, to build up muscle. Everyone was doing it. The gyms full of Poles, so getting stuff was no problem. At nights, girls loved it. The size of me. Well, not downstairs. Steroids shrink things. You get it back once you stop, but I didn’t feel like stopping. Wasn’t getting any, wasn’t about to have kids, so what did I care? Stopped stripping down to the altogether, so it didn’t matter. Until one night. This girl tore my underpants off, when I was dancing on a table, and another filming it on her phone. The next day, it was on the internet. And the next, all over the world. People in chat rooms were laughing, in emails, text messages. Even in

Andrzejowki. How was I ever going back, Father? I could stop the 'roids, let it recover, but I couldn't get that video back, could I? Not like those celebs, with their little films on the Web. So dirty. So cool in the end. No. This was me, before the whole world, barren and tiny.

"Work started to dry up. People were laughing at me on the scaffolds. I was drinking a bit, almost fell off a few times. And the drugs were always there. When you're weak, they can smell that. The dealers. And it was different now. Lots of coke in London. And hash. And ketamine and more. I stopped going to church. Hopeless. Came home every night, very alone. Drank. And the internet. I was addicted to that too. It's so easy. No need to talk. Just log in to these chat rooms, with cameras, and type, slowly, so no one know where you are from. Kingdom of all the women in the world. It wasn't porn so much, you see. There's all these women. Thousands. All happy to be naked, to open... you know. And so beautiful. Smiling. So I was looking. Looking for one that looked like my Aga. I know it's wrong, but I had to. Maybe you've never seen it, but there's so many, and so sweet. I never knew there could be so many women. And so easy. Drink, computer, and angels. It was an hour, and then three and then five and six every day. No need to go out. No risk, you think. I'd stopped taking the 'roids, and it was kind of growing again, but the other stuff wasn't helping. All the spare time I had was on-line. Drinking. Snorting. Touching myself. Hours, days on end. Even when it hurt. Even when it was sore or raw. It was so easy. So good. The girls looked good. And the blokes, like I was not so long ago. I had a right. To be there, you know? I had those muscles. I'd had those nights. And those films. For what mine did to me, they owed me.

"But my mind. It was all out of shape. I wouldn't talk to anyone. Tried to stop. Failed. Tried to stop. Got angry. Into debt with some bad people. Stopped taking the drugs, not because I could, but because I couldn't afford them any more. I just drank, thought that was safe. But no. Christmas coming. Everyone happy. Everyone except me. I couldn't bear to think it had been a whole year. My head, my heart. Thinking things. Hearing things. My computer talking to me. Not like in the movies. In my dreams, waking me, calling me. Perversions. Sucking you dry. Nothing, no part of me is any good any more. It said that and I knew it was right. And one night, I got it into my head that somehow it was that girl's fault. The one who filmed me. Working in that restaurant just down the road. And I was drinking and trying to keep calm but it wasn't working. Very drunk. Very angry. So I got the Tube, and rode all the way up here. And I hung around for ages. Drinking spirits. Not good. Then I went in, couldn't think, looked for the waitress in the kitchen and saw a knife and that was it. I don't remember what next. I... I didn't think it mattered."

13

Radek was weeping again. Jurek looked away. Outside the window, a length of brick wall. Another towering hospital ward, some way off. A scrap of blue sky.

"That's some story, brother."

Radek took a long time subduing his tears. His voice came through gasping sobs.

"Sorry, Father. Can't help myself."

"Maybe you should be grateful. Mad man running around with a knife, if it was back home, the cops, they would have shot you." It was clear, from the hesitant breathing, the reddened eyes, the body slumped, that Radek did not appear to be grateful at all.

"Are the voices still with you?"

"Yes. Strong."

"And what do they say?"

"That I'm finished. And that hell is next."

"Oh... And you believe in hell?"

"And you?"

Jurek exhaled slowly, in what he hoped was a sage-like fashion.

"No. God made us, right? All of us, even our free will... Think about it. You love God, right? Well, what sort of a god would put his children through eternal damnation?"

"He made Satan. And Satan was punished. He got hell."

"I'm not sure. Satan was proud. You are sorry."

Radek did not look at all convinced.

"After what I've done, I don't think even hell will take me."

14

Jurek didn't know what else to say. Where to look. This wasn't like interviewing a celeb or a car crash victim or even a grieving survivor of some family horror. Whatever ride this boy was on was still very far from over.

He thought about those last words. About hell. And about what would happen if he chose to run this story, sneaking it into the first edition of the new year.

"Christmas tomorrow. Anyone coming to visit you?"

"No."

"I will." Jurek was not sure how, but he knew, no matter what happened with the piece, he would have to be back. "Father Szymon will be busy, maybe I will get another priest, but we will come back."

"I deserve what I deserve. All I ask is that you bring a priest here. Just the once."

Jurek's gaze sank to the floor and the papers that littered the corner of the room – the Polish Times, Polonia and his New Era. He'd worked for them all, at one time or another, and it hurt to think of the years he'd given to their easily smudging pages. He looked up again, but Radek's eyes were shut. If he did come back with a priest, that would be it. The boy would not recover.

As far as headline features go, it would be poetic and bloody and perfect. But Jurek didn't believe in saints and purgatory. A priest's visit would only further condemn him, and he didn't feel like leaving the boy to last rites. There had to be alternatives. Staring at the mags and papers, Jurek remembered a Polish-speaking psychiatrist he had interviewed for an article a few months back. Yes. He would send the man in here. It would prolong the boy's suffering. Probably even strip the story of its ending. But at least it would mean his years of filing crap copy were worth something.

"OK. I'll get you what you need."

"Thank you."

"You're the one who has to do the work, though. Recover. Hope for something. There must be something."

"There is God. And He's unhappy."

"How do you know?"

"The way... He is making me feel."

"Maybe that is the devil."

"No. Some things you just believe."

"Until they become real?"

"Until they... release you."

"Release from what? From life? You have an obligation, to your wife, your future ki..."

Jurek stopped himself finishing that last word, but Radek was finally making eye contact.

"One more thing, Mr Karol."

"Yes?"

"The doctors should be coming soon. Will you stay and help them translate?"

"Can't. Got things to do, errands. I've a rented car I have to take back to the shop tomorrow, and it just can't wait. Really." For once, it felt good not to lie in the name of his trade.

Radek breathed a sigh of surrender, his eyes on his hands, the fingers slowly, repeatedly

picking at themselves.

"I understand."

"Duty calls."

"I know. I'm sorry."

"Look, stop apologising... I can stay a while longer. Can't leave you here on your own, can I? At the mercy of those voices. Do they speak Polish at least?" Radek nodded, his blond hair shaking like summer hay. Jurek smiled. "They came from somewhere and they'll go back there, if you want them to. What time are the doctors coming?"

"In an hour or so."

"All right. My English isn't perfect, but I'll give it a shot."

Jurek knew he was taking a risk by staying, maybe chancing arrest, maybe the final breaking of Radek's heart. But somehow it felt wrong to run.

They sat in broken silence, the window open on December dusk. Jurek wondered whether they could deport him for impersonating a man of the cloth, but chastised himself for thinking like a child. This wasn't Poland. The church not holy here. This was serious reporting in a serious time and place. No matter what Beata might think. Life and death risk. Something Mr Walberg would approve of. And Weronika. Why he bothered with words in the first place.

"Mr Karol?"

"Just Karol."

"Karol... Would you do something for me?" Radek was whispering, his voice back to that of a boy. "Don't know how to ask. Since the operation. They haven't said anything. I don't want to wait until they come in here. Nurses. Women doctors. Will you... Help me look under the bandages?" Karol stared at the pile of newspapers on the floor and wondered if now, right now, was not the best time to really start praying. "I know it is too much to ask, but you are a man of faith. A man with the will of God. Please?"

LOSING LIGHT

06:33

Has the day begun, or is it still night?

I wake fully conscious into the limbo part of the morning, everything invisible, even though my face is right next to the whitewashed wall by the bed. I know my eyes are open only from the physical sensation of the lids lifting, the awareness that I've willed them to lift. I'm not sure I've actually woken, if I slept at all, or if all I've done for the last few hours was lie back, alone, waiting for sleep that never came.

I think I slept because I dreamt, though I don't remember what of. Nothing there, no detail, the finished reel of my imagination spinning a fading echo. But I'm sure I dreamt, feel it in my chest, the heart racing the way it would in a cinema the moment the credits begin to roll, the house lights still down, in that instant when you can't yet remember a single frame of someone else's life which has just flashed before your eyes.

06:41

Lying sideways, I stare at the digital alarm clock. 06:42 appears and before I know it turns 06:43. The next minute is an age in coming. I try capturing seconds, but counting to sixty is not the same as marking out a minute. No matter what I do, I can't get in with the flow of clockwork, start distrusting the little box, irrationally. It's a reliable calculator, I know, but clocks aren't toys, don't play tricks, share none of time's capricious sense of humour.

Time tests me and my mind every day. Today, I want to test it back. Time and hurt can wear the mind down and twist it until it's hard, maybe impossible, to tell where the suffering is coming from. Poets ignorant of anatomy wax lyrical about the heart, but there's nothing there, even if it is one hell of a muscle, beating faster with the very thought of you. The mind is where it's all at. All I know and trust, whatever I understand of myself and my nature is, if not born, then at least shepherded through the world by it. There all life resides, all identity, the mind both the seat of emotions and the house of reason. The one organ you can't transplant or replace with plastic. A miracle, which may explain why I can't separate you from mine, no matter what will I apply.

06:57

Twenty minutes from waking, I notice I have a hard-on. I feel it reaching up like a pet animal, mutely craving attention, but without enthusiasm, as if my flesh knew I'm not even remotely stirred by its needs right now. Still, I'm glad it's there, glad to wake to the comforting sensations of an empty belly, a full bladder, working order organs. Today will not be about physical strength, will be a whole other kind of test. But I'll build on this, hoping my body will provide a sound platform for a stable mind.

The mind is where it's all at on this dark morning, with every voice inside me, from hope to peace to terror, spinning from the word go. Maybe that's why I can't recall any of my dreams. The instant my focus turns from restless, half-aroused flesh, I sense you. A presence. A fair-faced ghost. A siren, seducing and scaring, both equally and at once.

I'm not whining. I know the rules. I know it's a sin against nature to love what's gone, hold on to the spirit of something that will not change and pass and make room for new things inside a

life. But I've tried every decent trick my mind could conceive of to set myself free, rid my consciousness of you, and have failed and failed miserably. Every day I show the world nothing. Take what I'm given. Give what I can. As far as possible live each day in near-ignorance of what wonders I've seen.

07:00

The radio alarm on the floor beside me bursts into song. Another cover version of Hallelujah. The snooze button on top of the casing is round, about the diameter of a jar lid. Easy to find in the dark with the base of my fist.

Next to it is my mobile. There is a text, the first few lines previewed on the phone's screen, but it is in Polish and therefore not from you and so I let the phone drop back down to the floor without reading it. Probably a little Christmas limerick or another appeal from mother to call and let them know I'm all right. As if calling home once a week, a thousand miles away, to tell them lies not worth the price of a phone call was not sacrifice enough.

07:34

With the lights still off, I rise and move around the bedsit, the familiar patterns of dressing and organising the space around me feeling alien and new, like learning it all for the first time. Light creeps round the edges of curtain and I prise them open a little, let the orange glow of London's street lamps sneak in.

I cross the clothes-strewn carpet, pull a string beneath the kitchenette cupboard and the counter top before me floods with fluorescent white. I turn back to see what's left of last night's vodka session. Easel and canvas in the corner, covered with a dirty dust sheet. Paint tubes on the floor. My hands stained with colour, meaning I have broken my promise never to lift another brush.

Turning away in disgust, I crack some eggs into a frying pan. Cooking, hung over or not, has a calming effect. Therapeutic. I'd rather not eat at all. Rather just absorb myself in the soothing business of cooking all day, but this is no holiday. No time for fasting. Today, I need strength, in whatever fuel form.

The eggs set in seconds and I eat standing up, making sandwiches for later in between mouthfuls. Swallowing hurts. I've been smoking too much in these months of shortening days and falling temperatures. My throat has a hard time accepting the passage of breath, even more so with food or drink. Outside the window, the dim light of day swells slowly. The sky is overcast, looking unwell today, bleak and tired. But I'm glad. Glad the sun won't be blinding my eyes, the heavy cloud cover somehow blanketing tired spirits.

I pack the sandwiches and whatever is left of the vodka into a rucksack, light a cigarette, look up. On the opposite side of the street, a tall, leafless tree waves with its many bare hands, calling me out for a breath of fresh air.

08:39

Jumping off the double-decker at Horseguards' Parade, I know the cold will hurt by the time I reach the West End, but it's good to be out in the centre before the shopping crowds descend. To have London to us alone again, for a couple more hours in which to retrace the steps we took two years ago, after you rang, out of the blue, introducing yourself as a Guardian freelancer, writing copy about "unusual migrants" and how they celebrate their Christmases. In my still-broken

English, I told you I would be spending it alone and there was not much else to say, but you quietly asked again, explaining you had spoken to friends, one of whom had bought one of my paintings, told you a little about my past, my career, the curious circumstances of my deciding to move to England. Asked again if we could meet, take a walk, just chat. If nothing came of it, so be it. I still wanted to say no, but you sounded so kind, asked so quietly, I agreed to meet you by the Christmas tree just outside the National Gallery. Two years ago today.

08:50

The massive spruce is back up and dressed in Trafalgar Sq. I walk on, sipping from the bottle to tame the cold. Two lost-looking strangers, we recognised each other straight away in the crowd beneath all those giddy lights. You smiled, though I could somehow tell the gesture was forced, something dark happening within the silver-grey of your eyes. I was expecting chit-chat, a grilling, pleasantries at least, but you stood there instead, more adrift than I was, in your own city, then asked if we could take a walk, away from the busy square, sit down somewhere to record the interview proper.

We strolled towards the Thames, but instead of conversation I got puzzling silence. Not uncomfortable, but not too easy either. Today, the Embankment is cold and almost completely quiet. Pigeons and a few seagulls lost in the mist overhead. Hungerford Bridge spanning the Thames, its steel supports perfectly matching the grey water and sky, but two years ago everything was sunlit enough to make me forget the end of the year was near, the warmth and the light so unlike all the Christmases I had so far known on the other end of Europe.

You led me across the river and up to the bar atop the Southbank Centre, overlooking the London Eye, Westminster Palace and all those other shades of grey. I ordered coffees while you fumbled with the voice recorder, and when you eventually got it going, we both laughed as you had forgotten to print off the questions you had meant to open with. Then you looked so crestfallen, I took the blank page you had placed between us and started sketching your portrait, while jabbering on about my childhood at the tail-end of communism, growing up in a house full of exhausted intellectuals, eventually graduating from art school only to fail, after a few high-profile openings, to push to the front of the up-and-coming talent queue. My “thing” was to paint, just paint, in old, unfashionable oils, rather than working in all kinds of new media and trying to make sure whatever I became sold. After five years of near starvation, all my money gone on canvases and crazy girlfriends, I quit the finer arts and came here, joining the masses, the EU wide open, letting me live the legend of a master of the arts painting walls and ceilings. Swearing I would never touch artists’ colours again. Enjoying the new-found freedom of being just a decorator, a craftsman for a change. But of course there came times when people asked if I could pretty up their kids’ bedrooms or do something different with a bathroom wall, and I started to show off. Murals. Gilded detailing. Angels and satyrs and flora dancing across ceilings. Customers were delighted. Suddenly, I had found myself agreeing to tacky commissions, painting canvases again, cheap portraits from photographs, kids, celebs, pets even. Nothing beautiful. Nothing profound. The less heart I put into painting a Johnny Depp or Dodger the Alsatian, the happier people were. I didn’t care, thought it funny that I had gone from making art for nothing to making a killing out of kitsch. Ironic, and a little sad, but I had by then grown out of lofty ambitions. Happy for once to be able to afford the finer things. Like sitting there with you, wrapping up that first drawing in a Southbank café, without having to worry about who was going to pay for the double espressos and the hand-baked cakes that cost as much as I would once have spent on a week’s worth of food.

09:12

Now, walking back across Hungerford Bridge, I stop, turn to stare up at the grey slab that is the Royal Festival Hall and that sixth floor window. See you sitting there, your eyes actually paying attention. You finished with a few questions about Christmas in Poland. I told you the big event was not the Day itself, but the Eve before, when everyone would fast until the first star appeared in the sky, then sit down to a meal of thirteen dishes, with an extra place setting, just in case an unexpected visitor, the long-awaited Saviour himself, came knocking on the door. Then you got up, thanking me over and over again for the picture. You had to rush off to type up the text and send it to the news room, but that you would let me know when the interview was published. I was left alone, sitting there in that members area, a nobody again, with my full wallet and my silent mobile and my unpronounceable name.

09:18

Walking back across the river, I wish for the millionth time I had a copy of that sketch still. Or another in its place. But you never let me draw or paint you after that first meeting. I would ask time and time again, in the months we spent together, yet you always said no. I have photos, dozens of them, though I have never tried to work from those. Painting from stills is nothing to true life.

You called me the next day. Christmas Eve. To say The Guardian was running the piece, along with your scanned portrait, but also to tell me that your parents had read the interview and were insisting I come over and join you for supper. I uttered a polite refusal, pride doing my thinking for me, but you said they wouldn't take no for an answer. They already had thirteen dishes lined up. Wanting to do something different, something truly Christmassy. A gift of hospitality for someone who would otherwise be alone. And a thank-you for the portrait.

I can still smell the wood polish, the freshly cut tree, the domestic aromas of your North London home. Chatting with your parents in the kitchen, then being shown round, I absorbed the paintings, the books, the old furniture. Everything said England to me. Your stories of West Country childhood and Oxford studies. The tiny crackle any time you pronounced the letter S. The shyness which stopped you looking at me when you knew I was staring, struck ever more dumb. We took the dogs for a walk, to a bookshop your brother ran in Camden. You seemed a lot happier than the day before, though the things you were opening up about were far from sweet. Your husband. And your recent separation. About how he had got you the Guardian job, though you were scared and did not want to write for him, now you were no longer living in his flat, no longer together.

And of course I was pleased then. A happiness I feel even now, sipping on the bitter spirit, climbing back up along St James' Park, past the bare trees and the marble lake and the day which just won't get started. Happy to hear you tell me such personal details, to imagine there was more to your invitation than just Christian kindness for a lost soul.

09:31

Walking up towards Green Park, I take a swig against the cold and remember myself telling stories, over baked salmon, nut roast, parsnips, about my motherland under communism, riot police killing people, shops with nothing in them, the greyness that seemed a million miles and years away from your house, with its prints of old maps and watercolours, its books piled high everywhere I looked, its sense of permanence and class and culture I felt going all the way back to Chaucer and Turner and Blake.

Then your parents left for a drinks party elsewhere and we were left alone, in the living room, by the roaring fireplace. We drank some more, talked about our favourite authors, how

different our universities had been, how we both wished we had studied at opposite ends of Europe, then you put on an old video tape of Grease, the film you had watched every Christmas since you were little. We laughed right through it, but the moment the tape stopped and started spinning back, you were crying. Your first grown up Christmas without him. The man you met as a girl and married and who had now left. You apologised for the tears, then walked me back to the Tube, waving me off into those tunnels and the dirt of south London and the cold of my flat again.

09:36

Nearing Hyde Park Corner, winter cuts through everything but the clouds overhead.

I sip on the vodka, a few tourists starting to converge round the back of Buckingham Palace, when my phone rings. Mother. She can't quite afford these mobile international calls, but I answer. To tell her everything is fine. That I will be on-line tomorrow, on camera, to prove it. But I am anything but that. Thinking about Christmas Day, two years ago, when nothing, no amount of booze was getting me drunk, all alone, until you rang. In the evening, to wish me Merry Christmas again. And invite me for a third time, in as many days, to meet. Just to walk some more. To chat. This time without the Guardian or your parents or the ghost of your husband listening in.

We walked the Cenotaph, ran from the Boxing Day sales crowds towards the river again, got the boat down to Tower Bridge, saying little, smiling a lot. It was simple, silent and I never wanted the day to end. We ended up closer there to my bedsit in Borough than to your Swiss Cottage home, and I offered to cook supper. You smiled, sadly, but agreed without hesitation. I remember nothing after that, nothing until the moment, in my kitchen, when you suddenly asked me to hold you. I was calm as you reached out, brave and breathing hard, not sure what to expect, what was happening.

We spent the rest of the night like that, holding each other in my bed, half-dressed, worried about what next. You were married still, and I little more than a stranger. Though it was true, you admitted, that the friend who had told you about me had also said I was cute and that you should definitely call, using the Guardian gig as cover. A young Slav artist to help blow away the blues and make you feel, if not happy, than at least alive again. I felt flattered, pleased to have been victim of so sweet a trap.

09:42

I cross beneath Hyde Park Corner, the mind numbed by the cold and the concentration forced on me by the walk. Hyde Park looks grim in today's low light, even if no less stately than usual. Before I have to report for work, I kill what time I have walking, right into its heart, towards the kidney-shaped pool of the Serpentine. There's no other place like this in London, not this close to the rushing core of the city, where it's possible to shut out the sound of surrounding traffic and feel like there really is nothing but Royal woodland in sight.

The weeks which followed are no blur, no blank, even now. So many days and nights spent together and not one cramped moment, not one foot wrong, just the world changing, for good. I don't have to think back, see it even now, on any clear afternoon. The hallmark of your presence on everything. Every object, each colour and shape. Every leaf and brick and scrap of blue sky. I remember it all the way a new landscape registers itself on a traveller's eye. Everything vivid and aroused before the senses. Everything highlighted with an acute, hyper-clear glow. Today, I wish it wasn't true, wish none of it happened, but I embraced the change of vision when it made us both happy and can't honestly deny it now.

When, a week from our first meeting, standing in my kitchen, two days before New Year's, I said I loved you, it didn't matter that I had never said the words in English before. I didn't know

how or why or any other detail. Just knew, and wanted it said, because it was happening. I wanted you to feel it in me, whether you felt the same or not, and if it seemed like a challenge or a threat then I was sorry. I did not mean to offer or ask for too much, especially with the separation still ongoing, but I would not take it back. You said nothing in reply, but I knew. Knew you wanted to hear it, hoping I would have the backbone and the guts not to mince about, to reach out just as you had done to me.

When, a couple of days later, on New Year's Eve, you stopped us walking in a park and, in the middle of a conversation about something I can't possibly recall, told me you loved me back. I felt as if the world around us had completed its transformation. I remember clearly the evening hour, the wet grass, your eyes as they sought assurance in mine. Eyes that smiled and failed to hold back tears at the same time. I said you looked beautiful, and you giggled when I said something crass about rainbows, about tears and smiles being like sun coming up on passing rain. But by then language had, for me at least, shifted to new frequencies. Words stale and worn to paper-thin shreds by a billion other tongues suddenly fresh and strong and utterly capable of closing the gap between heart and mind, and not just for the one body, but two.

What was it? What was the combination that got you in so deep? Love. I had no doubt. The simple ecstasy that came from every moment of contact. Every phone call to every shared orgasm. It held fast and felt like it was not just about you, not me, or us, but like we were adding something to the world. Not once did I feel like shouting from a rooftop. Not once did I feel like saying a word to anyone about it. But in every action I felt some spark of you, a charge I feel somewhere in me still.

I knew you were struggling to deal with the pain of being abandoned. It had only been half a year, but I was hoping to be the antidote to all that. Those few months we had together seemed like we hit the perfect balance. East-West. Male-Female. Painter-Muse. Young and smart, our bright futures wide open. Meeting your friends, everyone commented on it. Asked for the secret of our sudden union. We didn't know what to say then and I still don't now. Something superior existed in us, some peace so white-hot not even language can get near without being consumed.

Crossing the frozen lawns of Hyde Park, stumbling across landscape that is more mud than grass, I'm still trying to get clear in my own head the flesh and bone mystery of it all. Still trying to work out how someone as wonderful as you managed to fuck up my heart so bad.

09:50

Heading across an expanse of muddy green towards Speakers Corner, I stop some way short, away from the network of paths wrapped round it, crouch down under the wide brim of today's sky, pull out a cigarette. Everyone in sight is moving energetically, walking or jogging or horse riding. Cigarette lit, I start back the way I came, towards people in colourful layers walking under bare-naked oaks. Only a few weeks ago, the grass beneath them was piled high with leaves as wonderfully bright as their clothing, now swept away in the pre-Christmas clean up, the remains a wet, brown smudge.

I cross through one of the subways that run a maze beneath Marble Arch, the walls lined with chipped granite slates and stencilled graffiti promoting Middle Eastern causes. It feels even colder down here. Reason says this narrow, subterranean space should be warmer, and reason may well be right, but it's not reason that takes a man's temperature at a time like this. My heavy boots pound out a stiff rhythm against the walls of the tunnel as I approach a prostrate bundle of rags stretched out against the wall at its far end. Wrapped in the warmest clothing I have, I find it impossible to believe any human being could survive a night lying down here with nothing but blankets and cardboard for cover.

Closing in, I see a face sticking out of one end of the cocoon and realise he is also a Slav.

Something about the shape of the skull, the eyes, feels like a visual burst of home. Just by the haircut I can tell he's new here, still somehow seeming tidy and fresh. Resting against the tiled wall, he is smiling, right at me, no hands held out, no cup at his feet. Just a sideways grin, though I have no idea what he could be happy about. And though the smile stops me and I pause there for a few seconds, wanting to do, say something, I can't think of anything other than the subject of you to put to him. Your name is on the tip of my tongue long before I make to open my mouth, and it's not words of complaint, of shared grief I find there, but the very opposite. I feel myself wishing I could tell him of what we were, as if that could work its magic again, as if the sound of your name alone here was alchemy.

10:03

The silent crew of students and non-English speakers meets in an alley behind Selfridges to receive their daily supply of pre-Christmas leaflets to hand out along Oxford Street, plus the usual pep-talk from the supervisor. The small, short-haired woman shouts at us as if we were a group of unruly school kids on an outing. She warns us not to try outsmarting her, reminds us it's her job to patrol throughout the day, making sure we're not slacking off or vanishing home early. We get paid by the hour and we work by the hour - that's one of her catchphrases. We may not see her, but she can see us - that's another.

She's not the worst boss I've tried not to cross swords with in the dozen or so jobs I've worked my way through in the past two years. None's been any kind of career move or held my attention for long. Since I quit all brushes, I've worked in a bar, a restaurant kitchen, a car park and as a night watchman. It took me a while to see the pattern emerging in the choices I've been making. It wasn't conscious, this moving away from the face to face. I don't want to become alien, don't want to dwell or wallow or hide. But for the time being, I just feel happier avoiding conversation. In that respect, this bit of income is near-perfect. All it demands is patience and resistance to the elements, something I've had plenty of schooling in of late.

10:10

The huddle over, we all fan out into the tense crush of Oxford Street, some working in pairs, others alone. I head for Oxford Circus, the epicentre of the mayhem and the spot most likely to strip me of my valueless gifts the quickest. It's like piranha infested waters out here already, hands snatching leaflets, attracted by the offers emblazoned in loud, Christmas coloured lettering. No one slows, no one meets my gaze. Doing this job, I've discovered the secret of invisibility. Which is fine for me today, a small blessing, the hustle and bustle of commerce leaving me well alone. The homeless Big Issue vendor next to me seems to be doing a fair trade, a couple of mates helping him shoot the freezing breeze. He chats with passers by, shouting out greetings, booze making him jolly. Me, I'm on my own guilt trip here. This useless job of advertising weighs on my conscience, the fruits of my efforts trampled and pulped into the pavement wherever people have seen fit to rubbish what I've offered them.

As hands snatch at me, I ask myself for the thousandth time, was it all too fast? The intimacy? The sex? The talk of shared futures? Was I too passionate, too eager, my words, my accent, too rough?

While I stand still, the cold slowly but surely eats into me. The hands suffer the worst. Gloved digits can't separate the individual pages fast enough, and fingerless gloves help next to none. At the very least it's not raining. The clouds hang low, and if they're going to let loose today, it'll be white, I'm sure of it. Just one of those things you feel in the bones. Rain's a drag, but snow

would be nice. I wouldn't mind a little magic filling the air between the heavens and the pavement today.

11:28

Cold coming up from the ground reminds me of the moment earlier, out on the Hyde Park lawn, feeling the same chill. The recollection puzzles me, the way the defiantly green December grass froze me more than the tomb-grey cap of winter sky. It doesn't seem right, doesn't fit with reason, same as the sense of temperature down in that subway. Even though all light comes from up above, it's the earth that's closest to home and should provide the warmest welcome. The ice crawling up through the soles of my boots is making me feel uncomfortable, because I'm still trying to relearn how to feel at home here, in this solitary dimension.

I still don't know how I failed, you, us, myself, now, two years minus two months together, though I have been asking every day since the night you called, out of nowhere, in a tone of voice which itself said something I desperately didn't want to hear. It took nearly an hour to reach your flat, from South to North, across the Thames, heart in my throat all the way, fear of the subdued mystery in your voice choking me already. I was terrified. I knew you'd been struggling to resolve your feelings about the separation for a long while, but whenever I breached the subject, you smiled and said not to worry, shrugged it off as the usual troubles life had installed in your way before we met. I couldn't pry, even if I had every right to be afraid, couldn't press, couldn't show weakness. To let you in on my insecurity would have meant failing us both.

But the moment I saw your face as you answered your parents' front door, I knew just how wrong that was. The meeting didn't last long. I don't remember a thing said in that kitchen, nothing beyond you saying no, saying sorry, saying goodbye. Even when I asked you if it was for good, you didn't answer, just broke down in tears, and Christ, what it was to stand there and watch you freeze and weep and all seemingly down to me, the fact you didn't love me, keep still in myself, accept the reality that I couldn't help, that there was no word or look or touch any more that was going to make anything better for either of us, no new embrace.

I thought I'd go crazy right there and then. You said you loved me, but were not in love with me. Which is no answer to give a man, no help at all. At the time, it was something to cling to, yet now it seems so small and sorry, an awful compromise, only adding to the fall. Good, but not good enough. No match for you. Nothing next to what I felt.

12:16

The cold is starting to hurt, so I move along, handing out flyers in transit. After hours of staring inwards, I'm forced again to look to the crowd, fighting my way through it towards Tottenham Court Road. I remain invisible, but my eyes are open to a thousand human beings at once, all moving, ducking, like waves on a hurried sea, appearing and vanishing in a fleeting multitude.

And I see what I am ready to see. Something obvious, something I haven't been bothered by for a good length of time now, and hoped I'd never be bothered by again. Not the face of that insane supervisor spying on me, but you, appearing out of nowhere, time and time again. I expected this trick of inconsolable imagination. That in this cast of thousands I'd see you in some other reality, in some woman around the same height as you, her hair the same as yours was then, maybe dressed after your fashion.

It's my fault. I'm looking out for you today and that's what's accosting me with your features. And the funny thing is, I really don't want to see the real you. Not here. Not today. There's

every chance you're still living in London, out here shopping today. Even though a place like this was never to your taste, it's not impossible. The thought of meeting you out here terrifies me more than anything else. What if? Maybe with your parents? Maybe with him? Maybe with a child already? You'll suddenly see me with a handful of leaflets, pushing through the crowd, and know, instantly, that I'm still lost.

I should have gone back home ages ago, left this England behind, started anew again. But I haven't. There you go again, vanishing in the crowd, your mask on someone else, a woman in a grey woollen hat, hair just the same as you used to wear yours. I turn right around, against the flow of human tide, stuffing the leaflets deep into my rucksack, forcing my gaze past all the faces as I speed back towards the Tube. I don't know whether I'm doing the right thing here, running from ghosts. All I know is that each one of those mistaken instants makes me realise that there's still another shred of my heart can be broken again. Right or wrong, paranoid or not, I have to get out of here, get some shelter, before I let whatever's left of it be ground into dust.

13:50

I hid indoors for the rest of that insane day, same as I do now, shedding more tears then I ever thought a human being capable of. There was nothing else to do, nothing, save let my body expel what was necessary to help see me through to the morning.

I called you the next day, but there was no change. I apologised for phoning, but the shock of this totally unexpected, totally unannounced rejection was not something I could stomach without asking for explanations. If there was to be no future for us, then at least I wanted to know what and where went wrong, get some chronology of how the world had come to be turned on its head. Again you didn't reply. And just as I was about to snap and say what depths I'd fallen into, I heard you crying softly in the distance and knew I had to lie, for the first time ever. I had to say I was all right, it was all right, not to worry, and said thank you, somehow, and goodbye.

14:12

The bedsit is filled with cloudy dusk already, as if the sun was clocking off early too. After twenty minutes of sitting indoors, in my coat, I'm still trembling, hardly feeling any better than I did out on the loud, busy streets. I let near-frostbite pain release its grip on my limbs. Chewing through the sandwich I've carried with me all morning, my throat feels ready to give up on either smoking, eating or talking, or maybe all three at once. I raise a smile at the thought of what would happen if I were to catch a throat infection. Imagine myself sat here, sandwich in one hand, a cigarette in the other, trying to decide which of the two was worth the pain. So stupid, it makes me laugh and hurt my throat even more, like the old joke about the three addicts in purgatory, locked away with an endless supply of their vice of choice. One with a mountain of food, second in a hall full of booze, third with nothing but cigarettes. The first one dies of satiated obesity, the second of giddy alcohol poisoning, while the third lives on to a ripe old age of madness, having forgotten to ask for matches. Hell may be other people, but living with the consequences of your own stupidity is no picnic either.

Looking out across the street, I see the old man who lives opposite has framed his window with a line of fairy lights. I search myself for a positive response to the sight of their winking colours, something good and innocent to get excited about. The visions are there, I know, it's just that I'm unable to unfreeze any of them.

14:17

When I didn't see you for a month after that, it was endless hours of the most incredible cold turkey. At first I believed you were for convincing around, for winning back. I had to think that this was all a test of some fated kind, a trial of my own self-belief, of holding out for long enough to prove to you I could love and let go and thus get you back once and for all. I wrote letters I never sent, countless letters outlining every single point and reason for why I felt what I felt and why I believed I deserved another try, why I couldn't just let it go back to a time without your presence by me.

Eventually, I looked within and couldn't see you anywhere any more, hit some strange state of wash-out, my head clear, the sense of release incredible, like someone saying - no more to come, no more madness, the world and its boot off me, free to go. I enjoyed the few days of Easter at a friends' place, glad to show people a relaxed face again. Got talking to a girl, cuddled a little. But the magic didn't last. You called me, mid-April, and I was ready to talk, chat, laugh even, prove the impossible was real and we could just be friends again, but when I asked how things were at home and you said your husband had taken you back, and that you were living together again, I choked. Felt like I'd been hit by a train. No exaggeration. No brute simile. It's exactly how I remember that moment, hearing his name. The realisation that our time was up, that we were at an end, felt like a train, that's what I saw flashing before my eyes and see even now, something hard and unstoppable and deadly coming at me.

After another month of being unable to go near a brush, I took the first job I could find, selling jeans and T-shirts off a Brixton stall with some Polish artists who knew nothing of you, and it went from there, the pattern. New jobs. New women on the rebound. Some like you, others the complete opposite.

Feeling the cold pressing on me in the unheated bedsit, I think with sullen pride of how I did as right as I could in the months that followed, learnt to live alone again, away from the haven I had in us, without losing my senses or burdening anyone with tears or with pity for me. I have not turned to ice, nor stone, nor hate. Love turn to hate? How? Love turn to blind obsession, and then hate, maybe, but never in the same identity, never the same man. To madness, yes. Hopelessness, yes. To the death of want, the death of any survival instinct. But never to hate. Hate the one you love? How?

14:22

The phone rings, jolting like a taser. It's a long time since it's had that kind of effect, but today the bell seems wired right into my nervous system. I resist the temptation to move to it, leave it to ring until the answering machine kicks in. I recognise Nicky's voice over the speaker phone, even though it sounds a little more strained and distant than usual. I'm half guessing she called when she thought I'd be out, just wanted to leave a message, extend a gesture of goodwill without having to actually converse. She says she's calling to see how I am, asks to be called back when I get the chance.

Nicky's one of the few women I have tried to get close to since you left. In the end, she was the only one I told about you. After we broke up, a month ago. We parted on cool terms, her disapproving, me trying to make peace, neither of us sure whether the exchange had brought us closer to knowing or unknowing one another. We haven't spoken since and I didn't know if we ever would again, the distance between us like a ravine the width and depth of which can only be judged by how long the echo of a testing shout takes to come back.

15:06

It's getting dark outside, the clouds starting to thin a little, a few cracks of washed-out blue still visible through parted curtains. I try not to move, or breathe, leave as little impact, have as little mass in the world as possible, but then the doorbell rings, another metallic, piercing noise I do not want to hear today. I go down a staircase so narrow my shoulders bounce off the walls. I think it might be a neighbour or some religious caller, but no, it is Ala and Pendzel. They look like evangelists, somehow though, the same kind of pity in their eyes, before they don the appropriate smiles and invite themselves inside.

I am pleased to see them, even if not to have them stay. We studied in Warsaw and came here together, although both our paths and our careers have gone their separate ways since then. I unpack the cakes and cold meats and the whisky they have brought. Listen to them chastising me for not keeping in touch. Not even responding to their invite to go over to theirs tomorrow and celebrate Christmas with other arty outcasts living far from family homes. Cracking the seal on the spirits, I smile and tell them we didn't escape those places just to start trying to replay scenes of festive love we never had back when. Eating festive dishes we don't actually like, calling people we don't miss, shopping for things picked without love. I try to say it with a light air, but it seems they think I am being cold. Their faces cloud over. I turn on some lights, trying to dispel the dusk. Ala and Pendzel are the sweetest people I could ever hope to gate crash my misery. With their tidy blonde dreads and piercings and arty glasses and perpetual keenness to paint and be together.

I dish up the food, washing up crusty dishes as I go, listening to tales of what's happened in the months we have not seen each other. The joint exhibition they put on in Hammersmith which, as usual, cost them more than it returned in sold canvases. About one of Ala's graduation paintings which turned up at an auction in Berlin, signed by one of our old lecturers. Pendzel goes on about scaffolds and money troubles and plans for a holiday somewhere warm come January, if they save up enough. I know though they want me to speak, repay something of their gossip, but all I can do is sit in silence and watch as Pendzel gets up, hands hanging limply by his bony sides, and walks over to the sheet-covered easel in the corner of the bedsit. He looks back at me, a little relieved, thinks about asking to look or just looking anyway, but he doesn't have the heart to do either. He runs his hands through the mass of paint tubes lying on the table next to the canvas, as if the sound of that colour-filled aluminium rubbing together was assurance enough.

Ala is staring at me now, not smiling for once, as if trying to show just how serious things have got. I cannot hold her stare, eyes down on the empty shot glasses between us, hands lifting food to my mouth I do not want and cannot taste. But I am still smiling. Still doing that little to improve everyone's mood.

Eventually, Pendzel says they have to go, start cooking and cleaning and if I want to come over, I can, any time. Even today. They have a gift for me, but they didn't bring it. It will be waiting for me beneath their tree tomorrow. I need bring nothing to receive it. Just come. The smile is wiped from my lips and my face twists into the ugliest, most broken mask and when I look up at Pendzel I can see the uncomprehending fear in his eyes and I want to laugh but my face is frozen stiff. He can't stand to see me this way. Puts his arms on Ala's shoulders, says they should go. I couldn't agree more, and so say nothing, just grab my keys and see them out.

Downstairs, we embrace. Without a word, I escort them up the street and then leave them at the door to a newsagents. Smiling again as they turn and wave and vanish in search of saner endings.

16:12

Before going in, I look through the window, plastered with posters advertising fags and cheap international phone cards, to see if the young Turk who owns the place is behind the counter.

He's the sweetest guy, but in the last few years he's learnt a little Polish just to be able to ask after his most loyal customers, and he's another person I don't want to lie to today. The coast looks clear, only his quiet, smiling wife sat behind the counter, speaking neither Polish nor English. I don't even have to ask which cigarettes I want, she knows well enough.

16:23

Everything I do today seems superfluous, pointless. I shut the curtains on the fading day, submerging the room in near-darkness, the space around me heavy with the stifling smell of oil paints and thinners. I move to the desk, fumble for the switch on the table lamp, swivel its head up to illuminate the easel in the corner, draped with a colour-stained sheet of cloth. I remove the cover, come face to face with my own image, near life-size, sitting on a chair, staring out of the shadows. And breathe a strange sigh of relief.

So, I did not break my promise. The picture is rough, the paint laid on with a mixing knife. No brushes. Edges everywhere, colours clashing. The effect terrible. If my old lecturers could see what I'm up to, they'd hang me out to dry, painting a self-portrait in semi darkness, seated, head-on, the most awkward, difficult angle to get right. Without a mirror. From some kind of inner memory. But at least I didn't try painting you again. That has me acting the mirror to my joker-grinning twin.

16:49

My gaze blurs suddenly, my eyes losing focus, like I've run out of strength to keep them true. I turn out the lamp and let them rest a little. They feel sore, and it's not just from making them work under such isolated light. I can't remember the last time I cried, over anything, but it's been a year since the last time, the last anniversary. Before I lost you, I didn't realise a man could cry day in, day out, and feel no better, just less of anything. Nor did I realise that the same man could one day just run right out of tears.

I can't see the bottle I reach in the dark, but I know it looks mean, and when I uncap it the syrup smells as bad as it feels. I haven't drunk much since that first Easter without you, when I poisoned myself with vodka in this very room, an entire bottle to drown my then-furious sorrow. I sat here, collapsed on a chair, the overhead lamp as bright as a hospital strip-light, unable to get up, to get help, maybe not wanting help, just wanting to burn through enough hurt that night to make the bad trip worth it.

It wasn't, of course. Didn't even have a hangover the next day. Burnt none of my senses out, and none of you was gone, none of the anger. But maybe that night's excess saved me from further abuses. I slug a mouthful of the sugary liquid, keep my eyes open through the harsh taste and the buzz of disgust. It all stays where it should. I can feel the alcohol speeding round my brain in the dark, like a shiny silver ball around a pinball table, lighting up all the connections and unlit corners. The rush is pleasant, but I stop nonetheless. I want to ease, not add, to my troubles. I don't want to talk any more, just listen. I need you. In a dark hour a man needs light.

A huge, hungry grief swells up inside me. I've had enough lost, romantic causes. Nothing personal, but it's not worth it. You weren't worth it. Those two months of absolute joy, in exchange for two years of surging anguish, is not a worthwhile trade.

People talk about tunnels and lights and struggles, but that's too easy, too pedestrian a metaphor. I'm not in a tunnel, walking a flat surface towards some clear light. If anything, I'm climbing a steep, winding staircase. A tower with no windows, no light to see up above. The light may or may not even be there, beyond the unending twist of steps. The only thing to do is feel your way blindly along cold walls, hoping that there's some end to all this, even if it only be a cell at the very top, far enough to hide me from my need for you.

17:08

The smell of paints mixed with whisky is no good on an empty stomach. I open the windows to air the place, then decide to go out for another walk.

All the cafés and pubs around Borough are full of after-office crowds celebrating getting thorough another year of working together. I stop to light a fag in the courtyard of a plain church I pass by most days. It looks like a converted gym hall, or warehouse, all grey blue walls, thin strands of foliage climbing the cracks. I realise I've never been in a church. My family agnostic, none of my friends married or baptising yet. Tonight may not be the best time to start, but Wham's "Last Christmas" being pumped out of the pub opposite makes me wince so hard I decide it can't hurt to go in.

I take in the plastic flowers, rows of pews and a life-size plaster crucifix at the end of the main isle, the place almost empty, walk down to the very front, leaving my coat on in the brightly lit, unheated space. A few pensioners filter in. None of the faces look English. I sit tight, feeling a sober vacuum opening in me, a total absence of expectation. This is meant to be what god wants. For people to admit complete surrender. Makes sense in a way, god demanding the absolute before intervening. But, looking around, it seems this place is for those who come with nothing, expecting nothing. Those not even religion can disappoint any more. I pull the whisky out of my coat pocket, not caring what anyone around me might be thinking. Daring them to say something, show some spirit.

A clean-cut priest walks down the isle. Fumbling to arrange all the peripherals of his trade across the broad table set before the altar, he tries to reach us through badly amplified speakers. I look up, meet his gaze, for a moment feel ashamed, as if he could see through me, see I've come here to clutch at faithless straws. Christ's ugly, chipped plaster face hangs down from the cross, turned away from the congregation, and instantly I know there's no way I can identify with that image, god as man's victim, man as god's.

Was I not made good enough to have what I need? Not man enough for you? You possessed all of me. Why did I not light the same fire? Loved, but not in love. Loved, but lied to. I came in here with anger, but pointed at what? At you for using me as distraction before going back to the man you wanted? Chose? Fell for? Angry at myself for getting caught up, believing it would work, ignoring the warnings that were there any time I asked you to sit for a portrait, a sketch even?

But I am not guilty. Of falling into a trap which feels this good. As the thin crowd struggles through a hymn, I take another swig, staring back at the priest now, though he seems to be avoiding my attempts at communion. He keeps mentioning Jesus, the birth of Jesus, the grace of Jesus, but all I see is a wax effigy of someone tortured to death for telling us to love one another. Where was salvation in that? I know creation. I remember blessings, something of the form and spirit in which they come, living and breathing. Those times, sitting amongst friends, talking, resting I remember so vividly, you looking at me, your smiling gaze lingering for a second or so too long for it to be fleeting, that one extra instant of contact making all the difference. Not hesitation, but what felt like the kind of gift which stops time in its tracks. Not clocks, but time as in knowledge with the brilliance of revelation to it, of total fulfilment.

17:27

Anger, and despair, make me clutch for a cigarette. I turn to see if anyone bigger than me might be offended, but instead I see a tiny woman, staring straight at me, weeping her eyes out. There is something so worn in her narrow, desiccated face, in the tragic-comic purple hat forced

down to her painted-on eyebrows, it makes me remember what being with you felt like. How generous. I had this energy. This grace. Anyone I met, saw, in whom I did not recognise the same blessing, I felt instant affinity towards. Infinite patience for. How could that feeling be lost? Where would it go?

I turn around and put the cigarette back in its box. The priest is looking at me. With envy, it somehow seems. I look to the floor, then I hear words I recognise. "If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am but a dull, hollow bell. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have enough faith to move mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give away all I have, and if I deliver up my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing."

The tiled floor seems strange. Unlike the rest of the building, it is actually pretty. Tiny squares arranged in intricate patterns of colour and movement. Pale blue. Blood red. Waves flowing from under our feet, organic swooshes, fractals, out towards the walls and, for all I know, far into the world. Then, head still hung low, I see further. Not with my eyes, not the senses, but with the mind itself. At the back of the head. My whole life. The universe in all its angles of time and space. You. Me. And the thing which still joins us. As light as a page from a bible.

I look back up at the plaster saviour hanging over us. What sort of message is he sending out? Via the priest to the tiny being behind me, weeping all her energies away? I don't need to ask for forgiveness. I did nothing wrong, to love, to anyone. Not said a bad word to you, nor to any of your successors. Not been a fool in wanting to believe what was not true to be otherwise. Just a man hit with something way, way bigger than anything, even the idea of god. We tie it down to bodies, to senses. Beauties. Pleasures. Possessions. The way one animal is born to be leader, the rest inferior. One stag or bull or colt the winner, the rest condemned to wallow without prominence, partnership, progeny. Only good enough for unrequited love, for one-way reception, condemned to feel but never to inspire.

But that is not right. I am not a beast. I can hear gospels. Choirs. My own inner voice. Let the thing you love go free. What an awful, deadly commandment. You love. There is no freedom left in the world. And yet you do it. Take your offered up heart and shove it back inside the dark cavity of your own ribcage. And yet...

There is something to that sacrifice. Some secret answer. That the truth about us is that we want to love more than to be loved. That the real wish is not to be desired, adored, accepted. If that was the case, we would always attach ourselves to those who need us more than we them, to those whose loyalty is unbound, instead of longing for those who said No. Like you, by leaving, snapping sanity in two. Something which seems crazy, yet might be the thread needed to get me free from the labyrinth our parting has become. To move on. Love itself. The actual engine of evolution. The momentum needed to shake us out of stagnation, out of self-centred obsession, to drive us towards that which is beyond. If it was just sex, hunger, power, no one would get beyond the cave. Love. The true sun dance.

17:39

Stumbling outside, the path under me a myriad of sparkling ice crystals, the noise of Christmas cheer still booming out of the boozier opposite, I stick a cigarette in my mouth, but I'm shaking too much to light it.

The clouds overhead are stained by the orange, rusted glow rising up from a million city lights, torn here and there to reveal starless chunks of black sky. The temperature's dropped so low again, I can taste the cold in the air, sweet and sharp, not unlike the whisky in my hand. What was it I was thinking in there? Something about love. About how it is that, not sex, not desire, which drives evolution. The need not for a home, not for acceptance, but for transcendence. From having.

From knowing. From being able to lose anything ever again. Anything which feels truly real.

18:03

Back home, I shut the windows and thaw my body out with the remains of the bottle, feeling neither hungry nor drunk. It's kind of funny. I thought an empty stomach would at least guarantee me drunkenness, but even that fails me tonight.

Hours yet before I can sleep. Or want to. I find myself thinking of going over to Ala and Pendzel's, helping with the cooking, but I am too drunk to move. My laptop is open on the table beside me. I start typing in bits of the gospel that priest blurted today. "Angels", "tongues", "love", eventually realise what it was about the words struck me. Three Colours Blue. I type in the film title into another search engine and click the triangular play icon in the centre of the screen. Preisner's theme score starts buzzing through the old speakers, a choir singing those lines from Corinthians 1, and for the first time today, I think, I smile.

21:11

Slumped on my folding bed, looking forward to nothing but sleep now, I feel safe. I know you won't bother me there. Especially not today.

You hardly ever invade my dreams. Only when I happen to have my mind on other things when dropping off, then maybe, once or twice a year, you appear, just like in that crowd of shoppers, out of nowhere when I'm not looking, same as people say about love itself. But even so, the visions never last long, seconds maybe, just enough to shift my resting mind into heightened awareness, roused by the sight of you again, alarmed. Then I wake, always, as if my mind was unable to sustain a whole dream with you in it, like even that was too much to bear and I lie awake, same as now, motionless, restless, terrified.

22:12

There's a place the body gets to when you've chain-smoked enough, drank enough in one night, a great warmth swelling inside the chest that feels like you're being embraced from within.

Lying on my side, one arm hanging off the edge of the bed, I stare out through the half covered window, the section of sky there clear and starless. My mind feels as dark as that, just as frozen over. The only thing is, looking between the sorry, rusted glow of the clouds, sight adjusted to the unlit room, I see stars appear out of the thin night. Two, maybe even three. They're faint, but I know what fire power they carry. Minuscule, yet I know they are huge. Maybe dead already, maybe just reflections filtering in from the past. They've nothing on the darkness surrounding them, scale-wise, yet they dominate the imagination completely. The vacuum of empty space around them worthless. Those specks of heavenly body are the only substance anywhere in the known universe. The only matter. The only thing of meaning that is now and ever was.

But what does that tell me, as I slowly collapse into sleep? Is it all just a little too sweet and pretty for tonight? Too easy a metaphor? Am I just a black hole, a star once, now collapsed in on itself, turned turncoat, sucking in all light, all energy, every ray of brilliance out there with the single-minded gravity of the void?

I should ignore the stars. Empty space overwhelms the sky and everything in it. Quantity over quality, everywhere you look. No middle ground. No warmth. No life out there at all. Nothingness only occasionally interrupted by matter, like life by blessings. A grand and terrifying

sight. I should close my eyes now, stop looking up, and if I should ever lift my head again, then it should only be to spit and curse the whole of this blasted, vanishing creation.

But Christ, what death then? What meaningless madness. I don't have it in me. I know I don't have it in me, or rather I have too much grace still to bury the world whole, even on a day like today. I've lost faith and light, but I'm not asking for the stars. Only lightning to bolt the sky twice. A little love, is all.

NO WAY BACK WHERE

Joint Winner of the 2007 Penguin Decibel Prize

There's something strangely satisfying about being an exile. In our permanently shifting world, when intercontinental travel and multicultural dialogue are no longer the privilege of the wealthy and the adventurous few, being an out, as opposed to an insider, can be a thing of incredible value.

Of course, for most of those forced to abandon their homes by persecution, discrimination or mere economic necessity, the reality of exile is fundamentally traumatic. But having fled Communist Poland and settled in the UK as a child political refugee, I look at those born to and settled in the same land and sort of feel sorry for them too. I'm proud to be a compound soul. Not a product of one source, one culture. The stuff I am made of is alloy, stronger than any single substance, and I can't imagine what my life would be like had my immediate family not made its escape those thirty-odd years ago.

Poland, 1973. Trapped between Western Europe and the Soviet Empire, not yet recovered from several centuries of invasions, partitions, pogroms and occupations, my motherland was a difficult place to be born into. My home town, Warsaw, a place that "saw" enough "War" in a single century to give anywhere second thoughts about its future, was still in effect rebuilding. The Germans, with Soviet compliance, had destroyed some 90 percent of its architecture, before retreating to surrender and begin the restoration of their own homeland (with vast sums of US dollars, handed over in an effort to stabilise the former Third Reich). Yet Warszawa, in spite of communist attempts to keep it reduced to rubble, was not just rebuilt - she was reborn. Rising out of her own ashes, she became a symbol of national pride, of hope restored in spite of the murder of around a fifth of Poland's peoples.

My parents were caught in the very eye of this storm. Following a spell as a young Communist, my mother became a member the anti-regime Solidarity movement, an ambitious collective of disgruntled workers and dissident thinkers. She was of the latter breed, a young, well-bred university lecturer, happy to drink and talk her way through endless meetings and late-night parties where she always managed to shout the last word. My father, in absolute contrast, a simple steelworker from a farming brood of ten, grabbed the first opportunity to leave for London in 1981. His luck was in. A month after his departure, a high-ranking general declared a state of martial law, sending tanks into the streets, shutting both borders and lines of outside communication for years to come.

By this time, I was eight years old and already painfully aware of the political realities which framed every aspect of our lives. The 1980s were a time of severe rationing and even harsher oppression. Yet, in spite of the shortages and restrictions, my childhood was a time of immense vividness and excitement. I hardly ever remember being at home after school, free to play out in streets without traffic and parks without closing times. Communism did not provide prosperity for all, rather poverty for both the intelligentsia and the proletariat, and yet even that was in some way communal – without 24 hour television/work/shopping, families were tightly-knit, the relationship between city and countryside just as close, the taste and colour and texture of everything innately organic. Except for the chosen Party few, everyone had it hard and everyone suffered and yet the suffering was bearable, because everyone knew Communism wasn't everywhere and certainly not for ever.

My father's exile obviously cast a shadow on the closing years of my childhood, yet I

clearly recall the sweet side effects to his being out West. Although there was no way of knowing if we were ever going to see him again, from time to time he would send us a package of western goodies or a cassette onto which he had recorded his voice and a few British and American songs (precious sounds in a state where all phone lines were tapped and even the airwaves censored). The odd pair of blue jeans, or shoes with Velcro, or soft toilet paper became humble, yet also impossibly glamorous promises from another reality.

Eventually, in 1985, just before Perestroika would thaw, at an unforeseen rate, the low-level terror that was the Cold War, my mother, my younger sister and I received our long-awaited passports. At the time, it was a document most Poles had little chance of ever seeing, but, after three years of judicious application of both bribe and blackmail, our escape towards reunion was about to be made good.

I struggle today to recall what that moment of rupture felt like. Not allowed to say or write how we felt about most things, I suspect we didn't allow ourselves to feel much at all. As difficult as it was to leave family and friends without a word of goodbye (for fear of being overheard by someone, anyone, with corrupt connections), without knowing if we would ever be allowed to return (staying abroad beyond the term of one's visa meant severe penalties upon return), the parting seemed easy enough. The West, Britain, London, all sang to us with such a powerful promise of freedom and possibility, we felt we were going to a much better place.

That our arrival quickly turned into a nightmare had nothing at all to do with the welcome we received from London, or its natives.

We landed just after my twelfth birthday, the weekend the first Live Aid concert was aired. Although we had just arrived from a land where fear, hunger and violence were a daily reality, our suffering had been nothing compared to the starving millions projected onto giant stadium screens all over the Western world. 1985 was also the year Elton John released a song called "Nikita", with a video of him cruising round Berlin in an open-topped, chauffeur-driven Rolls Royce Corniche, pining for a soldier-girl manning Checkpoint Charlie.

Today, it's difficult to put into polite words what I feel about such pop-political statements. Instead, I'd rather recall the initial amazement of walking London's fast-moving, multi-ethnic streets, discovering shops with fully stocked shelves, colourful clothes and advertisements and a sense of relative calm everywhere. The first time I walked into a local newsagents, its Asian shopkeeper, the first brown face I had ever encountered, handed over a free Twix chocolate bar for me and my sister to share. That shiny gold wrapper, the joy of finding two bars of chocolate inside, the sense of the exotic and generous, was amazing.

This, sadly, was one of the few pleasant moments of our new life abroad. Unable to attend school with our non-existent English, we spent the next six months sitting in grotty flat above a high-street laundrette, listening to our parents tearing three and a half years' worth of strips off each other. It was a pattern they would hold, without break, for the few decades. Neither my sister nor I had had any idea that my father's departure back in 1981 was not just a working holiday, but also an attempt at a marriage-saving separation. The attempt, alas, was a tragic failure. As long as my parents had been "at home", with the support and supervision of families and friends, their relationship had kept from imploding. Exile, far from patching up their differences, simply magnified their mutual incompatibility and turned each moment of contact between them into all-out domestic war. Having since met migrants and exiles from all over the world, this litmus test of character and relationship seems to me a universal kind of experience. Many who are oppressed in their countries of origin flourish in the greater freedoms of the developed world. Conversely, many who thought themselves success stories back home just can't manage the same trick on new soil.

Cut off from our native support networks, my sister and I got on with learning English by watching daytime TV soaps, with titles like Falcon's Crest and Sons and Daughters. To this day, I

have an accent that is somewhere between London, Dallas and Sydney, a unique mix no listener has ever been able to decode.

Eventually, I was sent to a “language unit” in Southall, a kind of prep school for the children of refugee families, readying them for assimilation into mainstream education. I was one of only two white kids in this austere, severely under-funded establishment. Morning assemblies were a stunning sea of singularly brown faces and glossy black hair (Hounslow back then had London’s largest population of migrants from the Indian sub-continent). The only other students were a rather mean and unhappy Polish girl, whose name I can’t recall, and Nereyda, a beautiful, mixed-race girl from Colombia. She must have been the first dark-skinned person I ever befriended, but I don’t remember that ever being an issue between us. She was tall and kind and her radiant smile was a rare blessing in a difficult time. Although neither one of us spoke any “proper” English, I remember us laughing together every day, two speechless, yet somehow communing, exiled teens.

Then, after barely a month, considered ready for proper schooling and warned about corporal punishment still being used in some classes, I was transferred to a local secondary. Nereyda and our silent understanding were replaced by a thousand boys in black uniforms (in Poland, no one wore suits and ties to school, and the idea that genders might be separated during their most formative years was unheard of), but the school I was sent to had a wonderfully mixed-race population, high standards of teaching and no canes in sight. On my first day, my form tutor told me I had a lovely accent and sat me down with a group of boys who would remain my friends until our final exams, some even until today. And, of course, we wore woolly blazers, long trousers and warm hats when weather turned cold, although the odd icy spell which passes for winter in London is no match for the white wonder years of my childhood.

When, afforded the status of political refugees, we were allotted a council flat on the poorer South-East side of London, I convinced my parents not to transfer me to another school closer to our new home. Instead, I cycled every day back West, all through winter, to the same school I had only just started at, so as not to have an inferior education (or be forced, once again, to adapt to a whole new environment). On top of my thirty-mile daily bike ride, after finishing my homework, I was out doing any odd jobs I could find. Having seen my father cheated in every deal he ever made with his fellow Polish immigrants, I learnt quickly that it was not where you came from, but how you carried yourself, that matters. By the ripe age of sixteen, while studying for my final exams, I was working as a part-time staff manager in a large high-street shop, earning enough to pay for all my clothes, my music, even a motorcycle. All this allowed me a new escape, away from domestic war and into a future I could construct on ever more independent terms.

After graduating from secondary school, I went on to take my A-levels through an exchange programme at an all-girls’ convent school near Richmond-upon-Thames. Ashamed of my impoverished background and unsure of my own potential, I watched from afar as floppy-haired boys from local public schools got all the attention. Had I known then that having East-European cheekbones and a motorbike and a troubled past would have got me endless sympathy from the pretty, middle-class waifs, I would have been happier with myself. Much happier. Soon after I enrolled, I fell in love with a charismatic siren from leafy, middle-class Chiswick, a dark-haired, blue-eyed drama student who broke my heart with such force that I spent the next couple of years hiding from the lunchtime crowds, painting and writing as if possessed, crying myself to sleep far more often than I had when my father was exiled from us only a few years earlier.

Following this new experience of rejection and loss, I committed the next decade to becoming a writer of powerful stories. Literary success seemed connected with inner development, though I never considered international travel as a way of expanding my horizons. I finished university, but, unlike most of my peers, I stayed in England, volunteering in hospitals, running a

restaurant, working in offices, in security, in both the penthouses and the basements of my adopted homeland.

I certainly felt no longing to return to Poland, fearing it rather, worried that the precious Neverland of my childhood would vanish following an encounter with its post-Soviet realities. With no support or security in my daily life, facing the indefinite future of a struggling writer, I hated the idea of losing the one place I could still call home – the memory of my motherland. Eventually, though, exactly ten years on from our escape, and a mere five since the end of Communist rule, I braved a month-long trip around Warszawa, then the Baltic seaside in the north and the Carpathian highlands down south, all framed by recollections from my earliest days.

Poland turned out to be an amazing place to visit – my vast family happy to see me, my hard-earned pounds sterling affording a rare taste of financial freedom, the whole country running high on a renewed sense of possibility. I made the 30-hour coach trip back there around a dozen times in the next five years. Then, in 2000, struggling to finish my first novel in a humble Brighton bedsit, I decided to move back in a more permanent sense.

The plan was to live in Warszawa for a year, teach English, finish the book and return to London to pursue publication. I wanted to write in a different environment, and part of the story was set in Poland anyway, but I also wanted to stop being a tourist and see what it would feel like to live there again, full-time.

I ended up staying for almost two years. A decade on from the collapse of Communism, everyday existence was still far from easy - bureaucracy continued to rule people's lives, shopkeepers were as rude as in the days of state-owned commerce and the place had a slightly worn and dejected air about it. But I breathed differently in Warszawa. I walked its streets discovering new friends, old childhood haunts, nooks and crannies that spoke to me in a voice I had not heard in London or Brighton or Peacehaven. The scene of so many recent historical struggles, it was easier to question, discuss and understand one's place in the world there. In the daytime, its heart would beat with the vigour of somewhere only just emerging from a long, bitter winter. At nights, by contrast, the capital was so still that even the traffic-light system would be turned off until morning. Everyone I met had a story to tell – the young of their hunger to learn and tackle the future, the not-so-young of their complex and dramatic past. I wandered Warszawa's broken pavements and ancient parks, listening to the myriad of voices whispering out of every courtyard and slowly opening door, and never felt lost, never alone.

Moving "back" to London again, the finished novel at the bottom my suitcase, I found the transition harder than when I had been a speechless, powerless child. I started to earn a decent wage, teaching English to refugees in the community and to prisoners all over the globe in HMP Feltham, kept writing and got published here and there, but it did not matter where I walked or who I met, I continued to feel alone. What little family I had left in London, the few friends from my school or university, did not make up for the absence of the spirit I had discovered on the other side of our continent. I tried to relearn how to enjoy the large-scale buzz of my other capital, but every time I drove or flew back for a quick visit to Warszawa, I could not shake off the feeling that my life was upside down – I was living in a place I should've been passing through, and passing through a place I should've been calling home.

People often ask if I feel more Polish or British, and I've always answered with the stock phrase: I have a Polish heart and a British head, and that is why I am happy. Poles are passionate, romantic creatures, but all too chaotic in their thinking. Because of its geographical location, caught between the ever-warring strongholds of Europe and Asia, we have always had to be good at fighting, even when there was no one around, save ourselves, to battle against. Brits, by comparison, are their opposites – not having experienced a single invasion or territorial conflict in a thousand years, we have the grace of a nation used to a peaceful status quo. Being who I am, born

in Poland, matured in England, I believe myself to be the best of both worlds.

I've always thought of Poland as my metaphorical mother – the one who raised me as a child, letting me play in innocence, while also strengthening me for the challenges ahead. Britain, in turn, seems to have become my father figure – responsible for my becoming a man, a hard, yet necessary discipline.

But now, the more I think about my own experience of migration, the more I realize we are all exiles. Every stage of our lives involves some kind of expulsion – first from the womb, then from the innocence of childhood, then the irresponsibility of youth and eventually the ego-centeredness of pre-parenting age. All the time, we are forced to move on in directions we do not choose, and this is why the experience of real exile can help us define who, and where, we really are.

Recently, I have found it ever more difficult to pronounce many words in either of my native tongues. When speaking English, my Polish roots are showing, and when speaking Polish, I'm all too often lost for words. While this worried me at first, I now realize it is indicative of a sense of development – of no longer needing to sound perfectly integrated. Not that long ago, I was being paid to rid my students' English pronunciation of accent. Today, having travelled the width and breadth of a newly borderless Europe, running various migrant support and art projects I have founded in the UK, I tell everyone I work with to take pride in their individual identities and accentuate all that which makes them unique, language included.

Also, for the first time ever, I find myself truly free to choose where I want to call home. Finally free of parental or governmental or economic constraints, I can live and work wherever I like. Yet the more I consider the idea, the harder it is to think of myself as a “national”. Polish? English? British? None of these labels fit, because they are not specific enough. What do I have in common with the wild Highlanders of Southern Tatra, or the troubled peoples of Northern Ireland? My experience, it seems, is more sharply defined. Defined not by nations, but by two cities which have helped raise and shape who I am today.

Britain's capital was founded by migrants, thousands of years ago, arriving and making camp where the river Thames was still wide enough for seafaring boats to negotiate. Its founders did not choose London. London, all by itself, chose us. Sail further towards the source of the Thames, onto Richmond, Windsor, Oxford, and there you begin to discover Britain. But those of us emerging from this most amazing of capitals, a state within a state, must ask themselves how valid the crest on their passports really is.

In the past few years, I have travelled all over Europe and hope the “outsider art” projects I am now involved in will give me footholds in places as diverse as Croatia, Catalonia and Finland. Yet although Britain will always be a partner in many of those activities, I cannot stay here. London does not need me half as much as I once needed it. I know it will not miss me once I leave, and will find someone to take my place the moment my few belongings get shipped East, its future, like its identity, set on firm ground. Warszawa, by comparison, is calling loud and clear. Today, as so often in her past, she needs her children back from exile, with new skills and new visions to help make up for lost time. Having survived so much, so many wars, both domestic and external, she is, at the end of the day, more me.