

Almost Dead

Anna O'Hare

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Smashwords Edition

Contents

I go to Plymouth University.

I'd never put a bet on before.

I had an hour and a half to waste.

Carlisle and his bald mate were still leaning on the counter

"There you go,"

I took my pie upstairs

Since the conclusion of this whole affair

I was a little scared the next morning.

The team for the pub that night

When I got back, I was sick. In our little back garden,

It was eleven miles to the moor.

Before I got back to Plymouth

In crime shows and horror films

Carlisle was on North Road East

At about midday,

When I got back home, I went up to my room

I walked round the outskirts of the city

I woke up at five o'clock the next day

Back at the house, I had another odd time shower

Sally and Cat

The four of us started walking home.

When I got home, I logged onto TMNT forum

Birmingham was a fucking mess of a city.

"Like Kick Ass?"

I slept in my car in a multi storey

That night when I got home,

Apparently, it was as easy as that.

We went to some dark and dingy

Martin and Felton played the first game of pool.

Cat was the one that found us

Before she rode off into the sunset

“If you do that again,” Felix said and picked up a beer mat. “I am honestly going to cut you.”

The two girls seated either side of him started laughing.

“Oh you!” Sally said. She put her arm around him and kissed his cheek. “We love you really.”

Felix smiled. He stretched his arms along the back of their booth and sighed. Cat had a sip of her pint and watched as the barmaid went passed to serve the booth on the opposite side of the pub.

“I could get her,” Felix said and sat up.

“No you couldn’t.”

“I could.” Felix got his phone out of his pocket. “If I switched on the charm, she’d be all mine.”

He threw his phone up in the air and then caught it.

“Go on then.”

“Er, no,” Felix said. He threw and caught his phone again. “I’m just going to play it cool today.”

“You liar.”

“I am.” He threw his phone again. “You can’t-”

With a rattle, the phone clattered down the back of the booth. Felix leapt around and peered over the back.

“Shit,” he said as the girls watched, unmoving. He stuck his arm down the back. “I can’t reach it.”

“It’s just a phone,” Sally said.

“It’s my phone!” Felix said. “I need it! Come on! Show a little enthusiasm!”

Sally sighed and sat up on her knees. She looked down the back of the booth as well.

“This is the most important thing that will happen to us today,” Felix said and leant next to her. “So pay attention. Can either of you reach your little girlish hands down there?”

Sally tried. Cat leaned next to her and tried as well.

“Sally, Sally,” Felix said after a few seconds. “You’re getting in my light.”

“You asked me to try,” Sally said and swept her hair out of her eyes. “Tell Cat to move as well then.”

“Just both of you move!” Felix said and pushed Cat off the seat.

He tried to reach his hand down the small gap between the radiator and the seat. He stuck his tongue out of his mouth.

"I can... just feel...it," he said. "Do we have a pair of pliers?"

"Oh yes," Sally said. "I always keep a pair handy."

She went into her bag. Felix sat up expectantly.

"You twat," Sally said and threw her bag onto the floor. "I was joking."

"Bitch," he said. He put his hand down the back of the booth again and glared at her. "Get me something then! A fork! A spoon!"

"Here," Cat said, holding up a fork.

"What the hell am I meant to do with that?" Felix said. "Get me something useful."

"But you said-"

"Come on." Sally stood up and pulled on Cat's arm. "Let's ask at the bar for tools."

They crossed the pub together. Sally was tall and thin and dark and went around with her nose held up in the air. Cat was short and squat and blonde and went around scratching her head like she had lice.

"Little and large." The barman smiled at them as Sally leant on the bar. He winked.

"What?" Sally said and glared.

"Oh, er, nothing. What can I do for you ladies?"

"Our friend," Sally looked over her shoulder. The back of Felix's jeans was just visible as he tried to squeeze his entire self between the back of the booth and the wall, "has dropped his very expensive phone behind booth number six. Do you have anything that we can get it out with?"

"Oh yeah." The barman leant on the bar and watched Felix's attempts at shrinking himself. "Lots of people do that."

"How do lots of people get their things back?"

The barman shrugged.

"Most don't. A couple do but we don't have a specific tool to help them."

"Wonderful," Sally said. "Can we borrow some sticky tape then? And a pair of kitchen tongs?"

"Sure." The barman said. "What have you got in mind?"

"I'll tell you if it works," Sally said. "Then, next time, you can have the specific tools. Move out of the way," she said when they got back to the table. She knelt on the seats behind Felix and clacked the tongs. "I have a plan."

He wiped his hair out of his eyes. His face was red. He sat on the table.

“She’s clever,” Cat said and sat beside him.

They watched as Sally knelt on the sofa and stuck the tongs down the back of the booth. She straightened up.

“More cellotape,” she said.

Cat stretched a length from the roll and began wrapping it frantically around the end of the tongs.

“Make sure it’s inside out,” Sally said, touching the end with her fingers. “We need it sticky or there’s no point.”

“Oh right.”

Cat tried again. Sally stuck the tongs back down the booth again.

“Mate,” she said, looking up at the ceiling as her arm wavered out of sight. “Can you come and have a look and tell me how close I am?”

Felix jumped up on his chair and leant on the wall. He squinted, he adjusted his position.

“You’re close!” he suddenly shouted. “Really close! Come left, left. No, left. Left!”

“I am going left!”

“Oh no, I meant my left.”

Sally rolled her eyes.

“Your right,” Felix said. He leant closer. “Right, right, right. Stop! It’s about three centimetres beneath you now. Careful, careful. Lower it carefully.”

“I am.”

“There! You should have it. Clench the tongs now.”

Felix peered deep into the gap. Cat tried to look as well but he pushed her out of the way.

“Got it?” Felix asked tentatively.

Sally sat back on the sofa. She pulled her arm out, then the tongs and there, clasped delicately in their sticky taped teeth, was the phone.

“Yes!” Felix said. He took the phone and kissed it. “Yes, my baby! My baby!”

“No worries,” Sally said and unwrapped the stick tape from the tongs.

“Oh yeah, thanks, Sally,” Felix said. He put the phone in his pocket.

Sally shook her head and went back to the bar.

“Did it work?” the barman asked.

“Yes.” Sally handed back the tongs and the sticky tape.

“What did you do?”

“Used the tongs to dangle the cellotape behind the booth and hook it up,” Sally said.

“Really?” The man frowned. “I can’t imagine that working.”

Sally went back to the table.

“I need a slash,” Felix said. He stood up and stretched. “Where’s the toilets?”

“They’re in a separate shed in the beer garden,” Sally said. “I told you this pub was old school.”

“Oh, come with me,” Felix said.

“What?”

“I don’t want to go out there on my own.” Felix put on a mocking whimper. “It’s dark, Sally.”

“You wus,” Sally said and stood up. “Do you want me to hold it for you as well?”

They crossed to the back of the pub. It was richly decorated with dark wood and smelt like a carpet soaked in beer, which wasn’t far wrong. The walls were hung with pictures of cricketers and 1950’s footballers. The lights were small and low hanging, so to see the Elvis quiffs and stripy shirts, you had to put your nose against the frames.

Sally opened the door into the beer garden. Felix peered tentatively outside. It was dark. The back of the garden was hidden in shadows. The toilet block was just a hulking white shape in the darkness.

“Go on,” Sally said and pushed him out. “Man up. The toilets are there.”

Felix trotted across the garden and jumped inside the toilets without a word. The walls were white and bare, with just a naked bulb hanging from the ceiling, lighting the way to the two dirty urinals hanging from the wall and the one cubicle without a door. Felix grimaced. He pulled his flies down and positioned himself in front of the urinal. It was a bit nippy in there. He waited a few moments. He looked up.

Something made a noise behind him. He stopped and looked around.

“Sally?” he said. “Stop messing about.”

He turned back to the wall and urged himself to hurry up. Something made a noise again.

“Shit,” he muttered, shaking himself. “Shit.”

He turned. Someone was standing behind him. Felix gasped. His lungs inflated in one cool whoosh. Then the someone hit him over the head with a spade. Felix fell against the urinals. His arm went into the bowl.

“Shit!” he shouted and tried to clear his vision. “What the fuck man?!”

He was hit on the head with the spade again. He slid down the wall, his hands grasping the lips of the urinal for support. He blinked and his vision faded.

“What the hell are you doing?” Sally said. She came in through the door. “You don’t have to shout whilst you-”

She tailed off. She looked from Felix, bloody and slumped between the two urinals, to the person standing over him, holding a spade.

“Shit,” she said.

“Shit,” the person said.

He hit her with the spade as well.

I go to Plymouth University. I live in an eight bedroomed house on North Road East and I spend most of my days standing at my huge window and staring out into the street outside. That window freaks me out. I’m looking at it now, trying to measure it up, trying to paint this picture for you. It’s about a metre wide and two metres long, situated slap bang in the middle of the wall. If I get naked or put my hands down my pants or watch porn, anyone standing outside, or in the house directly opposite, will be able to see me. There are no obstacles. I feel like I’m in a fucking viewing gallery. Sure it’s good for the light and all that but, come on, I have to shut the curtains if I want to change my trousers. Well, I don’t have to, but school kids walk passed the window and I don’t reckon it’d be appropriate for them to look up and see a half naked twenty year old guy readjusting himself.

I’m telling you all this to try and convey a sense of belief. You know like the guys on T.V. or liars; if they’re brief in their description you know it’s not the truth. The guys who go into detail, who are rich in their descriptions, you’re more inclined to believe. And I guess I want you to believe this. Not so I can get one over you or laugh at you for being gullible but because it really happened to me. You see, for twenty years, my life was boring. Really dull and so, people thought I was boring and dull. Hey, not anymore. Look at me! Look what happened to me.

It’s an ego thing. And even if I spent a further twenty years in a dilapidated state of intense boredom, at least I’d have this story to tell people; my one moment, my one period of intense excitement, which blew those first twenty years out of the water.

I guess it all started one Sunday morning. I was down the library, perusing the shelves for relevant books for my essay references. There were a couple of guys there as well, doing the same thing. I reckon every uni student does it. You can spot us a mile away. We’re the ones who walk along the shelves, waiting for a relevant book title to jump out. We take all the information about that book down- title, date, author, you know the drill- and then we put it in our essay bibliography, like we’ve read it. It makes us look well informed. It makes us look like we’ve done our research and not just sat on Wikipedia for six hours.

I pulled out a book and looked through it. It had a good title, it made sense. The guy's second name was Dicker though. Mr. Dicker. Mr. Richard Dicker. I wasn't using that. I put the book back and pulled out another one beside it. This looked promising. I wrote the reference down on my hand and then put the book back.

“scuse me mate.”

“Oh, sorry.”

I stepped aside and let another guy go passed. He was big. Six foot, muscles like a rugby player, smart Jack Wills shirt on, sandals. He patted me on the back in thanks. I nodded my head in an idiotic acknowledgement.

I watch a lot of T.V. I watch anything. Stupid BBC Three things, embarrassing American comedies, cheap U.S. films. The colleges in America (which I figure are equivalent to our unis) are always shown to be so cliquey, you know, like secondary school. All jocks and cheerleaders and ‘oh my God, like totally, check out that girl's hair!’ You see the sports players pushing the geeks into cupboards at frat parties and crushing cans on their heads: ‘Like, uh huh, yeah, totally!’ Stupid guffaws, it's high school all over again.

It's nothing like that at English unis. Take that guy for instance. He was as jock as you could get. And me? Though I'm not cool enough to be a geek, if this were America, he'd have shoulder barged me into the shelves and laughed as the books fell on my head. I guess English guys just don't care. Are we more mature? Or is the whole culture of our universities just different than American colleges? Or do those gay T.V. shows exacerbate the tensions at college to make it worth watching? Like One Tree Hill. I'd move out of that town if all that shit kept happening to me or my mates; definitely not worth it.

After twenty more minutes gathering references for books I'd never read, I went into town. It was my routine. On weekdays, I'd go to town at nine but Drakes Circus toilets didn't open until ten on Sundays. Drakes Circus is the shopping centre in Plymouth and it has the nicest toilets. Flush sensors for urinals and cubicles, mirrors everywhere so you can check the back of your head and the side of your face at the same time and those new Dyson hand dryers, where you post your hand through a letter box gap and your hands gets dried by a reverse Hoover. It's fucking awesome.

They're so good, in fact, I never use the toilet in our house. You, the reader, might have seen a student's house before. The shit piled on the stairs, the old food in the kitchen, the rotting bowls in people's rooms. It's terrible. I don't do anything to prevent such rubbish but I don't add to it, so I can judge.

I don't know, however, if you've ever seen the toilet in a student's house before. I'd like to get those ladies from 'How Clean is Your House' round. I'd reckon they'd faint if they saw it. A mouldy bath (mould, on the bath?), a toilet that's never been cleaned, a yellow sink, a communal bath mat and an inch of dust around the taps, the skirting, the shower head. The toilet seat freaks me out. Someone told me you can catch Chlamydia from toilet seats. I didn't believe it until I watched the progression of dirt around our toilet seat. If that myth turns out to be true, you'd definitely get it from our toilet seat. You'd probably get HIV from our toilet seat, or cancer. I stopped sitting on that in September (it's April now by the way) and started visiting Drakes Circus every morning instead.

There's something great about using public toilets. I never used to like doing it, it felt dirty for some reason, but this year, it's my new favourite thing. They're cleaned every hour for Chrissake. There's always soap, the sinks (in Drakes Circus anyway) are so cool, like Roman troughs with long, silver taps fitted every few feet. There's twenty cubicles to choose from, so guys coming in never know which one you've come out of.

That's another thing that weirds me out. When you live in an eight bedroomed house with only one bathroom, things can get a bit claustrophobic, a bit stuffy. And it's generally obvious who the last guy in there was. If you leave it in a state (sometimes it can't be helped) you get ribbed for it. And what's even worse than leaving a bathroom smelling like shit is going in there when it smells like shit. Especially if you know which guy's just vacated the area. It started to make me gag, it started to make me question the diet of some of the guys in the house. I wouldn't be surprised if all they ate were cans of tuna and Guinness.

In my experience of the Drakes Circus toilets, you never get this problem. Always smells nice, anonymity and free toilet roll. Win, win, win.

I do get worried, however, that the security guards might start to notice me. I do go there every morning, between nine and ten. I must be all over the CCTV. They might think I'm doing drugs in the toilet, or collecting a stash hidden in the Dyson machine. They might stop me, one of these days, take me into some back office, handcuff my hands behind my back and question me in an interrogation room, with dark walls, no windows, a policeman by the door and a huge mirror to my left. I'd have to explain, probably in some form of written statement, that I only come in so regularly so I can take a shit in their nice bathrooms. Then they'd ban me or call the police because they get pissed off when cheap student kids take all their toilet roll and soap without spending a single penny in any shop.

So I try and avoid the guards when I see them; cover my face, look in the shop windows as I pass, put my hood over my head. I get nervous when one comes near me, in case he's about to put an arm around me and ask me to come with him.

You have to go up these escalators into the food court to get to the toilets. I see the same guy behind the counter at Burger King every morning and I know he clocks me going into the bathrooms and I know he clocks me coming out five minutes later and I know he knows what I'm up to in there. Shitting in public toilets. The biggest crime. The girl behind the juice bar (right next to the toilet door as well by the way- I'm never going to that juice bar) looks at me in disgust every time she sees me. I just keep my head down and slip through the doors. I feel like a dirty criminal.

That Sunday morning, after creeping my way inside again, I was sitting on the toilet, reading a Cineworld brochure and circling which films I was going to see that month, when two guys came in. That early in the morning, on a Sunday especially, guys don't really come into the toilets, so I was a little surprised. They were talking really loudly, laughing together, you know, so I put my magazine down and prepared to wait until they'd gone before resuming my work.

I saw their shadows go passed my cubicle and stop in front of the urinals.

"Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah," the first guy was saying. "Yeah."

"Right," the second guy said.

"Which one?"

"William Hill." I heard the zips go down. "45/1."

"45 to fucking one?" the other man said. "Yeah?"

"Yeah."

"How'd he get such long odds?"

"Ah, they reckon the trainer ran the horse slow all season. He's probably planning on making a killing as well. Either way, 45/1. Fifty pounds on that is over two grand."

The zips went up. I heard the urinals rinse.

"And you're certain he's going to win?" the first man said.

"Positive. I saw the thing run last season." The taps starting running. "I guarantee it, mate. Best is West, midday, put a fifty on it and you've got yourself two thousand pounds."

Their feet trooped out. I was busily writing down the name and time of the horse on my Cineworld brochure. I had fifty pounds as well. I finished up in the toilets, washed my hands and left, the brochure sticking out of my back pocket. The Burger King guy waved at me. I put my hood up.

I'd never put a bet on before. Well, I'd once bet five pounds that my mate Tubby Brown wouldn't run naked through the halls last day of Year Eleven and he did, so I lost my money there. But I'd never put a bet on in a real bookies before. Russell Howard says it makes you feel like a man. It made me feel like a little kid. Like an actual little boy going in there that day. The street outside was so sunny and clear and fresh. When I pushed the door open, it was like being eaten by darkness. The place stank of man sweat and tears, it was gloomy, barely lit. There were giant, bald headed men leaning on the fruit machines, slamming their knees into the side in their desperation to hit the right numbers. There were skinny little Robert Carlisle impressionists jumping about under the T.V. screen, wearing Argyle shirts and sporting tattoos right up their skinny arms. I pulled my jeans and belt up and put my hands in the front of my hoody. A couple of guys watched me pass. One snorted and wiped his nose. I looked the other way.

"Oh hi," I said to the girl at the desk. Her hair was scraped back like Al Capone and she had thick black make up over both eyes, liked she'd been punched in the face by one of the guys in the shop. I smiled at her. I'd so get her if I could.

"Can I see your I.D. please?" she said.

"Oh, er, yeah, sure," I said and put my hand in my back pocket. "How old do you have to be?"

"We operate a think 21 policy," the girl said and held out her hand. She had long nails, pink talons. They'd hurt. The very addition of those to her character ruled out half the stuff we could do together.

"What?" I said. "I thought you had to be eighteen to bet. I'm only twenty."

One of the men behind me laughed.

"It's a think 21 policy," the girl said and took my driver's licence. She handed it back to me. "It means we ask everyone who looks under 21 for I.D. It don't mean you have to be 21."

"Oh right."

I put my Licence away and smiled at the girl. She looked back at me, unblinking.

"Yeah?" she said.

"Oh, I want to make a bet," I said.

"Yeah?" she said. "Go on then."

"It's called-"

"No, mate," the girl said. She handed me a tiny pen. "You write it down and then give it to me."

“Give it to you?” I said and looked at the tiny pen.

“You never done this before?” she said. She was starting to smile. I banked on it.

“No,” I said, smiling back. “First time.”

“Right.” She sighed and picked up a small form. “I’ll help you. What race?”

“I, er, don’t know,” I said. I laughed. “It’s a race at midday. The horse’s name is Best is West.”

The girl wrote something on the form. She glanced at the T.V. screen.

“45/1,” she said.

“Yeah, that’s him.”

“How much you putting on?”

“Fifty pounds.”

She looked up.

“Fifty pounds?” she said. “Fifty pounds? Why are you betting fifty on a horse at 45/1?”

“It’s my first time.” I smiled.

She raised her eyebrows.

“Fine,” she said and wrote something down. “It doesn’t sound like you’ll be doing it again.” She typed something into her computer and then looked at me. “That’s fifty pounds, please.”

I took the money out of my wallet. I’d just got it out of the ATM outside. If this didn’t pay out, my dad would kill me. If it did, my dad would probably think I was selling drugs. I preferred the second scenario; it would give me a little credibility about the family.

“Thanks,” the girl said and took the money.

She put it through the till and then handed me a receipt.

“What now?” I said.

“Race isn’t for a few hours,” the girl said. “You can’t claim until the race has gone through, so come back when it’s over. It starts at twelve, so come back around then.”

“Cool,” I said. I folded up the receipt. “Thanks.”

I turned around and pulled my trousers up again. I put the receipt in my back pocket. Robert Carlisle and his giant bald mate with golden hoop earrings were watching me from the counter in the middle of the room. They were both chewing gum. I nodded my head at them. They nodded slowly back. I left pretty quickly after that.

I had an hour and a half to waste. I could go home and sit in that shit heap of a house or I could wander round town. I chose to wander round town. I got as far as the Sundial Fountain

in the middle of town before I got bored. I sat on the edge of the Sundial and fiddled with my shoelaces. A group of Goths were hanging about a few feet from me, their dark heads bent, muttering closely together. One of them had a Twilight shirt on. Another one had a piercing through the bridge of their nose. It was pretty scary. Especially seeing them in the sunlight. It was like discovering that vampires were not only real and operative in society but they could stand the daylight.

There was always a group of Goths hanging about the foundation. Everyone knew it- there was a group on Facebook about it and everything. On the other side of the fountain, a group of fourteen year old chavs usually sat around on BMX's, drinking Red Bull. I'd like to see the two groups come together, in a sort of World of Warcraft type fight. Or Tekken: Plymouth.

I got up and went into Superdrug to buy some two pound fifty sunglasses. Apparently you got a free lipsil with it but they were all out so I didn't get mine. I admired my reflection in the cheap, tin foil mirror above the lipstick. I looked cool. I swaggered back outside, into the sunlight. The Goths looked at me. I pulled my collar up and strutted up the hill to Shakeaway. I knew I'd look a lot less cool sucking from a giant blue and yellow cup but I was prepared to risk that. I didn't really have that intrinsic cool factor anyway. I'm one of those guys that can look cool but everyone knows I'm really not. In my experience, cool is a type of presence, not a look. Like you see guys and girls wearing dirty, paint stained jeans with holes in and old jumpers and unbrushed hair and they are cool. Everyone knows it. Cool is how you are, not how you look. I could look as cool as Becks but it'd fool no one.

I got a Malteser shakeaway. It was pale and bland, like my life. I sat on the wall outside and sipped it until my straw got stoppered with chocolate and I choked. The chavs went whizzing passed on their BMX's. One of them threw an empty can of Red Bull at me. It knocked my new sunglasses off and they all laughed. That's something you'd never get in America; little kids, barely into High School, picking on twenty year old guys.

I waited until they'd skidded to a stop by the fountain before picking my sunglasses up and putting them back on my face. They knew cool was a presence. They'd never have done that to the kids wearing the paint stained clothes.

Sometimes, I think I'd prefer to be uglier and be cool than average looking and with no social status whatsoever. In my experience, looks is nothing to being cool. Look at John Lennon in 1968. He was cool but was he fit? I'd trade in my looks in an instant for that sense of presence, that aura, like him. The only thing I got going for me at the moment is that my best friend, Martin, is black. I don't mean town black though, like playing basketball or

shooting people, I mean goofy black like that guy from Blazing Saddles. He is quite cool though, in a weird sort of way. A cool that means the girls all love him but if shit started going down, he'd never pull a gun or pop a cap in someone's ass. Still, for people who don't know he likes to go home and drink Cherryade whilst watching King of Queens, it's pretty neat to be seen together. We're like Hey Arnold and that guy with the big hair like Marge Simpson.

His dad is presence cool. He drives around in a silver Mercedes and wears a Giorgio Armani suit. It's awesome. I've seen pictures of him from the seventies. Afro is not the word to describe it. It's like someone grew a man from a ball of hair. I love it when he comes down to visit. He drives us across to Cornwall; air conditioning, heated seats, T.V.s in the back. It's better than our house.

I text Martin then. He text back quickly. Sunday mornings, he goes to play Squash in the gym over by Central Park. I'd go with him but then I'd miss the toilet trip to Drakes. I do go with him Wednesday evenings because I'm paranoid about putting on weight. I've always been the skinny kid, right through school, always. If I suddenly get fat, it'd be so obvious. I'd feel I'd let people down. It's not like I was chubby. If you put weight on when you're already a chubby, no one gives a shit. If I start getting fat after being known as the skinny one, I'd never hear the end of it. People might feel sorry for me. I go running every Saturday and Tuesday as well. Just a couple of miles around Central Park. I don't need much motivation to make me go. I just think of Tubby Brown who, at Primary School, was the skinny little kid we sent behind the P.E. shed to get the footballs back and, by his naked run in Year Eleven, was pushing fifteen stone.

"Hey man."

I looked up. Martin was standing behind me.

"What's up brother," I said and stood up. "How was squash?"

"Better than playing with you."

We started walking the same way.

"Cool Converse," I said and pointed at his shoes. "You play in them?"

"Seventy quid," he said and scratched his arm. "Are you kidding me?"

"I would," I said. "They look pretty cool."

"When you can afford a pair of seventy pound shoes," Martin said. "You can do what you like with them."

"That time may be fast approaching," I said. I got the receipt out of my pocket. "I just put a bet on."

“A bet?” Martin frowned. “On a horse? Why did you do that?”

“I heard some guys talking whilst in Drakes,” I said. “This guy reckoned the horse was a guaranteed win. So I put fifty pounds on.”

“What odds?”

“What?”

“What odds?”

“45/1.”

“45/1!?” Martin looked at me. “You blew fifty quid on 45/1?”

“If it wins, I am rolling,” I said. I put the receipt back in my pocket. “If it wins, you are going to be jealous.”

“If it wins I want a share.”

“Get lost.”

Martin put me in a head lock. We’re about the same height but he’s much stronger than me.

“Ok, ok!” I shouted. “I’ll buy you a McDonalds.”

“A McDonalds?” Martin said and swung me around. “You got to do better than that.”

“Ok, I’ll buy you something better!” I said. “Just tell me what presents black boys want.”

Martin laughed and pushed me away.

“Come on, man,” he said. “What time does that horse run?”

“Midday.”

He checked his watch.

“Let’s go check it,” he said. “We can watch it race.”

Carlisle and his bald mate were still leaning on the counter when we went back into the bookies. With Martin beside me, I walked in slightly stronger than the way I left. I leant on the counter beside them and stuck my elbows out until they nudged Carlisle’s denim jacket. He looked at me. I stood up straight and pretended I needed to go the till.

The girl was there still. She had her back to me. I leant on the desk and prepared my smile, watching her hair swing as she categorised some files or something.

“Hey,” I said as she turned.

“What?”

I backed off. It wasn’t the same girl. This was a woman. Probably about forty five with a heavy bust and John Lennon glasses. She had a moustache.

“Can I see your I.D. please?” she said.

“Yeah, uh, sure,” I said and got my driver’s licence out again. “I’m twenty.”

She looked at it, her lips moving like a bored horse. She handed it back.

“Are you making a bet, sir?”

“Uh no, not now.”

“Then move away from the desk, please.”

I stepped back. Carlisle and his bald mate were watching me carefully, chewing in tandem. I scratched the back of my head and went to join Martin on the fruit machines. He was slapping buttons madly.

“People in here are weird.”

“Yeah, man,” he said and hit a new button. “Jackpot.”

“You’ve won the jackpot?”

“Nah.” Martin bent down to collect his money. “Just fifteen quid.”

“Fifteen quid? I’d love fifteen quid. You can buy me a McDonalds. How did you do that?”

“Luck.” Martin shrugged and put the money in his pocket.

He turned around and leant on the counter. Carlisle looked at him slowly.

“What’s the time?” I asked him, so the men knew we were together.

“Just gone five to,” Martin said. “Hey, man.” He looked at Carlisle. “He’s been I.D’d, he’s over eighteen. Quit looking at him.”

Carlisle shrugged and turned back to the T.V. screens. His bald mate sniffed.

“What?” Martin said as he saw my look of fear strewn incredulity. “You don’t need that.”

“How come they never I.D. you?” I asked and leant beside him.

“Look at me,” he said. He tugged his collar up and bared his teeth. “Now look at you. You got asked for I.D. going into a fifteen last week.”

“He was just doing that to annoy me.”

“Sure.” He slapped my chest. “Best is West, that’s you.”

“Yeah.” I glanced at the T.V. screens lined up along the wall. “Where? Where?”

“Third one along.” He pointed. He whistled. “It is 45/1,” he said. “You might be on the verge of a raping.”

“I trust my sources,” I said and squinted at the T.V. screen.

“Two guys in Drakes?” Martin said. “You were on the toilet, weren’t you?”

“Be quiet.”

We watched the horses shaking their heads in their stalls. I was gripping the edge of the counter. It was quite thrilling. I hadn’t been thrilled like this in ages. I could feel my ears going red. Martin laughed and thumped my back.

“Don’t take off, mate,” he said.

“If it wins, I’ll fucking fly.”

I couldn’t hear the noise of my race above the football on one screen, the dog racing on the other and a grey haired man commentating on the last. Next thing I knew, the stalls had opened and over a dozen horses had come flying out. My stomach leapt and my palms stung.

“Which one is mine?!”

“The green and pink one. Closest to us,” Martin said. He was gripping my shoulder. “Come on.”

My horse was at the back of the pack. I glanced at my ticket and wiped my mouth. My palms were sweating now. The jockey was up in his stirrups, waving the whip energetically. The horse tossed its head and surged forward.

“Fuck me,” Martin said. “Look at it go.”

It careered passed the second from last horse and then pulled out onto the far side. It pulled itself separate from the pack and charged.

“Go on, you little bitch!” I shouted as my horse steamed down the outside lane. It was level with a red and gold horse. “Go, go, go!”

The two horses reached a hedge and jumped in sync. My horse landed a few feet ahead. It leapt forward.

“It’s leading!” Martin called, clinging to my shoulder. “It’s leading! It’s leading!”

“It’s pulling away!” I said. “It’s not just leading! It’s pulling away! Look at that baby go!”

A couple of real men in the corner were watching me, either in amusement or annoyance. I didn’t care. Best is West took the next hedge and started to move into the inside lane. The gap between it and second place was lengthening. Its great muscular legs and shoulders were stretched out as it flew down the track, sods of earth and grass flung up behind it.

“Oh my Christ,” I said and twisted the receipt in my sweaty thumbs. “Jesus, Martin, Jesus. I’m about to win two thousand pounds. You can’t claim that on MP expenses. I’m going to be rich.”

My horse was galloping ahead of the pack now. Its head was down. The jockey waved his whip as it went racing passed the cameras like a whippet. It took the last hedge and landed, strong, majestic, beautifully, powerful. Its head bowed and it charged down the home straight. Martin was shaking me, shouting, and Best is West flew over the finish line in first place. The rest of the horses came tumbling through next but it didn’t matter. I was holding the receipt, staring at the screen.

“Christ!” I shouted and turned to look at Martin. “Did you see that?! I’m doing that again!”

Martin grabbed my head and shook me, then lifted me off the ground.

“Two thousand pounds!” he said and bounced me up and down. “Two grand! I want that McDonalds.”

“Can you keep the noise down please?” the woman behind the desk said. “We have other customers.”

“Sorry.” Martin put me down and guided me to the desk. “My friend here has just won a lot of money. Give her the ticket.”

I handed it over. My hand was shaking. She looked at it, her lips moving about again.

“45/1 at fifty pounds.” She glanced at Martin and raised her eyebrow. “It’s only two thousand.”

“Sorry, love,” he said. “Can he just have it please?”

She sniffed and turned away. I was bouncing on the spot.

“Two grand!” Martin said and put his hands on my shoulders. “Two grand! We have to celebrate this!”

“McDonalds,” I said. “On me. Oh my God, I think I’m crying.”

“Did you have a tip?” the lady said, shuffling my wad of notes on the counter. Mine. Mine.

I was salivating. I sucked in.

“What?”

“A tip off?” the lady said. She raised her eyebrows. “You must have.”

“Just give him his winnings,” Martin said, his arm still on my shoulder.

She handed the wad of money over. I sucked it up at once. I stuffed it into my wallet, then put my wallet down my pants.

“Let’s get out of here man,” I said. My heart was pumping fiercely. I couldn’t shut my mouth. “I need that McDonalds.”

“Right, bruv,” Martin said. He jerked his head at Carlisle. “I said stop watching us, mate.”

We swaggered out of the shop, all hips and shoulders, on top of the world. Carlisle and his bald headed mate stood up a few moments after we’d gone and left as well, spitting their gum out onto the floor.

“There you go,” I said and slid some notes across to Martin.

“What’s this?”

“Just for you,” I said.

“I don’t want that.” Martin laughed and pushed the money back. “I was kidding.”

“I want to give you some of my winnings,” I said.

“That looks like a hundred,” Martin said. “Either give me a real slice of those winnings or nothing at all. Don’t insult me.”

I laughed. I took the money back. We were sitting at a table on the sunny top floor of McDonalds. I’d bought three big Macs. I wasn’t sure who the third one was for. I’d just got over excited at the counter. I’d never had more than a fiver at McDonalds before. Now I could buy the menu.

“What are you going to do with the money?” Martin asked and bit into his burger.

“Part of me wants to save it,” I said. “I could get some good interest on this bitch.”

“And the other part?” Martin swallowed.

“Wants to buy a hot air balloon or a polar bear.” I sipped my coke. “I’m undecided.”

“Pity you can’t buy some skill,” he said. “Else maybe squash would be better.”

“I could buy a professional squash player,” I said. “And have him beat you.”

“Are you going to do anything special tonight?”

“Probably not.” I was lying. I was going to drink coca cola from a champagne glass and eat a hot Apple Pie. “Why?”

“If you were going out or anything, I’d come with. But if not, I’ve got work to go and do.”

“Essay?”

“You know it.”

“Need help referencing?”

“Nah, mate, I know where the library is.”

We shot the shit for a while and then he decided to get started on his essay. I made sure my pants were full of money and left too, heading towards the Sainsbury’s in the Armada Centre. I was still walking with a swagger and not just because my wallet was rubbing against my crotch. I was loaded. I was lucky and loaded. No one could touch me. I suspected the novelty of it had worn off for Martin but not for me. This would keep me buzzing for weeks.

I went into Sainsbury’s and bought a two litre bottle of coke and an apple pie. It was a proper classic apple pie; one of the ones with a picture on the front of the pie with a slice missing and you can see the filling and it could be either kiwi or lime, or one of those other fake pie flavours, but you know, you just know, deep in your soul, that’s is apple, classic apple pie.

I stood in the Pets aisle, facing the Whiskers, and surreptitiously pulled my wallet from out of my pants. I looked for a ten and put the rest back. When I turned around, one of the supervisor’s was watching me in disgust. You know the sort- stuck up bitches who wear the

head sets and act like they work for fucking NASA. On this occasion, I let her off; it must have looked like I was touching myself to the worming medicine.

I stood in the ten items or less queue and smiled to myself. I had to check to make sure I wasn't floating. I was going to go home, hide the money in a pair of socks (I'd seen that in a movie somewhere) and then bake the shit out of this pie. I know most kids would probably have blown half the money on a night out. But I couldn't stop thinking about the pie; hot, fresh from the oven, smelling like a bakery. And when you make that first clean, perfect cut and you feel the knife slice through the upper crust of pastry, the soft apples and finally the bottom of the pastry (you know, that beautiful thin moist layer that acts as a sponge for all the apple juices. I like to roll that layer up and eat it like a Swiss Roll), it's almost orgasmic. The smell as well; it's proper dish on the window sill sort of stuff. A perfect pie. Soft, hot, sweet, maybe with some whipped cream on you second helping. Compare that to downing your fifth shot of Vodka in a hot, sweaty night club, with the lights spinning on the ceiling and the smell of sick on your shirt. Not being able to hear anything as you chug back a can of Guinness and then retch onto the dance floor. I wanted the fucking pie.

I walked home with my head phones in, bobbing my head to the music. It was getting dark. I must have spent an hour in Sainsbury's debating over the different pastry products (pie or strudel? Value for money wasn't an issue, it was all down to what I wanted). The street lamps came on as I passed. I felt like a wizard, I was fucking Gandalf. I started whistling. I kicked an empty Red Bull can off the road and pretended I'd scored a goal at the World Cup. Yeah, Rooney in the eighty ninth minute, yeah! World Cup Final.

A solitary car went passed. Its headlights picked out my celebrations and I resumed my regular walking. Oh, what the fuck? I was rich. I started running.

Someone grabbed me round the neck and swung me round. My ear phones fell out and I dropped my coke and pie. The bottle rolled down the street.

"My coke!" I shouted and leapt forward.

"Steady on there fella." A voice laughed and pushed me against the wall. "Hands up."

"What?"

I was looking at the bald headed man from the bookies. He was smiling. Beside him, Robert Carlisle was grinning as well.

"Here he is." Carlisle smiled. He had worse teeth than Robert. "Where you been hiding, fella?"

"I don't have anything," I said. "Please just let me go home."

"You don't have anything?" Carlisle said and they both laughed. "We know that's a lie."

“It’s-”

The bald headed man pushed two of his huge sausage fingers into my nostrils. I yelped.

“Don’t lie to me, Harvey,” Carlisle said. “We were in the bookies today when you collected your winnings and you know you owe us money.”

“Wuh?” I said, my voice muffled by another man’s hand. “I’m not Harvey. Please, I just want me pie. I just want to go home.”

“Where’s the money?” Carlisle said as the bald headed man pushed his fingers up further into my nose cavity. Something cracked. I squeaked.

“What money?”

“The four grand?”

“Four grand?!” I yelped. “It was only two!”

“You liar!” Carlisle said. “How dare you lie to us?”

“It was!” I cried. “I have the ticket, I have the ticket.” I patted myself. “Somewhere.”

“He has the ticket.” Carlisle laughed. “Fuck your ticket, mate. We have your ticket. Four grand. It’ll go up to five if you don’t give us those winnings now.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.” My nose was stinging. My eyes were watering. Bald Headed Man’s fingers were up to the knuckle in my nose. I wondered if my nostrils had ripped into one hole. I whimpered. “Please let me go, please.”

“Hey, look at this,” the Bald Headed Man said and pulled my iPhone out of my pocket with his free hand. “Check that out.”

Carlisle whistled.

“Pretty fancy,” he said and examined it. “You been buying this with our money?”

“Are you joking?” I said. I was almost crying. “I got that months ago. Look, the screen’s cracked. You can have it. I can’t get on the internet with it anymore.”

The Bald Headed Man took his fingers out of my nose and looked at the iPhone. My eyes stung brutally and I blinked several times. The back of my throat cracked.

“Where is the internet?” he and peered at the icons on the screen.

“It doesn’t work,” I said. I touched my nose. It was bleeding. I hiccupped.

“Just tell me where it is,” the Bald Headed Man said. “I bet I can get it working.”

“You can’t.” I pointed over his shoulder. My voice stung my throat and I coughed. “It’s that blue one there.”

“Safari?”

I dabbed my nose and then wiped a tear from my eye.

“Yeah, that’s right.”

He touched it and squinted at the screen.

“It’s just blank,” he said.

“It’s broken.”

“That’s shit.”

I looked at him. I wanted to run. This was the best chance I had to run but I could imagine them knifing me in the back if I did. The Bald Headed Man didn’t look like he could run but Carlisle was short and skinny and I bet he went like a whippet. Yes, it was much better if I just stayed still and tried to talk my way out of it.

I started running up the road. I paused, skidded back and picked up my pie.

“Hey!” Carlisle shouted. “Come back here, you little fucker!”

I ran. I pelted up the hill, my arms pumping by my side. I shut my eyes and whimpered. I was nearly crying. I didn’t know if they were following me or not. I just sprinted. All those morning runs- they were fucking useless. Pacing? Breathing? Rhythm? All that went out of the window. I ran like someone had cut all my tendons. I must have looked like a Thunderbird dancing up the hill. I screamed as I approached the door. I kept imagining being pulled away, at the very last second, being dragged away and knifed in the gutter.

I yanked my key out of my pocket. I dropped my pie. I burst into tears and kicked it into the porch, then slipped the key into the lock. I was kicking the door with my feet and forearms as I turned the key, screaming at the top of my lungs. I fell inside. I grabbed the pie from the mat and shut the door, gasping, sobbing. I could taste blood.

“What the fuck?” someone said from the living room.

“Oh my God!” I panted.

I lay face down in the dark hall for a few seconds and tried to stop myself crying.

“What’s the matter with you?” someone else said from the living room.

I could see the flashing light of an internet video against the wall. I noticed they hadn’t come down the hallway when they heard me banging on the door. I could have been knifed to death right there and then in the porch and they’d have stayed on the sofa watching YouTube.

“I just got mugged,” I said and pulled myself up.

I picked up the pie. The box was all bent and squashed.

“Shit,” someone said slowly. There was laughter. “Did you see that bit?”

“Rewind it.”

“Turn up the volume a bit.”

“After this, look at Funny Cats number six. It’s this, times about seven.”

“Did you hear what I said?” I shouted into the house. “I just got mugged.”

“What did they take?”

“My iPhone.”

“Wasn’t that broken anyway?”

“I’m not sure that’s the point. What should I do?”

“Call the police,” someone suggested.

“999?”

“No, you idiot. It’s not an emergency. They didn’t knife you did they?”

“Oh yes, I’m just standing here, bleeding profusely into the hall.”

“F12. F12. Hit F12.”

I heard someone hit F12.

“Who do I call then?” I shouted.

“Police. They won’t do nothing though.”

“If you want to claim the iPhone though, you should see them,” someone else said.

“They’ll give you a crime reference number and- oh my God! Are you on level thirty four?”

“Yeah. I’m amazing.”

I blinked.

“Has anyone seen Felix?” I asked as I went up the stairs.

“No,” someone said. “Oh, no, wait,” they added, after a pause. “He’s here.”

I took my pie upstairs to my room and checked my reflection in the mirror. I looked pale. My nostrils were dark and bloody. I looked hardcore. I grinned at myself, pulled a couple of James Bond poses and then wiped my face clean.

I sat down at my laptop and wondered whether I should watch porn or call Martin. Wanking off straight after being mugged might be a little weird so I opened up Skype and called Martin.

“Hey, Martin.”

“Alright mate, how’s the cock?”

I smiled. I pulled the wallet out of my pants and flourish the notes.

“Rich. Just. You’ll never guess what.”

“What?”

“I just got mugged.”

“Fuck! Are you joking? Did they take the money?”

“No, they took my Iphone and then I ran away. You know the guys from the bookies?”

“Little and large?”

“Yeah, it was them. I need your help”

“Yeah, of course. When I got mugged we called the police to get the crime reference number. Not 999. I’ll get the Plymouth police station number.”

“I mean, I want you to go round there and beat them up.” I smiled. “You’re black.”

“Very funny. You ready for this number?”

I picked up a pen.

“Hit it.”

“But you kept the money?” Martin said as I scribbled the number down. “That’s lucky.”

“I was freaked out. They kept calling me Harvey and were banging on about four grand.”

“Four grand?”

“Yeah, I know.”

“Weird, man. At least you got away. You alright? You want me to come over?”

“Martin, I’m not gay. Although.” I picked up an envelope off my desk. “My brother sent me Pulp Fiction yesterday. If you’re done on your essay you can come round and watch.”

“Give me ten,” Martin said.

He signed out of Skype. I opened the envelope and checked it was Pulp Fiction. If it turned out I’d lied about that, he’d probably think I was gay.

I hid the money in my socks and the pie in my underwear drawer. I’d eat it on a happier occasion, when my stomach wasn’t churning with such unrest I was seriously worried about just shitting myself where I stood.

I put the DVD in the player and opened my top drawer. I knew why I’d been mugged. I wasn’t wearing my lucky glasses. I took them out of the drawer and put them on my head. They were a pair of battered orange cycling glasses that I found on the floor of James Street Vaults at Christmas. I got my first official university girlfriend that night, hence my lucky glasses. I say first official university girlfriend- it lasted about a week. It was a good week, though. I took her out, we went to the cinema, I drove her to Cornwall. It was beautiful, stretching, golden, sandy beaches, blue sky, a red sunset over the horizon. Her name was Jody and she was fit as. She thought I was funny. She must have meant funny looking because she first met me when I had those orange glasses on my head (I never wore them over my eyes but over my hair, like a thirty five year old mum pushes her sunglasses into her hair when she goes to see her kid’s primary school teacher). Anyway, then she broke it off. She said she couldn’t go out with me because she didn’t like me enough to stay with me if I

was bad at sex. Fair play to her. I'd prefer that than letting her down every night or having her bitch about my performance to her mates.

Maybe those glasses weren't that lucky after all. On the other hand, every time I'd worn them, I'd never been mugged.

As I waited for Martin, I logged into TMNT forum. It's this internet web page I discovered when I was like fourteen. It's all about Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles. I first signed up on it because I wanted to see if anyone knew where I could watch the old T.V. series. No one did but, after a few conversations in the forum, I discovered a whole community there. You know, like, freaks with nothing to do so they make friends online and sit there talking about eighties cartoons. It had a hierarchy and everything. I was assigned as a newbie. That wasn't even at level one. How fucking pretentious is that? I wasn't allowed on some areas of the website because I was only a newbie. Level fives and sixes wouldn't even respond to my queries and I bet they knew where I could watch the old show. So I logged in a couple more days until I became level one. I didn't find out much more about the show but it was interesting. A level three told me that when you reached level 10, they tell you a secret. A Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles secret. You see all the level tens around the site with screen names like 'Level 10 forever' or 'Level Ten is consciousness'. I asked a level ten what the secret was and the prick wouldn't tell me. Level Tens only. I asked how I became a level ten and he said dedication to the website. So, for six years, I've been signing in and chatting to these freaks. I'm level nine now and when they tell me that secret, I am going to shout it from the rooftops. I am going to make every newbie and lowly level one aware of it, I am going to bring down this fucking forum and all their high horsed arrogance.

Martin pushed my door open.

"You alright, brother?" he said. "Your nose is bleeding."

"Fuck." I ran to the mirror and examined it. "Again?"

"Did they hit you?"

"Nah, the bald guy just put his fingers up my nose."

"Ohh no." Martin laughed and shook his head. "Mate, that is bad."

"Shut up. Let's just watch this shit."

"Tell you what you can do," he said as I turned the lights off and sat in my chair. "Get your eighth cousin on it."

"Shut up," I said again.

"Come on, I'd be calling favours on that guy like no body's business. I'd be ringing him up every weekend, family values and all that."

“Eighth cousin is miles and miles away. Distant,” I said. I put my feet on the bed as he lay down. “Your eighth cousin is probably Barrack Obama or something.”

He laughed loudly.

“If my eighth cousin was Barrack Obama,” he said. “I’d be at fucking Oxford. I would pull those strings. You should too.”

“He probably has a thousand eighth cousins,” I said. “And I bet they’re all goofy kids who get mugged on Sunday nights. Now, watch the film.”

“If we had guns,” Martin said after a few minutes. “We’d totally be Jules and Vince.”

“Nah,” I said. “I don’t have Vince’s hair.”

“I meant I’d be Vince,” Martin said. “You can be the black guy.”

“Well in that case, you don’t have Vince’s hair.”

“And I never would.” Martin sat up. “What is with that cut?”

“No idea. Maybe it was the style in the mid nineties for white hit men.”

“He’s still cool and everything with it,” Martin said. “But it is terrible.”

I started to nod off. My nose was throbbing and it was making my eyes hurt. I wanted to go to bed but I felt bad having invited Martin round and then telling him to fuck off.

“Pop tarts,” Martin said.

I opened my eyes.

“What?”

“Bruce Willis just having a pop tart there,” he said.

I nodded.

“Chocolate flavour.”

“It was strawberry,” Martin said. “It was white, brother. It was strawberry.”

“Are you joking me?” I said. I took my feet off the bed. “That was chocolate.”

“It wasn’t.”

I rewound the DVD. We both watched as Bruce Willis took the packet out of the cupboard again. I paused it.

“Chocolate!” I said.

“That’s strawberry!” Martin got right up close to the screen. “Look, it’s strawberry. You’re getting fooled by the shadows, white boy.”

“That is a chocolate. I know. I used to eat them all the time.”

“So did I and I know a strawberry pop tart when I see one. Sainsbury’s only make the strawberry ones now.”

“Technically,” I said, clicking play, “he’s eating a Toastie Pasty, so the same rules don’t apply.”

Someone started banging on the door downstairs.

“Shit,” I hissed and pulled my feet off the floor. I looked at Marvin. “Shit. They found me.”

The hammering on the door intensified. My giant window pane rattled with the force of it.

“Alright, alright,” a faint voice shouted from the family room. “I’m coming, I’m coming.”

“Shit,” I said.

I ran to my door and made sure it was shut. Martin ran to the window.

“I can’t see,” he said, peering around the frame. “I’ll go down.”

“No!” I cried, holding him back. “No! Let’s just hide and pretend I’m not in.”

“Yeah,” we heard someone say from downstairs. “He’s on the first floor. The door with the picture of Zoe Saldana on the door.”

“Shit,” I hissed. “Fuck. Martin, brace the door.”

“No mate, we’ll be fine,” Martin said and switched the light on. “They won’t hurt you up here.”

“Who’s Zoe Saldana?” a new voice said from downstairs.

“Bird from Avatar,” one of my housemates replied.

“Oh yeah. She’s in Star Trek as well.”

“Is she?”

“Yeah. She’s Ohura; gets off with Spock.”

“I thought Spock couldn’t feel?”

“So?”

“So why is he getting off with people?”

“I don’t know.”

“Just go up, you’ll see his room.”

Feet began to climb the stairs. I hid under the desk. Martin stood by the door until someone knocked. He opened it.

“Yeah?” he said, filling the doorway.

“I found this,” a man’s voice said. “It had the address registered here.”

I crawled out from under the desk. The man in the doorway wasn’t Carlisle or the bald man. It was some weedy looking guy in a suit and he jumped when he saw me suddenly appear.

“My iPhone,” I said, standing up. “Thanks, mate.”

“And is this yours too?”

“My coke,” I said, taking the bottle. “Cheers.” I smiled at Martin. “Wasn’t that bad after all? Lucky glasses.” I tapped my head.

“He got mugged,” Martin explained to the suited man. “And it was that bad- some six footer stuck his fingers,” he held my head back, “right up his nose.”

Since the conclusion of this whole affair, I had certain details filled in for me. So, just to let you know, I’m not omnipresent; this is stuff I found out later:

Carlisle and the Bald Headed Guy went back to the man who had sent them after me. I’m sure you’ve guessed that by now. There was no way that was a random hit; they’d have kept the iPhone at least. I won’t describe the mob to you; I’m sure, like me, you’ve seen enough films and read enough books to get what they’re like. The detail’s already there.

Still, this is Plymouth’s mob. So forget nice offices or BMW’s. A conference box at the Argyle ground is an imagination stretched too far as well. Picture: McDonalds. Late night, top floor, empty tables and chairs, rubbish screwed up and dropped just short of the bin. Maybe some tall, young kid, with long, lank, Vince-like hair, sweeping up. And at the table by the window, a guy in an open collared shirt (it’s good quality), pair of Levi’s jeans, a nice belt and leather shoes. He is the picture of suave and sophistication. He has presence. He is cool. He’s playing with a Zippo lighter but he doesn’t smoke. His mum always told him it was bad for him but he needs a look, he needs a trademark that his enemies can recognise. Hence, the lucky lighter, the Zippo box with a smiling face on the side.

Carlisle and the Bald Headed Guy came strutting up the steps. They were wearing the same clothes they’d had on in the bookies: dirty, ill fitting denim, white t-shirts and Argyle jackets.

“We got him,” Carlisle said, sliding into the seat opposite Zippo.

Zippo shut the lighter.

“You got the money?”

“No, but-”

“Ah.” Zippo stretched. “That’s not what I want to hear.”

“Listen,” Carlisle said. He glanced up at the Bald Headed Man who was standing, arms folded, watching Vince brushing up from across the restaurant; Vince was glancing at the trio out the corner of his eyes. “It’s good, we know where he lives.”

“You sure it’s him?” Zippo said. “He’s been laying low for four months now. You reckon you just met him in the street?”

“Better.” Carlisle smiled. “In the bookies. Like you said. Exactly as you described. Young kid, stupid hair, mad for betting.”

“He was betting?” Carlisle nodded. “With my money.” Zippo snapped the lighter open. “Did he win anything?”

“Two thousand,” Carlisle said slowly, smiling. “We followed him home. We got his house number. We know where he lives.”

“Ok.” Zippo snapped the lighter shut. “I want you to go round there and get the two thousand. I don’t care how. Be as brutal as you like. But remember: to get the next two thousand, we need him alive.”

“Understood.” Carlisle was grinning openly now, showing all his crooked teeth. “You got it.”

“So, I dunno.” Zippo shrugged and scratched his chin. “Maybe beat him half to death. Really cut that bitch up, no rules. Take the two grand and promise him if he doesn’t pay up with the rest, I’ll consider it the price of his life.”

“Got it.” Carlisle stood up. “No problems.”

“Where you going?” Zippo frowned. “Sit down. You can’t do it now. He’s a kid, he’s high from winning two grand. He’s probably surrounded by people who want a piece of it. You turn up now and you got forty witnesses. Just relax.” He nodded at Vince. “Hey, you guy.”

“Me?” Vince pointed his brush at himself.

“Yeah, get us three lots of Chicken McNuggets and a chocolate milkshake.”

“I, er, I reckon you have to order it yourself, uh, downstairs,” Vince said. “I can show you.” He pointed vaguely towards the stairs.

“I’m not a dick.” Zippo smiled. “I know how to order a fucking McDonalds. I just don’t want to. Listen, the manager knows me. Go down and say the guy upstairs with the Zippo want three lots of Chicken McNuggets and a chocolate milkshake. He’ll make sure I get it.”

I was a little scared the next morning. I figured Carlisle and his Bald Headed mate were probably waiting for me. I spent a few hours watching out my window but the only guy I kept seeing was this shuffling man who collects cigarette butts from the gutters. I was so terrified of getting beaten up or raped or something, I couldn’t even make it to Drakes. By that point, I didn’t even need the toilet anymore. I kept imagining Carlisle crawling under the door whilst I was on the toilet and grabbing my ankles. Fucking terrifying.

In the end, I went for a run. I guessed if I went to Central Park at this time, in this sun, it’d be busy, they couldn’t do anything to me. And if they did, I’d be running. I’d have a head

start already and I could scream and yell until somebody came to help me. So I put my very expensive Fred Perry white polo shirt on and my Nike sweat bands around my forehead and wrists. Because I've got such nice legs as well, I wear these little fluorescent blue hot pants so girls can check me out and I'd bought these neat Adidas trainers with my birthday money, so even my feet were cool. I looked at myself in the mirror and did a few stretches and warm ups. I winked at myself. I looked like Rafael Nadal.

I left the house and set off at a jog down the street, towards Central Park. It was sunny. The sky was blue and I felt happy. I smiled at some people. I waved at strangers. My hot pants felt good. The mugging the night before felt miles away. I truly believe it is the simple things that make life; a morning run, Saturday football, leek sausages and scrambled egg, a cheeky wank over Countdown. That's what life was really about.

When I got back, I figured I should do some University work. Whilst at uni, my average weeks consists of about three percent actual university work. The lectures are pointless, you can't reference them, the lecturers are generally quite boring and I have trouble staying awake. Before I came to university, I always thought you had to be really tired or in a bed to sleep. Apparently, that's not the case. During lectures, I've fallen asleep in a chair; I've fallen asleep with my head in my hands; I've fallen asleep getting a pen out of my bag. It's torture, it's a complete waste of money. Three grand a year being poured away for a sleep in a giant lecture hall, where some guy keeps announcing over the microphone to wake up. And everyone finds that funny. I get over it by reminding myself that universities are set up solely for people who can't think for themselves. I'm only really going to uni because I don't want a job yet. I don't know what I want to do and the job market is treacherous right now, so it's not the time to try and find out. Hopefully, when I graduate, I'll have an idea about what I want to do. Or, even better, maybe they'll just be giving some jobs away at the door.

I went to the library first, hated it, then went to the cafe in PSQ to wait for some course mates. I sat at a table and watched three cleaners standing by the doors.

"Ooh, yeah, tell Derek about the door."

"Derek, this door? What's all that about?"

"What door?"

"The door." The woman pointed. "Up there."

"Oh yeah." He nodded. "That door."

I tore open a packet of sugar from the pot in the middle of the table and spent a few minutes blowing the white grains onto the floor. University gets dull. It's the same old things every day. Sleep in late, do nothing, do a lecture, do nothing, go out and get drunk, do

nothing. Everything loses purpose. My parents, my brother, my friends who don't go to uni all say 'new people, new people, think of all the new people you can meet'. New people? Save for Martin (who I met when I was thirteen anyway), everyone is the same. And every time you see a new face, it's always the same old questions: Hi. What's your name? What course do you do? Where are you from? Hi. What's your name? What course do you do? Where are you from? Hi. What's your name? What course do you do? Where are you from? And then you must ask: Hi. What's your name? What course do you do? Where are you from? Hi. What's your name? What course do you do? Where are you from?

Once, at one summer job interview, someone asked me if I had one question to pose to Hitler, what would it be. I said 'what's your favourite colour?' I figured all the most obvious questions (what the fuck were you playing at, why Jews, why Goebbels, why the moustache?) would have been done before. If I had that one opportunity, I wouldn't blow it with any old run of the mill question. I'd want to find out what his favourite colour was. I always remember this every time I meet someone new at university. I wish I could just say, 'fuck my name, my favourite meal is lasagne and my feet are size 11. How about you?' You'd find out so much more about them. It's more interesting, you know? I couldn't give a shit about where they're from and I don't much like telling them where I'm from. Who cares? I wish I had the stones to change it up, to lie. Yeah, I'm doing further physics and I come from Galway. My name? Obama. But I don't. I just give the same old, lame answers, silently wishing for a meteorite to come bursting through the ceiling and take me away.

My course mates came strutting over the foyer towards me. I stood up and picked up my bag. It was empty except for a screwed up leaflet about STI's. I wasn't sure why I even took it out with me.

"Alright," I said, nodding at them. "You done that essay?"

"What essay?" Cat said.

She was this short, squat little blonde girl who was thick as shit. Honestly. Uni for the clever kids? Christ no. They must have just got Cat to jump through a hoop to get in, or write her name. She once asked me who David Cameron was. What is even the point? Honestly, why even bother. I don't want to be mean or anything but sometimes I just want to punch her in the face. She doesn't talk very often but when she does, she doesn't fucking stop. Everything just comes tumbling out of her mouth in a giant verbal stream that makes the hairs on the back of my neck stand up. And she doesn't get out of my face. Look at me! Look at me! Look at me!

"The end of term assignment."

“Oh yeah, I was going to start it last night but I got distracted by my fish.” She laughed. “I had to feed them.”

“Fish?” I said.

“Fishville,” Carl said from over her head. “You know, on Facebook.”

“Fuck, fishville.” I exhaled. “Right. Of course.”

“And then,” Cat said. “After I had fed them, like, like, I was feeding my fish and afterwards, like I ordered some pizza from, um, um, um, Pizza Hut and I had to, er, like, when I rang Pizza Hut I had to order order over ten pounds to like, er, to because when I rang Pizza Hut, they like have this thing where-”

“End of the story is,” Carl cut in. “They didn’t have any brownies so she couldn’t get a takeaway.”

“Carl!” Cat screeched. She hit him and laughed. “I wanted to tell it.”

“I get it,” I said. “I get it. Thanks, Carl. Good story, Cat.”

“Hey,” Carl said. “Does Justin know that Mike’s feet smell?”

“I dunno,” I said. “Why?”

“I just need to know before I start talking about t in front of him,” Carl said. “I know they’re mates and everything and Justin might get offended.”

“Can’t help you,” I said. I readjusted my cycle glasses on my head. “I’d just steer clear of the whole subject.”

Carl was alright. Just a regular guy, you know, albeit a six foot four guy with giant rugby shoulders and ginger hair. One who you talk to everyday, value, go out and about with whilst at university but afterwards, it’ll be unusual for me to think of him again, or him to think of me. Convenient friendships. If I was cool, people would want to stay in touch with me.

Everyone is going to want to stay in touch with Martin.

“You at the pub tonight, Carl?” I asked.

“I am,” Cat piped up.

“Carl?” I said.

“I am not,” Carl said.

“Why won’t you be at the pub tonight, Carl?” Cat asked.

“I have to feed my nan’s cat.”

“What?!” I said. I laughed. “What? Feed-”

“Your nan’s cat?” Cat said. She looked entirely perplexed. “Why?”

“Feed your nan’s cat?” I said. I was still laughing. Carl was looking embarrassed. His red hair was leaking down his face. “Are you having a laugh?”

“My mum says I have to,” Carl said. “Nan lives just up the road.”

“Pussy whipped,” Cat said.

“That doesn’t really work with mums or nans,” I said, frowning at her. I looked at Carl. “So, let me get this straight, you are leaving uni on a Monday, the student night of the week, to go home and feed your nan’s cat?”

“It might die.”

“In all honesty, Carl,” I said. “You should have just lied. Thought of an excuse, you know. Sister’s birthday. Car MOT. Going to the cinema with my brother.”

Carl bowed his head. I laughed and whacked him on the back.

“We all have the loser within us,” he said. “Or in your case,” he nodded at me, “all around us. You’ve got those cycling glasses on again.”

“They’re my lucky glasses,” I said, touching them.

“You wear them all the time,” Cat said.

“Yeah.” I took them off and smiled at my reflection in the lens. “They’re like sick. They go with anything.”

The team for the pub that night was me, Martin, a housemate of Martin’s called Jess and some underwater hockey player who’s name (as he shouted it to me above the din at the bar) I never quite got.

The pub was packed, as it always is Monday night. We had to stand by the door, holding our pints, our hands in our pockets, watching the girls go by.

“You were proper staring at her,” Martin said, looking at me.

“She’s dressed to impress,” I said. “There ain’t no way a girl comes out to a bar like that and expects not to be stared out. She wants it.”

The girl turned as I spoke. She was wearing a scarlet red dress, her dark hair thrown over one shoulder. We all recoiled.

“Mate,” Jess said, nudging me as she moved on. “Mate, she was ugly.”

“Bob Focs,” Martin said.

“What?”

“You know Bob Focs,” Martin said. He sipped his pint. “Body of Baywatch, Face of Crimewatch.”

We all laughed loudly. I slopped my pint onto the floor and the underwater hockey guy nearly slipped in it; we found it hilarious.

“Man, if you slipped, you’d die,” Jess said. “And we’d have to bury your body up on the moors.”

“Why?” I said. “Why not just call the police?”

“We might be suspected of murder,” Martin said, putting his empty glass on the floor. “Of killing the star player.” He began to move away, through the crush. “I’m getting another. Anyone?”

“Yes!” I said, draining my glass. “Yes, please.”

“You know,” Jess said to me. “The moors would be the perfect place to hide a body.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” I said, leaning over to put the glass on somebody’s table.

“Brady and Hindley did it,” Jess said. He finished his glass and handed it to me.

“What a thing to be famous for,” I said and put his glass down on the empty table as well. Jess laughed.

“Yes, I suppose,” he said and touched his hair. “I’m going to be famous one day.”

“Are you really?” the underwater hockey guy said, leaning beside him. “How famous?”

“The most famous person of the twenty first century,” Jess said.

I whistled.

“Shit, now that is quite famous. How you going to do it?”

“It’s a secret.”

“Serial killer,” I said. “Like Jack the Ripper but for Plymouth. The Plymouth Ripper.”

“You can’t be the most famous person in the 21st Century,” the underwater hockey boy said as me and Jess both laughed.

“Why not?” Jess said.

“Because, well,” he shrugged, “you just can’t. Not you.”

“Why not?” Jess repeated. “Somebody has to be.”

“Yeah, but it’ll be like David Beckham or Simon Cowell or someone.”

“We’re only ten years into this century,” Jess said. “There’s another ninety years worth of celebrity coming. Imagine in 1910, the people saying, well, who’s going to be more famous than,” he waved his hand, “Sherlock Holmes. He’s the most famous person of this century. They’d be wrong, wouldn’t they?”

“Alright, alright,” underwater boy said. “I agree, I see your point. But still,” he finished his drink, “it can’t be you.”

“Why not?” Jess said again. He was smiling as underwater boy stared at the ceiling and fiddled with his nails.

“Because famous people come from somewhere,” underwater boy settled on. “They’re never just nobodies.”

“Not true,” Jess said, shaking his head. “Not true at all. All the best came from nowhere—The Beatles, J.K. Rowling, Ricky Gervais, even David Beckham. They had no leg ups in life.” He pointed at underwater boy. “It was just pure talent and determination that got them such astronomical success. That’s all it takes,” he said, taking a bottle off Martin as he fought his way back to us. “Just your own perseverance.”

“Not your bloody famous thing again,” Martin said, handing me a bottle. “Jesus. What are you going to do? Cure cancer?”

Jess laughed.

“It can’t be done,” underwater boy said, shaking his head. “You need a real unique skill to be that famous.”

“Oh, so writing is a unique skill?” Jess said. “Only possessed by Rowling? Being a funny man, kicking a football? Oh yes, only Ricky Gervais and David Beckham can do that.”

“Yeah, but they got famous because they had something else,” underwater boy said. “Something,” he held up his hand, “else.”

“Yeah.” Jess nodded and sipped his beer. “Hard work. Trust me, mate, just trust me. I’ve got it too. It’s like climbing a ladder. Anyone can do it; it’s just that you can’t always see the top so most people give up. Too high, too hard work, too dangerous. No. It’s possible.”

A table cleared behind us as he finished speaking. Underwater boy slid over the back of the chair and landed in the seat. We crowded round him. I put my beer on the table and looked around at the other three.

“Ever noticed,” I said, as I fiddled with the label on my bottle. “That our life is just a series of us sitting in different places. Lectures, home, car, here.”

“Speak for yourself,” Martin said. “I also stand.”

We all laughed.

“Mine won’t be for long,” Jess said, stretching.

“Ok, apart from Da Vinci here,” I said, pulling the label off my bottle altogether.

“I play underwater hockey,” underwater boy said.

“Ok, just me then,” I said. “But don’t deny, we sit a lot.”

Martin picked an empty balloon off the floor and blew it up. We watched as he tied the end and balanced it in an empty glass.

“Hey,” he said, turning it round to face us. “Doesn’t it look like it’s got a face?”

We all looked.

“Maybe,” I said, tilting my head. “Because of that mark there.”

“Include it,” Martin said, stroking the balloon. “Like that episode of Spongebob- he’s a real person. Talk to it. Say goodbye.”

“I’m not saying goodbye to a balloon,” I said and shook my head.

“Why not?”

“Why?!” I said. “What would it gain?” I looked about the packed pub. “People would think I was mad.”

“Er, manners?” Martin said.

“Hey, guys,” underwater boy said. He sipped his drink. “Would you rather have Action Man’s smoothed over crotch or Gollum for a penis?”

“Gollum?” I said. “Does he talk?”

“Yeah. It’s just Gollum, but he’s your dick.”

“The Action Man one,” Jess said. “Undoubtedly. You can still have sex.”

“No you can’t,” Martin said. “You haven’t got a dick.”

“You can scissor and stuff,” Jess said.

“There’s no nerves there, at all,” underwater boy said. “It’s just like a slab of flesh. Nothing.”

“Oh.” Jess thought. “Still, I’d choose it over Gollum. What would the girl think when you whipped that out. Eurgh.” He pulled a face. “People might be able to hear it talking through your pants.”

“Yeah, I’d choose Action Man,” I said. “Martin?”

He nodded and sipped his beer.

“Action Man.”

“Hey,” Jess said, nudging my arm. “Check out that guy.”

We all turned as one to look. An old, hunched over man had found a stool by the corner and was squatting over it. He was covering his face and muttering into his collar.

“That,” I said, “is shuffling man.”

“Shuffling man?” Jess said, frowning at him. “Looks more like muttering man.”

“He’s this guy that wanders round our neighbourhood,” I said. “Like, picking old cigarette butts up from the street.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know. He just does.”

We all looked at each, then burst out laughing. Shuffling man looked over at us.

“What a dick,” underwater man said. “Where does he come from?”

“An old people’s home,” I said. “They just turn him out every morning and wait for him to shuffle back to them at the end of the day.”

They all laughed. Martin kicked the table.

“And if you talk to him,” I held up my hands, “just a stream of abuse.”

We roared. Jess hunched over his bottle, gripping it for support as he laughed. I leant back in my chair and held my waist.

“What a fucking nutcase,” Martin said, wiping his face as he quietened down. “Look at that jacket he’s wearing as well. Like fucking Mr. Green.”

“Who’s Mr. Green?” Jess asked.

“Character from Reservoir Dogs,” underwater boy said.

“No, he’s not,” I said. “There is no Mr. Green. There’s Mr. Brown and Mr. Pink and-”

“What’s Reservoir Dogs?” Jess said.

“Tarantino film,” Martin said. “The one where the guy is tied to the chair and gets his ears cut off.”

“Oh yeah.” Jess nodded. “I don’t mean to name drop but my friend Sean has seen it and he says it was good.”

I laughed.

“Name drop?” I said, looking at Martin, who was laughing as well. “Name drop?”

“It’d not name dropping if it’s just your mate from down the road,” Martin said. “Name dropping is only for famous people. Like, it’d be name dropping if you said, my friend Quentin was involved in the production.”

I laughed.

“I don’t want to name drop,” I said, sipping my beer and shaking my head. “Good, because you haven’t.” I put my beer down and checked my watch; it was nearly midnight. “Shit,” I said. “I got to go. I’m meant to be writing an assessment tomorrow.”

“Oh no, stay,” Martin said. “Let’s put a song on the juke box. You get to choose it.”

“Nah,” I said, shaking my head and standing up. “I really got to go.”

“One song,” Martin said. “Just choose your favourite song and then you can go.”

“Band Aid,” I said, lifting my leg to get over Jess. “And it’s bad luck to play Christmas songs when it’s not Christmas so,” I shrugged at him, “I guess I should go.”

“You know, I never got that song,” Jess said, finishing my beer. “When they say, there won’t be snow in Africa this Christmas- like it’s a bad thing. What? That’s just the climate. It’s not because they can’t afford it.”

We laughed. I stretched and pulled my jacket on.

“See you guys,” I said, pushing the door open. “See you, balloon.”

When I got back, I was sick. In our little back garden, we have this tiny vegetable patch that one of my housemates tried to grow carrots in first year. They were fucking rank and to show my disgust for them, I always make sure, if I’m going to throw up, I do it right in that fucking vegetable patch.

I sat on the shopping trolley for a bit, taking deep breaths. The trolley was lying on its side, the wheels held up in the air like arms of surrender, mud clinging to the grate. When we first stole the trolley from Sainsbury’s, it had been such a novelty. We pushed each other around in it everywhere- up and down the stairs, round the house, about the garden. Cat once dressed up as a fairy and we wheeled her round town one Friday night. She was waving this kids wand she got from Tesco; it lit up when you moved it and made a noise like brinnng and people would bow down in front of her and buy us drinks.

Then the novelty wore off. No one wanted the trolley in there room, so we chucked it outside, along with Cat’s fucking wand which must have broken or something because it went off now if you even looked at it.

It was tied to the handle. I touched it. The lights flashed pathetically; its heart wasn’t in it. Then, after a pause, it blurted out a brinnng.

I went back to the vegetable patch, leant on the spade and threw up a bit more. Then I went back inside.

My housemates were all sitting around their laptops. The only sound was the constant clacking of fingers on keys. I sat down on the sofa and opened a can of coke. I sipped it. Then I went into the kitchen to spit into the sink.

“Anyone seen Felix?!” I called into the front room.

There was a prolonged pause.

“Yeah,” someone said. Then, “no, wait, actually no.”

They all laughed together.

“Fucking You Tube,” someone else said. “Check out this Boomerang clip.”

“Yeah, seen it, what is with his voice?”

“I haven’t seen it. Send me the link.”

“Open a dialogue box.”

I leant in the hall doorway. They didn’t have the light in there. The only light was the blue white glow emanating from their screens and slowly rotting their retinas.

“Has anyone put any tuna out for him?” I said, opening my cupboard.

“Yeah.”

I looked at his empty bowl on the floor. I filled it.

“Hey man!” someone called from the front room. “I, like, I reckon I can hear Felix out the front.”

“Really?” I said, striding down the hall with the bowl. I opened the front door. The path was empty. “Puss, puss!” I called. “Puss!”

No one came.

“You’re fucking wrong, mate,” I said shutting the door.

“Maybe he doesn’t like you. My fish is on level six. Shit, send me a gift, gift me, gift me.”

“I’ve got tuna and he loves that shit,” I said, walking back down the hall.

“Maybe he hates you more,” someone said, “because there’s definitely something crawling around out there. Gift me,” he added and I heard him typing frantically. “Oh cool, you’ve got a Yellow Submarine in your tank. I want one, how many points?”

I put Felix’s bowl down on the side and sipped the coke again. Something jumped over the back gate.

“Felix!” I cried, opening the back door. “Here puss! Here puss, I’ve got tuna. I’ve got-”

Bald Headed Man grabbed the front of my shirt and dragged me outside. I screamed. Carlisle shut the door and smiled at me.

“Harvey,” he said. “Remember us.”

He snapped out a knife.

“Shit!” I screamed. “Shit! Shit! Shit! Help me! Christ! Somebody save me!”

“Shut him up,” Carlisle said and wiped the knife on his Argyle shirt.

I flinched. Bald headed man lifted me off the floor, flung me round and squashed me against the wall by the window. My housemates were sitting on the other side of the glass, hunched over their laptops, their fingers clicking madly over the keys.

“Help!” I screamed as Bald Headed Man punched me in the stomach. The air went out of me. He dropped me to the floor. I grabbed the window sill and gasped. “Help.”

My housemates were laughing at some You Tube clip. Bald Headed Man picked me up again and threw me down the garden and into the vegetable patch. I rolled in sick and groaned.

“Now, Harvey, me old mucker,” Carlisle said, slowly approaching me. He was holding the knife like a pencil. “We know you have two grand.”

“You can have it!” I cried. “Christ, you can take it. Please, just don’t hurt me.”

Carlisle laughed.

“How nice,” he said.

Bald Headed Man picked me up. My legs weren't working so I let him hold me up by my collar. I felt like I was going to be sick again.

“The thing is,” Carlisle said, “I was told I could do what I liked to you. I was told I could really mess you over.” He poked my cheek with the knife. I closed my eyes and whimpered. They both laughed loudly. “And then I could take the two grand,” Carlisle said. “As a warning, as a promise, so that you know, when we come back for the rest, you give it to us without a fuss.”

“What money?” I said. I was crying now. Great. “I only have the two grand!”

“Then you need,” Carlisle said and he touched my forehead with the knife, “to find two more.”

“I...Can't!” I said. My voice was wavering as my chest shuddered. “Please, just leave me alone. I don't get what you mean.”

“There's only one thing you need to be worried about right now,” Carlisle said. “And that is what I'm going to do with this.” He lowered the knife dangerously. I put my hands over my crotch. Oh, how I wished I was watching Countdown now.

“Please,” I said. “Don't kill me.”

Bald headed man laughed.

“We can't kill you,” Carlisle said. “Yet. We need our money. You ever seen Reservoir Dogs, boy?”

“D...don't cut my ears off,” I said, clapping my hands over the side of my head.

“P...please!”

“It's your ears or something else,” Carlisle said. “And I don't mean a finger.” He looked at Bald Headed Man. “Christ,” he said. “I'm getting into this. I should have brought the other knife. But,” he picked up the spade, “ooh, very weighty.” He smiled at me. “I'll have to use this.”

“I brought it,” Bald Headed Man said. “It's in the bag on the bike.”

“Oh.” Carlisle put the spade down. He patted my face with the knife blade. “In that case, I'll just go and get it.”

He turned away. Bald Headed Man dropped me and I fell into the vegetable patch. I wiped my face and watched Carlisle leave by the back gate. It clanged shut. Bald Headed Man tilted his head back and looked at the sky.

“Clear night,” he said and put his hands in his pockets.

“Uh huh.” I nodded, wiping my snotty, teary face. Maybe I should tell Carlisle to cut something else off. The way this was going, I didn’t think there was anything left down there now anyway.

“What’s the rent like in a place like this?” Bald Headed Man asked.

I sniffed and shrugged.

“I pay a,” I hiccupped, “thousand a term,” I said.

My voice was still shaking. I was crumpled in the vegetable patch, in the dirt and the vomit. My stomach had shrunk with dread. It felt like the last seconds of my life. It felt like I was walking out to meet the executioner. I couldn’t move. Any second, that gate was going to creak open and Carlisle would be back with a fucking machete or something.

Bald Headed Man whistled.

“Not bad,” he said. “My daughter wants to go to uni here. If these are the prices, I’ll recommend it. Would you recommend it?”

I looked up at him. I was shaking. I was cold and wet. I didn’t know what he wanted me to say. I dumbly nodded my head. The gate creaked. I jumped. I started crying. I grabbed the wall and pulled myself up.

“Oh, please, no,” I said, hiding my head on the bricks, snot running from my nose. “Please, d d d don’t cut me. I’ll d d d do anything. I’ll give you anything you w w want. I know girls who’ll do anything. I know boys. I’ll do anything, p p please just-”

“Be quiet,” Bald Headed Man said. “It’s just a cat. Here kitty, here kitty.”

I turned. I was gasping for breath, in a total fit of tears. Bald Headed Man was squatting down, holding out his hand to a black and white cat that was sitting by the gate.

“T...that’s our c...c...cat,” I said. “F...Felix.”

“Ah, Felix,” the Bald Headed Man said, stroking Felix as he bumped his head against his knee. “Is that because he looks like the cat off T.V.?”

I laughed.

“Y...yeah,” I said, walking carefully over. “Yeah.”

I had the spade in my hand. It was very heavy. The handle was covered in sick. I hoped I wouldn’t drop it. I lifted it over my shoulder, took a breath and brought it down on Bald Headed Man’s head. Felix darted away, back over the gate.

I thought it’d be like in the movies, when you hit a guy and he goes out stone cold. Bald Headed Man just turned around and looked at me.

“What the fuck are you doing?” he said. “Give me that.”

I didn't. I hit him again. All the panic that had been seated in my belly came flying out down my arms. I brought the spade down on his head again and again and again. He fell over. I kept hitting him. I was shouting something, growling, roaring, whacking this guy senseless. I felt like this was the fight for my life. If I stopped, I died. Beyond the window, my housemates were all crowded round one laptop, laughing at something on Fail Blog. I didn't stop. I thwacked and thwacked and thwacked, unable to see what I was even hitting anymore, just knowing I had to keep going, I had to, I couldn't stop or I'd be killed.

I ran out of energy. I started crying. I dropped the spade and fell against the wall, sobbing. I wiped blood from my face. There was a lot of it. It was all down my shirt. Bald Headed Man wasn't moving. His face looked like the time I tried to make spaghetti bolognaise. The head of the spade was black with blood. I had killed him. I had just fucking battered a guy to death with a spade and, any minute now, his best mate would be coming back with a machete. I nearly shit myself.

Luckily for me, however, that same adrenaline which had allowed me to feel the handle of the spade amongst the dirt and chunks of vomit in the first place, suddenly surged through my veins. I felt dizzy. I stood up and went back inside. I got my keys from my room. I had a fully functioning plan. I paused in the hall. I turned and went into the front room.

"Can I have that blanket?" I asked.

"Sure," a housemate said without looking up.

I pulled it from under him.

"You got something on your face," he said without glancing away from his laptop.

"Thanks."

I left the house and wrapped Bald Headed Man and the spade in the blanket. I managed to lift him up by the legs and put him in the shopping trolley. I was moving fast. I felt that if I moved slowly, my plan would leak out my head and I would be left with dead Bald Headed Man in a shopping trolley just as Carlisle came through the gate.

He fell inside and his legs hit the wand. It went brinnng brinnng brinnng and started flashing with gusto. I panicked and tried to pull it free but it was proper wedged under the bulk of the blanket. Felix miaowed around my legs.

"Christ," I gasped, tugging the handle of the wand. "Christ."

It was no good. I left the wand and pushed the trolley down the back path. Felix miaowed after me.

"Tuna's on the side," I panted, opening the gate and pushing the trolley into the alley beyond. "Give me an hour and I'll let you in."

I ran down the back alley, the trolley rattling frantically in front of me, the wand flashing pink and singing out happily; bring bring bring. It was making one hell of a noise. I kept expecting someone to step out of their back garden. What would they fucking do? Probably run. I would; blood covered boy pushing dead bald man in Tesco trolley down back alley at one o'clock in the morning with fairy wand to light the way. Yeah, you'd run.

I got him to my car without seeing another living soul. I was panting. I opened the boot, made sure the blanket was expertly tucked around him and lifted him out. The blanket unravelled. The spade clattered onto the tarmac. The wand went bring. My nerve almost broke. I nearly dropped him and just ran to London.

I was shaking. I took a deep breath and pushed him into the boot. I had to fold his legs to make him fit. I kept expecting him to move, to sit up and say, 'what the fuck are you doing?' But he didn't. At that point, I was buzzing so much, desperate, I think him sitting up and asking me stop would have just annoyed me and I'd have hit him again. It always happens in the movies like that, doesn't it? The body sits up. It's alive, it's alive!

As I threw the spade in, it moved the blanket and I saw his face. I could see an eyeball staring at me from the pulped mess of meat and bone and I knew he wasn't getting back up again.

I shut the boot.

It was eleven miles to the moor. Me and Martin used to cycle it in first year. My car groaned up the first hill at twenty miles an hour. That didn't bode well. My car was just a beat up old red Corsa. It struggled carrying just me, let alone a giant dead, bald man and spade. I was missing a wing mirror. The whole thing was so rusted and old, it was built before anyone had heard of Corsa, back when everyone thought it was just a word an Italian used to confirm something. I caressed it into third gear and it made a funny noise until the hill changed and we started cruising downwards.

My heart was still beating fast. I rubbed my face frantically and put a CD in the player to calm me down. It was one of my nineties tracks- C'est Le Vie by B*witched; I mean with a * and everything.

I settled back in my seat and braced my arms against the steering wheel, trying to drive calmly. I checked my nonexistent wing mirror. Christ, what would I do if I got pulled over for speeding? I'd be fucked. I tried to turn the heating on but it wasn't having any of that. My toes and fingers were cold. Air was rushing in from somewhere. I blew on my left hand and then on my right. I sat back in my chair, my eyes on the rear view mirror. I started nodding

my head to the music. I indicated to leave the city. I was starting to relax. I was Ok. I was good. Everything was going to be alright. C'est le vie.

"...and I said, hey boy, sitting in a tree," I sang as my car cruised the lanes leading to Dartmoor, "mummy always wants you to come for tea. Don't be shy, straighten up your-shit."

I swerved as a deer loped out onto the road. I saw its eyes in my headlights and slammed my foot on the brakes. It vanished into the hedgerow in one ceaseless bound and I rubbed my nose and waited a few seconds before driving on.

I turned off the road and down a farmer's track and then onto the moors themselves. It had been dry all month so there was no mud. I'd love to call the AA to pull my car out of the mud: blood covered boy, spade, moor at midnight. What's that in the boot?

As it was, my little Corsa rocked happily over the rabbit mounds and pony shit until I figured I was deep enough out to avoid being seen now and bald headed man being seen later. I stopped the car and turned the engine off. In the darkness and the silence, I took a few deep breaths and then I opened my car door. It was fucking cold.

I got the spade out of the boot and starting digging a grave. In *The Lovely Bones*, that pervert digs his child trap using the headlights from his truck to see what he's doing. Halfway through this grave, I considered it, but I figured it'd be the easiest way to alert everyone in the area to my presence.

When I had a hole waist deep and about three foot long (I was going to squash him in like a slice of processed cheese because I couldn't be fucked to dig him a real grave), I chucked the spade down and pulled him from my car.

I didn't put him in the grave straightaway. I laid him on the blanket by the side of the hole and looked at him. It might have been the cool air, the clear sky or the feeling that, finally, maybe, I wasn't going to be suddenly spotted by the police or Carlisle, but I suddenly felt bad. I desperately wanted him to sit up then. It'd be like waking from a nightmare. Thank fuck! You aren't dead. That is quite a weight from my mind. I knew I couldn't really kill a man. He'd rub his head and ask what the fuck I was doing. I'd give him a fucking hug. I'd tell him I wouldn't bury him out here if he and Carlisle left me alone and he'd agree. We'd shake hands and then I'd drive him back to Plymouth and he could go home to his daughter and talk about university and I could watch Countdown on BBC Iplayer.

I bent over him and shook his shoulders.

“Hey, mate,” I said, gently shaking him. “Hey, mate. I’m about to bury you. If you’re alive, now is the time to say.” His mashed head lolled on his shoulders. I tapped his shoulder. “Hey,” I said. “Come on, please.”

He said nothing. I sighed and sat down beside him. I wrapped my arms around my knees and looked at the stars. It was a very clear night. If I knew the constellations, I could have picked some of them out. I suddenly started crying. The guilt hit me. The dread was a thousand times worse than when Carlisle went to get his machete. I didn’t want to be a murderer. This was just unfair. I didn’t want to bury this man. This wasn’t my fault. I just wanted to go home and go to sleep and wake up and it to be Monday morning again. I wanted to take a shit in Drakes just like I always did, without a dead man looking over my shoulder. I wanted him to get up and go see his daughter.

I buried my head in my hands and proper cried. I wailed. That was my life over. Right there. Over. I would never be the same again. Not only had I battered a man to death, I’d driven him out on the moors to bury him. If I got caught, I’d be sent to prison and raped like Andy Dufresne from the Shawshank Redemption. If I got away with it, I’d be fucking haunted all my life. I’d have nightmares. I’d be the old muttering guy in the corner of the pub, always staring into the distance and the twenty year old guys, with their giant dicks and swaggering shoulders, would all point at me and say ‘what the fuck is he doing here again? Hasn’t he got anywhere else to go?’ I’d never get married with this secret over my head, I’d never have kids with this guilt lurking over me. I’d never be able to tell anyone. Even Martin. Hey, Martin. Hey, good night? I BATTERED A FUCKING MAN TO DEATH AND THEN BURIED HIS BLOODY, PULPED BODY ON THE MOORE but you know, don’t want to burden you or anything, I’m cool.

I wiped my face and stood up. The air was cold on my wet cheeks. I felt my tears freeze where they were. I dragged the blanket into the hole. I squashed the man up like processed cheese. I had to stand on his body to fit him in. He was starting to go hard, like rigor mortis or whatever. I bounced on him a bit until he was totally in and then I started covering him up. I used my hands to drag all the soil in because I’d buried the spade with him. I patted down the soil on top, like a little old lady potting her magnolias, then I drove home and had a shower. It was nice and hot. It washed all the dirt and blood and sweat and tears and snot and sick away, down the plug hole, gone. I had a new coconut shampoo to use and that smelt really nice. I started to cheer up. Like I said, it’s the simple things.

Before I got back to Plymouth, Carlisle, obviously, returned, with a machete. He looked around the empty garden, the machete hanging limply by his side. Felix rubbed his head against his knee and miaowed.

“Paul?” Carlisle whispered. He pushed the cat away and tiptoed down the path. He peered into the vegetable patch. “Paul, mate?”

He saw some blood on the path and frowned. He looked around. He must have noticed the missing spade. He slipped the machete into his trouser waistband and kicked the gate open. He ran down the alley and jumped on their bike. When he first said bike, I pictured a Harley. You know, something cool. This was a Halfords push bike. He pushed off from the wall and pedalled madly down the street.

He met Zippo at the back of KFC. He was panting. He pulled the machete out and dropped it on the table as he sat down.

“I think he’s killed Paul.”

“Excuse me?” Zippo said.

Carlisle blinked at him. Zippo nodded at the machete. Carlisle dragged it away and hid it under the table. KFC was empty anyway. There was no one in sight.

“I think he’s killed Paul.”

“Harvey?” Zippo said, dabbing his lips with a cheap paper napkin.

Carlisle nodded.

“I left them together to go and get,” he tapped the table, “the machete, you know, and when I came back, they were both gone.”

“Oh no,” Zippo said, raising his eyebrows.

“I think this is serious,” Carlisle said. He wiped his brow. “I cycled here so fast. This is bad.”

“But your entire evidence rests on the fact that neither were there when you got back.”

“Yeah and!” Carlisle brightened. “And! There was this spade. There was a spade in the garden. I threatened him with it. But when I got back,” he held up his hands, “gone.”

“So, you think,” Zippo cracked open his lighter, “that this boy battered Paul, and this is Paul mind, to death, with a spade he found in his garden and then what? Drove him up onto the moors and buried him without so much as pausing?”

At about this time, I was waist deep in the grave, lost on the dark moors, slowly crying as I heaved spadeful after spadeful of dirt into the air, Bald Headed Man’s dead face watching me from the open boot of my little red Corsa.

“It’s unlikely,” Zippo said, snapping his lighter shut. He picked up his coke and sipped it through the straw. It sucked empty.

“Then where’s Paul gone?” Carlisle said.

“If you ask me,” Zippo said, putting the cup down. “Young Harvey gave him the two thousand and promised to follow it up with the next two grand by the end of the week. You know Paul. He’s soft hearted. He probably took his word for it and let the kid go.”

“Paul would never do that.”

“Ok.” Zippo opened the lighter again. “Young Harvey gave him the two thousand and promised to follow it up with the next two grand by the end of next week. You know Paul. He’s impatient. He probably took the money then battered the kid to death with the spade.”

“But why wouldn’t he wait for me?”

“Hey,” Zippo said, putting an arm on his shoulder, “he had to bury the body.”

“Of course.” Carlisle smiled.

“Right,” Zippo said. “Trust me. He’ll turn up with the two grand. Paul is reliable like that.”

“Yeah.” Carlisle smiled and nodded. “Yeah.”

“I’ll give you a call when I see him.” Zippo smiled. He jerked his head. “Go on, off you go.”

In crime shows and horror films and that, the murderer always wakes up the morning after and enjoys a few seconds of complete and utter ignorance. Then it all comes screaming back to them. With me, it was nothing like that. After my shower, I lay down in bed, wrapped the duvet around me and shut my eyes. I thought about Bald Headed Man. I thought about Carlisle. I panicked about the blood in the garden outside. I was so terrified about it, I wanted to go and check, to wash it all away. Then I remembered I was scared of the dark.

I tossed and turned until four in the morning, when I got up and watched some porn. It sounds like something a psycho might do. Murder a man, oh yeah, go home and watch people have sex. If the police were watching me or Carlisle or anyone, they’d think I was just a sick fuck. But I’m not. I wasn’t being perverted or anything like that. I just needed to take my mind off the noise the spade had made as it hit Bald Man’s bald head. Like two bricks covered in porridge grating together, metal on pulpy matter and bone. A shifting, grating wet noise. When I was doing it, I couldn’t hear the noise. I was screaming, my head was buzzing. But those sounds crept into my subconscious somehow, or maybe it was just my imagination; either way, they were replaying over and over. I kept wincing. I was terrified I’d develop a twitch. I didn’t need that right now. So I watched some porn.

I wasn't in the right frame of mind to crack one out to it, so I just sat slumped in my chair, watching the videos with a critical eye, my chin in my hands. Is it sad when you start recognising the actresses in amateur porn videos? I think it'd be worse if I recognised them in the street or started recommending their films to my friends.

As soon as the sun was up, I erased my computer history. All guys do it, but we never like to miss an opportunity to make fun of those who leave their stuff lying around. I don't know why. Maybe girls cut each other some slack. Do the majority of girls watch porn? That's a pretty hot idea but, on my world wide web travels, I don't often see porn directed at the female market.

Normally, I'd go downstairs in the morning in just my boxers but I was terrified Carlisle would be there and I'd be beaten to death half naked. So I put my clothes on and crept cautiously into the garden. Felix was by the vegetable patch, sniffing the patches of blood. I shooed him away. I filled some empty beer bottles with water from the kitchen tap and then poured them over the blood. Most of it washed away at once. There were a few stains that remained and I had to scuff my shoes through them until they were gone. Then I panicked about blood traces being found on my shoes. I'd watched CSI and all that. I filled another beer bottle with water and rinsed my shoes in them. I took my clothes from the night before and washed them as well. Then I tumble dried them, folded them nicely and put them away, just in case the police came round and asked why I was washing a jacket and trousers at seven in the morning.

I checked my timetable online. I had lectures nine until three, with just an hour's break at eleven. I didn't want to go. Fuck the money. I couldn't sit in a lecture hall today, not with Cat sitting beside me and whispering, under her breath so I could hear all the spit in her mouth, about what she had for breakfast and why.

No one would notice me missing. They'd all just think I'd had a late night and was hung over. Technically that was true. Plus the fact that I WAS A FUCKING MURDERER.

I decided to go and visit my Grandma. She was dying of some sort of cancer. My parents told me but I never really took it on board. Cancer is cancer. She'd had the chemotherapy and the medicine but the doctor's reckoned, at the age of seventy four, she'd had it. The big T.

I went out to my car. The trolley was still by the side of the road. The wand had stopped flashing and making that noise. I pretended I couldn't see it. I checked the boot for blood stains. It was empty. Still, just to be sure, I poured a whole bottle of engine oil into the boot. It stunk like fuck and I nearly passed out but hopefully it covered all traces of bald headed man.

I pulled my car onto the main road. I had to wind down all my windows so the fumes from the oil didn't get to me. It was starting to get warm so it wasn't that much of a problem. I tried listening to the CD but the music reminded me of the night before, so I put the radio on instead. Tinchy Stryder was on; that song where he gets his rhyming dictionary out: way, A's, days, maze, you are, number one.

I nodded along to it as I pulled up to North Cross roundabout. It was always busy here in the mornings. I looked into the car next to me; some guy in a suit and tie, driving to work. He probably had his lunch in a bag in the back. I wondered if he had a daughter. He looked left and saw me. We made eye contact for a second and I realised I would never, ever be like him, I could never relate to or join him because I had killed a man.

Someone beeped me. I swore and lurched forward. The car stalled. More people started beeping then. Everyone is a fucking critic. The guy in the suit pulled away. He wasn't looking at me anymore. A cyclist was yelling from my passenger window. I swore again, restarted the engine and pulled out. I had to swerve to avoid the stream of traffic now swinging round the roundabout. I nearly died. That would have solved a whole lot of problems.

I visited my Grandma about once every two weeks. She was staying near Tamworth which was a good three and a half hours away but it was worth it to see her. I was closer to her than I was to my brother, who's a bit of a dick really. Aside from Martin, if I had to say who I was closest to in the world/ who I got on with most, it would be my Grandma. That's sad. More sad than the whole porn actress thing. Still, it's true. It was just easy with her. I didn't have to try. I didn't have to impress or suck up. There was no ego between us. I didn't have to worry about what I was saying. I didn't have to worry about what I was not saying; kids my age never get that. If you're not joining in, they're in your face at once : 'are you, ok, are you ok, what's the problem, is something wrong, you seem a bit'... And then you have to pretend to be really happy so they fuck off. If you snap 'I'm fine you fucking twat, get out of my face!' it immediately confirms you have a problem.

Not with my Grandma though. She gets me. And she's interesting. If there's one flaw kids have, it's that they do have the tendency to chat about unbelievably mundane shit as though it actually means something. I mean, don't get me wrong, my Grandma does talk crap but she does it in a fun, amusing way because she knows she's talking crap.

Carlisle was on North Road East, in the phone box. He rang Zippo.

"He's alive."

“Good Morning.”

“He’s alive.”

“Excuse me.” The clicking lighter was audible down the phone.

“He is alive. That fuck face Harvey. I’ve just seen him. Christ!” Carlisle hit the phone box wall. A couple of students passing on the pavement quickened their step. “He’s alive! And he’s not hiding out in some back alley. He’s cruising around the city with his windows down, listening to some shit gangster music, like he’s hardcore. He’s not hardcore! He thinks he’s hardcore! Fuck me!”

“Calm down, calm down,” Zippo said. He snapped the lighter shut. “Can you be sure it was him?”

“I was right next to his car!”

“On the bike?”

“Yeah. And I got a proper good look at him. His windows were down and he stalled it, the fucking prick. I bet he hasn’t got a dick. Have you heard from Paul?”

“No,” Zippo said, slowly. The lighter was silent.

“Oh Christ, oh Christ,” Carlisle said. He leant against the phone box. “And you know what else? Opposite his house there is a fucking trolley on the pavement. And I know that trolley was in his garden last night. It had the same fucking wand on it.”

“Wand?”

“Some gay pink thing.” Carlisle shook his head. “I just can’t imagine what that sick fuck was up to.” Zippo was quiet. “Don’t you see?” Carlisle hissed. “He definitely killed Paul. He must have carried him out to his car in that trolley and then driven away. The fuck face! The fuck!” Carlisle hit the phone box again. The glass shook.

“Yes, I do see,” Zippo said. He took a deep breath.

“And he doesn’t even care!” Carlisle shouted. “He thinks he’s some sort of big balled man now.”

“Ok,” Zippo said. “Go and find him. Make sure you get that two grand from him and then kill him. I’m prepared to lose the other two just so long as we kill that prick.”

“Yes, sir. I’ll do it before the day is out.”

“Make it quick and clean.”

“With all due respect, he probably battered Paul to death. I’m not going to let him go for anything less.”

Zippo cracked his lighter and then hung up. Carlisle just dropped the phone box receiver and wrenched open the door. He climbed on his bike and sailed down the hill, spitting onto the pavement as he did.

At about midday, I was sitting on one of those tall, spinning chairs outside a hot dog stall at Drayton Manor. It was a sunny day, clear sky, hot around my body but cool and crisp by my face and the park was packed. I sipped my drink and waited for the guy next to me to finish making his order. My grandma, on the other side of the counter, was wearing one of those blue and white checked hats that means you work in the food industry. She had a similar pinafore on as well and looked a bit like Julie Walters from Dinnerladies. She gave this guy his hot dog or whatever he'd ordered and then leant on the counter to talk to me.

"You look much cooler with long hair," she said. "I do wish you'd grow it." She touched my hair. "Then you'd look like John Lennon in the sixties."

"Nah, grandma," I said. "Long hair makes my head look bigger than it already it."

She laughed loudly and banged the counter.

"Refill?" she said.

"Yeah," I replied, pushing my cup back over to her. "This time, could I have half coke, half Fanta and just a dash of almond essence?"

"Goodness Gracious me," she said, taking my cup. "You ought to slow down, sonny. You know what too much sugar causes, don't you?"

"Spots?"

"Not at all." She handed me my refilled cup and smiled. "Athletes foot."

My Grandma hadn't been the sort to take dying lying down. As soon as the doctor's told her it was terminal, she had gone out and got a job.

"I couldn't sit at home waiting to die," she told me. "So I decided to sit at Drayton Manor and wait to die instead."

We had both laughed.

"There'd be nothing better," she'd often say, "than to keel over behind the hot dog counter at Drayton Manor one sunny day. Think of the kids! They'd be talking about it for weeks. It'd make the news."

She'd lied on the application, saying she was fifty four instead. She could pass for fifty four. She was all grey but she was energetic and alive. She drove a motorcycle into work every day and kept the helmet on the floor by her feet whilst she worked because she had

gotten it signed by Meatloaf when she and my granddad had bumped into him in Madrid and didn't want it stolen.

She and my granddad used to travel Europe on their bikes. And I don't mean when they were younger or before they had my dad and his brother. I mean when they were sixty eight, at retirement age and living off their pension. My granddad was fucking hardcore. He used to do motorcycle racing up until he was seventy and he only stopped then because he died. He died in a very Steve Irwin- esque way. He was sitting on a wall in Shropshire, taking photos of deer, when he fell off and banged his head. He didn't think anything of it, went home, got into bed and didn't wake up the next day. I know it's not quite as cool as a stingray barb to the heart but it's the same general idea. My granddad had done sky diving, swimming with fucking sharks and been a bare knuckle boxer for the Navy and he went and died like Humpty Dumpty.

Grandma always wanted to go motorcycling again, like she did with him.

"Money, money, money," she would say when I told her to pack up the job and just go. "I'm saving for another great road trip, I'm saving. Your Granddad always had some scheme to screw the government out of money but me on my own, I need the income."

I spun my empty cup around the counter.

"Grandma," I said.

"Yes, sonny?"

"You know granddad used to box?"

"Yes, sir. He was the greatest fighter the Navy ever produced. He had a right hook that fisherman wanted to use." She smiled at me. "Do you get it?"

"I get it Grandma." I played with the empty straw. "Did he ever hurt anyone boxing?"

"That was the general idea."

"No, I mean, real bad. Like actually injured them?"

I looked at her intently.

"A few broken noses," she said, thinking. "Nothing worse. He could control himself."

"Oh."

I looked down at the straw. I could tell her about it. It'd be so easy. And she wouldn't scream or shout. She'd help me. She'd know exactly what to do. And it wouldn't be something lame like going to church or telling the police. She'd probably jack a shotgun from under the counter and demand to be taken to Carlisle. She'd threaten him with it and tell him that if he ever came near her grandson again, she'd pin dead bald head on him and then blow his fucking head off. He'd shit his pants. Then she'd tell me university was for losers and to

live whilst I was young. Then she'd give me granddad's old bike and we'd ride off towards Morocco.

"Grandma,"

I looked up. There was a fit girl standing at the counter beside me. And I mean fucking fit. Blonde hair, nice tits, skinny waist. She had a pair of sunglasses on and looked like fucking Paris Hilton. As I stared at her, she glanced down at me and smiled. I sat up a little straighter. She looked away and I pulled my collar up, smoothed down my hair. I had to act cool. Have the presence of cool.

"Yes, sonny?"

I ignored Grandma. The last thing I needed now was for Paris to think I was sitting here talking to my Gran.

"Hey," Grandma said, punching my arm and frowning. "And now you just ignore me? Oi, I'm talking to you."

I sighed and shut my eyes. Paris flicked her hair over her shoulder and looked away.

"Hey, doesn't this young lady want to order something?" I said, staring at my Grandma.

"Oh, I see." Grandma said. "That's how it is." She smiled at Paris. "What can I get you, dear?"

"Just a can of coke please," Paris said.

I turned away nonchalantly and pretended to sip my drink. I wished I'd had a cigarette or something, then I could have pulled off James Dean. I didn't have the courage to talk to this fit girl, no way, but if I looked cool enough and handsome enough, she might find the need to talk to me.

Grandma handed her the coke. She paid, smiled at me again and left. I watched her walk away.

"You never spoke to her." Grandma said.

"I couldn't think of what to say."

"You could have offered to pay for her coke."

"Oh yeah, that's a great idea. Damn it, I should have done that."

"It's ok." Grandma said. "It's a hot day. They'll be others. I know, for the next one, I'll overcharge her and you can step in and say, 'wait a moment, you've over charged' and when I argue, you can suggest she goes to eat elsewhere."

"Won't I just be getting rid of her?"

"No, you can both go and eat elsewhere. You can offer to buy her food at the next place. That's how it's done. Do you need any money? I can take a twenty from the till."

I suddenly got really excited. This could all end in me getting some action behind the tiger enclosure. Then my bubble burst. I suddenly remembered why I was so down in the first place.

“Nah,” I said, sagging.

“Why not?” Grandma frowned. “I see these girls every day. This could all end in you getting some action behind the tiger enclosure.”

“Nah.” I said, rolling the cup around the counter.

“What’s wrong?” Grandma asked.

I looked up at her little old face. Now was the moment to tell her.

“Grandma, I know you’re dying of cancer but I killed a man last night, panicked and buried his body on the moors. I’m pretty sure his partner is out to kill me as well and I owe their boss four thousand pounds. What should I do? And can I have the same again, except way more almond?”

“Nothing,” I said, smiling. “Just a bit tired.” I stretched. “I have loads of work to do.”

“Then go home and do it,” she said, hitting me with her hat. “Stop wasting your time up here talking to me.”

“It’s not a waste of time,” I said, watching as she scratched some tomato sauce off the counter. “I just something think...”

“Yes, Sonny?” She looked up at me.

“Nothing.”

I stood up. I hitched up my belt and leant across the counter to kiss her cheek.

“Love you, grandma,” I said. I waved and started walking away. “Remember,” I called, “if you die before I next see you, make it dramatic.”

She laughed and shouted something back but I couldn’t hear what it was.

When I got back home, I went up to my room. I took my jacket off and hung it on the second peg along on my wall. Second, for Tuesday. There were five pegs in all. On the weekends, I went wild and hung it over my chair. It sounds sad but university is so boring, I have to do these things to stop myself going mad.

I sat down at my desk and checked my phone for the first time that day. Martin had text me. They were having a barbecue. I signed into TMNT to make a few random comments; one guy was going on about bringing the old age back, the true characters and I agreed over and over with him until he said he couldn’t believe I wasn’t level ten. I thanked him, then got back up, took my jacket off the peg and went out again.

It was hot outside, too hot for a jacket, but I didn't care. I put it on and felt myself start to sweat as I walked down the street, passed all the girls in their vests and hot pants and sunglasses and topless guys. I wanted to sweat. I wanted to sweat until I passed out or melted away. I wanted to sweat or be completely naked and just run around the streets until I got arrested.

I went into Martin's house by the back gate. There were quite a few people crowded round there already, sitting on the grass, sipping beer, laughing by the back door and listening to music. Martin and his house mate, Jonny, were crouched over a make shift barbecue.

"That's at an angle," Jonny was saying.

"So?" Martin said.

"So, then the sausages will roll off," Jonny said. "The sausages will be muddy! Muddy sausages! Is that what you want?!"

Martin laughed and turned around. He saw me standing there, hands in pockets, staring at him.

"Heya!" he said, patting my shoulder. "You look pasty, mate."

"Only compared to you," I said, sitting down on the wall.

"Why you got that massive coat on?" Jonny asked. "It's scorching."

"That's his style," Martin said. "Burgers ready in two minutes. You hungry?"

"Not really."

"Want a sip of my beer?" Carl asked, sitting down on the other side of me.

"No thanks, mate."

Carl sipped his own beer.

"You didn't miss much today," he said. "Lewis was just saying-"

Someone threw a ball at him. He dropped his beer and started laughing. I slunk away as he leapt up to play wrestle with whoever had thrown it. I stood in the corner of the garden, wondering if anyone would notice if I was sick on the floor.

"Alright." Jess said, coming in through the gate. "Is Martin here?" I nodded to the BBQ. "He's been pestering me." Jess smiled. "About my coursework."

"Not done it?" I said. My throat was dry. Yeah, I was going to be sick.

"I have." Jess stretched. "Just not to the best of my ability." He leant in confidentially. "I'm bigger than this," he whispered. "I don't need this degree, see?" He leant back. "I've got something else waiting for me on the horizon."

"Oh yeah," I said. "You're going to be famous."

"S'right bruv," he said, moving away. "Did you want a beer?"

“Nah, thanks.”

I watched him go. I put my hands in my pockets and concentrated on breathing so I wasn't sick over everyone.

“Hi,” Cat said, coming over to stand with me. I actually groaned out loud. She didn't notice. “Like,” she said. “I was walking here today and, you know, before I came here today,” she took a deep breath, “when I was walking here today, like, because I never normally walk, I normally, if I'm coming this far away from, because I live on,” she pointed. I nodded. “The other end of the city.”

I nodded again. Have you ever seen Frost/ Nixon where Michael Sheen's Frost tries to stop Frank Langella's Nixon from settling into a long, rambling speech because it just sucks all the interest out of the interview? That's what it was like talking to Cat. Everything was ok and ticking over nicely and then she slides over and just starts talking about the most boring, abysmal shit ever. It's impossible to interrupt. All you have to do, like Frost, is settle back and wait for her to finish her long winded monologue, in the desperate hope that when you finally do manage to get a word in edgeways, all your desire to live is still there.

“Yeah, yeah,” I was saying quite aggressively. “Yeah, yeah, yeah.”

I looked around the garden. Martin and some James Dean look-alike were looking at pictures of girls in bras on Martin's phone. I wanted to be in that conversation. I didn't want to be stuck in this corner listening to this shit. I tried to manoeuvre myself subtly away. Cat followed.

“Because, like,” she laughed, “there's no rush, right,” She dodged around me like Ka from The Jungle Book trying to maintain eye contact with Mowgli. “Right,” she said, standing on tiptoe so I had to look at her. “Like, ha, you understand, right? Like, there's no rush. Right?”

“No,” I said; Martin had put his phone away. “Hold on a moment, Cat.”

I stepped away from her and climbed onto the garden wall. I knew she couldn't get up there. She laughed and danced about and shouted some things up to me but I ignored her.

I could see the whole garden from up here. Three guys by the back door were swapping beers.

“He so sits at the front because he fancies that girl.”

“I don't!”

“You do.”

“Which one?”

“The one with dreadlocks.”

A couple of girls near the back gate were laughing.

“I saw that status on facebook.”

“I know, like oh my God.”

“I can’t believe it.”

“Did you see her profile picture?”

They all shrieked.

“What a loser!”

I wished I could join in with any of them. The dread, the guilt, was settling on me like an actual weight. I realised I’d never be the same again. I truly wouldn’t. I couldn’t even hang about with my mates without feeling sick, without remembering the sick on the end of the spade. I wanted to know about the girl with dreadlocks (fit?). I wanted to see the profile picture on Facebook (loser?). I wanted, above all, to be able to care about both those stories.

I took a deep breath. The garden gate opened. I felt my balls tighten. It was only Sally. Cat latched onto her at once. Martin glanced at them from across the garden as they sat down on the grass. Martin and Sally were going out. I got a bit scared when Martin told me. We’d been friends for so long, I didn’t want him to get a proper girlfriend and just sit around every time we were out, licking her face. You know those sorts of couples. It’s like, we get it, you fuck each other, you don’t need to be constantly biting each other’s lips when we’re all sitting together in the pub. It makes it awkward. There you are, a pack of your best mates, crowded round the table, nervously fiddling with beer mats and not catching each other’s eyes as your friend sits in the corner, sucking his girlfriend’s face and trying to climb on top of her like a ladder. It’s just bare annoying.

Luckily, Martin and Sally weren’t like that. I wouldn’t even have realised they were an item if Martin hadn’t slipped into the conversation one day that they were sleeping together. You’d never know. They didn’t go around together or act overly affectionate towards each other. I think it was more of a fuck buddy scenario because Sally was as cold as ice. Still, good going, for him and for her. I bet she watched porn.

I slid off the wall. I was getting nervous, staying in one place. Carlisle might find me. The police might be onto me already. They might have tracked me down. I had to get out of there, I had to get out of there quickly.

“Hey,” Cat said, catching my arm. “I had this really weird dream last night. Like, I was dreaming that, you know my coursework. In my dream, I was like, sort of seeing myself, like, in the dream, I was doing my coursework and I’d like, you know the page numbers? In the dream, I was doing my coursework and, I was doing the coursework and the page numbers,

like, I'd sort of put them in Roman Numerals and like, why had I done that? What the hell? I don't understand!" She looked genuinely confused. "Like I never normally-"

I shouted. It wasn't a word or even a really coherent noise, I just shouted and waved my arms. Cat looked taken aback. Everyone in the garden turned to look at me. I put my finger to my lips and looked at Cat.

"SSh," I said. "I cannot deal with your shit, right now."

Then I walked passed her and out of the garden gate. Because it was Cat, I'd probably get away with it. No one took her seriously. I didn't want to be rude or anything, I just couldn't honestly give a shit about her right now. There were more important things. It was like the time I had been in London with a mate. I was too scared to use the toilets at the hostel we were staying in because there was only one bare dirty bog and it would have been obvious it was me. So when we hit Oxford Street, I was desperate for a shit. My mate wanted to look at the food court in Selfridges, so whilst she was doing that (touching the cows legs and trying the raw fish, you know) I slipped away to find a men's toilet. By this time, it was about eleven and I'd needed a shit for four hours. I was sweating I was so desperate. My cheeks were flushed, my knees were tingling and weak. I'd heard a story about some kid that needed a shit so badly he passed out and then shit himself. Fuck. That was the last thing I needed right there in the men's department of London Selfridges. My hands were literally shaking. I must have looked like a drug addict as I hurried along the racks and racks of clothes rails with just one or two items of clothing hanging on them, priced way over £200; the sort of clothes that drove millionaires wild with desire. I passed little glass bottles of water standing on solitary plinths with £20 price tags, I trotted down art deco style aisles with red neon lights or just white and sterile, like a hospital ward, passing mannequins and models and beautiful sales assistants wearing the latest clothes, looking the best, oozing richness and wealth and good fashion sense and I honestly didn't give a shit. I just wanted a dark corner that I could crouch in. At that moment, a few seconds away from tears, all that astronomical wealth and fashion seemed a bit pointless compared to the basic human bodily function of shitting.

Yeah sure I'd love to be able to afford to shop at Selfridges like it was Primark, to have enough money to belong there. To be able to laugh at the people who could only go there once a year and buy one item, to know that I was better than them, to know I deserved better than them but right then, on that day, when I was on the verge of shitting myself, I'd have swapped it all for a hole and a curtain.

I reached the toilet in the end. It was fucking euphoric. I nearly came. I swaggered back to my friend like I was fucking Prince Charles. And you know what I noticed? All the

mannequins in the female department had really small tits. There was hardly any emphasis on them whatsoever. Do rich people not look for tits? Is that not such a big deal? In Primark, you can't move for tits.

My whole point is, Cat was talking shit and I couldn't deal with it right now. I walked down the back alley. Martin text me saying: LOL so I knew he didn't suspect I was on the verge of a nervous breakdown, which was good.

I turned into Central Park and started walking out of the city. I didn't know where I was going. I just didn't want to stay still. I saw a couple getting off with each other on a bench. It looked pretty intense. I've always wanted to get some outside, in a park or something. On my run, there's a secluded cricket pavilion I pass. The back is out of sight, hidden next to a tall evergreen hedge and I reckon that'd be a good place to take a girl if you wanted to do it outside. Not even it, do anything, like John Lennon and that bird he fingered on the golf course in Nowhere Boy. That was pretty hot. In those days, it was alright to have a fuck outside. It was the place kids had to go to get some; in the park, the fields, the woods, because parents wouldn't let girls and boys sit in the same room together. They thought it was alright though if some sixteen year old kid came to collect their daughter from the house and walk with her to the bus stop. What could they possibly do outside, in broad daylight? And he's such a nice young man.

Wrong. Take her round the back of the football shed and fuck her. In those days, girls let boys do that to them because they fancied them and they reckoned it was the best chance of being fancied back. Boys did it because they wanted to know what it was and, as the men dominated society back then, no one was stopping them.

It's all different now. We have so much sex education and chats about treating each other equally and protection and what's right and what's wrong, it's taken the excitement, the intrigue away from it all. In the fifties, it was all about discovering shit you didn't know about the opposite sex, acting on basic, animal instincts. Everyone wanted to explore; kids didn't even have to get drunk to have a fumble around in the bushes. Now, everyone watches explicit porn online and if you have a fuck outside, everyone thinks you're a dirty gypsy skank.

I walked round the outskirts of the city and then back up North Road West. I passed Carol's house. Hers is the one that overlooks the green and she always sits at the window and watches people through her blinds. Freak.

As I passed, I heard her shout. I stopped and turned. I could only see the drawn blinds through the open window. A pair of fingers appeared and prised the slats apart.

“Do you want to come in for some tea?!”

“Yeah.” I shrugged. “Yeah, ok.”

I turned left sharply and made my way towards her front door. She always left it on the latch because she was always calling randomers in off the green. I pushed it open and kicked my shoes off. Her house was nice. Her parents were rich as so they bought her a nice one bedroomed house and everything to save her sharing with a bunch of skanks. I’m talking cream carpets, dishwasher and pictures of flowers on the wall. It smelt like Febreeze. I took my jacket off and hung it on the wall.

“Up here!” she called from upstairs.

I went up the stairs. She was sitting in her room, still gazing out of the window. On her desk was a kettle and some cups.

“Help yourself,” she said, smiling at me.

She adjusted the blinds and continued to peer out at the people going passed. I poured myself some tea and looked around. The room smelt like those incense sticks you burn. Carol looked like an incense stick. She was tall and thin and dark skinned, her hair caught up around her head in a purple and golden scarf. She liked to wear these long, thin flowing dresses that wrapped around her body and were tied at the wrists by bangles and threads and beads so that she looked like a fucking textile box.

I picked up my tea and sat on the cushioned window sill beside her. She was still peering through the blinds, her dark, heavily made up eyes in shadow as she examined each person that came passed.

“How are you?” she asked.

“Ok,” I lied.

“Are you not at Martin’s?”

“I left. How come you’re not there?”

“Oh,” she said and waved her hand. “My star chart said I shouldn’t head north today.”

“Oh.” I sipped my tea.

She picked her cup up and sipped it as well.

“Oh, look,” she said, nodding through the blinds. “Grace Clive is there. I read her stars yesterday and I don’t think she should go to Paignton tomorrow.”

“No?”

“No.” Carol dropped the blinds and smiled at me. “Very dangerous.”

I smiled to myself. She obviously thought I was smiling at her. She took my hand.

“Look at your life line!” she cried.

“Shit, what’s the matter with it?”

“It says,” she bent down and studied my hand closely, so that I could feel her breath on my palm, “you’re going to have a very long life. This is interesting.” She traced another line with her finger. “And you’re going to be rich.”

“Great.”

“But you have enemies.”

“Oh?”

“I can find out details for you,” she said, looking up. “Your date of birth is October the 16th right?”

I nodded.

“Strange,” she said, turning round and opening her desk drawer. “In my life, I don’t know anyone whose birthday is on October the second but I know three, yes three,” she looked at me, her eyes wide and intense, “born on October 16th.”

“O-oh right,” I said. “Yeah, weird.”

“Strange,” she corrected. “Weird is when two people born on the same day, die on the same day.”

She had some cards and a few charts and shit and spread them on the desk. I scratched the back of my neck and cleared my throat. I finished my tea and put it on the window sill.

“Uh oh,” she said, peering at the chart. “There is to be a death in your family...very soon.”

“Really?” I said and leant down beside her. “Can you tell who?”

“It says,” she turned something that looked like a protractor around the chart, “that the death will involve...” She kept turning the protractor. I couldn’t help myself: I kept watching my heart in my throat. I was thinking of Grandma. “Do you,” she said softly, still watching the chart. “No anyone...by the name of...Hey, Suzanne! Suzanne!”

I leapt. Carol was at the blind, waving to a girl across the green. The girl waved back. She was dressed similarly to Carol.

“Do you want to come in for some tea!?” Carol called.

“No thanks!” Suzanne yelled back. “My star signs say I should remain outside today!”

“Fair enough!” Carol called. “Maybe tomorrow?!”

Suzanne waved. Carol went back to the chart, smiling.

“Ah,” she said. “Oh, yes, as I was saying, your chart looks pretty normal. Nothing wrong there.”

“You said someone was going to die.”

“Did I?”

She rechecked the lines, the protractor swinging around and around.

“No,” she said. “It says everyone will live long.”

“And prosper.” I sighed. “So it doesn’t say anything bad will happen?”

“Nope.” Carol smiled at me. “You’re lucky. The fates are watching out for you.”

“Great.”

I left Carol’s house after that. She had called Dave in from across the road and we passed each other in the doorway.

“Watch out, man,” I said. “She’s reading star signs and shit today.”

“Cool,” Dave said. “I always wanted to know what my constellation is. Hey,” he caught my arm as I stepped out onto the road, “you live on North Road East right?”

“Yeah.”

“Do you know if a guy named Harvey lives there?”

My heart turned to ice. My bollocks leapt up inside me and for a second, I was winded. Dave must have noticed the change come over me.

“Shit, man,” he said. “What’s wrong? You been stung by a bee?”

“F...fuck,” I said. “Fuck. Listen, Dave.” I grabbed his arms. “Listen, what do you know about Harvey? Why d’you ask?”

“Hey, no, man, no reason,” Dave said. “No need to freak out on me, you know.”

“Just tell me,” I said, shaking his arms. “Just give me an answer. Why do you ask?”

“It’s like,” Dave glanced over his shoulder. “Er, what was I saying? You’re really freaking me out here, actually.”

“Fuck Dave!” I shouted and pushed him into Carol’s hall wall. “Just tell me!”

“Christ!” Dave said. “Christ! Chill out! Some guy just asked me about him, that’s all.”

“What guy?!” I said. “What did he say?”

“He just said, have you seen Harvey?”

“That’s all he said? A random stranger came up to you and asked if you’d seen Harvey?”

“Heya, no, man, no.”

“Then tell me what happened!”

I was nose to nose with him now. He looked like he’d shit himself. I was gripping his forearms so tightly, my fingers had gone numb.

“This dodgy looking guy came up-”

“Dodgy? Dodgy?! Describe dodgy!”

“Like, like Robert Carlisle from the Full Monty!”

Shit.

“Carry on.”

“And he asked, he asked me if I was a student at the er, the university. And I said yes.”

Dave swallowed. “And then he said, do you know a guy named Harvey, he lives on this road. And I said, I said, I didn’t and I kept walking, I just kept walking and that was it, man, I swear, that was totally it.”

“Fuck.”

I let him go and staggered towards the door. I rubbed my face with my hands and stepped outside. Dave called something after me but I didn’t give a shit.

I spent that night walking around and around in circles. I was too scared to go home. I cried a lot. I got worried about not doing my daily log in on the TMNT forum in case I lost my level. That’d be such a bitch.

I walked to the Sainsbury’s on the outskirts of town because the one in the Armada Centre was closed. I spent about an hour looking at the magazines, trying to see if there was any hardcore porn there, and then I bought a knife. They asked for I.D. but it didn’t matter because I had my driver’s licence on me.

Outside, I tore the packaging off the knife and looked at it. It was a hefty carving knife, with a giant silver handle and a blade bigger than my palm. I put it down my pants and then put the hem of my jacket over it. I practiced walking to make sure no one could see it on me. Now if Carlisle started, I’d cut him before he cut me. I knew that could mean another murder on my hands but I’d decided to report this one to the police. I wouldn’t bury the body, I’d ring 999 straight away and say it was in self defence.

I walked home. At the bottom of the alley that led up to our back gate, someone had leant a bike against the wall. There was a bag on the back. I remembered what Carlisle had said about keeping the machete on the bag on the bike and went over to investigate. It was padlocked shut. By that point, I had e fucking nough. I was cold and tired and hungry and my feet were covered in blisters which stung every time I put a foot down. I was limping like someone with a fucking club foot. The knife down my pants didn’t make me feel bigger or stronger or invulnerable- it made me feel like I was about to chop my dick off and I really didn’t want any of Carlisle’s crap. So I did what any self respecting man on the run would do, pulled the knife out of my pants and cut the bag open.

Inside were several week old newspapers, Bald Heads man's wallet, Carlisle's wallet and a fuck load of knives and shit that made it look like they were planning to build another Edward Scissorhands. I knew better than to touch Bald Head man's wallet after what I'd done to him but I kept Carlisle's wallet for myself and chucked the rest of the bag over the wall into the university gardens. Then I hid the bike on its end in the phone box.

I stood over the road behind a wall and watched my house for a few minutes. I couldn't see anyone, not even shuffling man, though he was generally never out this late. Just to be sure, I called one of my housemates and told him to open the door because I'd lost my house key. I waited. Nothing happened. I called him again and he muttered something down the phone, then his long, lank figure wearing just an old dressing gown appeared behind the frosted glass. He opened the door and stumped away again, back into the front room. I checked both ways and then hared across the road and into the house.

"Alright man," someone said from the front room as I shut the door.

"Yeah." I looked through the frosted glass. There was still no one there. "Yeah," I repeated.

They were all sitting round their laptops again, their fingers flying over the keys as they tapped frantically in silence. I went upstairs and logged into the TMNT forum. Raphael_426 asked me where I'd been. I said I'd been wanking and he found that funny. He added me into a conversation with I_am_Shredder and they started talking about the second series. I added a comment from time to time but I wasn't really paying attention; I was more interested in Carlisle's wallet.

Apparently, his real name was John Stoke. He was forty six. You'd think, at forty six, you'd have better things to do than go round threatening kids. He had about £25 pounds in cash as well and a credit card with a four digit pin number scratched into the back. What a dick. Looking back, I guess it's weird I never even considered not stealing from him. I put the £25 in my sock drawer at once and put the credit card in my pocket, planning to draw out the maximum the next day. I mean that is a crime; an actual, premeditated crime. I should have felt more guilty about that than when I beat Bald Man to death because that had been a spur of the moment, life or death thing. But I didn't. I wanted compensation for what this prick had done to me.

I found Martin on Skype and asked him what he was doing.

"Watching Valkyrie," he said.

"Turn the web cam round so I can see."

He did so. I watched the grainy picture for a few seconds, made a comment on TMNT and then resumed watching.

“Isn’t it funny,” Martin said. “All the people that tried to kill Hitler and-”

“Tom Cruise was one of them.”

He laughed.

“Yeah, mate,” he said. “No, actually, I was gonna say, in the end, he had to kill himself. I mean, that is weird, isn’t it? Fifteen suckers tried to take him down and they all failed. I wonder how he would have gone if he hadn’t committed suicide.”

“They’d have killed him, wouldn’t they?” I said, typing on TMNT. “The Russians or Americans or something.”

“He might have talked himself out of it.”

“Unlikely.” I finished typing. “What would you do if I became the next Hitler?”

“What do you mean?”

“You know, say some trauma happened to me or something and I turned evil and started killing all the gingers. What would you do?”

“Assassinate you,” Martin said without a pause.

“Really?”

“Yeah. I mean, Prince Harry’s ginger, you can’t kill him.”

“I’m touched that you’d assassinate me,” I said. “It really shows you care.”

“No worries, man.”

“How would you do it?”

“I’d put a bomb down your trousers so when you went to touch your dick, you’d blow up.”

I took my hands out of my pants and laughed. His web cam moved slightly and I heard a girl’s voice. “Hey, man,” Martin said. “I gotta go. See you tomorrow.”

He went offline before I could say bye. I sighed and logged out of TMNT, then lay down in bed, fully clothed, and stared at the ceiling. I just needed a plan. Like Jess. He had a plan, a fool proof, perfect plan and it was going to take him places. If I got a plan, I’d be unstoppable. I just needed to figure out what it would be.

I woke up at five o’clock the next day. The sun was coming up. I didn’t want to watch porn. I thought I could go for a walk before Carlisle woke up. Find some sunshine. He was probably somewhere else by now, raging about his wallet.

I went into town. It was completely deserted. A Ghost Town. Not a soul in sight. I kicked a can and it made that empty tin rattle that you associate with deserted streets, or Stop It and

Tidy Up. I liked that show. It wasn't until I was older that I realised every episode was only five minutes long. As a kid, they always seemed to take ages. That show was my first instance of real love as well- in the form of Terry Wogan.

I walked passed the fountain. The Goths and the Chavs weren't there today, not that early. I picked up a stone and dropped it into the water. Maybe if I was cool I could have made friends with them, both, and united their forces against Carlisle. I picked up another stone. That would have been a good idea.

"Stop dropping things in the fountain!"

I dropped the stone onto the floor and leapt back. I looked into the sky. It sounded like the voice had emanated from the clouds.

"It's the camera, mate," a voice said behind me. "Behind the fountain. Above the Disney Store."

Oh right.

"Oh right," I said, turning. "Thanks."

Shit.

It was Carlisle. I leapt up onto the fountain. My converse slipped on the ledge and I nearly went in. Carlisle grinned at me. He rolled up his sleeves and took a step toward me.

"Help!" I shouted into the empty street. "Help! He's going to, he's going to-"

Carlisle clamped a hand behind my head and one over my mouth. I muffled something behind his fingers, then licked his palm.

"Erugh, you little skank," Carlisle said, quickly removing his hand. "Hey, get back here."

I had jumped into the fountain. It came up to my knees and was fucking freezing. I felt the hair on my head retract and my balls leapt up into my body.

"Shit!" I shouted, wading through the water. "S, shit!"

"Get out of the fountain," the voice said, bored. The mouth behind the microphone sighed. "Please. Do you think I like telling kids to-"

"He's going to kill me!" I cried, looking at the camera fixed on the other side of the square, above the Disney store. I waved my hands. "He's going to kill me! Look! Look!"

Carlisle was racing around the fountain. I pulled my sodden legs out of the water and stumbled over onto the pavement. Carlisle grabbed the back of my jacket and swung me around. I hit a telephone box and he punched me hard in the back of the head.

"Help!" I shouted, trying to block my head and my stomach at the same time. "Help!"

The man behind the microphone sighed again.

"I'm not supposed to leave my post," he said.

“Call the police!” I screamed as Carlisle punched me in the ribs. “Call the fucking police!”

I pulled myself free from Carlisle, yanked the door to the telephone box open and leapt inside. Carlisle fell against the door, kicking it, hammering on it, his twisted face pressed against the glass. I was gasping for air. I braced the door shut with my legs and lifted the receiver off the set. I dialled 999. It rang out. I waited.

Carlisle was watching me. He had stopped hammering on the glass, he was just staring at me as I patiently waited for someone to answer. I scratched my nose.

“Oh, hello,” I said. “Could I have the police please?”

Carlisle smashed through the glass with his fist. I screamed. He reached through and grabbed me by the neck.

“Drop the phone,” he said.

I dropped the phone.

He pulled me across the phone booth until my head was sticking out of the shattered pane and punched me in the face. I fell back against the poster for international phone tariffs, holding my nose.

“Now, stand up, you wimpy little shit,” Carlisle said, wrenching the door open. His trainers crunched over the shards of glass. “I want to hit a man, not a kid.”

“I am a kid,” I said, gazing up at him. “Please, I’m just a kid.”

He grabbed my lapels and lifted me up. He was one strong mother fucker. He flung me out of the phone booth and I landed hard on the concrete by the fountain. I gasped, holding my stomach, so winded, it felt like my lungs had dissolved.

He came prowling out after me, grinning, his tail swishing. I pulled myself up onto my elbows, hot blood and snot dripping onto the floor, and crawled away, towards the Disney store. Buzz Lightyear was waving at me in the window. Buzz. He would help me. He always helped.

I grabbed the ledge and hauled myself up. Carlisle was facing me.

“Come on, you little shit,” he said, holding up his hands. “What have you got?”

There was about ten metres between us now. If I got a good pace going, if I leapt onto the bin and onto his shoulder like Achilles in Troy, I might be able to knock him back, into the fountain. Then I could get away. I cracked my neck from side to side. It was a proper action move. I looked at the bin. All I needed was speed and precision.

I started running. My arms pumped by my side, my feet pounded the pavement, I could hear the beat in my head. Carlisle took a step back, his mouth open, his eyebrows raised. He held up his hands in surprise at this sudden attacking move. I leapt. My right foot slammed

into the bin and propelled me high, high, into the air. I leant over, like a bird in flight, putting all my weight onto my left side, the side that was going to crush Carlisle to the floor.

Carlisle watched me arch overhead. He raised his arms to protect his face and when I landed on him, he leapt up and shot me back into the air. I soared overhead, now completely out of control, writhing in the air like a salmon up a waterfall and crashed back into the fountain.

Cold water completely submerged me. I gasped for air and got a mouthful of water. I pushed for the surface and Carlisle punched me in the face.

“Stupid prick,” he said as my face broke the surface. “Can you swim?”

“Y...yes.” I gasped.

He pushed my head under. I flailed, kicking, screaming, my arms windmilling pointlessly in the water. He let me up for air. He was laughing.

“Don’t!” I managed to choke before he pushed me under again.

I was starting to go dizzy, my vision was blurring, when he let go of me. I jumped up, my head broke free of the water and I splashed away, grasping the side, trying to pull myself out. All the strength had gone out of me. I was shaking, bleeding, cold.

I looked at him. He was standing by the fountain, his hands in his pockets, staring at the broken phone box, his eyes puzzled. Maybe he had ADHD. I didn’t care. I rolled out of the fountain and slapped onto the floor. I started to crawl away.

“You go any further,” he muttered after me, “and I’ll put a nail through your knee.”

I pretended I hadn’t heard him. I kept crawling. The rubbish truck went passed. Two men were waving at us from the driver’s seat.

I pulled myself to my feet and started running. At first, it was that Thunderbird run again. My legs couldn’t hold me, my knees were weak. Then, as the truck rumbled passed and I realised I was going to miss it, my feet kicked in. I shot forward, my pace regimented, my arms reaching out. I leapt and grabbed the back of the truck. For a second, I was running, just holding the rubbish lorry, then my arms flexed and I hauled myself off the floor. The hot smell of sour milk and old fish washed over me like a warm curtain. I gagged and rolled headfirst into the bin bags. They split as I made contact and my head squashed against lumpy paste. Some of it touched my cheek, something malleable brushed my lips. I started sobbing with relief. I hauled myself up, my soaking trainers perforating the skin of one bag and allowing something heavy to engulf my foot, and watched Carlisle. He was still by the fountain, his hands in his pockets, watching me. I waved.

Back at the house, I had another odd time shower and went to bed. I woke up at eleven. I thought it was too late to make a plan by then and I decided to wait until the next day to do it. I put my knife down my trousers again and went out to the ATM on campus. I drew out £400 and then posted the card down the drain. I looked at the money. I shuffled it in my hands. When I'd got the £2000 on Sunday (which seemed fucking years ago) I'd had a fucking orgasm. Money, money, money! Fucking money. This £400 left a sour taste in my mouth. What was the point in money? I'd swap all the money in the world right now to re-do Monday night. No actually, that was a stupid idea. I'd swap the £2000 to not put a bet on that horse. To just undo all of this. Sunday morning, in Drakes, I should have just gone on reading that Cineworld Brochure and ignored the men.

I went to Drakes after that. I hadn't eaten properly since Monday and hadn't needed a shit since then either. Today was no different. I hung about the urinals and sinks, trying to decide if I should try or not, until one of the security guards came in. I left quickly in case he thought I was trying to pimp myself out and put me on the Most Wanted list. Hopefully, one day, I'd be shitting in Drakes again and when that day did come, I didn't want to be taken to the back room by the guards under suspicion of prostitution.

I wandered around the main town for a few hours, then went up to the Cathedral. I've never been much into God but I hear all those lame stories about near death experiences and how God helps people through times of crisis and I wondered if He had anything for me now. Maybe He could save me. If He did, I'd convert to Catholicism or Protestantism or whatever the real one was and just devote my life to wandering around towns and preaching about God. I'd do anything if he got me out of this shit.

I stood back and looked at the Cathedral. As Cathedrals went, this one was pretty unimpressive. It was just a hollowed out block of cement with glass doors. There were some inspiring words written on the glass which cheered me up slightly. I read them again and again it really did make me feel slightly better. All that usual uplifting stuff, like what Jess says about believing and doing your best and never giving up. Maybe there was more to this God stuff than I gave credit for. Maybe He did exist. If the words on the church made me suddenly feel better, anything was possible. I mean, did you know there are more historical references to Jesus than there are to Julius Caesar? I read that somewhere. So, even if he wasn't the Son of God, Jesus was clearly a popular bloke. He might have been the Messiah as well, for all he did. I wondered if that was what Jess wanted to do with his life; be the next God.

I tried the Cathedral door but it was locked. That was a bit annoying. I found a sign which said: if door is locked, try blue door on East side of Cathedral.

I didn't know east from west so I wandered round the outside for awhile until I found a blue door. That was locked as well. Fucking Christians. It was probably some sort of faith test they used to see how much you really believed. I couldn't be fucked with it. If it was this hard to just get into a church, imagine getting into heaven.

I got a text from Carl, asking where I was. I ignored it. Then I got a text from Martin, saying he, Sally and Cat were up at the Hoe. I left the church and God and slowly made my way in their direction.

Sally and Cat were talking about weddings when I got there. What is it with girls and weddings?

"Me and Sally are thinking about getting married," Martin told me as I sat down on the grass next to him. "What do your reckon? You can be best man."

"Married?" I said. "Fuck me, really? Why?"

Sally threw me a look like daggers as I said that. I held my hands up in surrender.

"Sorry," I said. "It's just a surprise."

"We have been going out for a year," Sally said, turning her nose up at me.

"A year, that long?"

"We're thinking of getting married at the end of final year," Martin said. "Like a celebration."

I raised my eyebrows and scratched the back of my head.

"Er, yeah, good idea," I said. "I'll be best man, yeah, sure."

"I'm maid of honour," Cat said. "And I mean, like, I've been, before, at another wedding, the thing is like, at this other wedding, before, I was supposed to be..." She tossed her hair out of her eyes and thought of her next word.

In the interval, I quickly turned back to Martin.

"So married," I said, before Cat could restart. "Pretty cool."

"My dad said he'd buy us a place in London," Martin said. "So we'll be right near Harry and James and all the boys from school." He thumped my arm. "Friday nights will be just like old times."

"Yeah," I said. Except you'll be fucking married.

"House, wife, job," Martin said, smiling at Sally.

"Job?" I said.

“Yeah, I’m thinking of getting a job at my dad’s place,” Martin said. “Personal office, £30,000 year, moving up to £100K with a Director’s position, respect of the top guys in the industry, company car and free parking in the centre of London.” He nodded. “Either that or Harrods because they have a nice canteen.”

I laughed. Sally didn’t look amused.

“Kids,” she said. “I want to start having kids by the time I’m twenty five.”

Fuck me. Martin engaged to be engaged. He’s got a fucking plan, a life all ready and waiting for him. He’ll be down the pub with his London mates every night, he’ll have a job, money, a family. He’ll have everything that society says he should want, he’ll do everything that society says he should do. Is that what life is really about? Is that a goal? Is that interesting? He’ll be just like his dad. Mercedes, business suit, offices in London. For the rest of his life- reading the paper, drinking his tea, filling in reports for work, very important, yes, yes, must be done, must be done. That was what life was about after all. Was I jealous? You bet your ass I was. I felt nauseous with jealousy. Fucking hell. I’d give anything to be in his position. Wife, kids? Yes please. Just a future outside of prison or the grave would be perfect right then.

“So,” I said.

I wrapped my arms around my knees and gazed out to sea.

“Have you thought about wedding songs?” Cat asked. “I think Lily Allen would be a good one. Or Britney Spears.”

“Britney Spears?” Martin said. “No way. I hate her songs.”

“And she’s thick,” Sally said. “She said Canada was overseas.”

“It is, isn’t it?” Cat said.

“She was in America at the time,” Sally said. “I mean, what is her point?”

“Oh,” I said. “She brings a lot of joy to people’s lives; she’s worked hard to bring those smiles to faces. Our world just wouldn’t be the same if she hadn’t taken the time to pick up that umbrella and smash it into that guy’s car windscreen. Life would be different; her little bald head wouldn’t be an icon of the age. I can forgive the Canadian comment for that.”

Martin was laughing. Cat was looking confused. I shook my head.

“Is Canada overseas to us though?” she said.

“Yeah,” I said. “It is.”

“No but no,” she said. “It’s part of our country, isn’t it? I mean our Queen is their Queen.”

“It doesn’t change its geographical location,” I said. “It is still over the sea, even if it is part of the Commonwealth.”

“Commonwealth?” Cat said.

“Yeah, the Queen’s stuff,” I said. “You know.”

“Don’t get him talking about the queen,” Martin said, lying back down on the grass.

“Why not?” Cat asked. “Are you not a Royalist?”

“Royalist?” Martin laughed. “He’s fucking Royalty.”

“I am not,” I said. “Honestly, Cat, it’s nothing.”

“I don’t get it.” Sally looked between the two of us. “Royalty?”

“His eighth cousin is Prince Charles,” Martin said. “Tell ‘em.”

He pointed at me. I shrugged.

“There’s nothing else to tell,” I said.

“So, does that mean you’re related to the Queen as well?” Cat asked.

Martin laughed.

“Yeah,” he said. He rolled over to look at me. “What’s it then? Like, seventh cousin?”

“Once removed,” I said. The girls were staring at me in awe. “It’s nothing. We only found it out because my brother was doing our family tree. If you looked up your family tree, I bet you’d find loads of shit.”

“You don’t get any money or anything?” Cat asked. “No invitations to Buckingham Palace?”

I laughed.

“No,” I said shaking my head. “My dad makes shoes for Clarks.”

“Is that near Street?” Sally asked.

“Used to be,” I said. “He moved to some offices in Nottingham about six years ago.”

“You seen the game last week?” Martin asked.

“Sure, watched it online.” I laughed. “We’re doing better than Charlton.”

Martin slapped his leg.

“If I played in the league, I’d be doing better than Charlton,” he said. “It’s like watching eleven one legged men trying to swim.”

I laughed. Sally was pretending to look out to sea. Martin told me they’d got together after they found they had a mutual interest in Charlton. For about three months before they finally hooked up, they were always going to games together, watching scores online, you know, Martin had found his very own Saturday buddy. Now they were actually doing it, Sally had no interest in the football whatsoever. Cheeky bitch. Still, I don’t think Martin minds. I once had a girlfriend who just used to bitch about my team until I had to get rid of her. I support Nottingham Forest so it wasn’t hard to pick holes in their performance. She did it every day,

even when I wasn't talking about the football. She'd find a way to have a fucking dig. I think it was her preconceived plan. She was too nice to dump me so she purposely got on my tits until I ended it.

The four of us started walking home. At Royal Parade, I was busy looking left, towards the theatre, wondering who Carlisle reported back to. I bet it was somebody high up, real high, like the theatre director or maybe a theatrical actor. Someone like the Godfather. Shit. Why didn't he just blow my face off?

"Look out!"

A car hit me. It wasn't going fast. I just rolled up onto the bonnet and hit the windscreen. It screeched to a stop and I was thrown off, onto the road. I was completely winded. Someone was screaming. I writhed on the road, grasping my head, groaning.

"Ow."

"Shit, man," Martin said. He was at my side, trying to roll me over. "Shit, are you alive? Are you alive?"

"Fuck," I said.

I sat up; there was a crowd of people around me. The driver of the car was looking pale. He was leaning on his open door, shaking.

"Oh my God," he said, turning away. "Oh my God, is he bleeding?"

"Hey man," I said, trying to stand up.

Martin helped me. He supported me.

"What the fuck are you doing, man?!" he shouted to the driver. "It's a fucking pedestrian crossing! Why don't you watch out?!"

"No, no, no, no," I said, I shook my head and held out my hand to the driver. "No, no, no. Mate, come here. I'm fine. I'm fine. Chin up. I shouldn't have walked out like that."

The driver was on the edge of tears. I grasped his hand and tried to shake it. It was like he had Parkinson's.

"I'm cool," I said.

I smiled. He looked shocked and tapped his mouth. I touched my teeth. My front left tooth was wobbling. I checked my fingers. They were bloody.

"Ah, shit," I said. "No." I looked at the driver. "It's not you. It's just a wobbly tooth."

"You were driving too fast," an old woman on the side of the road said.

"Hey." I rounded on her. "You fuck off!" I said, pointing at her. She looked shocked. "You don't know anything. I just stepped out without looking."

“He’s drunk,” the old woman said, stepping back. “Call the police. Get them both reported.”

“Let’s get out of here,” I said to Martin. “Quick.”

“Don’t you want to call the ambulance?” the driver said.

“No, mate,” I said. “Because I am fine. Go home, have a good night’s sleep. Forget about me. It’s not your fault.”

“I think we should call the hospital,” Cat said.

“Shut up, Cat!” I shouted. “Martin!” I grabbed his shoulders. “Let’s go!”

Martin looked at me. And then he nodded. I could always rely on him.

“Come on.” He took my arm. “Let’s walk. Sally.”

“I need that fucking hedgehog with me to cross the road,” I said, wincing as we headed down the street. “Martin, look behind, has the driver gone?”

“Yeah,” Sally said. “He’s driving away. I really think you could have prosecuted him, you might have got some money.”

“I don’t want to be on his conscience,” I said. “It was totally my fault anyway. The light was red, I walked out.”

“Still-”

“Let’s just drop it,” I said. “Please.”

“You know, in France,” Sally said. “Everyone runs all over the place on the roads. Cars go up the curbs, in the gutters, down the pavement. There’re cars honking, brakes screeching, pedestrians jogging out through traffic. It’s madness, no one gives a shit about the road.”

“Fucking French,” I said, rubbing my ribs.

“But in Germany,” she said. “Everyone waits for the green man; even if the road is deserted, everyone stands in a neat line on the curb and waits for the man to go green. No one walks on red. How strange is that: two countries right next to each other and so different.”

“Great,” I said. “Thanks for that information, Sally.”

“Hey, I thought it was interesting,” Martin said. “Maybe you should be more German.”

“Maybe the driver should have been more French,” I said. “And just gone up the curb to avoid me.”

They laughed. I winced.

“You’re not going to the hospital then?” Cat said.

“No.” I shook my head.

“You’re bleeding.”

“It’s just my tooth.”

I never get the NHS. I mean, if I pay it, or my parents pay it, whatever, why do I have to pay for my prescription every time I get something stuck in my ear? What exactly does the money from the NHS cover? I'm not racist or immigrantist or anything like that- I had a friend at school who was Polish. He was really good at Chess- anyway, how come, when I go to the doctors, I have to run home and get my wallet to pay for my ear drops because I'm over eighteen, when the Polish immigrant in front of me gets it straight away, for free because she hasn't got a job? It doesn't work. What is covered and why? If I was in a giant car crash, like this or way worse, I know the NHS would scoop me up, take me to hospital, fix me up and pump me full of drugs. And when I wake up, supposedly, they'd give me a bill for everything. What if I couldn't pay it? Would they get some cricket bats out and start beating me on the head until I was in the same state as before?

"Is it loose?" Cat said.

"A bit."

"Stick it back in," she said. "Use that dental grip stuff."

"Cat," Martin said. "You are obsessed with that dental grip stuff."

"I can survive," I said.

When I got home, I logged onto TMNT forum and then checked my face in the mirror. My left front tooth was so loose. I touched it and it fell out. It just came away in my hand. I was so shocked, I nearly fainted. I went light headed. I stared at the bloody pearl in my palm and blinked. Fuck. I was missing a fucking tooth. My front fucking tooth as well, the most obvious one. I spat viciously onto the floor, not caring about the carpet and then wiped all the blood away with my sleeve. I checked my reflection. I had a giant gap, right there, right in the middle of my fucking mouth. I looked like a hillbilly. I sat down on the floor and cried. I put my head in my hands and cried. I was ugly. And not cool ugly like John Lennon. I was ugly like Elephant Man ugly. Fuck.

I sucked in air through my gap and spat again. I pulled a bit of blue tack off the wall and tried to fit it into the gap. I got up and checked my reflection. It looked like I'd stuck blue tack to my tooth but at least it looked like I had a tooth.

I sat down at my computer. Donatello_is_cool had sent me a link for a new conversation. I joined it and made a few lacklustre responses for several minutes, fiddling with my chipped blue tack. Then I got a new message up from Splinter1. It said:

Congratulations The_Real_Raphael, you've progressed to level ten.

At first, I didn't care. I typed back cool, excellent, I'm so proud, the usual, and went back to sticking my little finger through the front of my teeth.

This means you can be told the TMNT secret.

I looked at the blinking computer screen. Of course. Level Ten. The whole reason I'd signed into this fucking thing for all those years. I have to say, in spite of everything, I was excited.

I am excited. I typed. But I'm ready to be told.

You must understand, Splinter1 typed, that once you are told you cannot reveal or discuss the nature of the secret with members who are not level ten.

No shit. I was going to email everyone on the forum list, just so they didn't have to go through what I did. What happened to freedom of speech?

Of course, I typed back.

You must also not discuss it with people are not part of the TMNT forum, he (or she) typed. This is a highly, valuable, closely guarded secret.

Got it, I typed. I tapped the keyboard irritably. How secure did they need to make it? It was only Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles; probably just a website for streaming the episodes or some information about the characters.

If, upon hearing the secret, Splinter1 typed, you decide you do not want to be a part, all you have to do is say. Your TMNT forum account will be wiped and you can expect never to hear from us again.

Ok, this was slightly more interesting. I leant over the keyboard. Sure, sure, I typed, sure, I understand. I sat back and moved my hair off my forehead. Now tell me what it fucking is.

It's too important to explain over the forum, Splinter1 typed, and it is highly sensitive. TMNT Level ten members are meeting tonight to discuss the latest developments. You are the last member to be invited to this meeting. There was some debate about whether we should initiate you now or wait for next week's meeting. I decided, after your dedication to the forum, that it should be now.

Yeah, you did. I paused over the keyboard, thinking. A meeting? I typed. About Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles? This all felt very strange? What would they discuss at a meeting? It couldn't be all TMNT. The heroes in a half shell. Turtle power.

I feel I must inform you, however, Splinter1 typed, that the secret has nothing to do with TMNT.

Oh.

The forum acts as a front for level ten members.

A front for what?

A front for a new stage of development, Splinter1 typed, outside of the animation sector.

Like, films?

No, not like films.

Then what?

Power, authority.

I watched the blinking cursor and thought. I looked at the little TMNT logo in the top right screen. It was Leonardo, grinning at me and holding a pizza. I paused over the keyboard, wondering whether to tell him to fuck off or keep prodding the bear. I kept prodding.

Tell me more.

I can't.

Oh.

Come along to the meeting tonight. You will learn everything there.

Where is the meeting?

Birmingham.

Fucking Birmingham? Birmingham? What sort of TMNT fans were these?

At the meeting rooms on Colmore Road, Splinter1 typed, eight o'clock tonight. Will you be there?

I paused. I tried to weight my options. One, don't go, deal with the man who's trying to kill you, lose out on all the years of your life spent on this forum and spend the night rocking in the dark. Two, go, escape Plymouth for a few hours, find out what the fuck this is all about. Maybe they were a group of vigilantes. Oh my Jesus Christ, that was it. Level ten TMNT hero members were obviously guys trying to be have-a-go superheroes, like the Turtles, like Kick Ass. They tested you on your devotion to the turtles then asked if you wanted to join their crime fighting team. Of course! How could I have not thought of it before!?

I wondered if I should tell Splinter1 I'd worked it out. No, he said it was too delicate to be discussed over the forum. There were probably people watching us. I decided to circle the drain.

I have a question about the nature of this group, I typed.

Go on.

If I'm in trouble, if I need protection, can you give it?

Certainly, he typed back without a second's hesitation. That is the very nature of our group. We protect our own. If you are one of us, we will die fighting for you. Have you got into trouble fighting for our cause?

I wasn't being a turtle or anything, I typed, but I have got into the trouble.

Do you fear for your life?

This guy was good.

Yes, I typed.

Then you are even more perfect than I first thought. You must come tonight. We will offer you protection and help and maybe, in return, you can provide your own.

Definitely, I typed, I will be there, you can count on me. Do I need to bring nunchucks?

You are very funny The_Real_Raphael, I am glad we found you.

It hadn't been a joke, but I didn't say that.

The password for the meeting tonight is Donatello does machines, Splinter1 typed. You will need to give it at the door, along with your forum name. See you tonight.

He went offline. I was too excited to stay on the forum anymore, especially now I was Level Ten. Screw all those level four and five guys, screw the newbies, I wasn't talking to them. I was a few hours away from becoming The_Real_Raphael.

I typed 'Level Ten Forever' as my screen name, just to piss all those new starters off, and signed out. I lay on my bed and checked my watch.

Birmingham was a fucking mess of a city. I parked on the outskirts and got the train into the centre: number one because I wasn't going to pay £20 to park my car and number two because I find it hard to park my car in busy cities if I don't know the roads. Fucking parallel parking? Whatever.

The train was practically empty. I sat on a seat by the window and pretended I was busy on my broken, smashed iPhone. Just as the doors were beeping closed, a guy leapt on. He was tall, skinny and dark haired, wearing skinny, turned up jeans and shiny black loafers. Italian, I reckon, the posh twat. He had a navy overcoat on with the collar turned up and his fringe stuck out from his forehead. He was young, about my age, and, as I was staring at him, he caught my eye. He smiled.

"Donatello," he said.

My heart started fluttering. Wow, I was being initiated already.

"Does machines," I said.

The one or two business guys sitting around the carriage looked at us. My face had gone red. I sat up straight in my seat as this guy came over. He held out his hand.

"I'm Charlie," he said.

"I'm-"

“Wow, forum names only,” he said

“The Real Raphael,” I said

“Cool.”

He sat in the seat opposite me and put his shiny Italian loafers on the little table between us. He grinned.

“How come you got a forum name like Charlie?” I asked.

“Because I didn’t want to look a douche at meetings like this.” He laughed. “I’m one of the original members.”

“Cool,” I said. “Good to meet you.”

“Not at all.” He pointed a finger at me. “I remember your name actually. You only just got to Level ten? Like today or yesterday.”

“Today, they said they wanted me there for this meeting.”

“And you came.” Charlie nodded. “Dedication.”

He settled back in his chair and looked up at the luggage rack above our heads. I slowly looked up as well.

“You know,” he said, touching his chin with one of his long fingers. “There’s no way a monkey in a bag would fit up there.”

Right. That statement stumped me. I was speechless for a few seconds as I tried to articulate some words.

“Sorry?”

“You know.” Charlie grinned at me. “MVP. Looking up there,” He nodded at the luggage rack. “Just makes me think how flawed it was.”

“MVP?”

“Most Vertical Primate,” he said. “You must have seen it. It was always on Sky Movies at about ten or eleven in the school holidays.”

“I might have,” I said, tucking my legs in. “What was it about?”

“Like this chimpanzee who could skateboard.”

What. The. Fuck?

“Oh, no, I missed that one.”

“Yeah, it was pretty shit. But there were sequels,” he added. “Most Valuable Primate, Most...” He thought. “Can’t remember the others, but there were loads.”

“Why do the luggage racks remind you of it?”

“Cus, like, in the first one, the original, the guy puts the monkey in a bag and puts it on the luggage rack.” He pointed. “There’s no way a monkey in a bag would fit up there.”

“Why did he put a monkey in a bag on the luggage rack?”

“Because they wouldn’t have let it on the train otherwise.”

Sure.

“Why did he want it on the train?”

“Oh you know, the museum was closing or something.” Charlie shrugged.

Course.

“So this guy put the monkey in the bag,” Charlie said. “Bought a train ticket,” he looked incredulous, “got on board, put the bag on the luggage rack and left again.”

“He didn’t even stay with it?”

“No, he couldn’t. He was sending it to Canada or something.”

So far, I was thinking that the issue about luggage racks was not the main problem with this film.

“How did it survive?”

“He’s put books in there,” Charlie said. “A torch and loads of bananas.”

“Just bananas?”

“Yeah, that’s all a monkey needs.”

“Not a balanced diet,” I said.

Charlie laughed. He whacked my leg and leapt up.

“This stop is us,” he said. “Come on.”

I stood up slowly. Charlie hung by the doors until they opened and then strode off. I trotted to catch up with him. He put his hands in his pockets and marched down the middle of the station. I noticed he didn’t have a ticket with him but he just tapped his forehead to the security guard by the barrier and got waved through. I fumbled with my ticket from my pocket, put it through, the barrier beeped, I did it again, the right way round, got let through, waited for my ticket, then realised I didn’t get it back. Someone behind me tutted and muttered something and I stumbled on.

Charlie was leaning on a pillar out the front. He nodded his head at me and kept walking. I ran to get beside him.

“So,” he said, veering to the left to avoid some women with prams. “What do you know about the forum?”

“You protect...stuff,” I said.

He looked down at me.

“You worked that out for yourself, or were you told?”

“I worked it out.”

“What do you think about that?”

“Stuff needs protecting,” I said.

He nodded.

“And what’s in it for you?”

Me?

“Well, in my personal circumstances, I do feel threatened.”

“Where you from?”

“Plymouth.”

“Ok... Go on.”

“And I hoped the group could help with that.”

“And you’ll help them help?”

“Yeah, I’ll do anything I need to do to sort this problem out. To make sure I can live my life peacefully and unthreatened.”

“Cool man,” Charlie said. “This way.”

We turned left up a side road. There was a building about half way down with silver doors and cement steps. Charlie trotted up them, taking his hands out of his pocket. He effortlessly pulled the door open and slipped inside. I tripped up the steps and staggered through after him.

In the white tiled foyer beyond, Charlie was shaking hands with a couple of men by a pair of double doors. They were all laughing together. I pulled my trousers up.

“Real Raphael,” he said, beckoning me over. “I have to go inside. You remember the password?”

I nodded.

“Right, give it to these guys and I’ll see you later.” He put his hands on my shoulders. “Though, I should tell you, if you want to leave, leave now. If you are just the tiniest bit unsure, go now.”

He looked at me. His eyes were clear green. I felt weirded out. He was staring right at me, about three centimetres from my nose, I could feel his breath on my lips. Maybe he was trying to read my mind.

“Er, no.” I swallowed. “I want to do this.”

“Ok.” He shrugged and turned away. “See you.”

He went through the double doors. I turned to look at the men. They were tall and broad and clearly bouncers of some sort. Bald headed men. I thought of bald man and swallowed. One straightened his jacket and folded his arms.

“Password,” he said.

He had a very Brummie accent. It made me realise that Charlie hadn’t been Birmingham at all. Not even a hint. More London, home counties. I wondered why, as a founder, he’d chosen to have the meetings all the way down here.

“Er, Donatello does machines,” I said.

“What was that first word?” the other bouncer said.

“Donatello.”

“Forum name?” the first bouncer said. He picked a clipboard off the table behind him. It looked tiny in his massive hands.

“The underscore Real underscore Raphael,” I said.

He spent ages pretending to find the name on the list but I could see it was right at the top. I pulled my trousers up and waited. After a while, he put the clipboard down and nodded me through.

I opened the double doors. They were heavy. I had to grab them with both hands and lean back to create a gap small enough for me to slip through. Charlie had done it like they were made of cardboard. The bouncers smiled at me. I grimaced back and slid in.

The room beyond was a small hall. Old wooden chairs had been set out in front of a small podium and flip chart. I peered at the lettering on the flipchart: TMNT- UK.

I sat at a chair at the back and looked around the hall. It was half full. All the people there were young men, tall, strapping, clearly fit and athletic. Of course. Superheroes always were. But guys who wanted to be superheroes were always weedy and pathetic, spotty nerds with glasses and autograph books in their back pocket. I shifted in my seat. Maybe they got rid of those guys. Maybe there was training you had to go through. I didn’t give a fuck. I just wanted someone, one of these beefcakes, to go and beat up Carlisle.

After about ten minutes, the hall was almost full. Charlie was standing at the front talking to some young man with a goatee and baseball cap on. They had their heads bowed and were muttering together. Goatee was shaking his head as Charlie was talking. Charlie paused and I watched as Goatee tried to explain himself. He wasn’t dressed as smartly as Charlie. He looked a bit like a homeless person, like a Philosophy student who had just rolled out of bed.

As I watched, he picked his ear. Charlie nodded and then pointed to us, the audience, Goatee nodded and turned to face us.

“Gentlemen,” he said and raised his hands.

Everyone started clapping. I joined in but watched Charlie instead of Goatee. He made his way to the back of the hall and stood, chin in hands, leaning against the back wall.

“Gentlemen,” Goatee said again as the applause subsided. “Welcome and thank you for coming. We have two new members this week, The Real Raphael.” Everyone immediately turned to look at me. I scratched my neck. “And Donatello does your mum.” They all looked to some guy with his nose pierced who was sitting near the front. He waved his hand. “You may introduce yourself to them after to show. For the newcomers, I am Splinter One, who invited you here today. Any questions you may have, please leave until the end. I am sure the meeting will answer most of them.”

He went to the flip chart and whipped the cover off. I had to lean forward to read what was written on the next sheet: The Movement of National Totality. There was a picture of Splinter One without a goatee but with a gun.

“Events have been moving quickly in the past month,” Splinter One said, turning the next page. “We have established bases in every major city in the country and we are poised to act and finally bring our name to public attention. Like Al Qaeda, the Tamil Tigers and even the KKK over a hundred years ago, only national and international notoriety will enable us to move freely.”

Everyone was nodding. I had frozen. The next picture on the flip chart was of a black family, standing outside their home somewhere. I felt cold sweat begin to go down my back. Shit.

“Our first target,” Splinter One turned the page again, “as we have discussed, will be the Mosque in this city. Then, every Friday for the next six weeks,” he turned the page again, revealing a map of the UK “we will attack the headquarters of a different minority here, in Manchester,” he tapped the chart, “Edinburgh, Liverpool, Newcastle and two sites in London.” He turned round and faced us all. “The explosives have already been prepared. We come together today, at this meeting, to ask for volunteers. Each event needs a group of six to properly initiate the attack. The Mosque attack in Birmingham already has its six but we need thirty six for the subsequent attacks.”

Hands went up. Actual hands went up. Donatello Does Your Mum was on the edge of his seat, his hands in the air, his nose held up like someone had hooked his piercing and was winching him towards the ceiling. Why was he so eager? How was he more prepared for this than I was?

Splinter One was smiling.

“Excellent,” he said. “Excellent. We have so many eager young men, eager to fight for their national pride, eager to fight for Britain, as the young men have been doing for

centuries, eager to rid their country of the foreigners, the parasitic foreigners who feed off out land.”

The audience started clapping madly, passionately. People whistled. Splinter One held up his hands.

“It will not be easy,” he said. “But we have done the groundwork. Five years of hard planning to create the group we know today. Even those of you not picked for this mission will have their chance in the future to die, to bleed for his country, to aid in cleansing it of those genes who threaten the totality of the British man, of the British blood. Charlie has gone to fetch some paper and pens. Those who wish to volunteer for this, our first, our greatest, our soon to be historical attack, can write your forum name and submit it.”

Oh. Holy. Shit. As Splinter One turned the next flip chart over (showing the twin towers on 9/11 alongside a picture of a Muslim), the audience all turned in to their neighbours and began whispering excitedly together. I tugged my collar. I was nearly crying again. This could not be happening. Who’d have thought a group I joined online and agreed to meet in Birmingham would turn out to be a party of political activists? This wasn’t fair. I just wanted to know why Splinter, as a rat, was so big. I just wanted to know where the name Shredder had come from. How had I missed this?

I took a deep breath. I licked the gap in my tooth. Ok, ok, I’d just sneak out. Easy. As everyone was filling their names in, getting up to get pen and paper, I’d creep out. They didn’t know my real name, they didn’t know where I lived, I’d delete the account as soon as I got home and forget all this ever happened. I looked over my shoulder, desperate to see Charlie return. I felt like there was a timer on the wall. The longer I stayed, the harder it would be to leave. Someone might start talking to me. Splinter One. Oh shit, he was looking over. He could clearly see my terrified face. He waved. I actually almost pissed myself. Then he started walking down the aisle towards me.

I shifted in my seat. I looked over my shoulder. I blinked back stinging tears. Splinter One was smiling, he was holding out his hand. Come the fuck on Charlie. I looked over my shoulder. Shit, this was the worst thing that could have possibly happened.

The window on the far side of the hall smashed. Everyone jumped. I dived onto the floor and skidded under the chairs, my hands over my head.

“Everybody freeze!” somebody yelled. “This is the police!”

FUCK. The double doors opened and more police came charging in. They were kitted out in thick padded clothes and had guns raised. Splinter One swore.

“Everybody down!” one man said, stepping forward. “Hands out in front of you! No sudden moves!”

More police were climbing in through the window. One tore the flip chart down. Splinter One was yelling something from the middle of the hall.

“...you cannot silence us! You cannot silence the people of Britain! Do not give in to impurity! Do not stop fighting for the totality of the British people!”

A dark skinned policeman hand cuffed him and pushed him towards the door. I wanted to run after the officer and hug him. I wanted to beg to be let go, to beg for protection. At that moment, I loved him more than anything I’ve ever loved in my life. I would have told him all about Carlisle, Bald head man, the porn on my computer, anything. He would have saved me.

“Get up you fucking loser!”

Someone caught me by the collar and pulled me up. It was some bald headed white man. I choked as my shirt caught on my throat.

“Fucking look at this guy,” the officer said. “He’s shit himself.”

“I haven’t.”

They handcuffed me and pushed me towards the door. Donatello Does Your Mum and his nose piercing were being led away as well.

“I didn’t know!” he was saying. “I didn’t know! This is my first meeting! I thought it was about turtles!”

He was pushed out into the foyer. I saw an officer point at him and they dragged him a different direction to everyone else.

“Me too!” I said as they pushed me out into the foyer as well. “Me too! I swear!”

“Yeah, yeah,” an office said, stewarding me along with the butt of his gun. “That’s what they all say.”

“It’s true!” I said. “It’s true!” I saw Charlie talking to an officer by the door. He had a police badge pinned to his jacket. “Charlie!” I screamed. “Charlie! Tell them I’m not really meant to be here! Tell them this was my first meeting!”

“I gave you a chance to turn back.” Charlie said. “You said you were in.” He turned away and pointed at Donatello Does Your Mum. “This guy is new today. I didn’t get a chance to speak to him. Set him aside.”

“Charlie!” I shrieked as they pushed me towards the door; there were police cars waiting outside. “Charlie! I thought it was superheroes like Kick Ass! I thought...” I wrestled against the officer trying to push me outside. “It was...superheroes,” the officer shouldered me through the door, “like Kick Ass!”

“Like Kick Ass?”

The sergeant dropped a file on the desk in front of me. It slid across and hit my chest. My hands were handcuffed to the chair behind my back. I was in The Interrogation Room. Dark walls, no windows, a police man standing by the door. And that mirror to my left. I was in the shit. This is how they caught the Yorkshire Ripper. They pulled him over for some minor offence and he'd panicked and thrown his bloody tools over a wall. It didn't fool the police though. I read, when they searched him, instead of wearing pants, he was wearing a v-neck jumper. He'd put his legs through the sleeves and let his cock hang through the neck so he could get himself off whilst he knelt over the bodies he was butchering.

I looked down at my own crotch.

“Hey, kid.” The sergeant thumped the desk. “Look at me, not down there.”

“Is Charlie there?” I said. “Charlie!” I shouted at the mirror. “I didn't know, I swear.”

“Listen.” The sergeant sat opposite me. “All those others, we've set inside, they're in the shit, ok. But you,” he pointed at me, “you. We know it was your first meeting, we know this was your first offence.” I swallowed and pictured the moor. “We know you're just a kid at university. This makes us think, maybe,” the sergeant shrugged, “you are innocent.”

“I am! I am! This is all a giant mistake!” I took a deep breath. I didn't want to start crying again. I'd cried in the police car, I'd cried as they dragged me through the cells. I blinked rapidly.

“Ok then,” the sergeant said. “Then answer our questions straight and honest.”

“I will, I will.” And I would. If they asked what I'd been doing Monday night, I'd have said battering a man to death.

“Why did you travel three and a half hours from Plymouth to go to a meeting about what you thought was,” he checked the file and read out, “Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles.”

“I said,” I sniffed, “I thought it was like Kick Ass.”

“And what is Kick Ass?”

“It's this film,” I said. “About a guy who becomes a superhero.”

The policeman at the door made a noise. The sergeant looked at him. The doorman wiped his face and resumed his composed demeanour.

“So you thought the TMNT forum was recruiting for superheroes?” the sergeant said, looking back at me.

I nodded.

“Like vigilantes?” he said.

I nodded and sniffed again.

“At what point during your,” he checked the file, “four year membership on this forum,” he looked at me again. I was staring at the file. They had everything there. They’d probably searched my computer’s IP code and found all the websites I’d gone on. Porn. Porn all over the place. What if they’d already found out I’d killed Bald Man on Monday night? They’d see that straight after I’d gone on You Porn and then they’d think they’d caught a psycho. The guy who wanks off after killing people. Thank God I didn’t have a jumper on instead of pants.

“Did you think they were recruiting for superheroes?” the sergeant finished.

“At first, I I I just signed up to know the secret.”

He held up his hands.

“What secret?”

“I dunno.” I sniffed. “Level ten members were told some secret. I hated the fact I didn’t know, so I joined the forum to get level ten membership and learn the secret.”

“And what did you think the secret might be?”

“Like where to stream the show for free, or some information about the characters or some political allegory in the story.” That’s right, allegory. There’s a university education for you, dick face.

“So for four years, you signed on every day, without fail, to engage in conversations with people in an effort to find out some trivia about an eighties T. V. show?”

I nodded. The sergeant frowned.

“Why?” he said.

I shrugged.

“It was easy.”

“And you never once, during all your conversation with the level Tens, noticed that there was a deeper meaning behind the forum? That they were discussing political euphemisms and inciting racial allegories?” He blinked at me. Cocky bastard. “That it was just a front and that none of them cared about the show?”

“Oh... some did,” I said. “Like with the Level Ones and twos, all we did was talk about the show. The higher up you went, the less they chatted about it. But I never really paid attention. I was always watching T. V. as well or on Skype or Facebook, just agreeing with them. I just wanted to know the secret and tell the rest of the forum to piss the level tens off.”

“And then they invited you to a meeting?”

“Yeah and were talking about protection and honour and all this and I thought, Kick Ass, Vigilantes, superheroes, of course.”

The sergeant leant back in his chair.

“You,” he said, “are clearly stupid.” I hung my head. “Partly for wasting your life on this but mainly for driving all the way to Birmingham to meet with a bunch of strangers who you believed to be dangerous vigilantes.”

I looked up.

“So you believe me?”

“Yes, we believe you.”

“Oh, thank Christ,” I said. “You don’t know how happy I am.”

“Good.” The sergeant stood up. “We’ve shut down the forum. In the future, just think.”

He left. The policeman on the door left as well. I rattled the handcuffs on my chair.

“Er, excuse me.”

Charlie came swaggering in. He was smiling. He held up the key.

“You,” he said. He held up his thumb and forefinger, “came this close to getting fucked today.”

“I know, I know.” I nearly started crying again. He knelt down and unlocked my handcuffs. I was too relieved to even rub my wrists like they do in the movies. “I know. That guy with the piercing, he-”

“You aren’t a part of this,” Charlie said, leading me from the room. “So don’t try and give information away on others.”

“Oh. Ok.”

“Anyway, I’d spoken to him on the forum,” Charlie said, leading me down a bright corridor. I felt like I was Jesus, going into Heaven. “And I already knew he was strongly for the TMNT. Also, the way he leapt up at the chance to volunteer was a dead giveaway.”

He stopped and looked down at me. I blinked up at him. Behind his head, there was a notice board covered in fliers. One showed a cartoon of a robber running away with a phone. I swallowed.

“You look ill,” he said. “It’s a long drive back to Plymouth.”

I wondered if he was coming onto me.

“I’m fine,” I said. “I’m used to driving late at night. Because,” I added quickly, “my Grandma lives near Tamworth; I visit her all the time.”

“Ah, well, I’ll get someone to give you a lift back to your car.” He held out his hand and I shook it. I wondered if you could get fingerprints from skin. Maybe he already knew I’d

killed bald man and was just screwing with me. This was just a ruse to get evidence. They'd already searched my car, found the blood, found the dirt particles from Dartmoor; they'd put it all together, I was fucked.

"Bye, Raphael," Charlie said and patted my back. "Leave the forums alone now, ok?"

I slept in my car in a multi storey on the edge of Plymouth that night. I wasn't in the mood to be assaulted and I didn't even have my knife down my pants. I lay on the back seat of my car, all tucked in on myself and slept right through until about ten the next morning, when I got a message from Carl asking if I wanted to work on the end of term essay with him.

It took me a while to work out why I didn't want to. What was it? What was that thing? Oh yeah, I'd killed a man and suddenly, for some reason, I didn't give a fuck about writing essays. Bald man's bald face came screaming back to me. With the terror from the night before and the mind numbing fatigue that had taken over and forced me to park across three bays, I had completely forgotten I was a MURDERER. I had killed a man. Thinking about it was like poking an old wound that you thought had healed. It stings sharply on the surface and then hurts dully deep down and you think that means it's getting better. Then you find out it means you're rotting, that it's gone septic bone deep and you're going to have to lose the whole arm before the gangrene takes over your entire body.

I lay back on my seat. The familiar feeling of wanting to cry washed over me, I just didn't have the energy. I screwed up my face like I was going to, but no tears came. I waited for several seconds, and nothing. Maybe, physically, I was over it. My body was screaming at me to get on with life and stop crouching in dark corners and wailing.

I text Carl back saying I couldn't, I was having breakfast with Martin. He text back asking where I'd been the last few days and I didn't bother to tell him. Then I text Martin and asked if he wanted to get some breakfast. He said he was with Sally and Jess in town and all four of us could go together. At first, I was completely outraged. No, I didn't want to have fucking breakfast with those two; tell them to fuck off. Then I calmed down and realised I wasn't in the mood to talk anyway. The more people there, the less obvious this would be.

I text back ok. I debated whether I needed my jacket. On or off? It wasn't hot enough yet to take it off but it might be later and I didn't want to have to carry it around with me. I stood by the car for several minutes with my jacket on, then with my jacket off, testing the air. I settled on wearing it. If it did get too hot, I'd sweat it out, because I was hardcore. Plus, it was like extra protection. Not mentally. Physically. If Carlisle came at me, the first few inches of knife would just get jacket.

My phone went off and I leant back in the car. It was Martin, telling me Sally had chosen to eat at Starbucks. Fucking Starbucks? I wanted a fry up; something greasy and sickening, which would put me off food for the rest of the day. Starbucks did coffee. And I hated coffee.

“They don’t just do coffee,” Sally said as I sat down with them. “They do Paninis as well.”

“What the fuck is a Panini?” I said, picking up a menu card.

“Like a toasted sandwich thing,” Martin said. “I’m getting a ham and mozzarella one.”

“Me too,” Jess said.

They all looked at me.

“Nah,” I said, slumping back in my chair. “I’m not hungry.”

“You said you wanted breakfast,” Martin said.

“Yeah, it was just to chat.” I shrugged. “I’m fine.”

“Ok.” Sally stood up. “Three ham and mozzarella paninis. Any drinks?”

Martin and Jess shook their heads. Sally turned away and joined the queue. The Starbucks was a small one, with tables and chairs squashed into the corners and by the windows and alongside the queue. It was fucking packed that morning. Who came to Starbucks for breakfast, or Brunch, as it was now? Someone tried to drag Sally’s chair away and Jess had to drag it back. An argument could have ensued but I pointed out a spare chair by the window and the guy stamped off to get that.

“Right.” Jess looked over his shoulder. “Is Sally still in the queue?”

“Yeah,” Martin said. He looked up from his phone. “Did you want something else?”

“Nah.” Jess was grinning. He tucked his chair in closer to the table. “Nah, I wanted to talk to you guys about some porn I saw last night.”

I looked up, interested. Martin put his phone away.

“Why?” I said, frowning.

“You ever watched threesome porn?” Jess asked quietly.

“Yeah.”

“Sure, all the time,” I said. “Who do you think we are?”

“Nah, I mean, like, with two guys and a girl.”

“Ah, no way man,” Martin said. “Are you having a laugh?”

I sat back in my chair.

“No!” I said. “Jeez, of all the shit on the internet, why would I want to watch a video which is 66% man action?”

“Have you been watching it?” Martin asked Jess.

“Yeah,” Jess said.

“Ahh.”

Me and Martin both started laughing. We rolled in our chairs.

“You gay boy,” I said. “Watch some real hardcore stuff.”

“Hey, I’m not doing it for fun,” Jess said.

“What? It’s in your lecture notes is it?”

“No, I mean, I think a two man threesome is a good education,” Jess said.

“Well it won’t get you a fucking degree,” Martin said.

“Hear me out,” Jess said. He lowered his voice. Me and Martin edge in closer. “If it’s just you and one girl,” Jess said. “Sure, you get your dick inside her and it’s done. But if there’s more guys, if she’d busy with another guy and your dick isn’t the one she’s focused on, you have time, and permission, which is crucial,” we both smiled and leant further forward in our seats until our foreheads were nearly touching Jess’, “to,” he shrugged, “have a look around, to really explore the female body. The other guy is the perfect excuse. You could become a master of the art with that sort of experience.” He sat back in his chair. We both watched him, waiting for some more information. “You know,” was all he said.

“So,” Martin said, his elbows on his knees, “you’re telling me, you’d engage in a man, man, woman threesome just to have a look at a naked girl?”

“No,” Jess said. “I’m saying if the opportunity came passed for me to get involved in a man, man, woman threesome, I’d take it because, not only do I get sex but while she’s all turned on and busy with the other guy, I can learn some stuff which will improve my future performance; a chance for real exploration, for curiosity sake.” He grinned. “I’ll be a fucking sex God.”

“And who would ask you for a threesome?” Martin said.

“David Beckham.”

We all started laughing.

“He’s called, has he?” Martin said. “Did he text you?”

“Dear Jess,” I said. “Threesome, question mark.”

I hit my leg in enjoyment and Martin punched my shoulder.

“No,” Jess said. “I was watching that Russell Howard show and it said on there that so many men would let Beckham sleep with their partner. If I had a partner, I’d let Becks sleep with her, for that threesome experience.”

“Oh yeah, I saw that,” I said. “But what if he didn’t want you involved? What if he just wanted it to be him and her.”

“I’d make sure he understood my terms beforehand,” Jess said. “Would you let him sleep with your girlfriends?”

I thought.

“No,” Martin said.

“No,” I quickly added.

“You frigid, sexual pansies,” Jess said. “What are you afraid of? That you’ll come away loving the sight of cock?” He settled back in his chair. “I’d let anyone sleep with my partner anytime, just to get a bit of sexual excitement.”

“What was that?” Sally said. She sat down in her chair and put three paninis on the table. Jess sat up quickly and moved his hair out of his eyes.

“Oh, er, nothing,” he said. He cleared his throat. “Paninis.”

“Are you talking about that Russell Howard thing?” she asked, picking hers up. “About Beckham and people’s wives?”

“Yeah.” Jess nodded. “Did you see it?”

“Yeah. It was funny.”

“Sally,” I said. “Let’s reverse the scenario. Would you let Posh sleep with your boyfriend.” I pointed at Martin. “Our friend here?”

Sally frowned in disgust. I thought I might have offended her. I still didn’t know her that well.

“Not Posh,” she said, biting her Panini.

“So you’d let someone?” Jess said, putting his plate down.

“Yeah,” Sally said and then laughed. “Actually, it depends on what my level of participation would be.”

“What level do you want?” Martin said.

“The highest,” Sally said in an obvious tone. “I don’t want that opportunity to slip me by.”

“Fuck,” Jess said, grinning at me.

“Who’d you pick?” I said. “One famous celebrity to have a threesome with?”

“Keira Knightley.” Sally shrugged, biting her Panini again. “But that’s without thinking about it.”

Jess sat back in his chair and touched his chest. Martin looked like the moon had turned round and started talking to him. I was nodding.

“Would you let Beckham sleep with Martin?” I asked.

“Fuck yes,” Sally said. “If my participation level was high again.”

“Hey, no,” Martin said, back down on earth. He frowned at her. “No.”

“Oh you wuss,” she said, kicking his leg. “You’ve got to live a little.”

Two men appeared over the back of Sally’s chair. My heart sank as my balls tightened. They were dressed smartly. They must be policemen. They’d found me.

“Excuse me,” they said to Martin and then I thought they were going to ask to have a threesome with Sally. “Can we sit there?”

They pointed to two recently vacated seats between me and Jess. Martin looked at us.

“Oh, er, yeah,” he said, nodding and sitting up straight. “Yeah.”

The men put their coffees down on our table and shifted between us. Sally lifted her bag, Jess moved the table, all I could see for several seconds was a strange guy’s ass, smart suits and the hems of jackets as these men side stepped in front of me, their knees and elbows knocking my chair and head.

“Sorry, sorry.”

“Excuse me.”

“Thanks.”

They sat down. I cleared my throat and tucked my knees into my chair. An awkward silence fell on the table. Sally bit into her Panini. One of the men reached forth and sipped his coffee. I stared at Martin and he turned away to laugh.

“So,” the business man said.

“Yeah?” I said, crossing my legs.

They looked at me.

“Sorry,” the business man said. He pointed to his partner. “I was talking to him.”

Every tittered at me. Ha ha, very funny. I put my legs on the table and hid behind my knees. The man sipped his coffee. I heard it swirl around his mouth and then splash down his throat.

“So, I said to my brother,” the other businessman said. “No way, don’t do that. I can make you a deal.”

“You got networking?” the other man said, holding his cup.

“I sure did. I mean,” The man reached forward and picked his coffee up. “I only got to where I am today by using my contacts and half of them came through my dad and uncles.” He took a loud sip and smacked his lips. “I got to pass the favour on, you know.”

“Did he mind?”

“I don’t care if he doesn’t mind.” He leant forward to put the coffee cup down with a muted bang. “In ten years time when he’s UK Sales Director, he won’t be minding. It’s not what you know or how you do, it’s who you know.” He nodded. “Age old saying, true as the

hills. Ring in the relatives and you'll be sorted. Business networks, sure," he waved his hand idly, "but keep a close knit family circle around you; think Robert De Niro in Meet the Parents. Circle of trust. That's the way to rise in the business world."

"Hell, think Robert De Niro in the Godfather," the other man said and they both laughed loudly.

I was staring at them. Martin hit my arm and nodded towards the door. I frowned at him for several seconds, uncomprehending. Then Sally got up and picked up her bag. Jess stood up and opened the door.

"Let's go," Martin said, dragging my arm.

I stood up and manoeuvred myself between the table and the men's legs.

"Sorry, sorry, excuse me, thanks."

Then I was gone, out the door and onto the sunny pavement with the other three. I blinked. My mind was whirring.

"...course," Jess was saying as they started to walk up towards the university; I tagged along behind, my hands in my pockets, thinking. "I won't need family connections for my idea. It's fool proof. It'd be like Susan Boyle referencing her neighbour on the Britain's Got Talent registration form. It's going to be all me." He pointed to himself. "Hard work and Genius."

"I see hard work?" Martin said frowning at him. He looked over his shoulder. "But where's genius?"

"Hey look." Jess pointed to a poster across the street. "Sally, who's that? Is that your friend Keira selling Miss Dior?"

"It's Chanel actually," Sally said.

"Do you want to kiss it?" Jess said, tapping the poster as we passed.

"I never said I wanted to have a full homosexual experience with her," Sally said. "There'd have to be a guy in there somewhere to keep it straight."

"Talking of straight," Jess said. "We've got Clive first thing."

"Oh, Clive." Martin laughed. "Gay!"

"One legged gay."

"He's only got one leg?" I said, pricking into the conversation.

"Yeah."

"How did he lose the other one?"

"In a game of cards, ha, ha." Martin hit me. "I've been waiting to say that for a year and a half."

“How really?”

“I dunno. Aids?” Jess shrugged. “I’ve got to go back to the house first. I’ll see you in lectures, Martin.”

He turned and began jogging down the street, waving over his shoulder. Sally hit Martin’s arm and then went up the steps to Sainsbury’s.

“You coming into campus?” Martin said, nodding along the road.

“No, er, no,” I said, taking my keys out of my pocket. “I need to go and visit my grandma.”

“Didn’t you do that already this week?”

“Yeah but, but, she’s not coping well recently.” I nodded sadly. “So I thought I would.”

“Yeah, that’s cool, man. Carl says you’re not in lectures anymore.”

“No, you see, yeah, I’m just worried about her.” I was playing with my key ring, knocking it against my hand.

“Yeah.” Martin started walking away. “You can probably claim extenuating circumstances on that.”

I laughed extra loudly so that his last memory of me that day was a happy one, then turned and ran back to my car.

“Grandma,” I said, sipping my drink.

“Do you want to go and see a film later?” she said, leaning on the counter. “I haven’t seen Alice in Wonderland yet.”

“Yeah, maybe I said.” I sipped my drink again. “But Grandma-”

“I’m not sure I think much of 3D films,” she said. “I went to see Avatar at Christmas with some workers from here.” She shook her head and pulled a face. “I wasn’t impressed.”

“Yeah?” I said. I put my cup down. “Grandma-”

“And you know that main girl?” she said. “The main Avatar female thing?”

“Yeah,” I said, moving aside so a group of kids could reach the counter.

“If she weren’t blue,” my grandma said, moving along the counter to serve the children. “She’d be black. Hello!” She smiled down at the first child, who was blinking up at her.

“What can I get you?”

The kid looked a bit taken aback. He was about twelve but old enough to spot a hint of racism when he saw it. The worst kids coming here were the fifteen, sixteen year olds. The guys that try and be like The Inbetweeners and ask her if she sucks. Fuck, I get so embarrassed. I wish I had the guts to tell those guys where to go; usually I just sit hunched over on my stall, playing with my straw and praying that they go away. Grandma loves it.

She always says ‘yeah I suck. Want to see how hard?’ And the kids shoot out of here like she’s fucking Ganush from Drag Me To Hell.

“Alice in Wonderland?” my Grandma said when the kids had gone. “I finish at one. My treat.”

“Yeah, yeah.” I nodded. “Yeah but Grandma-”

“Yes, sonny?”

“You know we’re related to like,” I waved my hand, “the Queen and that.”

“Yes?”

“Do you, like, do you know any of them? Personally?”

My Grandma laughed.

“Oh, heaven’s no.” I sagged. “No, no, no, no,” she reiterated, smiling and shaking her head. “No.” She started wiping down the side. “No. No. Not at all. Your cousin Felton does though, I believe. He is a friend of Charles.”

“Felton?” I said. “I haven’t got a cousin named Felton.”

“Oh no, you’ve never met him.” Grandma said. “And he’s not a first cousin. Second or third or something.” She lit a cigarette and blew smoke into the air. “To tell you the truth, I only met him at the Queen’s Garden Party six or seven years ago.”

“Wait, wait, wait.” I held up my hands. “You’ve gone to the Queen’s Garden parties? But you say we don’t know her?”

“Oh, she knows of us.” Grandma waved her hand idly. “She’s good to all her relatives. She can’t talk to them all or send out cards on every birthday but she’ll have a party for everyone in Buckingham Palace. It’s a good place to meet the old line.”

“How come I’ve never been invited?”

“You can come with me next time.”

“Next time? How many have there been?”

Grandma shrugged and dragged on her cigarette.

“One, maybe two, a year.”

“What?!”

“Your granddad used to love them.” She smiled. “He always got into trouble climbing over the walls.”

She stubbed her cigarette out on the counter and flicked the butt away.

“So, you know some royalty?” I said.

“I get along with Felton best,” she said. “He’s not really royalty. He’s a cousin of the old Marques of Cambridge.”

“Who?”

“Oh,” Grandma waved her hand. “His father was a brother in law of George the fifth. It’s all very watered down and I wouldn’t call anyone out of the immediate Royal family Royal. Felton doesn’t think of himself as royal.”

“But he gets all the perks?”

“Well, his bloodline is much stronger than ours.”

“How much do you see him?”

“All the time. Granddad and him got on like a house on fire. He’s quite a funny man. I’m seeing him next week.”

“I’d like to meet him,” I said.

“Here.” Grandma pulled herself up onto the counter and handed me her Blackberry. “Look him up. Oh and also, I’ve got something else for you.”

“What?”

“You know those shirts that your brother bought, which you loved so much?”

“Yeah,” I said. “The Ralph Lauren ones.”

“Well.” She smiled at me. “I went out and bought some yesterday. Especially for you.”

“Oh, Grandma, you didn’t have to. I know you and money-”

“I wanted to.” My Grandma smiled. “And I know how you get an allergic reaction to some new clothes, so I’ve washed them specially and ironed them.”

“Grandma.”

She winked at me.

“Watch the stall,” she said. “I’m going to the toilet.”

I watched her stride away, then turned back to the Blackberry. My poor Grandma. I searched through her contacts until I found Felton. There was an email address. I scratched my chin. I hadn’t shaved in days. I copied the address into my phone.

As I stood there, staring at my phone, a girl with huge tits came and leant on the counter. I watched her. She turned and looked at me. I pretended I was looking at something just behind her head.

“Hey,” she said, turning to face me, front on.

“Hey,” I said.

“Do you know where the lady from here is?”

“Nah,” I said, glancing at her chest again. “Nah.”

She left.

“It’s one,” my grandma said, hitting my shoulder as she came back. “Let’s blow this joint.”

“Shouldn’t you wait for someone to take over?” I asked, pointing at the hut as she walked away.

“Nah, if they were more organised, they’d be on it. Come on, Sonny.”

I took my jacket off. It was hot.

“Hey Grandma,” I said, running after her. “Can you carry my jacket?”

“Chuck it in the compartment on the back of my bike,” she called back.

We did go and see Alice in Wonderland in the end. 3D, which didn’t impress my Grandma. A sign came up on the screen saying: It is now time to put your 3D glasses on. Everyone did. It was like a form of brainwashing. I reluctantly put my own on. Not cool. I sat at the back of the cinema, looking at the hundreds of people sitting in their oversize glasses, staring at the screen. Did they not know how completely ridiculous they looked. Imagine if it was just a joke; the industry just having a laugh at everyone.

“Here, here, tell them they have to wear this hat to properly enjoy the film.”

“This hat is a bit silly.”

“What about these giant sunglasses?”

“Yeah, good idea.”

That night when I got home, I sat in my room and thought. Being with Grandma, watching her smile and laugh at Johnny Depp with funny eyes, when her own eyes were hidden behind giant 3D glasses, it really made me think. All that she’d done, the wars she’d lived through, the places she’d biked through, the people she’d met, my Granddad, the man she’d loved, the cancer, his death, the changing world, which must be liked missing a step going down the stairs, and she didn’t care. She didn’t care. She went with it. She rolled with the punches. It tried, but life never kept her down. Life is the decisions we make. Whether it’s sitting in a variety of places or getting up and doing something.

I didn’t want to live in fear. I didn’t want to spend my life waiting for Carlisle to get me or waiting for someone to come and help me. I was going to get up and roll with it as well. I was going to blow this joint. Just hit the road. Why do anything less? You don’t hand a report card in and the end of your life and get marked on how good you’ve been, how straight and proper, how married, how many kids, your income. The only person it matters for is you. On your death bed, looking up at the ceiling: was it all worth it? Or should I not have bothered coming out of the womb in the first place?

I slept easy for the first time that week. Fuck, I slept easy for the first time ever. There was no looking back. Roll with it. Next morning, I put on my nice, crisp, clean, Grandma washed

Ralph Lauren shirt and went to Drakes toilet to shit whilst reading a brochure for train travel in Europe. I didn't overhear anyone's conversations but I wouldn't have cared if I did.

When I got back to the house, I packed a bag of socks and underwear. I looked at myself in the mirror. I'd keep in contact with Grandma through postcards. I should have asked her to come with me. I spat out the piece of blue tack that had been in my mouth and smiled at my toothy reflection. Life. Here I come.

Downstairs, my housemates were in the front room, looking out of the window.

"...loser." One of them said.

"Do you reckon he's mental?"

"Nah, he lives in the old people's home down the way. They let him out every morning and back in every night."

"Like a dog."

They all laughed. I dropped my bag in the doorway.

"What's going on?" I said, looking at them all, wrapped in duvets and dressing gowns and stinking of stale, sweaty bodies.

"Ah, shuffling man," they said without turning round. "I bet he's got leprosy."

"You can catch that."

"Pick up my laptop. I'll look it up."

I picked my bag up and left the house. Shuffling man was bending in the gutter outside our house, picking up cigarette butts from amongst the leaves. He had a new jacket on. It was shiny leather, beautiful and fresh. I wondered who'd bought it for him.

"Hey, man," I said, setting my bag down on the wall.

"Urgh," he said, nodding at me.

His face was slack and weathered, probably from all the time he spent outside. His hands hung limply by his side. I held my hand out to him. He looked at me. I swallowed.

"Urgh," he said and shook my hand.

His hand were lax, they barely held my fingers at all.

"Sit down," I said, sitting beside my bag. "What do you do with all those cigarette butts?"

He sat heavily beside me and held his recent acquisition up. He unravelled it and tipped the pinch of tobacco into his hands. Then he got a small bag out of his pocket. It was filled with tobacco.

"You collected all of that?" I said. "Wow, man, that's good. Cheap, eh?"

He nodded and smiled and pulled out some cigarette paper. I watched as he rolled up a single cigarette and lit it. He held it out to me. I was touched.

“Thanks, man,” I said, taking it. I took a drag and coughed. “Shit. That’s better than I expected.”

He smiled at me. I handed it back and he took a drag. From behind us, through the glass, I could hear my housemates shouting and banging on the window. I ignored them.

“You see much of Plymouth?” I said to the man, taking my Iphone out of my pocket.

He nodded, the cigarette hanging limply from his mouth, bobbing up and down with his head.

“Pretty lame, huh?”

He smiled and nodded again. I checked my phone. I had an email. I read it. I reread it.

“Shit,” I said. I looked at Shuffling Man. “Shit. I’ve got to run, man.”

I stood up. My heart was going mad in my chest. My face had flushed again. I didn’t know which way to run. I knocked my bag off the wall and into the front garden. All thoughts for leaving flew straight out of my head. Fuck that. I could get my old life back here! I could be saved.

“I have to go man,” I said, starting to walk away. “Hey, no, wait, what’s your name? Everyone just calls you shuffling man. What do you want to be known as?”

He nodded.

“Shuffling man,” he muttered.

“Shuffling man?” I frowned. “Really?”

He smiled at me.

“You know more what I do from that than a name,” he said. “What’s in a name?”

I smiled. I turned. I started running. Fuck. The email had been short and sweet as fucking sugar:

Hello,

Thank you for your email, it was wonderful to hear from you. Your Grandma speaks about you all the time. If you need my help, of course I will provide it. Anything you need. I’ll get the helicopter to the military base at Stonehouse. I should be there at about half past ten. Meet me at the gates.

Felton.

Sweet fucking lord. He replied. Within twenty four hours. What a fucking hero. When I hastily typed the message whilst looking at the girl’s tits, I never thought it a million years he’d get back to me. I thought I was literally shooting into the dark. Firing blanks. But no. I had an actual hero.

I raced down to Stonehouse. It was already quarter to eleven. Imagine if I blew it because I was late. What if he got the helicopter back? Shit.

Stonehouse Military base is right out of the way down this quiet little residential street. You know, proper seaside town B & B's: cream fronts, blue doors, windows. And facing them, a pair of giant Army gates, golden lions holding orbs, men with guns, jeeps coming in and out and those guys in berets. Also, on the pavement, something I never got, are a dozen or so quotes from Sherlock Holmes. What the fuck?

The street was deserted when I got there. Not a man or beret in sight. I raced up and down for a few seconds and then started shouting "Felton!" until a man with a machine gun opened his sentry box.

"Shut the fuck up, you little twat!" he shouted down at me. "Piss off! Go somewhere else!"

"Have you seen a guy named Felton?!" I called over to him. "He got here by helicopter today."

"Felton?" The guy frowned at me. "Felton, you little prick? He went to look at the ferry." He shut his sentry box and nodded down a side street.

I burst into tears. I started running towards the street. It led down to a little harbour where a small open air ferry was tethered to a cement bollard. The ferry man was leaning on the ladder and talking to a tall, lean man in a suit and tie, holding a briefcase. It was him, it had to be him.

I flew down the road and launched myself onto him, latching my arms around his chest and burying my face in his shoulder.

"You're still here!" I said into his suit. "You're still here! I thought I'd fucked it up!"

The ferry man was watching me in confusion. The man in the suit unlatched my arms and looked down at me. He looked stern. He didn't look like the sort of man you hugged.

"There you are!" he suddenly cried, beaming and patting my back. "There you are! I was worried you never got my message."

"I did! I did!" I cried, hugging him again as sweet relief swept me. It was like being reunited with your dad. He put his arm round me and patted my back. "I did and I ran all the way here and now I've found you! I've found you!"

He laughed and ruffled my hair.

"Don't worry," he said, smiling down at me. He had such a brilliantly posh accent. "We'll sort this out today. I'll keep you safe."

I nearly started crying again. The ferry man was blinking at the two of us.

"So, er, you want the crossing?" he said to Felton. "To Mount Edgecumbe?"

“Yes,” Felton said. He handed across a twenty pound note. “Two please, keep the change.”
Cool.

We climbed on board. Felton put the briefcase on his knees and looked serenely out to sea as the ferry pattered away. I just stared at him. My saviour. Probably mid forties, thick, neatly clipped brown hair. He was so handsome as well, in his suit and tie and amazing Italian loafers. I’d do him without a seconds thought. Fuck threesomes, this was the full homosexual experience. Here was my Becks.

“So,” he said, turning to me and smiling.

I sighed, “yeah,” and smiled back. I was smitten. I wanted him to hug me again.

“You said in your email you were in a lot of trouble.”

“A lot, a lot, a lot,” I said. “A lot. I was thinking, with your contacts, you could get me out of it.”

“We’ll see what I can do first,” he said. “Tell me what’s happened.”

I took a deep breath. The ferry was bouncing over the waves, the engine whirring frantically somewhere beneath us. It was cold. I was all hunched over on myself, the sun doing nothing against the wind, which was sailing through Felton’s hair and making him look like Jesus ascending into heaven. He didn’t look cold at all. He was sitting, straight back, legs crossed, hands clasped over his briefcase. He smiled at me. Behind his head, the ferry man was trying to watch us and guide his ferry to the swelling plume of Mount Edgecumbe across the river.

I thought maybe I should tell my story a bit at a time; save him fainting or just telling me to fuck off and go to the police. Let him in gently.

“I killed a man,” I said. “I didn’t mean to. I was in Drakes and I heard two men talking about horses so I put a bet on a horse and won two grand and there were two men in the bookies who followed me home and tried to take it they kept calling me Harvey and I’m not Harvey. I got away that time but then they appeared in my garden and had a knife and one went away to get a machete and cut my ears off like in Reservoir Dogs.” I took a deep breath. “And I was panicking I thought I was going to die then Felix came over the gate and bald man stroked him and I hit him with the spade to knock him out but it did nothing and he just got mad so I hit him again and again and again and the sick on the handle made me fill dizzy and I couldn’t think and then when I looked down he was totally dead so I drove out to the moors and buried him because I didn’t want to be raped like Andy Dufresne.”

I stopped and took another deep breath. He blinked at me.

“And now everywhere I go that other man is there he’s watching me I know he’s still after me he still thinks I’m Harvey. He might go to the police, I’ll be arrested and the guilt of it all is just eating me up inside. It’s not fair it’s not my fault I never meant for any of it to happen and now my life is ruined. I want it over, I want it over, over, over!”

I was shouting. The ferry man was staring at me, letting his ferry drift aimlessly along the river. My face felt pressurised, like it was about to explode, my eyes were burning in their sockets from my yelling and I half expected them to pop out.

Felton blinked again.

“And how did you lose your tooth?”

“A car hit me.”

“I see.”

He stroked his chin and thought.

“Yes,” he said slowly. “Yes.”

I watched him, biting my bottom lip. The pressure in my cheeks and eyes had dropped. My ears were pulsing.

“It seems to me,” he said slowly. “That we must do two things.”

Here we go.

“Number one, stop the man coming after you,” he said, unclipping his briefcase. “And number two, disassociate yourself with the murder of this Bald Man.”

I blinked at him now.

“Er, yeah,” I said. “That’d be great. Can you do that?”

He checked the contents of his briefcase and then smiled at me.

“Of course.” He snapped it shut. “The Royal Family has been dealing with these sorts of circumstances for years.”

The ferry bumped into Mount Edcumbe harbour. He stood up. With the ferry not moving and the wind nonexistent, the sun finally reached my skin. It was warm. I squinted up at him.

“Now,” he said, climbing onto the pier. “Do you want an ice cream?”

Apparently, it was as easy as that. No worry. All that fuss and guilt and I should have just asked Grandma straight away for a Royal contact. We ate our ice creams on the beach at Mount Edgecumbe, its sunny green fields behind us, the chopping blue water of the Tamar in front. I had a chocolate ice cream in a little cup and he had vanilla in a cornet.

I couldn’t take my eyes of him. I watched, mesmerised, as he licked his way to the edge of the cornet and then ate the wafer like a KikKat.

“So,” he said, dusting off his hands. “The first question is, where to find this man who is trying to kill you?”

“He just hangs around my house,” I said, wiping my finger around my cup. “With knives and things.”

“Excellent,” Felton said. “That makes it much easier.” I licked my finger clean. “You may find,” he said, gazing out across the river. A giant Navy boat was cruising passed. “That the feelings of guilt remain for a while. But don’t fear; they do subside after time.”

“Nah,” I said and swallowed. “I reckon once this is all cleaned up, they’ll go away. It wasn’t my fault. He forced me to kill him. I only feel guilty because it is unresolved.”

He looked at me.

“That’s the spirit,” he said, patting my shoulder. “A true Brit.” He picked up his briefcase. “Come on, let’s get this sorted.”

“I should warn you,” I said, following him across the pebbles and shells of the beach. I slipped and slid all over the place; he glided over them. “This man, is a nutcase.” I slipped again. He waited for me to catch up. “Like knives and torture. You should have your wits about you.”

“Thank you for the advice,” he said, stepping onto the pier. “I shall ensure that is so.”

When I got back to the house, I went in through the back gate. The garden was deserted. I looked at the vegetable patch. My sick was still there. I peered around the corner of the house. There was no one. Odd.

I opened the back door. A man jumped on my back. I felt a blade go across my throat and screamed. We fell backwards. I squashed him onto the ground and he punched me in the back so hard, I was winded. I rolled away, coughing, choking, crying again. Carlisle stood up. He shook the knife.

“You little shit,” he said, striding after me as I crawled away. “Stand here and tell me where Paul is.”

He put a foot on my back and then Felton jumped off the garden wall. Carlisle started. I quickly crawled further away. Felton pressed a gun to Carlisle’s head.

“Good afternoon,” he said as Carlisle stared up at the barrel of the gun. “Could you drop that knife, please. Thank you very much.”

I stood up, panting, winded. I checked my neck. I wasn’t bleeding.

“Who the fuck are you?” Carlisle asked, staring at Felton.

“That doesn’t matter.” Felton smiled. “We would just like you to take us to your employer.”

“My what?”

“It’s obvious you haven’t orchestrated this yourself,” Felton said. “There must be someone pulling the strings. The quicker you take us to him, the more likely it will be that I don’t shoot you.”

“He’s on the other side of town,” Carlisle said.

“I have a car,” Felton said. “It’s out the front. My briefcase.”

He held it out to me and I took it. It was empty now. I’d seen him pull the gun from it just before he leapt onto the garden wall.

“Through the house I think,” Felton said, nodding at me. “Could you open the doors?”

I nodded, breathless with excitement and leapt forward. I pushed the back door open and stood aside as Carlisle followed me inside. He was glaring at me. Fucking livid.

“Just keep walking, please,” Felton said, his gun pressed against the back of Carlisle’s head. “To the front door.”

We passed the front room. My housemates stared at the procession in incredulity, the glow from their laptop screen accentuating the dark hollows of their eyes and cheeks. Me first, smiling and holding a briefcase, then Robert Carlisle, looking haggard and grim and finally, a man in a suit and tie, pressing a pistol against Carlisle’s head. He waved at my housemates.

“Carry on,” he said in his Eton accent. “I have this scene under control.”

I opened the door and stepped outside. There was a black Mercedes waiting for us on the pavement. The driver got out and opened the back door. He bowed to me and I climbed inside. Carlisle slid in next and finally Felton. He shut the door. I could see my housemates in the doorway, staring at the Mercedes in speechless wonder. The driver got behind the wheel.

“Where to sir?” he said.

Felton looked at Carlisle.

“He’s in Drakes,” Carlisle said, scowling at Felton.

“Drake Circus, please,” Felton said, sitting back in his seat. “Seatbelts remember.” I did mine up at once. Carlisle glared at Felton as he clipped his in. “Come on now,” Felton said. “I don’t want to have to shoot you over it.”

Carlisle pulled his seatbelt across. I moved politely out of the way so he could clip it in. He looked at me like he’d prefer to wedge it down my throat. I smiled.

The three of us sat in silence, rocking together as the Mercedes went round North Cross Roundabout and up towards the town centre. It’s meant to be pedestrians only in the town

centre but taxis and employees cars sometimes go up and down the main drag. There's one of those automatic bollards in place to stop joy-riders cruising all over the shop. As the Mercedes reached the bollard, something in the car beeped and it slowly began to descend into the road. The Mercedes pulled forward, swung round and stopped right in front of Drake's doors.

"Ok, then," Felton said, undoing his seatbelt. "We shan't be long, Jones."

"Thank you, sir," the driver said.

"Come on," Felton said, opening the car door. "What shop is he likely to be in?"

"HMV," Carlisle muttered, climbing out next.

"I'm sorry, I didn't quite hear that."

"HMV," Carlisle said more loudly.

"How fitting. Leave the briefcase in the car, I'll just carry the gun with me." Felton pressed it into Carlisle's back. "Lead the way."

The automatic doors swung open as we approached and we marched through like the fucking Ghostbusters. Carlisle led the way down the steps, his head down, his hands in his pockets, looking like a naughty school child and offering no resistance whatsoever. Felton strode next and I brought up the rear. Almost whistling. I wanted to tell people who we passed: that's my cousin. That's my big cousin. He's protecting me. He's making sure I'm alright. Check us out.

We went into HMV. Carlisle paused in the doorway, looked around and then pointed towards the t-shirts and books in the back corner.

"There," he said, scratching his chin. His fingernails grated over stubble. "The guy in the sunglasses and white polo shirt."

"Come on then," Felton said, digging the gun in harder. "Please lead the way."

As we approached, the man looked up. My balls tightened. He had a shaved head, stubble on his chin. He was young, handsome, in jeans and shiny shoes like Felton. What if he opened fire on us? I ducked behind Felton, who had taken his gun away from Carlisle's back. Carlisle, head bowed and tail between his legs, went and stood behind the man in sunglasses. The man sniffed and put back the DVD he was looking at. He took a lighter out of his pocket— one of those silver Zippo ones and flicked it, staring at Felton, whose gun was still up.

"Excuse me."

We all looked. A woman was trying to get passed. Felton stood aside and held out a hand so she could walk through. The man with the Zippo and Carlisle stepped politely aside as well.

“Sorry,” Zippo said.

“No worries.”

She walked through. We all watched her. She stopped and picked a book off the shelf. She read the blurb and then put it back. None of us moved a muscle. I needed to readjust my cock but I was terrified of moving and then Zippo shooting her. She coughed and looked at another book. She pulled a face and then slowly meandered away, into the next aisle. Me and Felton looked back at Zippo. I moved my hand around my crotch.

“I think this is a case of mistaken identities,” Felton said. He raised his gun. “Don’t you agree?”

Zippo slid the lighter into his pocket. He rolled his head on his shoulders.

“Yes,” he said and stepped forward.

Felton stepped forward as well. I flinched. I sank back into the rack of new releases, hands up.

“Tom!” Felton cried, hugging the man. He clapped him heartily on the back. “Tom! It’s good to see you again! So you’re still in this business?”

“Yeah, yeah!” Zippo Tom said, patting Felton’s back as well. They took a step back from one another and admired each other at arm’s length. Zippo Tom pushed his sunglasses onto his head.

“How’s business?” Felton asked.

“Oh, so, so,” Zippo Tom said. “Most of the accounts tick over quite nicely.” He glanced at me. “There’s just one or two that need sorting out.”

“I see you still have that Zippo lighter,” Felton said. “Is it the same one I gave you?”

“Of course. And I’ve yet to smoke a single cigarette.”

They both laughed. Felton sighed and put his gun into his belt.

“This,” he said, holding out his arm to me, “is my cousin. Come and say hello.”

I gripped his arm and stepped forward. Zippo Tom was smiling at me.

“Nice to meet you,” he said and offered me his hand.

I shook it carefully.

“Yeah.” My voice came out all squeaky. I cleared my throat. “Yeah and you.”

“This is my associate John,” Zippo Tom said, pushing Carlisle forward. “He’s a good man.”

Felton held out his hand. Carlisle looked at it with disgust. Zippo Tom nudged him.

“Nice to meet you,” Carlisle said, shaking it rigidly.

“And you,” Felton said. “Shake hands with him,” he said and pushed me forward.

Me and Carlisle both shook hands. We made eye contact and I could tell he was as confused as I was. I tried to smile, to show we were sharing the joke and he crushed my fingers under his own. I winced and tugged my hand back.

“The thing is,” Felton was saying to Zippo Tom. He put his arm around me. “He’s only a kid and you really scared him the other day. He’s not this Harvey guy you’re looking for.”

“Oh no, no.” Zippo Tom nodded. “I met Harvey and this is definitely not him. It was just a case of mistaken identities.” He looked at Carlisle (I wasn’t going to call him John like we were mates) and then at me. “I am so sorry for causing you all this trouble.” He touched his chest. “Sincerely, from the pit of my heart. Sorry.”

“Er, that’s ok,” I said.

“So you can leave him be now,” Zippo Tom said, looking at Carlisle. “He’s not our man.”

“But…” Carlisle looked at him. “What about Paul?”

“Ah yes,” Felton said. He took his arm off my shoulders and put it round Zippo Tom’s. “You see, the thing is,” they bowed their heads together near the row of books. Carlisle glared at me from behind their backs. I took a step closer to Felton, “he panicked a bit on Monday night, you know how kids are, and he tried to defend himself against your Paul. Things got ugly and well, one thing led to another.” Felton shook his hand.

“Oh, I know, I know,” Zippo Tom said, standing up straight. “It’s all part and parcel of the business. Paul knew what dangers he ran. Has the body been properly disposed of?”

“It won’t be found,” Felton said.

“That’s fine. We don’t report disappearances to the police,” Zippo said. “The families know not to report them. It’s the dangers of the business.” He looked at me. “You’ve got balls, mate,” he said. “Well done for not completely freaking out.”

I remembered crouching over, snotty, bloody and crying, hiccupping in my own sick.

“Yeah,” I said. “Yeah.”

“All water under the bridge,” Zippo Tom said.

“Do you want to come out for a drink?” Felton asked.

“Can’t, mate, sorry,” Zippo Tom said, putting his hands in his pockets. “It’s Friday, so we have some money to collect.” He nodded at Carlisle, who looked like someone had made him bite down on a lemon. There were tears of utter rage in his eyes. I stepped further behind Felton. “Nice to see you though,” Zippo Tom added, patting Felton’s back. “And you, little mate.”

He patted my shoulder. I swallowed. I felt a little light headed. Felton and Zippo Tom exchanged a few more pleasantries and handshakes and then we left. Simple as that. All that worry. We got offered 10% discounts at the door. I took a leaflet but Felton didn't.

"Weren't they nice?" I said as we went up the stairs towards the car. "That was much easier than I expected."

"Most things are," Felton said, striding through the open doors. We got into the Mercedes. Felton put his gun back into his briefcase and then looked at me. "And now for serious matters," he said.

Here it came: a lecture on murder, or gambling or zebra crossings. A lesson on living life and being wary of one's emotions. He might sign me up for therapy classes. Or make me promise to go and apologise to the family.

"For the next forty eight hours," he said.

I'm grounded. Yeah right.

"You are in the hot zone."

"What's the hot zone?"

"It when you are most appealing to members of the underworld community," he said. "This situation will not have gone unnoticed. Even if John and Tom never open their mouths about it, word will spread. You've got Harvey and his men who might prick up if they discover your existence. This whole fiasco will not have helped his cause and he might be out to vent some frustration. Then you've got loan sharks, who know you've got £2000 stashed in your sock drawer," I shifted, "and will either sell that information to petty burglars or hound you for investments and, lastly, you've got Paul's family who might me out for revenge."

"Shit." I swallowed. "That's a lot of people, huh?"

"Huh," Felton said. He looked out of the window. "But Hot Zones are common and brief. That's why they're called hot zones. They flare up and then they vanish. After forty eight hours, a new man will be on the market and everyone will be interested in him instead. Every social community is a maze of hot zones. If you steer clear of the criminal underworld from now on, you need never enter a hot zone again." He smiled at me.

"Ok," I said. "But how do I survive it now?"

"Simple," he said. "With three easy steps. For the next forty eight hours, don't go to your house, change your regular habits and get friends to call you by a different name. The longer it takes to find you, the quicker you become cool."

"Cool?"

"Cool." He smiled at me. "On that note," he said. "Let's go out and get a drink."

We went to some dark and dingy pub on the outskirts of town. It was probably full of underworld characters but Felton said that simply meant we were adhering to the three steps. He ordered me a pint and then we sat in a little booth right by the radiator. Martin text me asking about dinner, so, at Felton's insistence, I invited him and Jess down. They arrived with Cat and Sally, which was a bit annoying, but there was room along the booth if we all squashed up.

In the silence, as we sat, shoulder to shoulder, pressed together in the little booth, I cleared my throat and pointed at Felton, sitting serenely in the middle of us.

"This is my cousin," I said. "Felton."

"Hello," Felton said. "The drinks are on me." He put a twenty on the table. Everyone stared at it like it was Charlie Bucket's Golden Ticket. "So get what you want."

"Yeah man," Martin said, standing up.

"Oh and get some change for the pool table," Felton said, stretching his arms. "I fancy playing."

"Let's get a tournament going." Jess said.

"I like that idea," Felton said. "What was your name?"

"Jess."

"Jess."

They reached across me and shook hands. I cleared my throat again. I was sitting dangerously close to Cat. I nearly made an excuse to move. I nearly slipped under the table and crawled away, then I thought fuck it. This had been the most exciting week of my life. Here I was sitting next to my cousin who kept in regular contact with our mutual cousin, The Queen of England. We had a car waiting for us outside, to take us to some posh hotel in Plymouth, where I wouldn't be found by underworld parties and shot. I was in the Hot Zone. I was a fucking wanted man. Who cared if Cat talked shit at me for half an hour?

"So, Cat," I said, turning to look at her. "How was your day?"

"Well, like," she said. She took a deep breath. I gritted my teeth and smiled. "It, you know, like when it started off, like when my day started, before I went to university, this was like, when I just woke up, before, like, I'd even gone to uni-"

Fuck it. Life was just too short.

"Two minutes," I said and slipped under the table to crawl away.

Martin and Felton played the first game of pool. Sally and Cat sat in the booth talking shit and me and Jess circled the pool table like sharks, sipping our drinks and being men. Yes, I was finally a man. Big bollocks and everything. Here I was, sipping my pint.

“So Jess,” I said, leaning on the wall. “Tell me, what is your big idea?”

“How do you mean?”

“Your big idea,” I said. “The one that’s going to make you rich and famous and successful and historical. Your fool proof plan.” I smiled. An actual, genuine, smile. I was alright with the world. I was back. “You can tell me.”

“Ah,” Jess said. “I can’t. It’s a secret.”

“Oh go on,” I said. “I’ve had such a week. It’d really mean a lot to me. I won’t steal it. Go on. Mates?”

Jess looked at me. He’d drunk more than I had. He smiled.

“Ok,” he said. I grinned and laughed and rubbed my hands. “Promise to keep it a secret?” he said.

“Yes, yes.”

“Don’t tell anyone.”

“No, no.” I held out my fingers like he was going to hand it to me. “Come on, come on. Is it porn?”

“No.” He shook his head.

“Is it swimming?”

He shook his head, smiling.

“Well come on then!” I said. “Tell me.”

“It is,” he said, leaning in closer. “Potatoes.”

“Potatoes.” I frowned. “I don’t get it.”

“Potatoes.” Jess said. “Potatoes. You know, you eat them.”

“I get what potatoes are,” I said. “I just don’t get how they’re going to blast into stratospherical success.”

“You are so narrow minded.” Jess smiled, shaking his head. He put his arm around me. I looked at it suspiciously. “Potatoes are a huge source of carbohydrate,” he said carefully. “I’m going to mass produce them on and an astronomical level. I’m going to create new sorts of potato. I am going to harness, to harvest the power of the potato and reinvent food. I am going to obliterate world hunger. No more famine.”

“Oh right,” I said, nodding. “Yeah, potatoes.”

“I have it all planned out.” Jess said. “I am going to be bigger than The Beatles with these.”

He smiled at me. I forced back a laugh and slipped out from under his arm. Freak. I sat down in the booth with Cat and Sally. Sally pinched my ass which was fucking weird and I leapt up.

“If you do that again,” I said, picking up a beer mat. “I am honestly going to cut your legs off.”

The two girls sat either side of me and started laughing.

“Oh you!” Sally said, putting her arm around me and kissing my cheek. “We love you really.”

It was like everyone was infected by my utter elation. My love and peace with the world. Or drunk. Either way, I was fucking high. I stretched my arms along the back of the booth and sighed. Sally had a sip of her pint and we watched as the barmaid walked passed.

“I could get her,” I said.

“No you couldn’t.”

“I could.” I got my phone out of his pocket. “If I switched on the charm, she’d be all mine.”

I threw my phone up in the air and then caught it. I was so fucking awesome. I was practically cool.

“Go on then,” Sally said.

“Er, no,” I said, catching my phone again. “I’m just going to play it cool today.”

“You liar.”

“I am.” I threw my phone again. “You can’t-”

With a rattle, the phone clattered down the back of the booth. Shit. What a fucking piss take. I leapt around and peered over the back, between the booth and the radiator.

“Shit,” I said, trying to squeeze my hand into the tiny gap. “I can’t reach it.”

“It’s just a phone,” Sally said.

“It’s my phone!” I said. “I need it!” And I thought today was going so well. “Come on! Show a little enthusiasm!”

Sally sighed and sat up on her knees. She looked down the back of the booth.

“This is the most important thing that will happen to us today,” I said, leaning next to her. “So pay attention. Can either of you reach your girlish hands down there?”

She tried. Cat leaned next to her and tried as well.

“Sally, Sally,” I said after a few seconds. “You’re getting in my light.”

“You asked me to try!” Sally said, sweeping her hair out of her eyes. “Tell Cat to move as well then.”

“Just both of you move!” I said, pushing Cat along.

I stuck my tongue out of my mouth. The tip of my middle finger was brushing the top of the phone.

“I can... just feel...it.” I panted. “Do we have a pair of pliers?”

“Oh yes,” Sally said. “I always keep a pair handy.” She went into her bag. I sat up expectantly. “You twat,” Sally said, throwing her bag onto the floor. “I was joking.”

“Bitch,” I said. I bent back over the booth and stuck my hand down there again. “Get me something then! A fork! A spoon!”

“Here,” Cat said, holding up a fork.

“What the hell am I meant to do with that?” I said. “Get me something useful.”

“But you said-”

“Come on,” Sally said standing up and pulling on Cat’s arm. “Let’s ask at the bar for tools.”

They left. I climbed onto the back of the seats and tried my other, none wanking hand. It wasn’t any better. If anything, it was even further away. I sat up and rolled my sleeves up. I braced my chest against the back of the radiator, my feet on the table and stretched. I got my index and middle finger around the top of the phone and almost pulled it up. I got so excited. Then I dropped it. It clattered against the radiator.

“Move out of the way,” Sally said, kneeling on the seats behind me. She clacked a pair of tongs. “I have a plan.”

I wiped my hair out of my eyes and sat on the table to watch.

“She’s clever,” Cat said, sitting beside me.

Sally knelt on the sofa and stuck the tongs down the back of the booth. She straightened up.

“More cellotape,” she said.

Cat stretched a length from a roll of sticky tape and began wrapping it frantically around the end of the tongs. I don’t know what the fuck she was playing it.

“Make sure it’s inside out,” Sally said, touching the end with her fingers. “We need it sticky or there’s no point.”

“Oh right.”

Cat tried again. She is such a twazzock. Sally bent over and stuck the tongs back down the booth.

“Mate,” she said, looking up at the ceiling as her arm wavered out of sight. “Can you come and have a look and tell me how close I am?”

I jumped up and leant on the wall to have a look.

“You’re close!” I said. “Really close! Come left, left. No left. Left!”

“I am going left!”

“Oh no, I meant my left.” Sally rolled her eyes. “Your right,” I said. I leant closer. “Right, right, right. Stop! It’s about three centimetres beneath you now. Careful, careful. Lower it carefully.”

“I am.”

“There! You should have it. Clench the tongs now.”

I peered deep into the gap. I was getting well excited, my heart was racing, my face was burning up, I needed to piss. This was better than when Felton put a gun to Carlisle. Cat tried to look as well but I pushed her out of the way.

“Got it?” I asked tentatively.

Sally sat back on the sofa. She pulled her arm out, then the tongs and there, clasped delicately in their sticky taped teeth, was the phone.

“Yes!” I said. I took the phone and kissed it. “Yes, my baby! My baby!”

“No worries.” Sally unwrapped the stick tape from the tongs.

“Oh yeah, thanks, Sally,” I said and put the phone in my pocket.

Sally shook her head and went back to the bar.

“I need a slash,” I said when she got back. “Where’s the toilets?”

“They’re in a separate shed in the beer garden,” she said. “I told you this pub was old school.”

Shed? Garden? I looked into the pool room. Felton and Martin were busy having a laugh. I couldn’t be that much of a baby and ask him to come with me.

“Oh, come with me,” I said to Sally.

“What?”

“I don’t want to go out there on my own,” I said and whimpered quite genuinely. “It’s dark, Sally.”

“You wus,” Sally said, standing up. “Do you want me to hold it for you as well?”

Yeah. We crossed the pub and went out the back door. I peered tentatively outside. It was pitch black and cold. Everything was shadowed. I swallowed. Sally pushed me.

“Go on,” she said. “Man up. The toilets are there.”

I took a deep breath and trotted across the garden. I was being stupid. I’d followed Felton’s three steps: I hadn’t been home, I was at a pub I didn’t usually visit and everyone was calling me by a different name. And why would any underworld character be hiding in these toilets, anyway? I stepped inside. They were bare and desolate, cold. The walls were white and

empty, with just a naked bulb hanging from the ceiling, to light the way to either the two dirty urinals or the one cubicle without a door. I laughed. I was safe.

I pulled my flies down and positioned myself in front of the urinal. I looked up and concentrated on peeing. Something made a noise behind me. My peeing stopped. I looked around.

“Sally?” I said, shaking my dick. “Stop messing about.”

I turned back to the wall and told myself to hurry up. Something made a noise again. Louder.

“Shit.” I muttered. That was enough. I’d piss at the hotel. “Shit.”

I turned. Carlisle was standing behind me, holding a spade. I think my balls fell off at that point. He smiled at me and then slammed it onto my head.

“Shit!” I shouted and fell into the urinals. “What the fuck, man?!”

I felt something hot on my ears. My jaw had seized up. I think he’d paralysed me. He stood over me; I could just make out his shady legs as my vision faded and then I felt the spade hit me on the head again and again. It didn’t hurt. It just made a noise inside my head like someone whacking two bricks covered in porridge together. I couldn’t move any part of my body and that scared me more than anything. I was slumped between the urinals, feeling the cakes beneath my hands, blood pouring down my neck and onto my nicely cleaned, ironed, Ralph Lauren shirt. I heard a voice in the doorway as I faded out. It sounded like Sally. Poor Martin- his best man and his wife gone in one toilet trip. I didn’t see Carlisle hit her with the spade. I died right after she spoke, slumped there, my blood filling the urinals like unhealthy piss, the cakes squashed in my hand.

So people were never going to say I had a boring life. In the future, whenever they spoke about me, it would never be about those twenty years of unassuming nothingness. It’d be about that last week:

“He killed a guy!”

“Murdered his ass with a spade.”

“Then he stole four hundred pounds and joined a terrorist organisation.”

“He couldn’t even go into HMV without being started on.”

“And he died when he got in a fight in the bathroom at some pub.”

Ah yeah. That was what it was about. If life was about handing report cards in at the end, mine was going to be all smoking A’s.

And if life wasn’t about report cards? If it was about those last few seconds, staring at the ceiling of the dirty pub toilets, watching the naked bulb swing as Carlisle chucked the spade

aside and climbed over Sally's body, when you take stock of your own life and you ask yourself: was it worth it? I'd had twenty years of security, friends, fun and then gone out in the end in a blaze of glory. I was happy with that. I could take that.

Cat was the one that found us. She finally came in handy when she looked at the clock and realised we'd been gone for six minutes, four minutes longer than we said. To check we were alright (not sure what she would have done if she'd walked in and seen Carlisle beating us both with a spade) she went out to the toilets. There was me, slumped in the urinals and seeped in blood, and there was Sally, lying in the doorway, her face covered by her hair.

Cat did have a personality strength after all: in truly terrifying situations, when nothing is trivial and everything is desperate and important and crucial, she thought clearly. She checked my pulse and discovered I was stone, cold, dead. Then she checked Sally's and found a faint heartbeat. She put her in the recovery position and dialled 999 from her phone. She gave the name of the pub and street name. Then she went back inside, finished her drink, and went to the pool table.

"Hey, Cat," Martin said, straightening up from taking the shot. "What's up? Where are the other two?"

Then, Cat burst into tears. Everyone crowded around her at once. Jess gave her a glass of water. Felton put his arm around her.

"Cat, Cat," Martin said. "Here, sit down, sit down. What's the matter?" He knelt down in front of her. "You can tell us. What's wrong?"

"It's...it's....it's..." Cat sniffed. Her nose was snotty and running. Felton gave her his handkerchief and she blew her nose loudly. "It's like," Cat looked up at the ceiling, "I'm not in a great place, like right now. I'm struggling with my, like, because I'm not on top of things right now, I'm finding it hard to, like cope, and I'm struggling with, like, my coursework and everything. But, you know, like the thing is-"

"Is this blood on your hand?" Felton said, lifting up her arm. He examined her fingers. "Goodness gracious. Where did this come from?"

"The bathroom."

All three men drew back. Cat looked up at them and sniffed.

"I'm telling you, I'm telling you," she said. "Sit down and listen."

"Have you miscarried?" Jess said. He looked at Felton. "My sister miscarried once."

"Yes, my wife did as well." Felton nodded.

"No!" Cat said. "No, if you'll just listen, I'm trying to explain as clearly as I can."

The men all assumed a position of listening. Martin put his hands in his pocket. Felton folded his arms.

“Like,” Cat said. She waved her hands as though to get water off them. “Like, I’m struggling with coursework right now. And, like, I had this dream the other night, like, when I was dreaming the other night.” She took a deep breath. “I was ticking blue boxes. In my dream, I had this chart and I was, on the chart that I had, I was meant to tick the boxes. But I was only meant to tick the red ones and in the dream, I was ticking red boxes. No, wait.” She thought. She waved her arms to rub out what she said. Felton scratched his eye. “No, I was ticking blue boxes but, you know, as I ticked blue boxes, I knew, I was meant to be, not blue, red, I was meant to be checking red.”

“Hey.” The barman stuck his head around the door. “We’re a bit miffed here. Did someone call an ambulance? There’s a couple of paramedics at the bar.”

“Oh-hu.” Cat took a shaky breath and blew her nose. “Yes,” she said. “I did.”

“Why?” Martin said, frowning at her. “What’s the matter? Have you miscarried?”

“No!” Cat said, glaring up at him. “No! I’ve been telling you!”

“Telling us what?” a man in a paramedics uniform said, coming into view. “Listen we got a call about two bodies in the toilet.” He checked a chart. “One male, dead. One female, critically injured.”

“That’s what I’ve been saying!” Cat said, stamping her foot. “They’re in the toilet.”

Everyone stared at her. The barman blinked.

“Toilet?” the paramedic said, looking around.

“This way,” the barman said.

“Who’s in the toilets?” Martin said. He knelt down in front of Cat. “Who’s in the toilets Cat?”

“S...S...Sally!” Cat said. “And...and...” Martin had already left. She waved her hand at Felton. “And-”

Felton left too. He leapt the chair thrown out from the booth and overtook Martin before he reached the back door. The two paramedics were leant over Sally’s body in the doorway. The barman was being sick in the bushes. Felton vaulted over all of them and landed in the middle of the toilet. He skidded in my blood, seeping out from the urinals and had to grab the cubicle for support. He stared down at me.

“Sir,” one of the paramedics said. “Sir, could you step outside a moment please.”

Felton didn’t step outside. He moved forward and knelt down beside me. He moved my bloody hair off my forehead. He touched my crisp, clean, ironed shirt. It was bloody now.

“Sir,” the paramedic said, touching his shoulders. “We need to examine him.”

Felton stood up. Martin was wailing from the garden. The paramedic checked my pulse.

In the end, Sally was carried out of there on a stretcher, Martin holding her hand and calling her name. I was carried out in a zipped up body bag. Felton stood in the doorway, holding his chin, watching as somebody tried to mop up the blood.

I think he told my Grandma. He must have rung her up not long after it had been officially, properly, doctor confirmed that I was dead. She decided to come down to Plymouth at once and began to pack up her bike. She found my jacket that I had stowed in there earlier that day and I was glad. Not because she got it out and started crying over it but because I’d put the two grand in the pocket earlier that day. All the winnings, along with Carlisle’s £400, came to almost £3000. I had cleared it out of my sock drawer before I went to see Grandma that Thursday. I wanted her to have it. I was never going spend it. Not after killing bald man. It’d have made me feel sick. I always wanted her to have it.

In the end, she quit her job at Drayton Manor, roared out of town and hit Europe, like she did in the old days with Granddad. Cancer hasn’t caught her yet. She’s in Venice at the moment. I like to keep my eye on her, from time to time, just to check she’s alright.

I thought you might like to know as well, Sally came through ok. She had a metal plate in her head or something and can’t tie her shoelaces but apart from that, no real harm done. She just got a good story out of it. She and Martin got married at the end of third year. Now they have the house, job, family, children, a long, happy and mundane life and I’ll just be that fiery trail that they knew when they were kids. I think that’s the only way to be. Live slow, die fast; like Oblivion at Alton Towers.

Before she rode off into the sunset, my Grandma spent £500 of the money on a new top of the range hand gun. Then she and Felton, both kitted up with guns and knives, went to see Zippo Tom for a chat. And when I say chat, I don’t mean ‘chat’, where they beat his head against a table and pull his fingernails off. I mean, chat, chat, where they all sit down around a coffee table and drink tea and biscuits and talk about shit.

Felton told Zippo Tom what had happened to me.

“A spade was used,” he said, dipping his custard cream in his tea. “Like Paul’s murder.”

“John,” Zippo said with a sigh. “Yes, he has been acting odd.”

Felton bit into his custard cream. Zippo Tom got up and moved to a filing cabinet behind his desk. He opened the top drawer. My grandma watched him. His office was bare except

for that filing cabinet. His desk looked like it had just been moved in that morning and would be moved out again that evening. Empty. No personality, whatsoever.

“John,” Zippo said, flicking through the filing cabinet. “Aha, here we are.”

He pulled a card loose and handed it to Felton.

“That’s his full name, address, past convictions, description, everything.” He shook his head. “I am so sorry. Don’t be lenient on him Felton.”

My Grandma checked her gun.

“We won’t,” she said, standing up. “Come on.”

Carlisle lived in some grotty third story flat on the outskirts of town. The one good thing from this whole tale was that he had no family members still alive or still interested in him. He was like a first time buyer on the market- no chain. He was dispensable.

Felton and my Grandma composed themselves on the landing outside. My Grandma pulled a balaclava over her face.

“Aren’t you going to do the same?” she asked as Felton ran a hand through his hair.

“No,” Felton said. “I want to make sure he sees my face.”

My Grandma cocked her gun. Felton checked his was loaded and nodded.

“Let’s do this.”

Felton kicked the door open. My Grandma ran in and fired at the ceiling. She turned into the first open doorway, gun raised.

“OK shit basket!” she yelled, pointing the gun around the room. “I know you’re here.”

From down the hall, they could hear a television blaring. Felton crept passed my Grandma, gun raised, toward the room at the end. The light was off; the blue glow of the T.V. was flashing against the wall. Grandma backed him up, her gun by her ear.

Carlisle fired a shot down the hall. They both leapt aside. He jumped into the doorway, gun in hand and fired again. Felton rolled. He pushed off from his knees and charged down the hall. Carlisle aimed and fired. Felton, arms pumping by his side, the light of the television flashing off his face, leapt. His right foot landed on the hall wall and propelled him into the side of Carlisle. They both tumbled backwards, into the room and over the back of the sofa.

My Grandma leapt in behind them. She watched as they rolled around on the floor, a mass of arms and legs in the T.V. gloom. She raised her gun and fired. The T.V. screen blew up in a white flash and swung off the wall, onto the floor with a crash. Carlisle sat up from the fight.

“That was HD!” he said. He pointed at Grandma. “Who the fuck are you?!”

“Who the fuck are we?” Felton said, standing up. He smoothed back his hair. “We’re the fucking Royal family. Now.” He raised his gun. “Put your hands behind your fucking head.”

And as for me? Are you still wondering what my name is? What course I was taking at University and where I was from? That’s pretty sad. After all I’ve said, is that all you can think about? Ask me a real question. My favourite colour is red, I love lasagne and my all time favourite super hero is Hit Girl.

<http://h2kyhd.tumblr.com/>