

## One: Ambition

...and I had always known it was going to be this way. There's a growing disaffection in me as she sits on my face and I eat her out. I'm making slight growling noises like I'm a dog or something, like I'm a big bear, and she's wriggling and giggling; she's squirming as I make sloppy work over it...

My name? My name is not important. What is important is that I am a writer. I am twenty-four years old and only recently published, a fact I am constantly amazed by; daily I have to pinch myself to check I'm not dreaming. For this has always been my dream, to succeed through creativity is my life's ambition. Like everyone, I want to make money, I want to be famous, I want to go down in history as being important, but I want to achieve all that through writing, to be a famous novelist.

My problem is that now I am published, now that I am considered a novelist in my own full standing, an achievement I would have given anything for a year ago, I'm not satisfied; I want more.

More fame, more money, more recognition, more hot sex with models.

For everything that has happened to me, nothing really seems to have changed – I'm not famous, I've made some money, enough to give up work for a while, but I'm not rich, I often sleep with beautiful women but I did that before the book deal (and enjoyed it more than too).

So it is this ambition in me, this need for further success, in my case literary glory, that makes me unhappy. It sickens me and makes me feel empty and alone. It is biggest part of me and yet it is the part I hate the most; I sometimes hate myself.

...and there's this feeling of discontentment as I slurp away. Everything's getting a bit messy and there's saliva smeared over my chin like the glazing from a doughnut on a messy eater. The brunette's still wearing her bra – sheer black and uplifting – that ends the run of delicious tanned skin that ripples up her stomach, concealing, just, the taut abs I had spotted back at the bar...

I had met the girl after the launch party for a new book, mine, a first novel called 'Ambition', something... horrendous.

Sitting with my agent, Cedric, in Penny's Bar, we had ordered champagne and had tried to impress the tan barmaid – blonde, great tits – that he had liked. Cedric had been smiling at her, eyeing her up, his chiselled jawline edged by an crisp, oversize collar, his slightly receding hairline cut short, trimmed and trellised.

Watching the barmaid turn away and serve, Cedric had tried denying how drunk he was, his slurred words and French accent making him near impossible to understand, telling me that he liked the barmaid, that he thought she was hot. In response I had told him he was really wasted and, sipping champagne from a flute, Cedric had attempted to catch the barmaid's attention again.

I had tried pointing out to him that hot, tan barmaids don't go for drunk, French guys twice their age, but had been interrupted when a couple of girls had stumbled into us, trying to get to the bar. One of them had collapsed into me, loaded, fat and blonde, pawing at my lap in an attempt to straighten up, mumbling something. Helping her to her feet, her friend – brunette, good-looking in an obvious way – had smiled at me, her long, brown hair curling and shagging. It had fallen in front of her face, partially covering dull hazelnut eyes. I had motioned to the bartender for some ice water for the blonde friend and the brunette had sat down next to me and said something about how sweet I was.

If all else fails...look bored.

...and there's this growing resentment within me. She's riding my face and coming, her thighs squeezing together and crushing my head. She arcs her back, crying out, her fingers laced through mine, pinning me to richly textured bedsheets and I'm growling still, munching and slurping as she bucks, my tongue making holding patterns on her flanged clit but it's all disconnected from reality, unrelated to feeling, but it's okay. It's not altogether bad...

Introducing herself, the brunette had told me she had been a rebel at school and famous for being wild. She had started to tell me that now she was on her gap year but, not listening, I had turned away and said something disgraceful to Cedric about the barmaid under my breath.

Touching my arm the girl had told me again that she was on her gap year, that she had been schooled at Benenden, that she had been a mischief maker and had gotten into trouble for drinking and smoking, that she had been famous for it and really popular.

When the brunette had asked me where I had lived I had told her, "Off the Fulham Road," and unprompted, she had told me that she lived in Kensington and I had said, "That's nice," and asked her if she had wanted a drink, motioning again to the barmaid.

"I'm a model," the brunette had started to tell me. "That's what I'm doing on my gap year. I've modelled for Burberry."

"Really," I had replied and turned back to Cedric, asking him if he had wanted to get out of there, go somewhere else, maybe try Twisty's.

"Don't you believe me?" The brunette had asked, sullen. "I really am a model. I've modelled three contracts. I was discovered at school."

"Discovered at school?" I had played with the ice in my drink, wiping my hand on a paper napkin. "That's cool."

"You don't you believe I'm a model?"

Looking at her suddenly, my interest piqued for some reason, I had asked her directly, "Is it important that I believe you?"

"What?" She had seemed confused and caught off guard.

I had repeated it for her, speaking slowly and clearly, enunciating every word deliberately, spelling it out. "Is it important to you that I believe that you're a model?"

She had thought for a minute, eyeing the middle distance, and said, "Yes," possibly fazed by the question, and when I had asked, "Why?" she had not responded and I had turned and ordered another Absolut, letting her confusion wash over me in an awesome wave.

...and now there starts a feeling of total boredom as I continue to munch away. The brunette from the bar is crying out like a cat, like a tiger, like something feral and out of control. She readjusts herself on the bed to place smoky, pouty lips over my cock, using it to lozenge her deepest, darkest throat, giving me a feeling similar to the buzz, similar to the warm elation, that had infected me for moments during the launch tonight. It had been like a birthday party but better; people had been congratulating me not because for simply running out the clock on another year but for actually doing something – which had been weird...

Leaving the book launch with Cedric, we had grabbed cabs to Penny's on the Fulham Road, bundling in past the doormen, already slightly wasted, his hand on my back, guiding me, repeating his mantra over and over about how successful the night had been, about what a good impression people had had of me. He had not mentioned the book once.

Later, inside Penny's, bored with the conversation, Cedric had left me talking to the model at the bar and had disappeared off to try and score some coke from a guy he had spotted in a corner booth, mumbling something under his breath.

Dazed-looking, the brunette had asked me what I did and I had told her that I was a writer, naming the book, telling her it was my first novel, that we had been to the launch party tonight, that she had just met my agent, alluding to Cedric, waving at his departing form, his dark blue suit, still the Gallic jawline.

Looking interested for a moment, the girl had asked me what the book was about and deadpan, in an even tone, I had replied, teasing, "You've not heard of it?"

Confused again, the brunette had shifted on her bar stool, barely able to sit up properly. "Wasn't it, um, released tonight?"

"The launch party was tonight," I had confirmed simply, picking up and showing her the copy Cedric had made me sign for him at the launch for some mysterious reason. Sipping champagne, she had said that it was not a flattering photo, ignoring the text.

"The picture on the back cover?" Seeing my confusion, she had added, "You're much, um...older-looking in it."

Growing restless, I had nodded, sighing and looking around, listless from the inevitability.

"So, um, where do you live again?" She had asked again.

...and she takes it all now, the cock, and I marvel at how there's no gagging reflex, thinking maybe she's been trained out of it, taught not to choke – maybe at school at Benenden – behind her boarding house with the rest of the fifth-form class, using bananas, their mothers' stolen vibrator...anything. Maybe though, I'm thinking, she's had a lot of practise, that she's probably chewed on a lot of dick...

Pulling me to one side in Penny's, while the girl had staggered off to the bathroom to do some of the coke he had given her, Cedric had suggested that she had maybe blown her way into the Burberry contract, alluding to her oral prowess over a couple of glasses of Absinthe that he had ordered while we had been alone. He had bet

me she could really suck it and had told me that her school was famous for it as if I hadn't always known this about Benenden girls, hearing long ago that their House Mistress takes them aside at a certain age and shows them the business, honing their skills for future husbands. The complete education. A finishing school for the twentieth first century.

## Two: Party at Rebecca's, Sex with Girl

...and I'm sitting with Freddie at traffic lights on the King's Road. We're on the way to one of Rebecca's parties, an old friend of mine, in Freddie's MG Midget, toy car red and shiny.

Freddie is the guy we'd all want to be if somehow we could get away with it. Freddie is tall and handsome and his family is wealthy but he's an arsehole and he knows it. Freddie worked at a Melbourne swimming pool one summer to 'get ass'. It worked.

"You know gameshows" I ask Freddie, watching him drum absent-mindedly on the steering wheel. "Know the questions the contestants get asked before the start, like, what their hobbies are?"

"Yeah," Freddie says, studying the lights, sounding bored, cut features impassive behind his aviators. "They always say their hobbies are reading and hanging out with friends, going to the cinema, shit like that?"

"Exactly," I nod, watching the twenty-two bus go past, the entire lower deck full of girls that all look the same, half of them still adding make-up, all of them young, all of them blonde, most of them hot.

"What would you say?" I turn back to Freddie. "If you were to go on a gameshow?"

"Dunno," Freddie replies, looking at me, an orange, trucker-style Hooters baseball cap constraining his wild, unruly black hair, matt black and sticking out from under. "Mate, can't really imagine being on one. Not really my style. I'd probably say the same boring shit as everybody else. That in my spare time I do a lot of reading or something. Talk about my acting, y'know? Mention drama school. Try make myself sound interesting."

"You, er, read much?"

"Sort of."

"Dude, last book you read?"

"Dunno. Was a while ago. Shit, can't remember. About submarines or something." Freddie lifts his cap, runs a hand through his hair. "Mate, I'd rather watch a film or...something." He shrugs, still taping on the steering column, an eye on the lights, impatient and distracted.

"So what you're saying is," I glance down at the Observer review section on my lap, "What you're telling me is that if you went on a gameshow tomorrow you'd tell them that one of your hobbies was reading, even though you can't remember the last book you read?"

"Yeah, but like, books aren't the only things you can read," Freddie counters. "I read magazines and newspapers. I mean, I read cereal boxes – that all counts."

The lights change to amber and Freddie puts the MG into gear, waiting for the final shift to green.

"No it doesn't," I tell him, shaking my head incredulously. "When you go on a gameshow and tell everyone that one of your hobbies is reading they expect you to be talking about books – literature, things like that. Not comic books or porno magazines or the back of the bottle of wine you bought in the supermarket. Not the instructions to your new DVD player. They think you mean Charles-fucking-Dickens, William Shakespeare. Y'know? Something with a plot."

"Yeah? So what?" Freddie snaps as the lights go green and we pull away from the crossroads, turning left. "So I don't read books. So big-fucking-deal. What's your point?"

"My point is that if you're prepared to go on national TV and tell people that in your spare time you enjoy reading – which you don't – how many others that say it are lying? How many people on crappy gameshows actually read more often than the occasional paperback on the train? Or the spy novel on the beach, in Spain, on holiday, that they never actually finish?"

"You got me," Freddie says, sighing, adjusting his shades, throwing the MG into third down a deserted sidestreet, the road blazing in the summer heat, light bouncing off bonnets, car insides cooked, the metalwork hot to the touch, searing.

"Cos," I continue. "If they all did actually read books – like, all the time – then they maybe wouldn't get the answers to the questions wrong."

"You're probably right," Freddie says, uninterested, looking over at some girls holding hands in the street, their tan, flip-flopped feet dirty, the road hot and dusty, just some models carrying portfolios, wafting by and looking mean, looking lean, bored-looking.

"So what is the right thing to say? That my hobbies are getting pissed and getting high? That in my spare time I like to spread rumours that probably aren't true? That I like to tell sexist jokes and masturbate when I can't get

laid, that I just generally don't give a shit about anything or anybody else? Should I tell them that on the weekends I like, if at all possible, which it often isn't, to going hunting or shooting? That killing animals makes me feel like a hero, that it makes me feel like a big-fucking-man?"

"At least," I grin, "It would be honest."

"Well, fuck me," Freddie replies, exasperated, looking over at me and laughing. "Mate, you think it's a good idea to be honest all the time?"

"Whatever," I sigh, shrugging and look away, running my hands through my hair, watching dark-skinned girls coming out of a Sloane Square station as we dawdle in traffic, feeling frustrated. "I'm just fed up hearing that all people want are the kind of books that get turned into movies, man. Stuff with mass market appeal."

"People buy chick-lit," Freddie says, checking himself in the mirror, his tan deep and fitting, a prettiness betrayed by his size and shape, good-looking straight up, alpha. "Got to be one of the most pathetic things ever. Written for the neurotic, the self-obsessed and fat. I tell you that Swedish bird I was with used to read that stuff out to me?"

"Inga?"

"No, shit...what was her name?"

I shrug. I'm no help.

"Started with an N?"

"You dated her?"

"Whatever, I fucking loathed it."

"You're a great guy, Freddie."

"Mate, seriously, if that's the standard you're seeking to emulate then I wouldn't fucking bother. Pop fiction is just like pop music, like Hollywood movies. It's commercialised, serialised shit churned out to make money. You just got to get on and do your own thing, mate – fuck the rest of them. They just wanna make some enough to retire and buy the boat, sail round the Greek islands."

Freddie stops, running out of steam and I glance down at the dashboard and see he's doing fifty in a built up area.

I look again at the Observer in my lap...

I had met Freddie when we had both been drunk and waiting in line for the Chinese Movie Theatre in Soho. Somehow we had got to talking.

"You know what Paris Hilton says?" Freddie had asked, grinning at me for no reason.

"Paris Hilton?" I had repeated, confused.

"The heiress."

I had frowned. "What does Paris say?" I had asked, drunk but interested.

"Never get up before ten."

"Right," I had said, tentatively, confused again.

"Never go to bed before three."

"Uh-huh." I had eyed him, suspicious.

"And, 'Learn how to pose.'"

"Pose?"

"And get this," Freddie had said, beaming. "If all else fails...look bored."

I had nodded at these hidden depths.

"...Who are those girls over there?" I ask Robert, motioning at three brunettes talking in the corner. Robert replies that they are models and that they are from Brazil.

Looking around the rest of Rebecca's party, I scan for people I know, for girls, for something half interesting, for anything vaguely sordid going on and I'm not surprised to see Freddie giving chat to a girl who's blonde, young-looking and totally gorgeous. Her trousers are so low slung you can see her hip and the pelvic bone is visible as she's so thin but she's not anorexic, not very anorexic anyway.

Wearing good, black high heels that add maybe three or four inches, she's above shoulder height with Freddie and his jeans are frayed and his shirt tightly striped blue and white, one collar popped. His shirt-tail sticks out from beneath his dark, blue v-neck jumper – classic prep.

"Fill me in," I say to Robert who's sipping from a short, square tumbler, loaded with ice. "Who is she – talking to Freddie?"

"Canadian," Robert says approvingly. "Just in country. Model from the back-of-beyond. Young. Seventeen, eighteen, I think. Why? You like her?"

Expressionless, I look at Robert, and decide to ask him where he found the good vodka. He tells me he'll get me one and, as he turns to leave, Charlie enters from the patio and says, "Hey," moving over to our corner.

"Mate," I say, greeting him with a nod. "Freddie looks like he's zeroing in."

"Yeah." Charlie looks over to where I gesture with my head. "Awesome – nice arse."

I agree, saying, "Nice set too," and then Robert appears, re-emerging with some drinks, and I take one from him, sipping from it, the vodka harsh but mellowed, ice cutting into the clear liquid, creating streams of translucent texture. Jet wash from an aeroplane in a clear, blue sky.

"What should we drink to?" Robert asks campily, limply raising his glass.

Charlie grins. "To honour."

Me: "To being on her?"

Charlie: "To staying on her"

In chorus: "And if you can't come in her...come on-her." We toast and Robert looks perplexed but smiles anyway, just happy to be included in the straight man talk.

"Where's Mark?" I ask, turning to Charlie.

He makes a tugging motion. "Pulled the ripcord."

"Mark left?" Robert asks, visibly concerned.

"Some girl shit," I guess. "Probably crashed and burned."

Charlie shakes his head. "He's got a job interview tomorrow. Some marketing firm or something. Said he wanted to get an early night."

"You sure?" I ask. "When did this happen? Mark didn't say anything to me."

"He got a call today," Charlie shrugs. "Asked him if he wanted to come in tomorrow. Not sure if he even wants it though. I told him to try. Can always turn it down."

"Marketing," Robert says slowly, confused-looking. "Didn't know Mark was...into that?"

"Well, he's not," Charlie says. "I mean, I think his Dad sent him a load of stuff about different jobs. Some online personality and psychological tests. Y'know, to help find out what you'd be good at, what jobs you'd like and shit."

I'm trying to keep one eye on Freddie and the blonde Canadian he's still talking to.

"But it's not his ideal job. Still wants to be a photographer, but he's finding it hard to get much work. Think the marketing thing is a bit of desperation." Charlie adds, "Its pressure from his Father. Mark's doing it to keep the old man happy. Plus," Charlie shrugs, "We all got bills to pay."

I'm nodding like I'm listening but have turned turn my attention to the models in the corner and I'm thinking about how they're in their own little bubble, how the party flows around them, how it's like a zone for models only. A model zone.

I watch as they start chatting to a couple of guys who I'm pretty sure might also be models and the girls flick their hair at them, laughing, the male guys all cheekbones and jawlines, lips set to permanent pout and I'm thinking 'does nobody I hang out with have a proper job?'

I had met Mark in the dark room at Central St Martins during a first year tutorial I had been taking. He had been sullen, ignoring the Freshers in the beginner's class I had been taking to supplement all the creative writing credits I had. Mark had grunted rudely at those in his way and had gotten angry with me for taking too long in the developing tray as he had been desperate to meet a deadline for a glossy magazine he had been freelancing for. He had been hassling us because had claimed he had his own darkroom, lying to them to get the job and escape spending the summer working for his father in the family business, camping out the whole time at St Martins and poncing off them everything from dark room time to photo equipment, hiding in London's easy anonymity.

After he had managed to shoe almost everyone else out, barking at their clumsiness, I had sneaked back to ask him about the young girl he had shot, a picture of her already hung up to dry above our heads. Suddenly animated, Mark had told me she had been a drama student at the college and that he had convinced her that an 'artful' series of pictures would help her portfolio and it had been this lack of depth to Mark's pictures, his total focus on the glossy surface of things, that had interested me initially in him.

"The only thing worse than being bored," Mark had told me, "...is being boring."

...and out of the corner of my eye at the other end of the room I think I see a guy I recognise chatting to a red-head but, trying to get a better look, I lose him in the crowd, disappearing completely. But then somebody taps me on the shoulder and, turning, I see it is the guy.

"Todd."

"Dude," Todd replies, grinning broadly, opening his arms for a hug. "How'ya doing? Good to see ya. How the fuck are ya?"

"Good-good," I say, giving him the once over, checking for obvious signs of deviation, repetition, hesitation.

"You, er, look well," I say and he laughs and grabs me by the shoulders, play wrestling, spilling my drink.

"You shit," Todd says, trying to wipe the vodka from his shirt sleeve. "You little bitch. Don't get your fucking apple juice on my threads asshole. This ain't kindergarten." He smiles like he's only kidding.

"Dry your eyes." I tell him and he laughs and motions over to the makeshift bar where he refills our glasses. He asks me, "So, I hear you're dating again?"

"You hear a lot. Probably cos of those goofball ears of yours." I point at them, moving my head as if to get a better look. "Shit, thought plastic surgery was big in the states. Couldn't they pin those fuckers back?"

Todd smiles and touches his glass to mine, smirking and surveying the room. "Tell me about her, dude. She business class? Big ass? Couldn't fly coach?"

"That's right," I reply tonelessly. "Gotta buy two seats."

"Really?" Todd asks, chuckling. "Shit, man. I'm sorry, bro. That's bad news."

"Never date a brunette."

"Brunette? That's unlike you, man. Thought the gentlemen preferred blondes?"

I smile back, almost grimacing. "Gentleman prefers anything he can lay his hands on."

"I hear ya partner," Todd says sipping his vodka, eyeing two of the Brazilians models that are dancing with each other, pointing out that if they were from Liverpool maybe they'd have their handbags on the floor...

It had been at Rebecca's house, of course, when I had introduced Freddie to Charlie, my best mate from school. It had been deep summer and hot and everyone had been feeling wild and there had been a weird sort of unleashed tension in the room. Charlie had been there with his girlfriend Annabella but when Freddie had started flirting with her it had not bothered Charlie, even when she had flirted back. I had gauged then how serious it must have been between them, the fact that Charlie had not minded Freddie hitting on her, that he had trusted Annabella completely and I had realised for the first time how close they were.

Freddie, sensing this confidence, had seen in Charlie something he could respect and, later, the two of them had ended up in the garden smoking a joint with Mark, the only person I had invited from St Martins and I had found them sitting half enveloped by a hedgerow, out of their minds high, giggling like school girls, tears literally streaming down their faces. I had joined them even though I had not been alone at the party, even though I had been there with someone and had been sharing hosting responsibilities with Rebecca. Sitting down on the cool grass I had taken a huge toke of Mark's joint, playing catch-up, and had caught the tale end of Mark telling a story about one of the famous people he had photographed but had been so completely spazzed out that he had been giggling incoherently through most of it so that we couldn't understand half what he had been saying and were forced to do the same, his laughter setting off a chain reaction in us.

Eventually Annabella had found us outside and had groaned when she had seen the state Charlie had been in, hysterical with laughter and almost completely engulfed by the hedge. She had brought the car round and loaded him up, taking him home before he had done anything else she would regret, leaving Mark and I to continue talking until late, the two of us watching Freddie score with some Eastern European chick that no-one was sure had actually been invited.

Seeing Freddie at work, Mark had complained to me that he found women 'difficult', that they were a 'mystery', and not for the last time I had wondered why he found them such hard work as they clearly liked him.

"...What about you?" I'm asking Todd. "Who you here with? Don't tell me – you got married but are already cheating on your wife with seventeen year old call-girls from Berkshire?"

Todd gives a lurid laugh. "No dude, free as a daisy."

"That's...unlike you?" I say.

"Hate it in London, man. I'm just so tired of dating. It's like going for a fucking job interview. First five minutes they review your social CV then dinner is grilling number one. If they like you, you get a follow up interview. Then if you really play your cards right, a final deciding interview." Todd sighs.

"Maybe, just maybe - if you're really fucking lucky - you might just get laid at the end of three, very trying, dinner-and-a-movie dates with some girl who you really don't like that much. The thing is, by the time you've had all this dinner and watched all these movies, you've learnt all there is to know about her and realise she's an absolute psychotic bitch who'll break your balls and hassle you forever, but who you absolutely, pos-it-ively,

have to fuck because you've spent over five hundred pounds on her and you need to get some pussy somehow."

"Five hundred pounds?"

"Cheaper than a good hooker."

"Uh-huh," I say, raising my eyebrows. "Why not go back to New York?"

"Shit," Todd replies, exasperated. "At least here you can get them drunk. At least here sex might punctuate the dates where you learn about how fucked up they are. Hell, the sex in Britain is crap. British girls want to impress you, don't want you to know that three months into the relationship they'll be letting you fuck them in the ass whilst video-taping it. Strangely they think it would, in some way, make you less likely to go out with them - but at least you don't have to go through the same New-York-Woman bullshit."

"Mate," I say, laughing at him. Am I supposed to feel bad? Hardly. "London has absolutely fucked you."

"Tell me about it." Todd sighs again. "What about you dude? What are you up to? Besides women?"

"Just finished working on a project." I'm sipping the good vodka, chilled to perfection, studying his face over the rim of the glass. "Kinda like, super hush-hush though."

"Yeah?" Todd looks interested maybe and asks "What was it man? You some kinda secret agent? Some like, super-duper James Bond type? You been running gangs of whores? You like, some super-fly pimp or some shit like that? What the fuck is this super hush-hush shit you got going on?"

"Todd, where in New York are you from again? Park Avenue?" I ask and then say seriously, "No, it's something I've been writing. That's all, man."

Todd raises his eyebrows, the pitch of his voice. "That's cool."

I explain, "Just don't want to jinx it by talking about it."

"Yeah?"

"Sure," I say. "I'm up for this first time writers thing. It's kinda a big-fucking-deal. Cash prize and stuff."

"Awesome."

"I'm only long-listed. Whatever. It's all good publicity. I just don't like talking about it too much. Kinda spinning out as is."

"Mate," Todd says, clasping a hand to my shoulder. "I understand. It's like not talking to your pitcher in the middle of a no-hitter."

I tell him that he knows that I hate baseball. Moving off the subject, I say, "Seriously, I can't believe you're not seeing someone."

"Dude," he shoots back. "It's not like I don't have certain situations with various young ladies. It's just I'm between girlfriends."

"My favourite position," I say and he grins...

The Summer before my graduating year I had traded the student favelas of Camden and St Martins for the leafy burbs of West Hampstead, camping out in Freddie's spare room, the flat supplied by his father for the duration of acting school, parental love shown through tenancy and trust funds.

We had spent that whole summer watching cricket, full days flopped out on his sofa in front of the TV in the quiet pub across the street while Freddie had cut line after line of coke in the bathroom, the landlord turning a blind eye to the powdery residue left on his upper lip. Freddie, of course, had bankrolled the whole operation, buying all the drinks, the drugs, paying for what food we ate, letting me sponge off on his father's generosity while I had desperately tried to finish my book, working on it in the late mornings and afternoons as Freddie had slept of the excessive binges of the night before, nursing a hangover continually and always complaining about how shattered he was.

That whole summer nameless, faceless girls had floated around the apartment. Strange oriental-looking prostitutes had turned up in the dead of the night, sometimes naked underneath long overcoats, and Freddie had always made me answer the door to let them in, shepherding them to his room, sometimes in gangs of two and three, sometimes arriving together, sometimes not.

Working on the book had kept me from Mark and Charlie, utter poverty making me reliant on Freddie, his pad and his cash. I had stayed up late, night after night, wired on the strong coffee I had made on his espresso machine, freaked out by the sounds coming Freddie's room, the walls wafer thin. I had tried blocking it all out with the sound of the printer spooling draft after draft, each one edited by hand, insane pencil scribbling scrawled across the page, always trying to get the prose flatter, the dialogue sharper, the story tighter, more woven, interlaced. I had fretted constantly to myself, pacing the small room I had commandeered, muttering out loud, always fearing the worst, despairing totally, lacking a mentor, completely unable to show it to anyone, needing some kind of critical appraisal, to divest myself of it.

That whole summer I had totally tortured myself.

“...Thing about London in the summer, dude, the thing about London Town, is that it is literally crawling with young, beautiful babies. Young, single, successful pieces of poosy all living on the same tiny block as you. Same fucken square mile, dude.”

“Uh-huh,” I’m saying, refilling my glass, wondering where’s he’s going with this, how I’m going to get out of this conversation.

“The thing is,” Todd continues, “A lot people in London are single. You get married, you have kids, you move out. Even if you continue to work there and socialise in the city. I mean, shit, who fucking wants to raise their kids in Zone One? What people want is a house and a garden for their families, man. Not some flat in Mayfair. Not a studio in Soho. Not even an up and down in Holland Park. The city is a very young place. You want someplace to raise a family, someplace nice, we’re talking a Chelsea Rockpile. That shit’s not cheap. Your money don’t buy you a whole lot of house in SW10, man. Even big bucks don’t spread very far.”

Todd pauses, looking around, sipping his drink, and tries to remember his point. “So I’m in this city with all these beautiful, young women running around. All of them desperate to get married. I mean, dating is a bitch.”

“Sounds like,” I say and he smiles, something edged into his features, a weariness behind his smile. Todd looks lost but that does not please me as much as I would have thought, it does not help me out any.

“Dude, you don’t even know,” Todd’s telling me. “There are unlimited possibilities. You name it, London has it, man. It’s constantly changing. Constantly evolving. Reevolving. You can’t find a girl you like this year? Not a problem. Just wait for the fresh boat from Paris, or from Rio, or from like, Uzbekistan.”

“Don’t, er, like the locals?” I ask, trying to think of something to say to this.

“British Girls?” Todd spazzes out – spare me. “They’re too uptight. You’re just asking for trouble.”

“Uh-huh?”

“And with all this choice, all these decisions to make, with all these women to meet, you can’t pick one. You can’t settle on one. It’s why every person in this city is so fucked up, man. There’s too much choice. How can you be sure about just one when there are millions others out there?” Todd sips his vodka as if to let me consider the question.

“There are all these young, beautiful women working, living and sleeping on the same mound of earth.” Todd rolls on, oblivious to me, “I mean, shit, it’s not like living in a small town where everybody marries their high school sweetheart before they hit twenty-five. Cos if you don’t snap her up fast somebody else will. London’s the direct opposite to that, man. Too much choice. It’s why you get guys in their forties and fifties who are still single. Why get tied down when there’s all this fluff running around? Shit, if you’re a guy the dating pool gets bigger the older you get. Rich old guys are considered a catch. A rich old woman? No-fucking-way, dude.”

“How insightful,” I say and sip heavily on the Finlandia I found. “But I’d rather have too much choice than be stuck in Bumblefuck, Nowhere with no alternative to the fat, ugly girl that nobody wants.”

“Buddy,” Todd says, gesturing expansively. “Don’t get me wrong. I fucking love it. But it’s costly, see? I mean, when you choose one of those hot, little bitches what happens? What do you lose?”

“Fuck knows.” I shrug. “The will to live?”

“Pal, you loose the opportunity of fucking other women. Dude, the cost of sleeping with one hot piece of ass is that you can’t be balling other hot pieces of ass at the same time. You forgo the opportunity to fuck her friends, her neighbours, man. When you settle down with a girl you pay the opportunity cost of scoring with other chicks, the one living in the flat across the street, the total hardbodies you’d just love to jump...”

“—Why you have to bring some pseudo social science into this?” I ask, scanning the room for Freddie, desperate now to end the conversation.

Todd says, “Just saying that monogamy’s too costly. It’s just too cruel. I mean, there are like, all lot of hot girls in town and I intend to fuck every last one of them. How am I going to do that if I’m not ruthless about it?

Scientifically, mathematically, we’re saying you’d have to be like, screwing a hundred a day.”

“What,” I say, trying to control my face, thinking logistics. “That would make your dick bleed. Seriously. Your cock would chafe, it’d go raw and bleed. You ever see that documentary about the first Five Hundred Guy Gangbang? This pornstar was supposed to screw all these guys so they were told beforehand not to put their fingers inside her. Producer was worried she’d get cut from all those fingernails.”

“Nasty,” Todd says, making a face like the sick fuck never heard of it.

I agree. “Yeah but she still started bleeding internally just from all the fucking. She never got close to her target.”

“Shit, man,” Todd says, really a little disgusted maybe.

“So, even if you could find a hundred girls a day that would fuck you,” I say. “And you did it every day for a hundred years, and you didn’t have to worry about your dick going raw, which it would. That would still not be all the girls in town, man,” I say, adding extra stress to the ‘man’. “It would still be considerably less than half.”

“That’s depressing,” Todd says, clearly deflated.

I nod. "Plus, if over those hundred years the population is constantly in a state of flux, like you point out, you'd have to screw even more than that to say you'd balled every girl in the city."

"Fuck. That's so wack. That's so...depressing."

I nod, look around, consider how little it matters...

Things we did one weekend the month before graduation: Visited Charlie at Cambridge with Freddie and Mark, punted down the Cam drunk, hung out in the Pitt Club, smoked weed on some guy's battlements at Trinity College, met an Italian Count called Mikele who liked to throw bottles of wine at walls while wearing a wife-beater, teased Christians wearing College scarves, chatted up girls wearing Cambridge University Netball Team t-shirts and pointed out the moniker, read toilet graffiti that said, "Sex with Brian Harvey equals bad aids." The whole weekend we had stayed at Charlie's flat on the Bateman Road and once, high, visited the 'Reality Check Point', the words 'Reality Check Point' carved into the lamppost in the middle of the park, supposedly marking the boundary between the University and the Real World. In the evenings I had found myself feeling self-destructive, one night hanging around in the Hawks Club and getting head from a girl I met in there who had been a Blue-tac – she told me that she liked to sleep with University Blues. I had made faces while she unbuttoned me – she had not been very good-looking, probably part of the swim team, although I never asked. On the last night in town we had gone to one of the many Black-Tie Balls and Charlie had fallen through decorative playing cards that had been part of the Alice In Wonderland theme and, drinking too much by the river's edge, Freddie had proposed that we feed champagne cut with ecstasy to some first year theology majors but we had decided against it, releasing that there were no good-looking girls in Cambridge so there was no point, and left.

... and I left Rebecca's party early with Charlie, Robert and a girl – not one of the Brazilian models but a friend of Rebecca's – and she's sitting on my bed next to me, drunk, her hand under the covers, gently massaging my thigh.

At this point I'm pretty sure that everyone else in the room must have noticed what she's doing but neither Charlie or Robert say or do anything out of the ordinary which I guess is because they're all so wasted that they can't tell what she's up to. I keep thinking that the expressions on my face should give me away as every time she catches the tip of my penis I shudder and even though the girl, who I don't really know, isn't really my type. She is, however, still completely fuckable; she's tan and has a tight, little arse with big, full tits despite being pretty skinny. So all I can think about, as she strokes me, is how to get Charlie and Robert out of my room, both of them drunk and very high, the pair of them looking a little white from mixing too much booze and weed.

"So, what did you think of the party?" The girl drunkenly asks Charlie, who mumbles something as he tries to get comfortable on the sofa in my room, annoying me; I wish he would leave.

"It was ok," Robert volunteers, sounding spaced. "I mean, I liked it and everything, but God, why did all those ugly girls in togas show up? Totally destroyed the harmony of the party. I mean, there should be a rule, no ugly girls allowed in revealing clothing."

The girl is still rubbing my thigh absently under the sheets and I'm spinning out, not really remembering anything about togas. I wonder how Freddie got on with the Canadian chick.

"But Robert, aren't you...gay?" The girl asks, loaded and confused.

"Uh!" Robert squeals. "How can you say that! Uh! Me? Gay? Are you high? Are you totally...uh....like, on something? Sweetie, I told you I fancied you. Uh!"

Rubbing his eyes on the sofa next to him, Charlie mumbles something about Robert being a fag and blows him a kiss, which I imagine is supposed to be mocking or something, but as I'm rock hard and the girl is secretly starting to pull me off, I don't really give a shit either way.

"I'm really tired," I announce and pretend to stifle a yawn, trying to ESP a message to the guys on the sofa, get them to leave.

Taking the hint and getting up from the sofa, Charlie says that he's got the munchies and needs a taco and Robert follows him out of the room, confused, asking, "Where are you going to get a taco at this time in the morning...?"

In June I had spent time looking for a place to live with Freddie and Mark – Freddie's father stumping up the cash for the house – looking at properties mostly around Chelsea, Fulham, Kensington, anywhere in West London, just not Shepherd's Bush. Charlie had tagged along whenever he had not been rehearsing or getting high with his band but usually Freddie had been unable to make up his mind, nearly always hung over from a heavy session the night before.

Before moving in we had stayed with different friends but had been together the whole time, cruising around in Freddie's Landrover – 'borrowed' from his Father – and just checking out a lot of girls on the street. Freddie had sometimes pretended to be a record company scout, getting them to sing for us on the hot and dusty streets corners off the Fulham Road, hitting on Australian backpacker chicks that had needed a place to stay for the night, Mark, never without a camera round his neck, had taken hundreds of photos of them, sitting in the back of the Landrover quietly, shutter whizzing, chewing through film.

That whole month we had talked about getting out of London and going somewhere. Charlie had been thinking: Amsterdam, Mark: Prague, Freddie: Warsaw, but it had never happened. Not once in the whole of June did any one of us go south of the river or further east than Sloane Square. Never at any point did we consider straying North of Hyde Park or go anywhere the District Line could not take us. It had been as if there had been an invisible barrier hemming us in, confining us to South West London.

It had also been the time that Cedric had started calling me more frequently, the launch of the book getting really close, the hype around it getting out of control. Cedric had repeatedly pressed me for any new gossip I had had, the girls I had slept with, the ones I wanted to date, telling me the excitement about the book was making him hard, that he was getting tangible amounts of sexual tension from the publicity. I had done kegels.

... and after Charlie closes the door to my room I grab the girl by the waist, pinning her to my bed, telling her she's a very naughty little girl, asking if she knows what happens to naughty, little, cock teases?

"No," the girl giggles, still wasted. "What happens to bad girls like me?"

"They," I say roughly, wondering if she's clean, bringing my face close to hers, looming large, grinning through gritted teeth, "Get spanked," and she squeals as I put her over my knee, pinning her down again, using my weight to make sure she can't wriggle free. She squirms playfully but I hold her steady, and whip the flip-flop off her right foot, her legs flailing in mock protest, right foot bare, wriggling and giggling. I use it to spank her little bottom, still holding her over my lap as she squeals and struggles, the rubber making a satisfying sound across the taut jeans. We must be audible in Mark's room because I think I hear him calling out, "Spank it! Yeah! Spank that bitch!" but it may just be that he's masturbating over Eastern European porn, something from the Czech Republic perhaps.

"Think you're so clever, don't you," I say through gritted teeth. "Coming in here, putting your hand under the covers. You liked stroking my crotch didn't you?"

The girl squeals, eyes closed, as she struggles playfully. "What are you going to do now? What are you going to do to me?" She's breathless and excited.

I tell her she's gonna get fucked, hard, and ask if she likes that, calling her a naughty girl again.

"Yes, fuck me." She giggles. "I want to get...fucked."

I let her rise from my lap and she throws her weight forward onto me, kissing me hard on the mouth and unbuttoning her white blouse to reveal bra-less, golden breasts with no trace of tan-line. I'm thinking, 'awesome, she must sunbathe in the buff', and slide put my hand up her skirt, which is white and frilly, to remove her panties, but there are none, which I like, a lot, and a new sensation takes over when I realise that she's totally shaved, not even a landing strip, or a bikini wax, but totally trim, and my hand goes straight to it, resting my thumb next to her pussy, letting her know that it's there, that her body should start producing lubricant; although she's already a little wet, I hate going in dry. Kissing me viciously her technique is unusually toothy; she likes to playfully bite my lower lip and I let her as she's a bit of an animal, a wild horse I'm determined to break, and when she's definitely wet enough I lay her down on the bed next to me and remove her skirt, slipping in my middle finger with the palm upturned, slowly, feeling its way in the dark. At first I just put in the top inch and I know it's good because she holds her breath and I just leave it there for a moment, using my right hand to brush the hair from her face as we kiss, still aggressive, still a little toothy but good, and I move my finger inside still deeper, another inch or so, and she gasps audibly when I apply pressure, curling the finger back toward my open palm, pressing that button, hitting the spot, and the more pressure I apply the more she arcs her back and the deeper her breathing becomes, and as I start to motion with the finger, in a beckoning kind of way, she closes her eyes and tilts her head backwards fully, gasping with every pulse. She is very wet now.

"You like that?" I ask. "You like it when I do that?" But she doesn't respond other than to moan, nodding her head, eyes still closed, breathing still irregular.

Slick from her insides, I remove my middle finger and return it with the index, shifting my position slightly, starting to apply pressure with both, gripping her vagina like a bowling ball, and she lets out a squeal, her hips moving up off the bed, moving her pussy up to meet my hand, her eyes tightly shut, a sort of grimaced expression on her face as she bites her lower lip, her hands exploring the bed, unable to find a resting place as I start to flex both fingers and she writhes, squealing, and gasping, touching me constantly, pinching the flesh on

my arms and shoulders, grabbing at me, whimpering as I pick up the tempo, faster, faster – deeper, deeper, stronger pressure, and her breathing becomes these short, ragged punctuations. Screwing her face up into a ball, her cheeks flush and red, she’s convulsing as I squeeze hard inside of her, losing all control as I really start going for it, the vigour causing her to shake up and down, crying something so guttural sounding I can’t really tell, spasming then lying still, a sheen of perspiration over her face and forehead, totally covering her chest and heaving breasts, her breathing like she’s just run a marathon, panting, looking totally spent.

The girl opens her eyes and looks up into my face, her cheeks still red, still flush and hot. She murmurs, “I want you to come inside me.”

“All in good time.” I whisper, grinning then kissing her ears, nibbling on the lobe as she squirms a little more...

The weekend we had moved in we had all gone for breakfast, Freddie choosing a café off the Fulham Road near our flat, the inner walls stained yellow like the teeth of the late morning clientele, cracks in the plaster running down from the ceiling.

Mark had flopped the Observer in front of me but his fingers, long and lean, had lingered for a moment on the rough surfaces of the print. His voice deep and tone serious, he had inquired, “You seen this?”

Annoyed, I had told him that I had, and Freddie had drunk his coffee and chewed on his bacon roll, melted butter oozing onto his plate. Looking up, Freddie had asked what it was, his bloodshot eyes betraying an advanced hangover, grin permanently fixed in place, devilish and playful, teeth tearing through the roll, cut features straining.

Mark had told him that it was the latest speculation in the Observer on the book awards, taking the ketchup from beside the wall and letting the thick, red, sauce drop slowly onto the bacon below. “This guy...” Mark had tapped the paper. “...has tipped you as a possible contender.”

Freddie had made interested noises, glancing over the text and mumbling slightly, a piece of toast between his teeth. “There a photo?”

I had told Freddie that there wasn’t, that it was just a filler, just a round up piece, nothing to possibly get excited about. Not even a little bit.

“But the dude said he thinks you have a chance?” Freddie had eyed me suspiciously.

“He said that and like, a whole bunch of other things.” I had replied, trying not to show my anxiety, that I had been on the edge.

“Whatever, mate.” Freddie had found the page, checking again over it. “Can’t hurt can it? You’re doing well, that’s good news, man. You should be happy. You should be fucking thrilled.”

“Exactly.” Mark had stabbed the air with his spoon.

...and as I start to flex my fingers again, still inside her, she gets hot. She whimpers that she wants me to fuck her and I tell her that I love it when she begs, squeezing hard, deep within her, grinning as she grunts heavily, expelling air, and she moves her hand down, searching for my crotch, feeling for my penis, trying to remove my sleeping shorts and prise it from my pants.

“Come inside me,” she says, demands, and I pull my hand out of her slowly, slipping my shorts off. I position myself above her, preparing for entry, then slip it in a little but she stops me. “Wait - not without a condom.”

“Okay,” I say, leaning over her and fishing into my jeans on the floor beside the bed, removing my wallet from a front pocket, taking out two condoms, slivery packaging on one side, see-thru on the other.

“You have a choice,” I tell her. “Green or yellow.”

She looks at them. “Never had a green one before.”

Biting the packaging open I pull out the rubber and she rolls it over my cock expertly, green latex engulfing the veins and contours, telling me that it looks like the Incredible Hulk’s penis and I smile and say, deadpan, that she wouldn’t like it when it gets angry, pushing her down onto the bed roughly...

“You remember when you were a kid growing up?” I had asked the guys when we had been walking back to our flat, the London air hot and sticky, no respite. “Remember when you first started thinking seriously about girls? Some girl you really liked.”

“Krista Smith,” Mark had told us. “Lived next door. Year above. Used to lie out in her garden in the summer and sunbathe all day long. My room over-looked it. Used to spend ages just watching her tan.”

“You sad bastard.” Freddie had said, passing a couple of young looking girls, giggling to each other, blushing. I had asked if Krista had had a boyfriend.

“Sure,” Mark had replied, looking wistful, his eyes flitting up like he had been accessing memory. “Some guy who lived nearby. We were fifteen, I think. He was like, nineteen or twenty. Worked some shitty job but he had

a car. Not anything special but, y'know, a car's a car. Sometimes, when her parents were out, he would go round and I swear I could hear them at it."

"A real squealer?" Freddie had asked, grinning and passing a wandering drunk, the guy's torn Barbour jacket stained with something, a bottle of supermarket label whiskey poking out the pocket. The bum had been stumbling along the Fulham Road, looking lost, reeking of stale sweat and cheap liquor.

"Shit yeah," Mark had replied. "She loved it."

I had murmured that Mark must have been jealous as shit of that guy.

"Remember thinking that I couldn't wait to be his age," Mark had said, checking out a passing girl, a hint of recognition on his face. "Get a car and have a hot, young girlfriend."

"Girls like that always date older guys," Freddie had said. "Just want to get naked in the back of some dudes car, get that free taxi service."

Mark had nodded, obviously thinking about it, but had told us that when he had eventually got to nineteen he didn't want to bother with the fifteen year olds, however hot, complaining that they were just too young, too fucking precious."

"I hear that," Freddie had said as we had passed a girl wearing cut-off jeans, her midriff exposed, possibly fifteen, sixteen, the word 'juicy' printed on the denim, right on the arse.

...and lying on top of her, kissing effortlessly, our lips are locked, and I guide the tip of my penis to the vagina's outer wall, pushing against it gently until the barrier collapses under the pressure and already she's shifting her weight on the bed and rotating her hips around the shaft, murmuring when I delve further and I can feel the lubricant, the wet stickiness she's generating as I slowly put the full length in and she gasps loudly, a full, open mouth, her eyes wide, a look of surprise playing across her face, the whole cock filling her, and when I expand the muscle itself, flexing to let more blood flow into it, busting with sanguine, she squeaks, tiny and almost imperceptible. Suffer baby...suffer.

I leave it in for a moment before starting to thrust, slow, deep and penetrating, and she's screwing her face up in concentration as I build a rhythm, her index finger in her mouth, teeth biting down on it, sucking on the tip, a pacifier, her face still glimmering with perspiration as I start to pound her, hard and fast – serious fucking – our breathing ragged again, like machine gun fire, her hips coming to meet mine, ruining my momentum, annoying me, throwing my concentration. It's dark in the room and I can't see a whole lot of her face or body in too much detail so I close my eyes and try to think of the last porno I watched, the last blonde bimbo I saw getting triply penetrated by three long haired dudes from California called Brad or Steve or something. Jenna Jameson, Brianna Banks, Stacey Valentine, Rockie Roads, Vivienne St Claire, Devon, Houston, Celeste, but the girl's bucking under me, her movement and noise disturbing me.

Shut the fuck up bitch, I'm trying to fuck you.

When she climaxes, tight vagina muscles clamp down on my penis like the vice on a workshop bench and prevents me from continuing but I can't be bothered to fake it so I withdraw and roll off, unspent, and she looks at me uncertainly so I tell her that it doesn't matter and that I'm not that bothered.

But I am and it does.

Breathless, the girl asks, "You didn't...?"

"It doesn't matter," I say again, rolling off to one side of the mattress, telling her that it's not a big deal, looking at my watch, and when she seems to finally grasp the situation she looks a little upset, like I've wounded her somehow, like I've done something wrong, that it's my fault.

"What about...you know?" She asks, embarrassed. "There something wrong? Is there anything, y'know, I can... do?"

"No. It's cool," I reply, telling her not to feel bad about it or anything, that it wasn't her fault. "It's okay."

"Are you sure I can't do anything?"

"Whatever." I shrug and lie back onto the bed, a little beat, saying that if she thinks she can do something then to be my guest, show me something new, but just not to get her hopes up; she seems hurt, offended by this too.

"What do you mean?" She asks.

"Nothing. Whatever," I say. "If you wanna do something, go ahead."

Half-heartedly, she moves down and removes the green rubber, placing her mouth over my cock, and I get a view of her ass and pussy which in the dim light I imagine wink at me as she gives me an okay blowjob which, like her kisses, is a little toothy but she works hard, a real pro, and without warning I blow my load and she takes most of it in the mouth but some catches her in the face and hair and maybe a little hits her in the eye which is unfortunate but also a little cool...

...and Charlie's asking me if I think I've got a chance of winning. We're settling into our seats outside the Café Monmartre, ordering Citron Pressés, the wicker seats creaking satisfactorily under our weight in the sunshine. The waitress turns to fetch our order and I run my hands through my hair, an uneasy smile on my face, and contemplate Charlie's question as he smiles at a girl walking past, checking him out. She looks away and blushes, the sun beating on her back...

When I had first visited Forrest Publishing I had expected something more grandiose, a whole building to themselves maybe, something fabulous and showy, but while their Green Park office had been expensive-looking and had had a great location, it had never made the hairs on the back of my neck stand up or given me the goosebumps.

By that Spring afternoon though I was well used to it and when the lift doors had opened onto the seventh floor, the wood panelled lobby had given way to a small open-plan office, the cubicles all Ikea-like furnishings and Scandinavian pine; it could have been anywhere. Out of sight a phone had been ringing itself off the hook and I had looked around, trying to spot anyone, glimpse a sign of life, but it had been Friday lunchtime and warm outside, the staff probably sunning themselves in the park across the street with a sandwich from the Italian deli and a paperback. All pre-holiday conditioning and post-holiday top-ups.

Advancing into the office I had recognised the visitor's lounge with plush, red leather sofas and a coffee table but the effect had been spoilt by the morning mail strewn across the sofas, many of the packages unsolicited submissions sent into the small imprint, page after page of unfulfilled promise lying unopened on the red leather. Seeing them had filled me with sadness and I had felt a slight twinge and had been tempted to call out to see if anybody had been around but then, Forrest Junior, my editor, had emerged from around the corner, saying, "Great. You're here."

Forrest had led me into a large corner office where the furniture and arrangements had been covered in paper, manuscripts piled high in stacks on the floor, catalogues and magazines, old and new, read and unread, heaped onto a table in the corner.

"I'd like for you to meet my father." Forrest Junior had introduced us and I had noticed the family resemblance, shaking hands and noting his father's awesome Captain Birdseye beard and that Cedric had already been in there with them, looking pleased and sober.

"You know why you're here?" Forrest Junior had half asked, offering a seat on one of the sofas in the centre of the office next to Cedric while his father had poured coffee from a cafetiere.

...and the drinks arrive in the Café Monmartre, Citron Pressés, and sachets of sugar are stirred into the pale green juice, and I'm telling Charlie that there's a new sponsor for the prize, that there are questions, that people are always speculating whether or not the Debut Prize should be exclusively for books already published or if ones that are about to be published are eligible. Hesitantly, I admit that my chances are completely dependant on the judges and that they change from year to year. Ultimately I'm forced to concede that Forrest and Cedric seem to think this year is pretty favourable for me but that I checked the paper yesterday and saw that nobody's giving me good odds.

I say, "Don't risk your pocket money on me just yet..."

"There a problem?" I had asked Forrest Junior in the office, tensing up, guessing, taking a wild swing. Stirring my coffee, adding sugar, I had paused, looking from father to son and back again. Both had been sitting opposite me on the soft, leather upholstery. "Is something, um...wrong?"

"No-no," Forrest Junior had said quickly, smiling. "In fact we've got some rather good news. It's why Father's here."

"You know that the delays to publication meant we missed this year's submission deadline for The Debut Prize?" Forrest Senior had asked, pouring milk into his coffee, his accent different from his sons, more Mid-Atlantic. "Otherwise, you know we would have put you up for consideration?"

"Yeah," I had said slowly, almost questioningly, a creeping unease growing, a tingling feeling in my spine.

"Well," Forrest Senior had started, "Despite that, one of the judges on the committee has called in your novel."

"You understand how...unusual this is," Forrest Junior had broken in, seeming frazzled. "He wants them to have a look at it."

"If we're honest," Senior had added, bookish-looking in a spotted bow tie. "We're quite surprised, of course, but this doesn't really mean anything." He had picked up an advance copy, playing with it, running a hand down the spine.

Beware of too many clichés.

...and Charlie sips his Pressé and winces slightly at the tartness of the citron, the crushed lemon essence; he's not added enough sugar. "What do you mean about the judges? How are they favourable to you? Surely you've the same chance as everyone else?" And for a moment I start thinking how strange it is that it's Charlie I confide in for this stuff and wonder why it's not Freddie, especially as Charlie hardly ever talks about himself, his band, his music writing; Charlie rarely even mentions Annabella even though it was me that introduced him to her, she'd gone to Benenden with Rebecca and Charlie was her first pull.

"Mate," I say shrugging, my turn to look around and check out a couple of tan girls that waft down the street wearing worn flip-flops and cut-off jeans, one of them so brown her freckles have joined up, her fair skin doused in light. "I really don't know. Apparently one of the judges is a young comedian. He pressed to get me onto the Longlist."

I begin to tell him how happy I am just to get this far, that being on the Longlist itself is pretty-fucking-good, that I'm just relieved there's been nothing too bad in the trade papers, that normally there's a lot of scrapping. "It comes from all sides, goes in all directions. Everybody throws their two pence in. About the judges, about the whole process, about what sort of book should win. There's a lot of huffing and puffing. There's always tears before bedtime. It's not a big deal," I tell him, sipping my Pressé, secretly fearing bad press, petrified of failure. "Unless it's you they're huffing and puffing about."

"And what would you do with the money?" Charlie asks suddenly, on a tangent. "What is it? Two grand for the winner? Nice pile of cash man. Some serious stuff could be done with money like that."

"Dude, don't I know it," I admit, unbuttoning my shirt a notch, sweating in the heat of the day. "I think about it a lot. Everything else seems hazy, what the award would be like, any media attention, the glory...whatever. It just seems so far away, inaccessible...unreal. The money though," I pause again, thinking about a glass of water, something less sticky. "The money is something I can relate to man. I know what two large is. I know what it can buy. I've already spent it in my head a hundred times over. As for the rest, I guess it comes when it comes, if it comes, y'know?" If all else fails, look bored.

"Yeah," Charlie says, half teasing. "But are you going to win?"

"Not a chance," I tell him, aping good nature, staring off into the middle distance, thinking about which ex-girlfriends would suddenly remember my phone number if I did, how many long forgotten mates from school would get in touch, would want to go for beers, wondering if She would call...

Standing over by the office window Forrest Senior had said, "Either way we're going to take another look at it. Run another eye over what we can do. It may delay publication further but that may be the best thing given what the situation might mean."

Watching him lace his hands together I had wondered exactly what the situation did mean.

"For now though, all we can do is keep our fingers crossed while the judges decide. We might get lucky. Takes a few months. There might be something in the press. It could help us out with some publicity."

"Yes," I had said slowly, almost to myself, whispering. "I imagine it could."

#### Four: Charlie's Gig

...and Penny's bar is rammed with people, nervous chatter and high pitched voices. Everyone's looking around the room, checking out the 'scene', eyeing each other. Where is the centre?

Charlie's band is playing tonight and it's the first time I've seen them live as we've always been kept separate and there's quite a large crowd gathered, the bar packed with South Africans for some reason, but I can still spot sections of Penny's regulars.

"Mate," Freddie says, elbowing his way over through a sea of people. "It's butt-fuck city in here."

"It's an arse-rape village, man," Mark agrees, jostled on all sides. "It's fucking heaving." Mark turns to me.

"Dude, when did you get here?"

"Not long," I say, shielding my drink from the scrum, deciding not to mention that I was here all afternoon with Cedric, that he'd been hassling me for anything I've written for my second book, prepping me for possible interviews and just generally raising the state of tension.

"Okay." Mark prepares to dive into the swirling mass. "I'm heading to the bar," he calls as he moves away, shouting, but I struggle to make him out over the noise and Freddie follows him and I lose them in the crowd.

Turning away, I squeeze past two hot, Dutch-sounding girls, as I head towards the side of the stage where the Merkins are chilling out and see Charlie, sweat shining on his brow, a couple more of the Dutch girls around him, the total rock thing going on. Privately, I wonder whether, as a friend, I'm entitled to a share of the groupies. Is it access all areas?

Charlie sees me. "Mate, you came." I reach him and we hi-five Top Gun style, grunting.

"Mate, not for all the tea in China," I start, "Would I have not been here."

Charlie smiles and forgets the girls for a moment, pulling me away to a quiet corner, looking around. "What a great turn-out."

"Fucking rammed," I agree and he asks me where Mark and Freddie are.

"The bar," I tell him and, nodding, Charlie turns to introduce me to Sid, a Rustafarian, who's on drums.

"Sid's our rhythm man," Charlie tells me. "Without him..."

"—Boy, wittout me yood bee nuttin," Sid interrupts, his voice like coal, an almost Caribbean patois, but he grins me a mouthful of sunbeams to show he's joking. I wonder what he keeps under his Rasta hat, whether I can buy any from him.

"Wha yoo from brudda?" Sid asks me and Charlie turns back to the girls.

I answer Sid and ask him where he's from. "Crinkalwood," Sid tells me.

"Really?" I'm impressed. "Isn't that where the dude from Pulp Fiction is from? The Samuel L Jackson character? Jules?"

Sid looks at me, bemused, and I think maybe he didn't hear me, so I ask, shouting over the crowd, "When did you come out from LA?"

"Nahhh-munn. Aye is not from LA, munn." Sid starts laughing. "Yoo is tinkng of Inglewood? Aye is from Crinkal-wood." Sid looks right at me, big hands gesturing expansively, waiting for me to get it, for me to catch up.

"Crinkalwood's in Land-ann, munn."

"Oh, um, sorry dude," I say and another set of toothy headlights are flashed at me and his hand, a tough, thick hide, reaches out to touch my shirt, fingering the one flicked-up lapel, the half popped collar.

"Aye like your collar, munn," Sid says approvingly, although I wonder. "Fa reel, no joke, munn. It's cool like."

"It's the whole, um, Yin-Yan thing," I explain and Sid raises an eyebrow and gives me a deep chuckle. "Yoo is allrigh brudda." Sid palms me some love. "Yoo is okay..."

Earlier in the summer we had been having lunch with Freddie's parents, Mark, Freddie, Charlie and me wearing jacket and tie: blue blazers and slacks, ties from this type of University, from that kind of school. Freddie's mother had worn a cream dress and a pearl necklace round her tan neck, the skin freckled slightly and soft looking, her hair pulled back into a high bun. She had been sitting next to me, smelling faintly of jasmine - you could tell she used to be hot. Always look at the mother.

"How's Rupert?" Freddie had asked over the menu, but had not really seemed too interested in either his parent's response or his brother's welfare and Freddie's father, Conrad, had shifted in his seat, pursing his lips, distracted, his greying hair short and silky-looking, a seemingly constant three day beard, a slight paunch but still looking twenty years younger than he should.

"He's fine, Fred. We met Stephanie...lovely girl. Wedding plans going well," Conrad had told us, monotone, reading the wine list, scratching his bar tanned face, his apparent disinterest matching Freddie's. "Only a couple of weeks before they're over. Apparently her father's a golfer..." Conrad had trailed off. Like Freddie, not a hint of a Scottish accent.

Smiling at us, Freddie's mother had put her hand on Freddie's. "I take it Frederick told you all about his brother's wedding?" She had smiled again, patting his hand. "We're having it at home. You boys must come. You've never been up to Perthshire have you?"

...and I'm looking for Mark and Freddie in Penny's when I bump into this Californian girl who I met skiing last year. She's looking thinner than I remember, but that could be because it's summer and she's not in her ski suit. Saying hi, we exchange looks, and I check out her tight, black jumper which you can totally see through, a bright pink bra underneath which matches exactly the electric pink, severe, heels that wonderfully highlight her toned calves; her legs are tan and shapely and look deep golden and utterly sheer. It looks like she must have had them waxed within the last half hour – which I know is impossible.

"Hey," I say, obviously checking her out. "You're looking...hot? Never realised you had such good legs. They're totally, um...perfect."

"Oh yuh," she says in a thick San Fernando Valley accent, looking down at them sheepishly. "They only come out when I'm, like, really drunk." Did this girl work in a mall growing up? I can't quite be sure.

"Are you drunk now?" I emphasise the now, leering at her.

"Um, like, a little-bit," she admits, smiling. "I get so flirty when I'm wasted."

"Interesting," I say hoarsely, drawing in and touching her waist, noting the firm ripeness beneath the sweater, the shape and texture of her skirt - tight and short enough that I can see all I want.

"So what are you up to?" I ask.

"Nothing," she says, coquettish. "Just, um, like, hanging with friends and...stuff." She's twisting her torso left and right, playing with her hair, running her hands through the short and choppy, blonde locks.

"Cool," I say. "I'm just looking for some friends of mine. You hear the band playing tonight? The Smurf Merkins?"

She keeps playing with her hair but the swaying stops and she looks down at her feet, the pair sitting perfectly in the little, pink heels, stilettoed to distraction. I consider just how much I want to fuck her – which is a lot.

"Uh-huh," the Cali chick says slowly, using her straw to sip her drink, clear and fizzy, ice and a slice – maybe lime. I imagine bending her over and screwing her from behind and, as she looks up at me, her eyes peering over the rim of her glass, I get a Semi.

"The lead singer, Charlie, is a close friend," I tell her, my mouth going dry. I'm rock hard now.

"Uh-huh?" She says again, a little loaded maybe, and asks me where my friends all are now, and I tell her that Charlie's in the Beer Garden getting high with a couple of Rustafarians he sometimes jams with, that I don't know where Mark is but that Freddie's most likely freebasing in the toilets somewhere, hiding from a girl he started chatting up earlier who turned out not to be – that I think he found it all a little too gender non-specific.

"Cool," she says, leaning in, touching my shoulder, whispering into my ear, buzzing me. "Listen, you'd better give your number. I mean, it'd totally blow if it was like, another six months before we bumped each other again."

"Alright," I say grinning and knowing that whatever happens now – she is next...

After lunch, dessert and coffee over, we had promised Freddie's mother we would all make it up to the wedding and then we had left her and had been taken by Conrad to his Private Members Club in Mayfair. Conrad had ushered us in past the ancient porter, signing us into the red, leather bound guestbook, our sleeves brushing the 'Gentlemen Only' plaque on the way in.

"What'll it be boys?" Conrad had asked as we had settled into dark, plum coloured leather arm chairs, comfortable and old, the leather nearest the large bay windows warped and bleached by the sun's exposure. Freddie had suggested whisky and his had father glanced at his watch like the time of day might have influenced his decision. "Boys? Whisky alright for you?"

We had nodded our heads and Conrad had turned to order large measures from the hovering ancient waiter in a white coat who had noted the request in a notepad, much like the ones used in gentlemen's clothing stores for receipts.

Glancing over to the corner of what was known simply as the 'Big Room', I had noticed two old guys playing chess and sipping a light amber liquid from tumblers, soaking themselves on malt as old as their grandchildren, the styling on their blazers expensive-looking but the material run ragged, their threadbare collars almost hidden beneath mountains of dandruff. Returning, the waiter had blocked my view, balancing five large whiskies on a silver platter, the tray supported with just one hand, and I had wondered how long it had been since he last dropped a glass. Not since nylon, I had figured.

"So boys, tell me," Conrad had started. "How are the ladies treating you all?"

"Charlie's off the market," Freddie had volunteered. "Snatched up a very nice girl. Although he does tend to keep her well away from us. Anyone would think he's ashamed." Freddie had flashed a smile at Charlie, winking.

"Freddie, you're ab-solute-ly right," Charlie had grinned back. "I am ashamed... of you."

Conrad had erupted into laughter. "Fred doesn't keep girlfriends." He had looked at his son, laughter dying.

"Although at his age I wasn't much different. Was ten years his senior before I met his mother." Finishing his drink, Conrad had called over for another round and I had begun to see what kind of session it was going to be, the sort of workout my liver was in for.

...and after Charlie's Gig I can still smell her faint perfume on me, the particles bonded with my clothes, as we sit in Freddy's MG Midget, looking across the square we're parked on at the red bricked building, the car top down due to the warm night, the southerly wind heating the sky, bringing with it a nectar that hangs on the air, the notes of summer. I sit, drinking a bottle of Absolut in the passenger seat, while Freddie, in the driver's seat, is training a pair of binoculars on the building across from us, still a little high from earlier, the collar of his pink shirt is turned up through his navy blue jumper.

"I can't see anything," Freddie tells me and I think it might be because he still has his Aviators on and that it's pitch black outside but I don't say anything about it and take another swig of vodka instead and sitting in the hot night, breathing the traces of perfume, her smell start reminding me of other girls, of previous encounters, and makes me start to think that there isn't anybody I haven't already screwed, had unsatisfactory sex with, that there is no new joy to be obtained, no new intimacy to be shared, that there is no more nourishment.

"What time is it?" Mark asks from behind me, sitting on the boot, pulling on his claret, the red wine partially spilt on his cashmere jumper but it's ok as the v-neck is burgundy anyway and has holes in it.

"Anytime now," Charlie slurs from beside him and says something about it being almost three am but then taps me on the shoulder and passes a joint to me, blowing smoke out of his nostrils. "Ok...so what about Investment Banking?"

Sighing, I take a drag then offer it to Freddie but he doesn't want it as he is still looking through his binoculars, so I hand it to Mark who smokes it in between hits from the wine.

"Long hours," Mark says finally, squinting, smoke bellowing out. "They take people for the analyst programme which lasts two years. At the end they say fuck-you-and-farewell to ninety percent. It's total bullshit."

Freddie turns around to look at Mark, taking his eyes off the building, saying, "What do you mean? It's, like, the best paying job you can get."

"Not for the hours you work," Mark counters, smoke wisping across his face. "Know Peter Gifford? Just started at Goldman? He's working twelve, fourteen hour days, man. Weekends too. He's getting less than minimum wage considering the time he puts in."

"Yeah, but what about the bonuses? They're pretty sweet," Charlie says, his voice raspy like he's smoked way too much.

"All the excess shit has been cut back," Mark replies. "The eighties are over."

"What the fuck do you know about it?" Freddie starts to ask but is interrupted as the fire alarm goes off in the building across the street, a hollow, brittle sound coming from it.

"This is it," Freddie says, looking round at us triumphantly, grabbing the wine from between his legs, taking a big hit. "Here they come." It's weird to see Freddie so excited.

Motioning for Mark to pass me the dying joint, I ask him to roll another one, looking over at the building, still nothing happening; the fire exits remain shut and I begin to wonder if Mark's information is correct, suddenly doubting that the fire drill is for real.

"At least Banking sounds cool," Freddie says in a cloud of smoke; all exhales and secondary lung cancer. "People at least know what it is. It's the perception. If people think you've got a cool job then you do. It's all about image. Investment Banking has a sexy image. Money has...status." He sounds impatient.

"Wall Street," I say quietly, glancing over at the building, at the red brick, watching lights come on in the windows. "That movie made Investment Banking sexy, man."

"Gordon Gecko," Freddy chimes in, grinning, playing with the dashboard, absently tapping a dial. "Greed is good."

"Did more for their image than any wallet stuffed with pink fifties." Mark's nodding. "That slimy lizard made all that shit sexy, man. Made it super-cool. Dude made it animal. Gecko is that film and that film is the image of Investment Banking."

"Nobs." Charlie.

"Wankers." Freddie.

"Thing is," Mark says, his eyes dull, cradling his claret, waiting. "Is banking really that sexy?"

Freddie shrugs and clears his throat to speak but hears a noise and turns back to the building. Looking through his binoculars he announces that he can see people coming out the fire doors and that one is wearing some sort of nurse's uniform and is carrying a clipboard. Charlie mumbles something about moving the car closer to the building but nobody replies so he lights a cigarette and tries to blow a smoke ring but is too drunk and so stops.

Freddie gives commentary: "Alright, I can see one. She's in her nighty."

Lifting up his camera with its powerful telescopic lens, Mark opens the shutter, whirring, snapshots ten a second. "Pink with flowers on," Mark says. "Awesome."

From behind me Charlie says something but I can barely hear what and so I ignore him and reach over to Freddie, motioning for the binoculars. Focusing on the people coming out of the building, I watch the girl with the pink, flowery nighty line up on the street in front of the clipboard nurse, shivering despite the warm evening breeze coming up off the Sahara and continually looking down at her feet. More students start coming out, all of them looking ready for bed, two or three of them really hot; wearing white pyjamas with no shoes. They look soft, unthreatening and disarmed, their bodies pressing through the thin material; you can totally make out the shape of their tits.

"Shit man, I can see nipples," Freddie says, almost too loudly, Mark humming as he fiddles with the focus on the mammoth attachment. Charlie tries to take a look but is so drunk and stoned that he loses balance and falls off the back of the car. Nobody makes to help him; we're all transfixed.

"I'm okay," Charlie says from down on the pavement and Mark finally turns round to help him up, and across the square bodies continue to stream out of the fire exit until there are maybe two or three hundred of them

standing outside on the kerb, all of them youngish, all of them female, all of them definitely under twenty five, none of them wearing very much. As Charlie clatters back into car, he says something again about moving closer but Mark tells him we can't, lighting a cigarette for him before loading some more film.

Asking for the binoculars back, Freddie takes up vigil again, saying, "Someone's been caught at it." Then, grinning, he adds, "She's just come out of the building. Must be the last one."

"Yeah," Mark says, his camera reloaded with film, the shutter spluttering again. "She's with some guy. Doing up his shirt..."

"—Shit, is that...?" Freddie starts. "Fuck, that is Robert — thought he was gay...?"

"—Bollocks," I say. "Give me that thing," which he does and I look out and do actually see Robert.

Mumbling something about Robert perhaps being bisexual, Charlie closes his eyes, sleepy-looking and watching him through the glasses I mutter, "Christ, maybe he is bi."

"Who the fuck cares?" Freddie asks. "So what if the little fag does like girls."

"Chill-the-fuck-out Freddie," Mark replies. "Why don't you just go home and spank the monkey..."

Charlie giggles, his eyes red raw and drooping shut, lying on the boot of the car.

"Whatever," Freddie says, tired-sounding. "At least I have a libido."

"Uh-huh," I say, trying to diffuse the situation, checking over to see if Mark's done taking pictures but then suddenly realise that the nurse with the clipboard has noticed us parked over here and doesn't seem to happy.

"Um, shall we get out of here?" I suggest "Maybe try and find a house party or something? I'm starting to sober up."

And mumbling something about a party in SW6 that he knows about, that the rest of the band might be at, which is not far from here, Charlie lights another cigarette and takes a swig of wine...

Conrad's club had filled up slowly. Retired members who still maintained three or four non-executive board positions in town had shown up for brandy and cigars, entering and spotting old colleagues and friends, greeting each other, slapping backs, arranging games of golf, asking after each other's wives.

"...My advice, play the field," Conrad had been telling us over yet another round, his voice growing louder with each drink, his face more animated, his chat less coherent. "How do you know you've found a good 'un when you've not sampled all that's on offer? Trust me, you'll be glad later that you did." Conrad had paused to imbibe large quantities of Guinness. "If I were of you, boys, I'd decide what sort of girl I liked, the nationality I preferred, and then go live there. Take a year and go on a 'find-a-wife' tour to Sweden. Go to Brazil. Go to Eastern Europe, if that's your fancy. You can afford the time. You're young. Find the ideal girl. There's plenty of time before you need to settle down and start a family."

I had wondered what planet he was living on and whether you could buy tickets, but Conrad had called the waiter over again and ordered us all 'Old No.2' Malt Whiskies which, he had promised, were the Club's best and that they only had supplies to last another year or so. I had asked him why it was called 'Old No.2' and he had told me that when the Club ran low on a whisky, port or claret, they introduced a replacement five years before it ran out so that the membership could have time to make the transition.

"Nobody likes change," Conrad had declared and I had felt myself growing steadily more drunk, the Big Room growing full, the members starting to look more and more alike, identical to each other in almost every way.

"See that guy over there?" I had said in a stage whisper to Charlie, who had been sitting beside me, trying to be discreet but failing. "The one with grey hair that's going bald? Wearing the blazer? Red face and a big, red nose? Hair growing out of his ears?"

"Dude," Charlie had said, leaning in towards me and almost slipping off his chair. "You just described the whole fucking room."

"Exactly," I had said, giggling, and he had burst out laughing, loaded, and then had actually fallen completely off his seat.

...and we push our way in the door of the Party in SW6, squeezing past some people on the stairs that we don't know, and I manage to get a joint off one girl who's so stoned and drunk that she doesn't put up any resistance; she just hands it to me when I ask, sitting there, spaced out.

Inside the hallway is packed with people and, pointing, Mark says, "I hadn't realised we'd stepped back into the eighties," to me when we see a couple of young-looking guys all wearing jeans and blazers with rolled up sleeves. They're standing around talking to girls with big, looped earrings, all of them tan and young, all of them blonde and good-looking, expensively dressed, the atmosphere tense. It feels...heavy? It's too hot; everyone's on edge.

Pushing through the prep school kids on holiday and into the kitchen, we lose Freddie to the crowd as he stops to talk to a girl he knows and Mark starts searching the cupboards for booze while Charlie does the decent thing and tries to find out whose party it is, still completely wasted.

"Check the washing machine," I say to Mark, pointing over at it, and he finds a half bottle of Bombay Sapphire covered in white linen.

"There's no mixer," Mark says, looking around the cluttered counter tops, checking empty bottles for tonic.

"Just have to take it straight," I tell him, making a brave face. "It'll be alright. At least it's not lighter fluid." Mark laughs and we hi-five, both of us completely smashed.

When Charlie doesn't come back we decide to wander out as the kitchen is deserted except for a couple making out in the corner, pushing back past the eighties throwbacks, trying to find the living room or wherever the music's coming from. In the hall we bump into Charlie, who's looking for us, and he tells us that the Party is being held by some girl he knows and that it's her birthday or something.

"Todd's here," Charlie tells me and I groan and see that Mark is not amazingly thrilled about it either.

"Where is the bastard?" Mark asks but Charlie just shrugs and says he hasn't seen him, that he just heard that Todd was around from a number of different people.

"Maybe he's left or something," I say hopefully.

"Dunno," Charlie says, scratching his head, slurring his words, an unlit joint tucked behind an ear. "Someone said they like, saw him five minutes ago or something. Could be in one of the bedrooms?"

Murmuring agreement we head to where the music's playing, probably the living room, but it's hard to tell as there are so many people dancing and the lights have been switched off. Some trancey shit is playing on the sound system and so Mark goes over to try to put something good on. I warn him not to put on any techno, to try and make it something we can maybe dance to, and sharing the Sapphire with Charlie I scan the room, sipping neat from the bottle, recoiling from the taste, trying to get a sense of whether or not it's worth staying. Spotting Todd on a sofa with some girl whose face I can't see – short skirt, good legs – I grimace and turn away.

"Three o'clock." I say, nodding in the sofa's direction, having to lean into Charlie, practically shouting into his ear to make myself heard. "Todd's with some girl."

"I see him," Charlie says. "Must be his new girlfriend."

"Yeah?" I ask, eyebrows raised, hating that I'm interested.

"Russian."

I snort. "His friends about?"

"Dunno," Charlie says. "Can't see them."

Mark appears and tells us he couldn't change the music as he got agro from somebody who apparently lives here, some guy who said that Todd likes trance. Mark shrugs helplessly, standing there looking bored, taking the gin for a hit, not flinching, taking a long pull, not blanching; he could be drinking water from the tap.

"They said that?" Charlie asks, dumb with surprise. "Christ. What is this? I mean, the kid's only been in one TV show - which got cancelled."

"Guys," I say, deflated. "I'm wasted. I'm really gone. I've gotta find Freddie and get the fuck out of here." I yawn.

"Just not in the mood to deal with the whole Todd thing."

Mark and Charlie agree and we head off, trying to find Freddie who's gone AWOL...