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To Bethany.

For forcing me to find the freedom to write. Thank you.

To Miss Natalie Kols.

For helping me find everything again. You know who you are. You will be found.
1. The Fountain of Her Promises.

I still don’t know how I got here. Not just this place, not this position, not this crappy bent chair with the one leg shorter than the others and certainly not this bar but more how I managed to find this point in my brain. I call this place ‘fucked’. It’s not the most original of titles but I’ll be damned if I’m going to let originality continue to ruin whatever remains of my life.

I met this girl and she was perfect. We all say that, it’s just that this girl actually was how should see perfection; not the perfect person but as right for me as she could possibly be. All the clichés; everything fit in most of the right holes and she had this look that could make a tall tower like me fall from top to bottom and what she could do down at the bottom, well, that’s a story for another night’s hazy storytelling and only for us grown ups. But my God, she was original. Not your trendy glasses with no lenses girl, her hair like some rigid mess, she was 100% all her. We’ll call her Bethany. She was without influence except for the damage caused by the father she rarely talked of and the mother that pretended not to notice the carnage, the effects of the bottle on the whole family and the fallout of years of hiding in the bathroom, painted red, hurriedly cleaned away. That didn’t stop her from being ‘perfect’, that’s what flaws do; they made them even more ‘perfect’. As I say, I use the term loosely and why should I be any different and why should she not? I always sought
the original and rarely found it. We tend to do that, whether we know it or not.

Let’s be frank from the start; if you don’t already know, there is little original left. Don’t expect to find it in these words, nor should you expect to find it elsewhere. Originality is saturated to the point where the true originals are sadly watered down much like the overly-expensive whiskey I find myself drinking here.

This is not a new phenomena and that same search lead to me finding Trent some ten years ago. Call it clinical if you will but I was searching for a friend, not a lifer, as I didn’t think it possible to find someone who got you, just not enough to truly get inside your head. That’s what a true best friend is to me, the kind that will never know everything about you, but knows enough to know what to say but never to console and that’s what Trent was. For our little slice of the world on the east coast even his name seemed original at the time.

The irony is that I wasn’t even targeting him, I was trying to be friends with the most popular kid in class. He looked like a kind of cross between the guitarist from Alice In Chains and the drummer from Metallica and acted like it too; deluded, grandiose and on a lot of drugs. One night me and Trent found ourselves in a bar, not dissimilar to this one, waiting for him though we’re pretty sure he was doing something much more interesting with his beloved sugar and we hit it off. From then on we were unsworn blood
brothers, a pair of Jacks in a pack of Kings and twos, him the Jack of Diamonds for his razor sharp wit and me the Jack of Hearts down to my penchant for poetry and for seeking out the girls with the biggest ones of all. Hearts that is.

Then one day we both found ourselves and followed love in different directions, really unexpected directions, him to London and me to a little town not too far down the way called Manchester.

That’s a short introduction to the two people who will make the more significant appearances in this little ditty you’re about to spend precious hours reading, perhaps minutes if you can bare my uncanny ability to alienate and charm concurrently or so I’ve been told.

I have a way with women that seems to baffle and draw them near. It’s nothing I can help and while filling my nights with them all probably won’t ever fill me up again I’m not going to stop for all the world because they give me what I need, albeit almost always temporarily. But every once in a while I remind myself that everything is temporary and I’m not one to fuck with the universe. But if you stay awhile and indulge me there will be others that make small introductions and bow out along the way but they will be insignificant and like the proverbial grain of sand…blah-blah. There’s the poetry. But that’s no disrespect, they’re all wonderful people who I loved for all the time I knew
them in terms of who they are, how they look, who they become and in some cases, how they fuck.

But for this night I find myself slumped, sitting facing a wall of bottles all shining wonderful shades of brown, green, blue and the entire plethora of the drunken rainbow, where all the colours look so good, taste even better and blur into one as time goes by. I’m here alone, and to be frank, and I’ll be doing that a lot, I don’t want your company but you’re perfectly welcome to stay.

I am trying, not altogether in vain, to talk sweet nothings to the sweet woman who’s been pouring my drinks all night on the other side of this oak. She knows who I am because I was here a few weeks ago. I mistook her once before. Her accent rang of all those great actresses in all those great films that you always said you were going to see but never did. I made a bad joke about her being American, and she wasn’t. So I made a worse joke about being Canadian. She wasn’t. I’ve already made a fool of myself and I’m feeling it and all I want to do, really, is get to know her a little better.

So what’s stopping me? Everything. She’s beautiful and I’m not good enough. There is a more poetic way of putting that but it would only be romanticising the already nightmarishly unromantic; the girl that got away that never existed and only appeared before me as a taunt and a tease without even knowing it. Perhaps without ever seeing me. But I can’t move from my
seat to wallow in my own prison, so I just sit and wait until I give myself no choice.

When I finally make my move she looks at me in a way that gives me hope. Having been out of action for some time while I fought the battle between my heart and my ego, both as oversized as the other, all signs pointed to yes when she leaned into me, which is forward, even for this part of the city. She grounds me by telling me that she’s been in a committed relationship with a lady she calls Kate but if she wasn’t otherwise having her better-self satisfied by someone who knows her body so well, she’d consider giving this manchild a shot. I take that as a compliment and raise my glass lightly toasting.

“To Kate, her superior tongue and surely satisfied taste-buds.”

Now I have no choice but to leave my seat and head on back to my four surprisingly white walls. I won’t lie; I live in a beautiful, but financially crippling place, my problem is what I have to pass along the way. This might surprise you but I’m a surprisingly sensitive soul. They often say the more inappropriate ones are and my armour isn’t that hard to crack. I’m sentimental when it suits me and when it doesn’t sentiment simply doesn’t exist. Despite the sharp edges you’ll see more of as the days fly by, as doors close behind me alone or otherwise, as drink after drink leads us closer to everything we have to lose and as pages turn for all and nothing I’ve gained and lost along the way, I’m a
hideous romantic, my knees hold the most hardened skin and bone and if I were to define heartbreak it would be my own doorstep.

A good hundred feet from my illuminated, pretentious apartment building is a monument. Not so much a monument as a fountain, minimalist, if you can even call it that but for all it’s clinical charm, it’s the most heart-felt of places in this fine city and my last stop before I have nowhere else to go. Here the water dances and frolics as it shoots from its illuminated hiding place, the wonder lasting mere moments only for it to be exposed as painted plastic lit in multiple colours by the cheap lightning below. I realise this makes me something of a joy-kill to see it so clinically every time I walk by. This monument looks romantic in the conventional sense and people know this. Couples stand and lean and watch the colours for hours as if they’ve never seen them before. To me they’re not altogether dissimilar to the colours I see every day behind the bars I frequent, they’re just less predictable and aren’t anywhere near as intoxicating. People know how flatly romantic, how easy this place is and eat it up much like they come to eat each other, piece by piece. Be that as it may, people love this place and come here at the end of third dates when it really is the time at least as far as the guy is concerned.

Depending on my mood I see this continual affection as either stomach or heart churning, nothing more, nothing less. I’ve had
my heart broken and it fucking hurts and there’s nothing more that can be said about that. You don’t see people walking around here with a bloody hole in their chest, it’s simply not the way. This is where romance is born and builds its way up to puberty if it lives that long in most cases hitting a roadblock before giving up days later. I’m walking by particularly late this evening so I’m getting a showing of second-base by a couple who don’t seem half my age.

What? It’s not like I’m leering. I don’t have any choice, they’re in their own world, exposing their connected faces backlit by this lime green stream of water and they’re somehow oblivious to the watery sucking coming from their conjoined faces that’s somehow louder than the water splashing hard against the concrete from whence this showing has developed.

Either way, I can’t help but look at them and think of what was, what might be and almost always of the she-devil that broke my heart into tiny intricate pieces and left me, as always, truly breathless. So you can’t blame me if my pace changes. My doctor tells me I have high blood pressure. He says that I suffer with it. I’m pretty certain that this is about 30% due to my own jaded face that can’t see anything but concrete, confetti and cheap snogging that I can’t seem to shake and another 75% because of previously-mentioned she-devil. It doesn’t stop you loving them, if anything it makes you love them more, but for now I’m running for my life.
The building manager always gives me an obligatory nod. I live in a building full of beautiful people who’s parents paid for their education from the lowest level right up to the top who call him the concierge. Wankers.

“Good evening sir.”

I can almost hear the bitterness coming from his every section as he utters those words with all the gusto he can muster through the tight uniform on his bulky frame. I like Joe, I can be honest with him, genuinely honest ever since the day I moved in and he commented on what little I had and that I was either at the wrong place or I was running away from something. It turns out he was right. It took a couple of weeks to convince him that being honest like that wasn’t going to come back and bite him on his sizeable behind. Somehow it seemed like it had been bitten before. We formed our own union one night a few weeks later across nearly three-quarters of a bottle of Four Roses bourbon and talked of our hatred of regimented Nazi chain management and from then on the isolated existence that was welcome for a while after the breakup felt a little better in the knowledge that there was at least one kindred spirit in a building of hundreds who thought they knew better.

As soon as Joe had given me his joy-filled greeting, he offered me a wry, knowing smile and saluted me ironically. This always made me smile on at least one side of my face whilst the other was still
busy feeling sorry for itself.

“Shnell, shnell! Back to work lazy concierge!”*, I shout as I walk by, watching as his smile grows ear-to-ear. We have an understanding, Joe and me. It’s nothing we ever agreed, but if I’m hosting one of my parties which are way too few and way too far between and one of the locals complains about the *awful rock music* being played from five floors away, Joe always had my back. I can take his old school humour and enjoy it but invariably not his old school attitude towards the gays that take two thirds of these very walls and I always make my slow exit when the subject is breached, much like I am now. Right now I have my own reasons and, for once, I have no bottle to share.

So why do I live here amongst those of a higher standing when I hold them so lowly? I often wonder that myself as I stand with my back against the mirrored wall of an elevator that travels all too slowly to the seventh. Maybe it’s because I love to be a spy amongst those who have no useful information. Maybe it’s because I like to pay too much to live in a place that’s way too small. Perhaps it’s because it makes for an impressive second-impression following a second, third or sometimes first date.

We’re going to go with number three.

Normally by the time my key turns and my door is closed, my head is already half way down to the pillow of my bed not two
feet away from the doorway, a pleasure that’s a little too close to the outside for comfort sometimes. Normally I don’t care, but tonight I have things on my mind. I close the door and let the darkness do its thing. Tomorrow I’m not going to work, I’m not selling my soul to sell some shit I neither want nor will I ever be able to afford, but I’m visiting my friend Trent down in London for what some would call our three-year-reunion where no-one else is invited but for twenty minutes with the love that he followed there.

I walked out onto the balcony and I look over the city, retracing my steps as slowly as I walk them most nights leading right up to the building gates below. My eyes aren’t heavy or falling but when they do they have a long way to go. It looks like I’m having trouble finding the man with the big bag of sand tonight just when I need him the most. I would call it the excitement but little excites me these days. I’m twenty-nine years old and I have the body of a good fifty five and the mind of a better ten but I learnt how the world works longer ago than I dare imagine. But even here I find that there are still surprises in the world. Only when I go back inside and lie down do I find a comfortably small amount of room, warm and welcoming, and I remember that I wasn’t alone last night. The lady with which I found myself waking this morning is stirring next to me in the dark as well as when she was in the light of what is now yesterday. But through the temporary surprise I’m unmoved but her warmth is at least acting as the sleeping pill that I need.
“Hey there.” I say gently as to not be rude.

“Hi.” I hear, her voice cold but feminine, the type of thing you’d expect to hear if she had indeed been sleeping as long as she had. It’s quite the achievement but if I remember rightly, she’s quite a girl. I move up close. I don’t remember much. But I remember she’s quite something. They always are.

“I need to go, my shift’s starting in half an hour. Shit.”

“So I missed all the fun?” I asked as she sits up in the bed.

“If fun consists of sleeping for 14 hours following a binge like that, then yes. It’s quite the mess we made but all the better for the fun we had after. I’d love to stay for the second coming but my boss doesn’t take too kindly to bad punctuality.”

“I’d say you’ve done worse today, I just wish I remember what it was.” I say, as I playfully tried to drag her back down to me.

“Me too. Thanks for letting me crash, you kinda saved me.” she says softly, offering me a kiss goodbye before jumping from under the sheets, a desperate cold front filling the space left behind.

“Goodnight...” I reach for her name, but even if it were somewhere within me, it’s gone.
“Mary.” she says, rustling around in her bag for one of the many life-affirming mysteries that we men don’t understand they hide in there.

I remember thinking how beautiful a name that actually is. Lost in time. Gone forever almost. The kind of thing you’d expect your grandmother to be called but so full of life. Mary. I repeat the name in my head before I sleep, a surprisingly short process this one time. I hear the door close and think of tomorrow last of all. Through my faltering eyes I can still see the light of the city pouring in over the whites of the walls, the darker corners not quite so dark, nor as stained, not so permanent. Just quiet. As I struggle up to close the blinds to hide from what remains of the light and head back to the warmth Mary kindly left behind, I think of walking out the door tomorrow.

This is a trip that’s long been in the mind, less in the heart but as important as any I’ve taken for some time. I don’t see it as a getaway, to return a replenished man or even a blowout that will be remembered for a long time as Trent so convincingly sold it to me. It’s been a while since I’ve seen the point in sticking around and life has this funny way of proving you wrong at the best and worst of moments. At least that’s what I’m hoping for. I pull the covers close. They smell of one of those ancient perfumes like Chanel No. 7, floral, like life, like home. Trent thinks I’m coming to have the time of my life and maybe I will. I’m actually considering it my first step to ending it all.
2. Bus Seats and Painkillers.

It probably won’t come as any surprise that my head hurt when I woke. I’d started to lose track of what it is that makes my head hurt more, the lack of sleep, the daily drop or six of the potent brown stuff or the light that shines in through my window way too early, even in this, the darkest of winters for years. The blinds do little to contain the light and begrudgingly I lift them and let it all shine in on me. I’d say it’s almost energising to feel that bright light without any of the winter chill outside to go with it, it’s just a shame I felt like total shit. If this is the light of God, whatever you are and whoever you fill today, I’m simply not interested. The only friends I’ll be making today are bus seats and the only real saviours I’ll be filled by, painkillers. I turn on the idiot box. It’s telling me that the country is covered in snow, schools are closed because of an inch of fluffy white powder and airports are imploding on themselves because they don’t have so much as a salt-shaker but I can’t see a thing. I guess that’s the miracle of 24-hour footfall. The happy workers plodding off sleepily adjusting their ties or the junkies that came a couple of hours before from under the bridge separating the city from the people, rinsing and repeating seven hours later, often the roles reversed. But who am I to complain, it just leaves me a clear road to where I’m going.

Trent has already kindly sent me a message letting me know that his phone has been cut off and suddenly it feels like we’re in
university again. He’s never been the best with his money, I bailed him out more times than I dare remember but I’m not one to talk and in some ways, as I switched on the heat for just a little more warmth before I dare go out there, I wonder why the lights are still on as I start the search for my things hopelessly. In my drunken stupor last night before I went out to the bar I somehow managed to prepare my bag and essentials for the trip while simultaneously forgetting to pack anything that was even vaguely essential. I’m thoughtful to myself like that. So I just threw on last night’s t-shirt, stigmata and all and headed for the door thinking “Fuck my bag. Baggage is for people who have things in their life that mean something. This shirt might smell reminiscent of a brewery but I’d rather be mistaken for a roadie than not be noticed at all.”.

You’ll probably find that I’m being a little more of a downer today. This is the real me, you see. I’m down on my luck and I know it and use it at every possibly opportunity, whether it’s to get my way, or to get my way with a lady that likes the troubled type or roadies for that matter. But I’ll pick up soon, just watch me. Despite the pretentia-pad I live in, this is a pretty shitty apartment. The taps are loose, the furniture cheap and scratched and the walls mysterious stained from two years of the many occupants during my tenancy, cheap gold painted jewellery rubbed on the bathroom walls leaving behind cheaper memories, little smudges of lipstick against the back-board of the bed that I didn’t have the heart to remove. I’d like to tell you how they got
there but I’d like to think that if you’ve made it this far and you’ve decided you’d like to be my friend you’ve got a pretty good imagination. As much as I like my little box in the sky with all it’s tiny, vapid souvenirs from the only nights that mattered, more often than not on the nights that don’t I’d invariably rather be anywhere else. I moved here because I had no choice, I had no time and I had little else besides. I had a house, but that house quickly changed into a deep, dark hole in the ground, no walls except for dirt, and it took but one second to feel myself in free-fall. Believe it or not, I’m not one to wallow and I picked myself up real fucking quick and moved, along with the help of the few friends I had left. From the cab of a modestly priced man-and-van I offered my last goodbye in the form of an invisible middle finger and from the pits of despair where there was no sound, no movement, no signs of which way to go, I moved to seek life again. Because that is the ultimate despair; the nothingness and the silence that haunts you when all around you breaks and far from ready I left to find the new.

My favourite part of my new home however with the exception of the rebel concierge and the view of the Hilton as I stood waiting for the elevator that morning was the four or five doors that stopped unwanted visitors before they could get inside. One day Joe told me that most days it’s safe to leave your door unlocked if you were in a rush and since then I followed his words but not through laziness, not through a smug sense of security but because maybe just once I might return home to find that my life
might have been turned over completely. But as it turned out, the only villain, the only thief who was about to do that was me.

The bus that morning was packed and I had no seat number. I guess this is what you get for booking the cheapest bus on the day before New Year’s Eve. I’m surrounded by a dull, washed out rainbow of people that can, upon second glance, be categorised in two ways; the down on their luck and the hopeful, sometimes both in the very same person. That’s often the way with these cheap bus deals and I feel right at home. As I rested my eyes, I hadn’t quite made my mind up which camp I was in. If you want to see the true troubadours of our society, buy yourself a £5 bus ticket to an obscure, promised-land city. There are people clutching books on how to be a writer, listening to the music they recorded two weeks ago in GarageBand in the hope they’ll be signed and just one guy who was singing and dancing along to YouTube videos a little too loudly for anyone’s comfort. There’s always one talent show or another in town and he was probably on his way to his own humiliation, just like the rest of us. I think I’ll call him ‘lil’ Mickey Jackson’ thanks to his beautiful rendition of ‘Who’s Lovin’ You’ not ten minutes into the trip, as appreciated as watching whatever ear-fuck of a show he was going to be performing for. Then there’s those who don’t quite know why they’re here, mostly immigrants who are just trying to find a cheap way home. Either way, I feel surprisingly comfortable surrounded by the lost and the damned to fail, and it makes my mind drift. I haven’t always looked after myself in the way you
witnessed last night, I’ve treated myself considerably worse as I’m about to do once more. I’d forgotten the medication that kept me controlled, some would argue sane and a nicer shade of steady and I didn’t especially care. Once I left my doctor’s office I spoke to the chemist and upon being asked by a little old lady who was waiting for her husband’s anti-shake meds, I recited one of my favourite lyrics. “Diagnosed a menace and broken in the mind, the doctor said the Ritalin would surely work out fine”. I had a big smile on my face and the little old lady wasn’t impressed. It’s no masterpiece but I can attest to this, in fact I don’t just attest to it, I endorse it. But it’s not the drug I’m forced to swallow. In fact I have no idea what I’m on, I’m not good with names as you may have already gathered but also because I can’t pronounce the little fucker’s name anyway. The strange thought that lingers with me, running through my head as I see nothing but grey motorway and dusty leafless trees on the roadside is of a day when I was walking around with a piss pot in the pocket of my suit jacket having just been told that I have hypertension, high blood-pressure to you layman, and that I need to urinate into this plastic cup at the next possible opportunity to make sure the damage doesn’t extend any further following a couple of years of testing my body to its breaking point with bottles and the occasional pill. When I was asked why I did the things I did, I simply answered “because I could” the answer that sends the fear of Allah into any doctor because to that there’s no response and no solution. But I sat with that piss pot and I thought to myself that it seems somehow wrong to jail bodily
fluids, they’re meant to be free but it seemed they were doing something wrong so must therefore face the consequences even if it was my mind that was at fault. In the following days I went through test after test after test in which I’m pretty sure they took every single bodily fluid that I’m aware of and for the sheer amount they took, again and again, I became convinced that they were after my soul. Then again, maybe I’m just a paranoid schizophrenic, who sings rock and roll to little old ladies in pharmacies and narrates his own existence. Who truly knows?

Either way, I need to take the little orange and white bastards and I’ve left them home alone. If they’re anything like my piss they’ll surely get up to no good. To put a bullet in it, the rebel who the idea of being controlled by western medication was initially pitched fought hard against it but I have softened over time and now I am on a happy little jaunt, my vessels widened, my blood thinned by my little friends and my head seemingly clearer. We went through a rare dark tunnel and I looked at my reflection in the bus window and I stared at the red skin I’ve retained but then, it kinda suits me. I’m not ready to look into my eyes just yet.

Back in reality, I find myself falling, my head near smashing against the glass of the bus window. Apparently thinking about one of the more traumatic times of my life bores me to the point of sleep these days whenever I find myself falling, I feel inexplicably anxious and I feel myself checking my pockets for
the one object that means the world to me. I’m very unsentimental. But that wallet was the one thing I always carried with me and always, quite literally, keep close to my chest. I took it out of my inside pocket and felt the warmth and the rough snake-skin pattern and bring it close enough to me to breathe it in. It was given to me shortly after my grandad passed, the day after we put him in the ground, taken straight from the chest pocket of his frayed wool coat that he literally wore to death and put straight into the chest pocket of a suit that I haven’t worn since. The last time I saw the old man who became like a father to me he wasn’t himself. When the room finally cleared of everyone but me and him he told me how he was tired and ready for the angels. I didn’t believe he would be tired enough to leave us all until the day he did a few weeks later leaving me nothing but that heavy old thing in my chest pocket. The smell makes me think of being eight years old, looking up and seeing smiles and believing them. It smelt of a freshness that can’t be described to anyone who didn’t know him, thirty years of rubbing against tweed, talcum powder, cream tobacco and happiness, if such a thing even exists. Ultimately it smelt like home.

Somehow through all the ups and downs in my tired brain, tired of itself, tired of living on and breathing easier through pills while the rest of my body was giving up, tired of narrating, four hours had passed and we were on approach and London was indeed calling. We passed through the Jewish district where the buildings were all built in the seventies and look ready for the scrapheap.
After a while things started to look more expensive, the Volkswagens turned into Mercedes, the skull caps turned to business suits and the brown turned to a pristine white. The bus is tall and sits me ten feet above the ground, four feet above the people who move like nothing else exists and right now I’m in the perfect place. I have everything that matters at a substantial distance, exactly where it needs to be, except for that rotting wallet that meant the world to me.

The one last thought that crossed my mind as we enter this city of life, as we head into the future, apart from how much I’ll miss lil’ Mickey Jackson keeping me awake, is how the fuck did Trent send me a message that his phone has been disconnected from his disconnected phone?

This weekend will be fascinating.
3. City of Angles and The River Trent

I only need to step off the bus to remember that I hate this city. It’s a loathsome place where there are millions of lonely people who just wander from day-to-day being bad commuters and good consumers on either side of the vast divide between the wealthy and the nearly dead. You could say that that’s much like any other place, whether a major city, a slightly more obscure one or a small town, the difference is that here if you look someone in the eye you’re probably going to feel the smooth slip of sharp metal grazing your internal organs soon enough. I can see why so many get here and feel lost. I don’t see the romance, not even nearly, I don’t feel the love that’s promised in all the times I’ve visited. I’ve only stepped off the bus and I’m already feeling fucked in the sheer expanse of it all.

The bus station near to Euston is tall and gangly, one of the ugliest buildings I’ve ever seen, a mind-fuck for any traveler entering a mysterious land filled with promise. I watch as others depart the bus, stretching their bodies and looking almost as dejected as I did. Then I remembered that I had been here before, in this station, on a trip to Tate Modern with the University almost ten years ago. Trent was there too and I was as unimpressed then as I am now. We spent most of the trip in some state having snuck a bottle of vodka, an orphan of one of his parents blowjob social events, onto the bus, drank it on the back bench, singing along to ‘Lullaby’ by Shawn Mullins a little too
loudly. Upon arrival we were merry at best, collapsing at our worst. Unsurprisingly no-one noticed. It all came back like distant thunder, numb now at last, until I see Trent walk around the corner of the bus. He looked as oblivious to the world in which he now lives as much as all the worlds that came before, whether the smallest of Northern villages where we were born and raised or the town where we learnt everything we knew and nothing at all. He might have been thinking about the same thing I was. More likely he was probably just looking at the forlorn expression on my face wondering what he was getting himself into until a second after I saw him and I smiled. Sometimes the sight of an old friend, even one who looks as out of it as you do is all it takes to feel just a little less lost.

If you didn’t know him, he could sink right in, jeans close to his legs, a jacket vaguely resembling a blue high-fashion bin bag and a pair of Nike’s that look a lot like the ones from the last time I saw him three years ago, less white, more worn, much like the dull smile that still remained the same. Suddenly I’m back in a more awkward time when we knew nothing and the walls and the people who knew better taught us nothing either. Those days seemed never-ending until we found the way out and took it disgracefully with the lowest grades we could. Nostalgia. It kind of hurts but not nearly as much as that smile just did.

“Motherfucker!”, I hollered, retaining the smile, starting the slow walk in his direction.
“Poetry loving nancy-boy!”, he says walking towards me. We embraced laughing at the memories. We’ve already gone past the point in our lives of caring about what a hug means amongst men and he’s cold. The whole place is cold, at least compared to that coal-fired stove of a bus.

Trent lost his job at some furniture store on Tottenham Court Road a few weeks ago and he hasn’t had much to do. He used to illustrate beautiful pieces that explained complicated things in simple ways, large, three colours, no more, no less, but always a depth way beyond colour, but somehow he lost the interest as soon as he got here and he hadn’t produced anything in two years. He was our little school’s big white hope and I always encouraged him to pick up his pen and screw the world all those years ago and he apparently hasn’t since. His hands gripped my jacket a little longer. He’s been waiting here a while though I know he’d never tell me that.

“It’s good to see you.” I say after breaking the embrace and the silence.

“You too. You don’t look like you.”

“I’m not sure I ever did, but I’ve only been here a few minutes. Let’s see how I look a little later on.”

Trent smiles.
“What you don’t know is that you’ve been here longer than you can ever imagine my friend.” He says patting me on the back, leading me to the big double doors towards Euston like we were nineteen again. We’re not nineteen and it’s quite visible. There aren’t any more lines on our faces but we look more weathered, more lived in and frankly more stressed in our jointly furrowed brows and Trent’s olive complexion, slowly turning to an expensive leather. My beard is a little longer, a little darker and my natural expression has changed to a shade of ironic disappointment, his almost the same with a touch of knowing about it, after all, he was the one who needed it and look where he is. The big city and the girl whispered and screamed “I love you like you love me” and he came running. But through the changes, the doors we walk through to the underground and the differences in the people all around us who we’ll never see again, I believed myself for the first time in a while when I said it was good to see the only friend I had left.

After a short relatively quiet journey, tube noise aside and one too many displeased glances from the tube miseries for daring to exchange pleasantries, we’re having trouble finding anywhere that isn’t packed to the rafters with people, claustrophobia and bass. It reminds me of the last time we saw each other at our reunion, a procession way too early just two years after we said our uncomfortable farewells and just out and out bad timing having broken up with Bethany just two weeks after she said her goodbyes. Back then I was dealing with the intense heat of
questioning about life from people I never got to know when I found myself explaining how I’d fucked up the best thing that ever happened to me while their response was how they never thought they’d be in a position to buy a forty-two inch TV. Now we were simply dealing with the sheer heat of the place in which we eventually found a couple of chairs, the difference is that this is fractionally less likely to end in a fight. It’s 3pm, it’s two below, everyone has started their New Years celebrations a day early and are already five drinks in because it is just that cold out there.

“It’s not the arctic, though there are a lot of dickheads in fur coats, but it’ll just about do.”

I’ll give Trent one thing, he always had an astute sense of taking the bloody obvious and turning it into a dark sarcasm that has a way of making me smile. That’s what made me find him interesting in the first place as everyone else in class was destined for nowhere, middle-management marketing jobs at best, lap-dog art workers at worst. Perhaps in some way they knew it so spent their time either busy getting high and snorting coke over the light-box, being in love with themselves, a full-time job if ever there was one, or otherwise were just plain stupid. But somehow in this bar on the day before New Years Eve, just like the bad old days when we truly stood out and knew it, we’re still finding ourselves shouting to be heard.
“So what’s with you? Your face is vaguely reminiscent of a dog on his way for the snip.”, Trent chimes in at the very beginning of our first real conversation in all that time. Not his best attempt but a little rust is to be expected, especially with the constantly changing conditions as the door flaps open and closes.

“Like a noble type of dog like a golden retriever or a Great Dane?”

“More like a cross between a Bassett hound and a bulldog. You know, seriously droopy jowls, drool flying everywhere. The kind of miserable little fucker that would look forward to a trip to the vets.”

“Yep, you’ve got me. You’ve got me and you’ve assigned me a cross-breed, abused my face and vaguely indicated that you’re planning on cutting my balls off all in the space of three minutes. Are you going to get me a drink now?”

“What do you want?”

“I suppose a bowl of water might suffice.”

Through the time we’ve spent distanced, Trent was still exactly the same though nothing like I remember. For all the bad it brought and how it helped with the girls, I’d always had the ability to spot a certain darkness in people, something I’d noticed since it was pointed out to me by the school shrink at eleven
years old when she asked me why I thought the reason my mother screamed and cried so much to which I responded because she’d been lonely for so long she simply couldn’t hold it in any more. I wish I could turn it off and not have to think about it, especially now, but something has changed in Trent and I didn’t know whether it’s too early to be concerned. The upbeat, slightly tedious guy that I loved had become cynical and darker. The reason I got so concerned was because he was starting to sound like me and no-one wants that, not even me.

“Whilst we’re on the subject of our mugs, are you wearing eye-shadow?” I asked.

“Fuck, I didn’t get it all...Beatrix asked me to so I could help her rehearse for some re-booted version of Death of a Salesman”

“Ok, firstly, if you applied it yourself, bravo. Secondly, you needed mascara...”

“Eye shadow”

“....eye shadow for Death of a Salesman?”

“If it helps my cause, I did fight against it, but as always it was a losing battle.”

“So...there wasn’t a small part of you that wanted to try it?”
“I won’t deny that it’s not something I’ve thought about. But I must add that we had the sex right after so that straightened me out nicely.” he says nodding indicative of his achievements.

“Congrats, you’re not gay, because you know wearing eyeshadow is one of the big giveaways of male homosexuality. And she had lots of the sex with you whilst wearing makeup. So I don’t think it’s your sexuality you need worry about. Secondly, do you know that Death of a Salesman is written in a way so that reality and fantasy drift further and further apart until the two end up imploding on each other?”

“What’s your point?”

“I just think it’s quite an ironic reference to your love life, don’t you think?” I ask. I realise all this might confuse him, but the fact is, like most people in my life, I like fucking with Trent. But it is a rather strange coincidence being that I always seemed to pop up whenever one of his relationships was going down the pan and here I am again with a witty reference quite literally stretching across his face. Every relationship Trent has ever had has ended because of delusion and the fact that, like most people in love, he takes all his advice from the school of Colin Firth romantic comedies and then finds that rather than falling in love on Christmas day in the snow it’s more likely you’ll end up face down in the stuff vomiting because you happened to believe every word they told you.
“How the fuck do I know? Firstly, she asked me to put on mascara…”

“Eye shadow.”

“…eye shadow…and read some fucking lines for ‘authenticity’, that’s all I know. As for Arthur Miller, he’s as obvious to me as…”

Trent strains his brain for a moment and I wait impatiently.

“…the clitoris; I can try to understand it, maybe even make some headway but I’ll never know it like she does. Secondly, you’re still a dick. What do you want to drink?”

“Remember years ago when you compared Die Hard to It’s A Wonderful Life? I think you might just have topped your score on inappropriate comparisons that have never been compared before by comparing Arthur Miller to the epi-center of the female orgasm.”

Trent looks unimpressed.

“I would have said he was like a lung or something...no sex organs.”

“What the fuck do you want to drink?”

I smile innocently. I might finally be lightening up.

“Four Roses if they have it. Otherwise, whatever they do.” I say
as Trent turns away to head to the already packed bar, a sea of people looking for anything but water, notes in the air as if we were at the horses. I never gave Trent a nickname but I’m tempted from now on in on any potential sexual situation or conversation to call him the the clitourist but somehow in whatever frame of mind he has thus far, I’m not sure he’d appreciate it.

I remember the phone call where he told me about this girl and he talked about those things you only see when they’re actually worth the time to notice; a single wave in the hair, a little twitch of the nose the moment before their smile turns into a smile. I remember when he talked about the girl and didn’t stop for hours. “She’s fuckin’ crazy” he told me down the phone a year ago in October, “She makes me fuckin’ crazy.” he’d say. “I like being fuckin’ crazy”. I remember smiling because I knew what he meant and it didn’t hurt anymore to think about it by then. I tried to think of how his face would have looked while he talked to me. I’m trying not to read too much into what I’m seeing and hearing but now, a year later, there’s a small sense of hurt and weariness about how he talked of Beatrix and the things he does for her. I think of how his face would have looked when he called me that time little over a year ago until he returns with glasses in each hand.

“Beatrix will be here in like twenty-five minutes so you might want to put your best face on for the occasion.”
I roll my eyes and big fake Prozac face at the ready, I smile wide-eyed at Trent. He scoffs and heads away to get the second round of drinks he’d ordered in preparation including some candy-floss cocktail she drinks, sweet and sickly just to look at. The name of Trent’s one-and-only is more a concept than a name, one that puzzles me. *Beatrix*. It reeks of parents that wanted to name their next-born something different, something unique and full of spirit but also to justify how they fucked up the first few kids with their own worries and expectations by naming them something cute but were just a little too scared to reach further outside the box and find Sky, Sun or Star and in the end chose something that sounds like a bad romance writer. I’m pleased that Trent has found someone he can be with for longer than three days without fucking it up. Maybe he’s done the unthinkable and found 'the one' and by that I mean 'the one that can stand his shit whenever things get serious'. I’ve always suspected that this is because she was from the same small town we were and she was impressed by someone who could literally string two words together though more often than not those words made little sense being together at all. I love Trent like a retarded brother that you secretly wish knew how to tie his own shoelaces but the shiniest penny he isn’t and he'll freely admit as much himself but if you need your spirits lifting and occasionally your bubble bursting, he’s your man. But he’s a long way from home and I don’t think it’s unfair to want something solid and lasting for him.

“How’s it going anyway?”
“Fine.”

“Fine?”

“Yeah, fine.”

“Fuck you. Since when do we do the 'I’m saying fine because things aren’t actually fine' thing?”

“Since the moment you got off the bus, I saw the look on your face and decided I don’t want to talk about it.”

“To say you don’t want to talk about it, it certainly came up very quickly.”

“Yeah, because you’re doing that thing you do where you read way too much into the way my hand twitches or the shape of my eyebrow when I’m lying through my teeth or whatever psycho-bullshit you think defines me.” he says smiling, though his tone has become more serious again. I decide to bring the entire thing down a notch before it really looks like he wants to hit me.

“In case you’re wondering, life’s been better. In fact, it’s sucking me dry.” I say with a sigh looking at Trent playfully out of the corner of my eye.

“Well, I’d rather be sucked dry than not sucked at all.”
“There he is. I know you’re under there somewhere with the piss and vinegar. But I dare say the city might have finally got to you a little bit.”

“Who says it’s the city?”

“So it’s the girl.”

“Something like that. But before you start, they’re women, we don’t always have to learn something from them though we inevitably do and no, I don’t change, and that’s why you love me, my sweet!” Trent says taking a sip of his spirit. He’s taken a scotch while I prefer the bourbon and he winces at the smoke and the burn in his stomach. He’s right, I can’t deny my never-ending love for the boy. I hadn’t talked to him for little over a year but I still managed to know more than a little about his exploits, his successes and his failings. And at that moment, in the type of style unsuited for where we found ourselves, in walked the major product of all three.

“Hiiiiiiiii!”

We stood for her. Beatrix has one of those shrill tones like every woman who’s ever annoyed you has. She only stood little over five feet but the way she dressed made her look twice her size and she wore these curious heels with laces that went to somewhere between her ankles and her knees. It was hard to describe what it was that I didn’t like about her initially from the
one or two phone calls me and Trent had with her talking over him in the background and the meeting at the reunion when I was already out of it. In some way I think I was almost expecting him to get hurt before he’d even started to tell me about how much he liked her and she looks to be his most risqué girl yet.

“Well hello.” I say using all my strength to be sprightly.

She looked at me from the corner of her eye while she’s sharing a kiss with Trent.

“Hang on. Aren’t you a little young for that?”

“Ignore him, he’s being himself, don’t give him the attention.” Trent says post lips before going in once again.

“But it’s what I want the most and give anything for. And besides I was talking to you. This one actually looks like she knows what she’s doing.”

She breaks away from him smiling at me with a glow of all the spirit her appearance promised but still so very young and naive. Trent’s girls were always straight and plain, as straight as they came. Only when I started to see the pattern of how they eventually broke away from him did I realise that it was so he could try to bring out some long hidden quirk or fetish from behind the cleaner surface like if he rubbed hard enough they’d become harsh and rough. But with Beatrix he’d gone my way
about it, finding out that this girl does indeed kiss on the first date without having to wait. It’s more honest that way and she’s causing him to be ‘fine’ so that’s ‘fine’ by me. She certainly looks as good as she does in pictures if not a little better, ever a rare thing. She was wild with the makeup but it suited her and made her look tribal, just a little pretentious and so very young. For a while I thought she was a lot younger but she was twenty-four. I don’t remember twenty-four ever looking as fresh as Beatrix did though just like then, Trent always found himself in the clutches of a younger girl. I can see why Trent likes Beatrix. She had that something you lose when you become like us, something you don’t realise you have at the time but long for when it’s gone. It’s not youth, it’s not even passion, it’s still hard to define but like invisible catnip and I wasn’t the only one in this place or any other that could smell and want it. But Beatrix had it even if she had no idea, but then she was the kind of girl who’d keep something like that to herself.

“Hello there. I’ll take that as a compliment.”

“You should.”

Trent still hadn’t kicked his five year addiction and it was time to brave the cold and we stood outside while he smokes, while Beatrix sat inside and I looked around so my eyes didn’t freeze in their sockets. There’s a large gathering of people stood nearby from the surrounding bars, smoking, talking, hugging as they’re
joined by others, close enough that we can overhear conversations, some you want to hear, some you don’t. I look around at the people, those who’ve known each other for years, friends talking comfortably about wives and girlfriends, and those who’ve just met. Some are together, others are getting closer. Some pussy-foot around each other like dolls who don’t want to get their strings tangled even though they know they’d quite like to. I hear one man, tall but shrinking, trying to flirt with a red-haired girl he can’t look in the eye. She’s smiling and she’s closer to him than most people ever get, her eyes are focused on his and she knows, she’s just like the rest of them and wants him to tell her something good, offer her a compliment. Maybe touch her hair a little. She’s touching it enough for the both of them as it is.

Me and Trent exchange a look and smile. He understands almost as much as I do.

“Why do we never learn?” I said to him turning back to the pair. He blows out a long stream of smoke, thicker in the cold air.

“About...that?”

“Yeah, that. I mean when are we going to stop telling ourselves to not be ourselves in the hope that someone will fuck us?”

“We all do it. It’s like ritual or an ancient necessity or something.”

“Yeah, but why do we still do it? I haven’t done it for years. I don’t see how being so scared of ourselves is going to achieve
“anything.”

“Come on mate, we’re fucking terrifying and you know it.”

“Yeah, but I’m willing to bet good money that other than a few early fumblings, you’ve never laid yourself out like that.” I say. Trent takes another long drag.

“You’re outside in the rain trying to convince the smokers to give up and you’re stepping in the world’s biggest ashtray, my friend.” Trent says.

“Okay, but what the fuck does that even mean?” It’s a little early for philosophy, but I’m game if he is.

“I’m not sure, but it sounded good, didn’t it?” Trent says smiling. “I guess I mean that you could shout it to all the people out here who are doing just that and they might actually agree with you, some might turn around and just start fucking, but it doesn’t mean they’re going to stop. They need to do that for themselves. And they never will. It’s part of the danger. Much like a good cigarette.”

“Aren’t they all good?”

“Depends on whether they’re rolled out or fresh out of the packet but that goes for the cigarettes too.”
“I just don’t know why we always make things so complicated for ourselves.”

“It’s as much part of the fun as it is danger. Look at all the relationships you’ve had. The successful ones, the ones that were successful until they weren’t, the total non-disasters. How many of those are there?”

“One.”

“One?”, Trent exclaims near choking on his fumes.

“Yeah. It was the only one that wasn’t a complete disaster from the very start. In fact right around the beginning to somewhere between the middle and the end, it was downright pleasant.”

“You make it sound like a really good quilt and pillow set.” he says chuckling.

“In many ways it was. That is a lot like love in a way.” I say holding out my hand for the cigarette before it’s all gone, seeking a drag.

“There’s no room for melancholy right now my friend. Put the pin back in the grenade, or maybe until you’re on the bus home and step away from the ashtray.”

Trent hands me the stub and I laugh. I’m warmer for it. I glance
through the window at Beatrix looking frustrated, guarding our table. It’s hard to tell from pictures but she’s animated. She plays with her hair and it’s long and just messed up enough for it to have been planned and as if another hair was out of place the whole structure would fall apart. Her eyes are on the ground her eyelids painted a subtle green. It suits her skin, pale and wintry. I glance through the window and while she doesn’t seem to know it, she’s the centre of anyone’s attention, she seems to be in just enough control of who she is to tell me that she’s as lost as her flirtations suggest and she’s beautiful for it. I turn away when she looks up. Despite our ever more unrealistic chance of finding a place that has seats it feels like time to move on, Trent agreed and went inside to get Beatrix. My eyes move back to where the awkward couple were and they’d been replaced by a couple who looked just like them, relieved and with their lips locked. Trent tapped me on the shoulder and I smiled over at the man, nodded and moved on.

London still smells the same shade of shit as it had in my admittedly few appearances but it’s somehow darker now, despite the optimism of New Years. We walk by alleys and I look down each one, rich, poor, dark, bright, some dead, some alive, some resting places litter filled, cardboard palaces abound, others with nothing more than last night’s trash that won’t be picked up for days. It’s a contrasting place, full of light but the darkness and the isolation seemingly just as vital right now as a reminder if nothing else and they combine and merge
uncomfortably with the lights. When you have a place as lonely as this and you shower it in light it can only expose what was previously reserved for dark corners and in the jubilation we ignore what’s exposed, the difference is that this time we choose to and it becomes nothing but dark highlights we simply won’t remember. But with the dark colours running into the light it’s nothing short of fucking gorgeous. Trent feels differently on the subject. He always has.

From our college days he used to endlessly drone about getting out and getting to London ‘the greatest fucking city on earth’. Somehow despite him being here for a couple of years and living in the east, I still feel there’s a part of him that believes that Hugh Grant is going to come around the corner, bumping into him and apologising awkwardly having watched one too many bad British rom-coms with too many girlfriends. In some ways it might be nice to have a little bit of Trent’s version of reality, just a little bit, because despite his naivety, it’s what made him make the change that I couldn’t, that I only made half-heartedly, even if London was a false promise he made to himself. But he believed the hype. Don’t get me wrong, I’d never be best friends with someone that has no mind of their own or for themself or anyone who thinks Hugh Grant is a real person, but this is one of Trent’s flaws. He always believed what he was told and struggled when he’s then told that it’s a lie.

“I was pretty sure that place I know you’ll love was right around
this corner."

Flaw number three is his sense of direction.

“What’s it called?”

“Sorry?”

“What’s it called, the pub? It’s not another sex shop, is it?” I say skeptically.

“What?”, Beatrix asks cocking her head, glaring at Trent.

“Nothing dear, he’s just throwing up shit from his crazy brain.”

Somewhere along the way we’d stumbled into a pub. It’s just a pub of which there are thousands and it’s heaving. If it weren’t for it being five degrees under outside I’d believe it were July in almost any other country but this one. If you’ve never been here before, stay where you are. Somehow you’ll be in a better position, warmer, colder, whatever floats your boat, but there’s nothing new here. Beatrix is still bugging Trent about what my question meant and she seemed to be thinking about it a little more than she should be.

“Will you just drop it? It’s nothing. It’s less than nothing. Now what do you want?” Trent says looking toward a bar that can’t be seen. “I may be gone for a while...And don’t you say anything.”
he says looking in my slovenly direction.

“You know what we want.” I say. Beatrix looks disappointed, cross-armed. She sighs as Trent heads to the wall of people before the bar.

“So my good friend Trent once took me to a sex shop that he told me was a pub because he was too scared to go in alone. It was an ugly place. ‘Tits and Tongues’. Strangely rustic. I didn’t mind but it would have been nice if he’d have just told me that’s what we were doing and to prepare me for the oncoming dildopocalypse. I told him to order online from then on because a really big dildo fell off the wall and hit me on the head. I’m not going to say I wasn’t prodding it.”

“When was this?”

“About three hours ago.”

“Really?!”

“Ha, no. This was one of the brief moments when we were younger when he was actually single.”

“I’m going to assume there weren’t many of those then.”

“You’ve been together for over a year and you’ve not yet delved into his chequered, mentally scarred sexual past? Shit. No
You don’t think he’s got a fucked up brain.”

“You’re both pretty fucked up as far as I can see.”, Beatrix says wearily as Trent returns surprisingly quickly with our drinks. “You’re like some dysfunctional double-act that decided to take a break and you’re trying to recoup the magic of your best years together. And failing as far as I can see.”

Me and Trent are both smiling broadly trying not to titter.

“What are we talking about?” Trent asks.

I speak in an attempt to grow the conversation up a little from the men’s point of view.

“The results of our long standing love affair my friend, the illegitimate child we bore in those early years; our jointly broken brains.”

I turn back to Beatrix.

“There’s some things you should only see once for the sheer event of it and things you should never see for the risk of them being burnt forever into your mind. I simply can’t accept you’ve never seen how messed up his head really is. I mean really is there anywhere he’s not in some way defecated on you?”

At worst I’d made the conversation even more childish, at best it
was at least *adult*. Trent was trying his damndest not to laugh like the little boy that he really is. As you may have already realised, we’re still five years old in our minds if not in our hearts and I’ve missed that. Beatrix tried for a long time to break through our hardened defences. She’s as much like candy-floss as that drink she was sipping and we were like brick fucking walls. Beatrix just sat not knowing what to say or do and might as well be banging her head against us.

“Frankly, I’m wondering why that would be worse than the two of you going to a sex shop together presumably to buy a single, solitary porno. Sounds a little...gay to me.”

Me and Trent peer at each other at the revelation that for whatever reason had never occurred to us. I raise a glass to her while Trent downed a large portion of his Glenfiddich. She grins widely sipping on that little pink drink, welcoming her into our little play by mouthing ‘Touché’ with a little smile. I was finally starting to enjoy myself a little when conversation started edging awkwardly along to a more uncomfortable and controversial subject for me as Trent leaned in close with his phone erect between his forefinger and thumb.

“I have some good news for you!” he says playfully moving the phone between his fingers.

I stared blankly between him and his phone. The screen is
cracked and the backlight was off, unknown to Trent.

“Are you going to try and sell me a Nokia that’s nearly as old as she is?” I say pointing at Beatrix. “One that, unlike her, you’ve somehow managed to break.”

“Nope, something better. Something with a face, a soul and other lovely features.”

The backlight on his screen illuminates at the touch of a button. Looking back at me I see a pretty girl smiling emptily. She has mousey brown hair, a striking set of teeth and a little too much cleavage on show to make me believe this is anything other than an online dating profile picture. Her eyes are more than a little dead, but that’s often my favourite part.

“She looks nice.”

“Is there anything you want to know?”

“Does she know the Heimlich maneuver?”

“I don’t know.”

“Does she like the movies of M Night Shyamalan?”

“I don’t know. But who doesn’t?”

“Can she change a tyre?”
“I don’t know. Do you want to maybe ask a normal question?”

“No, because I’m not interested. Oh, one other question: what the fuck are you doing?”

“That, my friend, is Carrie. She’s Armenian, she’s a good friend of Beatrix. I know you like that European shit.”

“You know where Armenia is, right?”

“Regardless, she’s not English. You hate English girls. She’s 26, she’s got her own bike and she’s an actress, so she’s got a fucked up artistic temperament...she's also fucking nuts...I'm seeing sparks here and sparks mean fire.” Trent says hopefully.

“Ok, back to Earth. You might not have established this yet as we have been in each other’s company for the first time in three years for all of four hours, but I am a serious downer right now. Fuck, I’m ON a serious downer right now, and even if I was to get some type of sympathy fuck there’s a very good chance I would not be getting back to her about any future appointments since I live on the other side of the country. And if this is even a vaguely good friend of Beatrix’s you might want to keep her the fuck away from me. You of all people should know that.”

“You’re a charmer tonight, aren’t you? I don’t think you’re as toxic as you think you are you grumpy fuck.”
There’s a couple of drops of whiskey still remaining in the bottom of my glass and they look pretty lonely. I can only go on my overly critical reviews of the women I’ve spent more than two hours in the company of who were hardly sparkling with their feedback but I’m also quite warmed by Trent’s rather affectionate tone. I miss the days when he called me a grumpy fuck.

“When you’re not being this self-loathing prick that you’re being right now, you can be perfectly pleasant. There’s good in that right there.”

“Who the fuck are you to be using words like pleasant and nice especially about me of all people?”

“I’m the guy that’s going to get you a girl. And not just a girl, but THE girl. You’ll love this girl. She’s got everything you like. Look at her. You’ll love this girl if it’s the last thing I do.”

“Interesting choice of words...and I’m guessing it’s no coincidence that she looks almost exactly like Bethany?”

“Who’s Bethany?” Beatrix asked.

“No-one important”, Trent says, lying graciously on my behalf. I appreciate his efforts despite how misguided they are. The fact is I didn’t even know I was looking for the girl. Only in this instance is ‘the’ a big word, the biggest word of all the little words and right now if someone were to say to me ‘go big or go home’, I’d
go right the fuck home. But Trent wants me to go big and for the first time he was going to tell me why.

“You, sir, have cured all my ailments about all the women that have come before, the ones that I had something with which turned to a thin and dusty nothing. My demons surrounding every one of them that I have ever gone down on but never stayed for the after party, never mind the after burn. So while I have you, you illusive motherfucker, it’s time to return the favour.”

I’ll admit that I was taken aback by Trent’s honesty but how surprisingly sweet his fucked up sentiments actually were to me. He’s not even four drinks in and the saccharine, sweet smelling bullshit has already begun to stink. I raise my glass to more.

“Why don’t you ever say anything that sweet to me?” Beatrix asks.

“Because me and him...we’ll always be together.” Trent says softly, taking a sip of his drink. “He’s the love of my life” he says bursting into laughter.

Beatrix laughs for the first time and the sun is shining again through the darkness I can’t help but see in Trent’s face after the laughter stops. I’ve seen it before in the dearest people in my life at any given time, my mother, Bethany and Trent himself during worst times in our lives. I shrug it off much like most all other responsibility in my life right now but I can’t help but think that
I’m going to hear about it, whether Trent likes it or not.

“Call her up. Let’s see what happens. I can’t guarantee I’ll behave.”

I’ve taken care of other people for too way too long, I’ve seen stories in their faces, scars on their arms like running tracks and lines under their eyes like gutters. It’s not a life well-lived and now I’m thinking too much about the lines we earn, the lines we don’t deserve and the lines we cross for better or for worse. There’s only one cure from that and as long as it’s housed in a glass bottle and tastes like all the cigarettes I’ve never smoked then that’ll suit me just fine.
4. All About Beatrix

This warm little cavern is making me feel homely and it’s about time. I’ve been in London for hours out in the cold in almost every way possible and it was about time I felt something this good. It may all be coming from some place else, but in warm little hole on the corner of some insignificant little street, tonight, the world is happy and as you look around all the people were glowing. In the middle of all the jubilation, songs of joy and laughter comes The Stones’s ‘Waiting On A Friend’. In the month of gratification, living beyond our means and everything that’s important that we can’t afford for the other eleven months of the year, I can feel Jagger’s wistful, uplifting tones calming and bringing us back down to earth. It’s one of the least grandiose songs played that night. Only at this time of year can you say that about a song as big as that but it couldn’t have fit any better. For the first time in months I had the early stages of oblivion, exactly what I hoped for, and within that I finally felt as close to home as I had in a long time. The barmaid told me that the bottle of Four Roses I had taken a considerable chunk from had been sat there for months if not years and it was kind of nice to finally see it go and I couldn’t have agreed more. When I arrived back with three of the most overpriced little drinks I’d ever had the pleasure of taking away, Trent was putting on his jacket.

“Where the fuck are you going?”
“You’ll see. All good things and all that shite.” he says slapping me on the back heartily. Before I can say anything he’s already out of the door.

“He does that.” Beatrix says.

“I know. He always did have the habit of disappearing at really unfortunate moments.”

Silence.

“And completely awesome moments like this of course.”

A little laughter and a little relief. I’ve never been one for formalities but in a decade of knowing my best friend I’d never known anyone last so long, so in many ways we were members of a very unique club. We’ve both known Trent for more than a year, surviving his crazy swinging moods, including and especially the times he’s threatened to have sex with us both.

For the next half hour or so I go about my usual business when in the company of a woman, any woman, whether intriguing, ugly as sin or of no interest to me whatsoever by telling bad jokes about my life until one finally hits home and we find just a little bit of common ground. It’s different with Beatrix though because she already knows a little about me, a few bigger things and whatever other screwed up newspaper headlines that Trent has read to to her in passing, presumably things that are way too
personal but that the world can know for all I care at this point. After a while I actually that I quite liked talking to her. I like the way her lips move and what comes out from between them. I like the sweet way that her hair slots behind her ear despite how tangled it wants to sit right on top of it and the way she tries endlessly to keep it there, like a nervous reaction. Like if it falls away the world might end. I sit and smile while she talks, watching these little obsessions while I listen. I realise what I’m doing. I don’t know why I see sitting and talking to someone who’s lips move in such a beautiful way as a date but it’s just the way things seem to happen. To me, it’s just man vs woman in the most exciting battle ever fought, even if there’s nothing left to fight for.

“How’s life up there?” say the lips.

“Manchester is Manchester; it’s grey and they never stop working on it. So it seems completely dissatisfied with its surroundings but still pretty content within itself. So me and Manchester are getting along rather well. She’s providing me a service and I’m paying my taxes to keep her looking pretty for me.”

“So you see your city as a woman?”

“That particular city, yes. And not just a woman but a prostitute apparently. It’s probably all the gays, it gives it a huge estrogen boost. Plus the amount of work they’re doing can be nothing
other than a boob job. Everything’s getting larger and more vulgar. London however is a man without a doubt. It’s too confused to be anything else.”

Beatrix nods along in agreement and I can’t help but think that maybe it’s the effect Trent has on her that turns her into a bubbling five-year-old crossing her arms whenever she doesn’t get her own way. Maybe it’s the whiskey. Maybe I’m just not as cynical as I once was but now I’m just pulling at straws. I’m not sure why I didn’t see it before but she’s actually pretty sharp when she’s challenged so he must be the culprit who’s turning her brains to mush. It wouldn’t be the first time. I imagine if I had to sit for long evenings with him watching Space Jam and Police Academy 3, I’d be pretty dull in the head too.

It’s moments like this, where time has passed and comfort with a woman has set in like rigor mortis that I notice the details; both externally and inside if I’ve managed to get that far. I’ve been told that my ability to read into a woman’s vulnerabilities as quickly as a dog escaping the snip is a talent, one that I didn’t know I had. It doubles as both the deal breaker and often the closer. I thought for a long time this was something that all men had installed somewhere in the back of our brain and it just needed a spark plug replacing every once in a while to give it a little shine. At twelve my mother would confide in me about the breakdown of her relationship with the old man and how she’d only brought it on herself, all whilst finishing off her fourth glass
of red. That was the first time I realised I had it. So I guess I have something to thank her for. She’s found God now, so that’s something to keep her busy. It took a few more years to combine it with the ability to pull quite effectively. I’ve never had the face of an adonis but as it turned out, perhaps I didn’t need it. Then one day I woke up next to a nice woman who looked twenty-three but her hands and her morning eyes said more like thirty-five, who subsequently told me that not all men have this, just not as sharply. She told me that women seek it out but invariably never find it and end up with something close but nowhere near, much like we men seek out the perfectly fitting pair of pants. She was wiser than even those morning eyes suggested and told me to not lose it behind all the cynicism and lust. I loved those eyes. Her name was Janis and she didn’t appreciate jokes about her and Bobby McGee. I should have known better on so many levels. But like Janis, Bethany, maybe Mary and the other tragically nameless, I just watch their lips move.

“Are you ok?”

“Yeah, I was just thinking. Carry on. I like the way you talk.”

She smiles and talks. The forcefield is not impenetrable, stare for too long and they notice. It feels like you’re invisible, like those lips are moving without any sound but you still hear every word, every tone, every note up the scale and every doubt. I made my eyes wander further. What Janis said to me, much like this dress
Beatrix is wearing on that day made me think about how we only settle for what’s right in front of us when what we really want is there, we just don’t look hard enough. The dress she’s wearing was light blue, baby blue covered in small faded seagulls, each one trying to grip a fish in its claws. It looks vintage but the cut is modern and sexy and couldn’t be anything else but made in some Eastern sweat shop some weeks before. I know this girl had every intention of stopping into every vintage shop in her local vicinity in order to find the thing she desired that might never have existed but was stopped by a H&M she was passing ten minutes into her mission and her search was all but over. But this is the self-gratitude I’m talking about; it’s just these days its turning on us in the form of convenience and we don’t even realise it.

“I feel kind of shitty for not asking earlier, but how are you?”

“Why do you feel bad about that? It’s not the end of the world.”

“Because it’s what we do. Because of what you’ve been through this last couple of years I guess.”

“What have I been through Beatrix?” I ask impatiently. I watch her lips as they move but nothing comes out. This time there really is no sound as she realises she might have crossed a line. I forgive Trent easily for his indiscretions and he’s lucky, he always has been, but he’s on an exclusive list. She isn’t.
“Are you referring to the man cancer? The death of my secret love-child? My acute alcohol addiction that I’m now fully recovered from?”, I say taking a long sip of my whiskey, pretending to have the shakes.

“You didn’t have any of those things.”

“You don’t know that. You don’t know that they didn’t take my right ball in a rushed, botched and devastating way that left me in a spiral of depression because I can no longer perform without help or bear child to carry on my legacy. He was always my favourite too. Poor Bob.”

“You’re a fucking pig.” she says semi-seriously.

“I know. I’m sorry. How can I put this so you can understand me in an adult and straight-forward way... Right now I’m a little squirrel with a damaged tail and asking me about things like that is standing on my tail. There’s a nuts joke in there somewhere, but I’m saving that one for later.”

Beatrix sniggers.

“You’re still a fucking pig.”

“Ah, but that must mean you find pigs to be particularly funny creatures, otherwise...why are you smiling so much?”
She looks down sighed and laughs under her breath, releasing the tension she’s had built up all evening. I turn around and the place has emptied considerably. It had been some atmosphere. I concur and offer a smile.

“How’ve you been Beatrix?”

“I’m slowly mending.”

“Mending?”

“Yeah.”

“What, did you fall off your heavenly cloud on the way to H&M to get that dress?”

“Nice line. But no, from the operation.” she says much to my confusion. “He didn’t tell you?”

“Well me and Trent haven’t talked properly for mo…”

“Of course he didn’t tell you...I had to have an operation down south a few months ago.”

“No he didn’t...we’re both pigs I suppose. Why did you have to go further south than this fine place to get the work done?”

“What? No...I had an operation...down south. On organs you don’t possess.”
“Shit.” I breathe in the air through my teeth, sucking the air in the process.

“Yeah. It was an intricate thing this operation...the stitches split a couple of times before it all finally set and stayed in place. It hurts like you wouldn’t believe some days.”

“Wow...that’s kinda...”

“Shitty, I know. But I’ve had all the sympathy I can stand for the last and upcoming new year at the very least and otherwise I’m pure fantastic.” She takes a big gulp of her cocktail.

That tone that grated and pulled so much has all but gone and there’s a more genuinely dissatisfied murmur in her voice. I’m starting to believe that the whole facade of crazy hipster girl is all for Trent, all for London, all for this life. It feels like she’s offering me her personal moments as an olive branch for inadvertently knowing perhaps a little too much about me and for that she can be as forgiven as Trent can. If I know my friend like I think I do, he wasn’t as sympathetic or as helpful as he could have been so it’s the least she deserves from an imperfect stranger.

“Now onto the subject of the pain in your neck and nowhere else, tell me...where’s my friend and what have you done with him?”

“Trent’s gone to this new wine shop I heard about called Vine. They sell amazing wine”
“Oh really? They’re a wine shop called Vine. I see what they did there. And they sell amazing wine as opposed to really crappy wine.”

“Stop it!” she says tittering.

“How is the lanky fucker anyway?”

“He’s alright I guess. I don’t know, he’s not talked to me about much lately.”

And here, ladies and gentlemen, coming along like a train full of gold and promise is the vulnerability.

“So it’s the end of the road?” I ask.

“What? No, not like that, I don’t think so anyway. I don’t want it to be but he’s so far away some days I’m not sure I can see him anymore.”

“Literally or metaphorically?”

She pauses before she laughs gently looking at me through the tops of her big, painted eyelids from the base of her empty cocktail glass. Now she’s drunk herself into a corner, releasing her tension and settling in I can see how worn down she is. It makes her all the more beautiful.
“That’s just how it came out…But both…I think both, unless something happens.”

“A lot can happen, at any given moment, it just depends on what you want to happen.”

“We haven’t had sex in four months.”

“Holy shit. Holy. Fucking. Shit. Trent, you fucking liar. You have to get on that. Literally, climb on there and go nuts. Go nuts on the nuts if you have to. I know that guy, he loves the domination. Get a whip and the biggest dildo you can find, that’ll bring him right back.”

“You do know a lot about him, don’t you?”

“Worryingly so. He’s my best friend. He could felate with my own mother and I’ll remember the tattoo on his arse before what he was actually doing to the old girl. But it doesn’t make him perfect by any stretch of the imagination. His biggest problem which has lingered long with him since I got to know him in a place much like this, from the very first time I met him, is that he doesn’t know a good thing when it’s right there in front of him and…he has a good thing right in front of him.”

I take a sip of my drink but don’t lose her eyes. If not for the low light I’d say she’s blushing. This is the time you can see in their eyes that they’re trying to work out what you want from them.
Most already think they know but they’re only assuming. Women love to try to penetrate the impenetrable mind. Don’t jump in like the bully and the oaf you are with your own ideas on penetration there’s no magic there. If the trick fails, you will never regain their belief. Every great trick is drawn out and the wonder is not in the trick, it’s in the life that comes after the magic and sometimes that means bearing a little of your soul without ever revealing enough that they figure you out in return, but enough that they want to know the rest that they’ll never see.

“He’s right you know, you’re not as toxic as you think you are.”

“Maybe not in this instance…but trust me, I have this way of making a mess of things really quickly.”

“We don’t always dislike that. I like a good mess to clean up every once in a while. That’s the beauty of being a woman these days; we only do the cleaning up when we want to. But we have to see the dirt before we can know if it’s worth it. That’s what you guys almost always fail to understand.”

“Some days we’re too dirty to leave the house. It’s too thick to do anything else but bumble along and try to impress you with the bullshit. We can never even imagine that anyone would want to run their fingers through our dirt, touch the oily surface and dive into the darker depths. And sometimes, it’s easy to forget that there’s some of you out there that don’t mind getting in there the
same way that it’s easy to forget that sometimes we just want to get wet and feel clean afterwards.” I say quietly, taking another sip. “And I know you guys like getting wet just as much as you love the dirt.”

I’m smiling and Beatrix is looking at me differently. At some point between then and now, Beatrix moved right up next to me. I don’t know how to react for the first time tonight as I become aware of how close she actually moved into me. I realise something’s wrong in the right but I can’t stop now. I have my reasons and, right or wrong, they’re my reasons. So I wait.

“The famous words that work so well, that I’ve heard so much about. The ones that charm even the most dogged of targets, even those that are currently fucking your best friend.”

“That’s all they are, just words. They never hurt anybody but those who truly deserved it.”

Beatrix sits in silence for a moment looking right through me. For those still interested and not hiding under their pillows at the potential disaster zone I’m walking into, this is the bit where we have to just grin and bare it. I’ve made my bed and despite the composure I sustain, I might have just pissed it. Just keep looking into the eyes. Just keep watching those lips move.

“London has changed Trent and I wasn’t willing to accept it for a while. When we moved here it felt like it might just cement and
fill the areas where we were lacking, but it all just cracked still further down the line and he fell through them. Or I did. I don’t know anymore. We don’t talk about it, but I know he’s fucking my best friend. As well as being a semi-professional dancer and a piss-poor one at that, she also deals a little pot on the side. Good stuff too. She’s so fucking proud that she puts little symbols on the bags as a kind of signature. I sent him to get some and he didn’t come back for four hours.”

When you don’t think the room could become any darker, it does. But this charm act that works so well for me can be as much a way out as it is a way in. I slowly put my hand on her arm and smile sympathetically. I understand her all too familiar predicament. For now, let’s just say that it’s not just Trent I’ve had to look after when something’s ended.

“I’m not an idiot. If it wasn’t her it’d be someone else, she just happened to be in the wrong place at exactly the right time, when my eyes were turned and he couldn’t tame himself for two fucking weeks while I recovered from the operation. The funny thing is that she lives about a quarter of a mile from here…and it doesn’t take this long to buy a bottle of wine, even for him. You’re here for a couple of days, it’s not long. If you think about, he’s kind of screwing you too.”

Beatrix downs the last of her fluffy cocktail and lowers the glass to the table slowly. Just keep looking into those eyes. Just keep
watching those lips as they stop moving.

“So make your move, I don’t think we can sink any lower by this point.”

I’ve never had a clearer entry point especially from a girl as impossible to obtain and less-loose as her but all I want to do is find the way out before it shuts on me forever. I don’t know how long Trent has been gone but it’s darker outside now, the sunset’s reflection in the building windows across the way are gone and I’m having trouble seeing the little neon green exit sign no matter how hard I look.

“Beatrix, I’m more concerned about where your head is right now than anything else. I’m not one to turn down an opportunity but as fucked up as my friend is, this is something you need to work out and as misguided as he is in what he may or may not be doing, it’s only going to do more damage to follow a path like this.”

“My mind is right here. It just want to get to know you a little better. But it’s also telling me it needs a good fuck right about now. And you want this, don’t you?”

If it wasn’t obvious for all to see before, this has gone at least one step too far and that I’m not blameless. The dynamic has changed surprisingly suddenly and unexpectedly which leads me to believe she didn’t mean a word of it but in that moment she was looking right about to lean in towards me.
“There’s getting to know me a little better and then there’s this. And to be frank, I don’t know what I want, but when I really think about it, it’s not to screw over my best friend despite what he might have done to me.”

A girl I knew, one of the tragically nameless, a waitress in a bad, bad bar for years, a barista when I met her, told me that rather than create a situation you need to calm it before it becomes one and I was trying my damnedest to figure out how to do that when suddenly Trent’s head was hovering above us like the ghost of Christmas past and very fucking present. Beatrix jumps back pushing her hair back behind her ear awkwardly.

“ ‘Allo! Look at this my friend.”

Trent shuffles a bag of grass and rolling papers and shakes a bottle of red wine, already open and a quarter gone. A small hand-drawn daisy catches my eye on the bag.

“Wine n’ weed. The wine is old, like three. fucking. years. old... and the weed...fresh as milk from a cow’s tit.”

The bag of green sits in Trent’s hand like a bitter pill. I’m not saying I didn’t believe Beatrix about Trent’s wandering, it’s just that my mind was elsewhere at the time.

“Or a daisy”, Beatrix suggest drunkenly, brazenly. I’m left speechless for the first time today yet I wasn’t altogether
surprised. Looking out of the window, the relief to the problem of my own doing thanks to Trent’s timely intervention sits comfortably, I think that maybe this city won’t make me any more of a hard, cold cynic but it might just spin me around and warm me up on this fucking cold winter night, if anything through it’s sheer uncontrollable unpredictability. Domestic troubles aside, the liquid in my glass and the liquid in my brain are starting to mix nicely and what Trent’s actions are going to truly cost, I’m facing a night in which I’m excited to see which dirty place I’m going to find myself waking up without a hope, but hopefully at least half a drink and still only half-heartedly waiting on a friend.

It’s a hard life when you find yourself on the hard ground. It might just be the light of the day, long since faded but I can safely say I’m wasted, but wasted on what? My, the things we do to ourselves and the things that we don’t. What else could fill our lost nights but this, the incessant never-ending poetry on which the river of fantasy and the sea of alcohol flow. It’s later now than it was before, much later and I found myself wandering alone, my memory playing some long forlorn story about a girl I can barely remember. On a night like this, on this contemplative, redemptive evening at this bitter time of year that’s quite often the very best kind. It’s the kind that dams the flow, damns me to the eventual sleep and the very same that I might just want to get my claws into at some point in the next couple of days. She’s tall, probably 5’8", maybe even six feet, her lips are tingling and her eyes and hair is on fire and as with most of them, imaginary or otherwise, she’s a complete fucking mystery. But that’s not the fantasy. While I try to figure out if she ever even existed or was just a small piece in some unfathomable game of hide but don’t peek, she sure is friendly. That’s the fantasy. I’m only interested in getting one thing right now and so is she but sadly we’re both singing the wrong lyrics from a very different hymn sheet. I have the fuel tucked in every pocket and she knows it. She’ll get it all from me whether I want to give it to her or not. They always do. Whether I get what I want or not, that’s an entirely different story.
Despite Trent’s best intentions to get me to tie the forced knot with Miss Armenia 2001 in the coming days which he’s made to feel like a rather significant noose, I’m not quite sure where to go or who to please this time around, so my imagination might be the best place to be. It’s not unfair to think that it’s pretty fucked up that my friend wants me to settle down with a lovely girl while he’s fucking around on his own. But I’m in the city where life looks like Hell but it’s just big enough to ignore, and at least here, a place as colourful and never-ending as this where the possibilities are apparently endless, I can almost justify the more beautiful tricks of my mind and get them to pass as real people. They may very well be real people. What can I say, I’m a sucker for a red head and I can deal with any resulting mental health issues when I’m in a real place or at least a place that just feels real. It’s inevitable whether she exists or she doesn’t not.

“...is he?...dude?...Are you listening?...What?! Beatrix, it was the milder stuff...”

And then it all disappeared like the memory never even existed in the first place. It feels more of an irrelevant moment that I would just shake off and forget if not for the fact that I were telling you now. It didn’t have the time to mature and this is just what the mentally instable like me and my imaginary girl do when the drinks have flowed like the river did and either babble nonsense or babble everything but and make it somehow sound like nonsense, at least to the drunk with the mic on the shore, which
incidentally is all of us. So you’ll be less that I’m taking my best advice and keeping my mouth closed as what remains of the meds I left behind are now in a happy little dance with the booze and the weed. The silver lining is finally in sight and it looks like I don’t have to pay a therapist after all. But while I’m still swimming, I seem to be gladly washed up on the shore and I’m alive enough to open my eyes to realise that I’m laying down and Trent is sticking the boot into me with his obnoxious size 9 Nike.

“I’m up. I’m up and I’m out baby.”

“Thank fucking baby Jesus...for a minute there I thought I’d have to call somebody. I don’t do lip service even with tits as big as yours...the fuck dude? You’re in the fetal position.”

I raise my head slightly, neck cricking, eyes and mouth wincing. I try to talk but it’s the same gibberish that’s running through my head, just with less cohesion.

“Dude, move. I’ve seen too many fucktards fry and die on the concrete in passing since I moved here to let it happen on my watch, while you’re my guest. Give me movement or I shall take all that is yours and give your body to science.”

I open my eyes wide and stare at his big, bushy face, putting my hands in the air. He looks down at me through the smoke he just lit, smiling affectionately like he’s looking down at his first born for the first time.
“Fuck that. My body’s going in the cold hard ground. I’m only six feet above and trust me, I’m all about the easy way these days.”

“There you are...”

“Dada?”

“Oh yeah, you’re fucked up. You look like you’re doing jazz hands.”

Trent bends down and instead of a hand, he offers me a drag. The man knows me. I run my fingers across my face and look at the relatively unsoiled surface of my skin.

“At least I didn’t black up. I’m not blacked up, am I? Because I’m ashamed to say that it wouldn’t be the first time.”

Trent turns around picking up the pack of cigarettes he dropped on the floor whilst checking up on me.

“Not as far as I can see. There may or not be some shit stuck to your cheek however. Does that count?”

I didn’t know if it was this pointless, bizarre conversation but this was the first time I felt like I’d truly left it all behind. In that moment I realised there was nothing on my mind but accidental casual racism and I shake my head. Trent lights up and blows another green backlit layer of smoke into the air.
“You’re fucked up, I can tell you that much.”

“To rapidly change the subject, I might live on the other side of the fucking planet but I need to know where you got this grass. It might have fucked me up royally when combined with all those other toxins I forgot to take into consideration but I like what I’m seeing. It’s certainly making this shit-hole city burn a little brighter. This isn’t like that shit that they’re peddling around the Gardens up north. It’s making me feel so much more.”

“Sebastien doesn’t go out of town sadly, even for friends”

“Sebastien?” I say doing my best Queen’s English accent. “Really? Fooking Sebastien?”

Trent stood on the spot trying not to look shifty but I’ll be damned if he didn’t look as shifty as a shift key on the shiftiest keyboard in the shift department of a small local car dealership. I saw the little hand-drawn daisy but he doesn’t know that I know what it means.

“Yup” he replies and with that I know for sure that Trent’s being a dirty dog again. There’s little more guilty than a one word answer as small as the responsibility it hides is big. But it doesn’t seem like anything that can’t keep while ever our eyes and the bars remain open.

“Well...Seb seems to know his shit at least.”
The stuff was potent and it made my whiskey taste like shit but it at least made that neon sign behind that dirty dog’s head shimmer in a more beautiful way that it ever had the right to. I might be barely awake but I’m starting to consider that an upgrade on the past few months.

“Get up, we need to move” Trent says abruptly, nudging me in the side with his Nike. I swipe his foot away childishly.

“Why?”

“Beatrix is getting restless. I’d like to say she wants to go somewhere good, but she’s looking for something with a little life in it.”

I wince at the sheer thought of it. It might be warm though. I look in her direction having forgotten that she was there at all to find her smiling at me like a little child lying on the ground kicking his feet that she feels sorry for.

“Does she ever...fucking...rest? We’ve been moving around all fucking night. We’re not that young any more dude. It’s a young man’s game this. This isn’t our bag anymore. I don’t even have a bag. She’s like a...roadrunner and you’re that wiley wolf motherfucker, always on her back.” I say loudly, still not quite back to normality, probably a bit louder than I realise.

“That wiley wolf motherfucker is a coyote, you beautiful specimen
of man meat."

I raise my head to look at Trent warily to double-check I heard him right and suddenly within the man I profess to know, stood six feet above me. He’s smiling unnervingly and there behind the clean sheen of his glazed eyes stands an old acquaintance, some might say an old friend, rarely seen and even more rarely welcome.

“No. Oh no, no. Oh shit, is it that time already? Gentleladles and mendies, it’s gay Trent and he’s here at least two hours early.”

“Gay Trent is not gay, he is merely confused by women.”

“Aren’t we all?”

Beatrix nods in agreement and I smile over at her raising an eyebrow.

“Sober Trent is confused by them too, but Gay Trent just wants to fuck that little bit more and is less inclined at to with what he fornicates.”

“Regardless, your face is full of spunk and I’m not interested in your penetrating eyes Gay Trent. You’ve done enough damage already.”

“Penetrating? I like the way this is heading...”
“Fuck off. Besides, you don’t want any of this. Not that you deserve it either. You’d be facing a disaster zone of out of place fat, brittle bone and a dick so retracted it’s actually imploding on itself. You’re a girl who could do so much better than this.”

“Kinky!”

“And you know why?” I say downing the last few drops from the glass as well as one or two blades of grass that I may or may not have scattered in there along the way, breathing out victoriously as I at last stand tall above my friend.

“I know you can do better too, you don’t need to rub it in.”

I grabbed the cigarette out of his hand, and took a drag like I’d become the dirtier dog and I was trying to overrule, walking over to Beatrix, placing it carefully into her mouth, giving her a reassuring wink.

“Nope, because you’re a dirty fucking dog and you don’t deserve none of this, you slut!” I say as I turn back to Trent.

“But I thought that’s what you loved about me.” Trent exclaims with a troubled, drunken confusion about his face.

“I do, I really do, but I don’t know what you’ve caught down here. But whatever disease you’re ridden with can stay with and within you. All you get is a hug.”
I grasp Trent close. I can hear Beatrix mumbling in the background at the display that to anyone but us would seem as pathetic as if I were watching it myself. I talk into his ear softly.

“Honestly, in all truth, I tell a lie. This weed is ruining my night because it sucks balls. But...ironically...that’s the reason you go to ‘Sebastien’ anyway, right?”

I release Trent from my grasp and lean against the wall several feet away and I could see from Trent’s expression that he’s hearing me now, at last, with all its none too subtle undertone, a bitterness in all the intoxication. His look tells me that he knows that I know. What he doesn’t know is all the reasons why I care. Since the early days of me and Bethany there’d always been a tension between me and Trent and there’s almost always a very good reason when two best friends don’t see each other for three years. Though I’m no saint myself, I’m finding I don’t like the person he’d become. Despite what he may or may not have done on the coldest day of the year some five years ago, I preferred that version of him, the one that I was still getting to know, the one I was beginning to trust and the one who seemed to care about something, anything, even if it was nothing at all. That might have been the only time I ever saw remorse on his face and it goes without saying that I always knew every little inch of Bethany when she’d done something wrong.

Beatrix had a curious little smile on her face like she didn’t know
what to do with her herself. I remember thinking that a face like that is good when it has lots to do, but would look at its very best doing nothing but looking straight ahead. Maybe that was the real problem there on that night; she thought I’m his better half and that I’m a better option with little in the way of change. It was starting to get way too quiet and someone had to break the silence and for once, it was the fair lady.

“Are you two done? I mean, am I going to have to call time on a relationship with the most woman-hungry man I’ve ever known because he’s a raving homo? In the middle of Soho, no less?”

“So you would find it surprising...that the biggest shagger you’ve ever had...”

“I prefer ‘testoster-bone’ if you could be so kind.” Trent says bowing his head before moving out of earshot to talk to a traffic cone.

“...that the biggest shagger you’ve ever had the displeasure of awkward but agreeable sex but turned out to like a bit of dick on the side?”

“I know there’s something on the side. And I know you know it too.” she said to me.

Beatrix would continue to shout her protestations about men in our faces for the rest of the night but she had subtly reminded
me where we are and things were getting really shady, really fast when this boy from the north finally turned around to take in the real world. There’s guys in every gay cliché imaginable, drag, leather, gag masks hollering over at us about how out of place we were, enough to get two northern, supposedly rock solid but modern straight boys’ attention and draw it away from a drunken woman wearing next to nothing. The bears, the cubs, the twinks, every flavour under the sun, were staring at us making a show of ourselves like we were the special ones and the effects of the grass alone was enough for that to scare the shit out of us.

“Could someone please tell me why we’re in Soho?” I say seeking another drag from Trent’s dwindling last cigarette while he hides from the locals behind Beatrix.

“You said you wanted colour. Where’s more colourful than this?”

Trent’s points dramatically, inadvertently and completely fucking stupidly towards a mean looking group of bears to our left exiting a club in their best glow in the dark vests and Bridal veils.

“Hen party?” I called over.

“What else?” one of the bears shouts over waving around the feathers expertly taped to his ass.

“So you’re a hen party consisting of only cocks?”
“Better that than a couple of pussies like you!” another shouts as they start to walk along to the next club, the others cooing along in approval. Trent’s smile had left his face.

“Yeah, well…”

“Shut the fuck up Trent.”

“He called me a pussy!”

“Well he’s not wrong. While it’s not out of place here, please put your dick away, it’s no longer needed nor appreciated. Besides I’m not sure I’ve ever seen a group of people I’d like to deal with less and I’d rather wake up in a pool of my own vomit rather than a pool of my own blood, teeth and shit.” I say. I turned around to walk back to Beatrix, slipping on a grate and I felt myself falling back to the ground. It’s just in time as I’d had just enough to escape the happiness and the ecstasy and it was time for the regret. The cold air is sobering, it always had that effect on me. And when I’m awake my mind wanders where once it had nothing, the cold air making me think of even colder days. As I hit the floor again, my second wave short-lived, I was slipping away. It happens. If I weren’t preoccupied I could wish it didn’t, but it already had. As I listen to Trent and Beatrix start tittering and arguing about our plan of action I seep into the haze that’s starting to fill the city. It seems all too easy to go from one extreme to the other, worryingly so. I left my meds at home and
tried to put the blame on them when whatever comes from the next couple of days is on me and no-one else. I hoped I would realise that soon enough. I needed to. I can’t even blame the river. Bethany was standing right over there, at the front of my mind but way out of reach, the all too significant, once-extinct predator that she was. She’s out of focus and she’s out of reach but she’s here and from the way she’s standing there looking straight at me through the blur that refused to focus, it seems she’s not going to leave me alone any time soon. I stare at her as a taunting shadow, a darkened shimmering highlight of everything in a puddle on the ground, and think that wherever she is tonight, she’s right here with me. That fucking shadow. That fucking shadow in my brain to everyone else is a cat sat in a window with a lamp behind or a traffic light shining on a torn piece of billboard. But she’s right there, my fucking shadow literally grounding me.

“How am I here again?”

“You told me you’d never been here”

“Not here. Not Soho. I always somehow find myself lying on a street that mysteriously never has any cars driving down it while I lay here in the middle of it. This street’s probably the busiest road in all of London when I’m not here.”

“Not really, this is a side alley. With quite a lot of rodent crap in
“Could you shut the fuck up and let me be deep for a minute?”

“One minute.”

“Thank you.”

I can’t make my mind up if the fact that no cars came here in however long I was out for before Trent awakened me with his foot is something saving me from being run down or something telling me I’m alone because I wouldn’t allow it to come close even when I was lying unconsciously waiting for it, like everything else, because I wouldn’t let it. I wouldn’t let them. I tried to express this to Trent but I could neither say it right nor does he want to hear it or knows how to deal with it, just like the friend I always expected him to be and the friend I always wanted.

“Why does it have to be anything at all? Why can’t it just be? Why can’t it just be midnight on a dirty street with no street lights and everyone’s gone home for the night and all the cabs don’t need to come here because it’s as close as doesn’t matter New Years Eve and they’re out partying in the light?”

Maybe it is. I hear a single click of a heel and watch as Bethany’s phantom leg disappears around the side of the bar we’re beside. We need to find a bar, one that isn’t called something like ‘Clench’ or ‘Billy’s Hole’, some seats and act like normal, fucking
wasted consumers. Trent’s in ‘camp’ mode, our scary new bearded, thinly-veiled friends had decided to stay outside a little longer to watch the funny little straight boys struggling in the shit, taking much pleasure in our stumbling attempts to move almost anywhere like we’re on our way in some fucked up rendition of the Wizard of Oz to just maybe find something new in the old. It seems all too apparent to me that Trent needs some courage to do something about this life, Beatrix needs a new brain lacking all the confusion that sets in so easily if you let it and that I need a new heart. I turn to her and would click my boot heels three times if not for the near certainty that I would fall flat on my face once again and I’m already two-for-three and the night isn’t over yet. Trent sits next to Beatrix, still firmly rooted to the wall and puts his arm around her.

“Fuck you homo, I need a real man.” Beatrix shouts way too loudly, before turning to look at my slouching frame. “Are you a real man?”

Her eyes are on fire in the neon while all around us remains dark and I can see the flames nearly six feet tall. They’re brown but they burn to a rust. I see the flames and I see the good and I see the damage and I see the bad. It’s just all so fucking hot in every last way and I’m torn. I’m torn between letting be and a vengeance I don’t know that needs to be fulfilled and it burns inside me and it taunts me like that fucking shadow.
“Answer the woman dude.”

Somewhere in the silence and the distant laughter and shouting a church bells ring eleven times. It takes a long time. I’m tired and faltering by the ninth. The fire is warm and dry but I’m content in the river on top of all the words I couldn’t say.

“Not like this guy.” I say pointing at my friend. He smiles and thrusts his arms around Beatrix like the oaf he is. She looks tender, like me, but she takes his grapple in her stride. She doesn’t look over to me again and the fire goes out. Trent laughs.

“I’ll tell you this my friend. It took a man such as yourself to tell me I’m a real man to make Gay Trent disappear without a trace. At least until the next time you come to visit because that guy likes you. This guy loves you, but in a very different way. Now stop coming on to my girl and buy me a fucking drink!”

“We’re sat in the middle of a street.”

“Oh yeah...” Trent says looking round. “We are. We are indeed.”

I look over at him and he doesn’t know about me and Beatrix. His big dumb smile is a reminder that he is my friend and that we’re drunk and everything that can be done at this point would be near impossible to undo if it were to be remembered and these are the things that have a tendency to be remembered.
“He also has a nine inch cock.” Beatrix says completely lacking irony, but doused in bitterness downing whatever remains of whatever’s in that stolen pint glass.

Nodding like an obedient dog, my lips screwed up in a sideways smile. My arms are heavy from lying on the soaked ground and I picked up the glass from the concrete that like Beatrix I’d haphazardly stolen. While it wasn’t my worst attempt at theft for that one night it was certainly my most successful. I was no longer under any illusions in that I knew as little about the people I had surrounded myself with as I did the nights ahead, though in some ways they had become one and the same and had been for quite some time. For the first time in a long time, I knew that I was okay with that. That glass was still half-empty so I stumbled to my feet walking up next to Trent and I continued nodding as I toast my smiling, cheating, fucking neon dirty dog of a friend. I guess that night we were all thieves one way or another.

“Come on brother. Let’s give the lady what she wants for once.”

Somewhere along the way and after the moisture at the seat of my jeans had all but dried in the breeze, we found ourselves walking into the warmth of the underground, one of a hundred stations, all the same, bright and fading. All the bench seats were taken by the drunk, the near dead and the homeless, often all three in a single person, in a single seat. The walls looked like they hadn’t been touched in years except for the graffiti artists
and their spray cans. Trent remarked on the colour in the graffiti, the life running through it, trying to sell it to me as exhibitions of ‘real life’ and substance. He remarked on how much I looked like the model on some flaking advertising board while we wait for the underground to take us to wherever that next stop might be and I could see his point, with the model if not the substance. ‘I cracked the crack’ it read underneath my lookalike, another vacuous anti-drugs campaign. A stranger who overheard laughed at the truth in what Trent was saying and asked if we had a light and Trent lit him up while I continued to look at the billboard. The guy does strike a resemblance. He’s smiling but there’s something underneath.

“Do you mean the overly elaborate smarmy look on his face, or the sense of dissatisfaction about what he’s resorted to?”

“I don’t think he’s an actual crack addict.”

“No, I meant the actor whoring himself out to advertising.”

“Neither. It’s just the glasses and the dimples.”

The tannoy informed me we were in Leicester Square, it’s about time someone did. I often used to wonder what the use of anything telling you where you were was until the day I didn’t have a clue where I was. It could only be better if it had directions to the closest off-license or rehab centre for those who were even more fucked up than I was. But that flaky billboard in a station as
busy as this one perplexed me. We’re not in some little station on
the outskirts of the city where you’d expect to find things to be so
damned unkempt and desperate looking. We’re closer to the river
than before and we’ve walked miles to get here. But this guy
keeps looking at me and he’s just that handsome that I can’t bear
the thought of challenging him on it. But his paper is flaking,
yellowed glue is visible on the back and everything else I see
here is so fresh and clean, except for these syrupy floor tiles. It’s
not the big things in life that make me think that I’m supposed to
be in this particular place at this particular moment, it’s the ones
that move by quickly as we board the train and leave it behind.
It’s like a visual metaphor that tells you that your skin is peeling,
you’re becoming something else, something that was underneath
the surface all along, an image of what once was, that wasn’t
cleared up from a previous life. if it really were me that would
make me a reincarnated oven chip so it’s a relief that I simply
don’t believe in such crap. I see what I need to and I remove the
things that I don’t from what I see and what I feel; it’s served me
well until now at least. But at least in that existence I wouldn’t
have felt so cold and I would be a healthier shade of brown.

Despite it being below freezing, the carriage is stagnant, almost
unbearably so. Following Soho and a shortness of inebriants
being handed to me so liberally and the biting wind keeping me
above the water, I’d sobered up. Trent sees me puffing out and
rubbing my hands.
“It’s always like this. I’m pretty sure I heard some Indian guys down here just last week saying that it’s just like home.” he says smiling.

Trent seems to be at the twilight point where alcohol and sobriety are meeting, where everything seems to come together nicely before the next drink arrives. For all I know his happiness could be because of the drinks to come. Beatrix, oblivious to his feelings is on the verge of sleep, she leans against him arm, not noticing that her ballerina pump is resting against my right ankle. In my current subconscious, it continues to feel like some three-way in limbo albeit invariably not the good kind. He gingerly strokes her hand with his so as to not disturb her by putting his arm around her. I stopped caring about what will be and what won’t a couple of hours ago. Any pain, large or small, can wait until the afternoon that belongs to tomorrow. She’s slipping away from him slowly. How she can sleep I don’t know. Trent turns his head towards me doing his best not to disturb her increasingly fragile position on his shoulder.

“She’s a good girl you know.”, he says moving his eyes onto the top of her head. “She keeps me happy.”

Everything’s quiet but for the buzz that we’re both on and the occasional shudder of the carriage that combined feels like the end of the world, like this is the last night that will ever be and that that’s alright, like oblivion just fell through the cracks of the
train door. I look up at Trent with a little smile in the hope that he does the same and that he offers me one of his trademark winks to break the tension but he’s staring out into the darkness of the tunnel, his chin on Beatrix’s head when I looked back at him, a darkness that right now feels like freedom rather than something to be afraid of, the type of darkness where the real feelings of even the most hardened of emotional criminals are revealed. The kind that makes the light our biggest enemy when the time comes.

“The trouble is she doesn’t make me happy. She satisfies the things I need, but it only ends when I want something.”

I’m sunken by his comment but, as ever with my friend and his track-record, I’m not altogether surprised.

“What do you need that she gives you?”

His eyes sank, thinking for a moment, but he almost immediately beamed, laughing under his breath.

“As humans we need sex, food, water, shelter and shoes. Good luck kids.” he says laughing a little harder.

“Ah, your quote from our college yearbook. How could I forget? How could anyone? It was definitively more memorable than most of them.”
“Your quote was right after mine. And...Shit, what the fuck was it?”

“Don’t forget musical theatre!”

Me and Trent close our eyes and belly laugh at the memory and Trent has to catch Beatrix as she nearly falls from his shoulder. He looks at her affectionately as he puts his arm around her shoulder for better support. She didn’t even notice. It was just another bump on the train ride.

“I suppose that’s why the gay rumours still circulate to this day.”

I continue chuckling as the train continues to shake violently as it turns the snaking corners. It feels less claustrophobic now.

“It’s okay to feel how we do at our age, right mate?”

“Since when did age come into the picture?”

“When I got to twenty-nine and felt like the things that were once worth everything were worth nothing.”

As striking as his admission was, I ignored it and asked the question again.

“What do you need that she gives you?”

Trent sighs and looks back out into the darkness behind me. I
don’t know where we are but it’s surely the other side of London by now. It seems that neither of us care.

“The usual things; love, conversation, distant eyes... sex.”

“So no shoes?” I say grinning.

I pull him back from the darkness of the window and he smiles at me, a genuine smile.

“Remember Carey from the course?”

“I think so. Blond highlights before blond highlights were a thing.”

“Yeah. She inspired the ‘shoes’ part. ’I couldn’t live without my shoes‘.” Trent said mockingly. “And then you said ‘Well you could but your pretty little feet would smell like shit’ in the most deadpan way I’ve ever heard. The whole class erupted!”

I smile at the memory again, I smile at everyone laughing at the joke, one of my few good memories of that time near forgotten in my mind until just now, a few hundred miles away. Despite the subterfuge behind, I try to keep Trent in the present.

“Come on. I know there’s more than that. You’re simple at heart, we both know that and if there’s one thing I consistently, or perhaps inconsistently know is you in love. I know that look and you have it. I know the tone that you had on the phone all that
time ago.”

Trent’s head drops so that he’s looking in my direction, his nose hovering over some of Beatrix’s loose locks. He pushed them away softly with his breath.

“She tries to give me all of herself, and I want to want it. I would take everything I’m offered but I can’t. I don’t. She doesn’t try too hard, she doesn’t push herself to the point where she becomes a lie…she just isn’t what I hoped for and I’m only realising it now when we’re already ingrained into each other and into this place.”

Though I’m on the other side of the carriage, five feet away and leaning forward, I can see tears trying to push their way from out of my friend’s eyes and how tense he’d become while Beatrix still lied against him, stiller while the ride became heavier, and even though closer to him than she could ever hope to get, she’s somewhere else and can’t hear him. Whether he was seeing what I was seeing and thinking what I was, he scrunched his eyes up and his lip quivered.

“What happened?” I asked him as softly as I could while balancing the carriage.

“She was going to have our baby. And then…”

I stare at Trent, trying not to lose his eyes even when the first
tear rolls down his cheek.

“What? And then what?”

“...and then she wasn’t.”

He wiped it away.

“They took him out of her and sealed her back up. And I never saw him.”

I’ve heard people talk about the Underground before and how it can be intimate and I always thought that those people were crazy or they’ve never known intimacy at all, not truly, but at 3am when your friend or even a complete stranger decides that it’s the right time, I can understand. But I’m ashamed. I’m ashamed for not knowing the depths of my friend’s pain, for not taking his calls for never responding. So I listen, really listen, as we crash through the tunnels under the city.

“We’re given this concept of a foundation from the time that we can talk, move our hands, write, shit and piss, that we need to be with someone, someone...who gives us all of what they are supposedly. That’s the plan. And we’re supposed to see this as endearing. I’ve thought long and hard about what that means to me.”

“What does it mean to you?”
“Everything. I’ve had it before. You have, you just didn’t know it”, Trent says picking himself up, shaking his head.

I appreciate my inclusion in his reverie, and I appreciate him noticing something that for the longest time I couldn’t but the truth stings for me as much for him. It always will.

“But she isn’t that and she isn’t everything. She’s not even anything.” Trent says anxiously wiping his eyes and breathing out deeply, nearly in anger.

“Fuck you.”

“What?”

“I said fuck you. Don’t give me that shit. I’m tired of seeing you piss away things this good, that make you feel like this does.”

“You want me to feel like shit?”

“I want you to feel fucking everything. I’ve seen it. Stop thinking about it so fucking much. God, sometimes I want to…”

“What?”

I look around for something that expresses the flaring anger I felt that my friend was once more about to kick himself to the ground, to lose again, a violent expression big enough, even a
metaphor.

“I want to push your face through the glass in that door. I want to push your head through the glass in that door for not seeing what you have for thinking about it so much that it makes you want to run. For fucking around on that girl behind her back especially while she’s so...damaged. Fucking coward.”

“What do you know about it?”

“More than you know.”

Trent sits silently. His bravado is gone, his edge smoothed and he knows I’m right. We don’t talk for two or three more stops, his eyes rooted to the ground, mine against his crown. His arm is still around Beatrix, his grip loosened but holding onto her when it looks like she’s slipping and now I can see the extent of how much she’s been falling and how much my friend is failing her and himself. My eyes locked onto him, the other passengers nearby looking near sleep again, I decide we’ve been silent for long enough.

“You’re drunk. As elegantly as you’re saying these things, I’m pretty sure we’re going to wake up at some point over the next couple of days to find that you’re in a better place than you think, even if it is still this one.”

Trent continues to look at the ground, unimpressed.
“You’re drunk” I repeated.

“No, no, I’m not”

“Yeah, you are.”

“Yeah, I am, but I’m not. Not in my mind. Not where it matters.”

The train doors open and what seems like an hour passes as people stream to leave and mercifully few replace them. We’ve missed our station more than a few too many stops ago but I’m not going to let this go for the sake of finding a hot spot and lose the connection again. It’s constantly on my mind that I’d been battling him for something that was on the verge of breaking and breaking him and despite what he says, he needs her in his life and that I’d be the world’s biggest shit of all to take that away, past or no past. I look over at Beatrix sound asleep and lean in closer to Trent.

“T, you need to talk to her.” I say quietly. “I’m no-one to rely on for advice in love and life, but I know people and I know how we work, even if we don’t always walk the same line. And I don’t think she’s giving you all of herself because you’re not there. In her head you’re already gone.”

“Not the shit with her fucking dancer friend again, please.”

“I don’t know what’s going on, but she suspects you’re up to
something”

“You know I’m up to something”

“I had my wonderings, yeah. It’s been three years but I still know the signs, I’ve seen them before...maybe a little too close to home for my liking, but I’ve seen them.”

Trent sighs and looks at the advertising on the roof of the carriage. It’s inescapable now.

“I don’t want to talk about that. We talked about it enough at the time, you and me. Nothing happened. You had your suspicions and as it turned out you were right; it was just I wasn’t the dude in the crosshairs. And what happened was fucking wrong and she was a bitch for it.”

“What?” I say sheepishly.

“You know I’m talking about Bethany...”

“Ahhh, fuck you Trent. Don’t do it, I’m telling you now.”

“Nah, no, hear me out. I want to know what you felt since you’re so good at telling me what I’m feeling.”

I flop back in my seat. In a year now ending where I’ve desperately needed to escape my own reality, the last thing I
I want to think about is the part of my life that I’ve marked in a book I want to burn. Maybe that’s how I should respond, but I didn’t. If I know my friend as well as I think I do, I’d be doing him a favour by distracting him from the pain I suspected was there from the moment Beatrix told me about the operation, but never really thought was true. You never want to see it, you never want to see a pain like that in anyone especially your best friend or your worst enemy, but I know the best way with him is to give him something else to feel, if just for a moment. I sighed.

“Quid pro quo?”

He nods.

“What do you want to know?”

“I want to know what happened when it ended. I want to know what you felt.”

“Why?”

“So I can prepare myself if my fucked up mind lets her go and then has to regret it.”

“You really are fucked up.”

The lights in the carriage flicked on and off and buzzed before jumping back into life though nothing had changed. I sighed. I
wish they’d have stayed off.

“When I was with her?”

“Yeah”

“You know, I used to tell you” I say, looking at the doors next to Trent.

“I don’t know any more. I want to hear it again”

“Well...the truth is, I don’t remember”

Trent continues to stare at me whilst flashing his Oyster card at an inspector, working way too late. He’s here, now with me and me alone. The carriage is now almost empty but it might as well be swarming with people.

“I’ve pushed it away. I can’t think about it. I can’t express it, not even to you. There’s very little I wouldn’t tell you. I’d show my most intimate of areas to you if I was concerned by a diseased looking object on there.” I say smiling. My humour doesn’t change a thing.

“Ok...so what do you feel now? Two years down the line from the day she dropped out on you, what do you feel?”

Chaos. Chaos is the only way to describe what I felt, and it hasn’t
changed in all this time. If anything it’s intensified.

“Everything. It’s just that everything turned from good to bad so fast.”

Trent’s eyes drop at this remark. Maybe, just maybe I’ve shaken the subject through my negativity, so often a saviour for me.

“And that’s the problem.”

Trent’s eyes lean towards Beatrix once again.

“If this girl dropped me in the morning, bleary eyed...my heart already torn to pieces, my crazy mother falling apart next to me, barely three days after my grandad’s funeral...”

I breathe out uncomfortably. I can’t believe he remembered and he’s doing this now. I sat back and swallowed all my anger and all my fear and near choked. Suddenly I am that oven chip from that billboard, my skin peeling in front of me, my best friend the one pulling it apart. Waiting for the doors to open infinitely.

“...and she dropped me. Come two years down the line, my beard wouldn’t be longer, my outlook would not be fucked like yours, I would not look as old as I might actually feel. My hands wouldn’t shake at the mention of her name like yours do.”

The doors open and the breeze relieves me and keeps any risk of
tears solemnly and solely in my eyes. They wouldn’t come anyway. If anything it might just turn them to ice. In all this time they never did and that wasn’t about to be turned around by him. Our eyes are locked, frozen in an entirely different way as I prepare my shuddering, barely literate response before Trent interrupts my intentions.

“But that’s what I’m talking about. It’s a fucked up way to think about it but if she left me like that...tomorrow might be black, a couple of days would go by in the dark but the future wouldn’t be. I mean, you’re still waiting for the day when you wake up and you’re moved on. That’s how much she meant. You’re getting out there and meeting women that I’ve never seen but I can imagine not one the same or anything like Beth...but they will always be shadows in her reflection until the day you can accept it’s gone.”

I sit for a minute looking straight on right through Trent, I look at the door next to him, through the window and out into the black, thinking about how he could possibly be right and how I could possibly be this wrong about my own life and be so judgemental of his. But I’m not reminiscent. Ultimately every day looks the same and I don’t know when that’ll change and like the passing stations offering flashes of light behind Trent’s surprisingly deep head, there’s little pieces of life that make me believe there’s still something out there for me. But somehow flashes in the black are enough. That may be the way it always will be. But tomorrow will be better mainly because I don’t know how it will look, but
like all those women he so rightly describes, it’ll be anything but the same.

“Think we should turn around and go back” I say quietly, under my breath. I sound exhausted, and I am. I’m beyond exhausted.

“We can’t go back. We need to change.”

Trent sits up, looks out of the window behind him and awakens Beatrix abruptly.

“Come on, we need to get out”

I’m relieved as Beatrix, who was still coming round is pulled up by Trent and we exit the train the sleeve of my jumper getting caught in the door but pulling through with relative ease and no further damage obtained from the journey.

It took some time, but we were on a train heading back home as the over-ground offered a quicker route to Trent’s home and I’m the only one with my eyes open. We hadn’t said another word to each other. I’m also the only one with no idea where we are, and Trent and Beatrix are unconscious. But it’s in this moment I remembered and realised why I was there. It’s not that I found myself sitting alone in the darkest of corners, looking into myself and seeing nothing. I’m drifting erratically and the fact is I came to London to make a decision about whether the Earth needs me, whether to get off at the next stop or to carry on. Through the
sea of people getting on and off the carriage, I see my friend, flawed, in pain and alone, but warm. I can’t expect him to talk me down, that’s down to me and now it looks at though I’m going to have to show him the error of my ways. Sadly I know Trent very well and he had just asked me to help fix him, to talk him away from the windowsill of his own self-inflicted heartbreak. My problem is that I’ve never been that persuasive. I look over at Trent and Beatrix realising that I need them to be awake so we can get home. But I won’t wake them, not yet. They look like some remnants of something I once knew; a drunken photograph of love dimmed and faded over time. A time where little mattered but the little we had. They’re in love and it’s not perfect but neither of them knows that the other is frightened to death of it. I’ve seen two people scared of what that means before and that can melt even the strongest of bonds through fear and I know my friend and how he’s fucked up even the best, most tightly welded connections he’s had and if there’s one thing that might keep something as empty as me around for a while longer, it’s filling a hole I can see in him, rather than the one I can’t in me.

It’s still hot as fuck even on the over-ground. This is certainly not heaven, but it might just be hell.
6. Miles.

Generiqué by Miles Davis. The first and only song you should be waking up to from a hangover of this magnitude after a night that long. It soothes wounded brain cells mourning the loss of their dead friends whilst still feeding them a culture they crave and just enough cool to make me feel like me again. But I was waking to Metallica instead, and not just any Metallica but ‘Ride The Lightning’, for my money their heaviest and the most overlooked of their classics. I say for my money literally as I’ve bought 4 copies of the thing, not including the vinyl that I could never play, purely because I wanted the artwork 5 times bigger than the CD.

Trent knew how to appreciate a good slab of vinyl if only his apartment were big enough to house a collection. What he didn’t know how to appreciate is a pounding head if he’s not feeling it himself. The pounding is aggravatingly fast yet somehow slower than the beat from ‘Fight Fire With Fire’ the album’s apocalyptic opener. He mercifully lowers the volume before it gets really heavy in the room.

“Remember that guy in college that looked like Lars Ulrich?”

I look up at the wall for a clock that isn’t there. This isn’t even sleep in my eyes, it’s like fucking sand.

“No…actually.”
“You had such a man-crush on that guy. I think you were just into him for the rock and roll” Trent says offering the devils horns with one hand, holding his pink plastic spatula in the other.

I eventually locate my phone, slithering to the far corner of the living room, not six feet away from me. Somehow I remembered to plug the thing in and charge it. Other than discovering it’s one in the afternoon, or as close to two as makes no difference, I also have no missed calls and no messages, which to me is the best way to wake up on most days.

“Ok, Mr ‘Oasis are the greatest band to ever grace the musical landscape’, what are you doing with a Metallica album anyway?”

“Ok, that you remember. Good fucking morning to you too.” he says waving his pink spatula at me.

I smile like the hangover isn’t killing me. My eyes inevitably said different. But I’m perplexed by his lack of sluggishness and how he has enough energy to play one of my favourite albums on top volume in the knowledge that this is the one time that would seriously piss me off.

“I thought this is how you always woke up.”

“Yeah, you got me brother.” I say. I didn’t have the energy to argue or spar. I was saving myself for doing it all all over again later. It’s somehow easier to be agreeable than speak with my
mind while it’s spattered with whiskey like blood in a slasher movie. That’s how it feels anyway. Like that searing sensation you get from a bad bourbon at the back of your throat, sometimes in your heart or the pit of your stomach, it feels like it’s seeped into the already burning brain. That’s what a whiskey hangover feels like for those of you who don’t know and have never experienced the unadulterated pleasure. I’m used to waking up alone in this state. I’ve grown quite fond of it but only if there’s a little left to wash down the paracetamol in the morning.

It’s kind of nice to wake up not thinking any further ahead than tonight, which is a great deal closer than it is when I wake up most days. It’s kind of nice to wake up to see my friend, but I hate his guts right now simply because he’s there, much like if anyone else was, and how he now seems to be burning toast to continue the assault on my senses. I pull the cover back over my head.

“So how are you really feeling? Musically or otherwise?” I smirk thinking back longingly to Miles Davis and utter, “Kind of Blue.”

Trent hands me the remote to his hi-fi, an old fashion stack set, all black, no silver, no modern or vintage influence. It was just a hi-fi that was a little out of fashion having never been in fashion. I remember that hi-fi. The day we graduated we spent all night listening to Black Flag and The Clash on there like the cool kids
we strived to be but could never be until we were, well, how we are now; fucked up and genuinely jaded by the system. Back then we believed we were. We didn’t know and now we really were, we didn’t even notice. But that night we ripped those speakers apart and spent the next day sleeplessly, still drunkenly trying to put them back together. We thought we knew everything.

“The floor is yours. Pick your poison”

“Do you have anything by Poison?”

“Piss off.”

“Come on. You must remember that hot geeky girl with the big glasses who was seriously into hair metal. She wore that sleeveless Ratt top. She loved a bit of Poison. But then, didn’t we all?”

“I do remember. Misty. Well that’s what we called her. I got to second base with her.” Trent said spreading butter on blackened bread.

“Fuck. You never mentioned that.”

“This surprises me as it was one that I was particular proud of.”

He offers me a slice of his devilled bread. I shake my head slowly,
the smell alone making me wish I were dead.

“Why?”

“Because I used one of my most poignant and relevant lines to get there. In the form of song no less.”

I roll my eyes, nod and wait.

“Come on baby, talk nerdy to me!”

I laugh ironically.

“Oh like their single ‘Talk Dirty To Me’! That was indeed one of your very best.”

He smiles.

“Now, maestro...”

Trent points in the direction of a small CD cabinet with a couple of 12" records teetering on the edge of the lid, about ready to fall off much like most of the possessions of Trent’s apartment. It all reminds me of the first apartment I had when I left home. I remember liking the claustrophobia, the little stains here and there on the walls, because it was mine...but most of all, the things that needed to be thrown away but couldn’t because they belonged to the apartment, one of which was this set of wooden
speakers left behind by a prior tenant. To this day I don’t know why they didn’t take those speakers but they made Miles sing without ever opening his mouth. Trent’s setup is much more basic, plastic, seven inch vinyl stacker that can play albums but isn’t supposed to, requiring a degree in engineering to switch from 45revs to 33 and a third. So I flip through all thirty or so of his CDs, and I’d best make my selection well.

“Want some coffee? It’s pretty awful and I think the milk’s off.”

“Aww, you remembered how I like it.”

I continue flicking through memories and surprises. There’s not a single one from the last five years. They’re for someone else’s nostalgia somewhere down the line but not Trent’s and certainly not mine. These were albums that truly touched the masses, million sellers that weren’t put together based on one-hit-wonders. ‘Jagged Little Pill’ by Alanis, ‘What’s The Story Morning Glory’ by Oasis, ‘13’ by Blur. I flick through memory after jaded memory until, like gold out of a sea of mere silver, there is was.

“Holy shit, I’d forgotten…”, I uttered under my breath not realising that Trent was right behind me, shitty coffee in hand.

“Yes.”

I slowly pulled out a massively worn copy of ‘Automatic For The People’ by REM, its indescribably grey cover still a complete
mystery but perfectly representing the album it was fronting, a melancholy yet somehow uplifting masterpiece, the one that saw us through the worst of our days. The plastic was scratched, the back cracked in the middle from being stood on one too many times and the booklet inside dog-eared, just like us, all signs of a deeper love. We found it a few years after it first hit the world as hard as it did but that’s the beauty of anything truly great, be it a bar, a book or your best friend; it might become worn out, damaged somewhere along the way but it never gets old and stays perfectly in time even if the meaning and the feelings change.

“I have to. It’s fucking perfect.” I say smiling.

“The floor is yours my friend”, Trent says patting me on the back. “Just skip...you know, that one”

We say we hate ‘Everybody Hurts’ because it was so overplayed and it continues to be the song that defines them. The truth is that there was one particular snow-drenched night where we arrived to Trent’s flat to discover Bern, his Yorkshire Terrier lying lifeless on the floor. It was the first song we listened to on the CD mixer in his car driving back from the vets empty-handed. It was the first time I ever slept on Trent’s floor so that he wouldn’t be alone and it’s the one sad event that really cemented our friendship. Since then ‘that one’ has been code for something that we both know should never again be heard.
“Actually, there’s one thing I need to do first.” I say placing the CD onto the tray, skipping to track eleven.

‘Nightswimming’ is arguably the album’s true masterpiece, the one that always somehow clears my mind of all the crap that’s gathered in there over time. It’s funny what we forget and it’s almost invariably the things that are the best of all. Somewhere in the background I hear Trent singing along in a hushed tone and it warms me that he remembers, even if it’s something we’d long since forgotten. And once it’s done, I’ll turn down the volume and play the whole thing through making sure to listen for the end of ‘The Sidewinder Sleeps Tonite’ so we can move right on to ‘New Orleans Instrumental No. 1’ in all it’s beauty, leaving that one behind.

I take my seat next to Trent. I choked lightly on the overwhelming taste of burnt coffee and curdled milk.

“Lovely. Just like I remember.”

“Fucking Starbucks bitch” Trent says laughing.

“Fuck you, that was a compliment. Your shitty coffee is the best coffee I’ve ever tasted. I’ve missed your God-awful, vomit-inducing coffee.”

“I love you too.” Trent says tasting his own hot creation with a wince. “So there’s one question I’ve been wanting to ask since
you called me a couple of weeks ago. Why’s it taken so long for you to come see me and what are you actually doing here?”

“That’s two questions. Come on, it’s a little early, isn’t it?”

“Technically, yes. In actuality, no. This isn’t easy for me. I also think it’s important why you tell me why I didn’t hear from you at all the first two years after we left town.” Trent says softly, taking his first cigarette of the day from the pack.

“I presumed it was on good terms. But it’s been like an annoying little fly buzzing in the back of my mind for the last couple of years and you, my friend, are the one with the bug spray.”

“Are you asking me to spray myself to offer you much-needed relief?” I ask with a little smile on my face. “Because I knew this girl once who liked that. That didn’t end well. For her at least. But for the fifteen hundredth time, you’re just not my type.”

“Your tropes might be a bit better than mine motherfucker, but you can’t joke your way out of this one. I never ask shit like this. Surely my asking this right now tells you that this is important to me. You kind of owe me.”

I zone out for a minute, grabbing the remote upon the last notes of ‘Sidewinder...’ and settle back into my seat, pulling the blanket over my arms to preserve some of the heat remaining in the room.
“To be honest, I didn’t think it would bother you that much if I didn’t.”

“There’s more to it than that. You know I’m not the deepest of people who let’s every little thing that happens affect me like you do…”

Trent tries to light up, his arms emerging from under the cover, but takes his time as the mysterious draught filtering around his apartment stops his crappy three for a pound lighter from igniting.

“…I carry myself how I carry myself. But this is one of the few things that bothers me and kept me up a night or two.”

“Do you have a guilty conscience?”

I turn to look at Trent for the first time today and his face looks clear through the milkier skin and baggy eyes he has developed overnight.

“I was worried about you. Apparently you still don’t trust me. You can’t just stop talking to the people who give a fuck about you like it doesn’t matter.”

Trent doesn’t understand how much I needed to distance myself from everything once everything changed, despite how much he remembered about when it all went down last night. But
underneath it all you don’t always realise how much you hurt the people all around you when you go into hiding in your mind and stop answering calls until, like your heart, your voicemail is full to the brim. But despite the passage of time, rediscovering the ability to talk again, I still sit quietly.

“I felt I should have done more if I’d been able. Instead I didn’t know if you were alive or dead and that hurts more than all the women and all the crap you helped me get over put together. I just wanted to know you were alright, at least, and even if you weren’t that’s all the more reason to talk to me.”

The moral dilemma here is that the friend I technically chose because he wouldn’t care so much developed feelings despite years of never showing them. In the last 24 hours I’d seen more emotion from Trent than I have in ten years. If possible, he might just be going as crazy nuclear as I am and everything going on with Beatrix right now might be causing the fallout. I did owe him something even if he didn’t know what it was for.

“I’m tired of talking about it. And I’ve barely talked about it. I talked about it last night if you can even remember. You’re my friend and I appreciate everything you’re saying, really, and I’m sorry if I hurt you, but I’m here now. I’m a little broken, but I’m here and all I want to do while I’m here is drink and have a good time with you wherever that leads us. Wherever it leads me. Anything else after that, good or bad is a bonus. So I hope that
answers both your questions, at least enough so that any unnecessary burden you have is gone. Because it’s not fucking necessary.”

“I might not feel as much as I should most of the time and I don’t want to dwell on it but something is telling me you’re not okay. And I don’t think that, now I have your attention, I can let you leave here knowing that.”

“Fuck me, I’m not. But you don’t have to worry about that. I’m here to try to help myself. Like seriously fucked up therapy or something. And I’m already half way back to real life. I’ve forgotten what it looks like but I’m starting to see things I recognise.”

“I’m not an idiot. I don’t know why you can’t tell me what I know you want to tell me.”

Trent sighs and looks at me. I smile, a genuine smile.

“Let’s not get wistful; I came back to you, you bastard.”

“Well you’re the one that put on this fucking record.”

We laugh gently and it feels good to have said what we said without ever realising it needed to be said. There’s probably a lot of things I’m not saying that need to be said to a lot of people. ‘Nightswimming’ has long since finished for the second time and
through Trent’s poorly drawn curtains the only light coming through is that of flashing lights, all colours, the police screaming by and a few premature fireworks bursting into life. We can see in the New Year having already paid our respects. My resolution; to remain here and to be a better friend. As Trent helps me up from his broken sofa I realise that despite everything, his significant flaws and his ill-advised flirtations, he needn’t make a similar sentiment. No matter what he thinks, what I thought about him and how I don’t need it but still love him for it, he already is.
7. Moments of Weakness.

To say I’m surrounded by so many buildings that are so damned tall, you’d think there’d be less wind around London. The bluster does little but piss me off and further perpetuate the hum, the continual business, frantic, blank faces of people running around to be somewhere else as soon as possible. It’s not cold though it’s far from warm. No-one here stands still, but that’s much like any city, it’s just that rather than deflecting the wind away, the wind just comes from all directions. The hangover is all but blown away but remnants remain and they probably will long into the evening. The wind is feeling more like a boxing match I’m mysteriously competing in and paralyzed to do anything about. It’s only 7pm and if I were anywhere else but Oxford Street, the place would be close to dead on New Years, but I’m walking through the never-ending stream looking for somewhere to buy a coat. It’s only by some miracle I didn’t wake up this morning with pneumonia judging by the amount of time I spent on the cold, wet floor, so I’d rather not take the risk now.

Trent had filtered off into some shoe shop having a sale on Converse, his own particular vice like we all have in trying to keep as young as we can for as long as possible so I had Beatrix along for this particular ride and I imagine for her artistic opinion. I wondered why she didn’t want to stay with Trent while he drooled over endless rows of patterned canvas trainers and her response was that there was no individuality within that anymore but the
way it was worded suggested she might have been talking about him rather than his footwear. Nevertheless, she walks through this shit-storm every day of her life and though I’m somewhere behind her kind of hoping I’m going to get lost and a victim to the drudge, I’m grateful that she’s here to help. If not for Trent’s untimely intervention last night I would have been able to tame a situation that I was the very creator of, but right now she’s the one that’s leading me on as I’m just tall enough to be seen through the pack. She seems barely five feet tall in all of this but she knows her way through a crowd of giants better than the tallest of freaks like me. Her determination reminds me a lot of Bethany, at least towards the end. She grew from a sort of dandelion, a lilting beauty growing from the concrete that felt no confidence in herself before becoming, to put it subtly, a fly trap that lost all the elegance and serenity of Venus. She used to dodge in and out of people like they never existed, mentally for the most part, and in the end I was sadly not to be excluded. Maybe if we’d have moved to a city this fucking huge and full of this many people, we’d have never gotten into this mess in the first place and into an entirely different one where we barely see each other, talk even less but might have been happy out of the spotlights and under the sheets. But it’s not the mess I’m currently trying to deal with.

“Come on, we’re a few blocks away from the best place for you.”

I’m not one to be dictated to but, trust me on this one, if you’re
lost and, frankly, a little vulnerable amongst a sea of unrecognisable fodder, then you’ll take all the dictation you can get.

“If there was ever a time to show that Northern gristle you’re always going on about with Trent, it’s now.”

“Believe it or not, contrary to common belief, our accents and our piggish ways, we also have decorum. Who the fuck are you people anyway?” I say loudly, in vain as I’m shoved in the shoulder for the twentieth time obliviously, straining to follow Beatrix’s short frame.

“We’re nearly there” Beatrix says turning around, grabbing my hand. I respond by quickly pulling it away.

“I’ll make it. And if I don’t, get me something nice, under £100 and come back and get me. Get it two sizes smaller than me as by the time you get here I’ll be lacking most of my bones and shitting out my internal organs. Consider this plastic bag a landmark for where I so honourably fell.”

Finally Beatrix turns off into a deserted entrance and I follow suit and stand next to her, concealing a couple of deep breaths.

“Fucking Northern pansy...” she says laughing and entering the doorway.
“Wait, aren’t you from York? As in North York-shire? As in North?’ I say sarcastically following her into the gold lit shimmering entranceway.

“Yep, but I was raised here and I’m proud of that.”

“You should be, it must have made you less oblivious to how the real world works and, you know, how to understand that when someone is in your way the key is to knock them over.”

“I don’t like hearing no. I never have and today is no exception.”

I notice that I’ve just passed a smiling doorman, all suited and booted. He looks a little like my building manager Joe and has a similar look of disillusionment. I nod in both acknowledgement and appreciation. I’d asked Beatrix to find me somewhere where I can get something half-decent at best that’ll preferably just last me the night and I can just put it in a bin somewhere such will be the amount of alcohol it’ll end up doused in that it presumably might explode if I should fall victim to a falling sparkle or most likely one of Trent’s fags. I don’t mind getting burnt, I don’t even mind getting a little tan, I’d just prefer not to have to pay for the privilege.

“Where the fuck are we anyway? I don’t remember asking for chic, but I do remember asking for shit.” I say, visibly upsetting the lady I dodge trying to spray me with aftershave as I walk by.
“You can do better. From what I’ve been told you can afford better.”

“I know this, I just choose cheap. Cheap suits me, cheap is part of my persona like breathing or a good lay, which is a good basis on which to go out and buy a coat. But seriously if I have to put down serious money for a jacket designed by the assistant of dead designer who he fucked just enough to justify him or her getting his job behind his name, then I’m out the door.”

“You just let me look after you.”

“You also need to refrain from grabbing my hand. I need to talk to you and this place might be the right place to do it anyway. Actually it might be perfect.” I say spotting a café.

I’m breaching the subject so she knows I’m thinking about it even if nothing comes of the conversation today, it is coming. It’s a tried and tested method that’s worked for me before just for the exact opposite reasons. In fact it’s a first that I’m going to be having ‘the conversation’ about not wanting to do anything with the beautiful lady rather than the usual ‘it’s not me, it’s the way you screw’.

“I’m a little off talking right now. I feel like actually doing something and it’s funny you should mention about this being the ideal place so yeah, let’s talk.”
“Exactly, no Trent, quiet place, all that stuff.”

“Perfect. Let’s find you a coat first.” Beatrix says veering off to the right at the first coat on the very first dummy an almost exact contradiction to the ‘Yorkshire code’ which she probably never had the chance to learn, poor thing.

“Speaking of perfect…”

The coat she’s chosen has a great, albeit loose fit, cashmere, black, maybe navy blue, British racing green trim, ideal for the classy gentleman who goes about his business around town quickly and efficiently then comes home and doesn’t fuck his wife.

“Fuck, no. Not me at all.”

“At least try it on…what’s the harm?”

I raise my fingers to start listing off.

“One: the image will be burnt into my memory of me as Michael Douglas or perhaps De Niro…”

“…Both very handsome men”

“Both very old. Like the man who’s supposed to be wearing this coat”
“Ok, if I’m dealing with the quarter life crisis, like it would appear, we’re in the wrong section entirely. Where is G-Star?” she says sarcastically.

I try to jump in.

“Put the fucking coat on.”

A short staring match ensues that I lose just by smiling, always the way with brown eyes. She loses my eyes. I don’t find her stance humourous, nor the way she talks, it just so happens that I laugh at my own naivety for giving in so easily when big brown eyes like that give me direction. The girl makes me want to punch her and that usually means we’re getting on quite well. She smiles back gracefully while keeping her serious face on. Fact is, I was more than a little turned on.

Next thing I know I’m stood having a similar staring match with a tall model-esque lady who, if she moved any less, I’d believe the stick up her arse would actually be made of porcelain. Way I see it, if you go into a shop where the staff judge you then you deserve everything you get, pay far too much for it and don’t deserve half of what you have. She removes the brilliantly red rope from one side of the wall to let me into the brightly lit changing room.

“Take your time. We close in 23 minutes.” she says sharply.
“Thankyouverymuch” I say, emulating The King to see if I can make her frown any more than she already is. I’m unsuccessful.

I don’t like mirrors, less so when I have bloodshot eyes. This is probably why statue lady was staring at me so intensely. That and the beard. I like the beard, long and defining but it doesn’t match my eyes. I don’t normally give this much of a shit but it seems that I’m going to be wearing this coat more than the once and I need to get my money’s worth. So I spend the next five minutes pulling all the faces I typically would on a daily basis. The grimace; the Norman Wisdom; the Kenneth Williams; the scrunched-up eyes. Somewhere in your family there’s a five year old or a man in his early twenties who can appreciate what I’m doing. Only when I get on to the piece de la resistance, De Niro in Taxi Driver, do I realise that the curtain is slowly being opened.

“Lady, I’m making a calculated decision based on many stances and criterias...”

I look into the corner of the mirror and see Beatrix standing there slightly wrapped up in the curtain she pulled so slowly across.

“The stuck up bitch is helping a lady find a fox’s fur that’s no longer attached to its body. So let’s talk.”

Beatrix comes inside the oversized dressing room, drawing the curtain behind her sitting down on the bench behind me, stretching the entire length of the wall as if nothing strange was
happening. I’m all for inappropriateness at the best and of course, the worst of times but it’s very rarely at my own expense.

“Weeeellllll, I meant more the overpriced café we walked past.” I say apprehensively. Beatrix just stares smiling. “But fine, this is good too. Not weird at all.”

She continues to smile in that sweet little way in the mirror. I’d like to add at this point that I’ve had my fair share of experiences in dressing rooms not half as classy and as much as the Neanderthal genes that have been handed to me from millions of years of breeding in all manner of places are coming into play, it goes without saying that I have to think about the future happiness of all parties involved which is a new experience for me when I’m within an inch of what’s potentially a fantastic fuck. Never pass up a fantastic fuck unless the strings attached are anything other than the ones you can pull loose with your teeth.

“So talk. You say your piece, then I’ll get mine.” she says looking at me in the mirror.

I turn around. Often the case in all manner of circumstances but twice as awkward in this one, I don’t know where to begin other than on a lie.

“Last night I had no idea what I was doing. And I don’t like to put words in your mouth but I don’t think you did either. What I do know...”
Beatrix sits up in her seat taking hold of the price tag situated in the bottom pocket of the coat, gripping it between her teeth.

“…What I do know is you’re a little starved for attention…”

Beatrix nods slowly as she plays with the zip of the coat down near my crotch, price tag still firmly in her teeth.

“…and that you want to get back at Trent for what he’s *supposedly* doing. But you see herein lies the problem…”

*Pull.*

“*Fuck*…you don’t know what he’s doing and even if he is, I’m not the solution.”

Beatrix shakes her head slowly, faux-mockingly as she releases the tag from her mouth putting her hand against my crotch none too subtly. When the crotch comes into play, that’s when shit gets real.

“It certainly feels like the solution…”

I jump away a little, attempting to laugh the situation off. She’ll have to give up sooner or later.

“Well, feelings are overrated, especially physical ones. Your head is where you should be right now, trust me on that”
Stroke. Yank.

“I’ve learnt the hard...the tricky way.”

Beatrix stands up slowly and edges towards me. One of the major design flaw of dressing rooms, number 1; there’s nowhere to run when your best friend’s girlfriend is trying to go down on you. May I or anyone else never have to say that sentence again unless all parties are in agreement on the boundaries, if there even are any.

“It feels like your head is where I should be. Both of them.” Beatrix says firmly pushing herself up against me.

I hit the wall loudly in the process, the impact dropping me down so that I’m in full target range for her lips to push against mine. I try to keep my lips sealed and my eyes fucking anywhere else which is always hard when someone’s trying to push their tongue into your mouth. For one with such a small body Beatrix was strong, especially that tongue and within that I can see what Trent likes about her.

“One way or another you’re going in my mouth...” she whispers, taking a break, looking slightly terrifying in the process.

The next thing I know her teeth are clamped onto my lower lip and pulling. If it didn’t hurt so fucking much and if it was virtually anyone else but her I wouldn’t be complaining. Under any other
circumstances it could barely get hotter.

“HOLY FUCK!”

I shout loudly at both the excruciating pain and heart pounding experience of it all. Beatrix had nearly succeeded when the curtain is whipped open once again.

“Really?” Statue lady says sighing.

“Oh fuck! I WOULD LIKE TO BUY THIS COAT!” I exclaim finally escaping Beatrix’s iron molar grip, my hands pushing her away with all the strength I could muster.

“Yes, you do…”, statue lady says, her arms crossed.

She’s acting like she’s never seen anyone fucking in her dressing room before but I’m starting to believe that’s just her natural expression.

“I think you’re going to have to.” she says looking at my chest.

Confused, I turn and look in the mirror finally pushing Beatrix to one side to see that down the right lapel is a stream of blood running from my lower lip as well as spatter on the breast.

“FUCKING HELL!”

Beatrix bolts past and I laugh insanely. Statue girl is unimpressed
and rightly so.

“Here’s a handkerchief. It’s Liberty, limited edition, but you can keep it. Just get out of my dressing room before you desecrate it further.”

Graciously, I take her up on her advice. Beatrix is presumably hot footing it back to see Trent. I offer a backward wave to statue girl as I follow suit.

“Thanks. You have no idea why, but thanks.”

“Thank you, sir. My commission for a day this slow suddenly looks a lot better.”

That statue is some kind of bitch. I walk to the counter still bleeding from my mouth watching her out of the corner of my eye, her look as scolding as her words, coat under arm, gay hankie held firmly to my lip. Cold, hard porcelain bitch.

“My goodness, sir, are you okay?” the counter assistant asked as I approached like stupider questions have been asked of people bleeding profusely from their mouth.

“Yes, I have my pretty hankie and my ostentatious and soiled, presumably overpriced coat, so I’m just awesome!”

The cashier doesn’t respond other than to smile falsely and goes
about scanning the coat. I thought about doing a runner but firstly they have my DNA and lots of it, everywhere, and the second I think it’s a plausible option I turn around to see Statue bitch is still watching me me scornfully, so I don’t.

“Sir, the tag won’t scan. It looks a little frayed…it looks a little ripped…”

“Yes, don’t fret, it’s fine.”

“Let me go and get another one from the rack”, she says sunnily. Statue girl glares down on me, folding her arms.

“No, it has to be that one, it has…bodily fluids on it. My bodily fluids. And maybe a little of someone else on that frayed tag.”

“Sir?” she responds looking like I’ve just tried to touch her up. I point obviously at the hankie that my bemusement is hidden behind. She let’s go of the tag and grimaces finally without any pretence.

“But sir I can’t scan this…”

“Can’t you just put in the code?”

“I can try.”

“Thank you!” I say, tilting my head sarcastically.
“There we go. That’ll be £1879 please sir.”

“Motherfucker!”
8. The Bite.

Leaving the department store, the first thing I noticed is how empty the streets have become as if it’s just for you. It’s not. It’s after eight and the shops have closed early because it’s New Years Eve. The next thing you notice is the windows across Oxford Street, filled with red and green hinted imagery, advertising distorted by a sudden convulsion of incoming rain. I’d stood there long enough to realise I was calmer now yet more frantic in the most controlled of ways. There are few enough people on the streets to be able to hear the drops hitting the floor, hitting the glass, skimming the chrome of the entranceway where I’m not moving from. Not yet. I can appreciate it right now. For once I can appreciate every little instance in the moment that they occur. The rain calms and helps me to think. I think about what just happened and it makes me think about the things that I’m not sure about. Not a lot is sure right now. I started well but as usual it all became a jammed, awkward mess in there. The door of the department store just locked behind me but I don’t look back though I know they’re waiting for me to leave their steps. I look for distraction while I wait for an indication to step into the bright lights of the night. The people that remain are still hurrying to go somewhere else, bags bulging, coats thick, faces red and firmly to the ground. Then there’s the Japanese tourists, subtle but complex people who’ve stopped at the bottom of the steps. They remind me of the tourists I saw on the streets of Manchester on the first morning of Gay Pride weekend and they
have a similar look of disillusionment, like they’d accidentally entered the wrong terminal and departed from Japan on a space shuttle rather than a plane, landing sometime in the future on some undiscovered planet. It was a funny thing to watch at the time but I kind of envy them now. I envy them for their open-mindedness, their ability to still see things with wonder and surprise, in some cases disbelief, effortlessly, as it should be. From the look on the elder man of the group’s face, fatherly, greying around the ears, a wise smile, he’s impressed by my new coat. He stares up at me at the top of the steps, his hair wet from the downpour and he noticed me holding the handkerchief to my lip. He just stares and I stare back, no smile, no anger, no change. Perhaps the blood has seeped through to the other side.

He takes a small tin out of his upper pocket and a metal lighter from inside his coat, a light purple lining as luxurious as mine disappearing as quickly as it caught my eye. He lights up one of those small brown cigars and took a couple of drags, his eyes never leaving mine. I can smell the tobacco, smooth, creamy unlike any cigarette from a packet. It smelt old, worn in and I clutch for my old jacket searching for the wallet. The old man smiles up at me and seems to say something that I don’t understand. I’d nearly forgotten the wallet was there and nearly panicked when faced with the prospect of not knowing where it was. I close my eyes, losing the old man’s eyes, briefly resting my hand against the battered old leather. I close my eyes and I smell. The smell is smooth, creamy unlike any fucking cigarette.
you can buy now, unlike any memory you can’t replace. It smells like sitting on the floor in a warm house, being ten years old and hearing stories of mine shafts, losing at the horses and falling in love with the girl working at the corner shop. Feeling the same way some fifty-five years later, making me believe in love, instead of it making me feel like I’m dead. Making me think of ashes and black and long lines of long cars and my bleeding, throbbing lip and the bandage I hold that wouldn’t stop it.

A young voice from the group shouts out. “Chichi!”

I open my eyes and the old man is gone. The group has gone and the street is empty and quiet except for the rain now sleet hitting the ground and my lip throbbing inside my head and it’s time to leave and face whatever I have to. The smell lingers, an invitation to leave if ever one was going to show itself with such grace. I walk down the steps and out into the light, the sleet and rain not as harsh as I thought. It’s never quite as bad as it looks somehow.

The lesser foot traffic allows me to see more even if there seems to be less to see. You certainly get to see the less affluent side of everything now that you can see below your own eye line and the less affluent side of London is as abundant as its purse-strings can stretch and only half my height. In The States they say that there’s a Starbucks on every corner. For all the irony that comes with that, I believe it. Here there’s a homeless man on every
corner and each and every one will ask you for help and will wish you a good New Years night whether or not you acknowledge them. And all this despite their evening not looking quite so hopeful. That I find harder to believe.

The handkerchief still held to my lip is drenched through. I’m not sure if it’s almost entirely blood or a mixture of that and rain from above and from being splashed up below by the passing taxis. I daren’t look. I take it away from my face and stroke the rip gently. It seems to sting just at the thought of being touched, let alone the briefest of glances and I wince. I look at my hand and it’s clean. It’s enough to assure me that despite how it’s grown bigger than it felt, it had finally stopped bleeding or as close to stopped as I’d consider safe to lower my hand. I still don’t look at the handkerchief as I hurl it into the next bin I walk by nearly hitting the disgruntled homeless man below. This one does not wish me a good evening and nor should he. I like to think that these guys, the genuine ones, have learnt the hard way, like the best and worst of us. Perhaps they’re continuing to do so. Either way, if someone walks by and offers you nothing when you ask them a question and you still wish them a good night, you have to have some kind of belief. Belief that something will come back and repay you for your kindness even if you’re not offered the same this time. If anything was supposed to ground me and lift them up from the ground, it’s that, not money, not simple acknowledgement, it’s that. The only hope I have within that is that they don’t find the church and spoil it all for themselves.
I’ve been walking for five minutes in the direction that I came from. It’s basically a straight line. Nothing is for sure right now. I’ve been thinking about what I’m going to say to Trent when I find him or he finds me. I’d rather I found him as that means he’s not out there looking for me. I’d rather neither of us found each other right now. I’d rather just keep walking in a straight line and that I’d find somewhere I’d finally feel like I can rely on myself not to keep getting into situations like this. Though I don’t feel I’ve done anything wrong, this is without doubt the worst thing I’ve ever done. The last worst thing I ever did was supposed to be kept to myself but when I found I couldn’t look her in the eye anymore it had to come out. It took all of ten minutes to go from heaven and straight to hell. That was two years ago and I’ve hardened since. At least that’s what I tell myself in my sodden state, today and every day before and since.

It’s nearly a week after Christmas, I’m late, I’m lost and I’m following a star. I’m no wise man I assure you, there’s no accreditation I’d like to provide for myself right now, not now I’m within sight of my destination. The star is bright white, shining brighter than the others. It means that’s where I should go. The famous star of Converse.

I can see from a distance the shape of Trent, more distinctive than he was before. My eyes are sharper waiting for an attack or to defend. Trent’s spotted me from afar and squints in my direction to make sure that he’s not just running at someone he
doesn’t know. But run he does. My eyes are sharper, hopefully sharper than his. I keep walking and my heart is pounding like a motherfucker. Da-dum, da-dum, da-dum. The beat seems to match the throbbing coming from my lip and it further enhances the anxiety that’s returned to me. My heart is beating like a motherfucker as we meet. My heart is beating like a motherfucker as he slows down and grabs the lapels of my coat firmly in his palms.

“She wasn’t kidding, was she?” Trent says quietly.

And then silence. I don’t have any choice but to look him in his eyes. I wait, just not sure what for. I know what the choices are, just not the one he’s going to have to make. Not a lot is for sure right now. His hands are like clamps with hooks at least in my head. My heart is beating like a motherfucker.

“What do you mean?” I ask breathlessly.

“This fucking coat. It’s really nice. She said it was cashmere but I didn’t believe her, you flush fucker!”

It’ll inevitably be short lived but I’m relieved. The tension in my body drops like I feel like dropping to the ground. If my legs weren’t about to cave from under me before, they certainly are now. Those clamps with hooks suddenly feel less tight, less in control, at least temporarily.
“She picked you a good one.” Trent says as his eyes come back up to mine, spotting my cut along the way, his smile turning to a concerned gulp.

“Yeah. Probably a little too good for a dog like me, right?” I joke as I regain myself.

It probably looked worse than I thought. He releases me and I back away a couple of steps nearly tripping off the curb and into one of those damned oncoming taxis that’s been splashing me all evening.

“What the fuck happened to you?” he asks, focusing on my lip. His eyes darted around a little looking for further damage. I saw Beatrix over Trent’s shoulder as he leans in to take a closer look, lingering behind him, sat on the steps to the shoe shop. I wish his eyes would look back. Look back right fucking now. That’s where the damage is. We’re stood under that star and the white is illuminating the damage. The damage is beautiful but always broken, never all there as ever. Her eyes can’t meet mine and she stares at the ground and I take a step away from Trent.

“What do you think happened?” My tone is aggravated but calm. A part of me wants him to see the light, see the damage in the light. The rest of me, the part I like to think is the better part of me knows it would kill him, despite what he said to me about her the night before.
“Shit. Did they get anything?”, Trent turns to Beatrix. “Why did you leave him there? You knew he didn’t know the way.”

Beatrix swallows and looks up thinking of her excuses or her reasons. Her justifications for the part she played in the crime.

“She had to take a phone call. The snobby fucks in the store looked at her when Blink 182 started blazing from her phone. I thought it was funny. They didn’t. So she left and took the call. Your brother, right?”

Beatrix nods vigorously.

“I just had to pay for the thing anyway. Plus, as I’m sure you’ve gathered by now Oxford Street is a straight line, I’m not an idiot. Not always.”

I watch Beatrix as she sits there and she keeps looking away and back at me. While she’s trying to figure out why I just jumped in and saved her from being the stuttering mess she is inside, I just stare. Maybe I was trying to figure it out too. Sometimes it seems the more they fuck with me, the more they screw me over, the more they hurt me, the more I want to save them from themselves. They’ve already saved themselves from me for the most part. Maybe it’s just that they’re all so beautiful when they’re as screwed up as they are. I stare for as long as I can, until I need to be normal again.
“What the fuck is up with you two?” Trent asks. Apparently the tension is enough to have penetrated his particularly high barrier for awkwardness. We don’t respond. He turns back to Beatrix on the steps again.

“Him, I understand, he’s a miserable fuck, one with a beautiful new coat. But what’s your excuse?”

“Leave her alone dude. She’s probably just tired and we haven’t eaten today thanks to your inability to put food in your own fridge.”

“There were crackers for lunch. It’s up to you if you didn’t take them.”

“For the sake of my health, which as it turns out seemed due a battering anyway, I chose not to.”

“So I guess you win.”

“No-one fucking wins. I’m just saying it’s quite obvious the little one could do with some grub. I could hear her stomach rumbling from in the changing rooms at the store.”

“Now I know for sure you’re fucking with me. I’m tired of standing here, fuckin’ freezing. Come on, I know where we can get started. But something’s up here and I’m going to figure out what it is, mark my words motherfucker.” Trent says jokingly, putting his
arm around me. I just wish there were a joke. At least one that didn’t bite so hard.

Around the corner there’s a place. As it turns out it’s as close to perfect as we’re going to find on the busiest night of the year. It’s a basement bar, near empty when we arrive. It has a combination of faux deco furniture, Chesterfield chairs and modern walls, clean but with flourishes of the old amongst the dullness of the new. There are pictures on the walls, generic, dark images of people sat at bars drinking spirits slowly. I’ve never quite understood the concept of sitting in a bar staring at a picture of someone sitting in a bar. It suggests an insecurity in a place that screams ‘we are trying but this is what we want’. But I’ll raise a glass or ten to a few things tonight and I’ve just added this place to that ever expanding list, that it get over itself and allow itself to be so we can sit and see in a new day if not a new time. They have a wide-plethora of whiskeys and bourbons so I know Trent has chosen well.

“They have Four Roses, both standard and special” Trent says proudly. “Also take this. Take one for that huge lump on your face...and your lip too!” Trent jokes.

“What is it?”

“Codeine. It’s a strong painkiller. It’s prescription but it’s strong as hell. It won’t hurt. That’s the whole fucking point I suppose.”
“This had best not be fucking e. It looks like e.”

“It’s not fucking e.”

Shrugging, I take it out of his hand.

“Got any water?”

“No. Was the Four Roses the special or the standard?”

I always like to start on a special and my first toast of whiskey and strong painkillers will be to the family. The ones that barely exist in my mind now, the ones that I didn’t call on Christmas Day, the ones that drifted away, the ones I left behind. I need to distract my mind with something. I owe them that much despite how little I want to do with them. I take the pill with the first single of my rather generous double. There’s nothing else to take it with and there feels to be little else to lose. This place has no windows but it’s not dark, but just the right level of darkness for the night ahead although I’m sure the lights will come up as soon as the time is right and the shit hits the fan. The shit always hits the fan at midnight on New Years or virtually any day if you’re up that late, at least in my world. When I think back to past New Years spent with Trent, they always somehow end up being over emotional encounters that end with one or the other of us professing the love of our friendship to the other, spending the rest of the next day awkwardly paddling around the other, or we kick each other’s ass. Emotionally of course, it’s never gotten
violent, not on the outside anyway. This year I’m being extra cautious since for once there’s actually something to get upset about, something that could blow up everything, something that everyone present knows about except the one that will actually blow up.

Trent is talking and Beatrix is half-heartedly leaning against him. Neither of us can hear what he’s saying and don’t especially care. She’s not comfortable here, with him, with me, nowhere. There were a few times when putting my glass to my mouth resulted in a pain-filled wince and I’d notice her glancing at me, her eyes hitting the floor as soon as I saw her. I didn’t mind. It might have been remorse, maybe interest in the pain she’d caused. Either way she wasn’t ignoring everything like I was trying to. I glanced at the clock, out of place shabby chic on the neon lit wall and it’s 9.25. As the evening passes and the drinks disappear and resurrect right in front of us I can see her loosening like the screw that holds the whole structure together and how the right turn in the wrong direction might just bring everything to the ground. She’s starting to talk more and more like she’s coming out of a lucid coma. I’ve just got to hope that my earlier good but completely unnecessary deed will keep the spanner away from that screw. The last time I checked this is a girl who’s quite free-spirited when high on the spirits. For my pains and theirs, this is the type I always seem to choose and the type that seems to choose me. If you told me that any were a match made in heaven then that would be further proof that there really is no God. But
this is the type I choose and this is the type that chooses me. Trent continues to grin across the way, alcohol has seeped into the cracks and he’s in his own place in front of the world. The music gets louder and louder, the bass shakes our bodies and our brains and he dances on the spot. It aggravates my lip, now beating in time to the beat. Da-dum-dum, da-dum-dum. I can see Trent’s asking if I’m okay. I nod and close my eyes, acting the drunk so he’ll maybe stop talking to me until the whole night is over and I can see everything in the less fractured consistency of the daylight, where things make more sense and there’s less agony, less paranoia, less people and less booze that keeps turning up. He grins and nods approvingly.

I’m thankful for my personal space until it’s invaded time and time again and again and again. People in and out, people looking for a place to sit, for a place to bob their heads like any of this means anything. Things get blurrier and blurrier, the whiskey feels less harsh, it doesn’t burn anymore at the pit of my stomach. The pain is all but gone and my face drops from the top of the night to the bottom of the table time and time again and again and again. The people around me have become drunken puppets, every last one of them holding a self-inflicted frame, wooden but as breakable as glass, holding themselves above the ground, continually falling, each limb and joint needing control that they’ve already lost. But they’re happy in their world, tangled but happy. I stop caring as they keep falling into my lap, apologising and climbing up again. My mind wanders from here
to the Japanese father, the kindest look I’d seen in a while, the homeless who wished me well. I wonder where they are. I wonder where they are and I hope they have somewhere at least for this one night. Then I opened my eyes and see recognisable but unfamiliar eyes looking at mine, beautiful dead eyes, my favourite kind.

“Meet Carrie you old drunk” Trent shouts. I look over to him and he winks.

“Hi there”. Her accent is thick with Eastern promise and care through the beat. I glare at Trent open-mouthed at the shock appearance of her that was once contained within his phone. He approaches, puts his hand on my shoulder, his mouth next to my ear.

“You’re going to love this girl.” he whispers. He steps away from me and winks again holding his glass high. “TO NEW BEGINNINGS MY FRIEND!”

“What was wrong with the old beginning?” I holler. Trent laughs.

“You’re a funny guy you miserable grump!”

Trent is gone, at least out of view. All I see are eyes, they’re smiling but dead, my favourite kind. They can’t be mine. She can’t. Not tonight. I’m paralytic and she has expectations and I don’t know what they are. For his careful choice of bar and
timing, Trent has picked a shit time for a new beginning.

“You must be Carrie."

“That is I”, I almost forgot that she’s a drama student.

“Is you really?”

She laughs and puts an arm around my neck to balance herself. It stays there. It feels warm. It feels good and needed tonight. I rub my face and it feels warm and good and I do it carefully to try to wake up, avoiding the bite. Don’t draw attention to the bite.

“I’d like to say I’ve heard much about you Carrie, but Trent has been intentionally vague on the details. He has a tendency to do that."

“What?!"

She can’t hear me. I can barely hear me.

“Do you want to go outside? This place sucks."

“Okay!”

Carrie jumps from my lap and does a little dance to steady herself. There’s no denying it, she’s cute. She’s darker than her picture suggests but I’m not one to discriminate. She’s wearing way too little for the night and she doesn’t have a jacket. I’m too hot and my heart is beating hard. I walk behind her and watch
her hair dance and her derriere moving as she avoids people, chairs and flat-out revelers on flat-out chairs. It is a thing of true beauty and my throbbing lip seems to move with it. Da-dum, da-dum. Trent grabs my shoulder on the way out, spinning me around and offers me a thumbs up and that big dumb smile. I try to offer him the same and keep walking. I carry my coat under my arm as one of us is going to need it. It takes a few minutes but we find the exit, step gingerly up the stairs and stand on the edge of the street. The rain and sleet has stopped but has left behind a biting chill. Carrie immediately shivers upon exiting the door. My first instinct is to wrap the coat around her, someone should take advantage of its warmth. I think of ‘Winter’ by The Rolling Stones.

‘It’s sure been a cold, cold winter and the light of love is all burnt out. Sometimes I think about you baby, sometimes I cry about you, darlin’.’ I sing under my breath. No-one can hear but me. I look at the back of Carrie’s head and see Bethany and the cold days I never had a coat this beautiful to wrap around her.

“Thank you.” she says softly, still shivering as she wraps the wool and cashmere around her.

“That’s alright. It’s too good for a dog like me anyway.” I say smiling.

She laughs nervously. Her eyes are beautiful and dead, how I like
them. I can see how much she’s been let down before. She’s nervous and I’m not. I know what this is. She doesn’t. I’ve had enough drama for one night and all I want to do is talk to her. The evening air is helping me to sober up and it might as well be her. There’s literally no-one else around and it’s just us and the bass coming from inside.

“How do you know my friend Trent?”

“Through Beatrix. We have auditioned together. Trent seems cool.”

“So you don’t know Trent at all?”

She laughs nervously.

“I guess I don’t. But he had good things to say about you.”

“Never trust a man you don’t know, especially one that looks like that”

“Oh really? He said you were a soulful guy with a heart of gold. Can I trust his judgement?”

“Partly. It’s black gold…but gold all the same.”

She laughs nervously. There are touches and tones of honesty in her laughter now. I like the sound she makes, it’s elegant and
subtle, far from English.

“What happened there?” she says pointing at my lip, her finger lingering in the air.

“Oh yeah, a crazy homeless guy tried to get hold of me. I’m sorry to say there’s a little bit of this on that coat...right there.” I point at the breast pocket where there’s a little spatter, intentionally brushing against her hand with mine.

“That’s unfortunate, isn’t it?” she says smiling at my not so subtle approach. I laugh.

“It’s...inconvenient.”

She laughs nervously but louder than before, her head waving back and forth lightly, the back of her hair brushing against my chest. Her head stays there having tested the water. I tense up a little but I don’t pull away.

“Is the coat keeping you warm?”

She looks down at it, shimmering blue in the low light.

“Oh yes. It’s very warm. It’s beautiful, I wish it were mine.”

“Nah, that’s mine I’m afraid. It literally has my blood in it.”

She laughs nervously. She’s growing on me and I’m growing on
her it seems. There’s a sudden onrush of people entering the club excitedly and those who were outside across the road smoking suddenly throw out their quarter finished cigarettes that smell like shit and rush to get inside.

“What time is it?” Carrie says, clearing her throat. We’ve sat silently on the wall for the last couple of minutes. I’m not complaining, it was most welcome. I look at the clock on the pizza place across the way, I squint because it’s so hard to read through the still apparent blurriness and the dark back street.

“Shit, it’s five to midnight.”

“Do you want to go inside?”

I hesitate.

“Do you?” I asked.

“Yes, I do. I want to see it in with our friends.”

There’s something warming about hearing her say ‘our friends’, like something I could get used to again. I’d missed that. I think of Bethany and of better songs.

“Let’s go Miss Carrie” I stand and offer her my hand and her hand is warm and soft in mine. I pull her up and she weighs nothing. We make our way inside the main door and she removes my coat
and hands it back to me and she weighs nothing on me.

We find Trent and Beatrix supporting each other in front of a big screen showing what’s going to be the countdown to New Year. He turns around and sees me stood next to him and he offers me an arm and a big, dumb drunken smile as he has all night long. I do my best to return the favour.

“**It’s not dark yet, my friend**”

I nod agreeably.

“**And just in case, if no-one else does, tonight, I FUCKING LOVE YOU!**”

I hold back on my less drunken protestations. I let him talk and nod along, putting my arm around him to show my appreciation while he jabbers on about all the things that simply don’t matter. I say nothing and within that it feels like things might be okay again. The next toast which I make in my head could only be for the friend I nearly lost who never even knew I nearly lost him.

We’re all stood in a row waiting for the inevitable, the one thing I’ve known for sure is going to happen all night. It’s close to countdown time and for the first time tonight, I’m finally feeling good. I look over to find Beatrix. She smiles over and it feels like things are better at least until the morning and I can live with that when for the longest time it felt like I didn’t know how much more I could take. The codeine and the drink has helped. They
would have been better separate but then so would a lot of things. For now I’m enjoying closeness, new people and better yet older friends who thankfully are still old friends. Trent puts his arm around me and looks almost Buddha-like. Sometimes on nights like these I wish it wasn’t a narcotic that makes us all of ourselves but I’ll still take it however it comes, now and always.

“10–9–8–7–6–5–4–3–2–1…HAPPY NEW YEAR!”

Rapture spreads across the floor and the lights come up. I turn and look at Carrie who looks up at me. I bend down to kiss her on the cheek and her mouth moves onto mine. Her lips are warm and they feel good. They’re soft. They’re soft and pink and like all the others hard to stop from wanting. I kiss back, the adrenaline in the room intoxicating. The consequences can be considered later. I’m tired of consequences and this is no time for them. I smile at her and raise my head back up and turn to Trent and Beatrix in an elongated Hollywood kiss. How could I expect anything less? It’s good to see and I’m still happy for my friend. I want to be happy for my friend and I want him to be happy. Eventually he pulls away and looks at Beatrix, the room quieter now.

“Happy new year darlin’ “

“Happy new year sweetie!” She says flashing her teeth as she smiles.
I see red as she smiles, blood on her teeth, the light showing the front of her mouth normally clean, coated in red. My heart is in my mouth and I look at my blood on her teeth and turn to the back of Trent’s head. The room feels quiet, silent and I hope he hasn’t seen, but he has. He turns, and looks at me with concern and turns back to Beatrix looking confused, lost again having only just found her place, she starts shaking her head, frightened. It only takes Trent a few more seconds to swing round, glaring at me, my lip, my face stupefied, his fist swinging round and connecting to my cheek hard and true, probably deserved, certainly accepted as I stumble backwards. I will not fight back. I will not raise my hands to become fists, only to surrender. But I don’t get the chance. As I stumble backwards another fist connects to the same spot sending me sprawling to the ground, the back of my head feeling the full impact of the floor as I start to black out. As it starts to become darker I see Trent stood above me, silhouettes of all others who I don’t know all around me and it all feels so familiar.

“I fucking knew it!”

Fading out. Dark light. Then just dark. I’m being pulled out of the way, the last thing I remember. Da-dum, da-dum, da-dum.

I wake up in a back room, sofa, brown walls, paisley wallpaper, nothing more, just muffled bass and my lip throbbing. Da-dum, da-dum, da-dum. No-one around. No life but no death as hoped
upon waking, as hoped for a long time, now desired more than merely wanted. No-one watching me, no-one watching over me, no-one to watch me leave. I push myself off the sofa, the pain in my cheek, in my lip, the blurriness in my head not mattering, less than everything else and I head for the door. It leads me out to the main bar where we were and everyone has gone...Trent, Beatrix, Carrie, everyone. All that remained was just someone picking up glass and party remnants, not the saddest sight I’ve seen tonight, but far from the best.

“Hey, you okay? That was a pretty hefty fall you just had.”

I don’t respond even though he couldn’t be more right. I stumble down the stairs and make my way for the closest tube station to get me back to Trent’s. I need to talk to him, to try to justify the unjustifiable to stop the pain, to stop the blood all over again.

I stand waiting for the tube, now less frequent, hardly moving. I sit next to a homeless man who sleeps on the floor next to the chairs. I wonder how he sleeps through the rumbling of the trains and realise that he probably sleeps soundly knowing he’s been wishing people well despite what they think of him. He probably sleeps better than almost anyone I know. The tube train arrives and I stand holding my coat and take a last look at him. He’s Asian, his beard is long, greying at the top, his head and ears covered by his tainted hat. He’s muttering in his sleep in what sounds like Japanese. Everything is dirty, everything has been
given to him but it’s all broken and ripped and falling apart. It’s all falling apart and he wished all of London well today in the hope of change, in a sandwich, in being found and he sleeps soundly in the station, contented but barely warm.

I step closer. I quickly place my blood spattered coat over him, covering him from his shoulders right down to his ankles and hop on board the train gingerly, not knowing where I need to depart. As the train slowly moved away he stirred and in my head I wished him well for the night ahead in the hope that someone will come back and find me.
9. Messages From Below the Broken Tree.

I woke up on the steps to Trent’s apartment looking up at the ceiling. It on the bottom floor and I was down there on the bottom cold as anything but still hopefully warmer than if I were waking out there again. There’s a big window on the left and there was no-one walking by which, along with the grey in the sky, greyer than in the midday made me believe it was still early on. ‘Fuck’ I thought, ‘I got here still early on’.

I looked at that ceiling and wished it were the sky. It wasn’t long before an Indian guy walked past the big window slow talking on his phone distracting me from my wishes. He paced back and forth, back and forth talking on the phone. I couldn’t tell what he was saying but from the look on his face and the amount his lips were moving I knew he was talking to a woman and that she was new to him. Back and forth, back and forth. I banged against the glass but he didn’t hear.

It’s true what they say when they say that physical pain isn’t the same weight as that in the mind. I’m waking up, staring at the ceiling which is of course somehow better than staring at the sky, with every single section of my body hurting, quite the achievement considering that just a few hours ago when everything was still darker I felt relatively good about myself. Even though they’re right, they’re as wrong as they can be because you can’t compare the two. The mental anguish of guilt,
betrayal and in some cases out and out hate is more a slow burner that’ll bring you down from within, whereas the bulging, still-seeping lip, the legs aching, the pounding head and the seething cheek are all just for you and only for right then. The floor is cold, a revelation almost as shocking as the fact that I’m down there again though my lower back was telling me that I’ve been here a while. The steps feel like they could collapse under the weight, albeit that I’m more slender this morning than the bloated mess I was expecting to be. Until I sit up, this seems like a reality that turned bad all too quickly.

Trent lives in the East of the city, not the best of areas but far from the worst, near Bow. The area has its share of burdens, including the addicts I had to weave around on my way back here way too early this morning. As I raise my head from the step, I hear the last, anguished cries of the year being exorcised from the fiends outside. I’m convinced there’s something sticky on my face, it was so hard to flex my cheeks to alleviate the pain of sleeping on the solid ground and the sting of the punch. I stood and fell against Trent’s door heavily. Our college days might have been a collection of rather disgusting messes but when I used to wake up at his place when I couldn’t sleep in the house anymore after Bethany, nothing would wake him. I could walk around with cymbals on my feet and he’d barely even scowl in his deepest unconscious.

I barely have the energy to reach for my phone to check the time.
From the dull winter sun appearing spuriously through some bleak looking clouds, it’s early morning. How early I don’t know. I don’t think I care. Fact is I arrived here in the early morning and I’m waking in it and that doesn’t feel right, but then nothing does and I’m not sure it had for some time. I figured I’d lean there for a while and think about what I’d done. What I hadn’t done. The parts I’ve played and the games I’d won and the ones I’d lost. It’s hard to describe the way I felt in that moment but the fact is I might just have lost my oldest and closest friend in the worst possible way, my only friend and that hurt more than anything else. I pound his door with all the strength I have. Once. Twice. Three times a bastard. No response. And all my strength in that one moment was gone.

“Trent...”

I hear nothing but the static of the world outside and the back and forth steps.

“Fuck! TRENT...”

I heard something crash to the ground in Trent’s flat and I leant my ear against his door. A louder crash crescendos and sends me flying backwards. Either Trent threw something heavy at the door or my banging knocked over his empty coat stand.

“None of this is acceptable. Not even this motherfucker.”
Once again there’s no response. I think this is really what they mean when they talk of standing in the cold light of day. In that moment, the little sun in existence disappeared behind the grey and I prepared myself for one of the longest walks of my life. You’d be right to wonder if I’d left anything on the other side of that door. A bag, a bottle of vino or some suggestion of conscience hanging on by a worn and torn piece of string perhaps. But no, I brought nothing with me, and I’ll take nothing away as I walk out of the door where it’s still in many ways dead except for the pacing of the man at the window who’d finally put down the phone. The guilt was already there, I’ve just swallowed a little more and like the emotional drug mule that I am, I’ll push it out on the other side. I always said it was the best diet pill around.

“You were calling a woman, weren’t you?”

“What’s it to you?”

“Is she beautiful?”

“Yes. Very.”

“Then she’s trouble.”

“You look like shit.”

“I’m going to hell. There aren’t any angels there.”
To anyone who hasn’t been here for a spell or who’s never experienced the joy, the city’s underground system and route can be like one of life’s great mysteries waiting to be unraveled like the oversized string of spaghetti that it really is. Frankly, with the cocktail of hangover, haze and obliviousness thinly concealing loss of hope, I can barely understand how anyone can figure it out, whether born here or raised on its dirty floors. It took eight whole fucking minutes for a train to turn up and only then did I roll my eyes at my own stupidity realising I’m on the wrong side of the tracks. At the next stop there was a clock large enough for me to successfully focus on telling me that it’s 7:23am on New Year’s Day, even earlier than I thought. It took me 3 hours to find my way back to Trent’s thanks to sleepy public transport workers just off shift giving me wrong directions. Either I didn’t sleep and merely fell into a dogged cat-nap or I slept so little I might as well not have bothered for the sake of the ache now stronger somehow on the more comfortable seats of Euston where I was taking a break staking out the closest men’s room for the inevitable vomiting. There’s more people here but like me they’re all on their way home, drunken grins sunk to weary frowns and they’re on their way to their beds. I could feel at home; the difference is my house is 5 hours away on a bus that I hope is leaving sometime soon.

Victoria bus station was packed with immigrants and people from somewhere else and drunks. I get the last seat, creaking exhaustively and sit and wait for the next bus to appear which
says Manchester, Liverpool, Hyde or Manchester Airport; I can walk the rest of the way as I’m not sleeping anytime soon. Only when we’re in a position of distress and discomfort do we wish that there were more at a time when we clearly don’t need half as much and at that time I’d have given anything for a bus every ten minutes to just get me the fuck out of a freshly waking London. As it turns out I have two and a half hours to consider entering the bathroom and never coming out again or turning back and breaking Trent’s door down and running away with Beatrix. Both seem beautiful ways to stop the hurt, at least emotionally, but the pain both would bring to others seemed barely worth it so I just did the sensible thing and thought about how I do what I do and why it never ends. If nothing else, this time is the best time for feeling sorry for something.

In the self-indulgent sorrow, something was shaking. My phone vibrated joyfully to let me know that there is some part of life that I’m missing somewhere. The battery was low and on its way out which was a metaphor for something at that moment. I’m in self-pitying mode should you not have seen it by now and I’ll be in residence for the next 2–3 working days, no receipt necessary and should you want your money back, just leave me at the door on your way out, skipping a couple of chapters or so if you so wish.

When I look down at my phone I had eighteen missed calls, two from Beatrix, one from Trent at quarter to midnight before it all
went to shit and the remainder from my mother. There’s a voicemail, but I hate hearing her voice judging me, especially on low battery, so I’ll look at the four messages she’s sent me instead.

‘Where are you? It’s important xxx’

I realise it’s been a long time, but then, it’s always fucking important.

‘Where are you you fucking ingrate? It’s urgent I need u xxx’

Now you know where I developed my fragrant tongue.

‘Your brother died last night. Fuck you. xXx’

‘He fucking hated you. xxx’

I slumped slowly back into my seat, absorbing the impact. But what impact I thought. I didn’t respond, I didn’t cry, my eyes barely even dropped to the ground. I thought for a minute that I might be hallucinating and read the messages again, one, two, three, four times. I thought about my mother’s face saying them out loud and then my brother’s face and he’s eleven years old on that day, it’s his birthday, and he looks so sad. He always looked so fucking sad. I look at the clock and it’s 8am. It’s only 8am and the first bus is at 9.30am. All I can do is sit and think when anything, anything at all would be better.
Me and John were best friends until I was fifteen. He was nine. I’m not altogether sure of what happened and from then on we bickered like you wouldn’t believe. I thought about one day when we were younger and it was raining. The grass had been cut a couple of days before and that the smell of summer was fading but still filling us up. John suffered with some serious hay fever and all I could do was keep blowing dandelion seeds in the poor little bastard’s face. One day one of the seeds got lodged in his eye and his face blew up like a balloon and we had to take him to the hospital and that’s when it all started to change. The unintentionally destructive arsehole that was already seeding in me and the poor little bastard was the first one to see it and I don’t think he ever forgot it. The doctors tried to make me feel better by telling me that I had actually done him a favour by discovering this severity and that I was there to comfort him and to tell my mother about it and that it was better than it happening while he was on his own. Apparently he could’ve died and that made me a hero. As part of this favour my brother spent a few days in the hospital, isolated and the rest of the month with the curtains closed in his room and the rest of his life on antihistamines all the while developing a paranoia of the summer and, with it, the sun. If it weren’t for us drifting apart we’d have made a hell of a vampire team with his new-found hatred of the sun and me with my love of the night and an apparent taste for making my way home with blood around my mouth. I suppose some things don’t change. I was a little shit. I was a little shit and I never felt bad about that until it was way too late. We always
promise ourselves that we will bring times like that back, like they’re merely rips in a thin tapestry that can simply be sewn back together leaving the smallest of marks but nothing that effects its overall value. But it never quite goes that way, does it? We leave these things, put them to the side until one day we’re told there’s nothing we can do and not even our supposed God, the finest seamstress there’s ever been, can mend these holes and put you back together. I damaged my brother, I damaged him and nearly killed him and I took the credit for saving his life. I never felt bad about that until right now.

I felt that bus station as cold as the place where my brother was. But I can’t be there and I can’t see him. I don’t want to see him but I do, but I can’t. He was twenty-three fucking years old. Twenty fucking three years old. My own brother at twenty three years old is lying somewhere in a fridge, and I’m nowhere close and I’m still drunk, waiting for either his ghost to talk to me or kick the shit out of me, for the grief to rip me a new one or for the sheer mental and physical exhaustion to take me away and let me deal later. All I feel is anger. Anger for what has happened, anger towards my mother for her sarcasm, anger at myself for not ever being there, anger at myself for not answering the phone, anger for the dandelions and for that summer and for the curtains and the hospital, anger at myself for not feeling sadness, grief and pain. Anger at myself, filtered anger, filtered by the remaining fumes of whiskey and the smell of blood, the taste of copper in my mouth. Anger for killing him. My brother won’t find
me, even in death, so pain now or pain later, it doesn’t matter.
Right now all I want to do is go home and do myself the same
favour I did to him.
10. **Snowflake.**

There’s something about a long bus journey and a dose of bad news to sober you up damn quick. It would be unjust to say that the news of my younger brother’s death was bothering me, it’s more that it’s niggling at me with the strength of 1,000 fleas to which blood is like crack. They’re eating everything, the good, the evil and mercifully the anger. The anger is subsiding and what will replace it, I was still yet to know. The upside of waking up early and getting the first bus home is that you get back early too. I had to check that my keys were in my pocket for absolute sure, I’d forgotten so much lately.

Arriving back in Manchester at midday on a day as joyous, as celebrated as this, to a sea of absolute nothingness, no people, no open doors, no lights and a dull aching sky above is appropriate this time around. It never had been before, but now with everything at last familiar again it couldn’t have been more perfect. I might as well have stepped out into the middle of the Sahara and been hallucinating that there’s more than there actually is, such was the sparsity of it all. I was looking for a drink to quench this incredible thirst I’ve had since my head first hit Trent’s step and something to fuck me up royally and not necessarily in that order. Nothing is open but I think I’m more likely to find a dealer around the gardens for a little bit of something and just maybe he’ll throw in a bottle of water if I buy enough to annihilate me for at least a couple of days. I walk for
what feels like an hour but nothing is open. Everything is still fuzzy, I’m just squinting in the hope of seeing something, any kind of light, neon, blue whatever, where I might be able to temporarily replenish that yet to be completely fried.

I’ve not been this lonely in a long time. I don’t think I’ve ever missed pointless conversation until now. I’m just one of the zombies in the apocalypse convincing myself I’m not the only difference being that my eyes are heavy and I need to sleep like you wouldn’t believe. When my grandfather passed, all I wanted to do was sleep so it would seem that if there’s one thing grief offers, it’s a sleeping pill and a free pass to oblivion. It’s looks like it’s the only pill I’m going to find today. I gave up and turned away towards my bed in the sky.

The streets are getting shorter and the cars are gathering on the main roads that run alongside the streets that lead to my door. They drift by in slow motion, one by one as if respectful of my mood. They’re going to visit their families, their loved ones and they’re going home. They’re going to hug their mothers, smother their grandchildren and repair the damage of the year, the visible dents and the scars they swallowed from their stubbornness, their disappointment and their absence. There’s work being done on the pavements on the route back, more botched work done on the cheap being covered over. It’s only a matter of time before I trip over one of the poorly scattered sand-bags that litter the streets and I don’t disappoint. I didn’t see it, I hit the ground
hard, the little change I had left scattering on the street. I didn’t see it because I was watching the cars and wondering why I never learnt to drive. There’s no love here and I watch the cars move on by, quicker now.

I look up and I see more than I wanted to though it taunted me for years. The sign that tells me the right way to go is right in front of me, as is the one that tells me the wrong way to turn. One is the street back to Pleasant Place, the other a stretch of road which leads to two more streets that lead to Bethany’s place. As I stand I walk past the entranceway to my apartment and head towards her apartment block. I still hadn’t decided if it was right or wrong. It’s been a while and though I told her conclusively, by way of throwing her favourite plant out the window of our house, smashing her car’s windscreen and denting the hood, that I never wanted to see her again. I never received a bill, let’s put it that way, and I never saw her again.

Apartment 310. Apartment 310. I’d never been here before and never wanted to until now. But I know it’s Apartment 310. Half way down the road I thought that maybe I should just count my blessings, cut my losses, forget all about her and stroll on home. The very thought of her has awoken me from my stupor and maybe that’s enough. But if I turn my back now and retrace my steps to the beginning of my street, would I ever come back. I tell myself that step by step, brick by brick, avoiding dog shit and empty beer bottles, to try and make a game of it. But this isn’t a
game and it never has been. Maybe it was to her at some point. Probably. There was a time when she was all I saw at my very core. You don’t forget the ones you regret most of all.

Anything, whatever I can, whatever I have, don’t be alone, just get through. You get going and get through. That’s what I told myself like I wouldn’t believe anything else if I told it to myself. And there it was. Apartment 310 with the green door. Every other door on this floor is white. I stood on the edge of the balcony and looked down. Almost every door in the entire building was white, but not hers. I could only have found her door. This could only be hers.

I raise my hand to knock, but I’m stopped by that good old indescribable force, the one that is usually your instinct telling you to stop when all other aspects of mind, body and soul are failing you. Why now? Why not when I was walking here? Anything, whatever I can, whatever I have, don’t be alone, just get through. Knock. Just get through. But I didn’t. I didn’t knock.

I rested my head against her door to see if I can hear anything inside. She used to sleep for all the hours she could and she probably still was. She slept so lightly that any sound, no matter how small, any light no matter how dark would keep her wide awake. But when she slept there was little better than the look on her face, as if the world was complete and all was well. But I need her to wake up. Knock. Get through. Don’t be alone. But nothing.
I gave up with the world in pieces and headed for the elevator shaft. I get the lift downstairs with God knows what in my head. Where I was going, who I was going to see. All I knew is that the dealers hanging around the gardens cold and bored were looking like the best option. They at least offered me a smile. The faster I’m going, the less likely I am to change my mind, but the lift does make you think more than if you were walking down the stairs and I have a lot on my mind. Trent, Bethany…my brother. My little brother, cold and alone. I’d finally reached the bottom and I laughed a little at the feeling of all the nothing that was down there as the doors opened.

I walked out of the building and across the way. I breathe full refreshing breaths that seemed to matter though they inevitably didn’t and they were taken away by the wing getting stronger by the hour. That winter was harsh for all the reasons you can imagine and a couple that you never want to. My thoughts were a wreck but my lip stopped hurting a while before and I could feel it healing in the cold air. The bitterness almost seemed to make it all better. I can feel it in the silence out here and I look over at the city, at all those buildings, empty for one day only and I feel at home for just a minute. But in the darkness of the ever brightening day something caught my eye. I turned to look to my right and I could make out someone sat on a step leading to the building’s car park and at first I think they’re asleep, like one of Dionysus’s seraphim soon to be awoken by the sharp afternoon light. But I look back to the city. She coughs violently and I turn
back to her. As I move closer I can hear that she was weeping quietly, and I can make out the details of the sheer jacket covering her head, the thing that made my eye turn in the first place. It’s one of those moments you wish you had a camera or a better feeling like you can walk by and not have to worry about what would happen to them. But she was quite the image sat there and her breath quivered like something beautiful that might just break that little bit more unless someone, anyone just went over there. I walk closer slowly. She might say nothing. She might say everything too loudly and too quickly, she might not even notice me there but I won’t be alone.

I sit down next to her. She wasn’t moving much but she’s shaking like I haven’t seen for years. She jumped back startled when she finally felt a presence there.

“Sorry, I’m never quite sure when the right time to say hello is in these instances.”

I see her face now, I see her better as she turns this mascara-trailed vision to me as if asking me to explain myself when she’s yet to open her mouth. Her skin is pale, almost too pale to believe. There’s white and there’s blinding and if the sun was out I could finally close my eyes and know I wouldn’t fall asleep. Her hair is some shade of purple with a mousey brown coming through out the top of her head, dyed weeks, months ago, it’s a perfect mess, matching her eyes. She settles back down uneasily.
She has a little of the Mediterranean in her and I thought how on better days she’d have more colour and more life in her. But those eyes knew things. They weren’t dead even if they weren’t alive that morning. They looked a lot older than the lip ring that suggested the rebellion of youth. She’s young, way too young to be out here right now, maybe 22, 21, perhaps younger. Her cheeks had trails of mascara and her eyes, messy like her roots and deep brown, the colour that keeps finding me, are asking me to explain myself.

“This is an interesting place you’ve chosen to fall apart. It’s got a hell of a view. I love this fucking city. It’s got it’s bad sides but then don’t we all. It makes me feel lonely like you wouldn’t believe.”

She says nothing and seems to be thinking less about what I’m saying and more about what planet I’m from.

“I don’t know if you’ve been in this position before but you don’t need to worry. I’m not crazy despite how much my behaviour suggests otherwise. But for the first time in a long time I’ve sat down next to a beautiful girl with her emotions all over the floor she’s barely slept on and I just want to talk if she wants to talk to me.” I say smiling, a genuine smile, an honest smile for once. “As clichéd as we men are, and as fucking stupid as we can be to friends, family, lovers...which I suspect is a very good reason you are where you are right now...today it’s not the case.”
I start rolling up my bus ticket I found in my pocket like I’m trying to do origami while I wait in the hope that she’ll talk and that she’s not just another mirage. Minutes passed and I started to stand and let her be. It felt good to finally be as honest as I was but all good things, well they tend to last as long as this very conversation had.

“It’s just one of those days.” I said as I went to push myself up from the ground.

“It’s New Years Day.” she says, her voice breaking from a lack of use. I turn to look at her, still smiling. I’m not alone. She is real and I was glad.

“She speaks.”

She smiles back, a vulnerable, enlightening heartbreaking little thing which left as quickly as it came. I might be a hardened old bastard at only twenty-nine but like all the romantics I’ve come from, I’m still susceptible to the classics; smiles, winks and pecks on the cheek; the angel’s trio.

“So we’re here to talk about you?” she said, sitting up a little taller, clearing her throat.

“I guess so, unless you move your lips a little bit more and sounds start to come out a little louder.”
She wipes the running mascara from her face. Most of it remains. It had been there for a while and it dried on and clung to her. She’s got subtle little features all surrounding these perfectly formed lips that keep opening so she can breathe, her nose still blocked from the tears and the cold. The ring that ran through the bottom animated the quiver, enlivened the sadness in her.

“That could get boring quickly. You men tend to complain about nothing until they get what they want.”

“Oh, the little snowflake sitting here like she has nothing has a little something. She has spunk. That’s a start.” I say smiling. “I’m just saying, Snowflake, but I don’t think we’re going to have any kind of conversation that won’t involve complaining or regret. It’s New Years Day. So let’s talk about this joyous day and what you’re doing here nearly half dead presumably having consumed vodka and red bull in the double figures.”

“How’d you know that?”

“I dated quite a lot of you in younger times. Whatever that was. I can’t remember, but I know if there’s one thing that never changes it’s the drinks. That and you have the wonderfully dank fragrance of vodka and energy through the distant smell of, I think, linen. Makes you smell like the snow when I was a kid little Snowflake. I’m not weird I assure you, I just have an exceptional nose for scents and bullshit.”
“Smart. I had thirteen at the last count. Technically eleven as two of them ended up down the front of me rather than inside of me.”

“Holy fuck, how are you alive?”

She snorts her laughter through the sniffling and stops, embarrassed. I widen my eyes jokingly and she laughs from behind her hand. The barricade is broken. She drops her hand and looks at me, still smiling.

“If I’m to tell you my sordid tale, I’m sure you know by now that everything I tell you will be something you’ve heard before somewhere else.” she says sighing.

“It doesn’t matter. It matters that you say it. Everything else is just experience.”

She looks at me in a way that only reminds me of why I came here in the first place; for comfort. I believe then that she’d been looking for the same and she might have been out in the cold for longer than I thought, much longer than tonight, much longer than the winter. She stares at me for nearly a minute before she says anything else about herself. Her eyes are full of way too much for someone her age. They’re not dead like I like them, but they’re not alive and they’re no tragedy. I like that too.

“Last night was terrible. I don’t know if I can relive it right now.”
“Believe it or not I have no place to be so whether it’s now or in 4 or 5…minutes, you’re going to tell me.”

It’s surprisingly easy to make a girl that looks this good laugh this easily but maybe it’s because I’m offering her a way out with no repercussions; a gift rarer now the years have passed than ever before. It feels good to be seeking a little bit of redemption in someone’s eyes instead of their most intimate of clothing. Right now she might be the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen. Her lips part dryly and she begins.

“My best friend is depressed. Like clinically. I took her out for New Years and it was going well. I’m not stupid in thinking that one night of craziness was going to snap her out of it, I’ve seen enough of it already. Her boyfriend came along and he’s been incredibly supportive of her. He’s like the guy you dream of when you’re watching all those movies, those guys that just don’t exist anymore.”

“I’m not sure they ever did.”

She lights up one of her cigarettes from this little green packet, menthol, smooth for the girl who’s had the roughest of nights.

“But this guy…he’s just unreal. He’s seen her through everything. She left school early, she stopped talking to her parents. She just gave up. There was never a reason. But last night this man couldn’t look at her anymore.”
“Why not?”

“Because he started looking at me.”

“I have heard this one before...yeah. In fact I’ve been a contributor to this one. But it’s never told this well.”

“I suppose you can guess the rest.”

“That doesn’t mean you shouldn’t say it and I shouldn’t hear it. That’s the only way you’re going to battle this out.”

“You’re not going to help me out of this one?”

She offers me a drag. I feel the cliché but having a smoke is more intriguing to me, especially from a cigarette as blessed and as gentle as this one.

“I’m a strategy man, and a pussy with a sword. But I always wear the armour, battle-ready or not, just in case of stray bullets. So take your shot and we’ll see where it bounces.”

“So he’s being nice to me all night which is how he is anyway, but then he starts talking about how she’s dragging him down and how he’s looking for excitement. Apparently he woke up one day and wanted to ‘experience more’.”

I take another drag.
“We do that. We do do that.”

“And it has to be his girlfriend’s best friend that is the new experience. It couldn’t be anyone else. Tells me he loves me, he’s loved me for a long time, since we all visited the coast one time back when we were seventeen. So I blow him.”

“You say that with such trepidation and concern.”

“Well, I don’t regret nearly fucking the guy. I don’t regret having his cock in my mouth. What I regret is that I didn’t leave it in his pants and smack him in the mouth instead of slapping his balls.”

I take another big drag and nod what I think was approval. It didn’t seem to matter.

“Ok, fuck it...how old are you?”

“18.”

I look at her, my smile is full of disbelief and it’s obvious.

“I’m 18.” she says impatiently.

“That’s the problem with being 18, is being 18. No-one believes you.”

“I don’t know what that means but it sounds really good.”
“Actually, I tend to believe you. You seem to be feeling more than any 18 year old I’ve ever known including my own sensitive self and you have no reason to lie to me.”

“So that’s where I am and that’s what I’m telling you. Sitting on the steps with a man twice my age on New Year’s Day, freezing my tits off.”

“Ok, how old do you think I am?”

“Double my age dumbass.”, she says brattily, finishing her cigarette.

Believe it or not, I’d gladly have taken thirty-six at that or any other moment. I’d been told worse and I don’t want her to lose her step.

“So here I am…eighteen and regretful.”

“It doesn’t change. You just feel it less, believe me”

She turns around and blows smoke in my eyes.

“You live in this piece of shit building? Or are you just screwing someone in here?”

“No, but there is someone here I used to know. And screw we did.”
“So where do you live?”

“The pretentia-pad on the hill over there.” I point over at Pleasant Place and I tense up in the cold. “I’m just putting off the walk of shame. And then there you were as good an excuse as I’ve seen all this sleepless night and all fractured morning.”

“I need some fucking sleep and I’m out of cash. Can I crash?”

I look at her with a concerned smile, trying to figure out what kind of a girl, eighteen or otherwise would trust someone this quickly even if I had put a solid case in for myself. For once I think I’d judged how lost the girl was and I’d got it right even if it was at the wrong time. I can’t fuck this girl. I’m done with the damaged and the near falling apart and I already promised her and promised myself that I wouldn’t.

“Listen, do you really want to wake up in 7 hours in my apartment smelling of vodka and whatever you’re going to want when we get back there? You don’t know where I’ve been and the things I’ve done there. Besides, I’ve only got one bed, with two springs still good and I need them both, I have a bad back and an age-appropriate hip that needs replacing.”

“I could always just lay on top of you.”

I nod again in agreement to myself wondering if I heard what I just heard. Get through. Don’t be alone. There’s my justification,
at last. It somehow feels enough and walking the walk of shame with another is never a bad thing especially with someone.

“Ok Snowflake, you can crash, but you only get one spring. We can continue this talk in the warmth, and talk is what it is.”

“I’m already shamed. What’s the worst that could happen? You got anything to drink? Vodka maybe?”

“I think there’s some Southern Comfort. I think it’s under my bed somewhere.”

We stumble to our feet and I lead the way with her hands clasping my left arm. I’m not alone. I’m getting through in whatever way I can. The only way I know how.

“That’s my favourite kind.”

I assume it’s today. It can’t really be anything else, but it feels like I’ve slept for months and today was several weeks ago. Today I might be waking up, staring at my ceiling, but I’m not waking up alone. It’s also not 7am, and more like 7pm. The sun has that glint that suggests a set rather than a rise. What’s most astonishing is that I remember everything, at least since midday. I check my phone and it’s still the same day as when I left London hazy and disgraced. But it doesn’t feel the same, it doesn’t even look the same somehow. The walls are whiter, the scratched table in the corner doesn’t look as bad as before I left. It’s all insignificant except for one thing. The smell. It smells like sex. Wonderful, inexplicable sex.

I turned over but she wasn’t there. The world was suddenly completely silent and smelling like a broken promise and the good feeling was gone but only for a second. There’s noise coming from the kitchen and I don’t think I have a cat. Least not the last I checked. Poor Snowflake still hasn’t eaten since sometime last night when she was working on her own demise and, like the fucked up rabid rabbit she’s proven herself to be thus far, she’s clumsy as hell. I’m pretty sure that my jar of that ridiculously expensive coffee extracted from monkey shit just hit the floor, so I might have lost the most expensive drunken purchase I ever made as well as my deposit. That was a fucking heavy jar. But I don’t care. I’m going to lie here and wait for my
new found little Snowflake to flutter back into the bedroom with coffee, bubbling from the percolator, toast and some shitty jam that’s been in the cupboard for 3 years from a time when I tried to eat properly.

“Where the fuck are the Coco Pops? You said you had Coco Pops, damn it.” says a frustrated voice.

My percolating bubbles are well and truly burst and they were going to taste so good.

“I said I had Coco Pops? Was that during the binge on Southern Comfort or after? Besides, there’s no fucking milk, the only liquid I have is some questionable apple juice and vodka unless you finished that off while I was getting some sleep”

“That was the plan, but I think I have enough left for my cereal if you just had some fecking Coco Pops.”

I hear another crash and wince, thinking of how we stumbled back here earlier and how it somehow took us half an hour to walk a full three or four streets narrowly missing at least one taxi she had hailed drunkenly by running in front of it then having to compensate the driver handsomely. I laugh but I’ve been spending way too much on accidents lately. I’m waiting for my credit card company to call to ask if everything’s okay as, in the space of 14 hours, I’d spent near two grand in some prissy London department store and dropped to buying a bottle of water
and twenty pounds worth of Nik-Naks on the way home 200 miles north in deepest Salford, at a corner shop called ‘Wine etc.’. I’m not sure how they’d take it if I were to explain that I just had an eventful day and it was all an accident.

“Well there’s two choices really; you can either go downstairs to the ridiculously expensive convenience shop at the bottom of my wonderfully overpriced living quarters or you can come back in here, we can go again, build up something resembling a real appetite and I buy us a couple of burgers, chips and key lime pie from the Italian place half a mile from here.”

Snowflake’s head appears around the door, the base of previously mentioned vodka bottle hanging by her side, breasts concealed but perfectly within view, an off purple cascade coming down over the rest. I fucking love my life right now.

“I’ve kept your side warm and as free of my love juice as possible.” I say patting the sheets.

“You’re disgusting.”

“No. No, I’m not. Otherwise, why are you here?”

“Because I’m disgusting.”

“Not true, but if in some parallel universe we’re proven wrong, then we go very well together.”
She skips over playfully to the bed and flops down on my chest. It’s not as toned or as solid as it used to be and I let out a short gasp. Her hair smells like cigarettes and cheap shampoo. It’s frizzy and purple and the roots are brown like the eyes I’m looking forward to seeing again.

“You like being hurt, don’t you?”

“Mentally, yes, I do have a special place for punishment. I keep my scars nice and fresh should the occasion arise.”

“No, no, we’re done with the dark for now. Look at the last bit of the light stuff glowing on the wall. This day went from shit to kinda awesome really quickly so don’t ruin it now.”

“But my depth is what sold me in the first place. And ‘kinda awesome’? Have you been spending a little too much time listening to Avril Lavigne?”

“Ooooh, you are young enough to know a little bit about ‘the kids’, aren’t you?”

“Frankly my dear, any time listening to Avril Lavigne is time lost and brain cells killed slowly and painfully.” I say laying back down in bed.

Snowflake sighs and lies against my chest with her arm around my waist. It’s nice, I’ve not felt it in a while and when you wake
up cold every morning, even in the height of Summer, I can’t complain, even if I feel like a bull grasping onto a lamb in the greater scheme of life. It’s still life.

“I’m tired”, she says croakily.

“Want me to do the work this time? I was awfully selfish... although you were very good at allowing me to be selfish I must say.”

“I just want to talk.”

Like a bull to a red rag, those are the three words that normally would make me jump out of bed and head further into the field at the risk of the abattoir that is normality but I’m happy where I am. I’ve had a bad couple of days, fuck, a bad couple of months and I’m about ready for some good, no matter how quickly it’s going to fly away.

“So...of all the buildings, in all the world...”

My bad New Yoik accent brings a smile and a titter.

“...what were you doing outside that one? It was a considerable length from Satans Hollow, Grand Central and all the local rock bars I can see you frequenting. You don’t look like a chav, so I doubt you were anywhere else.”
“I fucked up. When I fuck up, I walk. And I walked until I couldn’t go any further and I just wanted to cry and that just happens to be where that was. And where you were.”

“Thank the fucking Lord, right?”

“Oh, this isn’t about God, it never has been. You were just another random event that eventually turns me in the right direction, whether it’s because you’ve fucked me for your own, ego-centric reasons or less likely you might just become the great love of my life that I’ll spend the rest of my life with or you’ll let me go in about 3 hours time and I’ll pine and follow you for the rest of my life.”

I shift and look down at Snowflake. She’s slipping out of my grip, melting. She’s melting because while she’s reading me and reading me so well.

“I think I’ve misjudged you, little Snowflake.” I say, kissing her forehead.

She looks perplexed every time I call her Snowflake, but she never asked me why. Sometime post-intercourse I started to feel good and it wasn’t the usual chemicals, the smiles and the affection. At the time I had no idea what it was. But now I was awake I could feel the colour she’d gained since she I saw her, pale like snow, seeping into me and it feels good and just like that she was gone. It takes her all of ten seconds to get up and
whip on the sheer top she was wearing last night and another twenty to put on her overly complicated heels.

“Hey, come on, what happened to the second coming?”

“Not that I want to inflate your ego still further, but I’m pretty sure that would be the fourth or fifth coming and I’m not sure even Christ himself could take that many nails.” she says pulling on some tights she took from a hidden pocket in her bag.

“Many have said that Jesus was nailed to the cross with four nails per hand. If there’s one mystical being that can do it, it’d be the son of the creator. Besides, you’re a God of something, so I’m sure you can too.”

“I’m not sure how this got Biblical so fast, but I’m hungry as hell and I don’t think the big man would approve.”

“We just fucked without thought, intention or concern at least 3 times as far as I can remember, in some of the most unholy ways and orifices and you’re concerned about what God thinks?”

Snowflake sighed impatiently.

“Well we’ve spent the last couple of minutes talking about God and not once have I heard you discourage the notion, though you don’t seem in the least bit religious or spiritual. I’m still waiting on those loaves and fishes.”
“All I know is that I once read a book, written by a man and I was left disappointed and that hurts my feelings. I’m a spiritual kind of fuck up. I’m as spiritual as any fuck up can be. In fact I’m starting to think that spirituality is what fucked me up in the first place.”

“You are what fucked you up and there’s no other way about it. I haven’t been around long enough to experience the inner workings of what makes a mind truly fail itself, but I know that it’s all you. You’re intelligent and smart enough to see what effects you badly and yet you roll around in it like you’re married to it. All the while you were fucking me. And now you’re going to put on some clothes and buy me some fucking breakfast.”

I like her feistiness. I hate it that she’s right but she’s made me smile and they rarely manage that. I jumped up from the bed seemingly resurrected and walk towards her slowly and put my arms around her because I’m worried she’ll melt away and become part of the ether I can’t see in my shitty, Godless apartment.

“Fuck that hurt” I say, cricking my back.

Snowflake cracks with glorious laughter and looked up at me.

“At least you still look good, old man.”

“Oh, fuck that, I need a shave.”
Snowflake ducks out of my embrace, grabbing her hand-bag and her phone in the process. I have no idea how I’m going to keep up with this girl, that is if she even gives me the chance.

“Leave it. It makes you look pastoral.”

I smile and throw on an undevilled t-shirt. I remember thinking that maybe I was the blessed amongst the blessed after all. Call it delusions of grandeur but lest we forget that the last woman lying where Snowflake was violated was called Mary. It’d take some kind of happiness to make a man think he was the big man but then again, we all think we’re the big man at some point or another. Every man is their own God, that’s one of the few things I believe in and it’s not much of a belief as it is. But in that moment I was happy, like someone had given me a pill, the one that changes everything that exists as much as any God could and it’s all about the faith you hold. Someone once told me that Jesus was the biggest fuck-up the world had ever known and that if that wasn’t proof that spirituality, if not God itself, was seeping through all those who have some sort of faith, then he didn’t know what was. That was my brother for you. It’s the one thing that used to piss me off about him, the unwavering faith in something that he could never prove existed or show me why I should believe in it that eventually inspired my mother to be the crazy person she is today. There’s a part, a small part of me, as I look over the girl with the gradient in her hair and the lip ring who’s defying all the conventions I previously had become
infected by this last couple of years that wishes I could believe he’s somewhere now telling me how he was right all along. He always was the better of us because ultimately his faith in anything and everything never once wavered until the day I ran and never saw him again. But he won’t because I don’t believe it. I don’t believe it because I know he’s somewhere waiting for me to tell me that he’s ashamed that I’m feeling as good as I am when I shouldn’t be. That comes later. It’s cold outside and Snowflake is right here now and she’s hungry as hell. I barely lock the door for being pulled to the elevator shaft for more of my favourite kind of grace and leave behind all belief and faith I ever had for later.
12. The Afterglow.

It’s wasn’t long until we found ourselves in the middle of town where the people were already flocking and the birds bathed in the fountains of the gardens and the bright light. The clock on the wall of Debenhams reads 8.45, but then it’s been that time for what seems like years. It might once again have been one of the colder days of the year, the chill sharper than it had the right to be but the birds don’t care and it’s their favourite time of the day. Snowflake danced around them, moving through the streets a few steps in front of me while I thought about what the day is inevitably going to force. The good feeling felt better on that day but like anything as good, it moves away and it dances like her until it tires and sleeps. The birds don’t care that she moves the way she does, but she’s unnerves those who are still sleeping, myself included in some ways. People underestimate pigeons. No, let’s be honest, most people underestimate pigeons and don’t really see them as anything other than something in their way, as insignificant as last Tuesday’s rag blowing around, just less significant. Not Snowflake though. The city is littered with *the winged vermin* and they’re treated as such, but she happily skips around each one, like she’s playing some never-ending game of hopscotch with no numbered squares or lines to restrict her. I couldn’t quite put my finger on it but she’s as charming and sweet in the afternoon light as she is annoying in her sheer energy.
“You nearly got that one.\text引用", I shout as I watch a little albino pigeon flap in fright.

“Sorry Mr Pigeon” she responds, watching the bird as it takes flight way above our heads. Now that we were out in the open for all to see, this is when the child in her became clearer. Free of the makeup and the mascara that tainted her cheeks, she seems like a different person, lighter somehow, more her age I guess, whatever that actually is. Amazing really, how she frightened me more in the way she was then and the way she moves so freely than when she was provocative but vulnerable and flightless with this damaged wing from the night before. It’s something in the freedom I haven’t had for as long as I can remember and it was something in the way she expressed herself that reminds me of a youth long lost. I don’t know if it’s just circumstances being as they were but she made me think of John, the boy I lost so many years ago and just last night equally. The last time I saw him he was like her, and despite his faith and his beliefs, he was as lost as she is, a forced happiness spreading across her face much like it so often did with him, in a world where he wasn’t quite as accepted for who he really was, for the mind he had as fucked up as mine but that faith...that faith made the contrast that was as much as his one demon that he fought as it was his saviour and for the people he loved. Like him, every once in a while I see a glimmer, a glimmer of nothing quite being right before another skip forward takes it all away. ‘You feeling the afterglow?’ he said to me this one time on one of our too few phone calls, jokingly.
We called this the ‘afterglow’, me and John. When we were kids we never truly understood why we didn’t see everything we had in wonder, why after the good inevitably came the bad. But much like the last time we talked I miss him in the afterglow.

Call me fatalistic, call me a self-imposing party-killer but this is usually where it all goes wrong and I fuck it up. Not because she’s young, way too young, not because she’s not what she was last night in the light of day, not because she might no longer match some ludicrous expectation I give myself but because I’m running out of things to say and she’ll know it soon enough. We keep walking and I’m filled by dread and apprehension because I can’t feel anything else once the good is pivoting further, away from me. I’m under no illusion; Snowflake is an elegant distraction from life but one I wish I could feel were permanent. It’s been a while since I’ve longed for that but today is a bit of an exceptional day. I’m still walking around corners looking for my brother in something, virtually anything, pillars, the billboard above the bus station, the faces of the people pushing by, and this is sadly the bigger distraction since before I was in a locked room where the only spirits were there to keep me away from reality instead of directly in its firing line. This is the difference; I step outside to unfamiliar faces in a very familiar place, too familiar in fact, and I shrivel. She and those before bloom like the only amaryllis that found its way through the concrete and keeps the water from last night’s rain all for herself. I’m not sure if it’s just that I’m already looking at the end of something good but they come too often
and leave way too soon. Even if I’ve just woken up in this mood and none of this plaguing my mind even matters, she can’t know. None of them ever never need to know.

We sit down and we’re soon followed by eggs, overdone, bacon crisp and butter on rye bread, perhaps a little too quickly to stomach. We’ve stumbled into some kind of a hybrid café, one of many that litter the Northern Quarter, one that relates to the many of us who live here but don’t belong to the city, a nameless place that knows exactly what it’s doing and what it is. In other eyes it would be a greasy spoon, sign rusted and slightly ajar, seats cold and firm, aged and never replaced despite odd numbers. On the other hand the careless rust and Jesus-like Morrissey poster, framed imperfectly perfectly suggests a hipster paradise for the melancholy, lost, modern man seeking his own identity. If it wasn’t so fucking pretentious I might consider coming back on some other grey day.

“You like it here?”

“I do.” she said, playing with the sugar packets as she impatiently waits for the food to cool. “The cups are all different and I like the way the windows steam up.”

I remember starting to notice the details. I always do in the afterglow. There are strange little tassels coming off her coat that I hadn’t noticed before that move with every little movement she
makes. Everything about her wants to dance even if she doesn’t. Her eyes wander around freely, wide awake defying the lack of sleep, but I’m going to let you in on a little secret that perhaps I didn’t even know at the time. In this strangely intimate little setting, better than the street, better than the life outside past the condensation and facing my own private hell in the days ahead, she’s charming me and I know it. She’s lasted the night, so she’s doing something right. I didn’t know much of anything other than she has brown eyes that match her hair and that she dances in the streets as much as in the bed but were starting to go far deeper than I could imagine. I looked up and around me completely self-aware inside and out and finally, my brother is standing in the corner and he’s 13 years old and he has the saddened look of the 18 year old I last saw in him before I made the decision that he and all the others weren’t worth hanging around for. My eyes sunk onto the table as he scowled but a hand reached out and held onto mine. The nails were painted black but could have been any other colour for all I cared and my eyes rose to hers brown like the roots on top of her head and she was smiling at me.

“Wake up. I don’t want to have to fish you out of your beans” she said smiling.

I’d already started wondering if I was spending time with a complete imbecile with the luck of a sailor or an evil genius hiding a heart of gold. She can’t be anything in-between; it’s
through little comments like that, distant like she doesn’t know what’s in my mind but aware enough to know how I’m thinking, she was doing it for me in more ways than I dared want. Perhaps I’m the idiot, but I’m still happy in my dunce’s cap.

“But we could get that anywhere. The condensation I mean. We could get that back at the flat. we had that back at the flat.”

“But this place has the best kind of steamed up windows.”

“I’m pretty sure you’re talking complete shit, but still I’m intrigued little Snowflake. How so?”

“It’s just denser. No-one on the outside can see in and I like it that way.”

She leaned over and kissed me passionately and I can see her more closely while she’s the closest she’s been so far. In the light of day, in the flesh, without the makeup.

“I see your argument and I like your proposal, though why wouldn’t you want the world to see something that beautiful?”

She smiles and tucks into her bacon, eating like she hasn’t eaten for days. She hadn’t. I don’t care about her table manner, the stains on the tablecloth suggests it doesn’t matter anyway. But her lack of response made me thinking too much about how I’m learning about her and I’m learning at the wrong time, the wrong
time for me, the wrong time for her though she doesn’t know it. Her innocence and a certain kindness I’m seeing are calming to me. I’m swearing less and I start to think about the pigeons again and their quite pointless plight; the people that don’t understand them are the ones that are closest to them because they’re simply another inconvenience, something to get past when we’re just trying to get by and get home. Those that struggle are the ones that kick down; the ones that see the struggle try to understand. The difference is that they deal with what they’re handed a whole lot better than we do. After all, what choice do they have?

It doesn’t take Snowflake long to finish while I’ve barely started, but she wants to leave all the same. The more I think about what I’m having to face, the less I feel like eating.

“I’ve got a bus to catch and I gather you have things to do.”

“Can I walk you to your bus? I don’t have a lot to do, but I understand.”

I didn’t have a lot left in me, despite it only being mid-afternoon. I can speak and I feel like being a dick, but I retained chivalry for her.

“I think you do. Your eyes say differently and if there’s one thing I know, it’s eyes.” she says grabbing a slice of bacon from my plate.
“And why is that? Or maybe the question is how?”

She smiled a broad smile without losing eye contact. She can see her assessment bothers me. She stands and puts on her coat, those tassels dancing as we make our exit. Despite the fact that we’re walking through a busy street with what seemed like all the people in the world, we don’t walk into anyone or anything, inanimate, winged or otherwise. I’m starting to wish we had as she finally had an answer for me.

“You have my father’s eyes”

“Fuck me, don’t say that now. Why’d you have to say that? Now I feel like the old man that I am. This is no time to get Freudian, though there’s a furniture place around the corner if we’re going to be needing a couch.”

“No thanks, I’ve had enough of that for one lifetime.”

“Oh really?”

“Oh really.”

I nod and smile at the roadblock and allow her to graciously change the subject.

“How old are you?”
“I’m 29 years old. On the day I was born ‘Relax’ by Frankie Goes To Hollywood hit number 1.”

“Impressive. The biggest, gayest anthem ever was probably playing whilst your mother was squeezing you out. When I was protesting about showing myself to the world it was ‘Killing Me Softly’ by The Fugees.”’

“God, that’s depressing, but that also makes a lot of sense. And it’s quite appropriate right now.”

“How so?”

Don’t tell her. Don’t tell her what her eyes are showing you.

“I’ll tell you some other time if you allow me to. Now tell me about your father’s eyes.” I say smiling.

“You have his eyes when he was fifty, his name was Jack, Jackie to his friends and grandma. My father was a great optimist but the most desperately unhappy man I’d ever known and he never did anything to change.”

“You mean he never did anything to change IT? To change his situation?”

“No, I mean he didn’t change. His unhappiness was brought on by himself, he devised it, it marinated and burnt somewhere in
his heart and he sat in it along with his pride. And you could see it all in his eyes.” she says looking back at me.

“Listen, I don’t like to be this guy, but I’d like to leave this conversation on this very concrete step where it belongs.”

Snowflake doesn’t laugh or smile. She stopped on the spot. She puts her hands in her pockets, the fur lining of her hood blowing into her face in the breeze. She’s a couple of paces in front of me and she looks like the hottest, most frustrated statue I’d ever seen. A porcelain statue, delicate but not quite pottery, sculpted with a chisel, not formed in a furnace, not today.

“I’m 19 years old. The difference is that I’m the one who’s trying to tell you something you need to hear and at 29 years of age, you’re stomping your feet.”

“Why’d you tell me you were 18? It’s so minimal between the two.”

“Is it though? You said it yourself, no-one believes you when you’re 18.”

“And I wonder why people think that. Why did you not want me to believe you?” I say, my eyebrows raised.

“Because I wanted to make sure you weren’t an arsehole.”
“Well I am, but I am who I am with nothing but love. But how would you like it? I’m fucking 16, hell, fuck it, I’m 14.”

“Why are you getting so upset about this?”

There’s so many answers to that question none of which was the one I offered which was nothing.

“I might be quite a bit younger than you but that doesn’t mean I can’t try to point out a few things you might not be seeing.”

“But you already did, gloriously in fact.”

“Sex doesn’t save anyone.”

“Oh, I would disagree. I feel pretty saved right now. But we need to stop talking about saving lest we bring the subject of God back up again and nobody wants that.”

“You either listen to me or you don’t but I’ll know I tried because I don’t need you on my conscience for what remains of the day. Because you won’t be, arsehole. The first thing that I saw in you, what can only be hours ago, was your eyes and a pain that I knew I could trust. Sometime in between then and now, something changed and whatever it is I recognise it and not fondly. But I’ll pray for you.”

“So you believed in the big man all along?”
“Maybe. And for all you know that may be the only lie I’ve not told you today or it might be the only one I have. But that’s faith for you. You could benefit from some.”

I looked away from her and to the ground wondering why she was grinding inside me so much.

“I believe in the pigeons. Where’s this bus anyway?”

“It’s right here. We’ve in front of it for ten minutes. I’m getting on it and going home now.”

Snowflake glides over and kisses me on the cheek. It’s cold and she’s warm, the kind of warm that makes you close your eyes and sleep when you need it most. Ten seconds passes and she’s still there, I’m still barely awake, her breath soft on my cheek. Only the rarest of women can breath in a way that makes me stop and listen.

“And just so you know, the world doesn’t need to see what I wanted all for myself.”

I nod and offer a gentle hug before she climbs the steps and takes her seat. The bus pulls away and she’s gone, the warmth once more leaving with the girl. This is a part of town I haven’t been in for some time and it’s a lot less damaged than I remember it being so I take a seat in the bus stop. My throat feels full and I swallowed it all for a moment. In the last year I’ve
had eight affairs, eight encounters with women of my own age, some a little older and not one has spotted me so quickly. Most never did. She won’t even get the chance to really see me and for the first time in a long time when seeing a woman off to the rest of what’s ahead for her I think that it’s a shame and a shame for us both, not just me and not just her.

My phone vibrated in my pocket like an electric shock against me. It was my mother. I know it’s her, it’s her tone, an intentionally slowed down version of the Jaws theme to prepare me for a really droning attack. I pull my phone from my pocket, delicately so, as to not accidentally answer it in case I change my mind at the last minute. I have a tendency to do that, it makes life interesting. I’m a procrastinator at the best of times but with her, years go by between things I should do which turn into things I shouldn’t have done. Now I’m just staring at the screen, stuck in that period where you can’t make your mind up until the phone decides for you and sends her to voicemail. It’s a trick I’ve used many, many times before, but on this occasion it seems to just keep fucking ringing and shaking and whining. Surely what I’m going to hear can’t be any worse than this is, not with a head this broken. I look to the sky and mouth ‘Fuck you’ at nothing. I swipe the screen with some sort of purpose to try to inspire myself to open my mouth.

“Hi.”
“Hi son. Where the fuck have you been?”

“Around the bend, behind the shed kissing Stacey Longhorn. You know I never change.”

She chuckles like I’m off her long, sharpened hook. I use the same line every time we talk, like we’re speaking in a code only we know from a long, long time ago, a charming thing that friends in pubs do, not mothers and sons, but it’s all part of the game we’ve been playing since I was old enough to talk back and she laughs every time.

“Where have you been? That charm stolen right out of your father’s pocket might enchant all those little girls that flock to you like they should know better, but I know better and so should you by now.”

“My phone died. I was in London, no source of electricity and all means of communication went out of the window of my friend’s apartment. Much like where my phone charger probably is right about now.”

“Did you sleep on the streets again?”

“No, at least not by force. I just kind of ended up there.”

“So you pissed someone off again.”
Over time she’s increasingly not been able to hold back her scorn. The less and less I talked to my mother, the more and more it became easy to forget that we are kind of the same person. She was all I had, and me and Jesus on our kitchen wall were her every single thing and I became a surrogate to my two brothers. The son of God apparently wasn’t available to help out, but like most believers, she kept believing.

“To put it lightly, yes, I pissed someone off.”

“You are your father’s son.”

My dad was neither a constant drunk, a drug-controlled freak or a gambler. It just so happens that the only addiction he suffered from was just not being there, and how he wallowed in it. If there was one thing I picked up from the Y-chromosome and the man from which I swam away as fast as I could, it was his ability to wallow in his own filth, even though he was in some of the cleanest water you’d ever see in our little town, in our little family by the water eventually becoming broken buoys out at sea. The problem is that there’s only so much one woman can take and after a while she stopped caring when she got nothing back. She expected me to become him but in every single way that he wasn’t and I wasn’t willing. Not because I couldn’t, not because I simply refused but because I was twelve years old. But she didn’t stop believing; it was just that she gave up on me as much as she did him after a while.
The more confused she got along the way, the more she started to contradict herself. If there’s one thing I’m not, it is my father. If anything, I am worse than he was and thank the fucking baby Jesus that I didn’t have boys. Or girls for that matter, but especially boys.

“I know mobile batteries these days last as long as your father did, but that’s why we have chargers.”

“How about we get past the pleasantries and telling me what I already know about Dad and move forward with what we really need to talk about so we can talk again sometime soon.”

Her silence screamed like in some old, silent film where eventually the letters appear in front of you revealing an understatement of the true, over dramatic horror on their face. In this instance I have neither the face nor the words, but I can picture exactly how she’s staring into that space in front of her where there’s invariably the old kitchen table, a cloth patterned with dark blue raindrops, whatever remains of her self-esteem and her bible. The look is the same haggard, squinting, little squished smile that she always used to project, eyes darting left to right like she’s watching the world’s fastest game of tennis, like she was plotting something. Even at five years old, I knew that look and its reasons.

“But I’ve got you now, haven’t I? It took a good poke in your side
to wake you up, but here we are.”

“Come on ma, never. What really woke me up today if you want to know was a good talking to by someone who I should know better than but that’s another story, for another day.”

“So that’s what you’ve been doing while I’ve been sitting here waiting, screwing some little thing, half your age. You are your father’s son.”

“So I keep hearing. And no, not precisely. That would be breaking the law and that’s one thing I do know better on.”, I said hopefully.

“When did you start caring about that anyway? You and your brother used to get up to lots of things, mostly involving breaking or violating something until he saw the light, thank God. Where the fuck are you anyway? You need to come home, the funeral’s tomorrow. Since I didn’t hear from you about any ideas, thoughts…hell, feelings about the process, I just went ahead and booked it in with the Reverend.”

“You know where I am. I’m close enough to be near and far enough away to be out of reach.”

“Manchester then. Still on the wrong side of the Pennines. At least you seem like you might be gaining some consistency. Get back here and say goodbye and show some final grace toward
your brother. It’s the last and most reasonable thing you can do for him.”

My mother is trying to be the one thing I didn’t think she was capable of being at this stage; level headed. She always had this scornful intensity that, somewhere in the middle, I picked up and it’s one of the big parts of my being that I hate more than most and one of many things that has kept me in a state of anxiety for the last ten years or so. I’m not angry at her, I’m angry that she instilled this in me, this uncontrollable killer of moods, romance, everything that’s ever felt good, but I feel like I can’t let her gain control of hers whilst I’m dealing with mine so poorly.

“Actually I don’t think John gives a fuck what I’m doing right now. We didn’t exactly end things in the right way, not to mention that his spirit has left his body, his soul is in heaven or whatever bullshit you’re going to peddle at me over the next three or four days.”

“We all respect something if we don’t have anything to believe in. I ask that you respect me right now if there ever were a time and what I believe and beyond that that you don’t take our lord’s name in vain.”

She didn’t rise to the bait and I normally have so much fun bating her like a tired, old bear but I knew that she was either paralytic with pain, or she knows what I’m doing. Following the death of
her youngest child, she seems to be simmering, not burning and that’s a side of my mother I can stand so I took it easy on her.

“I’m sitting in a bus stop, down Portland Street. If God sees me, he can send me a bus to take me straight there, can’t he? But more to the point I need to get myself together.”

In reality if God is around, he can send me a bus full of booze, guide me on board, crack open the first bottle on the side of the vessel and crack one really good joke, and upon making his swift exit he can leave behind a couple of his best brown haired artworks who’ve already gotten started without me, but who may just be expecting me all the same. Just two. I don’t ask much.

“Just get on a train. We can talk when you get here. You can make your own way here from the station. You remember the way. At least you should do, though it has been 4 years. Don’t go home, you can wear one of your father’s suits, you should be able to fit nicely into one of those now and he always had impeccable taste.”

With that, my phone returns to locked position, my heart still open. It’s finally time; time to move forward, to admit that I’m a bad son and a worse brother without ever uttering a word. Time to pay a hefty train fare as well as my respects for the third time this week. Nothing fair about that and yet everything right lies ahead. Maybe I’ll be exorcised and the little sprites that keep me
awake at night will all fly out the window and into someone else’s less deserving ear. If only it were that simple. Even if I can’t lock my heart for now, I’d at least like it to close and stop beating every once in a while, at least for a moment’s peace.

I stand and put my hands in my inside pockets finding a couple of cigarettes, menthols that Snowflake snuck in there somehow knowing of the tougher times ahead. I ask a passing business lady if I can bum a light and she kindly obliged and I look to the sky and back down to the ground as I take the first drag and begin walking towards the station, hoping the dealer I’d hoped to find earlier in this never-ending day would be at last on his spot on the way.

“Your move God.”

I’d travelled a long way to feel as uncomfortable as I was in more ways than worth mentioning. I was suitably down and out by that point having ventured a further hundred miles to yet more of what I’d come to expect from home, it’s just that this time around it was going to make me feel 18 all over again, just with all the anger and the hurt and none of the little pleasure that was still with me by that point. But I was home. I’d arrived under the cover of darkness which in my little town on top of the cliff by the sea looked a little darker than the darkness of the city that I had fled towards in the first place and I’d slept little if at all. It was all a haze anyway, much like the memories.

I’d gone classic. Black suit, classic fit, Boss. White shirt, top button undone, slim grey tie up to within an inch of my neck, beard by seven days of mother nature, shirt and tie by Basics at Primark, just about enough to show everyone the little fuck I gave about their thoughts on the return of the bastard son. I care little for clothes and less for fashion, but like most men I know how to wear a suit, particularly for a funeral and I’ve been to a disproportionate few of those for a man of my age so I guess you could say I’ve got the experience. I had everything I needed in there including a flask full of God knows what and a pick and mix of a doggy bag of soft narcotics in case it just got that bad. In the jaded but immortal words of Donatella Versace, there isn’t a man alive that can’t wear a black suit and white shirt and not look
good so maybe I knew a couple of things about fashion after all.

I’d not looked at myself in a mirror for that long in years. I’d been up since 4am when mum’s French Bulldog, a posh pug to you and me, which had been in the family for 14 incontinent years decided to projectile throw up and shit at exactly the same time at the base of the bed. Normally I can push through being inconveniently close to bodily-fluids like a trooper but the smell was like the impending apocalypse if the locusts were tiny pieces of dog kibble re-digested and thrust forth from the stomach of the seraphim. Last night I snook a beer to bed and only half finished it. This morning it was all gone, but I’d decided to keep that to myself. I look at Gabriel through the corner of my eye in the mirror, lying at the top of the bed looking back at me exactly as he should; guilty, like he just evacuated his bowels. Yes, she actually called her fucking dog Gabriel.

It’s still five hours until the funeral begins and I’ve got nothing but all of time to stare into the mirror. After I got tired of looking through myself I dropped onto the bed. It’s hard and broken, like I’m used to and I looked down at the soft faux wood flooring stretching out into the hallway. It would be an understatement to say that I was getting antsy about getting the fuck out of there like some things never change. After all those years away, where important facts and figured flow in and out of the brain, I still knew intricately which floorboards creek and through years of planning my escape, I am sad to report that there is no plausible
way out without hitting an obnoxious one. My mother was the world’s lightest sleeper and once she was awake, there was no getting her back. As a teenager I got so bored one night having been grounded for smelling of cigarettes that I drew up a blueprint of it all. However as someone who couldn’t bare to be within 10 feet of her at the best of times, walls or no walls, in sleeplessness I sympathise. There is one way out and the last time I tried it as a horny 18-year-old with a sleepy John tagging along in the rear, I nearly ripped my Kurt Cobain jumper on the nail sticking out of the wall by the dresser and John was too scared to go any further after that. I stared in the mirror and thought about that. His face on that night used to make me smile, the irrational fear, the words he slowly uttered about what mum would do to us, the hand-me-down, bobbled Transformers pyjamas in which he was going to help me rule the night. Now I see him standing behind me, looking at me with that same forlorn look like I see it now, in reality, the last time he’d ever see me. I smile at the thought all the same though I shouldn’t. The next time I came back, he was eighteen and was trying his own method of escape through education for all the good it did him. He always was the good one, the one who would get away in whatever direction he could, I just didn’t think it would be this way, but I’ll be damned if he could wear a suit this well for the occasion. That was just another edge to his faith that few ever saw. We exchanged photos, a phone call every two or three years but I never saw another expression come across his face, other than the video diaries he’d send me from time to time in my
email. I laughed as I looked in the mirror thinking about these videos him and his best friend Grant filmed. The little fuckers always knew how to make me laugh but not because of their flagrant sketches, but the secret behind those eyes that he kept. It’s unfathomable to me how much he tried to connect with me and I always said that there’ll come a time when I can sit on the cliff and stare out to sea like the old times and talk about everything I’d ignored, all the things that I’d missed and tell him that I’m sorry. Now all I have to stare back at is a scared little boy who didn’t know any better.

Gabriel grunts at me as if he can see that I’m somewhere else.

“Got something to say, you little shit?”

He sighed and plonked his head back down against the sheets. He’s uncomfortable with the stranger in his room, much like her master is with the stranger in her house. The meeting in the train station was awkward, humourless and completely without affection and therefore as expected and the car journey was only made the more awkward by my trying to make jokes about how the Pope had just passed on and how him and John were probably standing up there at the gates complaining about the line to get in. We hadn’t talked much since. I needed to get out, floorboards or no floorboards.

I opened my door a little wider and peer out warily. There’s no
one around, everything is as it should be. Gabriel leaps off the
bed with a comedic thud. Back in the day even this sound was
enough to awaken my mother and I stand quietly waiting to hear
her stir. Nothing. Dog in tow, I decide the best option is to just
dart for it. I know the most vociferous of the boards so I know
what to hop over on my way. This is how it’ll go; I’ll elegantly jog
towards the stairway on tip toes, carefully avoiding all obstacles
with a delicate swing as I grab the bannister to slow me down.
And pugs might fly.

As the adrenaline built I felt the sweat on my neck and I felt like I
was twelve again. It felt like my legs were sweating, in particular
my right one but I couldn’t have been that excited. When I looked
down Gabriel was panting and dribbling all over my ankle. I
mouthed something at him, like ‘you little shit, get the fuck off me’
like I expected him to understand and I decided it was time to
run. I set off slowly landing gently for the first two steps before
realising that Gabriel can still run like his species wasn’t designed
to and he tripped me, sending me skidding down the hallway on
mum’s obsessively-polished floor like the fallen athlete that I
sincerely wasn’t. My quick-skate ended with me going head first
into her dresser table, knocking fifty years worth of keys in a
sweet jar and an over-filled pill dispenser flying off sending pills
everywhere, the contents of my jacket spilling everywhere,
everything crashing to the ground, all of which land in the same
spot as the guts of the dresser, mixing the two almost
indecipherably, barely an inch from my head. That was lucky.
Then I heard her stirring. I grabbed everything I could that flew away from the inner linings of my suit and I quickly stumble to my feet.

“Fuckin’ kids – what the f– are you doing?”

My heart starts racing and I push myself up and run for the stairs and subsequently the door. The dog can take the rap for this one.

I’m steaming hot as I close the door behind me swiftly. The cold coastal breeze cools me down the second I stopped running. It’s the same breeze that used to put a fire in my belly, the one that made me believe I would be something, the one that told me to get out in the first place. It’s the same breeze that on my darker nights I wish had cooled me down and turned me back around back then but there the wind doesn’t blow so much in September when I left for good. I check myself for damage and I find that I’ve ripped the shoulder of my suit. The padding on the inside is sticking out like fucking chicken feathers, blowing in the wind, and I don’t have a spare unless I have to dive into Dad’s wardrobe and that’s not happening for so many reasons now. I find myself with two choices; I can walk the cliffs thinking about nothing and thus everything, or I can go and see if there’s a shop that can sell me a cheap black suit jacket. That’s open at 7am. On a Sunday. In a small coastal town.

You forget a lot of things when you’re gone for so long. Names,
streets and in this case the smell of freshly cut grass and the local sewage works. Yummy. It’s easy to forget how tall the cliffs are and how you can forget all those faces you pass by, but never these ones. The front of the rock has gone a moist, shimmering brown, the effects of heavy erosion. It’s amazing how over time some things can become this genuinely beautiful and it only takes something this bad to get me back here to see it. Beauty never comes all at once; it comes in pieces and is usually partnered, often aptly, with tragedy. I sit down on the cliff’s edge and stare into the endless abyss, highlighted by the dull, rising sun in the east. My breath rises in front of me to show me how cold it all is, but I don’t feel it, I only see it. Everything might change in town, inevitably there’s a Tesco somewhere now, but this view never does. It doesn’t age, it doesn’t die and it doesn’t leave you until you’re already gone. That’s the great thing about going home; everything seems so permanent here except for the prospect of leaving again.

I always used to tell my brother never to go too close to the edge. This is the type of advice you offer anyone, one of the rules of common sense, the kind of advice you give to your younger brother even if you’re sure he already knows it. But I told him that because it’s the exact opposite of what I did. Just like today, I sit on the edge of the cliff and didn’t particularly caring if one piece of ground would fall away and take the earth underneath me with it. Even at 15 years old I knew he had more to live for than I did. By then he was twice as smart as me and had more
common sense than I do even today. But I told him anyway because I was his big brother and it’s all I had, and he took it because he looked up to me, despite how much I let him down and I was almost everything he had.

I glance over at the ripped shoulder, the innards blowing in the breeze and think about how glad I am that I’m no longer staring into that mirror anymore. I try to picture John bigger, grown, a figurehead, a politician, you know, one of the good, untainted, unfucked ones that don’t exist. But I can’t see him and I don’t think he’d see me either. I think he’d look right through me. He’d stand behind me, like he did in that mirror as an eight year old frightened boy, but as a man in a perfect, brand new suit and he’d look down at me, sat on the ground, looking over a cliff that I’m about to throw myself down there at any minute and he’d shake his head. I think he’d bend down and put his hand on my shoulder. At least I hope he would, I just don’t know whether he’d pull me back or help send me on my way. The wind was getting quite intense now and there’s a dog barking somewhere in the distance and my visions of John are shattered and gone, faded like all around me. The sun is bursting to get through the fog and I look at my phone and realise that it’s 10.45. I jump up and nearly lose my footing and for a split second my heart was in my mouth, as an unfortunate piece of earth falls to the ground 70 feet below. It looks like I need to keep running for a little longer.

I arrived back home barely five minutes later just in time to see
the funeral car leaving. I jog a little quicker and suddenly the brake lights turn on and stream through the still lingering morning fog. I picture my mother thrusting forward in her seat, fragile but as hard as old boots, her disdain moving forwards twice as fast. I slow to a trot down the side of the over-long black carriage. Mother has ordered in a special flower arrangement reading ‘Favourite Son’. He always was and he always will be but it still feels like a jab in the side with as many of the rose stems as she could buy. Even as a ghost she’d still talk like he’s alive and see him more than she’d ever see me. I jump in the cab next to mother. I don’t look at her face. Gabriel is sat on her lap, looking as inappropriate as any living thing could in the current circumstances, wearing a diamante emblazed collar, as we take to the main road to drive the five miles down the road, a typically dumb expression on his face suggesting this is the most exciting thing he’s done in years. He’s not alone as this is probably the furthest mum has travelled since I was a teenager. It seems my mother wanted a gay child, just as long as it wasn’t one she’d squeezed out of her own vagina.

“You nearly missed us.”

Five minutes have passed since the car moved and she spoke to criticise in softened tones. At least she’s trying to be appropriate for once.

“But I didn’t.”
“Here’s reality for you; your brother is in the boot of this car and it’s sickening to me that you wouldn’t be on time for his own funeral. You had one thing to do, and you could at least have honoured your brother by doing it.”

I look over at her withered, crumbling face and I can’t retaliate like I normally would. It’s not that I don’t have the strength, but I don’t think I’ve ever seen her in this pain. Not when I left for good, not when granddad died and certainly not when dad was finished. When someone says to you that it’s like they’ve lost a limb, you think that that sounds ludicrous. How can you compare having a leg chopped off to losing someone you’re so close to you? But I’m starting to come around to the true meaning and that’s that they’re bleeding profusely. Not blood, but anger, sadness, confusion and, in her case, her crazy fucking schizophrenia. It’s still red, it’s just not liquid, more like vapour. She’s losing a lot of something at a fast rate, I know that much. So I sat silently putting my hand next to hers on the black leather like a temporary bandage that she can take it if she wants. But whether she knows it’s there or not, she doesn’t. After a slow drive, even for a funeral procession, the car pulls to a halt outside a pristine white building, the only pristine white building for miles around. In every community, rich or poor there is one truly pristine white building. Sometimes it’s made of stone, but my, Lordy, how those stones shine. I find it kind of ironic that they hold these events that start out as sacred moments and turn into holy messes; Weddings, the rare Christening and funerals are the
only time you’ll find me on the top of this particular cliff and anywhere near this particular perfect white building.

“Are we going to be able to get you through the door without you turning to ashes and dust on the floor?” my mother said harshly but calmly.

I’ve promised myself I’ll remain calm and not rise to the bait, but it was already proving to be a little too difficult for me and my head tilted slightly to one side with every insult. It seems like she might just want me to make a show of myself at my own brother’s funeral despite everything that she says.

“No worries there, just make sure you keep the garlic and crucifixes at ten paces. Did you take your pills mother?” I ask without a sign of agitation.

“Yes, just before we left. I don’t need you to ask me.”

The driver helps her to exit the car by picking up Gabriel, to which he grunts in disapproval. Why she brought him, I don’t know. I exit my side to be greeted by the vicar, a young, attempted hip example of the progress within the Christian church who can’t long be out of God school. I know of him, I don’t know his name, but just how young he is as my mother pointed out many times in our all too few phone calls.

“My condolences to you.” he says to me, bowing gently.
“Shitty fucking day, isn’t it?”

He’s taken aback and looks to the ground while my vision doesn’t move away from his eyelids whilst I lock arms with my mother.

“I’m Justin and I’ll be here to help put your brother to rest and to help you with anything else you might need in the future. It’s been a truly tragic loss for the whole community, let alone what your entire family must be feeling. Your mother —”

“Father, whilst I appreciate the time and patience you’ve dedicated to my family in the last few days, my mother is delirious and has been for the best part of twenty years. I guess that’s something you’ll have in common, that and the fact that neither of you know it.”

His eyes lock onto mine this time but he smiles knowingly like he’d heard it all before. My mother, perhaps John had warned him about me. His eyes are kind but they’re the eyes that represent the fake and the non-existent and I feel nothing.

“Please make your way to the front, there’s a place there for you and your mother”

“Thank you J. Front row seats in your shiny, white beacon. Isn’t that something?”

I slap him hard on the shoulder and walk past him and alongside
my mother who’s walking like she’s got a limp, holding the dog like it’s all that’s keeping her together. We walk down the long stretch of the chapel, holy images on the ground and the walls I remember from my youth, but don’t recall their relevance. It’s like the Hollywood walk of fame but without the flare and the debauchery. My mother sighs and turns to me.

“I know you don’t like to be here but you have to admit there’s something serene and calming about it.”

“We see what we want to see and sometimes we’re told what we’re told.” I say trying to respect her as she asked.

“But really, you don’t see this? You don’t see this presence, hear this silence?”

I haven’t heard anything for the last 10 years but tinnitus, traffic and moans whether pleasurable or otherwise. That’s my shit, but I must admit to feeling calmer in here, albeit I put that down to the bizarrely baby blue walls rather than the presence of a long dead spirit.

“We just read different books mother.”

We sit and wait and before long, the curtains open and there he is, at least the deep wooden box that now holds him. I can’t help but think of how dark it looks, nearly black and it’s certainly not the lighting in here. Everything is white, crisp, new, in my
mother’s vision, serene, though everything is wrong. This is the contradiction, the lie that bothers me most. I didn’t know my brother well enough to know what he would have wanted in his final rest, it’s not what you talk about in your thirties or your forties, let along at twenty-three unless you’re a special kind of fucked up. But I know he wouldn’t want a man he barely knew talking over his decaying body while everyone he cared about, some way too much, sits and barely listens. I turn around to a small sea of faces that peer back at me, some nodding, some bowing, some scowling and one face, familiar to me, in the crowd with tears streaming down his cheeks and it’s on him that my eyes land. I look straight at Grant waiting for him to notice but he doesn’t. I wait for him to look at me so I can acknowledge what I knew from my brothers eyes, what he could never tell anyone else in any other way. He just sits there and sobs like I wish I could and I turn back to that wooden box. I’d say all this feels cheap, but everything about this, the casket, the embellishments, the fucking handles, the car, the ridiculous collar around the dog’s neck suggests that her every penny has gone into making this right. Now she’s looking to the sky, on her highest of horses and just spouting whatever comes into her mind as Justin takes his place.

“You could have been more. If you’d stayed, you could have been more than everything you’ve become.”

“Mum, I just want to get through this so I can go back to being
what I want to be, lacking or not.”

“I just don’t understand how you can’t see what’s happening in this room right now. It’s so beautifully sewn together, like some gorgeous quilt with every great man who has ever walked through our family and your square, your contribution is missing.”

I look at her out of the corner of my eye and I wonder what the fuck she’s talking about.

“Mum, if this is the part where you ask me to come home to look after you because you’ve lost your shit, this is not the best time.”

She doesn’t respond.

“Mum…”

Her eyes are glazed over and her mouth is wide open. If I’d even tried to look her in the face in the last hour I would have noticed before. I click my fingers in front of her eyes as discreetly as I could.

“Mum?”

It didn’t take me long to realise that she’s looking Jesus right in the eye and she’s fucking high. My mother is high at my little brother’s funeral and it’s too late for me to do shit about it.
“Oh, Christ...”

“CAN THE CONGREGATION STAND?”

And with that it was time to act like normal human beings again; one with a banging hangover, a ripped suit, a shaking dog that looks about to chuck his guts up again and our stoned mother. I help pull her up and she stumbles and leans against me, her head the only thing remaining upright.

“I’ve been asked to keep my sermon short today...”

“Thank fuck for that.” I say quietly, forgetting we’re in a small room with a big echo.

“....so I will. I won’t talk extensively about our Lord though we are in his house. Most here know that John was a man of God, a rare thing for a man of his young age, but we pay tribute here today. As you may know, John was one of the apostles, one of Jesus’ right hand men...”

I had to roll my eyes at our too cool for school Vicar. Come on, we all should.

“...but what is often conceived is that John was the apostle that was the loyalist of all. Along with Peter he stayed close to Jesus, at the foot of the cross and remained loyal in death and in resurrection. I would like to think that our John, the John we bury
here today, had some of his Christian namesake’s attributes.”

The vein in my forehead is about to pop. I remember looking down at the lop-sided bible on the shelf in front of me, thinking that Judgment Justin had best move on quick or it might just find itself hitting his ball-sack if I was feeling lucky. The sermon goes on quietly for another half hour or so, a full twenty-five minutes after I’ve already zoned out still holding my mother up looking every inch the perfect, supportive son. She’s moaning gently and I turn around to see approving faces at what a good son I’m being. Somewhere along the way my mother took my hand after all and the warmth surprises me like a jellyfish that’s just experienced its first predator; nothing usually stops me from moving along but for now I’ll just sit and wait in the depths.

It isn’t long before we’ve moved outside. It’s midday and the air is still brisk. In fact it feels like it hasn’t changed at all since 6am, but I’ve got some need to talk, I still look half-cut, half-dead and now I have my previously delirious, now deliriously high mother to deal with. It’s turning into one of those days that you don’t know will ever end, but you know the fun will start at some point, even if it’s at a minute to midnight, though that felt so far away in that moment.

The part where we planted my brother in the ground is, I can’t lie, quite moving. My mother is crying profoundly, albeit that might be the ‘pills’, and I remain as stone, still gripping her hand
tentatively, the other in my suit pocket playing with an elastic band and a small plastic bag holding a small bag of grass. I need some distraction, no matter how small and insignificant in the middle of all this meaning. When it’s over we’re about to head home and I’m guiding mother very carefully now and I’m thinking about dandelions, having seen a hundred dead ones already. A voice from behind breaks my thought.

“Can I see you for a moment, sir?”

It’s Justin and he somehow had the time to move from the very back of the graveyard to follow me and my mother out to the front. Perhaps zombies do exist.

“Sir? I didn’t realise we were being so formal, Justin.” I say turning slowly.

“Please.”

He shows me his palm and points to a distant landmark. With hesitance I walk behind him to a rock about 30 feet from the edge of the cliff. The fog is lifting and we can see the water for its never ending presence, here since long before we can imagine. Somehow I don’t think it’ll be the only endlessness that I’m about to bare witness to.

“You’re looking less troubled now.” he says as I approach.
I take a seat next to him on the rock as the wind picks up and blows my tie over my shoulder, near hitting him in the face. While his observation is probably correct, it’s not the truth and the next sentence that’s going to exit his mouth is going to be the most wrong he’s been in some time. My instincts might be for shit but rarely with my own melancholy. And I really like this tie now.

“My brother’s dead, father. I’ve not been this troubled in a while.”

I say reaching for the other menthol cigarette Snowflake snuck for me, lighting as quickly as I can.

“That’s okay, that’s okay. I’m not here to preach to you, I imagine that’s what you feel right now. Because you’re angry…but we’re from different sides of a very similar coin.”

For the first time what this man says is intriguing to me and I allow him enough eye contact to allow him to continue.

“So what’s troubling you father?”

“My sister was involved in a freak accident two years ago. She was hit by a motorcyclist and thrown to the ground on a busy street. She’s still on life support today. I’ve not been to see her for a couple of weeks…but I’m pretty sure that my mother will still be forcing her heart to beat.”

His honesty is impressive, it feels genuine, but like most things, especially from a man of his kind, it’s surely going to end in a
sermon, a morality lesson to ground us all. I offer him a drag of menthol as much an offering to carry on with his story as it was an offer of temporary peace and he politely declined with the same palm he used to guide me here.

“I don’t agree with what she’s doing, I can’t. My sister’s mind died such a long time ago but her memory remains. I can’t mourn because she’s not left and I see the same thing in you despite your brother being ash and his spirit gone.”

I couldn’t tell you what the prevailing emotion was for me at that moment whether it be the feeling of empathy for the man or the irk that I’m feeling towards him as he tries to sit closer to me while barely moving an inch.

“That’s a pretty big assumption for someone who’s met me once and spoken to me even less. I don’t need to feel anything else, because I’m grieving. And I do it how I do it. I do not need your God, I do not need His light or any of the other fucking magic that you profess that he’s going to show to me.”

His head is sunken and he’s nodding gently like he’s trying to find another way in. But there are as many entrances as there are exits with me; one and only one and only on a clear day.

“I am gridlocked father and there’s no other way to escape from the middle of the traffic. There’s nothing that a non-existent entity can do for me. I’m telling you this to save you from trying
to help save me. And if God does exist and he can’t get through to me, then neither can you. Because after all you’re a mere mortal, like me and there’s nothing more, no external forces to convince me otherwise. Either that or I’m totally fucking deaf and the last time I was checked out, I was in fine health, at least in that part of my head.”

There’s a small lie there, as you know, but if it keeps me from at a distance from him I’ll be forgiven. By myself of course.

“But I will admit that I admired your sermon, at least a part of it.” I said.

I’ve given him a way in and his head tilts towards me. He looks towards me slowly in case I change my mind and close the door again with his balls still in the gap.

“Yes? What was it?”

“When you were talking about my brother’s Christian namesake, John; the one who supposedly had a greater faith than all. It’s potent stuff. It might be from the biggest storybook ever written, but it’s potent. Coincidentally it’s also very accurate. My brother had faith; your faith, faith in my mother, and for his sins, faith in me, though I don’t doubt that that was seriously dwindling towards the end, but not enough faith in himself to trust that he would get through his own pain.”
“Is this why you think he let go?”

It’s an interesting turn of phrase, especially from a man who should be condemning of one of his sons ‘letting go’.

“No, I think he let go because he had no-one left. My mum is off her rocker at the best of times…”

I look over at her sitting on the car bonnet, letting Gabriel hump her leg. She doesn’t know any better but I didn’t know he had it left in him and I’m impressed. I take another drag and continued.

“...and I left long ago. He had someone but they left him and fucked his heart along the way. Truly fucked it. And yet he was the only one in there crying. My brother couldn’t come to me, our mother or anyone else because he never knew that I would be fine enough with who he was, and the fact that he had sex with men, and that made him not okay with it. And who’s he going to go to father? You?”

“I am not dictated to be against who he was. If he had an inner conflict and felt persuaded to come to me, he could have.”

“No, he couldn’t. Don’t bullshit me. Our mother hated them. Queers, fags, fancy friends...every one needs to be strung up, hung...beaten with rocks...whatever the fuck your book and your kind dictated. I gave up on it a long time ago when I read it as a kid and found it didn’t have the concept or the imagination to
hold me. Because that’s what it’s about father; holding people, controlling them. The bible is a law, and as I say, potent, more of a law than any other law that we create as and when we please and why....because it was written by our ‘creator’. So fuck you for telling me that my brother could have come to you. He didn’t know who the fuck you were. He would have known you as one of many of the people that made everyone else hate, hate, who he was. So as it turns out he was the one that was shafted and you’re the ones that fucked him.”

“Your anger is understandable. I doubted Him many times. I still do.”

“Him? Him with a capital H?”

I scoffed and blew smoke towards the sea.

“Then you’re in the wrong profession. How can you represent ‘Him’ on earth if you doubt Him? Every person in every profession hates the manager father, except yours. You need to love Him and not just Him but everyone else. This is a different world; the people that taught you wouldn’t know that because they’re wearing blinkers and they’re giving you yours, a bigger pair every day with the crap you’re spouting, especially to those who won’t listen, who can’t.”

“You’re angry at yourself. Not me, not Christianity, not your mother...”
Justin is silenced as he looked around to notice that my mother has passed out on the bonnet and that Gabriel is looking considerably more satisfied on the floor next to the front wheel that he did ten minutes ago.

“Yes, father. I am. He didn’t deserve me as a brother and I certainly didn’t deserve him. And neither you or me deserve to be hearing either side of this argument; neither of us is listening because we both know we’re right. The difference is I can walk away.”

I stand up and turn to the car and take a few steps and stopped.

“I’ll put it in words you can understand father. You said that John was one of the most faithful of all the disciples.”

“Yes.”

“What else do you know about him?”

“He...was the author of five books in the New Testament: the Gospel of John, three Epistles of John, and the Book of Revelation. And...I’m not sure how much truth is in it but modern theory has suggested that John was actually three people; John the Apostle, John the Evangelist and John of Patmos. But that’s up for debate.”

“Father, my brother was no Evangelist, no saviour, not to my knowledge, nor was he a writer. But he certainly was lost in who
he was and the many forms he had. But did you know that he was the second to last apostle to die? And do you know who died last?”

“Yes, yes, I do.”

Justin suddenly looked uncomfortable.

“If we’re going to compare father, that would make me Judas. Now if you’ll excuse me, my mother is high on E and I need to get her home so she can come down.”

I walked away from Father Justin, leaving him with a confused expression on his face. Now the real work must begin.
14. Dog is God—Reversed.

I sit against the leather of the limousine, now free of John’s coffin and lighter for it. I’m lighter for it. I’m lighter for my discussion with Justin the Rev. We’re on a slow trek home in the back of the car and it’s too dark to see out. If it weren’t for the windows showing the lowest semblance of light everything perhaps could be darker. Mum looked like hell and, well, like she was on something. I’m slowly starting to figure out that it might be something to do with me and my admission to Justin was probably making him believe that we might be the most fucked up family in all his little parish. Trees, darker, road markings, not as white, rabbits scuttling out of the way, just silhouettes behind the dark glass. It’s comforting to me and my mind is drifting back to myself. The only surprising factor about that is that I’m almost always thinking about myself. But I guess I’d been able to let it lapse over those few days and actually focused on things that were more than a little bigger than I was. I don’t feel like myself here; not in the back of the death car, nor driving cliff side in my home town, but I am here somehow, in body if not in spirit, and it seemed my mind was finally realigning or something. Either way my head is heading towards a time when I thought it was going to be me, long before my brother made the decision to beat me to it. In the calm of the car I’m reminded somehow of one of the most traumatic times of my life. I look over at mother twitching and her head can’t seem to stay in one place for more than two seconds. Maybe she should have been a doctor or at least my
doctor that particular day because I wish they would have given me the news in the same way that she did about John. Dr Khalil had this way of stepping around issues and not approaching them in a way that I found approachable; and by that I mean just fucking telling me what was going on inside me and what was in my blood. At the very least I had high blood pressure and as far as I knew there was no worst case scenario but inevitably there always is. Bees sting when threatened and die shortly thereafter; that’s the irony of life but it’s also one of its great truths. Bees are close to extinction, never to be seen again, which says a lot about how threatened they feel, like almost everything we encounter on a daily basis; people, wildlife, sometimes it seems the wind itself blows from behind of us instead of in front. I don’t think I need to state how much the world is fucked but it’s times like these that make you think about a time when it’ll all be over. It seems to be that the first thing I conceive to do right now, in this moment, is be analytical and judgmental about my own brother’s lack of mortality. I was starting to wonder when I’d start thinking about the end of life and how we’ll never know and the only people who can do anything about it, only know when it’s too late. Little troubles me any more, not in any kind of grandiose way, but that makes me uneasy. You talk about it when you’re kids, anyone who’s ever had a kid brother does; you are knights, romans, spacemen, astronauts or whatever the fuck else and nothing can damage you, nothing can kill you, nothing hurts. Splinters hurt for 5 seconds and you chop them away with your wooden blades like they never even touched you. It feels like the car is moving
backwards and I’m thinking about six months ago when I simply wasn’t functioning, at least physically. Mental dysfunction followed soon after but I had that many blood tests that, in the end, I’m pretty sure the guy was just testing how much blood I had left.

Every time I dropped in for the needle I was fine until the day that I wasn’t. There was a shortlist of things that could be the problem, more were going to kill me than less and I had to sit and wait to find out. At first, you’re not sure what to do with that information other than sit there and take it like the world’s worst hand-job and medical science’s scariest mind-fuck. One time I was dressed in my best black suit, shirt and tie following a successful client meeting at the job and I sat there for way too long, the kind of time-frame where your mind wanders. The longer the doctor keeps you waiting for ‘urgent’ test results, the better you feel about how urgent they really are. You wouldn’t be kept waiting a further 45 minutes to be told you have something that’s going to kill you. Sometimes though the world is fucked and we can’t always tell people bad things in the moment and you have to keep them waiting. Sometimes it’s 45 minutes, sometimes it’s all their life but if this was the worst case scenario that did exist after all, at least I wouldn’t be waiting too long. But underneath it all, sat there on top of my layer of booze soaked numbness, I didn’t care.

As it turns out I had borderline diabetes to match my borderline
personality disorders and blackened heart but there’s nothing quite like accidentally seeing the words ‘cancer’ and ‘high risk’ next to your name on a piece of paper while a doctor tells you not to fear the worst. And it’s in that very moment when it dawns on you that you have put yourself in a place where there are no friends to call, only acquaintances you’ve driven by and occasionally fucked somewhere along the way, and it’s just you in a white room, dressed from head-to-toe in black. But what matters is that I’m still here and I’m still alive, right? That’s what you tell yourself.

We’ve drifted along a good five miles and something doesn’t feel right. Perhaps that isn’t the best way of putting it as my mother was in the sky, I’m fucked and Gabriel...well, shit.

“Oh fuck, TURN THE FUCKING CAR AROUND, WE’VE FORGOTTEN THE FUCKING DOG!”

The driver looks around like I’ve woken him up from comatose and he swings the car round like we’re in a drive-by as fast as he can at the first possible opportunity, annoying four or five cars behind us and nearly hitting a kid on his skateboard who offered us the finger. I remember thinking that he read my mind. Mum turns her head loosely, barely moving from the maneuver.

“No we haven’t...he’s right here” she slurred pointing forwards.

“Mum, that’s the driver’s head. No, actually you’re pointing at the
driver’s hat. It’s a hat.”

She pushed out an elongated cackle, the most the devil will ever put into her for one lifetime.

“Oooooh. I was wondering why he was lying there and why the man didn’t mind.”

“Mum you’re high. You’re fucked up. Why else would your dog be sitting on the driver’s fucking head?”

I don’t really know why I was getting so annoyed at her. It’s not her fault, it’s barely mine and there’s nothing that either of us can do about it except to get her through it without embarrassment, at least on my part. Everything weird she can do, she’s done before, so why should that change now?

“Why would I be high? What am I high from?”

Her eyes are racing and I refrain from what is fast becoming a realistic reason in my head.

“I don’t know. I just know that you’re out of it, I’ve seen it before.”

“I’ll bet you have. What the fuck did you give me you little bastard?” she says still slurring angrily.
“Nothing. At what point would I have had the chance to give you something that’ll do this to you? You didn’t let dad anywhere near your teacups and I doubt that’ll have changed. The rest of the time I’ve stayed as far away from you as possible.”

“Of course you did, but you got in just enough to do this to me, however you did it.”

Meanwhile, our driver has got his foot down proper, like he’s finally seen the opportunity to do something meaningful with his life. Either way, we’re moving, albeit backwards once more. We reach the graveyard and the driver stopped the car with a jolt, thrusting the contents of mother’s handbag towards the front of the car. She attempts to clamber for them, a diary, a bundle of receipts and 30 year old makeup, some of which has spilled onto the carpet but she stumbles and I reach out an arm to steady her.

“Go get the fucking dog, I’ll deal with it.”

With that she scrambles for the door handle and pulls it with all her might, releasing the catch dramatically.

“Gabriel! Gabriel! GabriegeEEEEEELLLLLLLLWLLli!”

I realise the mistake of letting her back out there at the sight of a mad old woman bounding and bouncing haphazardly around a holy field full of the dead screaming ‘Gabriel’. I watch her and I wasn’t surprised at what was happened and somehow that
warmed me. I quickly gathered up what remains of the receipts and shove them in my pocket and exit to chase my mother down.

I finally catch up with her and grab her by the shoulders. I pull so hard that we both fall backwards right in front of a gravestone. While I gather my breath and grip her tight I notice that the dirt is freshly dug, so we’re covered in dirt to soil this incident still further. It seems that my mother can embarrass herself along with the best of them.

“Will you calm down a little? The dog’s probably shagging a tree somewhere having the time of his life.”

“I need to find Gabriel! He’s all that’s left of you!”

I take a deep breath and turn to her. Hyperventilating, her eyes were wild but waiting for me to talk and just like when I was twelve all those years ago, she was looking to me for an answer to a problem I couldn’t solve alone.

“Well stop running around like some crazy Jesus freak and get up. There’s no way that dog would have gone far, not with his bladder.”

I brush off what I can see of the dirt though I’m sure there’s more. When you find yourself standing up from a big pile of dirt and brushing yourself off, there’s always more to be found. That shit gets everywhere, trust me on that. My mother, high or not,
seems to consider Gabriel as one of her children. I don’t know why I didn’t see it before. She’s crazy enough and he kind of looks like my dad did back in the day I suppose, especially around the jowls.

We walk around gently, in mother’s mind she’s probably running like Linford Christie or more appropriately going like Lance Armstrong. Up ahead stood Justin, he’s still here and he’s holding a small panting creature that looks something like Gabriel. I sigh with relief.

“GAAABBBRRRIIIIIIIEEELLLLLLL!”

Here we go again. She limps off towards Justin like a wounded animal and once again a crazy old lady is running around a graveyard chasing a ghost, running towards the vicar screaming the name of the arch angel. The imagery is both ironically iconic and kind of beautiful, the sun coming from behind the fog right behind the shape of the church and for some unfathomable reason it felt good to be alive for the first time in a while. I laughed on the spot, stood there in that pile of burial earth. It’s good that life still offers surprises even if they’re in a place I ran from so long ago. You could call it a religious experience, but we won’t if you don’t mind. Your God, your friend’s God…They have nothing to do with it. All the non-existent pawns disguised as all the reason for all that is good cannot dispel the pain of those last days but on that day it finally felt like this one’s all about being
given another shot. My mother might be a depressing shrew, but she doesn’t need to lose her last child the same week she lost her baby. It seems that the heart and uterus are directly linked after all.

For now I’m not exerting myself as I walk over to where the brand new minister of marvel is standing, brushing myself off. Despite him being one of the more annoying, most testing members of the God squad I’ve ever briefly gotten to know, of which there aren’t too many, I like him. I simply can’t respect him, but him holding on to that dog and giving him back to my mother’s heart and for the large yellow stain on his perfect white shirt, I can offer him a hand as he offered one to me. By the time I reach them, my mother’s already on the floor and Gabriel’s full-on washing away any sin leaving him behind might have brought unto us. I approached slowly, removing one large pile of dirt from my suit jacket pocket, throwing it to the ground with gusto. I look across at Justin with a little smile.

“You’re probably feeling a little warmer in yourself right now.”

“In more ways than one” Justin said laughing at his own misfortune.

“Rev’s got jokes” I say smiling and playing with the remaining dirt.

“A gift from something, my friend.”
I looked at the ground, dropping the dirt onto the wet grass below.

“Thank something…right, Justin?”

“That’s right. Thank something.”

I nodded at him to offer my thanks from one believer to another, a believer in the goodness he offers if not the reasons. I bent down and put my hand on my mother’s shoulder and smile and guide her back to the car, she holds Gabriel tight to her chest with her right arm and I walk quietly next to them feeling the moment between mother and drooling son, trying hard not to smell the strong odour of urine. I barely noticed her left hand rub against mine but paid more attention when it held onto my thumb before we boarded the limo to get home.

Mum’s comedown was harder than expected and she’s not my biggest fan, not anymore. Nor is Gabriel but I don’t give a fuck because that dog stinks like shit as I imagine so does the back seat of that limousine where his rear was planted for half an hour while mum tried and to sleep off the high. Our driver was needed for the extra-curricular activity of helping carry mum inside to the couch, Gabriel perched perkily on top, dribbling on her face all the way. It was a contribution of sorts as it stopped her from dropping into a deep sleep which would’ve meant I wouldn’t have been able to say goodbye in the underwhelming way that I
foresee it happening. It has to be today, there’s no other way and there never will be and somewhere deep, really deep, underneath her disappointment I knew she would understand and, somewhat unfortunately, know how it feels all too well.

It’s still only two in the afternoon but it feels like the sun could set at any minute. Like most reluctant day-walkers, it never feels right to be up at 7am and going to bed before the clock strikes twelve, but that is what we have to do for everyone else’s sake apparently. That and to pay the rent so I can go home and just drop out cold with help or without. It’s pretty obvious that we’re a minority and we don’t so much as walk on the edge of society but more the torn edge of the day and I haven’t seen, or felt, a day this torn in quite some time. Yet somehow, despite the ten hours I’ve been awake being some of the oddest I’ve experienced in some years, it feels like that tear might just rip if it takes on any more pressure. This is why I need to make my exit imminently; at least if it tears while I’m standing on it, I’m the only one that’ll get hurt.

I was never able to find the light switches in the house despite having lived through it for my first 18 years. You’d think I’d have learnt by then, but apparently simply being born and growing up here wasn’t enough. The day is at its brightest and its barely dim and I’m starting to get a little tired of feeling this maudlin. When the lights eventually flash on the front room is stuck in time and there are things I remember from around the time I left. It’s
strange what we remember; I can forget to take my pills and haven’t taken for five days now with little effect so far, but I can still remember the little stuffed monkey that had been sat on the bottom of the mantle for what must be 20 years; a relic of some distant holiday in some middle-eastern town that I skipped all too easily at nine years old so I could go stay with granddad which is all I really wanted anyway. It’s hard to remember him too despite all the pictures and that’s what hurts the most about being back here. The most important thing that my life ever knew and he’s pushed into a clichéd book of photos that mother doesn’t even seem to have to hand any more, presumably locked away like that casket we just burnt behind a curtain.

Right now I’m doing the best thing I can for my mother and yet the easiest thing I’ve ever done for her; I’m sat next to her, her head rested against my leg whilst she sleeps off the narcotics that one way or another found her. Perhaps my accidentally drugging my own mother was a blessing in disguise and she might just sleep through it all and forget any of this ever happened. But inevitably she’ll wake up and see that monkey and how I wasn’t there when she picked that up all those years ago, like she’ll be picking herself up alone when she comes around.

“Why can’t you just be?” she slurs in her crackling sleep.

She had been muttering under her voice for a couple of minutes in tones that could only be attributed to John, her favourite son;
calm, patient, but still slurred and messy. That and the fact that she just called me John and apologised because she assumed I was someone else.

“Where are you flying off tonight? You’re so successful, aren’t you? You’re going to outrun us all.”

I look at her and I finally feel something. I’m getting good at that again and it’s about time.

“Mum, I don’t have wings, but I will see you soon.”

I’m pushed upwards, downwards and side to side not only in her twisting and turning but also in my feelings about leaving. Despite the feeling of darkness this place still instills in me, it still feels like the one place I can always run to. Forgetting how much she hates me, I’ll always be loved here when everyone else leaves me to deal with myself. And with that warming thought Gabriel lets out a sound from his guts that something four times his size could only imagine and my mind is made up. Call it a sad reason to leave; but it stinks the place out enough for me to see all the shit that I can never continue to be around. Aptly the day is dying but I’d seen more hope on that day at a funeral than I’ve seen in over a year. Hope seems to come from the strangest of places and whilst I don’t take hope from any kind of supposed religious experience, I took it from a miracle; finding a hapless dog that, by all calculations, should have fallen off the cliff that
we left him on, in the arms of a weaker man with the faith I lack, a man with the faith of my brother.

If there was any other way of looking at it, I would, but here it is; I found hope in the hapless, the dying and the deluded. Maybe that’s my own inflated ego just barely being able to find it in something bigger than me, but I don’t care. I found it, one way or another. The sun is finally setting though it seemed like it never came up. As I make my slow, slightly sorrowful exit, I think of Snowflake and how she struggled to sleep before the light came up and of how through all the fucking my favourite moments were when she stopped. Truth is I’ve not stopped thinking about her since I got here and now I’m leaving I’ll surely take her back home with me even though she won’t be there. I hadn’t found any peace in my tortured relationship with my mother but I’d found just a little peace in a place I had long forgotten about. Now it’s time to leave as dramatically as I appeared by jumping on the last train back to my own lack of reality without a word to another soul. It’s only six but few trains and little else pass through here. I’m sure I’ll return someday perhaps when it’s Gabriel’s time; the wake will surely be as lively as his bowel movements, plus I can’t imagine he’s long for this world. He’s sleeping contently on the end of my bed, any guilt of what he did there gone from his little mind. I rub the top of his head vigorously but he keeps on sleeping.

“Keep your eye on her you little shit. I know you’ll do a better job
than I ever could, brother."

The little fucker has grown on me, more in the last day and a half than in the other ten years or so that he used to dive-bomb me at 3am. I decided I was going to leave before he vomits like a Gatling gun or shits nasal acid and preserve the moment to my memory. That and before I can look in that mirror again. As if it were meant to be I walk down the corridor, bag in hand, hair in face, conscience intact, and there’s nary a squeak from the floorboards. I’m leaving behind all my love but none of my self; that’s not for here, not for now. My love extends across the cliffs, through the curving lines of boarded up shops and market stalls and back to my room eventually resting on Gabriel’s ass where it belongs. But even if I never come back in anything other than a box like my brother, I’ll always have that, in whatever consistency and currency it lies.
15. The Slow Train Home.

The train from my little hometown on the rocks isn’t what you’d call one of those high speed things that go between Manchester and London in two hours. To be honest you’d barely consider the thing to have any kind of speed and as for warmth, lukewarm when it’s a few below outside would be an overstatement. It rattled as it goes and for every turn and every jolt I wondered if I was actually going to make it back or end up walking from just outside of Huddersfield. I travelled on that line a few times over the years and each and every time it felt like you were with a friend, a really inconsistent one that kind of shrugs when you ask him if he’ll be able to drive you home though you’re unsure if he’s already had a couple of drinks, but one way or the other he always comes through. I missed Trent.

It’s a relief to get off to a more recognisable familiarity than ones from a broken past and this city doesn’t pull on my heartstrings like the old home did. I suppose that’s why some part of me chose it in the first place. This city offers an uncanny ability to be completely anonymous at the worst of times and to make you totally recognisable at the very best, like the very best of women we’re forced to endure during our lifetimes. As I walk out of the long, rainy passageways of the station into the fire of the overheated station, the atmosphere becomes clearer and right in front of me, I can’t help but feel like I’m running to her again. I’m always running to something and my feet hurt like you wouldn’t
believe. There doesn’t need to be any other reason, but in my cowardice and my cowardice alone with only fear pushing me away from everywhere else, I found home and it’s been that way ever since.

I walk past Manchester’s buildings, her tributes, her monuments, her brighter corners and her shames, sat on the ground and chatter nonsense for change. All the best women have shames and she’s no exception and it doesn’t take long for you to see them all. With great beauty comes great expectation and with that a serious nostalgia when they let you down. But this little city perched up in the North West is the one girl who’s never caused my heart or my mind a problem and, as such, I guess that makes her the one. I’ve been nursing my own wounds for long enough to know that I can’t work with any more nostalgia than being on the outside of somewhere and merely looking over it. Because if you don’t know something and never let yourself move toward it, you can never feel bad for it and the view is all I need sometimes.

I thought about the streets under my feet and how different they’ve felt over the last week. I’ve walked wearisome concrete, the grass and cliffs of home and now the cobbles of the very middle of the Northern Quarter, shimmering from the rain and the endless signs. I think about how many times I’ve walked along them with my heart hanging out in front of me. But somehow as I sit down at a table in the first bar I can find that
doesn't try so fucking hard, I get that awful sinking feeling like I’ve brought something along with me from those cliffs, something that belongs to my brother. It felt like something he’d miss and if he still had the ability or ever knew he could talk to me at all, he’ll call me to ask if I have it and how he can get it back.

I have been wandering for hours and I’m no closer to rest or a place to settle and now I’m simply killing time, straight, with ice. It never changes. All the women I could ever have loved stayed home tonight and those that haven’t aren’t interested and never would be if I could move any part of my body to even try. It barely changes. But I’m a little more than this unimpressive mess, damaged and burnt inside. I can’t imagine how I look on the outside, but I’m hoping something like Tom Waits circa 1972. I’d take the happy mess dressed as the depressed clown right now over the opposite of that. But then I am in the part of the city where people pay good money to look this bad and I’m finding I am getting some attention from the corner. She’s pretty, fake red, fresh, a little like her who I saw in my head down South, the bleach blonde that came before making a subtle gradient with orange at the middle, making for some kind of beautiful, none too subtle sunset at the parting. Sunset. That’s what I’ll call her. If anything’s calling me home, if there’s one thing persuading me to go on my merry way, it’s a sunset already set like hers. But I was not in the right place that night and suffering déjà vu with the very story that set me off on this wild ride into nothingness in the
first place, my friend Trent on my shoulder, set in the most beautifully backlit bar I’ve seen before or since that in our little town a couple of weeks before we got out.

“For the last time, you should go and say hello.” Trent said none too subtly.

“No” I say, looking into my glass at the remaining drops.

“Come on dude, it doesn’t have to be love. It doesn’t always have to have a bad ending.”

“It’s funny you would equate those two together, don’t you think?” I say looking over at Trent smiling ironically.

“You’ve had some shitty luck. Love’s overrated. Now a good fuck, that makes it better. She’s not going to sit there all night. She might, but I doubt it. And she’s looking at you, not the face of perfection you’re looking at right now. Because if you don’t do it, I’m going over.”, Trent says smiling.

I took another sip, the last sip, tired of talking to Trent about it, tired of him trying to snap me out of it with intercourse and intoxicants, thoroughly tired of trying to figure it all out, tired of thinking of the girl who’s laughter stopped me in my tracks and who could be anywhere but right there. I can barely see her anymore but she’s still here. I’m tired of finding no warmth other than the burn in the base of my stomach telling me I’d drunk too
much and the occasional glance from the woman with the black hair at the far end of the bar sitting alone. I look at her and I hold her eyes and she smiles nervously. I turn to Trent to say one last thing to try to figure it all out.

“Isn’t this what love is? Or knowing that you have felt it at least? That something that special, something that lights the dark noticed you in a room full of that much colour just as much as if the room had been completely empty and free of light. That you were worth even just a moment of their time. Not believing your luck that they even cast a glance over you in the first place?”

Trent put his hand on my shoulder. He knew I wasn’t talking about the solar eclipse sitting at the far end of the bar alone. He knew too well by that point.

“That’s not love, my friend, that’s the end of heartbreak.”

I tell myself that one from time to time when I forget that I was once good at something beyond sitting here and looking good staring out the window. The end of heartbreak. It’s important to remember that the start of something doesn’t mean the beginning of the end of it especially when you’re on the long trip home and there’s a beautiful woman looking your way with all her complexities yet to be discovered. I believe in second chances, in some cases third and in rare instances fourth and fifth shots, I have to for the amount I’ve had to forgive myself and
I have always wanted to take the setting sun home with me. Who knows, she might be partial to a face akin to the surface of the moon, scarred and interesting, much like mine. And besides, it’s her who’s eyes are focused on my surface, it’s just about who will enter who’s atmosphere and if we’ll be able to breath. I walk over smiling and introduce myself. Through all this, our fears of our predecessors, the love we might never see, this is the only place we have to go until we finally take the slow train home.

Jingling. Through everything else in and outside of my place that was louder or more obnoxious, that’s the noise that made me open my eyes on the morning after the night where I spent as long as I could just to get back to bed. When I opened my eyes, my head was lopping against the frame, a sign of a good time being had but a bad head to follow when I dare to move. It’s also one of the few harsher indicators that I’m not alone. The room was faded red and orange from the sunrise and there’s an intensely dark smell flooding the apartment. I raise my head to listen but the jingling seemed to have stopped. Maybe it never happened. Maybe none of this ever happened. All there was were far away police sirens and the sound of the bed belonging to the man upstairs bouncing on the ceiling above. I rubbed my forehead and scowled. I’ve gone from sheer annoyance on a near daily basis to simply thinking ‘Good for him. It’s about time he got some action, and, boy, is he getting some action.’ I met him at the one and only block party I was able to attend thanks to some unpleasantness at the local race track some months ago and he talked to me in some detail about how much he missed it. The action, not the race track. I would’ve offered him some devilled advice but the guy was a banker and a prick of the highest standards, his suit costing more than our monthly rents combined or so he bragged before all the talk of fucking. That’s when the unpleasantness followed swiftly, the connection satisfying and he hit the floor hard and that was the only advice I was willing to
offer. Whether he deserved it or not is another matter but by then I’d taken matters into my own hands. But now he seems to have found someone who’s willing to fuck him, possibly even in his suit, so, good for him. I offered him a smile and a nod the next time I saw him in the elevator but he didn’t appreciate the gratitude.

For today, it would seem I might be here to stay unless when my body allows me to turn it over there’s actually something worth turning over for still laying there, otherwise the results are already in and there isn’t a good tip at the track though the bookie had called time and the bet was mandatory. I used to call that the fuck me feeling but it’s more complicated than that these days. I don’t think it’d be wrong to wager that I was looking at my most attractive lying there with my mouth hanging wide open, but all I really see is a half empty bottle of Glenfiddich, the other half empty all over the hard wood of the bedroom floor. I don’t even remember buying it, I normally remember a desperation buy like that but that’s when you know you’ve been drinking too much or so they say, though I did regret the Fiddich more than the memory. Regretfully, the floor is pine, the most frustratingly absorbent of hard-woods for a clumsy drunk to walk on so I need to deep fucking clean that stuff up pronto or I’ll be smelling the worst kind of smoky wood like bad memories for whatever time I remain here. I went back to sleep for a while and forgot about it until a time when the sun was shining in, barely filtered, only streaks of orange remaining against the wall in front of me from
the sunrise. I found the strength to raise my head to a more familiar angle and through the focus I saw my bedside table on the other side of the room, scratched to fuck, the indentations in the cheap wood deep enough to be visible with the sun bouncing up off the dust. My back hurt, a stiff dull pain, which could probably be explained by the new deep dip in the middle of the bed that made me near fall backwards when I attempted to sit up. My bed, much like me, is broken, the base as long gone as my deposit if ever I had it in the first place. Yet none of this woke me, it didn’t even cause a stir but that little jingle from the middle of nowhere did and now it’s back. I search for the source with my ears and eyes squinted and all I saw was a dark but handsome, comfortingly feminine silhouette standing uncomfortably in the near black, beautiful in the blunt noir of the dark corner. It’s my favourite sight to wake up to and it always pulls the heartstrings. They needed tightening anyway. Once my eyes adjusted she was half the sight I half remember and half the vision I’d hoped. She stands tall, shimmering red from behind, cascading down her back to the top of the silver skirt, more creased and ruffled than the perfection of the content below. I remembered almost everything for what must be the third time with the same ravaged head. I’m either getting too old for this shit or I’ve been hitting myself in the head way too hard again. But she’s here to help with the recovery if she’s needed, at least for now and if I should ever pluck up the courage to ask.

“What’d you do to my bedside table woman?” I inquire with a
smile, my voice from the gutter. She was playing with her necklace before she turned around startled, like she didn’t expect me to even be there. Upon waking I often feel the same way.

“I’m tempted to say it was one of the casualties of the party but I’m not sure you can have a party amongst just two people.”, Sunrise suggests, her silhouette growing in features. As my eyes adjusted, the layers and the beauty only increased.

“Oh yes they can.” I say attempting to pull myself up by the frame of the bed. “In some ways that’s where the best parties are. Everyone has a good time and no-one ends up alone.”

“Are you bi-polar?” Sunrise asks, swinging around suddenly.

“Excuse me?”

“I said are you bi-polar? I had a boyfriend who’s sister suffered it. There’s no shame in it, it’s very common.”

“So much for the casual conversation of the morning after the night before.”, I say finally pushing myself up.

“Sorry.”

“Believe it or not that’s not the first time I’ve been asked and my response is the same as the one I gave them; unless you’re a doctor, I have no idea, but I highly doubt it.”
“Was he a doctor?”

“She was a chiropodist. So kind of, I guess. But not enough of a doctor to allow her to ask.”

“Well to be honest I am. And I think I touched a nerve.” Sunrise states firmly but undefended.

“Really? Well I’m both wrong and impressed. Which is a fucking rarity. My apologies, you just look so young. I’m not sure I’ve ever woken up next to a professional of any kind. Well...perhaps not any kind. So again that makes you a rarity.”

She plays with her breasts in the mirror to make sure they fit right in her top. As if they could fit any other way.

“A beautiful, fuckable rarity.”

“You mean you’re impressed because the girl who was giving you eyes, looking a little lost and a little alone turns out to actually be something more than someone lost out there waiting to be found?”

“Yes. But when you put it like that, I’m an arsehole. But in fairness, most people who I have found, as you so elegantly put it, in this situation have been just that, it just so happens you’re one of the educated one and you guys normally know a little better and put your head back in a book when you see me
coming. Little scares the likes of me off more than a beautiful face behind a book. But no, I’m not bi-polar though now an actual doctor has asked me I’m starting to wonder what else might be wrong with me. Want to stay a little longer and examine me?"

“That’s a tempting offer, but no. Thank you. I am a student doctor but a doctor all the same.”

“Well this morning has taken an interesting turn of events. It’s like my own murder scene without the satisfaction of actually being dead and watching my own funeral. And boy, wouldn’t that be fun?"

“Oh, you’re one of those people. One of those people who’s incredibly fun until the morning after. Some would call you liars.”

“While I might be a thief of sorts, if there’s one thing I’m not, it’s a liar.” I say awakened. I wipe more sleep from my eyes comically to spread out the thickness of the mood in the room.


The shadow titters a little when it sees me smiling. Maybe she knows me better than she thinks, maybe she’s commiserating. But until I can shake the stupor, I’m thinking how in an ideal world this was kind of how my I’d like my final party on earth to
look. A little bit fucked here, a drop of blood and whiskey there and just a little bit of sunny perfection stood in the corner for my ghost’s entertainment and my ghost’s entertainment alone, bed sheets, lingering sense of vulnerability and black tie optional.

“Do you really want to see your own funeral?” she asked me wiping away last night’s eye-shadow effortlessly.

“If it were possible I’d repeat just a little of last night’s highlights on the hood of the hearse, just because I fucking could.” I say standing from the bed. She was struggling to tie the dress she was wearing last night and there’s no way she’s going to do it on her own and no way she’s going to ask me for help unless I lighten the context.

“It’s interesting that you talk about watching your own funeral as if you’re watching someone else’s. Like someone close to you. You talk about it so personally.”

“Well it is my funeral.”

I help tie a subtle little bow at the summit of her top, all the details I’d missed last night that the girls love and we men always somehow miss becoming more apparent. I pulled the bow tight to her skin and kissed her neck softly and from her neckline I asked, “Are you a trainee shrink, doctor?”. She laughed.

“Thank you. And yes, as it happens. Is it that obvious?”
“Not one little bit, like a fucking tank running through the window of my seventh floor apartment.”

She turns to me and puts her arms around my shoulders. She’s a lot taller than I remember her being and I like it.

“It doesn’t matter. Last night you did something down there to bring me to the point of near-death-experience, so if that counts, go ahead, I’ll call the undertaker.”

“Wow, that’s about the sexiest...and yet most nightmarish thing anyone’s ever said to me.” I say, finally figuring out why my tongue was hurting so much.

I walk into the lounge and sit on the sofa looking at my favourite chipped glass lying on its side on the floor. Mere drops of last night remain from a bottle which now proudly sat balancing on the railing of my balcony looking like a work of art, empty against the biggest canvas in the world. I picked up the glass as Sunset sits next to me putting her head in my scarcely covered lap.

“Well this is a sad state of affairs” I say swirling the glass around above her head.

“It would be if the moon were still up.” she said with a judgmental little smile.

She’s right. The clock above reminds me that it’s nearly 10am
and I’m already wishing it were dark or at least sunset over the yardarm. I tell myself that I’m merely being young, just like I was fifteen years before. I hate change and the only kind of change I’d have liked right then was a subject change.

“I meant the chip on the table...It’s another of those little mysteries that I need to clear up later.”

“Well that’s the least of your worries.”

“Really? What did you do, you bad, bad girl?”

“I didn’t do anything, I just watched the show. And it was quite the show. Oh, the things I saw last night, things that make me want to get you on that couch the university’s been promising me for months. The highs and lows of theatre, that’s all I’m going to say.” she says, her head slowly rising from my lap.

“No, no, no,” I say holding her down, her laughter echoing. “That’s not all you’re going to say, you’re gonna sing little bird.”

“It’ll cost ya.”

“It always does. How about I promise not to remove the very thin sheet your head is resting against so the only pillow you’ll have will be my little friend in exchange for information?”

“Fair enough. Though I’m not sure that’s much of a punishment.”
You’re kinda weird. Which leads me on to last night nicely and how you are a thief. In fact, I’m going to itemise it for you; the chip in the glass was caused by you knocking it onto the side of the coffee table which you’ll find is also considerably damaged…”

I look a few feet in front to see a ruptured spiders web formed in the glass in the corner of the table.

“Fuck me…”

“…whilst you were dancing the can-can.”

“Fuck me!”

“Yeah, the can-can. I had to ask what the can-can was and now it’s forever burnt into my mind. But by the look on your face, I don’t think I’m alone in that.” she titters.

“With or without accompaniment?”

Sunrise grabs the stereo remote pressing a single button and the can-can began playing loudly, mockingly, its pomposity and bombast as punishing and as bright as I felt my face turning.

“Holy. Shit. That’s not even mine.” I say laughing nervously.

“No, no, I know where it came from. You wanted that CD more than you wanted me.”
“Ok, firstly, c’est impossible madame. Secondly, I have no idea where this came from, really.”

“Do you remember walking through the village on the way home?”

I could have saved the world last night, be in all the newspapers for all I know, but in my head, long gone. Of all the things to forget and all the things to remember, it always seems to be the worst ones that rear their head and say hello.

“Oh God, no.”

“You may have offered at least one sexual favour for ‘whatever this incredible art is that’s playing right now’ I believe you said.”

I love the gays. The gays love me. I lived amongst them but never hang around for too long and with good reason. I don’t love the love they often have for me. Or their cocks. So in that moment I found that mine had shrunken and disappeared between my legs, possibly even inside of me. Sunrise saw me shaking my head with my eyes closed and laughed, putting her hand on the top of my hand.

“Oooh, you didn’t, you...big...inarguably straight man, you. You’re just a bigger thief than you can imagine right now. You grabbed the CD when the door-lady’s back was turned and we ran for it. I had quite an eventful night on the way back to yours. You owe
me for a new pair or heels incidentally, these snapped in two on our little detour.”

“Apparently not as eventful as mine. I’m so sorry.”

“It was hilarious! It made me want to come home with you even more. It made me believe you wouldn’t mind if I had a cock. So many of you guys have such a problem with it.”

For a moment I actually believed her but then I’m relieved to hear her laughing her balls...tits off.

“You’re easier to fool than that ego would suggest.”

“Fuck. Well it’s all bravado my dear. Apparently I’m hiding more than I know...”

Sunrise sits up, climbing into my lap and looked at me with great intent as if about to tell me something I didn’t already know, but something that was missing that I’d been looking for all along.

“Maybe you are, but I think you’re focusing on the wrong wrongs. Perhaps you should just stop dancing so much.”

Open mouthed but relieved, I let out a little breath as she stands up from my lap and heads for the rest of her clothes, scattered everywhere in the most obvious and most unexpected of places, much like where I think I’d found her. And then I started to
wonder how she found me. But I didn’t ask and we left it to fate like we so often do. It seems I just need to watch myself around show-tunes.

“Is that your professional opinion? Because I’m one hell of a mover in the right spirits.” I shout to the bedroom.

“No, it’s the opinion of someone who’d like to see you again in a different light.”

I remember thinking about how that made two of us. Sunrise came back to see me before she leaves, laying a card down on the arm of my couch.

“Call me.”

“Really? A fuck up like me? An atrocious ballerina with lumpen legs? Why?”

What she said next both warmed my heart and worried me to my very core, the core they always try to delve inside but rarely touch the surface of.

“For more good times on your sofa where I can let you climb a little further inside of me, or more revealing times on mine where I can climb inside your head. The choice is yours.” she said, her smile as bright and shimmering as the fresh lipstick holding and framing it, kissing me and leaving nothing behind but the warmth
and the prospect of more, just like the sunlight shining in on my very own Sunrise.

It looks like time for her to go and I watched her walk away, hobbling lightly on broken heels, closing the bathroom door behind me to prepare myself for the world outside before she could look back. The saddest part is it smells and feels like the time too. I’ve shown my best and worst and more often than not there’s little in the middle worth hanging around for, especially when, as I look in the mirror it looks like my face has tongue-fucked a train, let alone the prettiest petal in this city’s rather limited greenery. I just wish it still smelt like her. I’m still looking in the mirror when I hear the door close and all I can smell is smoke and I can’t tell if it’s from the whiskey I still haven’t cleaned up slowly seeping into the apartment below, like some slow-burning, never-ending cancer, or the burning of the bridge between my heart and my mind, come to life. This is what I mean by how it smelt like it was time; it smells like me in here and the odour is exasperating, like eucalyptus oil to a dog. She’s left nothing behind except for a bright red tight-rope string from the top of her head that I just pulled out from between my teeth. I can’t help but smile; it’s my favourite kind of memento but the one that makes me saddest of all. This hair once belonged to someone alive, someone who came here and left again still alive, thriving, with everything behind her rotting. But that’s not her fault. It’s mine for never truly looking after anything.
17. Forget Me Nots.

Outside the sky’s grey and, for those who know, that isn’t a surprise. When you live in the UK’s equivalent of Seattle, you’ll get the gist, the misery and the rain. We share a wonderful ecosystem, as well as an inarguably great musical history but for that I’d take Pearl Jam over The Smiths, Soundgarden over Stone Roses, Nirvana over Happy Mondays, obviously…Madchester may well be dead but a buzz in the city still exists and those who knew it and lived it say that they can still feel it vibrating in the walls. I was not one of the ‘fortunate’ ones, I was born five years too late to see it all so it feels pretty dead to me though far from a burial ground. It’s merely alive in nothing but the hearts of those who knew it and those that’ll do anything to emulate it, striving to bring back a past greatness never to return.

Like most great cities, consumerism has taken hold and I can’t see it being grappled away by anything except some other future revolution, musical or otherwise. But the dreamer continues to dream even when the dream has already passed by. It’s no word of a lie to say that I have loved every woman I’ve ever been with whether it was for ten long years or five messy minutes but I’ve rarely needed them, no matter how far I swim into hopelessness once they’re gone, whether temporarily or the rare one or two with some permanence. Those are the ones that linger in my own dreams. I went to ditch Sunrise’s card in the river as I cross the bridge into the city but I hang onto it in the hope that, just
maybe, there’s a little permanence in her words and her meaning. Until then, I put her out of my mind until she finds herself there again. But just lately, post-woman, I’d been feeling their presence lingering with me long after they’ve walked away, like all-too-familiar ghosts. Right now the purple and the lip ring still remain as she has for days.

There was this vegetarian place close by and it always seemed like the perfect place to practice an exorcism or two. It was next door to this monastery or Buddhist society or something, the kind of place where it felt holy in the most genuine of ways but holy shit the prices were high. It was an odd type of place, unintentionally put together. You entered by passing this Buddhist monk who sat there, rain or shine, with this big smile on his face from a flight of stairs into a well-lit basement with two counters containing miscellaneous substances guaranteed organic, no meat, beetroot cake, overpriced bottled water made in the hills of Wales but tasting a lot like a tap in Stoke and a wooden passageway leading to a cramped seating area. It’s always a little too hot for comfort in there but it’s barely an issue as the majority of their customers wouldn’t know warm blood if it were fed to them through a straw like everything else they consume. It’s all vampires and health freaks on any normal day but today is different. I walk up the road past a group of monks meditating, on the entranceway to their centre next door to the restaurant and I headed down the steps and notice the big sign letting everyone know that they’re going out of business and
closing their doors. Everything is half off and, despite that meaning that the food is a regular price compared to almost anywhere else, it has attracted the masses. Full to the brim with people looking for something different on a budget that isn’t fast food all the while carrying their Selfridges bags, I nearly turned back around. But as it turns out, the comedy value was through the roof as you could see from their expressions upon taking the first bites of their vegan meatloaf and African special salads.

I sit down with one of their specialist dishes which is a bit of everything all mixed into one bowl. It’s dark green going on blue with little sticks coming out of it. I went to this particular place in the hope of detoxing my body, hoping that my mind might follow, flushing away those spirits in the process and the green-blue goo that lies before me on the stained beech table will hopefully do the job until I need a drink to help flush out that crap in return. I was finally self-medicating it seemed and I felt relatively at peace until a glass of water slammed down next to me on the table, scaring me shitless.

“Mind if I sit here?”

I don’t look up. I nod and that should be more than enough to not encourage further conversation.

“Not been here for a while and the portions are down, much like everything I guess. No-one gets as much as they used to for the
money unless you’re selling yourself and that’s when you want it least of all.”

In a better mindset I’d have responded, such is the rarity of words like that in a city like this but I sat unmoved for a while longer.

“But it has been a while my friend and you seem to have seen better days.”

You do get the friendly sort in here, the modern day hippies, the mind mixologists who smoke a little too much and then jabber on for days and I wasn’t in the mood.

“Really? That’s all I get? As I say it has been a while.”

I stop chewing long enough to look up and having eventually moved by the changes I could see and the bristles on his face, sat there was my old landlord Tony Shilling. His face was almost unrecognisable, once clean-shaven and city-ready, now furry like an educated hamster from a 70s prog band. I’d be a little happier to see him if I didn’t have a bone to grind.

“Tony...How are you doing?” I say, swallowing a little more gruel.

“I was wondering when you were going to realise it was your oldest friend in this city.”
He drops his wooden fork reaching out a hand enthusiastically, ready to shake, still chewing his cud.

“Oh, no, no, I’m not shaking your hand motherfucker. You still owe me my fucking money.”

“The bank screwed me.”

He smiled with his famous ‘salesman’ smile as me and some former friends called it. It never quite seemed all that real but always got the job done. Tony is my oldest friend from this town. His was the first house I found for rent and the last one I viewed. He seemed slick and ready and like someone I wanted to be back when I was young and unhardened. I guess I should have known then what I was getting into. But I always liked Tony until the day I didn’t, which was the day he left town for Belize and I found myself in the hands of the bank at the beginning of a pretty hard recession.

“Does the bank and the state know you’re back here and not dead? Because if not I’ll bet they’d like to. Last thing I heard about you was from someone in a black suit and tie banging on my door asking if I’d heard from you, two years into your fucking disappearance.”

“Really? What did you tell them?” he asked, still smiling.

“The truth. You’re an arsehole. And that I hadn’t seen you. Or
heard from you. In that order.”

Tony laughed, nodding, agreeing with himself as ever he did. We used to have some crazy nights while everything between me and Bethany was slowly breaking down until the day she was gone and he came around with a bottle of Sambuca from his latest trip to Japan. I liked it and rarely had I drunk that much and with that level of gusto and meaning. I guess that could be the birth of this guy as you’ve come to know me, right there.

“Come on dude, I’m all about the positivity these days. I lost a hundred pounds. My bills are nearly paid and my soul is resurgent. I’ll buy you a mango stir-fry, you’ll love it.’ he says chewing his miscellaneous orange mush.

“Fuck your mango stir-fry.” I say taking another mouthful, Tony snorting his laughter and his orange goop out of his nose.

“Christ. All this talk of money is making me sad, man. Eat up and we’ll go somewhere else.”

“Where?”

“Somewhere else with some soul. A little bit of life.”

The only reason the talk of money was making him feel bad was because it became the bane of his life. Tony always seemed to be struggling and whenever the rent was five minutes late, near
every month back in the early days of domestication, he’d be on the phone threatening with the bailiffs. He was my friend but he had issues. We talked about starting a business together and we very nearly did but as ever his neurotic personality and paranoia got in the way of anything meaningful. Yet I’m a forgiving kind of guy, even in this mood so I dropped my fork, sighed out of my nose and offered an olive branch. I’m sure there’s a few somewhere in the crap in my bowl so I can spare one.

“Fucking stuff’s making me sick anyway. This had better not be some kind of cult gathering” I say as we gather our coats. “And there had best be booze...”

Sat outside the Buddhist centre was Tony’s car, the same Nissan that was inches from making a bigger first impression on me than Tony did all those years ago. He turned up forty-five minutes late for the viewing, mounted the pavement sending me reeling back against the wall in the process. He climbed out of the passenger side door and in a ‘mockney’ accent said “Sorry, mayte. You here to view this mess?”. I liked him instantly. Sat there in front of that serene place, the lime green monstrosity had a few more dents on almost every panel including the roof, but it couldn’t have been more well placed sat there looking so sorry for itself. For all his positivity, Tony can’t stop the skies from opening and we jump inside as soon as he’d picked the lock on the driver-side door and opened mine from the inside. I sat down with a bump, the car shaking violently.
“When did you get this fuckin’ thing looked at?”

“My guy in Belize gave it a full bill of health a couple of months ago.”

“Forgive me if I’m a tad skeptical.”

“The mechanics in Belize are just as good as the ones here.”

“Was he actually a mechanic?”

Tony tuts and smiles, shaking his head without response. Fuck.

The rain was pounding the windscreen like it might cave in if it were to come down any harder. He pulled the collar up on his oversized sports jacket and he took a cigarette from behind it as if if he’d stored it anywhere else he might never find it or someone might take it away from him. That ‘salesman’ smile was as much what made him a success at the best of times and what made him a scary fucker at the worst, always his secret weapon in so many situations, whether getting into something or trying to get out of it, Tony was always a born winner that seemed to lose every fight he had and yet always still came out alive. I’m pretty sure that’s how he made his money in the first place. It must have been substantial as he found himself to be the proud owner of thirteen dilapidated little dream homes in some of Lancashire’s murkiest corners and that shitty Nissan. When the bills started rolling in and his love of grass has already turned out to be a
gateway to supposedly whiter, blurrier, dustier gardens, that car became his home before he finally split under a cover of darkness on the back of a freighter for Ostend. Later on at a Christmas party I stumbled into with Tony’s former business partner, I heard that he’d spent a few years in London and made his way up for better or for worse before he came up here and he’d made one morally ambiguous company in particular a shit load of money and himself one hell of a commission in the process. But his persuasion was also his major flaw and his incessant need to keep even the most unreasonable of clients resulted in the company suffering some financial losses and from that everyone lost, especially Tony. In the end it was simply his name on a name tag in the bottom of a box along with a rubber plant and some copies of Private Eye on the floor somewhere outside a tall building looking across Canary Wharf. He supposedly went from top to bottom so fast you wouldn’t have been able to clear up the shit stains from the walls as he hurtled down the elevator shaft. Like his infamous wins and losses, they were to be forever engraved into the walls. His pride is what finished him and made him flee here to find the new, just like the rest of us. That charm remained and even then, I could see it somewhere through the cigarette smoke and the jaded haze inside of him. ‘Motherfucking business’ he said to me the one time I asked him what he did before Manchester and nothing more.

“You must’ve missed me a bit despite everything.” he says, firing up the little old Nissan at the third attempt.
“There’s only room for a couple of psychopaths in my head and, trust me, you’re not one of them.”

“But the two in there, they’re wearing lipstick, am I right?” he says still grinning as we turned out into the main roads. “I hated that I had to do what I did. But I felt regret for a while and I felt sorry for it and that’s something psychopaths aren’t capable of my friend.”

“Don’t pretend you actually cared about those people you left in the wayside having to deal with the shit you needed to clear up and the money they couldn’t afford from the shacks they were living in. Some would call that abuse.”

“You made it out though, didn’t you?”

“Only because Bethany gave me the money. It was the least she could do by then.”

Tony’s face finally stopped smiling and he glanced over at me, then back to the traffic.

“Fuck. You too?”

I nodded. Tony leaned forward looking up at the sky through the windshield hoping for a better outlook than the sudden outpour while I was hoping for yet another change of subject. The sun peaked through briefly from somewhere up there and Tony
chuckled.

“But she’s single now, right?”

“What the fuck is wrong with you?”

Tony laughed, still staring at that crack in the sky, showering the side of one of the tall buildings with sun, a blinding rainbow effect appearing on a couple of windows.

“I imagine she took the lamp with the forget-me-not pattern on the shade. Dusty old thing. I always thought it was quite ironic as I shoved it in a cupboard and forgot about it the minute I saw it until the day you guys rolled up and pulled it out. She always liked that and the god-awful faux Tiffany ceiling shade with the bronze gilding. The only tenant I ever had in there that liked that piece of shit. I talked to her a few times. Girl seemed to have a thing for light like that and you were always a little darker but knew how to laugh.” he said, turning to me. “Did she take that with her too?”

I hated that lamp, it was too big and way too much, but Beth always had this way of making me look at things in a different way and now I love that shit. My apartment is full of things that are a little too dark, a bit too cold and invariably too simple except for that lampshade in the far corner of the living room next to the balcony door.
“She took everything.”

“Lighten up. You’ve still got your health. And your looks. At thirty you look pretty good for forty-five.” he said turning back to the slow-moving traffic.

“I’m twenty-nine. And people keep saying that.”

Always forty five. Never forty, never thirty-seven. I guess looking more than I am isn’t a bad thing, it’s better than fifty-five and the weather is harder out there than it is in here. The traffic thinned and thickened and whenever it seemed like we were getting anywhere, we’d always end up sat waiting again. It didn’t take long before we weaved our way out, a specialty of Tony’s.

“You want to slow down? It’s like a river out there.”

Tony had been driving erratically since and while I didn’t mind, it just so happened that I was starting to feel a little better about life and that I’d rather have not woken up having skidded head-first into a McDonalds drive-thru. The drive removed us from the hopeful silver and occasional green flash of the city and took us past landscapes nearly as grey as the sky above with a few rusted corners to break the monotony, littered with paneled factories and metal-fronted shutters like fortresses that felt like they were calling me home.

“We’re not going where I think we’re going, are we?”
“No, but it’s close. Light me up, would you?”

I grab Tony’s lighter from under the hand-break and ignite the cigarette perched in his mouth. He had a funny little expression on his face. I couldn’t make out if it was a smile or a gurn to hold his lips together and only when he took the butt from his mouth did I see the former. I just wondered why he smiled so damned much for someone with such flaws and problems surrounding him, who’s influence got all those involved with him into a similar hole. There he is smiling but for what?

Tony took a right turn, then a left and another right two or three miles outside of the city and he stopped in the middle of the street, a cul de sac of houses varying between fair and God awful in their condition. If the outskirts of the city were grey like the sky then this was black and blue, beaten and left to fend for itself lying naked on the floor facing up to the grey. We stepped out and the cul de sac was silent. I counted the houses, twenty-two-and-a-quarter, each with their own face and their own outlook, all abandoned yet occupied, the rustling of years of litter inside the broken boards breaking the silence, two or three sets of eyes watching from the windows all around. I know why I felt a sense of dread about being here but it’s not the junkies or the insecurity of the place but more because it looked exactly like the street where life came before it came to end with Bethany. Our house would’ve been the one to the far right of the street, number 12 which here looks like one of the few houses to have survived
whatever the havoc, the years and the cold had caused. The bricks were surprisingly intact, but that unnerved me more.

“Why are we here?”

“Does it remind you of anything?”

I was starting to get sick of his smile and his vague suggestions and questions by that point. That ‘salesman’ smile.

“It reminds me of lots of things. Why are we here?” I said, agitated, folding my arms in the cold. My stomach rumbled uncomfortably as if asking me what I was thinking when I was thinking vegan food and I felt nauseous.

Tony turned and looked to a house on the right side of the street. It was solid with burns all the way up the front side, the brickwork charred so badly you could almost smell it. The way the windows were set it made the burns look like the head of the devil, two darkened brown horns curving away from the upstairs windows, the door forming a mouth of sorts. The rain stopped and Tony finally spoke after what felt like hours.

“The first one” he said slowly with a forlorn expression on his face. “The first one.”

“The first what?”
He walked up to the walls and ran his hands down the side of the brick where the fire had hit hardest. Call it a false sense of entitlement, the type I hate most of all, but despite living in my fair share of places where the walls didn’t feel like they’d keep the bad outside, I was starting to become uncomfortable with the stirring I could hear coming from one particular house behind me.

“Tony?”

Tony ignored me and continued to pace around the house and disappeared around the corner. There were disgruntled moans coming directly from across the street, right from the broken window. They sounded wounded, threatened.

“Listen Tony, full disclosure, if you’re going to murder me and add me to your collection of human mannequins or whatever you have in a garage somewhere the tax people aren’t aware of, then you’ve chosen very well. But I’m going to make my way back home. I’m bored and there’s a Sopranos marathon on Channel 4 in about an hour.”

There was no response other than the sound of breaking glass under foot. I waited a good minute and a half before I started to walk away and I hear more breaking glass then shoes on the cracked concrete. I turned around quickly to see Tony, his neck was bleeding from just under his chin. It was still a better sight than the alternative.
“What happened?” I say pointing to the blood.

Tony touched his neck and winced. It’s not a bad cut, but bad enough to spot from six feet away, bad enough to make it stream down his neck.

“It’s not important.”

“We’re on a deserted street filled with junkies infected with God-knows what. I’d say it’s pretty important.”

“It was just barbed wire. I fell over and landed on it. Fucker who took the house away surrounded the place with the stuff. Hate the stuff. There’s no way you can go through it without getting hurt.”

He took his hand away from his neck to observe the damage and the flow. His hands were shaking and he seemed distant.

“Kind of like life really.” he says nodding towards the house. I turn and look at the walls again. It was still just a house, just a little darker. Tony returned to his car and grabbed a beer and threw me one. Hate the stuff, but I opened it anyway. The sun had gone by 3pm and we were getting there too and nothing had changed. I can still see the blackened walls but they look deeper now, less detailed. There’s one window missing, not just broken, not smashed, just completely missing. It made me think of John, like he was in there, just him and his belief and his burden. But
he’s not in there, he’s not anywhere. If there’s one thing it didn’t look like, it was life.

“Got a tissue?” Tony said wincing, still lightly touching his neck.

“Actually, for once, I think I do. Just never when I need ‘em.”

“I’ll bet you’ve got a whole pack in that pocket of yours for drying up the tears of the ladies.” he said snickering. I smiled.

“Difference is before they took them from me as an offering.”, I say searching in my pockets. “Now they refuse because they’re already half way out the door.”

We laugh knowingly and stared at that house while I rummaged around inside the pocket of my jacket. There’s broken trellis down the side of the door and it made me feel saddest about everything here. Without it, that house is just brick, just simply structure, one of a hundred thousand, all lined up, no individuality, no sense of being until you see a little bit of life like that. I find a perfect white napkin from somewhere in one of my inside pockets but before I handed it to Tony something stopped me. I noticed a little something on there against the perfect white. A little bit of writing like a little bit of life.

“Come on mate, I’m dying here.”

“Hang on, hang on…”
I go to unfold the napkin and a junkie emerges from the house behind hollering something incoherently at us.

“We don’t have anything worth anything. Shut the fuck up.” Tony said calmly. The moaning stopped and I heard the man shuffle back inside like a wounded animal. My stomach gurgles and stabs at me. I know how he feels.

I unfolded that napkin and saw sentences and words that made me smile like something better was watching out for me. I chuckle quietly. I was warmed in the kind of way that you can’t describe, where it’s not just warmth but a tug in your chest dragging you out of the cold slowly, but you know it. It’s like that whiskey burn I learnt so well only with a different kind of pain, a line drawn in the sand as a guide that runs right to you. I rip a quarter of the napkin away, the clean and crispest part and hand it to Tony, and push the rest of it, the perfect part back into my pocket. I kept smiling like something mattered at last.

“Thanks man. Funny how it only hurts once you know it’s there.”

“Like life.” I say jokingly.

We’d stood there for nearly an hour and I hadn’t felt eyes on me since, not even my own. I was warmer and I had my hands in my pockets and I was gripping that napkin like it meant it all.

“Come on Tony. I’ve dealt with enough shit this last week without
yours making it all the more blurry. So if you don’t mind I’m going
to go around that corner, vomit in the gutter and be on my way.”

“We’re already in the gutter, just vomit here.” he replied
nonchalantly.

“Maybe when the last of the dignity is already in there. Want to
tell me what we’re doing here now?”

He nodded at the house again, like I was supposed to be seeing
something. The rain started pouring again having stopped for just
a few minutes when he started telling his story.

“This was my first house. I remember the day I put my hand in
the air and won, put down ten grand and the next day I had
tenants in there. I barely had the time to look at what was inside
before they came to see it, but there wasn’t much. They were
this Asian couple moving from Newcastle or Gateshead or
something. The man had this accent like Pakistani or Indian and
she had this thick Geordie twang which seemed like the most out
of place thing I’d ever heard. They were so keen to move in and I
was so ready to get started and I rushed. It needed work and I
was way too impatient.”

Tony stopped talking and when I turned to him he was swallowing
whatever words were in him that weren’t ready to come out,
pushing them down a little further.
“Do you still have the key?”

“No, they went in the river when I got out of here.”

He was softening, the bravado disappearing slowly, bit by bit the smile at last deteriorating. I should have known better. I’m sure Tony always had the best of intentions in his own slightly fucked up way in trying to show me something that would speak to me but it always comes back to him just like it always had before.

“It did need work.” he said quietly, staring forlornly at the walls, nodding slowly. “There was this one wall upstairs that was moist. It wasn’t damaged but it was a health hazard. Like mold or something. I got the specialist in and that sapped away the first month’s rent. I had to overlook the other problems.”

“Did you tell them?”

“I told them not to mess with it.”

“Mess with what? The damp?”

“The gas fire. It needed to stay switched off. I told them to leave it alone.”

I looked around and saw the worst of the burn on the far corner of the left of the house where the living room was, where the gas fire would have been standing, where the chimney was. That part
of the wall was pure black, nothing but black. The window was nothing, not even a frame. I clenched my jaw and I stared at the burn.

“Holy shit…”

“They were sleeping. I hope they were sleeping. I told them not to smoke in there either.”

“You’ve brought me to a fucking crime scene.” I said brimming with anger. “You fucking coward.”

“I couldn’t take any more of it. It’s a horrible thing.”

“It’s fucking murder, you idiot.”

“I was tired of failing.” Tony was twitching and shaking hard.

“Sure, and I’ll bet their families are tired of not having them around for the rest of their miserable lives. Yours was the fucking sacrifice, wasn’t it? It always is.”

“You don’t understand. I’m trying to show you something and you don’t understand. You’re not looking at it right. Look at it.” Tony said getting agitated, thrusting his arms in the direction of the house.

“What do you expect me to see now? How can I see anything
“You only see what you want to see. You’re the one who died here, not them.”

“What the fuck are you on this week? Are you back on crack? PCP?”

“They burnt alive in their sleep. You’re still burning alive now, I can see it. She’s the fire in you but the one you run away from instead of the one you run to and you need to put that fucker out. We all burn, it’s just about how we do it. Some of us burn for someone, some burn for ourselves and there’s a few of us who burn and in the heat we fall apart but are forever on fire for no reason than because there’s fuel to burn. The problem isn’t in the fire, it’s in the fuel.”

“You killed two people.”

“So did you.”

I turned and took hold of him by those giant lapels on his oversized jacket nearly lifting him from the ground.

“You’re a fucking moron. *What did you say to me?”*

“There’s two kinds of death in this world and we’re both guilty. The difference is that those people are no longer on this planet.
Don’t you wonder if they’re maybe better off?”

“You hit it behind the house didn’t you? You snorted that shit back there.”

“What does it matter? Am I wrong?”

I let go of the lapels and let Tony fall to the ground. Through his drug-addled ramblings I know there’s a part of what he’s saying that’s ringing in my head like a bell somewhere. Things are becoming clearer with almost every minute like they haven’t in weeks, months even.

“Stop the fuel man. Let go.”

“Do not fucking drive home until you’re down from that shit. Call a cab.”

“What are you going to do?”

“I’m walking.” I say, already twenty feet away from Tony’s outstretched arms.

“No, I mean about...this.”

I stopped, turned and walked swiftly back towards Tony, thrusting my finger into his face.

“I was never here. You burn in your own house.”
I started back off down the street, walking with purpose and walking with meaning. The rain started pouring harder but it was pouring all over the metaphor which was keeping me stuck in place, helping keep it calm, never putting it out, ‘diluting the fuel’. I walked freely away. I turned once when I heard the banging of Tony breaking down the door to the house and walking inside. I never saw him again and from what I heard that place burnt down more than the once.

I did throw up in that gutter. But I felt better for it, better like you wouldn’t believe. I walked for an hour and found myself on a straighter path home with shiny silver buildings, green flashes and endless traffic slowing and purring to preserve their own fuel and the day once again became the night. I passed more familiar places, even familiar faces, I walked by Jerry giving out the evening news for free, and upon reaching home all but empty, I reached back into my pocket to pull out that napkin. I’d been waiting so long.

‘You never asked. So I took the initiative. It’s about time you did too. Let me know when you do.’

903-234-4332

‘Snowflake’. ’
18. Exceptional Circumstances.

It had been a long warm walk home in the cold. When I eventually woke I’d almost forgotten it but it was still there, all of it. All the way home I’d thought about that napkin, taking it out of my pocket and dialing in the number but I hadn’t. I’m not sure why. These days I find it’s all a little easier to just do what you’re supposed to do when you’re supposed to do it, but back then if I found something good, something that moved me and there was a next step, I would invariably put it off because that bit of something good was always just enough. That morning when I woke up I got to think about what an exception that discovery was and how it’d been right there with me for days and how I’d just not been looking hard enough. I’m used to exceptions having seen them, sat next to them in large open halls, somehow charmed them and subsequently some had made an exception of me. Most people would have seen it as an epiphany, something to move you to change into something else, to shift the shapes that currently exist into new ones, to give in and drop to your knees to observe your failings close-up or some other existential bullshit like that. What I did when I arrived back in the city was to go out on the type of night that starts off as just one to settle the stomach and ends up being the type of binge where you order in bottles rather than shots followed by the harsh shortcut of being personally escorted to the pavement rather than just being politely asked.
This shortcut had subsequently led me to some kind of coma where I remained in my bed and didn’t move for several days occasionally rising from my bed to seek out water but then my face is planted firmly back onto my pillow again. Though I’d never experienced the pleasure, it felt something like rehabilitation just without the vicious comedown and the screaming. No booze, no women and no fuck ups for three days. It’s hard to fuck or indeed fuck up when you can’t move. But today I’m going to raise myself from the dead, slip out of the dream and squeeze my bloated remains through the crack in the front door that I’d left open for the last three days. I remove my jacket from the pile of clothes I needed to put away and put my hand in the pocket taking out the napkin. Maybe I’ll make a call. Maybe.

I move gingerly towards the balcony in the hope that a swift breeze will help wake me up or send me flying off the edge. Either way I needed the wind in my hair. I step onto the aluminium floor, barefoot somehow forgetting it was early January.

“Holy fuck...‘s cold!” I winced.

“I know, fucking winter right? How dare it?”, a voice said scathingly. It would appear that the voices in my head that I was always so threatened by have finally reared their head.

“Hello? Sexy?”
Even my own tormented voices want to boost my ego today. Alas, as I turned to my left I realised the voice was my cuttily sarcastic neighbour, Karel. He’s also an exception. You know when you meet someone who truly defines the meaning of something else? Well if there was one thing Karel defined, it was ‘gay with a capital fucking ‘G’. I’d always wanted my very own crazy guy with a superiority complex on the inside to help me figure myself out so you can understand why I’d be a little disappointed to find it was my neighbour stood on his balcony in what was little more than a speedo and a big smile.

“Karel…I thought you were someone else.”

Karel smiles broadly and continues to look over at me amorously in his speedo.

“And now I’m starting to wish you were.”

“I’m surprised you’ve not commented on my getup yet. You’ve not even peered over in a shockingly disgusted manner yet.”

“Is that not what this face is doing? Well shit. I guess I am feeling better or I’m just getting used to the unusual right now.’ I say tipping my glass of water back down my throat. ‘And you are an exceptional man Karel.”

“Why, thank you. You know you’re the missing link, don’t you? The great loss to this big gay world that I inhibit.”
Karel is the owner of some ridiculously successful drag bar in The Village whilst simultaneously being the queen of the innuendo and for my ears the most promiscuous man in the city, the type of guy that makes me look as clean as a nun’s undevilled arsehole. They installed wall insulation a couple of weeks or so after he moved in and while I would say that the two events were unrelated, I’d probably be lying.

“I’m gratefully horrified Karel, thank you. But allow me to stop you there. Any other nice things you want to say, feel free to put them in writing and throw them off the balcony because that’s where you’ll find me if I keep having to hear them. It’s not that I’m not unappreciative or that it makes me feel awkward as hell, I’m just not in the mood for your particular brand of flirtation today.” I say smiling.

“The things I could do with that body…” Karel breathes lustfully. I remained unimpressed and make it clear in my looks as much as I thought I had been in my words but his mind was apparently elsewhere.

“You love it really despite your Freudian hatred of all penis that isn’t yours.”

I turn to Karel with a little smile on my serious face.

“Don’t make me report you to Joe. You know he’d love to have you for intimidation. Besides let’s not bring Freud into it, it’s way
too fucking early.”

“I’ll bet he would. Deeply seated homos the lot of you.” Karel exclaims as he tips back his own drink, laughing.

“Is that a Mimosa?”

Karel looks disgruntled as he pulls his lips away from the glass leaving a yellow moustache behind it.

“What’s the big fucking deal?” he exclaimed comically.

I turn around and peer painfully at the clock on the wall.

“It’s nine thirty…”

“It’s Friday! And besides it’s a virgin, unlike us, my squeamish little friend…”

Karel has a cartoonish justification for almost everything, like the time he managed to convince one of the local constabulary that he wasn’t breaking the law when snorting coke off the upper torso of one of his many boyfriends on the outskirts of the village by telling them that he had been giving him the Heimlich maneuver and how he once got out of my own questioning glances when he admitted that he had gone down on a fag-hag by telling me that ‘that must have been one huge clit’ and that he was sure he tasted cock.
“Don’t you have a pretty thing waiting for you inside?” he asks inquisitively peering at my balcony door.

“For once, sadly not. I think I’m finally at a point where there are no more women in the area who are interested in having sex with me, or I’ve finally lost my touch. Either way, it was inevitable.”

“There’s always new meat coming through the gates. Lest we forget that we’re in the city where the rejects come to find the gold and end up with the foil wrapping.”

“I’ve seen the latest delivery and I’ve popped the top off the latest I’m afraid. The rest were a little off.”

“So come over here if you’re lonely!” he squeaks impatiently.

“Karel, I know this seems to be increasingly hard for you to understand, but despite the amount of women I actually sleep with, I’m not actually gay.”

“I meant come over here for a mimosa, silly!” he says clinking his glass on an empty one awkwardly.

I turned to look across the city. It’s grey and dull, the air is thin and fickle, mid-winter and the clouds are as much a contradiction to the thick yellow liquid on offer across the way as a Catholic at a condom factory. My feet are warmer now having adjusted to the outside world. Suddenly it seems like an idea.
“They’re virgin, right?”

“The only thing over here that is!” Karel says shaking the unlabeled bottle of yellow, like moonshine.

“I’m just gonna put some clothes on.”

“If you must... Just come on over, turn my handle and come inside!”

I throw on a t-shirt and some less ‘crusty’ jeans and head on over next door. I didn’t even knock, I just walked in. I should have known better. Karel was stood there naked and I can’t believe my eyes. I wish it were the first time it’s happened but for all the right reasons, it is literally nothing I haven’t seen before.

“Oh young man, you have to give me the opportunity to change, myself. Did your mother never tell you to knock?”

“You told me to just come over and walk in.”

“Did I...? I don’t remember saying any such thing.”

“Again, don’t make me regret this. Socks on cocks or whatever the fuck they used to say in the army.”

“Well...”

“Just put on some fucking clothes. Where’s the fake booze?”
“On my balcón monsieur!”

I walked out of the room into the passageway to the living room.

“I see the little angel tattoo is still on your thigh. I thought he was long gone.”

“Me too. I didn’t have the heart. Like the one I put him there for, he’s still hanging around with his balls hanging out.”

That was one detail I hadn’t spotted thankfully. I stepped onto the balcony, prepared for the cold this time around thanks to the military-grade socks mother had given me for Christmas. I poured a tall glass of mimosa and look back into his apartment. Like most of them that I’ve seen, it’s camp, gay, homo-erotic and all the other clichés. In the middle of the main wall there’s a picture of an old but spritely looking lady. The wrinkles on her face suggest a life well lived full of smiles and frowns. The picture is framed by heather and some sort of glittery decoration, kind of like how a shrine to Liberace would look.

“You’re looking particularly fabulous today doll. What aren’t you telling me?”

“I haven’t eaten for three days and I spent the one prior to throwing up in a gutter whilst escaping a drug addict.”

He picks up a tray from the kitchen laying out a couple of
croissants and cheese. He tsk and winces.

“Oh yeah, that’ll do it…”

Karel emerges on the balcony fully clothed, of sorts, wearing this sleeveless shirt and skinny jeans. He noticed me looking at the portrait on the wall as he approached.

“A fine looking lady, wasn’t she?”

“She looks like she knew how to have a good time. Your mother?”

“Aunt. Aunty Martha. She was the biggest influence of my life.”

“Judging from the size of those pearls and the camp expression on her face, I can see why.”

“I still have those pearls around here, in my secret stash box. Want to see?” Karel says beaming. I look back unimpressed.

“Why does everything with you sound like an innuendo?”

“Probably because it usually is.”

“Well, with respect, you’re not saying that you have your aunt’s pearls between your cheeks now, are you?”

“No, of course not, how dare you?” Karel says playfully. “But that’s not to say they haven’t been there!”
On that note I take a big gulp of mimosa with my disgust and bile. I’ve been free of booze for a couple of days and I was feeling pretty good for it but my spidey senses were tingling. I took another sip and swished it around in my mouth.

“Karel...how virgin are these virgin mimosas?”

Karel raised his glass to his mouth about to take a sip guiltily.

“Fairly.”

“How much booze is in the mimosa Karel?”

“How much of it is sparkling wine. Doesn’t even fucking count.”

“Jesus Christ...” I exclaim as I take another gulp. “And yet I still drink this. Why am I still drinking this?”

“Because I make awesome mimosas, virgin or otherwise and if you didn’t know better you’d think I was trying to get you drunk. What’s up with you anyway? When did booze become such a problem to you?” Karel says tittering.

I gulped and thought about the question. It was a good question, a fair question to some people in my life or so I’ve started to believe. I sigh it away.

“You’re a bad boy...” I say smiling.
“Oh don’t you talk to me like that, you’ll drive me all kinds of crazy!”

“How do you have time for anything when all you seem to think about is getting laid? And drinking cocktails on your balcony at 10am.”

“Oh come on now, we all do it, some are just more subtle than others. Me and you are not those people and you of all people aren’t going to judge me for thinking about getting laid 24 hours a day.”

“No, some are just more fucking horny than others. And besides that’s not possible.”

“Don’t you pussy out on me now. I know you think about it in your sleep too.” Karel puts his glass back on the table and is in full animation. “I can’t believe the words that are coming from your lips. YOU! I’ve heard you through these walls you little screamer, you! I know what you need.”

“I know what you think I need and I don’t need, want or desire it, trust me on that one.”

“You need to get laid.”

I pull a disgruntled face and I’m about to go into a subtle rage about the limits Karel doesn’t have before he offers me the first
comfort I’ve actually wanted to come from his lips.

“With a girl. With a vagina!”

I turn around slowly.

“It has been four days. Go on.”

“Sorry, I can’t believe I just said vagina. It may be the first and last time…”, Karel splutters pulling a horrified face in the process.

“But vagina is good, vagina is the beginning of life, vagina might just be the very meaning of life!”

“Please stop saying vagina.”

I’m not sure what it is with gay guys and that word. It’s like sexual kryptonite. Maybe it’s because of the mystical expectations that surrounded it from their expectant family, or their bragging friends, the girls in school who they were connected to who came over to them to flirt and that they were expected to fall in love with just like their expectant daddies had before them that they now have an aversion to it. Either way, it feels good to at last have the power in the conversation. Remember that those who talk way too much are the one who will inevitably be brought down by one word and one word alone. I was holding on to some of the others for later, just in case I needed to escape.
“I know someone who might be interested in you and your depraved manners. But I warn you she’s both high maintenance and heartbroken. Want to meet her?”

“Why not, that’s two of the desirable factors on my list, what could possibly go wrong? Her vagina is her own, right?”

Karel downs the last of the mimosa.

“Oh yes, most definitely. Come knock at my door at 7.30pm tomorrow night. She may be here. If she isn’t, I can show you Aunty Martha’s pearls!”

“I’ll be here. For my sins. Not for yours.”

Karel sighs.

“A gay guy’s got to try!”

I walk back into my apartment and collapse on the sofa. It’s 11am and I’m already halfway to a mess but for once I’m feeling good about that. My phone beeps at me from the other side of the room and I stumble to my feet to see who wants me. The number’s unknown but there’s a voicemail.

“Hey. It’s me. There’s a couple of things I need to talk to you about. I know this is out of the blue but it’s kinda important. Call me back.”
I’d not heard that voice in a long time. They always tell us that we can only feel one thing at a time but no. Not when it’s her. They say you only hear one voice but no. There’s almost always one too many but still only just enough when it’s her. The majesty. The colours we can’t see. I dialed the number and sat staring at it after I listened back to the message two, three times to make sure it wasn’t my mind finally turning on me. It’d only take her to do it in the end even after a week like this. I listened once more. The imperfections in the perfection. The way they seem to forget that you loved them and they talk like a stranger and fail through the familiarity in their voice, in the subtle ways that they talk. How you hear something new but familiar every time you listen back until you break the imaginary tape in the recorder. For all the times she’d revealed herself in shadows and billboards, on faces in trains and night buses, how she’d walked through the frantic backstage to the beheld catwalk where all the others had walked, pirouetted and stood still, few stayed and most simply fell away, I’d shut her out for all I could. I sat there until the night came, feeling the little that I could stand inevitably failing to come up with a conclusion to if this is something I need, let alone want. By then it didn’t really matter. I made that call I’d promised to myself, it just wasn’t the one I was expecting to make. As a good friend and drug addict had said to me in the days before ‘much like life’.

With the call placed, I waited to hear her voice again, my halfway to being a mess becoming well and truly exceptionally fucked.
“Hello?”

Silence. I look out of the window at the dusk and the buildings and the rare seagull flying by and the subterfuge left by the planes flying back from warmer climbs bringing the people home and I think back across those ten years and all the homes we had and lost, all the places we compartmentalise in our minds with the bigger things sticking out of the holes in the side. She’d not heard this voice in a long time.

“Hello?”

“To this day I still wonder what Bill Murray whispered into Scarlett Johansson’s ear at the end of Lost in Translation. It’s one of life’s great mysteries.”

Silence but I can hear the smile. I can hear it and I smile.

“Hey you.” she says with fragility. She’s beaming.

“Remember that? I like to think it was something so beautiful that it was just too much to stand. Speaking of which, how are you Miss Bethany?”

“I remember one of us bawling his eyes out at the end.”

“I know, but what about the movie?”
I laugh to let her know it’s okay to find my self-deprecation funny again. She chuckled tentatively and I could feel her trying to read me like she always used to, like I’ve tried to read every girl since.

“Listen, I’m kind of in the middle of something but can I come over tomorrow? I need to talk to you. It’s fine, but…it’s just been too long.”

“Sure. I have a thing at 7.30pm I think, but come any time before that.”

I can hear a buzz behind her breathing and a regular beeping. Clinical and sharp.

“You still work at the hospital?”

“Yes, something like that. You always did have ‘a thing’ didn’t you? I’ll bet you’re just full of ‘things’ to tell me.”

“Let me just check. **HEY KAREL!**” I shouted through the wall, banging it with my fist. **“KAREL!”**

“What the fuck is it handsome?”

“Do I have something to improve myself for tomorrow or what?”

“Oh fuck yes, I just got off the phone. You’re going to love this girl.” Karel shouts, his voice hitting a high note on ‘love’. Feeling
deja vu again for yet another sentence I’ve heard one too many times this week, I’d certainly heard much worse.

“They always say that...” I say returning to the phone.

“A date, eh? Who’s the guy?”

“My neighbour Karel.”

“Oh, you do have some things to tell me don’t you? It’s about time you came out.” Bethany says tittering a little. It didn’t take long for her to fall back into her ways and I can almost see the mischievous grin creeping across her face much like the one I can feel restoring on mine.

“A pleasure as always darling.” I say smiling.

“I’ll come by. Bye bye Moon.”

I put the phone down before I had to hear her do the same.

“Fuckin’ Moon” I say to myself shaking my head and laughing gently.

Moon was always her favourite nickname she gave to me. I hated it because it suggested big, round and bright when all I really wanted was slender, dark and comfortable to sleep against at night while I lied awake most nights and she slept. But that’s why
she called me Moon and also why I loved that movie so much; no-one ever slept in it. It’s funny what comes back to you. That movie was one of the first things we ever saw together and I kept those tears in for as long as I could at the end but I saw her looking at me smiling out the tops of her eyes and out they came from my own. It had been a long time since my eyes were deeper like that and I’d been consumed with the need to let go in so many ways while the walls still stood all around me, it wouldn’t be a lie to say that I found the waters were high in the most cleansing way you can imagine that night. But the ability to talk and say anything to anyone without fear is important for a man to feel every once in a while if not more and even in times like these, we’ll always struggle. But I couldn’t have felt better and more open. I picked up the phone again and fished around in my pocket for that napkin. Perfect. If ever there were a time to take the initiative as requested, it was right now.

“903–234–4332”

No sound. I dialled again.

“903–234–4332”

“We’re sorry, the number you have dialled has not been recognised. Please redial and…”

“Fuck.”
I put down the phone, poured a drink in that chipped glass and while I felt something pull at my chest, I laughed. I looked over at the coffee table with the cracked corner, like a spiders web and I laughed. I touched my healing lip, torn apart by a lost girl in a department store and I laughed. I thought about the scratched bedside table in the bedroom, full of finger nail indentations and slurry dents and I laughed. I even thought about Tony sitting in that house, getting high and talking to himself and telling the junkies across the way to get the fuck away and I laughed. I breathed in through my nose deeply and smelt the Fiddich in the floorboards, took a sip of something better and I laughed. I thought about Sunrise and her offer to cure my mind and fuck my brains out concurrently on any number of couches and I laughed harder. I thought about my broken bed and I laughed. That week. I poured another drink and sat there and laughed another night away.
There’s some things in life that are as sure as don’t matter and there’s those that are simply inevitable. There will always be a baby born on Christmas day that won’t matter, the dogs and the cats will growl if not fight like men and the women do, there’s nothing that can’t be fixed unless it’s shattered into pieces and I only ever cleaned that apartment for inspections and the fucking Queen.

Thing is the Queen was actually coming. It may not have been a royal visit but she does wear a crown of sorts, it’s just that it’s a crown that only I can see.

I was beginning to make a habit of waking in the morning and at a really long satisfying stretch, I’d say I was quite liking it and I seem to think like I’m actually awake and that got me to thinking about how most of us are equally lucky and damned to have that person in our lives or as a distant memory. Her, she’s the Queen and him, he’s a Prince. If you haven’t found them just yet, they’re coming, they have this evolutionary tendency to do that. If it’s she, she might have already visited you, you may have already watched in awe as she walked royally by, even inadvertently curtseyed, it just might not have entered your mind that she was once there. The big give-away is that once she’s gone you’ll feel as though there’s no event in your life that will ever replace the event that was her. She may have been there for a day, a week,
a year, even longer if you’re as lucky as I was, but you’ll know it. You just might be too stupid to see it or too blinded by it to see at all and it’s that same mindset that probably made you fuck it up in the first place. After all, it’s not our fault we were born with a penis and whether we like it or not our eyes are directly connected to it.

Despite what they say about cleaning and the peace it offers, I find that clearing away the chaos allows me too long for my mind to wander back into it including a place in time where women rule the earth and we were banished to the outskirts of coastal towns to subsequently vanish into the sea. After all for all the evils we do you could argue we deserve it. It might for a minute have sounded like love had me snowed in on that cold morning but in truth it had long since melted away. As many of you will know and many of you won’t, love is a funny thing and something we all try to relate to. Bullshit. Love is not the same for any two people but for my money it is a process of breakages where you can’t believe how wrong you were when you’ve taken the wrong step and revivals that remind you why she was worth it in the first place. It’s pomp, it’s insanity and it’s amazing and if feels like anything less than that, then it simply isn’t.

When I was ten years old, I knew a man who told me that he’d been with as many women as he could count and he’d cared nothing for any one of them.
“...but you have no idea what I’m talking about anyway, do you kid?”

One night I came home from school and he sat there with his beer and I asked him their names. I wanted to play this memory game for my math homework and I’d not really talked to him for a couple of weeks and this kid Billy Priestley told me his dad had helped him with his. Trouble was the bastard couldn’t remember a single one. Miss Charles, the math teacher knew I had attention problems but instead of punishing me she showed me an equation that I tried on my dad, so I asked him how many there had been and if we count down from the top number the names might come back to him but by then the empties were piled and he was nearly on the floor. My dad was gone within a year but that’s just another lesson he taught me about love; it won’t last forever. I guess if it did we’d all be immortal and our hearts would never stop beating. I ended up failing the class.

There’s a lot to clean away from what remains of love and the heartbreak that fills the hole and no love is the same until after the heartbreak. Those are the fragments we can truly relate to; the breakage left behind when the revival is no longer possible and becomes a breakage in itself. Love works in the opposite way. When you remove elements that make something unique, that may even have encouraged you to fall for her in the first place, that’s when things get dirty. This is when the pile of shit starts to gather in the corner and neither of you are willing to clean it up. That’s when you stop talking to each other and the
place becomes so messy that they have no choice but to go and start a new pile of crap with someone else and you’re the only one left to clean up the mess of what you once were. Once you’ve fought the never-ending junk and the twinge of your heartstrings getting caught on all the jagged edges of table legs, skirting and old tabloids, you don’t feel any sense of accomplishment, progress or even the relief you longed for and hoped would be uncovered, you’re left as empty as that sparkling floor you forget was underneath it all. This is the part where you sit and wonder how you ever did without it like this. And you’re going to spend a lot of time doing that.

Trouble is the Queen is rarely the Queen until she’s gone, until she’s out of sight and out of the view of all the cameras in your head. Sometimes when they leave you it won’t hurt and you’ll think you’re fine, but give it three or four days and if her presence or lack thereof lingers long in your heart, and the light of day is nothing but burning and the dark of night continues to make you feel like that same 10-year-old boy, you’ll know the Queen lives and just not in your heart, but forever in the pit of your stomach.

There are no clean cuts, there’s no perfect removal of a limb. The only hope is that you can eventually start again and come out with a scar on your guts rather than a tattoo across your chest. The scar can be kept and only you can know. It will come to only twinge when you need to stop being bad to the next one you
love. If you already have it and you know it, clean the wounds, not with alcohol, but with nothing but clean water. Cry real tears if you need to and perhaps even if you don’t. If you think you have it, look harder. If you haven’t, you’ll hopefully know when you do. That way the only pain you’ll ever feel will be the one that heals them when they need you most of all. And remember them, all of them. Bethany, Jill, Carrie, Janis, Millie, Laura one, Fiona, Sarah, Laura Two, Girl with the Purple Umbrella, Sunset, Mary, Snowflake, Sunrise. The name’s might escape you but always remember them otherwise you’re no man at all.

With the cleaning done, all I had was time to sit and wait with. I hoped that Karel has kept something special for me to remember, a budding princess for the long nights and less scolding days. For the next few hours I remain court jester and here comes Queen Bethany again, ten minutes away and my apartment was finally sparking all over again. A couple of hours before, my doorbell had rang from the ground floor and I was talked at by a member of the God squad looking for new converts. The less reverent part of me would have taken the dirty dish water and thrown it down to the front gate directly below, soaking them through. As fun as she was at one time in history, me and Beth grew up, probably a little quicker than we should have. The one thing that remained was how late she was for everything. She became increasingly late until the day she didn’t bother coming home at all, so with the clock now at 7.20pm, ten minutes before my date, I was starting to get that familiar feeling. But this time I have pride and
reason on my side and, for the first time, Bethany’s about to miss her spot. It would seem, at least for tonight I’m a very busy boy. A part of me wanted her to not turn up so I could feel that moral victory. A part of me wanted to see her again so I could finally let her go. Before I go and throw on something fresh, making sure to give it a good hard sniff first, I called but only found her voicemail.

“You’re through to the voicemail of Beth Sorenson. You know what to do and when to do it.”

There’s a long pause before the beep, telling me that she still doesn’t get on with technology. She always did need help to find the right buttons to push.

“Bethany, it’s me. I’ve been waiting for you and I have to leave. I don’t know why but I’m surprised. I don’t know where you are but let me know please. A pleasure as always.”

I retained my cool but I was free, like it’s the end of the day and I’d made good progress in breaking a lock that long held me in place. Unlike monarchs of any time and place, she isn’t announced but she will announce herself when she sees fit, though you know when it’s her. It’ll only be her.

I rapped on Karel’s door a couple of minutes after time. For the state I was already in, I used my signature drunken knock, five raps and an “Oi!” for confirmation. I’d like to tell you that my
poor punctuality was for anticipation or to show I’m not too keen, but the fact is that I was late. I’d done something unusual for me and turned to the bottle in order to calm the storm. I was feeling better by the second and by the third I was back to where I started except that time had pushed me forwards a little too quickly and, as always, I had gone just one drop too far.

I’d learnt the wetter way that charm under the influence inevitably will bring you nothing more than any number of surprises across the face, but not one of them the sort you want. One thing that a successful first date does not make is telling the girl who’d spent priceless hours with the makeup brush, mascara and lipstick, that it’s no longer 1972 and that she’s not actually at war in the rainforests of Cambodia. But lightning can’t strike twice, right? Most of what beats inside me, including both head and heart, was telling me to take her seriously but more importantly to take myself seriously and the rest should follow obediently along.

I hear Karel’s looking glass open tentatively and I grimace like an eight year old going to his first rock show. So far, so good. He clatters to unlock the door and swung it open, thankfully standing before me in more than a speedo and a smile on this occasion.

“My God gorgeous, you look like shit. You look like Da Fonz threw up.”
“Well it’s good to see you too Will and/or Grace. Does that mean I don’t get a kiss?”

“Fuck yes, you do.”

I swiftly put my hand up to block the oncoming mini-gay and his puckering mug.

“No, no, I need to save my good ones for later.” I say brushing past Karel, who was looking justifiably disappointed.

“You behave yourself young man, this is a classy young lady.”

“Really? How’d she end up here?”

Karel sticks out his tongue in retort.

“I’m always the best the lowest common denominator of a gentleman can be. But it’s funny, I distinctly remember a conversation, just yesterday I think, in which you told me that you had someone for me that would be accepting of my ‘depravity’. At the time I found that rather funny coming from the mouth of a thousands cocks.”

“Firstly, thank you, but you still do me an injustice. And I also said that she was damaged.”

“So you know my type, congratulations. You also promised that
she has her own vaginé so you’d best not start letting me down right now, because this is where it matters the most because ‘damaged’ can mean a lot of things. Now show me the way so we can get this evening started.”

Karel grimaces as he walks past to guide me.

“It smells like you already have. Jesus fucking Christ, you smell like the bottom of an oak booze barrel...”

“Yes, but a well-worn and well-distilled old booze barrel.”

“...That someone has shit in. Speaking of old...”, Karel says stopping me in my tracks.

“Oh fuck me, don’t start a sentence like that and not finish it. You’ll make me self-conscious.”

Karel rolls his eyes and stares at me blankly.

“I swear to God I say this with the love of all that is gracious and fabulous, as the power fucking vested in me as the gayest man in all the land, it’s not all about you honey.” Karel says heading for the bathroom.

“Yeah. Apparently you want it to be about you. Ok then...how old is she? If she’s more than five years older than I am, can she at least be a MILF?”
“You are one dirty-minded motherfucker.”

Karel hands me a bottle of mouthwash. I tip back a mouthful straight from the bottle as I had with my previous three shots. While whiskey and minty anaesthetic make for a pretty vile combination, I was starting to develop a taste for it.

“I don’t know that yet. How many kids does she have? Ooh, tingly.”

“She’s 17.”

“So she is a kid. I remember being seventeen and an asshole and little has changed. ‘Tis a delicate time.”

“I know but you’re not seventeen and delicate now, are you big boy?”

“As I say, little has changed. Why pray did you suggest someone of her stature as an ideal candidate to date yours truly anyway, frankly, the straight versa to your vice?”

“She came into my club a couple of days ago hammered, clearly out of place. She was dancing with a coupla angry bears and she looked so funny stood there because she was like a little button next to these giant hairy arseholes. So I took her to my booth and she told me her whole story. Girl’s got a big bowl of soul under there my friend. Scout’s honour!”
“I don’t believe you were in the scouts.”

“Temporarily, I got caught tying rope knots with Akela and not for safety reasons...”

“Of course you did. Tell me more, I need recon.”

“Well, we were in the woods on a field trip and Akela suggested I...”

“About the girl, you twisted fuck.”

“I don’t want to. You have to find out for yourself. That’s your problem; you always go in knowing too little or way too much. I’d say tread lightly with this one but I think the best course of action is the opposite. Enjoy, but be nice!”

With that and a tap on the back which I’m pretty sure was supposed to be a slap on the ass, I’m guided into the living room. As expected there is a beautifully slender mosaic looking up, cock-headed at the shrine to Karel’s Aunt Pearl. If I could see her face I’d assume she was probably about as confused as I was, albeit probably not seeing the irony that my screwed up mind saw almost instantaneously.

“Oh Jenny, I have someone who wants to meet you!”

She turns to look at me. I should have been shocked but that
smile just grew bigger at the sight of that face.

“Jesus Christ.”

“Well hello there, young man” Jenny says walking over to me slowly.

“If I knew you a little better I would’ve recognised that silhouette anywhere. Hello Snowflake.”

I kissed her on her cheek. She smelt pretty. I didn’t even know what that meant but she smelt like flowers without the fauna. I remember noticing that she was dressed in such a way that told me that she was expecting Mr Straight Laced, more reserved, more slicked-back, but through the relative normality of the temporary blur in my eyes and with the safety pins connecting the shimmering black across her shoulders and down by the barely covered waist-side to the deep red in her dress, holding it all together, she was keeping a little bit of her right there with her. When it’s all said and done, no-one wants to lose themselves while getting completely lost out in the confusing world of man meets girl. She might or might not have thought about taking out the lip-ring that had driven me more than a little to pot but I was glad she hadn’t as right there alongside the charm that I’d not found in a woman twice her age and the way she seemed to know a little more about me than she deserved but that to which I didn’t begrudge her in the slightest, it gave me something to
aim for and get my teeth into all over again.

“Oooooh….you two have already met?” Karel asked grinning broadly. I wasn’t quite so pleased with him as he was with himself.

“You could say that. One night she took me out onto this beautifully lit patio and warmed my heart a little and then left me a number which didn’t work and led me up the garden path.”

“I wondered why you didn’t call me. I must have written it down wrong. Or did I?”

“One way or the other little one there’s no escaping me now. Fate done brought us back to the patio for a barbeque.”

She smiles at me and we have a moment that lasts just a few seconds. That moment for me was finally what looked like clarity. It was clean and bright and under purple light it felt a little like we’d gone inside to find a house if not quite a home. It was warm and held no sentiment with only sentiment yet to be built and hopefully a serious queen-size up in the bedroom. I have no idea what she was thinking. She’s a woman. This young almost unobtainable thing that may or may not have evaded me but one way or another had come back to me like so many hadn’t and the look on her face told me that she was willing to try.

I turn to Karel still looking quite pleased with himself as if the
little fuck had just become cupid.

“I need to talk to you. Now.” I say, pointing to the front door. I dragged Karel away to the entrance area of his apartment with little delay.

“So you guys already fucked?” he stifled as I dragged him out of the living room, through the entrance and out onto the walkway of the apartment block floor.

“What’s the fucking problem?”

“I know how you discovered this girl, now I’m going to tell you about how I did. She was sat alone outside an apartment block about a mile from here, mascara and that soul you were talking about leaving pretty little black lines down her face going in all directions except for the right one and now I know why. I’m thinking I found her right after you took her under your fat fucking fairy wings.” I said loudly, Karel’s eyes widening and tutting his disapproval. “Your club is on the other side of this fucking city so, before I disembowel you and make a messy tangled Pollock using your entrails on that pretty little paving right down there on the bottom floor, how did she go from the debauchery of your VIP lounge to sitting on the concrete along with yesterday’s rag on New Years Day?”

“Hey, fuck you, it’s fucking Christmas, can’t a girl put a little on?” Karel exclaims comically still reeling in my grips. “I don’t know
what to tell you...it was New Years Day, I was running the club. I took her details because I could see the state she was in, just like I always do when an intoxicated man, woman or child walks in, in case anything happened and she sat there for most of the night drinking coke and vodka and when I came back from the bathroom she was gone. Could you calm down a little?”

I let go of Karel and his body relaxed against the railing. I take a minute to catch my breath and circle, looking down at the paving, now a beautiful threat in my mind. The extra booze hadn’t helped calm me down from Bethany’s no-show like I’d hoped. I turn around to Karel and glared at him.

“You of all people should know how dangerous this city is. I’m starting to question your actions as fucking hopeless rather than just morally misguided.”

“You fucked her as soon as the opportunity arose having found her sat there. You’re a prize fucking pig of a Jewish saint, aren’t you?”

“Actually I didn’t. It wasn’t my intention.”

“So you didn’t stick your dick inside that girl’s...”

“Vagina?”, I say jumping in with an evil little grin. Karel winces and closes his eyes.
“My God...”

I did another three-sixty circle, sighing deeply and softened. It’s better that I did than he end up spaghetti on the ground floor and I’d have to go on the run for real.

“Technically she fucked me. I was a total gentleman until she climbed on top of me. I offered to not fuck her but as it turned out she wouldn’t hear anything of it so I’m calling that she perverted the course of justice.”

“Oh come on, get over yourself. We all make mistakes. I say we call this one even.”

“I say go fuck yourself. You let the girl go Karel.”

“What’s the matter with you? When did you start caring so much anyway? She’s a gorgeous girl and she’s here and presumably she’s losing patience. She is 17, we’ve technically been out here for about a quarter of her life time.”

I often think about what for me and Snowflake was the tragic day on which we met and how we talked on the floor, how our frozen breath turned hot and then how she slipped something into my pocket to find when I needed it most of all. I thought about it right for the first time as I stood there looking over the edge down at the overly-complex layers of the building that I’d never noticed before and would probably never again. I thought about
how at seventeen I was planning the first escape of many and how I’d never have found anything that profound in me to do for someone else, especially not a woman. It’s not like there weren’t opportunities. I’ve seen signs before in so many of them, big brass bands playing astonishing symphonies in their mouths and their every perfect mannerism was as clear as they could be and I let the signs fade and dim and run away from me whenever they present themselves as beautiful centerpieces, like that fountain, like the center of Soho, like the paving down there on the ground, all so lovingly conceived and then walked all over instead of stopping and waiting and saying what I really, genuinely needed to say, simply because they became more and more terrifying each and every time I happened upon them and I was finally done. The more I look for, the more I see. This time, it felt like I’d been given a gift so simple that it deserved to stay just that way.

“I think there’s something special about this one.” I said quietly, brushing past Karel. We walked back inside the apartment and found Jenny looking over one of Karel’s coffee table books, a curious little look on her face, shaking her head slightly.

“My apologies, I had to fill Karel in on a few things about life apparently.”

“Don’t worry about it, I’ve been learning a little about life myself.”
I gaze down at the book on top slightly ajar to all the others on the table. On the cover there are two men holding each other’s penis to attention, the word ART scrawled roughly on one of their four arms.

“I’m going to assume that isn’t Steinbeck.”

“No, I read a little of his stuff last year. In school.”

I want to laugh and snap back at the comment that told me she had heard everything and the smile that says that it’s okay but the all-new, shiny better part of me held me back. But before that, before any of this, there was one question I had to ask, one that I might not have asked of others before her, but one that seemed more important than ever.

“Miss Jenny, I think we’ve established that I think you’re older than seventeen, you certainly seem more turned on than the average seventeen year old, in so, so many ways…but I have a problem. Last time I checked you told me you were nineteen. I’m going to ask this once and once only; Because as of right now I’m doing a big thing in dropping my guard and in return you’ve dropped two years. Is there any more?”

“I’m pretty sure you told me, and I’ll quote you directly here from not too long after you had sex with me for the third time, “there’s always more”.”
“I never doubted it for a second, but in fairness if that number gets any lower I might have to bring my guard up once again and in more ways than I’d like to. I don’t want to have to deal with heartbreak behind bars and you wouldn’t want that, would you?”

“The number is seventeen. Do you want to see my ID? The photo on it was taken when I was thirteen and I wouldn’t want to get you hard.” she says smiling.

“I’ll believe you this time, like I believed you last time. That’s the extent to which it matters and it will forever be put to bed, for the want of a better phrase. Because in case you didn’t hear the entire dysfunctional back-and-forth between me and my friend out there, there’s something a little special about you and I’m not sure what it is yet and I’d like to see more and I want to do it the right way this time around.”

I looked at her face and she was still smiling at me. She hadn’t ran to some mysterious location that I could never find that probably didn’t even exist. If anything it just grew just a little bit in the corners. The charm that had seen me through the loneliness of the past two years all but gone for just one moment, replaced by something else, something that wasn’t an untruth that I’d long forgotten and she was still smiling.

“Me too. You haven’t figured me out yet so you don’t know what I mean, but maybe you will sometime.”
“That’d be something, wouldn’t it? But if you could make it that little bit harder on me, that would be much appreciated. I like a challenge.” I said, smiling back.

From that we just kind of looked at each other for a while, the oddest couple you could ever see, all five foot of the girl, fresh and confused, with the panda eyes, the lip ring and safety pins holding her together and me, the tall tower with the stained shirt, more than a couple of hairs out of place with the whiskey walk and the cocked head like the broken, old dog that I am.

“So when are you fuckers getting out of my fucking apartment?”

The silence is broken and I laugh loudly.

“Come on, I’ve got shit to do bitches!”

I look back at Jenny and point at the picture on the wall.

“I think that might involve Aunty’s Pearls!”, I whispered.

“Sorry?”

“I’ll tell you later. It’s not important.”

I take a sip of water from Karel’s bottle.

“In the meantime, for life, for Aunty Pearl up there and for the sake of two people and one evening, let’s move on to something
new.” I say smiling, a genuine smile.

In return the smile came back to Jenny’s face and for the first time tonight I feel relief and nothing more seemed like it mattered. Karel was right about one thing though. I did learn too much way too fast and that it always lead to ruin, it ruined me and it always ruined her. It cheapens and shits all over anything beyond that day leaving you alone on the next one and the one after that and the one after that until you find something else and you repeat. You repeat until it no longer matters and you lose the future, not just in her but in yourself. You get lost out there. We all do. But this is the kind of lost I’m sad to say that I’d learned to trust. Sometime around the quarter-life crisis the mindless and the meaningless suddenly found mind and meaning but it was hard to recognise, hard to emphasise and impossible to leave behind. It was like gripping onto something in the dark but not knowing what you were holding onto. We can’t choose the places where we want to run to. We just walk down the street and something grabs our vision, our heart, sometimes the entirety of our self and that it. So when all else seems like it’ll fall around you, leave your house, your cage, because you can do that you lucky, lucky bastard. Go outside into the wide open air, walk down the road. You might just end up in your own hiding place. Because that was the worst kind of lost and you only realise it when someone finds you and with Jenny, Snowflake, something seen rarely in a cold, cold season all too fleeting, I was starting to see the end, but not the end of everything I’d envisioned at the
beginning of that mess of a week but one that was the end of
everything I’d become in order to see something I could trust in
every way even if it wasn’t this one, this time. I put one hand in
my pocket and offered the other one to her.

“So where are we going, Little Jenny?”

She climbed up from Karel’s futon and put her hand into mine,
tip-toes high, kissing my cheek once more and I was warmer from
a woman’s touch, better than any whiskey could ever burn and
we walk out the door and into the cold.

“I like Snowflake.”

“Yeah. It’s kinda funny, and a little bit strange but so do I.”
20. The First Night On Earth

In light of revelation came the war. Not between me and her, nor between me and me, but I found myself on the steps of a restaurant circa 1944 being frisked by the oldest looking bus boy in the world.

“I hope you’re having as much fun as I am...Bob.” I said smiling at him, but it was a lost gesture and it only made him press harder.

This is no drunken flashback, nor is it a metaphor, it’s just that if the scene could be any more of the period, I might as well be sent away for desertion, as well as any of the other dirty acts committed in my lifetime that would have been illegal back in a better time for all but people like me. Despite my appeals to his greater good, the bus boy clearly didn’t like the look of us and who can blame him? He had a morbid fascination with the safety pins holding Snowflake’s dress together but not for the same reasons as I. As he was frisking me he was staring at her, looking her up and down, thinking about how dangerous she might be whereas I was thinking about how quickly I could get them off. But in the low light of this less than low life setting, following our entrance being granted, Snowflake looks elegant and demure, and many other words that rarely pass my lips in any given situation at any given moment. She certainly turned one or two heads from the conservative club, even those who were clearly
here behind their wife’s backs with girls of a similar albeit more silicone beauty. We were in a classy place with the more classless of the middle and even if it weren’t as a duo, we were going to knock the place down, I could just feel it in my freshly frisked body.

“What did you order again?” she asked me.

“Squid.”

“Maybe I should rephrase the question as my tone clearly wasn’t sarcastic enough...why did you order squid again?”

“Like with most of life’s big decisions, it seemed like the right thing to do at the time. That and I had a great joke about having eight legs but I forgot the punch line.”

Snowflake titters under her breath. It’s unfortunate but I was starting to believe that my slightly ironic choice of restaurant was holding her back or perhaps she was nervous. Maybe she was feeling a little under-dressed for the occasion, not that I was complaining. Either way something was bothering her.

“So how are we coming with the first course?”

I was starting to wonder if it might have been Romero, the somewhat overly attached waiter who, like at least one or two of the other fifty something couples in this particular restaurant
tonight, is clearly wondering why someone who looks like I do is in a restaurant this expensive with someone who looks, well, how she does. Half of them probably think that she doesn’t know about the good things in life, like she hasn’t already experienced them. I’d like to beg to differ. Like the class system dividing us there’s a distinct difference between what I’d class as the good things in life and what they would because, frankly I’m on the verge of tearing her clothes off and mounting her against this elegant oak table just to stop the speculation, and there’s little finer than that to me.

“Fine Romero, I just took a bite and, so far, it’s freaking awesome.” I say with a big smile, displaying the tail of a dry shrimp between my teeth proudly. Romero looks back at me like I’d just shit all over his sarcasm detector, hidden somewhere at home in the bottom drawer along with his diary as his crudely hidden dildo. He makes his exit swiftly thereafter.

“You’re on fine form tonight, old man”

“Hey, don’t call me ‘old man’ especially after I just used the young people’s lingos so very well.”

“And while we’re on the subject of old, why did you think this place was a good idea?”

Snowflake looks around trying to hide the little smile on her face like there was some joke that I hadn’t heard yet.
“I’m pretty sure Sinatra and Bogart both came here, possibly on the same night chasing the same dame. I figured that if anything were going to make me a gentleman, it might be that.”

Red velvet curtains, a little dusty, oak chairs, rounded bottoms and food with no flair with a large price to pay. I’ve paid my fair share of debts, but never for reasons of continuity and personal development. Simple fact is that I’m not sure any seventeen year old little thing has ever entered those big heavy doors unless we’re talking about one of the patrons condoms. But I can see she’s concerned with being out of place which is quite something for this girl. But I need to remember as much as I can how she might not be a kid but she’s still seventeen.

“Who’s Sinatra?”

Oh, you have got to be fucking with me.

“An opera singer. Big in the swingin’ thirties. Big guy. Black, first of his kind. The guy sat behind me wearing the tux would be able to tell you some stories.”

“Really?”

“No, I’m just fucking with you. I just like the way that little piece of metal connected to your mouth moves when you talk.”

“Could you keep it down?” said a voice from behind me. I slowly
turned.

“I don’t know, that depends.”

“On what?” he asked agitated. I looked across the table for ammunition.

“One whether or not you can turn down your digital hearing aid and for that matter turn down that fucking tie. Versace. Excellent choice for a straight man with such an elegant young date who I’ll assume isn’t your daughter.”

His ‘date’ smiled awkwardly, her new tits were probably younger than his youngest great grandchild.

“I don’t like your tone.”

“I don’t like your tie. I do like your date though. How long have you folks been married?”

The man turned back around to eat his food, looking back once more in disdain.

“That’s what I fucking thought.”

I wave at the lady before slowly turning back to my table. Snowflake smiles widely.

“You still didn’t really tell me why you chose this place.” she says
stifling her laughter.

“Well, we were walking down the street and you seemed insistent on me choosing a place. It was like every minute, ‘Where do you want to eat?’, ‘Are you hungry?’...and this one looked like it might just be what you were looking for. Plus we got felt up on the door, so bonus. The foreplay is done.”

“I’ve always found that a slightly fucked up way of looking at things.”

“Indeed, but doing a Google search in the middle of the street might make the most sense but it’s the least romantic of things. The future might be bright but it’s the death of everything good between man and woman if this shit continues.”

“I don’t believe you. You seem like a modern man despite... everything.” Snowflake says laughing.

“I don’t believe me either. I would most likely have done the age old trick of calling on a friend who knows some under-appreciated eatery in this crazy city. Because otherwise, does Burger King sound like a tantalizing option to you? Their decor has improved substantially since they tried to appeal to more than just the little ones and boys of your own age.”

I look around at the interior some more and noticed the burgundy paint on the far wall. I remember thinking that no matter how
unappealing it looked it was the closest thing to spicing up the place since the early eighties I’d seen thus far.

“I’ll admit it’s a little depressing in here. At the end of the day, while not great in the menu department, I’m pretty sure even Hitler’s bunker looked nice and look at how that worked out. The two do seem to be strikingly similar.”

“Quite well to be honest, he blew his brains out. What’s your point?”

I’d been rustling around in my pocket for some packet of gum from the last decade to take away the taste of the squid when I pulled out a receipt from a coffee shop where I took my mother back home. My mind was cast to a conversation me and my mother had about how she was going to cope concluding with the biggest lie I ever told her. ‘You’re going to have to bury that shit way down and keep it there and you’ll become numb to it. Trust me.’ I lied to her because, despite how I’ll always do my best to be something to her, something important because I’m begrudgingly obliged, I couldn’t deal with being her crutch any more.

“I guess I’m just saying that not everything is always as it seems despite what we’re told and what we tell ourselves.” I say, finally discarding the receipt onto the carpet.

“Well, why didn’t you just say that?”
“Because where’s the beauty in that little Snowflake?”

“Alright. Well I don’t suppose you want to keep on walking for a while? The temperature in here is probably only about 2–3 degrees higher than it is out there, which I suspect is to keep the residents alive for a few minutes longer or they’ve finished their meal, whichever comes first...”

“Can you run?”

“What do you mean?”

I tilt my head to look under the table. Snowflake instinctively closed her legs as quickly as she could.

“Good, you’re wearing pumps. Remember you were asking me about Sinatra and the other guy?”

“Bogart?”

“Yes, very good. Here he comes.”

I raise my head and I put half a dry bread-stick in between my teeth.

“Here’s looking at you, kid. Especially as you’re not wearing any panties. Now run!”

I wait for Snowflake to jump up and set off before I follow her at
pace to the front door. Places like this don’t have doormen, they have Bob. If one of the general members of their clientèle were to make a run for it, presumably because they left their wallet in their wife’s Porsche, they’d need little more than a wheelchair-bound boy with a severe head injury to stop them at best, at worst a large stick to whip away their zimmer-frame from under them would do the trick. Snowflake nearly slipped on the third or fourth step from the bottom and I reached out and grabbed her arm. A semi-professional thief I may be but always a total gentleman. It was only a few minutes later that we’re walking around the city’s most lowly-lit streets that we discover genuine conversation again.

In the dark, walking past the lovers, the lifers and their bottles, those on their way home and those that were born without a memory of a life being lived well or a life left wanting.

“I guess I should get to know you a little better than I do. We’re partners in crime now a bond rarely broken except through treachery and greed and you don’t seem like the type.”

“What’s to know? I’m starting to think I’m just like you, just younger, fitter and considerably more attractive.”

“Ouch. You do have a little bite in you don’t you little Snowflake? Though you’re right. Without a doubt, you’re right.”

I’m looking at her face like there’s nothing else to her and I’m
trying not to. She’s just emitting everything from there, good, bad and indifferent but never once ugly. The fact is I’d forgotten that eyes could be anything other than a colour and a place to look to see warnings. Don’t get me wrong, there is nothing limited about the ladies with which I spent my twilight hours, not a single one of them. It was just nice to get a little lost in one of them.

“You’re naive if you think that’s my first time stealing. But I’ll give you credit all the same, you’re a bad influence. But the more I hear coming from your mouth the more I realise I’m just like you and you’re utterly full of it. The difference is that you run with it like it’s everything you have. But you’re full of all the right things and maybe a few wrong and you’ve found them. You just need someone else to find them too, so you can see them through someone else’s eyes.”

She looks a little closer at me and squints into my eyes.

“You do have my father’s eyes, but this is how I know. I don’t know if you know much about this yourself but all the alcohol in the world isn’t going to clean your wounds. But you’re still here and despite this…bravado, this circus that you surround yourself with, you’re still just the joker.”

“I like being the joker. It takes away the pressure.”

“Sure, but the joker is always the one that suffers most.”
Whenever you’ve done, whatever shames you and keeps you thinking so hard about what you are, you’ll continue to see the wrong before the right until you truly see how much good there is in there. And until someone sees what you’re truly full of of course.”

I’m not going to lie and tell you that I tried to laugh this one off, in fact I swallowed hard and felt my heart fill up. It’s hard to describe the feeling, it was neither freeing or like a cage but it hurt and her eyes moved like the truth might continue to flow out of there like the tears that hadn’t loosened from within me for all those years. Not for the ones that went missing, my father, Bethany and not for those who I’d never be able to apologise to once more. And still they won’t come, but this feels like a start of something, something else I haven’t had for years. And if you’re going to let it all loose, it’s surely better for something changing than something gone missing. I swallowed hard and I cleared my throat and looked back over at her, at her little smile.

“So how do I know you’re not full of it?”

“You don’t.”

I smile and I believe her.

“Well then. Let’s get a fucking drink.”

We hit a few of the Northern Quarter’s finest. And how we hit
those bars. We didn’t eat, but for the nibble or two on her ear and her my neck a few times over the evening, under the dimming light and the ill-tempered street lights. There’s a lot to say for the low lit streets of the city. You can see anything your mind can imagine if you allow it whether it be a beautiful girl or a nightmarish beast, or perhaps both if you’re into that kind of thing. She may be as dark as the alleys that, even when filled with the brightest of anything, refuse to be lit. She could be as wide open and free as the main road leading us slowly back home. They can both be as equally scary and mystifying; where there aren’t shimmering blades, there’s always traffic even at this hour, the cabs as vicious as they come. As comforting as they can be on the inside, when you’re being driven through long lost places, you don’t know what it might cost you. You could go so far as to call them dangerous and on some nights you wouldn’t be far wrong, but tonight...well, after a while, tonight starts to feel like the first night on earth. But I’ve been here before and the sunrise is as beautiful as the sunset and the first time around and almost every time since I didn’t get to see the dawn and I think this time, I just might. And once again, my mind is changing. At some point or another it became 3am, like we expected it to be any different, like the number never existed or we’d never find it if we kept darting through the city like our very own playground, me, her and time itself. Sometimes it’s easier to let yourself be free if you feel the weight of the world on your shoulders, when there’s more to win, when there’s more to lose and I’m left questioning, really questioning, how I could ever have wanted to
not be anything other than a mess on the floor, a vessel filled with pills waiting to be found when it was already too late. And from then on it rained like we hadn’t seen for years.

But it’s moments like this, no matter how fleeting, how little they seem to matter at any other time in your life when you awaken, that make your torso stop aching from it all. The heartache. And you’re nothing but the whole world and nothing less and you shake like you’ve never shaken before with everything that never even mattered falling away. And something is definitely shaking in me.

“Well something’s shaking” Snowflake whispered in my ear, bringing me back to earth.

“Oh I know, like you wouldn’t believe.”

Snowflake smiled and put her hand deep into my trouser pocket and much to my displeasure pulls out a long buzzing, glowing object that isn’t directly connected to my body. She looked at the screen and groaned.

“I think you should get it. When a lady is calling at 4am, it can only be for a very good reason.”

She hands me the phone and it was Bethany.

“Shit. Any other night I wouldn’t take this but this is important.
Don’t go anywhere now.”

I move a little further down one of the side alleys that we’ve been travelling through in the hope of a few more good times, but it’s now turned into my personal phone box for me and the she-devil. These days it’s as simple as touching your screen to bring the conversation to life but somehow that seems harder than pressing a button always was. It’s probably the effect of not knowing what to expect that becomes an affliction like a child that’s been electrocuted whenever he’s tried to pick up his favourite toy. I’ve broken a lot of things today and for once I’m glad, so I’m hoping for the catharsis I might need as the final piece to fit with all the other broken pieces around me. And like the start of anything good, it might just be as easy as a touch.

“Where the fuck are you?” I say abruptly.

“Hi, it’s me mate.” says the male caller down the line.

“Trent?” I ask, confused.

“Hello?”

“Why are you calling me from this number? Where is she?”

I was starting to feel the tension and the horror filled me up again.
“Listen, there’s something you need to kn...”

“Did you fuck her? What is this?”

“Hold on a minute.”

“No, what the fuck is this? Is this your final mind-fuck? Is this your way of getting back at me?”

“Jesus...will you just...”

“Just tell me where she is. I realise I don’t deserve forgiveness but despite what you think I didn’t do anything with your fucking girlfriend, in fact if anything she took a chunk out of me. But this is the one thing...”

“She’s in the hospital, you fucking idiot.”

The silence of the city freezes over and in that one moment I’m still but burning, as cold as I expected it to be and once again I’ve crashed into the already cracking ground and I’m under the ice. And it burns, it burns more than any fire could ever burn in my heart. But it’s just a pre-cursor, a shot in the dark before I turn to Snowflake now looking at me almost fearful, and I know that I cannot shatter, I cannot break, no matter how soaked I am and how hard I’m hit. I can’t allow it. Not again.

“Where?”

The black coffee table in the waiting room sat as a complete contradiction to everything else there. It was a small room with no windows, no TV, almost soundproof, heeled footsteps distant but only just outside, a distant scream from a bad dream every once in a while, the distance indeterminable, and nothing else but women’s magazines and a picture of a boat lost at sea.

I don’t like hospitals and I don’t like the sea, just as much as the hospital, but this isn’t the bar anymore, or the street, I couldn’t just change what I see. I stare up at this image, this calming image that looks more like a catastrophe waiting to happen. I don’t like the fake sense of cleanliness they promise there and no amounts of bleach in the water can change how it feels on the inside of the walls.

I’d been there for hours. I say ‘I’ but I actually mean ‘we’. I have Trent on my left sitting silently, waiting for me to make the first move and on my left is Snowflake who didn’t have the heart to let me endure this on my own, at least that’s what I assume, I haven’t spoken much since the phone call in the alley. I’ve been on first dates before that have ended up in the hospital but never under circumstances like this and almost always with me waking up in itchy bed sheets alone. But if there was ever a night that started being about me and my own little trip into bettering myself it’s not this one. As with most nights that start out as well
as this one, it never was to go as planned. With that, at last the head of a man with a white coat appears at the door.

“Are you the friends of Bethany Sorensen?”

“Yes.”

The doctor closes the door behind him. His coat is stained on the back with little yellow blotches. I can’t decide if that’s a good or a bad thing. You expect a doctor’s coat to be perfect but in a way I’d rather see a little of the effects of the day even if it’s just a little. Obviously you don’t want your doctor walking into a room full of family of friends covered in a shade of red, that would be tragic and maybe just a little funny, especially if he then told them it was hot dog day in the cafeteria with bonus points for licking his fingers.

He walks into the room slowly, the type of walk leading up to something big or something small. Trent had remained silent since we arrived and hadn’t filled me in on what’s going on so I had no idea what to expect. I’ve always been one for breaking the ice but not tonight or rather in the morning as it had become. For her generosity perhaps the sins we shared from last night, Snowflake is barely awake at this point and all I really want to do is pick her up and take her home, wherever that is. Last night I was only just getting to know her. But as usual I’m torn between women, it’s just that there’s never normally more than one.
“I’m Doctor Shah, I’ve been treating Miss Sorenson since she was admitted. Where are we all in terms of knowing what’s going on?”

I glance over at Trent who’s still seated and not saying a word. He sighs and looks up at the doctor.

“I’m aware of the basics of her condition.”

“Well I’m glad someone is.” I say quietly but scathingly. Trent looks back to the floor.

“So I take it that you don’t know about Miss Sorenson’s status?”

“Status, condition, fragility, dead, alive, no, I don’t know, and I’m getting a little bit tired of the silence coming out of this room. So could you fill me in please?” I say looking over at Trent, seething under the surface.

Dr Shah looks over at Trent expectantly.

“What are you looking at him for? I was with her for ten fucking years, I basically married the girl, what the fuck are you looking at him for?”

“Sir, Mr Bennett, Trent, was on her ‘do-call’ list as her contact. Her parents are both in another country, her entire family is. For all I know, they might be dead. What I do know is that this man was her point of contact and you need to calm down.”
I stare at the doctor and turn back around to Trent who’s now sat up in his seat and looking up at me.

“It was the first I knew of it.”

I walk away from the doctor and stare at that ship on the wall and thought about how lost I was in that moment like many others. But I’m here and it’s time to be present, if not entirely correct. I feel a hand on my leg and look down to see Snowflake, weary-eyed but awake showing me she’s there, trying to tell me that someone cares. She’s smiling a tired but at least genuine smile. I just can’t return it. I looked down at her. I felt like I couldn’t offer her anything back until I pushed myself to the ground to kiss her lips softly and rest my forehead against hers with my eyes closed. I don’t know if her eyes were open. It didn’t matter. I was going to see them again. I know I felt her and I wasn’t going to let her go if I could help it, if I could help any of this. I put my mouth to her ear.

“I’m sorry. If I come out and you’re still here, I’ll take you home. If I come out and you’re gone and I call you tomorrow, will you answer?”

I can only imagine my eyes were pleading if they could get up from the ground.

“I can’t promise anything. But if I don’t, please don’t give up.”
I sigh deeply and head back to the center of the room, three steps away, take a deep breath and look at the doctor.

“I’m sorry. Now please tell me what’s going on with Bethany.”

“Perhaps she can tell you herself.”

The doctor opens the door to room 0310 and he nods as to say that it’s ok to go inside, like there’s nothing bad in there, like the world is a better place in there than I think it is. It’s 6am and visiting time has just started, we were waiting and talking for long enough to enable me to do what I needed to do, what I came to do in the first place. I just didn’t know it was going to be this hard.

“Just a moment, I need to switch on the light” whispered the doctor, brushing past me and walking towards the highlights of the metal frame of the bed. I remain in the doorway, only backlit.

“Miss Sorenson, are you awake?”

The bed creaks as an all too familiar but slender figure sits up in the bed, slenderer than I remember, the creak harsh, as harsh as the outline of her arms, a contrast to the soft round edges of the wires extending out of them.

“I haven't been asleep...but thank you for asking doctor.”
“You have a visitor Miss Sorenson.”

Still just a shadow, turns to the doorway.

“So soon? He only left at midnight. Trent?”

The doctor reaches over for the bedside lamp and I realise I have seconds. Seconds to make a second impression, seconds to decide how to be, who to be, what I think she needs to hear compared to what I need to express. All I do is slump a little more in the doorway against the frame of the door, push my hair back and look in the direction of where her face will be, wiping my eyes clear of sleep and everything else. The light switches on and I’m temporarily blinded, vision blurred as I focus.

“How Miss Sorenson.” I say, a little smile appearing in the corner of my face.

When I finally see, when my eyes at last adjust, there’s a fragile figure, barely even that, brown eyes once her biggest, most emotive feature, arguably her best part on the outside, now sunken, panda eyes, shadows where there was once pure white, Northern European skin like snow. Hair, flat but frazzled, once her greatest pride and her greatest annoyance now considerably shorter, now the last of her worries, her lips tired but on the sight of me smiling gently but as full of relief as she could be.

“How you.”
“You missed our date and I find you lying here in bed.” I say awkwardly. “What have you got to say for yourself?”

I walked slowly into the room. Her laugh, the sound I once lived for, now crackled and broken but still pleasing to my ear stops me in my tracks. I don’t look at her face. I step closer looking around for a seat.

“Would you hold it against me if I said something big came up?”

“Oh that’s a classic with you Beth. How many times did you break my heart with that one way back when?”

I pick up the closest chair in the corner of the room making sure not to drag it against the cold, harsh, dimpled hospital floor. I place it next to the center of the bed carefully avoiding the wires connecting her to the machine on the wall and sit down, my eyes slowly rising to hers.

“But somehow...this time I believe you.”

Only when my eyes reach hers do hers drop to the bed sheets. She nods gently.

“They were always big things. I just didn’t realise how small they were against anything like this. I know you’re a fan of the clichés...but I never imagined that anything this big would ever happen. And now everything just looks so small.”
Neither of us have slept and we’re emotional and that means many things, the best of which only being that we’re going to be honest, the thing I always wanted, the only thing. The trouble is that like Bethany, I never expected anything this big to make it actually happen. In ten years of looking into her eyes and two years of stopping myself, two years of bitterness and cold, I never could have wished to find her or myself here, no matter how much I hated her for what she did.

“How bad is it?”

Bethany struggles to raise her arms, taking most of her morning strength to do so.

“Well yesterday afternoon I was walking down the main road to your place, feeling pretty good. For the last three months I’d been held down, tampered with and fed really bad food and I was feeling free. The next thing I know I’m tangled up in here and I can hardly move. It was going to happen eventually…I just didn’t think it would happen yet.”

“What happened?”

“The man who actually stopped and tried to pick me up after supposedly being ignored for about half a minute by the other passers-by told the hospital that I stopped, took out my phone from my bag and dropped to the ground.”
“Your phone?”

“Yes...I don’t know what happened, if I was trying to call someone or I’d had a call or something. All I know is one minute I was fine, the next I was here.”

“But you’re not fine. Not now and not then.”

“No.”

Bethany used to ignore a lot of advice, especially when she didn’t want to admit she was wrong. It’s in the nature of her people, that stubbornness and in the nature of her father but I also can’t blame her having to be around someone who was twice as stubborn as her. It was her one and only consistent major flaw and I have that same sinking feeling I had years ago. It’s one of those feelings that never leaves you once it’s ingrained into your whole system.

“There’s a lot of things I could say right now. But I won’t. But the one thing I know I can say with very little repercussion is that despite how long it’s been and the circumstances we now find ourselves in, the circumstance you find yourself in, the wires in which we are tangled, you’re still fucking gorgeous, Miss Sorenson.”

The comment raises a smile. She always liked my over elaborate ways of complimenting her, she knew I was putting in the effort,
but it also raises an eyebrow.

“And you’re still a charmer. But you look like hell poet.”

“People keep saying that, especially today. But I don’t see it. Probably because I feel like hell and that makes me look better than I feel. And seeing you like this, of course, doesn’t help.”

“I’m sorry that my cancer is an inconvenience right now.”

“You know exactly what I mean. But if not for this there’d be something else anyway. But for once I can safely say that I’m not interested in that. Since you’ve been gone I’ve learnt that self-interest and self-loathing are as close to each other as love and hate, but it doesn’t even matter right now.”

“It always matters. I was coming to tell you about this but...”

Bethany stops and puts her hands together, shaking a little on top of the bedsheets, trying her best to swallow her tears as she always had, always a speciality of hers until now but I can see she needs help, just like a thousand times before.

“You were coming to make amends.”

“You didn’t deserve what I put on you Moon.” Bethany says softly, barely getting the words out. I try to interrupt her to stop her, but she closes her eyes and sighs deeply. “You didn’t
deserve me.”

I just sit and nod. I don’t try to stop her again on the off-chance that this might actually be helping her though, every other instinct in my body is telling me to stop her for what she’s putting herself through. But I don’t try to stop her again.

“You don’t have to say this.”

“You need to know. It shouldn’t take this for me to say it, but it has and I’m sorry.”

I look at the ground and feel a little smile crawl over me. It pained me to hear it, I won’t say it didn’t sting like a thousand shocks to finally hear it, but I couldn’t see her suffer any more for it.

“I’m sorry. For fucking it up. It’s what I do. So let’s move on.”

“Don’t do it again.” she said softly. When I raised my eyes she was smiling over me like the light that always made me feel better was back.

“I don’t plan on it.”

“Can you help me get up?” she asked, clearing her throat and indicating towards the bathroom door.

“Of course.”
I stand up, taking her drip stand in one hand, checking the wheels work, taking her arm in the other. It feels like tracing paper and it’s cold but it doesn’t bother me. I check the wires from the machines she’s hooked up to, making sure they’re not as tangled as everything else is in my head. They’re a million different colours and they confuse me. I imagine they’d confuse everyone but the people that know what they do but it feels like a relief that I’m doing something that might be useful again.

“Don’t worry, they’re about a mile long.”

I guide her to the bathroom tentatively, as if she were a baby bird dropped from the nest with a broken wing. My concern is not for what’s broken but more for if the mother will accept her back into the nest.

“I can take it from here.” Bethany says smiling.

“Don’t lock yourself in.”

I let go of her arm, close the door behind her and return to my seat and stare at the wires. Green, red, yellow, black, blue and white. And then, finally, they came. As the tears started to stream down my face, I cup my face to cushion any sound both internally and out of my hands. I can’t go into the hall, the door will creak and she’ll hear me leave and I won’t be able to lie when she asks where I went. Not after a night that long, sleepless and a morning this tortured. Clutching my face as tightly as I can, I
screamed into my palms, searching for temporary relief, wanting it all to just stop. Like the years before and the time apart, I can’t let her see me like this. I pull my hands away, shakily reaching for the tissue box on the opposite bedside table, knocking them to the floor in the process. I walk around the bed and breath out deeply as I bend down to pick up the box. As I reach down I hear the bathroom door open.

“I’m sorry. Can you help me again?”

My head slumps as I reach quickly for a tissue, wiping my eyes roughly and shoving them into my jean pocket. One more deep breath, eyes closed, I stand up and turn around without response, accidentally leaving the box on the ground. I walk over smiling and nodding. I take hold of her drip, my eyes focused on the bag, I reach slowly for Bethany’s arm, eyes firmly on the ground, watching that I don’t stand on any wires when her hand finds mine. I turn around looking at her hand holding on to mine, my fingers remaining loose like a child’s and I hear her voice next to my ear.

“There’s so many wires.”

“When you get me back to the bed, we’re going to talk about the things that keep you in wires.”
22. Women.

At some point that we failed to notice, the light from Bethany’s bedside lamp changed from being the most powerful to a secondary glow. The light from outside came through sometime around midday and this is looking like one of those days where the sun doesn’t want to come up but it has it’s duty and it will abide, albeit eventually. Fucker better had, I’m going to be needing something else to keep me awake pretty soon as at least one of us needs to be getting some sleep and it’s safe to say that I can see it in her eyes.

Through the darkness of all the corners of the room and the lightness sitting in the one in which we sat, there is love again. What that means, I wasn’t sure of but I had a good idea. Now I can finally see the details of the hospital room for the first time. It’s also the first time Bethany will be seeing them too. It’s quite easy to forget that when she looks like she’s been in here for a lifetime. Unlike the waiting room there is a picture on the wall of a ten year old girl holding a bunch of dried flowers. I imagine that hospitals and other places that are both literally and physically as clinical are put together by committee, every little detail thought out until there is no surprise, no joy and no sadness. You won’t see a Klimt or a Pollock on the walls here, they’re too unsure, too confusing, too scary, completely without numbness. When conversation wanes we need to find a place where our eyes can settle and that will invariably be on the four walls and whatever
they hold. The windows after all are too big and too bright. I don’t see the harm in there being something a little more challenging up there, even dangerous, but in my calmer mind, more prominent now than it has been in the twilight come and gone, I can also see why they wouldn’t want that. People enter through these doors walking through their darkest days so I find myself as something of an exception in coming in to what turns out to be one of the most cathartic days of my life.

We’d been talking through the night and the early morning and she’d been in and out of sleep. Those were some of the better times that allowed me to just look at her and I’d had enough time to think about what we had and what we didn’t and me and Bethany were always the best of friends who had a connection like no other and that always seemed like enough even when we failed everywhere else. All I know is that, despite current circumstances and placement, it feels good to have reconnected with the best friend I lost in, and because of, the darkness.

“It might finally be time for me to be on my way. You need to sleep.” I say, a little sleepily myself.

“You’re coming back though?” Bethany says from the depths of her pillow, looking out the window. I’m sat behind her looking at the back of her head. It’s a familiar position that I find myself in with the added bonus that I can leave at any time. At some time in quiet of the night I finally realised that.
“I’ll be around Miss Sorenson.” I say, putting on last night’s jacket.

“I still want to talk to you about everything. I want every last detail of these last years. I’ve missed you.” she says turning around to me before sinking back into her pillow.

“It’s not necessary. I think I just needed this.”

“We’ve been through a lot together so I think that makes me a pretty good judge, but I know you’re not okay. Just so you know I know that, if no-one else out there does. If you don’t know that.”

Bethany’s eyes are almost shut and I don’t respond. She needs to sleep, she needs sleep more than anyone I’ve seen in a long time, she needs sleep more than I do and that’s saying something. Cancer is a funny thing; it can bring out the very worst and the very best in people. It can bring people together; it can tear them apart just as much. For my little experience other than with my grandfather, I know nothing and would prefer to know less if I could. But it’s become a part of life as much as anything else and it’s never anything less than a tragedy whether to a 98 year old man or to a 30 year old girl. But tragedy, if anything, is the very best at reminding us that life needs to be taken hold of and fucked hard. I might have gotten a little sentimental of late, but I’m still me. That one night which started with the hope of me finding new love ended in the knowledge
that the oldest one is gone, something that all the best first dates in the world couldn’t ever help me to see. You’ll forgive me for sparing the details other than to say that we talked like the best friends we always were. That’s the thing with love of any kind. It doesn’t always need to be put on a plate for all to see, not all of it, not where it matters.

I wait five minutes after the silence and try to speak but the words fail to come. I look onto the bedside table with the tissues and the flowers and the one card that Trent had haphazardly bought on his way up from the south. I gently walk around the bed, the wires, the floorboards that may or may not creak standing on the edge of each and every one and I gently open the top drawer and there I see exactly what I was looking for and exactly what I needed. I push the bible to one side and I take out the paper and the pen quietly, looking over at her face, white, withered but still 100% all her and I sit down in the furthest corner of the room which also happens to be the lightest.

’Beth

Sometimes the hardest details are right there in front of us, mocking us and it hurts to hear and it hurts to see. It can chain us. These two years have been hard and the details you want even harder. But here’s the thing; You were and remain the most divine and detailed of things but forever the most distant, even now you’re sleeping right in front of me. So I hope you’ll understand if I need to distance myself now that I found
you again. But that doesn’t mean we can’t change the way we hear and see these things with time.

I moved somewhere beautiful that was full of life and full of people to get over you. It was good for a while and I met some people and found solace in all the wrong places and a few of the right ones and I felt like who I was again. But nothing, even being somewhere as beautiful as that, could replace the love we had on an ugly street.

You came back to me weak and wired and still managed the strength to ask me how I was. I don’t think you need to hear me say anything more than you’re still the beauty I can’t unsee and for better or for worse, you’ve freed me. But you drove me insane woman. You pushed me until I couldn’t see anything but the bottom of the cliff from five feet away. You picked me up and threw me across the room by the balls despite how little you could carry then and even less so now. You painted me white and drew me an inverted smile in red making me the clown that I was always born to be. You locked me in a cage and left with the combination long before you walked away. Little did I know that it was you all along. You shot me through the heart and left the dart there for every night and every beautiful creature since to see. Every last one of them was you, until her. But after this, after all this, you freed me today. I love you for it all, every last part, but I can finally live.

I’m not okay. It’s so grey without anything familiar, without the warmth and the tenderness I never found in other eyes and other bodies and it’s still so cold out there that it’s become hard to see. But it’s not dark
yet. I guess I might just have found something to keep it from getting stormy and keep this little vessel above the water and maybe, just maybe, there’ll finally be a little self-loving along the way and not the usual sticky kind. The cage door might be open but she’s trying to show me the way out and she might just succeed but not if you’re out there watching.

Don’t be sad. I’m going to be around Miss Sorenson. I’m going to make sure you get through while staying a hundred feet away. I know you’ll come through, you’re too hard and too good not to and you’ll drive someone else insane all over again.

Fuck ‘the good die young’, not like this. We’ll burn up that atmosphere long before we’re gone you and me, but from very different solar systems. I’m not okay. But I’ll mend, just like you will.

This thing called love; I forgot it existed, I doubted it like you wouldn’t believe. It made me bitter and it made me run and it turned me into a hermit with a huge sex drive and ultimately it made me not want to exist. But I’m better for it and that’s enough. It’s finally enough.

I’m leaving out that big white door. I’m not going disturb you, I did that enough, but I’ll be in touch. You’ll still be in my mind but less so in my heart because the door is open and now you’re free too.

A pleasure as always. S’

I place the note back on the bedside table and I walk away.
closed the door gently behind me and I heard Bethany turn over in her sleep to face the sun. I don’t look back. It’s finally enough.

I walk down the hall having almost forgotten about Trent and Snowflake in the waiting room some forty feet away. Snowflake is nowhere to be seen or found. As ever Trent is a vision and can truly sleep anywhere as I’m reminded upon the sight of him lying across two fixed chairs with a makeshift central mattress consisting of a huge pile of children’s books and women’s magazines. It’s a good day for making amends and my sleeplessness provides nothing if not further proof that I shouldn’t stop now. I slam the waiting room door, shaking Trent enough to wake him up, falling to the ground, his magazine tower falling with and on top of him.

“Let’s get a fucking drink.”

Sitting at a table way too big for the both of us in the hospital cafeteria, we sit facing each other looking in opposite directions, black coffees firmly in hand.

“This is fucking vile.” Trent says.

“Vile, yes. Good for you, almost certainly. Much like your own recipe lest you forget.”

“They do say that if it tastes bad, it’s probably doing you some good.’ he says wincing at another sip. ‘But it’s not exactly what I
had in mind when you invited me for a drink.”

“There’s been a lot of bad tastes lately, hasn’t there?”

“What do you mean?”

“It’s all become a little bit fucked up lately. What with Beatrix, us, Beth... I’m tired of fucked up.”

“Well I have no idea where Beatrix is. I’m not sure if that’s fucked up or a relief.”

“What happened?”

“What do you think happened? She went into a shame spiral and eventually told me everything, what she did, what you didn’t do. It might have been the first time I actually believed her. The next thing I knew she was gone.”

“They have a tendency to do that. It’d be good to know what I didn’t do though.”

“I’ll tell you sometime. Right now I’m really angry. Really angry. At everyone. Well except for that girl upstairs.”

“God?” I say jokingly. Trent looks at me confused and I can’t blame him.

“God is a she my friend. An ironic one with a self-hatred and an
insecurity complex, like most of them.”

“Well that would explain all the wars and shit I suppose.”

“But if indeed that God exists, she’ll make us do the right thing through the usual channels.”

“Blackmail?”

“Damn right.”

We look at each other and clack our polystyrene cups together. The contact feels good even if it didn’t sound it.

“You want to stay at my place tonight?” I ask. He nods and thinks before he opens his mouth for once.

“I’ve never understood your fascination with women. You know I love them as much as the next guy, maybe a little bit more, but you have literally taken it to biblical proportions now.”

I smile and look down at my coffee cup and think about Bethany, Snowflake, Sunrise and all the others before and those to come.

“Women are impossibly unfathomable creatures, complete contrasts of themselves, needing us at their weakest but never could there be a stronger man in the room...and I really hope they don’t figure out that they really don’t need us any more like
we need them and that they continue to love and tolerate us. Because nothing is better than them. Every last one of them.”

Trent’s features soften and he nods, a smile creeping slowly across his face.
About The Author

Todd was born in a small town in Yorkshire, England in 1984. He moved to Manchester five years ago and started writing three years after that. He lives in Manchester city centre and frequents many bars across the city, the best environment for him to work within.

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