*The Present*

"There is something in the swimming pool," Melanie said, pointing the camcorder through the access tunnel. "I can't see it from here but I can hear it moving about. It sounds like somebody swimming, but there is something not right about it." She stopped talking in order to let the sound speak for itself. The unseen swimmer seemed to be doing a slow crawl. More of a flop than a splash for each stroke, as if the liquid was somehow denser than water. They were asymmetrical strokes; Melanie imagined an oversized arm and an undersized arm, and other deformities.

The layout of the place was similar to that of the Aquatics Centre that she had gone to every Thursday with her school. Passing through the access tunnel meant walking through the footbath. She had shoes on now, of course, but she remembered the feeling of the non-slip tiles against her bare feet, and the smell of the chlorine. She also remembered her classmates barging past her, their swimsuits much skimpier than her own.

"There is no water in the footbath, and the showers on either side of the entrance are old and rusted." She moved the camcorder to capture those details. The view took in the graffiti - duplicated on the wall beside both showers - of a crude outline of a skull and something that looked like thorns or barbed wire. "This is to be expected. But if the place is as long abandoned as it appears, why is there any water at all in the main pool?"

She pointed the camcorder back through the access tunnel. Instead of walking through the empty footbath she adjusted the zoom to give the impression that that was what she was doing.

"The access tunnel is much longer than it needs to be, hence the restricted view of the pool itself. The level of the water in the main pool is not high enough to be visible from here. However, in addition to the sound of the water, we can see rippling sunlight reflected onto the far wall. Maybe rainwater leaked in through a crack in the roof?"

Even with the zoom she could not tell if there was water in the far footbath, the one in the access tunnel that led to the boys' changing room.

It occurred to her then that she was only assuming she was in the girls' changing area. The thought made her very uncomfortable. She imagined getting changed in what she thought was the girls' changing room, only to realise her mistake just as Kyle Matthews and his mates made their noisy return from the pool. She imagined trying to cover herself up while they laughed and whooped and sarcastically pretended to be aroused by her body and showed her what they'd got.

"The sound of the movement remains difficult to identify," she continued, dispelling the image from her mind as best she could. "It may be a person or an animal doing leisurely lengths. These cannot be full lengths, though. The water must be *very* shallow at the shallow end, if it reaches it at all, which means an animal is going to have no difficulty getting out of the water."

She paused the recording. She should be going through the access tunnel and investigating. That was what her subscribers would be expecting. So why wasn't she doing so?

She had her reasons.

Resuming the recording, she said, "There is a very faint smell coming from the direction of the pool itself. It is… not pleasant." She recalled Mr Gordon, her Key Skills tutor, telling her to put more of herself into her work. Well, she had started saying things like, "I can see a window," rather than, "A window is visible," but she was hesitant to be any more subjective than that. It wasn't that she was uncomfortable with doing it, it was simply not her style.

But perhaps she could introduce it gradually.

"The breath of a cancer patient after she has vomited," she began, thinking about editing it out even as she said it. To anyone who knew her, she was obviously thinking of her mother's final days in the Manchester Royal Infirmary. "Repellant, stale and scary, but more than anything else…" She sought and quickly found the word. "Bleak."

Her followers would no doubt think this was all a prelude to her finally braving the tunnel and seeing what was in the pool. But it occurred to her that she might be in real danger. She was alone and unarmed and her phone could not get a signal in these places. She wasn't good at picking up on unspoken messages but the graffitied skulls on the shower walls were clearly a warning put up by previous explorers: *Don't go through the access tunnel.*

Which was all very reasonable, but if she wasn't going to investigate further, what was she doing here?

She remained standing for half a minute, holding the camera so steadily that anyone watching the video might think she was using a tripod. It belatedly dawned on her that the sound from the pool had changed.

Either the thing in the pool had stopped moving, or it was climbing out.

Melanie moved the camera slightly to centre it on the edge of the pool. Her heart beat quickly; what if its head suddenly bobbed into view right there? What if it *saw* her?

She remained standing for maybe another half minute, listening intently for the movement of water. There was none. There *was* a sound, one she couldn't immediately identify, perhaps because it was not the one she was listening out for.

Belatedly she recognised the sound. It was the padding of wet feet on tiles. A hand appeared around the right hand side of the opening at the end of the tunnel. The creature, whatever it was, had already climbed out and it was coming for her.

Melanie fled.

\*

*The Past*

Two years earlier, Melanie had enrolled at Cosham Academy to restart her A-Levels. The death of her mother, the acquisition of a step-mother after an unseemly short interval, the move from Manchester to Portsmouth, and the Covid-19 pandemic had taken their toll on her studies, and on her general attitude.

Especially her attitude.

She'd been called into the principal's office because of trivial behaviour issues. Well, she considered them trivial. What the History teacher considered excessive use of her mobile phone during lectures, for instance. Which wasn't fair, because she *had* been paying attention, and was simply looking things up, things related to the lecture. Most of the time, anyway. Then there was her passive-aggressive manner, her bored, dismissive expression as if each lesson she deigned to turn up for was not merely boring, it was *beneath* her.

The principal had gone on to say, "Just off the record, your leather jacket doesn't do you any favours."

"What do you mean?"

"It's sending out the wrong signal."

"*What* signal?"

"I don't think I need to spell it out."

The trouble was, Melanie needed the principal to spell it out. There were two others in her class who also wore leather jackets, but they were never in trouble.

Then she realised, and her words caught in her throat. She wanted to ask, "Are you *fat shaming* me?" *Her* leather jacket emphasised her figure, and that was not a good thing. But maybe that wasn't what the principal had meant at all. In any case, it wasn't something she felt up to dealing with right now. Which was kind of the point.

As the result of an administrative cock-up, it was four weeks into the term when the Key Skills ICT classes began. By then, everyone was used to Wednesday afternoons being free periods, so only eight students turned up for the first session besides Melanie herself. Two boys, both looking too young to be in college, sat together and talked incessantly about Star Wars and other rubbish, until Mr Gordon threatened to separate them. All the others were from different courses, and sat apart from each other.

"It's pointless," Melanie explained to Stepmum when she got home. "It's all stuff I already know, and nobody else from my group goes."

"Well more fool them," Stepmum replied. "It's a qualification, and it will put you ahead of other candidates when you apply for a job. Isn't that right, Den?"

Her dad grunted agreement. As well he might. The timing of Dad's shifts and Stepmum's part time job coincided such that they were both free on Wednesday afternoons. If Melanie *didn't* attend Key Skills ICT, she faced the prospect of coming home early and finding them *at it*.

The idea filled her with a different kind of revulsion to the idea of Mum and Dad being "at it" back before Mum got sick. In fact "revulsion" wasn't really the word. More a kind of giggly cringe; a case of, "I don't want to know but secretly I'm pleased." Whereas with Dad and Stepmum…

Mr Gordon had set a project which involved preparing a PowerPoint Presentation. It was to consist of at least half a dozen slides and accompanying text, with appropriate use of fades, image manipulation and so on.

Melanie grudgingly admitted that she liked that sort of thing. She enjoyed working with computers. She was also pleased to have the opportunity to use her own photographs. Not just stock images from *Star Wars*, like the two boys were using. Proper photography, too, not like the girl in the corner with her silly snapshots of her cat.

Mr Gordon did the rounds. One student claimed to be unable to complete the task due to dyslexia, despite never having mentioned the condition before. Another had saved her work on a USB drive which she had accidentally broken during the break. Another needed Mr Gordon to explain the task again.

When he came to Melanie, he asked her to show him what she had so far. When she had done so he said, "Well, you're well ahead of the game." He added, "Did you take these pictures yourself?"

Despite herself, Melanie felt a glow of pride as she confirmed that she had. "It's the story of Kyle Matthews," she explained. "Singer, guitarist, and generally cool dude."

"Is he a student at this college?"

"Yes. He's in my History class."

"Well he certainly seems to be enjoying the rock and roll lifestyle!" Mr Gordon said with a chuckle. The photograph he was referring to showed the young man grinning while two bikini-clad girls were kissing him on either cheek at a beach party.

"Is it okay? I mean, as a project."

"I don't see why not. Assuming Kyle himself is okay with it of course. You've obviously got a knack for PowerPoint, and your photography skills are bordering on the professional. All in all, I can see that you're a very talented and creative young woman.

She gave him a warm smile. He was the first lecturer to receive any kind of smile from her. Then again, he was the first lecturer to pay her a compliment about something she cared about. But that was not what she dwelled on afterwards. It was the "assuming he's okay with it" part. Why had he said that?

Back home, she scrolled through her pictures of Kyle Matthews. There were a lot of them. He was smiling - or grinning - in every single one. But he wasn't looking at the camera - at her - in any of them. Why would he? He had his pick of the girls. The only time he'd exchanged more than three words with her was that time when they'd been paired up to discuss the Tudors.

Face it, he wasn't interested in her, and he was way out of her league.

So what the hell was she even doing, basing her project on him? What if he found out? What if his *mates* found out?

Time for an immediate rethink. She had plenty other material to work with. She searched through her carefully organised archives, and quickly found something suitable.

Next week she would tell Mr Gordon that the Kyle Matthews presentation had just been a practice draft. He wouldn't object, not if she had something else ready.

She would call it *Abandoned Places*.

\*

*The Present*

Safely home, and somewhat breathless, Melanie uploaded the contents of her video camera onto the laptop on the little desk in her bedroom.

She had things to get on with before she could settle down to viewing the video. There was her Open University course, which she'd started shortly after her sudden departure from college. She'd told Dad and Stepmum that she didn't need A Levels, she'd get herself a day job, and she'd study for a degree at night. Well, it was happening as she'd said despite their scepticism. She'd got a shelf filling job in Sainsbury's, and the Revenue Per Mille from YouTube was supplementing her course fees.

"But when will you have time to study?" Stepmum had asked. Like it was any of her business.

"There are enough hours in the day. You know I don't need much sleep."

That last was an understatement. According to an article she'd read, she was a super sleeper, getting by on very few hours each night. That gave her time to read through coursework, write essays, make YouTube videos and still be fresh and alert for her day job.

It was gone 2a.m. when she clicked play on the video. She still had an essay to finish but she couldn't wait any longer. She'd put earbuds in, not the noise-cancelling type, and she settled back to watch.

Out through the sliding door of Sainsbury's, turn left onto Guildhall Walk. (There are people in shot: a man getting out of a car, a young woman walking her bicycle. In college, Mr Gordon had told her to include people in her work. Well, maybe he didn't mean longshots, but still…) Turn right off the access road, face the fronts of the employment agency and the estate agent. The door between them could have belonged to either; in fact it belonged to neither. The door had a look about it. Unreal, she wanted to say, but *over*real would have been more accurate. Weathered, with one or two cracks, darkly varnished to emphasise the details of the wood - the grain, the knots and so on. As if an artist had been tasked with portraying the Platonic ideal of a door. Did Plato's cave have a door? No, that was silly.

Nobody ever saw this door. Or rather, nobody noticed it. She had seen the like many times back in Manchester, and quite a few here in Portsmouth. To her, the special doors stood out. To everybody else they might have been invisible.

Pull the door open, go through. Did anybody see her do this? What about people watching the video when she publishes it - will *they* notice it? What if they have the video on their phones while they wander around Portsmouth?

On the other side of the door is a communal changing room. In the recording it's in colour. Blue walls and brown wooden benches, but faded after years of abandonment. She doesn't know why she sees it in black and white whenever she's actually there. It's like being in those old films she'd watched with Granddad when she was little. Or the retro one they'd shown at Film Club before she and her dad had moved away from Manchester, the one about that local one-hit singer who'd hanged himself.

The door is a fire escape on the changing room side, but the viewers won't see this; she'd made a conscious decision to keep the camera forward-facing.

There are hooks on the changing room wall. There is a jacket, or possibly a school blazer, on one of the hooks. "How do you lose a blazer?" Melanie wondered out loud, but gave it no more thought. Too many mysteries, such as, how do these spaces fit? Presumably the employment agency and estate agent were on upper floors.

Leaving the big changing area through the opening to the corridors now. A row of non-communal changing cubicles. An opening in the wall opposite forming a counter where swimmers handed in their clothes on a portable rack. An arrowed sign on the wall that read "TO THE POOL" but some wit had prized off the L. Melanie was interested that she could read it now; at the time it had been a jumble of letters.

Then the view through the access tunnel.

The commentary was distinct throughout. Melanie winced at herself saying, "The breath of a cancer patient after she has vomited," but decided she'd leave it in after all.

There was the long wait for the thing in the water to appear. Melanie felt her heart racing, which was ridiculous because she was safely home now and the thing had not followed her.

She was congratulating herself at the stillness with which she held the camera when the hand appeared around the tunnel's farther opening. Her heart leapt into her throat. She remembered the hand but she didn't remember the wrist and the forearm being visible. She must have frozen for a second, longer than she'd realised, before the urge to run had kicked in. The camcorder, still running, recorded fleeting glimpses of her right leg, the non-slip tiled floor, the cubicles, the fire door.

Once outside, with the door slammed shut behind her, she'd felt safe. She recalled awakening from a nightmare when she was a child, back when she needed much more sleep. But she had no intention of going back through that door. Ever.

She heard movement from the other bedroom, and quickly turned off the monitor. Dad or Stepmum were getting up in the night. If they saw the glow under the door, she would get a lecture. Not that they could boss her around - she was nearly twenty, for God's sake! - but they would "express concern" about what the lack of sleep was doing to her health. And if she pointed out that she was actually in very good health, one of them - usually Stepmum - would comment on her weight.

It was Dad getting up, she realised, identifying him by the sound of him clearing his throat. Unlike Stepmum, he switched on the landing light when he got up to go to the loo. As a result, he probably wouldn't see the light from her monitor. But it wasn't worth the risk.

She had neither imagined nor misidentified the hand. There was something living in the abandoned swimming pool.

The stuff immediately after the hand's appearance wasn't usable. It had too much of a *Most Haunted* look, and she wasn't going for that.

As for the hand itself, she wasn't sure about including it in the upload. Again, it wasn't the vibe she was going for in her *Conceptual Spaces* series. It looked too much like something out of a cheap horror film.

Nevertheless she was curious about it. She wanted to view it again, but she had to wait for Dad to go back to bed.

Time passed. "What are you *doing* in there, Dad?" she asked under her breath.

She considered watching it under the bedclothes on the camcorder's own little monitor, but no, she wanted a proper view.

Eventually she heard the toilet flushing. More minutes passed before the coast was clear.

She switched the monitor back on and rewound the video to get a better look at the hand.

It was a hand. What else could you say about it? It appeared to have four fingers and a thumb. The middle finger looked slightly longer, and the index and little finger slightly shorter, compared to her own. But even that was far from certain. The access tunnel was long - unnecessarily long, she thought - so the hand was at the limit of resolution. Embiggening it (as Mr Gordon would have said) quickly resulted in it being lost in pixels.

Could the owner of the hand really be living there? What would it feed on? Fish? Snacks from the snack dispenser, if there even was one?

A more likely solution was that she had simply encountered another explorer like herself who had found another entrance. But someone who was content to swim in stinking water?

After some consideration she decided to fade out the video so that it ended on the frame before the hand appeared.

All she needed to do, then, was watch the video one more time, and if it looked okay, she would upload it to YouTube.

She was partway through watching it again when - unbelievably - the door to the other bedroom opened *again*. Stepmum needed the loo this time. Melanie switched off the monitor again, and rather needlessly held her breath until she heard the bathroom door open and close. Switching the monitor back on, she decided she was sure the video would look okay.

By the time Stepmum re-emerged from the bathroom Melanie had clicked Confirm. She was committed.

\*

*The Past*

Mr Gordon liked *Abandoned Places*. She'd used photographs and short video sequences from the bank she'd found off Wilmslow Road in Didsbury shortly before the move down south.

"It looks like something from the 1930s," he said. "The brass railings, the art deco style. How did you get permission to film in it?"

Melanie shrugged. "I just went in."

Mr Gordon had projected it onto the big screen behind his desk and invited the other students to share their impressions.

"I could fall asleep watching it," said Rick, an older student who had joined the group late. "I don't mean that as an insult, I mean it has a mesmeric quality. It's almost dreamlike."

"Could you get into the vault?" asked one of the *Star Wars* fans.

Melanie grinned. "I did but it had been cleaned out long ago."

"Why does it fade from black and white to colour in each one?" asked the other *Star Wars* fan.

Rick said, "Yeah, when it does that, I feel it should take the edge off the bleakness. Yet it somehow makes it *more* bleak. Do you get that?"

"I see it in black and white when I'm there," Melanie explained. "It's a kind of…" She looked to Mr Gordon and finished, "synaesthesia."

Before anyone had a chance to react to the word, the girl with the cat pictures asked, "What happened to the other presentation? The one with your crush, I mean?"

Melanie reddened, "He's not my crush, I just happened to take some pictures of him at the beach party. I had them on my phone because I hadn't got around to deleting them, and it was just a way of checking I could transfer them to PowerPoint. It was a first draft. That's all."

A silence had fallen in the classroom and Melanie realised she had given far too much of an explanation. *Methinks the lady doth protest too much*. She hadn't been aware that anyone had even seen the earlier presentation. And now that was what they all wanted to know about.

"What was his name?" The girl frowned puzzlement, then snapped her fingers as if remembering. "Kyle Matthews, that was it. Did he find out?"

"There was nothing *to* find out!"

"That's enough," said Mr Gordon, directing the next student to display their work. Predictably, this was a *Star Wars* presentation. The young student had copied and pasted a wall of text from Wikipedia into each slide.

Afterwards, as the students were leaving, Mr Gordon asked Melanie to stay behind.

*He's going to tell me off for getting angry with that stupid girl*, she thought. *He's like all the other lecturers after all.*

When they were alone, Mr Gordon said, "Are you familiar with Edward Hopper?"

"I don't know him."

Mr Gordon didn't notice the sulky tone. Or he did and he was cutting through it. "He was an American artist from about a century ago. He was a realist painter. The things he painted were very ordinary. A petrol station on a country road. Or should I say, gas station. People working late in an office, or sitting on a bed in a hotel, or having drinks in a street bar."

"What about it?"

"Hopper saw the extraordinary in the ordinary. Don't get me wrong, I enjoy *Star Wars* as much as the next person. But he made the banal, the mundane, *exciting*."

With a start, Melanie realised where he was going with this. Almost afraid of receiving another compliment from him, she said, "I'll look him up. What did you say his name was again?"

"Edward Hopper. But I wanted to give you this." He handed her a lavishly illustrated book of Hopper's artwork. "It's a spare. My partner bought it for me, not knowing I already had a copy. I mean, *this* is the copy I already had. Frankly you'd be doing me a favour if you took it off my hands."

She flicked through the book, conscious that she should be somewhere else. But even in the fraction of a second view that she got of some of the pages, she could kind of see what he meant. Still not quite out of her sulk, she thanked him and put it in her bag.

Before she reached the door, Mr Gordon said, "I think you could be the Hopper of another medium."

\*

*The Present.*

On the bus home from work, Melanie checked out the comments on some of her older *Conceptual Space* videos on YouTube and ShewTyme. There was new feedback.

"I just don't get it," said one. "Truth is, nobody gets it, there's nothing to get. Tell you what, I'll video inside my grandparents' coal bunker and call it high art LMAO. Send me the money by bank transfer."

She always got a few of those. She'd learned to ignore them. At the end of the day it was a hobby that made her money.

Another wrote, "It's like reading early J.G. Ballard while listening to one of Kraftwerk's albums. There is beauty in monotony, and this delivers in spades!"

Kraftwerk were presumably a band with a pretentiously-spelled name. Nevertheless, the phrasing was interesting. So many of the posts echoed what Mr Gordon had said.

Another wrote, "After watching this on a loop, reality itself feels unreal. Defamiliarisation."

There was a reply to this. "IKR?It feels like there's a whole other world just out of view beside this one. There's this big corridor at the hospital where I work. I must have walked down it hundreds of times but it seems otherworldly now."

Others were in similar vein. It had taken her some months to accept that most of the comments were not sarcastic.

It was less than a day since she had uploaded *Conceptual Space 62 Swimming Pool*. Too early for comments. Probably.

She hesitated. She'd attracted two or three trolls in the last few weeks (or perhaps one troll with sock puppets) who tended to respond immediately. Maybe it would be best to wait. As indeed she usually did.

But for some reason her impatience overcame her on this occasion.

There were half a dozen comments. The first one was indeed from one of the trolls - something about "62 of them now?" even though she'd explained that the code numbers didn't work like that.

The next one read, "WTF? I was watching on my Oculus. Nearly had a heart attack!"

Melanie frowned. It was not the reaction she'd expected. She read the next one.

"What IS that thing? I thought those places were supposed to be abandoned!"

The next one read, "LMFAO! Gotta HAND it to you! Next time have someone jump out in a scary mask."

Without reading any more Melanie played the video, fast forwarding to the end, which was fiddly to do on her phone. She was absolutely sure she had faded out before the hand appeared at the end of the tunnel.

But there it was.

\*

*The Past*

Mr Gordon had sent her a friend request on Facebook. Melanie had accepted - and learned that Gordon was actually his first name, not his surname.

And Melanie had stupidly mentioned it to Stepmum.

“Be careful,” Stepmum had warned. “He may seem like a very nice man…”

“But?”

“But be careful, is all I’m saying.” She paused; it was obvious she was going to say more. “He’s old enough to be your father. Men like that pick up on young girls’ vulnerabilities.”

“Are you saying I’m vulnerable? I can look after myself, you know! I have done.”

“I’m sure you *can* look after yourself, Melanie. That’s not what I mean. You have a poor self-image, though heaven knows why.” Melanie bristled at that last part; Stepmum knew perfectly well why she had a poor self-image. “Some men like to take advantage of that.”

"Mr Gordon is in a long-term relationship," Melanie said. "A long-term *gay* relationship. The only reason he's interested in me outside of college is because he recognises my talent."

"He shouldn't be interested for *any* reason outside of college," Dad said, for once without any need for prompting from Stepmum. "There are policies against that sort of thing. He should know better."

"So how is anyone supposed to encourage anybody?"

"He should have approached me first."

\*

Next day was the last day of term. Melanie did not have Mr Gordon that day, but he caught her in a corridor on her way to History and took her into an empty classroom.

"Look, Melanie, the truth is, I've overstepped the mark a bit and for that I apologise. It's my first college job, and I'm not used to the way things are done yet."

"Oh-kay," said Melanie uncertainly.

"I taught English as a Foreign Language before - before lockdown, that is - at a place where teachers were encouraged to socialise with the learners. But Cosham Academy has different policies in place."

"You mean there's an unwritten rule that teachers and students *don't* socialise?"

"Precisely. Well, not an unwritten rule, it's very much in writing. So once again I apologise - I am entirely at fault, not you."

"Can I still keep that book, though?"

Mr Gordon smiled warmly, and it was only with the disappearance of the tension that she realised just how tense he had been. "I am sure that would be all right. Best you don't draw attention to it though."

\*

However much they might complain about her attitude, Melanie's lecturers could not fault her on her work. Not usually.

But she was distracted today. Distracted by thoughts of how Dad had been right. Even Stepmum was right, for God's sake. That word "policies".

She was pretty sure he would have unfriended her on Facebook but she didn't dare check until after the lesson. As it turned out, he had.

The students were released before lunchtime. Together with two of her classmates Melanie went to the local pub, *The Station Tavern*. The place was heaving, almost entirely with students, many of whom were already slightly drunk. The place had been done up for Christmas, and so had many of the students. Mistletoe was being handed round and held overhead and people were kissing.

"I didn't know Mike and Julie were a couple," Melanie said in surprise after observing them. What she had seen was not exactly just a peck on the cheek.

"They're not!" said her companion, who then turned to a curly-haired youth, wished him a merry Christmas, and proceeded to snog him.

To Melanie, the sight was bizarre. It wasn't that long since masks and social distancing.

"Merry Christmas!" came a voice to her right. It was one of the *Star Wars* fans. A moment later he was French kissing her. It was her first time. It felt strange - a couple of months ago she would have considered him underage - but pleasant enough. Afterwards he thanked her politely and approached another young woman.

It was her first, but there were quite a few others, most of which she initiated. She had three or four rejections, one quite nasty, but she didn't let that bother her; she'd grown a thick skin over the years. She even had a girl approach her, one she knew slightly because she was (apparently) the only other Melanie in the college. She squirmed at the idea, then decided, *why not?* Just because someone had put her down didn't mean she had to behave the same way, and besides, it wasn't serious. "Merry Christmas," Other Melanie said, her voice a little slurred, and took Melanie's face in both hands. When they kissed Melanie imagined her trying to lick the last of the filling from a creme egg.

By then Melanie was on her third drink, all vodkas. Apart from a glass of wine with Sunday lunch every week, Melanie was not a drinker, but that was okay because the vodkas did not taste strong. It didn't occur to her that she might be slurring as much as her namesake. She was aware of the cat pictures girl talking to her; she was saying, "Look, there's your crush!" Melanie had noticed Kyle Matthews earlier on but decided to fake surprise for some reason. He'd been absent from the last lecture. He was talking and laughing with two of his mates, and he'd been glancing over at her ever since he'd seen her kiss another girl - that was as obvious as his failure to look at her during the beach party that summer.

"You should go over, " Cat Pictures said.

"He's not interested," Melanie replied. "He's probably having a bet with his mates. *Would you, wouldn't you?* That kind of thing."

"So what? You might never get another chance."

"Another chance at *what*?"

"What do *you* think?"

And so Melanie approached Kyle Matthews. She was immediately aware of his mates stifling laughter and moving aside. She didn't care. Kyle was finishing his pint of lager. He bought himself another, and he bought another vodka for Melanie. Towering over her, he made no move to kiss her, and somehow that felt warm and reassuring. Instead, he put an arm around her as if he were a protective older brother.

*Nothing's going to happen*, she thought, and that was okay. That was *nice*. All that kissing with the other students, it didn't mean anything. Next term, she would face the ones she had kissed without embarrassment. It was a bit of fun at Christmas, flipping the bird at Covid. *Everybody* understood that.

Melanie and Kyle made small talk. He did an impression of their History lecturer, and it was hilarious. Spot on. She slipped an arm around his waist and gave him a squeeze. "You're so funny."

The next thing she remembered he was snogging her, and they were in the back of a taxi. And then he was fucking her on his single bed in a flat somewhere. He was rough, and it was hurting. At first she told herself she was liking it anyway, but then she realised he wasn't wearing protection, and she stopped pretending. She asked him to stop. He didn't stop. Time passed. She supposed she must have slept, but she hadn't *really* slept since she was six years old, and didn't know what it was like any more. She was naked, very conscious of her body. There were other people in the open doorway, two of his mates. They were laughing, and taking pictures on their phones.

She thought it was over but he was erect again. He was clearly drunk, so she didn't think that was possible, but evidently it was. "Please stop," she said. "Please stop please stop please stop." He grinned as if her words were encouragement. "It's like doing it with a bowling ball," he told one of his mates over his shoulder. This was obviously very amusing to him because he said it again, and again, and again.

\*

*The Present*

Back home, on the larger screen, she watched the emergence of the hand.

She had frozen when the hand had originally appeared. What she hadn't realised was *how long* she had frozen for.

There was the wrist, and then the forearm, and then the elbow.

The elbow was too soon. Elbows should be halfway along the arm. This one suggested the arm was very short. Or…

With shock, Melanie realised she was not watching the original footage. She was watching the video she had uploaded to YouTube and ShewTyme. This was the video that everybody was seeing.

\*

*The Past*

And suddenly it was over. Kyle's laughing face changed to the look of someone caught in a shameful act by someone whose opinion mattered. And that was exactly what had happened.

The angry man was obviously Kyle's father. His mates had vanished. "Get dressed!" he ordered Melanie, not looking at her. "Then wait downstairs. I'll take you home." She grabbed her clothes and shoes off the floor, and found the bathroom.

Kyle's father had slammed the bedroom door shut but she could hear him shouting; she heard the slap, more slaps, and the sound of Kyle's head hitting the bedroom wall. It didn't occur to Melanie to take satisfaction that he was getting what he deserved; whatever the father's role here, he wasn't a knight in shining armour, and she was more than a little scared.

Dressed, she went downstairs. She was in the lobby of a high rise block of flats. She went out, wondering if she could get a bus or maybe a taxi, but she was in a part of Portsmouth she didn't know at all, and it was already dark. There was a white Mercedes with a dent in the passenger door parked near the entrance. It looked incongruous. Kyle's father emerged from the lobby, unlocked the car remotely, and said, "Get in."

It was a nice car, despite the dent. Kyle's father had calmed down a bit, which suggested he had not killed Kyle. He asked her her address. She told him. He nodded, said, "I know the area." They travelled in silence for a while. Melanie was confident that he *was* taking her home, so her main concern right now was not bursting into tears in his presence.

She broke the silence by saying, "He wouldn't stop." Kyle's father said nothing. She repeated it, tears running down her face. So much for not bursting into tears. She added, "I told him to stop but he wouldn't."

He said, "You only have yourself to blame."

She couldn't believe what she was hearing. "You think it was my fault that he raped me? Your *son* raped me?"

"He didn't *rape* you." His tone was dismissive. "Don't make allegations that you know are not true."

"How can you say that? You weren't…" Then a horrified realisation struck. Kyle's father spelled it out anyway.

"It's not rape when the woman gives consent. You *gave* your consent in front of witnesses. It was recorded on video, and the video was uploaded to… social media." He stopped at some traffic lights. They remained red for a very long time. Before they changed, he said, "It will have been taken down by now but Christ knows who's seen it." After another long silence he added, "It's the last thing I need right now!"

"The last thing *you* need? What about *me*?"

He turned into her road. By then, based on some of the shouting she had heard from Kyle's bathroom, and some of what she'd previously heard at college, she was pretty sure she'd worked out what was going on. Mr Matthews was a candidate for Member of Parliament for Portsmouth North, and his son had quite possibly scuppered his chances of election.

She wondered if he would offer her a bribe to stay silent, and if so, she wondered how much he would offer and whether she would accept. But in the event it did not happen. He drove past her house, stopped at the other end of her road, and said, "Don't say anything you might later regret."

She got out. He drove off.

Most of the streetlights nearest her house had failed to come on, so she walked in darkness. What had Kyle's mates included in it? How soon had it been taken down? *Had* it been taken down?

And then there was next term to think about. Oh God, Kyle would still be in her History class, and everybody would know what had happened, even those who hadn't seen the video. She might not be able to prove he had raped her, but posting it online was illegal. By rights he should be expelled at the very least. Otherwise, the college was not a safe space. He should be arrested, and put on the sex offenders register.

And what if she was pregnant?

It was important that Dad and Stepmum didn't find out what had happened. Not until she'd had time to think things over, get a pregnancy test, decide what she wanted to do.

She fumbled with her front door key. Before she could get it in the lock the door was opened in front of her. She looked up at her father's face, said, "Oh Dad!" and burst into tears once again, and fell into his arms.

\*

The pregnancy test was negative, thank God.

Other than that it was a shitty Christmas. Although, to be fair, both Stepmum and Dad were supportive. For the most part.

"I'm not going back," Melanie insisted. "Not if *he* is still there."

Stepmum knew someone socially who knew someone who worked in the college principal's office. She made phonecalls. "My daughter had an unfortunate liaison with one of the boys in her History class…" Overhearing, Melanie found at least three reasons to cringe at this. "...Yes, I appreciate that there are GDPR concerns involved, but…"

In short, Kyle Matthews would be back at college next term.

\*

Stepmum had told her, "Everything will be different after a good night's sleep." How many times had Melanie told her, she *didn't* sleep.

She lay in bed anyway, watching the hours tick by.

What was so sickening, though, was that it *was* rape. Yes, she had consented to the first time, but not afterwards; she had made that unmistakably clear.

And while she realised there was no way of convincing a jury that the second time had been rape, it was clear that she had not consented to being humiliated. Uploading the video counted as revenge porn, and they could definitely convict him on that. If only she could prove it had *been* uploaded.

As the night wore on she gradually arrived at the slow, bitter conclusion that there was nothing she could do. There was no way of getting back at him even; every idea she had of punishing him would prove ineffective, or do more harm to herself. If she could get hold of a copy of the video, and upload it, that would badly hurt Kyle's father's chances of election, but then *she* would be charged with revenge porn.

She had no choice but to let it go.

\*

*The Present*

There were more frames, and more of the arm had emerged around the end of the tunnel. It had a second elbow. It bent in a different direction to the first.

"What the hell is happening?" Melanie whispered.

It was like that Japanese horror film she had watched with her mother one night before she had stopped sleeping.