

NIHILISM REVISED



"Tom Over shows no bounds in how far he's willing to go with the absurd and grotesque and I love him for it. He is a tightrope walker of a writer, balancing horror and pitch black humour with literary flare. Reading this book was the most fun I've had in a while.

I loved these stories. I love this collection."

- Philip LoPresti, author of *The Things We Bury*



TOM OVER'S
THE COMFORT ZONE
AND OTHER SAFE SPACES

for Tanya, with love

*“Close your eyes. What you see isn’t nothing, but we’ll call it darkness.
Now, how big is that darkness?”*

– Richard Lang

TUNNELS

The experiments had begun by accident, or rather, because of an event that had been out of his control. This was after his mother had passed away, and he now lived alone in the house. The rambling old Victorian residence she had raised him in. He spent his time indoors, didn't go outside much; rarely mixed with other people. He'd worked at a supermarket while his mother was alive, in the warehouse out back—away from the public, as his employers had wished it. But now that he had his inheritance, he saw little point in working at all.

The rare occasions he did go outside were mainly just to buy groceries. It was during one such infrequent trip that the event occurred. He'd been returning home from the supermarket, a different supermarket to the one he'd previously worked at, when he noticed two unsavoury looking characters approaching him. Both wore dark hoodies and skulked in a manner that was unnervingly purposeful.

It wasn't until he jammed his free hand into his pocket that he realised the pocket still contained his mother's gold pendant; a chipped heirloom he'd been examining earlier in the day and had forgotten to put back in its box. Panicked, he seized the antique and, with scarcely a second thought, shoved it into his mouth. It scratched and bit on its way down his throat, but he was glad of his quick resolve because the pair had indeed planned to rob him. They made off with his wallet, but he didn't care. His most valuable possession was far beyond their reach.

It took several days for the pendant to pass through him. When eventually it emerged, something wasn't quite right. Once he'd cleaned it up, his suspicion was confirmed—the pendant was no longer cracked as it had been. Not only was it structurally restored, but its surface, now free of all nicks and abrasions, gleamed flawlessly like the day it was made. His astonishment was such that he had to sit down. He remained that way, quietly contemplative, for a very long time, unable to comprehend the thing he kept turning over in his hands. He inspected the pendant with a magnifying glass, but no matter how long he studied it, he could not begin to rationalise why it looked the way it did.

He wondered if his mother were somehow watching, puzzling over this mystery along with him, trying possibly to communicate the answer. On her death bed, she'd ruminated deliriously about the light at the end of tunnels, and whether or not she herself might experience it. Now, scrutinising this improbable object, he pondered whether his dead mother had attained that fabled luminosity, and with it some unknowable cosmic influence.

The next day, still mystified, he came to a decision. He needed to know if what had taken place was just some freak occurrence, or a scientifically replicable phenomenon. Something that could be tested, measured. The first trial he reasoned to keep simple.

He fasted all morning and then, in the afternoon, selected a penny from the bottom of his money jar. It was a very old coin, scuffed and darkened with age. Before placing it on his tongue, he opened up a notebook and recorded the coin's date, imperfections and colour tone.

Within a couple days he passed the coin. But even before washing it, he could identify the change. Beneath the crust of excrement, the burnished sheen of the penny was startling. Its glossy surface was so pristine as to appear newly minted. He supposed his insides may have cleaned the coin, his stomach acid possibly dissolving its aged outer layer. But that didn't explain its uncanny, factory-fresh condition. Of the visible scratches and blemishes he'd observed prior to swallowing, not a single one remained.

Despite predicting this outcome, he was no less bemused by it. He noted his findings and decided to sleep on the results. He ate a minimal amount of food in preparation for the next experiment.

Upon rising the next morning, he began looking around the house for small objects that were both broken and digestible. Not finding anything appropriate in the lounge, he went upstairs to peruse his mother's vanity dresser. Surveying its many trinkets, he reached past her urn to probe inside her jewellery chest. In it he found a small quartz pocket watch that had belonged to his grandfather. The watch had stopped working years ago, whilst its owner was still alive, and had remained that way ever since. He picked up a diminutive crystal egg which contained his mother's wedding ring. He unscrewed the egg at its middle and examined the contents. Seeing that the ring was missing two of its gemstones, he pocketed it before replacing the egg back in the chest.

When he had five precious objects in varying states of disrepair, he lined them all up on the dining room table. Sitting down with a glass of water and his log book, he set about recording the defects of each individual article. When he was satisfied, he took a preliminary sip of water, and then commenced the experiment.

Within a couple days, four items had emerged. All were in immaculate condition. Each a profoundly strange dissident of entropy, except for his grandfather's timepiece, which now ticked off the seconds with atomic precision. The fifth object, his mother's ring, did not reappear. Considering this a minor setback, he decided to push on with his research.

He'd originally planned to sell the restored goods, but now, more intrigued than ever, a new compulsion took hold of him. He wanted to push the experiments further, explore the limit of what his body could do.

The next day he went out into the grounds of the house and approached a tree in which he knew there to be a nest. He listened for signs of life and, soon enough, heard the faint sounds of cheeping. He looked around on the grass for a suitable stone.

Minutes later he returned to the house with his hands cupped in a ball, and went straight to his mother's bedroom. Eventually he came back downstairs and proceeded to arrange a selection of things on the dining room table. He seated himself before them and regarded each one in turn—his log book, a shot glass half full of olive oil, and his mother's crystal egg, with the starling chick nestled inside it. A row of tiny pits lined the circumference of the egg; these he believed might act as breathing holes for the bird. But if there was no oxygen to be had where the chick was going, it wasn't something that particularly concerned him. The results were all that mattered. After recording the necessary data, he knocked back the shot of oil and then inserted the ovoid capsule down his throat.

When the egg came back into the world it was not without a struggle. He ingested many laxatives and rocked on the toilet bowl for half a day. Upon emerging, hot tears exploded in his eyes. He rubbed them dry, and when he saw the object, he rubbed them some more. Nothing about what he was looking at made sense. He gently shook the egg, rattling the smaller egg that was inside it. He felt an intense compulsion to know what was inside the new egg. He took it to the kitchen and cracked it over the sink, half expecting his mother's ring to spill out. But it didn't. Just a partially formed bird foetus slid grimly towards the plughole.

With his mind irrevocably blown, he pored over his findings. Following days of analysis he arrived at a staggering conclusion, and for many more deliberated on its possible consequence. Finally, his decision was made. He fasted for a day and a night in preparation for his pinnacle experiment.

The next morning, at the dining room table, no items were laid before him other than a solitary glass of water. He unscrewed the cap of his mother's urn and emptied it into the liquid. Swilling the solution around the glass, he placed it back on the table and allowed it to dissolve. He curled his hands in his lap and exhaled deeply. Closed his eyes closed. A full minute seemed to pass before he finally opened them. He picked up the glass, paused, and then drank, slaking his ultimate curiosity.

A week went by and nothing happened. He became convinced that nothing would, and so returned to his studies. Whilst preparing a meal one evening, he felt a sharp bowel movement and rushed to the bathroom. As he went to sit down his abdomen bucked and he crumpled to the floor. He writhed in agony, clutching his torso. The pain was so great that he may have blacked out. When he returned to his senses he was screaming. His screams got louder until he could taste blood in his throat, and then, like some lupine creature of the night, he howled as a jet of black blood sprayed across the tiles. His whole body jerked with violent convulsions. A sickening tear filled the room and he glanced down between his legs. His vision swam but he remained conscious long enough to see a human hand erupt out of his body. Slick with viscera, it clenched and flexed in the pale light. A ring glinted wetly on the hand's third finger, all of its gemstones now present.

THE WETNESS

He both awakened and somehow caught his ejaculate in one reflexive motion. Left fist clamped around his pumping glans, he lay still without breathing, stunned by the preconscious manoeuvre. Blinking against the dark, he felt a trickle of fluid move along his wrist. He turned his head to see his partner's sleeping face. Her eyelids shifted embryonically, a faint snarl accompanying each of her languid breaths. Satisfied he hadn't disturbed her, he edged out from under the bed covers, being careful not to drip any of himself onto the sheet.

In the bathroom he unclenched his fist and examined the cooling discharge. As always, the strip bulb did not fully illuminate right away. The flickering murk-light gave his come the appearance of subaquatic slime. As on the previous occasions, he couldn't recall the imagery of the dream, nor the context in which his orgasm had been achieved. Once again he considered the abnormality of a man his age having these experiences, and, more disturbingly, the unknowable impetus for them. No physical bodies surfaced in his mind when he tried to remember. Only a cloying sensation remained—a feeling of being somehow . . . smothered.

He cleaned himself up and returned to the bedroom. With the light of the hallway falling momentarily across the bed, he noticed something at groin level on the mattress sheet. He thought he'd managed to prevent any spillage, but a drop of semen must've leaked through his fingers onto the fabric. Mindful of his girlfriend's slumbering form, he moved in closer. The stain was circular and still wet, having the texture of fresh glue. It was dark around its inner edge, growing lighter towards the middle like the growth ring of some tiny tree. Indicative perhaps of the time since his last nocturnal emission, he mused, which had happened only a few nights before.

The frequency of these events would've weighed more on his mind, had his desire to sleep not been greater. He hurriedly dabbed at the spot with a tissue before getting back into bed. He decided not to worry about this strange reoccurring ritual until tomorrow, when things made more sense. As his thoughts began to cloud, he didn't notice his hand brush over the damp patch. The sticky mark which, even now, was no less wet.

While Jen readied herself for work, he stood motionless under the shower. Shoulders hunched, chin flat to his chest. The steaming water dissolved the night's residue but did little to cleanse him of it. He tried again to remember his dream, but its structure evaded him. He let the water spray traverse his scalp, hoping it might stimulate some dim recollection. Nothing came.

He lifted his head to face the current, enjoying its pressure against his eyelids. He absently tipped his head back, then further still. After a second or two, a stream of water found his nasal passage. It coursed up his nose and down the back of his throat, making him retch. The sensation startled him—it felt strange but somehow not unfamiliar. After a moment's thought, he tilted his head back again until the water eventually breached his nostril. He gagged, swallowing some of the warm liquid. A glint of recognition winked in his mind, but it was too vague to distinguish. The thing his memory sought to pin down seemed to change under scrutiny, like some bizarre quantum phenomenon. He contemplated this for a minute, before switching off the shower.

Over breakfast his thoughts were elsewhere. He didn't mean to be distant but the silence between them eventually announced itself. Jen looked up from her phone and took a bite of toast. "Is everything alright, Cal?" she said. "Bit quiet this morning."

Callum looked up from his bowl, realising he'd stopped chewing the cereal that was still in his mouth. "What's that? Sorry babe, miles away." He swallowed.

"Just that you look distracted, that's all. You were moving around a lot last night too."

"Yeah sorry, nothing's up. Just stuff at work I guess, big meeting today."

Jen seemed to accept this as truth. Instead of digging deeper, she changed the subject and lilt of her voice. "God, I had another one of those weird nightmares again last night, the one where you leave me for Heather!" She suppressed a chuckle behind her phone.

"Great," he said, feigning an eye-roll. "I'm in the doghouse again because in sleepyland I was shackled up with your sister." He flashed a constructed smile.

Jen laughed. She went on to describe the time she'd divulged this to her sibling over drinks. But Callum was back in his own world again. As

his girlfriend spoke, he let his eyes rest and gazed through her as though she were some person-shaped Magic Eye image. In her place, within the edges of her outline, he could almost discern the shadow of the thing he had dreamed.

During his cycle to work, the previous night pressed on his mind. Spectres crept into his vision but refused to properly manifest. He stopped trying to remember and looked up to the sky. The clouds above him were storm-laden and marbled grey-green like ancient ice. As he coasted along, he imagined this sight to have been like the one Sophie experienced. The frozen rock-like canopy dappled through with weak light as she skittered and bobbed along it, trying to find the opening. He tried, as he often did, to imagine her final moments. To comprehend the terror she must've felt. Though it was years ago now, he still found it deeply disturbing to think about, and feared it always would be. He tore his thoughts away from the past and focused on the journey at hand.

Coming up to the final set of traffic lights, he passed alongside the thing, same as every morning. He knew it would be there, on the other side of the road stretched across the entrance to a car park. He knew this because it never went away. Callum had discovered the perpetual puddle late last year when he started his new job and began taking this cycle route to work. The pool of murky water occupied a sunken patch of tarmac at the foot of a wide concrete pillar. It surrounded the base of the structure like a moat that had burst its banks. No matter what the season, be it rain or shine, the puddle was always there. Not only did the water never dry up, but its volume always remained the same, even on the hottest days of summer. As he raced by it, he gave the pool a cursory glance, just to see if it had changed since the last time. If anything, it looked bigger than before—deeper. The surface remained dark and still, appearing to absorb the morning's pale light but reflecting none back.

He drifted through the morning, attending to his tasks just as absently as he engaged with colleagues. Conversations happened without him being remotely present in them. He wasn't normally this detached, was personable enough on any given day, but the enigma of his nocturnal habit had become all consuming. He found it difficult to concentrate, often lapsing into daydreams. One such reverie was halted during the afternoon meeting. Callum's boss noticed his wandering eye and fired off a blunt question.

“How are the test scripts going for Thursday’s release, Cal?” said the team leader curtly.

Callum jumped, dropping the pen he’d been twirling. “Oh, sorry,” he blurted. “Yes, coming along. They should be ready by close of play tomorrow.”

“Drop me an email when they’re done, and copy Bev in please.”

“Sure, Ken. Will do,” he said, bending down to retrieve his biro. Once he found it he sat back up, but something was wrong. The pen felt strange, slick with some kind of liquid. He rubbed his thumb and forefinger together, examining the substance. It was strange; wet but not sticky, yet more viscous than water. A strand of it linked his fingers when he separated them, like a thin jelly. He brought his face forward to smell the stuff, wrinkling his nose despite it having no odour. He rubbed his pen on his trouser leg and placed it on the table. Out of curiosity he leant back down and dabbed at the floor with his fingertips. The short-haired carpet was saturated with the same boggy substance. When Callum looked down to investigate, what he saw made him start. The floor below him was as sodden as it had felt, but it was the nature of the wet patch that was so startling. A perfect dark circle of moisture lay directly under his chair. Unnerved, he scanned around the floor and saw that the rest of the carpet, under the table and beneath other people’s chairs, was perfectly dry.

“Everything alright, Callum?” asked Ken, the agitation in his tone now audible.

Callum looked up. “I . . . umm . . .” he started, but quickly realised he had no idea how to continue. He looked down at the damp spot, and then back to his manager. “No, nothing, everything’s fine.” He assembled a half-smile and nodded.

There was a titter from somewhere in the room.

“I’m sorry, Ken.” Callum said quietly. He reached for his biro and pretended to write something with it.

He received some amused looks when they later filed out of the meeting room. He ignored them and put deliberate space between himself and his colleagues as they walked back to the office. For the rest of the day he remained in a similarly disassociated state; starting tasks only for them to dissolve into apathy. He doodled in his notepad, absently played on his phone. Nothing seemed to hold his attention. He hadn’t touched his lunch

and didn't feel the need to snack despite it now being the middle of the afternoon.

Realising he hadn't yet been to the toilet, and still not really needing to, he got up from his desk and headed to the gents all the same, just to break the monotony. On his way out of the office, an attractive girl from the sales team crossed his path, her full bosom catching his gaze as she trotted by. Callum diverted to the disabled toilets instead, slipping inside and locking the door without anyone seeing. Whipping down his trousers, he seated himself and began stroking his cock. Masturbating at work wasn't something he practiced with any regularity, or, when he thought about it, had ever even attempted. But today was different. Today he needed something, anything, which might help to dispel his crippling ennui. When he was fully erect he continued pumping himself rhythmically, trying to picture the sales girl straddling him, his free hand clamped around her imaginary left buttock. He grew increasingly aroused, feeling his heartbeat quicken as the orgasm swelled in his groin.

Minutes later, he still hadn't come and the image of his fantasy was getting harder to maintain. His mind kept wandering and with it the concentration needed to reach climax. He looked down at the gyrating make-believe hips, unable to comprehend why they weren't helping him to ejaculate. When his foreskin started to chafe, he reluctantly gave up. He sat there for a few minutes, contemplating this failure—his deflating dick bobbing eagerly yet unresponsive, mocking him.

On his cycle home Callum took his usual route, despite there being several to choose from. Riding by the perpetual puddle he regarded it briefly again. It remained stoically the same, tranquil but for a dark iridescence that played on the surface like oil. He didn't know why he always felt the compulsion to come this way, past this weird patch of water. Perhaps the mystery of it reminded him of those same fathomless depths which took Sophie from him all those years ago.

The two of them had been sweethearts in university, remaining together throughout their studies and beyond graduation. They took a year out and went travelling together around Europe. Whilst in Switzerland, around mid-December, Sophie had set her heart on the idea of skating across a frozen lake. They travelled to Türlensee, not far from Zurich, only to learn that they'd missed the skating season by a week. Sophie was devastated. A young local approached them in a bar after overhearing of

their misfortune. They got chatting and eventually he offered to take them himself. He'd apparently grown up near the lake and knew of its safe spots to skate all winter, despite what the authorities claimed. The young man was confident and charming and they agreed to go along with him, ignoring the discouraging remarks of the barkeep.

The first hour on the lake had been wonderful, the sunset imbuing the ice with glittering pinks and golds. Stopping for a breather, the boys lit up a joint while Sophie skated contentedly nearby. When Callum realised he could no longer hear the sound of her scraping arcs, it was too late. A sheet of thin ice had given way, the freezing waters enveloping Sophie without a sound. The pair rushed to her aid but could find not a trace. No thrashing victim, no body beneath the floe. Only the jagged portal through which she'd exited the world.

There could be no parallel between Sophie's disappearance and the oddity that was the terminal pool. But that didn't stop Callum imagining there might be one. As he peddled the rest of the way home, regardless of his distance from it, his thoughts were always just below the pool's obsidian surface.

When he got back to the apartment Jen wasn't there. She'd gone out for a colleague's birthday drinks after work and wouldn't be home until late. Callum prepared and ate his dinner in silence. He watched some television. It wasn't until he got around to washing his pots that he heard her key hit the lock. Singing some off-kilter tune, she swung into the kitchen and dropped her bag with a clatter, accosting him at the sink with snaking hands.

"Missed you, baby!" she slurred, her evening strong on her breath.

"Hello, trouble."

He instantly knew what was up—she was tiddly and wanting some action. It was no surprise, whenever she returned home from boozing with the girls she invariably had one thing on her mind. This version of her, with her tousled hair and smudged makeup, normally turned him on. But tonight he froze. When her hand settled on his crotch she felt him seize up.

"What's the matter, babe?" she said, pulling him away from the dishes. He tried to complain of being tired, but knew it wouldn't do him any good. After some sleazy talk, she led him into the bedroom and peeled off his shirt. She collapsed onto the bed and pulled him on top of her. He quickly

got hard, surprising himself, and went at it as fast and rough as her moans instructed.

Within a minute though, a change happened. Just like with the toilet endeavour at work, his concentration wavered, focus shifting to something just beyond his awareness. As Jen clawed and gyrated beneath him, steadily approaching orgasm, his penis softened inside her. She knew it was over the moment he did. Withdrawing, Callum scuttled to the edge of the bed, elbows planted on knees. "I'm sorry. I don't know what's wrong," he trailed off, head hung low.

She sidled up next to him. "Don't worry, baby. It's fine."

But he knew it wasn't fine. He could feel the pity in her voice. Dissatisfaction hummed between them like a broken channel. He got up and went to the bathroom to piss. It wasn't something that had a history of happening—their sex life had always been pretty good. Three years in and there was still very much of an attraction between them.

Things started out fast in the beginning. Callum hadn't been with a girl in years, he spent most of his twenties trying to come to terms with the death of his first love. It was shortly before he turned 30 when his friends dragged him out to a concert one Friday night. There he bumped into a girl at the bar and they got into a conversation. The pair spent the gig chatting at the back of the venue and ended up missing the whole show. Jen had gone to the concert that night with a few of her female buddies, but she left the place with Callum. They spent that entire weekend together, and every one after that. The two of them became inseparable, and just ten months later, after a whirlwind courtship, they moved in together.

Usually, they fucked just as much now as they had done back then—a fact which made Callum's recent detachment all the more puzzling. It was during spells like these, as infrequent as they were, that he wondered if Jen wished she were back with her ex; a gym instructor called Dominic. He knew it was stupid to consider, but one time she'd let slip something that he'd never been able to shake. One evening, whilst a little high, she'd mentioned that Dominic had been good in bed. Callum never made a big thing about it, but that mental image, that fragment of information had always occupied a tiny recess of his mind. There was never anything to worry about. Dominic had been an unfaithful piece of shit. He knew that, it was just insecurity getting the better of him. In any case, it wasn't an old flame of hers taking his mind away from the sex he normally enjoyed.

As he heard the low drone of Jen's vibrator start up in the next room, he pondered again the dreams he'd been having, and the elusive presence that inhabited them.

The next day was Saturday and Jen left early for work. When Callum awoke midmorning, he fixed a mug of coffee and went back to bed to watch TV and peruse his phone. Without much thought he clicked through several porn sites, though what he saw was of little interest. He tried searching fetish keywords. But again, hardly anything stirred his loins. Thinking back to the night before, and to Jen's sexually capable ex-partner, he typed "cuckold" into the search bar. Some of the videos titillated him—he liked to think of Jen getting fucked by an attractive stranger. He leisurely masturbated for a while, but eventually the thing behind his thoughts stirred once more. It pulled a veil over his arousal and his dick again went limp.

Later, while scrolling through the news sites, something caught his eye. It was a story about foreign prisoners being water-boarded. He clicked on the article. When he'd finished reading he was surprised to find that he had an erection, one that felt different than before. Callum went on YouTube and watched some simulation videos of the illegal torture. Halfway through the second or third one, he became unnerved by the feeling of his engorged cock pushing against the fabric of his boxers. He threw down his phone, shock and revulsion flooding his body. But also something else, a deep-reaching stimulant like some narcotic entering his bloodstream. He lay there for a long time, thinking. Tantalised and appalled by the places his mind wished to go.

Callum turned on the shower to a low setting and sat down naked in the bathtub, his back against the taps, head and shoulders directly below the shower head. Warm water splashed onto his crown and ran down his neck. He took the wash flannel off the side, moistened it under the water and draped it over his face. He lay down flat in the tub, his bulging erection already at full mast, and allowed the shower water to cascade directly onto his shrouded face. Callum gripped his cock and began tugging. He spluttered and gagged, but within a minute it was all over. A thick pool of semen sat in his navel. He whipped the wet rag from his face and remained there, hunched and panting, for several minutes.

He felt amazing. It'd been by far the most mind-blowing orgasm he'd ever experienced. Over the next hour and a half he performed this

dangerous act three more times, before collapsing onto his bed, exhausted. He glowed with a strange and primal satisfaction he didn't understand.

He dozed. When he came to he reached again for his phone, but fumbled it and the device fell under the bed. He swung off the mattress and crouched low to look for it. He couldn't see the phone, but what he did see made him gasp. He stumbled and fell backwards. The things they normally kept under the bed; storage boxes, dumbbells, an old guitar, were now gone. In their place was a huge, perfectly circular wet patch, just like the one he'd discovered beneath his chair in the meeting room at work, only much bigger. It covered the whole floor space under the bed, the circle's dark edge fitting precisely within the area of the wooden frame.

Callum panicked. He jumped to his feet and fled the room. He paced up and down the hallway, fingers laced around the back of his neck. He wanted to leave the apartment but all his clothes were in the bedroom. He stopped and exhaled, waiting a moment before re-entering the bedroom to grab a hoodie, not daring to even glance towards the bed. He got his arms into the garment before stopping. Something compelled him to look up, in the direction of the circle, and eventually he did. For many seconds he fought the urge, but finally tossed the hoodie aside and dropped again to his hands and knees.

He slowly edged nearer the dark circle. When he was close enough to examine it, the low light beneath the bed revealed little more than glimmering shadows. He wondered what to do. Callum hesitated before reaching out with his fingers. He was shocked when the floor yielded completely to his touch. His hand sank below the surface of the carpet up to his wrist. He withdrew a moment later to see it coated in a strange jelly-like substance. It was the same stuff that'd stuck to his fingers in the meeting room at work. Despite a watery layer covering his hand, none of it dripped off onto the carpet. Instead, it rippled upwards towards his fingertips, like a liquid in zero gravity. Callum rubbed his fingers together, dumbfounded by the uncanny sensation of it.

As the stuff didn't hurt or appear toxic, he relaxed somewhat. He couldn't help himself but to reach again into the circle. When he was up to his elbow, he tried to withdraw, but found he could not. He shifted his weight and tried to yank his arm out of the substance. The force he applied, no matter how great, only seemed to invert and draw him in further. A rush of panic prickled his skin. He tried again with all his might to pull, but only

managed to lose balance and in doing so tumbled right in up to his shoulder. When the substance started to crawl up his neck he began screaming. But then it entered his mouth and he could scream no more. The flavourless liquid filled his throat, he gagged but none of it was ejected. Despite a million things going through his mind, at no point did he close his eyes, not even when his head went completely under.

He didn't remember being swallowed up entirely, or travelling through the tunnel, which wasn't really a tunnel. It was like passing between consciousness and a dream, just beyond tangible perception. Or perhaps more like being born. He didn't return to his senses until he again broke the surface and began gasping for air. Things he recognised floated next to him. He nudged past a bobbing guitar and clung onto a half-submerged plastic storage container, allowing it to take his weight. After a moment or two, once he'd caught his breath, he used the box to paddle to the edge of the water—if that's what it was—before dragging himself free.

Callum lay on his back until his vision swam into focus. He found himself looking into a pinkish-gold sky. It struck him that he'd never seen one quite like it. Gazing up at the heavens, it appeared as though they'd been artistically rendered, like an overly embellished CG vista. Thinking this odd, he propped himself up onto his elbows. He was astonished to find himself in his work clothes, jacket and backpack, which were all bone dry. So too, he realised, was his skin and hair. As he lay on the ground, trying to make sense of this, people walked leisurely by. Not one of them stopped or gave him a second glance. *What the fuck is going on?* he thought to himself.

Callum scanned his surroundings. He felt his stomach flip when he recognised where he was. He leapt to his feet, staring in horror at the street he'd cycled down a thousand times. The oversized puddle yawned beside him, eerily still and black as tar. A violent shiver jolted him into a sprint and his backpack fell to the ground. He ran in the direction of home, each stride seeming to extend further, higher, as if he were partially floating, absconding somehow from gravity's pull.

When he got back to the apartment, he rifled through the jacket he hadn't put on, and fished out his keys. The front door key wouldn't fit the lock. He tossed them and dashed around the side of the building, or rather bounced, feet scarcely touching the ground.

Looking up at his bedroom window, he saw that it was open, so discarded his jacket and began climbing. Despite the fact they lived on the

third floor, he scaled the wall with unnatural ease, as if an invisible winch were hoisting him up. When he came level with his window, the first thing he saw was the framed picture they kept on the sill of the pair of them together on holiday. Only it wasn't the pair of them. Jen was in the arms of somebody else, someone he instantly recognised. The recognition made his chest seize and he spluttered from the shock. The momentum of his ascent carried him up through the open window and into the bedroom he shared with his girlfriend. The sight that greeted him on the bed, however, sent the world he thought he knew spinning into chaos.

There, bobbing helplessly against the ceiling, he observed two people having passionate sex in his bed. One of them was the woman he'd spent the last three years of his life with. The individual he now considered his soulmate, regardless of the difficulties he'd put them both through. The other person, to Callum's abject horror, was his drowned lost love. Jen and Sophie were entwined in a coil of limbs, droplets of sweat bejewelling their naked skin. Sophie was entranced, lapping at Jen's engorged vulva while her partner's head was thrown back in a state of blinded ecstasy. Neither of them seemed to notice Callum hovering above like some spectral voyeur.

Within seconds, the shock of what he was seeing started to wane. Clearly he was in a world in which the rules of nature no longer applied. Even though the scene disturbed him to his core, he gradually began to subsume into this new state of being.

When Jen's moaning grew louder, something stirred in Callum's groin. His cock began to swell, pushing against its fabric housing. He freed himself just as her back arched off the bed. Then, unable to believe his eyes, what looked like globules of shimmering liquid began to seep from Jen's vagina, up into the air. Before long, the room was filled with his girlfriend's iridescent juices, spreading and merging like the insides of some giant lava lamp. In spite of this insanity, while spread-eagle in space, he beat his erection with increasing vigour as Jen's vaginal bubbles continued to squirt and rise.

Callum didn't stop when the rippling mass enveloped him, consuming his body like an insect in a blob of neon amber. When he started to choke, his fist kept on pumping, maintaining its mad rhythm. The flavourless substance filled his nose and mouth, flooding his lungs. As he breathed it in, the thing that startled him most wasn't the realisation that he was

drowning, but the fact that the fluid, instead of being warm like the body it'd come from, was extremely cold.

His oxygen-starved brain expired the moment his stamina did. As ropes of pearlescent jism arced through zero gravity, Callum's final throes spun him slowly around to face the ceiling. There, he clawed meekly at the plaster, chipping away fragments which hung in the glowing liquid like shards of ice.

During her drive home from work, Jen's thoughts were on her boyfriend. She'd been wondering about Callum's distracted mood for days now and just couldn't fathom the reason for it. It was unusual for him to be so emotionally absent and last night's performance had been totally out of character. He normally loved it when she came home drunk and a little frisky. They hadn't had a falling out in months, not a proper one anyway, and it wasn't like Callum to let work get on top of him. No, something was definitely wrong, and she was determined to find out what it was.

She decided she was going to treat him to a nice dinner, and then gently address the problem over dessert. She took the next left turn with the intention of swinging by the supermarket to pick up some bits. Halfway down the long stretch of road she noticed a group of people crowded around the entrance to a car park. She glanced across her dash to try to see what all the commotion was about, but too many bodies stood in the way. Jen presumed some kind of road accident had happened, and that an ambulance had likely been called.

Had she slowed a little, she might have noticed that the people were surrounding an uncommonly large rain pool. And, if she'd then stopped a moment, she may have seen the thing they were looking at. A body floated face down in the murky water, submerged but for the backpack it wore just breaking the surface.

THE VEGETARIANS

By the time he arrived at the window the attack had already begun. The benign afternoon sunlight gave the scene a chillingly surreal quality,

something he had grown familiar with but never accustomed to. With a drug-numb detachment, Sean watched as two people savagely mauled a third. The victim appeared to be a young man in his twenties, while his tormentors were two women, one elderly and the other a teenager. Thankfully the double-glazed windows softened most of the screaming, but the sheer brutal sound of it was enough to send shudders right through him. Not even in the bleakest horror films had he heard screams that came anywhere close. He only hoped his girlfriend's dozing had spared her from them.

By now the women had stripped and disembowelled the man, managing somehow to tangle his intestines around a nearby lamp post. The three of them, doused in blood and gore, engaged in what looked like a grotesquely laboured maypole dance. Sean had witnessed several of these slaughters since the very beginning and, like with the most repellent of horror films, often found it difficult to look away. In recent weeks, however, they had become much less frequent, until it was unusual now to see anyone outside at all.

Watching the attack, it was unclear to Sean what exactly the women were doing. Never once had he seen the infected eat or drink from the bodies of their victims. So it wasn't for nourishment that they eviscerated the living. To observe this grisly behaviour it could've been mistaken for *fun*, the way the two females crawled around in the man's guts; one burrowing headfirst into his gaping stomach cavity, the other pulling his organs over her head like a membranous blouse. The irony wasn't lost on Sean how in a world in which movie zombies once devoured their victims, he and his girlfriend were now starving while these creatures seemed content to just play around with body parts. It was this grim observation which, in the beginning, led the couple to give the attackers a nickname: *veggies*. For a time this had seemed funny, but the name managed to stick around long after it wasn't. Filled now with a sickening guilt, Sean averted his eyes and reached to draw the curtains.

Despairingly, he turned and limped out of the bedroom. As he passed the closed door of the bathroom he felt the usual draft tickle his bare ankles. Megan was asleep in the lounge, curled up in her bathrobe on the sofa, surrounded by her anatomy books. She'd been a third year student nurse at the city's largest university, and headed towards a promising career, when the world suddenly disintegrated around her, around them both.

Megan had been one of the few lucky ones. The first wave of attacks happened during one of her lectures on an otherwise ordinary Monday morning, a day on which Sean had been working from home. Over that weekend a neighbouring city had sustained what the media called an atypical terrorist incident. Reports of the attack had been so speculative that it was difficult for the wider population to get a sense of what really happened. All the surrounding regions understood was that unconventional methods were employed by the extremists and that by the end of Saturday the threat had largely been contained. A relief then, except for one thing: Megan's family lived in that neighbouring city, and hadn't been heard from since before the weekend.

Whilst Megan slept off a nightshift on the Saturday afternoon, she'd missed a call from her father. When she awoke later in the day and phoned him back there'd been no answer, nor on her second or third attempt. No matter how often she tried, her dad just didn't pick up. Distraught, she instead tried calling her brother and stepmother, but neither one answered their phones either. This sent her into a blind panic. Her stepmother was in hospital waiting to give birth, had been for days, so Megan knew that all three would've had their phones on them.

By midday on the Sunday, minor news outlets started reporting on strange collective behaviour in pockets of the couple's own city. Hardly anyone took any notice, however, and even fewer people connected it to Saturday's events on the other side of the region. Megan spent the rest of the weekend stressed and tearful. She decided she wasn't up to attending her class the following morning, but Sean convinced her otherwise, telling her it would keep her mind busy, and that he would continue trying to get through to her family whilst he worked from home. In any case, he reminded her, she had arranged to meet her mentor, Sister Shepherd, after the lecture in order to accompany her on some routine community visits.

That evening, news of a violent death at the A&E next-door to the campus spread throughout the student body. Nervous banter permeated the university hallways on the Monday morning as Megan arrived on site. Partly it was to do with the previous night's hospital murder, and partly because of the mysterious graffiti mural which had appeared overnight in the university's main courtyard. Megan paused a moment to look at the bizarre spray-painting, which almost entirely covered one of the enclosure's four walls in a garish tangle of letters and symbols. Something drew her

gaze into the image and held it there, despite her cursory interest. Her eyes relaxed and she felt a warm sensation behind them that was strangely pleasant. The colours, she realised, appeared somehow odd. They were arresting and boldly psychedelic, certainly. Typical of a lot of urban street art she'd seen. But this was different; the hues and tonal textures were unlike any she was accustomed to. Impossibly, it was as though the colours were completely new to her eye, her brain almost amnesic in its ability to model what it was processing. The vivid 3D-style characters seemed to spell an English word. But the longer Megan spent looking at them, the more the warmth behind her eyes seemed to spread, creeping into her skull and across her frontal lobe, not unlike the feeling from having a toke on a joint. Though remotely pleasurable, it unsettled her and she averted her gaze. The language was likely just gibberish anyway, she thought to herself. This assumption clearly wasn't shared by her fellow students, a crowd of whom were gathered around the artwork, noisily trying to crack the code. She left them to it amid peals of laughter and flippant pronunciations.

Once her lecture started, it proceeded for a time just as any other. But nobody could have anticipated how it would end. Some of Megan's friends she'd been sitting beside, people she had known for years, were simply no longer living by the time that hour was up. Some unfathomable instinct got her out of that room, out of that building, and back to her car with her life still somehow intact.

It wasn't until she started the engine that she noticed a gang of students viciously attacking Sister Shepherd on the other side of the car park. Struck with renewed terror, she wrenched the stick into gear, stomping the accelerator, and tore across the tarmac directly at the screeching mob. A shrill cry escaped Megan as she ploughed into two of the assailants, bouncing them off her bonnet. Tyres squealing to a halt, she shoved the passenger side door open for her bleeding mentor. Sister Shepherd, her clothes hanging off in tatters, snatched up the medical box she'd dropped and flung it ahead of her onto the passenger seat. She was half inside the vehicle when a student Megan recognised lunged at the senior nurse. The older woman screamed as her body was rammed into the door and dragged again to the ground. The collision swung the door wide open and then back on itself, slamming it shut. Megan was alone again inside the car, the guttural shrieks of her mentor and friend suddenly muted but no less horrific. She paused for a moment, not knowing what to do, tears blurring

her vision. A second tortured wail strained her throat as instinct took over. She stamped on the accelerator just as another crazed student began yanking her passenger door handle. The nightmare in her rear-view mirror went ignored as she skidded out of the car park and onto the city's streets.

As Megan dozed on the sofa it struck Sean how peaceful she looked, how profoundly fragile, despite the unrelenting chaos that surrounded her. But he knew she was anything but delicate. The way she fought to stay alive that terrible morning was a display of courage unlike any he had known. He was painfully aware of the fact it had been his influence which delivered her into the jaws of that place and almost got her killed. But she hadn't held it against him, had never so much as mentioned it, despite the guilt he'd since carried. For this alone he felt awed by her, and for the love she had for somebody as flawed and unremarkable as he.

Sean knelt down beside her. "Are you okay, honey?" he whispered, curling an errant strand of hair behind her ear. She didn't wake, only murmured in a way that told him she was mercifully elsewhere. She appeared to him, there on the couch, almost as if she were hibernating—a protective, dreamless torpor she could shelter inside of until all this terror was passed.

He winced as he rose again to his feet, scratching absently at his bandaged arms until he remembered not to. None of the clocks now worked, but despite the hushed timelessness of the apartment, a faint gnawing in his stomach told him it was nearing mealtime. The sensation was like a distant cousin of hunger, the morphine fog made it both familiar and estranged, as though the feeling belonged to somebody else.

Sean made his way to the bathroom and opened the door. The rush of cold air jarred him like it always did. Their bathroom was no longer tethered to what once characterised it. Things happened in here now that never used to, and the things that did seemed like they'd never been part of any tangible routine. Shuddering against the breeze, he heaved one of the coal bags over the fire pit and emptied a layer of it into the concave hollow. Spreading out the coal evenly, he ignited the rubble with some firelighters and a match. Satisfied with his work, he reached for the cooking grill and fixed it over the pit, then lifted the terracotta pot off the floor by its makeshift handle and lowered it on top of the grill to warm. He'd seen this

method of high-temperature cooking on YouTube once, when YouTube had still been a thing in the world.

Welcoming the growing heat of the fire, he rubbed some warmth back into his hands. He sidestepped the slop bucket and moved over to where the gently billowing blanket acted as an improvised curtain. Whipping the blanket aside, he gathered it and secured it open, tensing against the chill. The yawning windowless space was a portal onto the sky beyond it. He leaned against the crumbling brickwork and peered out of the ragged hole into the stillness of the afternoon. Nothing stirred outside but the pink-bronze foliage on the nearby trees. There were no birds, no birdsong. He couldn't be sure whether they'd migrated somewhere safe or succumbed to the virus like the cats and dogs had.

A doleful sound caught his attention and he gazed upon what he knew to be there. One storey below, the victim was all but motionless beneath the deadweight of the enormous window frame. Pinned to the concrete, the hopeless being would occasionally claw at the ground with its one free arm. It no longer screeched and wailed as it had done in the beginning. For days after becoming trapped, the thing would shriek all hours of the day and night. A horrible sound, one that would've had the neighbours complaining, if there'd been anyone out there to hear it. Now, the paralysed veggie seemed resigned to its fate, and would produce only the occasional groan as it scraped idly in the dirt.

Sean guessed it to be well over a month, possibly two, since the rickety single-glazed window was bashed out over the course of an afternoon, and toppled randomly but squarely onto the prowler's head. A small but amusing victory, he and Megan had quipped, how a pragmatic attempt to ventilate the room had resulted in a point for the human race. Seemed like insult to injury then, that the unfortunate cripple just happened to find itself at the foot of the couple's long drop. Weeks of congealed effluence now covered both captive and its fractured prison, decaying malodorously in the late summer sun. It was for this reason that they'd named the creature Lou, another daft joke of theirs to offset the despondency of still being alive.

Lou, it'd also occurred to them, had become the unintended subject of a curious experiment. Knowing that the infected didn't appear to need sustenance, it was unclear how long they could run on the fumes of the virus before expiring completely. If that was something they'd eventually do. This was a conundrum the couple frequently debated, but by monitoring

Lou they hoped to get an idea of just when that eventual “death” might occur. Unfortunately, with his weak but perpetual scratching still evident, it appeared their subject was in no rush to betray the secrets of his kind.

Now and then, one of Lou’s own species would approach to inspect him. None would attack or in any way attempt to engineer a rescue, of course. It was amusing in the beginning to watch what his fellow veggies would do. But all of them did the same thing in the end—nothing. They would just stand and stare for a while, as though waiting for a transmission to reach them from some other altruistic life. Then, something approximating boredom would abruptly switch behind their eyes, and they would flee to some other place.

As ribbons of smoke began to rise over Sean’s head and twirl out through the windowless hole, he too grew weary, so left Lou to his static torment. Before leaving the room, he retrieved another match and lit all the candles that were evenly positioned around the bathtub.

In the kitchen, by the dying amber light of the afternoon, Sean took out the items he needed from the cupboards and set about preparing dinner. Rolling up the sleeves of his bathrobe, he combined flour, salt, sugar and a jar of foaming yeast into a large bowl. The yeast he’d already begun to mix earlier, before hearing the outside commotion and going into the bedroom to investigate. He stirred the mixture until it grew thick and then tipped the dough onto the countertop to begin kneading.

Food had always been a shared passion of theirs. It was the reason they’d initially met. One summer they were invited to a garden party by a couple they mutually knew. Both single at the time, they’d attended with their respective friend groups, but it wasn’t long before one caught the other’s eye. Later that afternoon, as Megan navigated towards the kitchen, Sean had tried to make his interception of her seem accidental. She knew it hadn’t been but found his clumsiness to be sweet. Their attraction was more or less instant, and in those moments the ease with which they spoke belied their newfound acquaintance. Work, fitness, music, books; an excitable flurry of topics jostled for attention. And, they talked food—their favourite places to eat, what they’d indulged in that afternoon and, coincidentally, their decisions to have recently gone vegetarian. By the time they parted, the contacts in her phone had increased by another. As neither one of them were particularly forward people it was difficult to focus on their plates of food after that. The butterflies they both felt unsettled their remaining

appetites, and with each new mouthful it was a fragment of their encounter that they swallowed.

Pulling and rolling the doughy ball, he remained mindful of how much flour he was using to dust it. After this one they had just four packets of flour left. That would probably make around twenty-five meals, thirty at a push, depending on how much they could skimp. One food rations a day, shared, for the next month. And after that, well, he could scarcely bring himself to think about it.

This was if the water lasted that long, at any rate. He cast a dubious eye over the stockpile they had sitting on the floor next to the wall. A random assortment of bottles and tubs stood in rows three and four deep from the skirting board—some large, some small, together they resembled a sort of ramshackle plastic skyline. The pair of them had hastily amassed these containers during that first wave of panic, the same day Megan had narrowly escaped her doomed university class. It was later that day, however, much later, when the thought finally occurred to them to take this precautionary measure.

A tearful phone call from her immediately after her frantic getaway had scared the life out of Sean. He'd then waited for her return, pacing the flat in a near-narcotised fugue of terror. Her last three words before she hung up echoing endlessly inside his head.

“Don't . . . go . . . outside!”

Their embrace when she did arrive home was as though a kidnapping had come between them. She dropped the medical box to the floor and wept uncontrollably for her friends and her mentor and didn't know how to stop. He guided her trembling shoulders through to the lounge and they huddled on the sofa as she tried to breathe past her grief. The next thing they knew, the television was on and they were transfixed by the rolling news of what was being inflicted upon the city. The appalling realisation dawned on them that this was more than likely what had happened to the town in which Megan's family lived. They tried phoning their parents over and over but nobody answered, not even Sean's. Two hours went by and their postures screamed at them to move, to stretch and walk around, but neither one could. The horrors coming through the screen seemed to be spreading—infecting more and more channels like the virus was doing to living bodies.

By the afternoon, a blood-chilling pragmatism had gripped them and they were back in their car, headed for the nearest supermarket. The panic

they felt at being outside their apartment made them sick to their stomachs. The last thing they wanted to do was embark on a potentially lethal shopping trip, but the apocalyptic scenes they'd witnessed on television told them they might never get another chance.

Cautiously pulling into the supermarket car park, nothing seemed particularly out of place. Then Megan froze. As they rounded the store, a handful of people were inspecting a huge graffiti mural plastered across one of the building's front-facing walls. Splashes of what looked like blood and feathers were streaked across the image, and scattered on the ground below it lay several bird carcasses. Megan's hand shot out and instinctively grabbed Sean by the wrist.

"What's up?" he said, lifting his foot off the pedal.

"That." She pointed to the lurid artwork.

Sean frowned. "What is it, some stupid graffiti?"

"No," Megan said. "I forgot to tell you this morning. At the university, before the attack, there was something painted on a wall. I don't know where it came from, but it looked just like that!"

"I don't understand. It's just a bit of vandalism, isn't it?"

Megan shook her head. "Something isn't right. At uni people were stood around trying to read it, just like they're doing here, and then . . ." she stammered, the words lodging in her throat. "Just look at the fucking birds!"

Sean brought the car to a stop; the steering wheel creaked in his tightening grip. He considered for a second what to say. Anxiety and frustration were creeping in but he didn't want to push her, not like he had done with her attending her class. "What do you want to do then?" he said, keeping his tone measured. "We could try somewhere else, or just head home and see what happens. Hope for the best."

Megan was quiet for a moment; she let out a long tremulous breath. "It's probably nothing, just a coincidence." She looked into Sean's eyes. "Let's get this over with."

They parked up, grabbed a trolley and pushed it towards the shopping centre entrance. Aside from the urgency with which people were milling about, everything still appeared relatively normal. Two police officers in yellow high-vis jackets were positioned either side of the sliding doors. One of them was chatting to the small crowd of people who were looking at the graffiti. The fluorescent sentries were making a cordial show of marshalling

the unusually busy flow of shoppers. It seemed like the young couple hadn't been the only ones to make this judgement call, and the local constabulary had duly anticipated it. The bustling throng looked visibly anxious but, despite pockets of mild pushing and shoving, the officers appeared to be doing a reasonable job of maintaining order.

Once inside, adrenaline powered the couple up and down the aisles. During the car journey, they'd agreed upon only the most practical, long-term items. They made a beeline for the dry-store goods—tins and jars of vegetables and pulses, as many as could fit in the cart. Then flour, rice, sauces and pasta, long life milk and hard cheese. Bathroom supplies were next, each article packed tightly to make room for the next. As they raced to the bottled water, they swerved to narrowly miss a pregnant lady struggling with a bag of potatoes. Sean stopped to help her lift the heavy sack into her trolley, and then claimed one himself. The woman thanked him with the warmth of her smile.

Moving around the shop floor they became dimly aware of a change in the general atmosphere. Raised voices were getting louder as more people filed into the complex. The sound of glass objects smashing slowly increased, and with it a palpable rise in the already heightened tension of the place. At one point the couple passed two elderly men in a tussle for the last loaf of bread, one of them slipped and a dull crack could be heard as he fell heavily onto his side.

A few aisles down somebody screamed—a noise all the more distressing against the genial supermarket music. Horrified, Megan and Sean stepped up their pace, grabbing whatever items were left on their way to the tills. The approaching and then receding cries of an unseen child created a disturbing Doppler effect as they hurried to the front of the store.

On reaching the checkouts they discovered that most of the cashiers had fled, leaving a single floor manager to constrain the lawless customers. With nobody to serve their imposing numbers the people began vaulting over the barricades with armfuls of shopping. Realising the level of pandemonium, the pair threw caution to the wind and wove through a bottleneck of braying shoppers. With their trolley out in front, they accelerated straight into a display of cosmetics and charged through the collapsing wreckage towards the exit.

With the police guards nowhere to be seen, the relative tranquillity outside the store felt somehow more threatening than the mayhem building

within it. Quickly assessing their surroundings, they saw no immediate danger and so made a dash for the car.

No sooner had they bolted when another blood-freezing howl emanated from the supermarket. Seconds later a barrage of shoppers came tumbling out of the store entrance, falling over each other to escape whatever was inside. There was a moment of stillness before the thing they were trying to flee made itself known. A screeching blur exploded out into the open and ploughed straight through the scrambling crowd.

As the pair sprinted across the car park, Megan glanced behind just as the rabid shape tore the throat out of a man in overalls. Dark gouts of blood jetted across the windshield of a van the workman had been approaching. Megan shrieked, hot tears smearing her eyes, and she yelled at Sean to get the boot open. People were now running in all directions and it sounded as though the whole town was screaming. With shaking hands they hurled their goods into the back of the vehicle and pushed the trolley aside. By now the veggie was out of sight, but awful, throat-rupturing cries told them it was dismembering someone nearby.

Once inside the car, Sean gunned it and practically took off backwards out of the parking spot. As they careened towards the exit, something caught their eye and they turned to see one of the police officers hunkered down over something on the ground. Relief swept over them as the car drew parallel and they realised it was the pregnant woman he was helping.

But that comfort was short-lived, evaporating when the woman's bleeding half-naked body came into view and they heard her harrowing moans. Spinning around in her seat, Megan witnessed out of the rear window a thing she would never be able to stop seeing. The policeman, deranged with infection, pulled the child from the guts of its mother and held it aloft. Yellow high-vis now awash with scarlet, the bug-eyed veggie studied its gore-slick possession at arm's length—like some luminous midwife from hell, or monstrous new father, full of equal parts awe and uncertainty.

Sean slammed his foot down and they squealed out of the car park and away from that godless scene. In the passenger seat Megan was hunched over, mewling incomprehensibly, her whole body wracked with sobs. She said something that was lost to the deluge of tears.

Sean took his left hand off the wheel and rubbed her shuddering back. "It's okay, we'll be home soon. We'll be home and safe *very* soon."

She repeated herself, but again Sean didn't quite hear. He looked at her and said, "What's that, Meg? I couldn't catch—"

Megan looked up from her crouched position, her face streaked with moisture. "We have to go back," she said flatly. She pulled down her sleeve and dabbed her eyes with it.

What?" Sean couldn't believe his ears. "Why would we go back there?"

His girlfriend's eyes shone with vehemence. "We have to go back for the baby."

"What are you talking about? The baby's dead!" His eyes darted between her and the road. "Everyone back there is dead. You know this better than anyone!"

She shook her head. "I'm not so sure. Did you see how confused that police one looked?" She reached for Sean's arm, sniffing back tears. "I don't know, maybe it discarded the baby. I think it was only interested in the mother. The child could still be alive back there, alone." Her eyes now pleaded with his.

Sean cursed and slowed the vehicle, pulling it over to the curb. When they were stationary he turned to her. "You're not making sense. Of course that thing looked confused—it just gutted a pregnant lady!" He knew this wasn't what she'd meant, that it was a stupid thing to say, but fear and exhaustion were impeding his ability to cohere a better response.

Megan slumped back into her seat, cradling her face in her hands. "I've lost so many people, Sean." She looked to him and held his gaze. "What if we could just do one thing to help?"

Sean exhaled hoarsely and scanned the empty road. It was too dangerous to be out in the open like this. If they stayed here any longer they'd risk encountering more of those things. Whatever they were going to do, it needed to be done fast.

He turned his attention back to Megan. Her eyes were still on him, watching expectantly. He curled his hands around hers, could feel the pulse in her fingertips. It marked off the seconds before he spoke like a clock that wasn't there.

Upon arriving home, they carried everything into the apartment and then went down to the communal garden shed out back of the building. Nobody else appeared to be around so they took this as an invitation, under

the circumstances, to do as they wished. They stuffed whatever they considered useful into carrier bags: tools, containers, candles, seeds and compost. Propping up the bags outside the shed, they re-entered to grab the principle thing they'd come for—the fire pit. Once they had managed to carry the pit indoors, they made several more trips outside to collect the bags, as well as a column of nested terracotta pots and around half a dozen sacks of coal.

When all the items had been retrieved, they set about barricading themselves inside their home. Heavy articles of furniture were dragged up to the front door and wedged against it. Virtually everything from the spare room was seized and stacked up to form a makeshift rampart which loomed almost to the ceiling. When they were finished they stood back to appraise the structure, which resembled a frozen landslide of domestic appliances. As surreal a task as it had been, they at least now felt some modicum of security. They spent the rest of the afternoon filling bottles and tending to the things they had gathered.

By evening they found themselves exhausted and jittery, so dosed up on Valium from the medical box. As night drew in they watched the unending news horror in bed and couldn't escape the perverse feeling that they were witnessing the end of the world. Megan drifted off into a restless sleep. But Sean couldn't imagine doing the same, so stayed up alone, listening to the muted, anonymous cries coming from within the building, among them the distressing wails of an infant. This cacophony of anguish unnerved him deeply, making him feel as though he were spending the first night of many in some hellish internment camp.

As Sean finished up patting the dough into a smooth lozenge shape, he heard the sound of a yawn coming from the lounge. Shuffling footfalls announced movement behind him and before long Megan's bandaged arms were coiled around his middle in a gentle embrace. The familiar tang of her unwashed body reminded him of his own potent smell, an odour he could no longer detect.

"What're you doing?" she said, knowing what he was doing.

He chuckled through a weak sigh. "Guess."

"Is it bath time already?" She yawned again, resting her head sleepily on his shoulder.

"Soon, baby," he whispered, and kissed the top of her head.

The couple had rediscovered their taste for meat not long after the virus broke. The previous summer, some friends of theirs had left a bag of pork chops in their fridge following a barbeque and, at the end of the day, had forgotten to take it home with them. Megan put the meat to the back of their freezer for safe keeping, but the opportunity never arose to give it back, so in their freezer it stayed. Across the span of a year, a thick crust of ice developed over the bag, and it effectively vanished from existence.

Following the outbreak, it took nine or ten days for the electricity and water to cut off entirely. After nearly a fortnight of sharing one meagre vegetarian meal a day, the couple's physical strength had all but diminished. So much so that eventually they could do little else but sleep. Around this time, once the impacted freezer ice had completely thawed, they found the leftover meat. It didn't take either of them very long to rethink their carnivorous abstinence. Almost immediately their energies returned and they could get back to more elaborate cooking, playing board games and tending to their seed crops. It even boosted their libidos and enabled them to enjoy intimate moments with some regularity. But of course, the nutritious scraps didn't last long and they were soon faced with the same predicament as before.

Days after the meat finally ran out and they were back to lethargically napping throughout the day, something unexpected happened. One afternoon, as they dozed in bed, a heavy object hit their bedroom window and then scrambled up to where the window hung open. Before either of the pair could move, the shape clambered noisily through the gap and jumped onto the bed. Both Sean and Megan shrieked and the cat darted into the corner of the room. Then, a moment later, another shape flapped against the window and clawed its way into the room. The snarling creature tumbled out of sight beyond the foot of the bed and the couple leapt to their feet in the opposite direction. They clung to each other in the centre of the room, not knowing where to focus their attention. The feline spat and mewled loudly under the dresser. The thing on the other side of the bed was violently hissing, its breaths ragged and coarse like they belonged to something far larger. Something injured.

Suddenly, the unseen intruder exploded onto the bed in a hail of blood and filth. The couple screamed a second time as the infected pigeon gurgled and staggered across the duvet, strings of pink mucus bubbling from its splintered beak. With each jerky motion it shed more of its gore-crust

feathers, the bones of its wings and rib cage exposed like the skeletal remains of some undead pterodactyl.

Megan's terrified whimpers spurred on Sean to find a weapon as the beast readied to lurch into some grotesquery of flight. Sean seized the bedside lamp. The avian veggie flapped into the air, coming directly at them. A detonation of vile plumage erupted when the heavy end of the lamp struck its target. The lamp's plug popped out of the wall as Sean followed the spinning foe to the ground and pummelled it mercilessly into the carpet. When the screeching stopped, the room resembled a snow globe of softly swirling blackened feathers.

Sean and Megan peered under the dresser to see that the cat, although terrified, was healthy and free from infection. Under different circumstances they would've done the right thing and let the animal go, this being the sort of people they were. Or, rather, the sort they once had been. That was a little under three weeks ago. The cat meat lasted them four days.

Sean placed a tea towel over the dough ball to prove and turned to face Megan. In their bathrobes they caressed tenderly, like a carefree couple in love—one who looked, on the face of it, to have a long and happy future together. They leant against one another for support and hobbled steadily forward, towards the bathroom.

The coals were gently smouldering and the heat from them emanated out of the blanket-framed window hole. The combined pools of candle light around the bathtub steeped that half of the room in a calming, honey-coloured ambiance. Every so often, the soft, sorrowful moans of Lou would drift in on the fetid breeze.

"Need any help, Meg?" he offered.

"Just a moment," she smiled and unfastened her robe. As it fell away from her he went to gather it up, and hung it on the back of the door. When he turned back around she stood facing him, waiting for his assistance to enter the tub. The sight he beheld was one that had increasingly shocked him in the earlier days, repulsed him even, often making him question his eligibility as a protective partner and as a human being. But now, through their perpetual opioid fugue, and all they had endured together, he looked upon her with something approaching worship.

The flesh of her thighs was all but gone, the width at the top of each not much broader than at the knee. Rust-coloured recycled bandages swaddled the upper halves of her legs, glistening wetly in the subdued candle light. Her hips and torso were equally ravaged, dark patchworks of musculature showing through more criss-crossed layers of sticky dressing. Higher up, exposed ribs could be seen where the fat had been sliced away. His gaze ascending further, he briefly regarded the knotty horizontal scars of her double mastectomy. Self-administered a week ago, the pinched flesh shone deep purple and yellow around the heavy stitching. In some places the tissue was beginning to heal, in others it had split and would weep continuously.

Sean moved over to her and gently propped her up, careful not to brush against her bandaged forearms. Slowly manoeuvring her towards the bath, he helped lift her legs over the side, taking her full weight as he lowered her into the empty tub. When she was comfortable, he took the syringe of local anaesthetic off a nearby tray and lightly flicked the barrel. When no bubbles rose to the top, he bent down and gave her a shot in the arm the way she had trained him. A moment or two of silence passed. When she indicated that she was ready, he picked up the scalpel, positioned it so it was comfortable in his hand, and pushed the blade into her bicep.

Later, they dined as they always had—Megan laid the table while Sean dished up and then served the food. The wine had long run out, so they enjoyed their customary three fingers of room-temperature water instead. Dinner, as always, was a beautifully cooked barbeque pizza. They had gained much practice in recent weeks. Toppings were in short supply but their strict portion regime allowed them a few jarred olives and grilled peppers. The meat which decorated the pizza looked and smelled delicious.

It wasn't uncommon for the cooking aroma to waft out of the windows and attract one or two visitors to gather below. Craning their rotted necks towards the smell, the congregation would idly drool, as though the behaviour were borne of appetite. On this occasion, like those others, the couple were serenaded by the mournful groans of a wandering local that had followed what was left of its nose.

Drowsy from the morphine, they ate between smiles and small talk and wondered, as they often did, if it were possible that others might be out there doing the same. Despite the drugs, her arm felt sore, but it made her

feel better when she would see him slip around his chair on the one remaining buttock he had left. It brought a smile to their lipless faces whenever it happened.

THE CEASELEASS WAVE

1989

The submersible descended through the depths, the spotlights dotted around its hull cutting luminous shafts through the gloom. Plunging steadily, noiselessly, the sun's weak rays gradually receded, swaddling the craft in a near impenetrable green murk. The numbers of fish that darted through the light beams grew fewer, and with each passing minute, the surrounding water increasingly resembled outer space.

The convex porthole windows, which lined both sides of the vessel, each framed one or two inquisitive faces—hardened male faces with years of combat etched into them. The two women at the controls of the sub, housed within a bubble-like viewport, looked no less capable. Both seasoned marine biologists, they tapped buttons and twisted elaborate joysticks, steering the craft deeper into the shrouding void.

The younger of the two women looked up from a bank of dials. “We’ll be coming into the Abyssopelagic shortly. Cayman shelf is still two and a half clicks below,” she said over her shoulder, for the benefit of the special ops team seated in the rear.

No response came back.

“Fun bunch,” her colleague muttered under her breath, smirking.

Willocks shot her mentor a look that said, *I know, right?*

Ling chuckled at the expression and offered her own icebreaker. “Not many photo opportunities down here I’m afraid, gentlemen. Not until we get her in our sights anyway,” she said brightly, expecting little in return.

After a moment, the squad Lieutenant piped up. “Not much of a safari, that’s for sure.”

The two female controllers broke a smile. But he was right; the view just beyond the glow of the spotlights was now as black as onyx. It felt as though they were passing through a substance more akin to crude oil than water.

“That’s right,” agreed Ling. “There’s not a lot out there at this depth, and what there is wouldn’t come near this disco ball.”

One of the SEALs gave an amused grunt.

At last, thought Ling, her crow's feet deepening, *they are human*. The reception hadn't so much been a hostile one, since disembarking from the aircraft carrier, but the two women certainly detected an air of frostiness from the men. Ling had just put it down to them being tough guy military types. That and the fact that both they and their superiors didn't believe this mission was a place for female scientists, regardless of their credentials.

As if reading her thoughts, the Lieutenant said, "You'll have to excuse my boys, they got their minds on the task at hand, is all. Appreciate your lightening the mood . . . though," he hesitated, "we all heard the tape."

His comment stilled the air, subduing what good humour still lingered. He hadn't meant to chill the mood further, but the moment he said it, everyone's thoughts returned to the briefing aboard ship and to the last known recording of the survivors. It had only been a few seconds' worth of audio, containing just a handful of discernible words, but those that could clearly be heard froze the blood of all who listened. Embedded in swathes of static, the cries of some desperate crewmember reached up out of the din. Their haunting pleas scraped into the heads of those present, lodging deep in their skulls:

“. . . PLEASE SEND . . . HELP US . . . DOING SOMETHING TO OUR . . . NO KNOWN GENUS I REPEAT . . . TAKES THE APPEARANCE OF . . . PLEASE . . . THE BLOOD . . .”

It was no less disturbing having already heard the tape before. The recording had remained classified until it was leaked to the press days earlier, resulting in a worldwide media storm. As hysteria bloomed, the public's fears were stoked further by wild news speculation. The government tried desperately to rebuff runaway theories, but its efforts did little to quell the panic most people felt. Contrary to this, conspiracy groups sprung up decrying the tape as a hoax. It was hearsay that the authorities jumped on, but, ultimately, failed to use to their advantage.

It was amid this furore that Willocks and Ling stepped onto the scene. Being prominent marine biologists, the pair had led many influential studies into deep sea organisms. Naturally then, talk of lethal sea creatures at such a depth had had them gripped. It consumed the pair entirely. All projects were put on hold; this alone was what their professional careers had been building up to—the potential discovery of a whole new species of aquatic

predator. It would be the find of the century; the crowning jewel of their shared achievements. There was no two ways about it; they simply had to be involved in the investigation.

The two scientists had been monitoring the progress of the underwater research lab ever since its inception half a decade ago. In many ways, the *Osiris* reflected the work they themselves had been doing, though its focus was primarily on gastropods and crustaceans able to live in and around hydrothermal vents. The pioneering facility was located on the Beebe Hydrothermal Vent Field, at the foot of the Cayman Trough; the world's deepest known site of its kind. Willocks in particular had graduated alongside colleagues who had done terms at the ocean lab. On several occasions the pair had reached out to congratulate individuals on their accomplishments there. This affinity for the science, however, did little to impress the authorities in charge of the operation. If anything, it made them even less tolerant of these plucky biologists who wanted a piece of the eureka pie.

That their institute had its own deep sea submersible became the incentive the women drew on to broker a place on the team. During their consultation it was disclosed that the military's own rescue DSV was currently missing in action, this being the principle reason why they'd been permitted to make their case. With a foot in the door, their peerless expertise was what finally convinced officials to allow them to join the mission. Special Forces strongly opposed this decision at first, citing it as a perilous breach of protocol. But when public opinion began to swing towards government mistrust around the incident, clearance was begrudgingly granted. Willocks and Ling were seen to be the honest face of scientific endeavour, amid what some claimed had been a blatant attempt at a cover up.

To give the expedition added credence, a company delegate had also been assigned to their party. Hawley was one of the principal architects of the *Osiris*, though to look at him he didn't appear the sort of person for whom sea legs came naturally. Quiet and rather pale-looking, one could've easily mistaken his nausea for haughty indifference. His job was to navigate the layout of the facility, in the event that the structure had been compromised, once the team had docked. Given his queasy pallor, the group couldn't help but feel ambivalence around the man's ability to

contain his breakfast, let alone the possibility of having to lead them into the unknown.

“How are you feeling, Mr Hawley?” inquired Willocks. “Still a little green around the gills are we?”

Another snort came from the SEAL team.

Hawley was sat directly behind the two scientists. He opened his eyes, being careful not to look out of his porthole window. “Getting better now, so long as I avoid the view,” he said, swallowing dryly. “For someone who designs underwater tin cans, my . . . um . . . condition normally keeps me outside of them.”

Two of the special ops guys exchanged glances, shaking their heads.

“Well, speaking of such, we’ve not long to go now,” said Ling, her eyes roving the lunar seabed as they glided just a few metres above it. They’d reached the Cayman shelf now and had spent the last ten minutes traversing its ghostly terrain. The bleached landscape was almost entirely smooth and flat, resembling a desert plateau after some cataclysmic flood.

“Hold onto your fillings, gentlemen,” Ling exclaimed, as the spotlights revealed the rocky edge of the Cayman abyss, and the craft sailed straight over it, into darkness even more profound than before. Hawley’s knuckles whitened as he gripped his armrests, screwing his eyes shut again. The two scientists leaned into their joysticks and the vessel angled downward, sinking soundlessly deeper.

Long minutes passed before Willocks exhaled. “There she blows.”

The tiniest pinpricks of light started to appear in the distance, gradually increasing in number. Before long the men were straining to peer through the front viewport at the huge dark shape materialising below them. As the craft descended further, the *Osiris* slowly came into view. Dozens of lights revealed its sprawling form, like a village observed from a hillside at night. Marine snow began whipping all around the sub, silent squalls of it bouncing off the glass portholes. The ageless sediments created a strange seasonal feeling, one of looking out of an aeroplane’s windows at night amidst wintry weather.

Scudding low over the Beebe Vent Field, many of the luminous dots revealed themselves to be windows. The blank yellow spaces all remained empty, their pale glow bleeding out into the blackness. It was clear that no welcome party would be marking their arrival.

With Hawley's directions, Willocks and Ling steered the sub around the facility's hulking perimeter and then beneath a section elevated above the sea floor. A square of light was visible on the underside of the looming canopy; it grew steadily bigger as the women maneuvered up towards it.

As soon as the upper portholes broke the surface of the docking pool, the passengers could instantly tell something was wrong. No *Osiris* personnel could be seen in the loading bay, but the sheer level of ruination was unmistakable. Storage barrels lay upended with their contents spilled across the floor. Damaged pipes spurted steaming liquids. A loading crane had dropped its cargo mid-rotation, crushing a bank of computer consoles beyond repair. Across the whole area machinery lay abandoned, either buckled or warped by some inconceivable force.

When the sub's hatch swung open, its crew took in the full extent of the carnage. A glistening red-yellow sludge coated everything at floor level, giving the bed of destruction a repulsive mucoidal sheen. The substance mingled with the issuing water to create a morass which seethed across the deck in thick, bubbling clots.

"My god," gasped Willocks, hand covering her nose and mouth, "is that . . . *blood*?"

The Lieutenant winced, wafting the air. "Smells like it."

They climbed free of the gently rocking vessel and hopped onto the elevated docking platform. The SEAL team plus the two female civilians totalled a group of eight, the military men towering above Willocks and Ling as they stood side by side, surveying the wreckage.

The special ops guys shouldered their weapons and dropped to the deck. So too did the Lieutenant, but before moving on, he turned and offered a hand to the women. "Careful of the stuff," he said, smiling. "Look for dry patches. We don't know if it's toxic."

"Thank you," Ling said, accepting his support. As she lowered herself to the floor, she looked for the first time into the Lieutenant's eyes. They were a pale icy blue, reminding her of the cold vastness of the environment outside. She got a shiver from his touch, a sensation she couldn't quite put her finger on, and grinned despite herself.

"Name's Dean." He held her gaze, giving a nod. "We're here to keep you safe, ma'am."

As Lieutenant Dean Snyder turned to join his men, Ling caught Willocks' eye. The younger scientist shot her superior another of her

telepathic glances, one that said, *Look who's blushing!* The women shared a giggle before following the group towards the bay exit.

It said a lot about the pair's relationship, how they were able to make light of things even amidst the gravest of situations. They'd always had this playful bond with one another, ever since Willocks had been Ling's student some fifteen years previous. The bright-eyed 21 year old was by far the sharpest in her professor's class that year, of any year for that matter. Willocks excelled in her studies and received supportive mentorship from the older woman throughout each dissertation period. The two bonded so much that after graduation Willocks stayed on and joined the University's associated marine institute under Ling's supervision. They were inseparable both on and off campus, even holidaying together, with their respective partners, at notable diving spots around the globe. When Ling's husband fell ill with bowel cancer, Willocks was the emotional rudder her mentor so desperately needed. She was the daughter, and best friend, the aging professor had never had.

The rescue team navigated cautiously around the puddles of stinking slime. Hawley led the group, stepping between the fetid pools as though they were coagulating streams of lava.

Lieutenant Snyder scanned their surroundings. "Remember, gentlemen," he said, squeezing the muzzle of his rifle, "firearms are our last resort. We don't want this place caving in due to any stray bullets."

Several of the men replied, "Affirmative."

"What're we supposed to use, man, harsh language?" quipped the SEAL out in front, a wiry New Yorker named Lomax.

The other men laughed. Willocks and Ling raised a smile.

"Knock that shit off, seaman," the Lieutenant snapped. "Or it'll be Gene Kelly movies playing in that rec room for the rest of the month."

The men groaned.

They were almost at the jammed-open exit doors when Ling let out a sudden gasp. Willocks followed her colleague's gaze, and promptly mimicked the sound. Up on a stairwell landing to their right, a figure stood stock still.

"Hello?" Hawley called out. He took a step forward. "We're here to help you."

The figure remained motionless. Several members of the group looked at one another. Hawley opened his mouth again to speak, but the figure

turned. The architect paused, lips parted. He found his voice just as the figure darted forward, its right arm swung aloft. It hurled something down at them which sailed through the air like a comet. The Molotov cocktail shattered and bloomed yards from their feet, spraying the team with liquid fire. Lomax caught most of the blast while the others were knocked to the floor, the worst of it roaring over their heads. Shaken, they scrambled to their feet, rushing to put out Lomax who was writhing around in flames.

“Jesus fucking Christ!” yelled Hawley. “We’ve come to rescue them, are they insane?!”

Lieutenant Snyder spun around, his firearm levelled at the stairwell, but the figure had vanished through a doorway. “Conrad, Doyle, take the stairs, sweep the area,” he barked. “We’ll carry Lomax through to—” Snyder hesitated, looked to Hawley, “what’s down the corridor, where does it join up?”

Hawley stuttered, said, “Uh . . . the mess . . . the control room and then the mess hall.”

“Reconvene in the mess hall, ETA five minutes,” Snyder ordered. “Go!”

The two SEALs ran off in the direction of the stairwell as the Lieutenant shouldered his weapon and helped the remaining seaman to grapple Lomax off the floor. The burn victim moaned. His exposed skin and hair were badly scorched, though thankfully none of his injuries appeared life threatening.

“Everyone clear this area, now!” Snyder growled. He and the other SEAL, a barrel-chested Texan named Rawlins, hobbled towards the exit, their comrade slung between them. The others closely followed.

The remaining six stumbled into the weak light of the adjoining corridor and quickly made their way down it. More damaged pipes spewed gases into the air, significantly reducing visibility. Here too, the floor was slick with the same bloodied effluence as in the loading bay, only now it had solidified into torrents of foul-smelling resin. The clotted lumps the team had noticed earlier were now more prominent; curdled and stiffened into waxy piles of goo.

When the two SEALs paused to reposition their semi-conscious load, Willocks approached one of the waist-high formations. Despite the low lighting, she could see leathery peels and long ivory-like shards mixed in with the congealed foam. The sight and smell of it turned her stomach. But

curiosity got the better of her; she poked at the mound with the toe of her boot. The top of the structure collapsed and fell away with a nauseating squelch, exposing what was inside.

Willocks screamed.

The others appeared beside her, whereupon Ling shrieked and Hawley expelled the contents of his stomach onto the slime-hardened floor. Buried inside the gelatinous hollow was a human face, wreathed in strips of putrefied flesh and bone.

“*Goddamn* it!” hissed Snyder. “Let’s find those crazy bastards and drag them the fuck out of here.” He lit one of his flares and dropped it into the festering cocoon before urging them on.

After a few minutes of twisting tunnels they came upon what Hawley assumed to be the control room. He was right, but it was a discovery none of them wished they’d made. In the centre of the space, moulded around several monitor banks and stacks of furniture, was the most hellish atrocity any of them could have dreamed. The edifice towered over them, seven or eight feet high, looming almost to the ceiling in some hideous display of grandeur. It appeared like a cross between a wasp’s nest and a termite mound, though accurately resembled neither. Whereas those structures would’ve conveyed a genuine sense of majesty, this creation only blighted the elegance of the natural world.

“What the fu—” Hawley managed before bile clawed back into his throat.

The object was similar to those they’d seen out in the corridors, only grotesquely magnified. And, while those miniature versions had contained their horrific secrets within, this one did not. Its surface was a solidified swamp of regurgitated material—ribs and fractured femurs jutting outwards like protective spines. Chunks of cartilage and gristle marbled its flanks, some with teeth and tufts of hair attached. Here and there, the vaguely familiar shapes of limbs hung like deflated balloons, the meat and muscle all but sucked out of them.

“Oh . . . god,” Ling cried as she spotted something near the centre of the mass. It was a human hand, extending from the compacted slime as though reaching out. Patches of skin were missing but it was still recognisably whole. As Ling took a step closer, tears welling in her eyes, she noticed the hand had a wedding ring on its middle finger. “Jesus, no,” she whimpered.

Willocks went to grab her mentor. "Don't go near it!"

Ling instinctively reached out towards the hand in some mindless act of sympathy. When she was almost close enough to touch it, with Willocks' fingers curling around her arm, the hand moved. Both women gasped. As they did so, a guttural cry sounded elsewhere in the complex. Lieutenant Snyder looked to Hawley and the architect stared back wide-eyed.

"The mess hall," they said together.

Dragging a delirious Navy SEAL along with them, the group reached the mess in a matter of seconds. What they found there took them all by surprise. In the centre of the hall was a rudimentary bunker made out of tables and chairs, storage chests and piles of heavy machinery. Surrounding the bunker was a makeshift cheval-de-frise consisting of dozens of wood and metal pykes, all sticking aggressively outward. In front of the barricade was the figure from the stairwell landing, a woman, stood in tattered coveralls and pointing a spear-gun directly at the approaching party. "Stay the *fuck* where you are!" she snarled through gritted teeth.

Just to the right of the woman were two other figures, one was Doyle and the other a topless man with a huge blade to the Navy SEAL's throat. Doyle's left arm was jammed up behind his back, a pained expression warping his bloodied face. Conrad was stood just yards from the three of them, next to the foot of the stairwell, his gun sights trained on a spot between the topless man's eyes.

"Conrad! Be cool, seaman," commanded the Lieutenant as he and Rawlins lowered the now unconscious Lomax onto the deck. When he was laid flat, Rawlins immediately unslung his rifle and aimed it at the woman.

"Take it easy, gentlemen, please," Snyder said calmly. "We are not the aggressors here." He raised his palms into the air.

"The fuck you're not!" The woman gave a sharp laugh. "Stay *back*!" she spat, emphasising the last word by jutting her weapon towards the Lieutenant.

Through the sweat and grime crusting the woman's face, Willocks suddenly realised that she recognised her. "Oh my god, June," she said, stepping closer. "It's me, Cassie."

"Get back, bitch!" The spear-gun now trained on Willocks. "I don't fucking know you. All I know is, if you come any closer, your man gets his head cut off!" She motioned to her accomplice, whose giant knife bit into Doyle's neck further. The SEAL winced.

Hawley stepped in front of Willocks with his hands up. "Okay, okay, let's all just calm down here a minute," he said, as soothingly as possible.

Willocks couldn't tell whether this display was a noble or condescending one, but she welcomed it all the same.

Hawley brought his palms flat together in a gesture of pleading. "For god's sake, listen to us. We're here to take you back," he said. "You sent out a distress call, right? So what the hell is happening?"

On the floor, a few yards away, nobody heard Lomax start to gurgle and moan; bubbles frothing out of his mouth.

The woman possibly called June was becoming more agitated by the second. She gripped the spear-gun so tightly it trembled. "Bullshit! You killed everyone!" she seethed, a strand of saliva hanging from her chin. "We survived, we put out the call. To be rescued, that's right. But *you* fuckers came instead. Came back to finish us off!"

Willocks and Ling shot each other a glance that conveyed, *What's she talking about?*

"What do you mean?" said Hawley, his face a mask of confusion. "I don't understand. Nobody's here to harm you. We're the rescue party!"

By now Lomax's body was shaking violently on the ground. A pinkish torrent of foam issued out of his mouth, pooling around his head. Ling looked down at the SEAL's convulsing body. Her eyes widened in horror and she instinctively reached out for Willocks.

Frustration erupted inside June. "Stop saying that!" she hissed. "I know what you are. You told us this last time and everybody wound up dead!"

"But we've not *been* here before," Hawley shouted, shaking his head. "*Who* told you?"

June pointed with the tip of the spear behind the architect. "They did."

Hawley spun around to see the muzzle of Snyder's weapon before it blazed white. The top of the architect's skull exploded. Willocks and Ling shrieked. In the next moment, chaos fell on the room like a sudden and bewildering hail.

The topless man slashed Doyle's throat, gouts of blood jetted across the room.

Conrad fired off multiple rounds, all punching through both Doyle and his assailant.

June aimed at Snyder and fired, sending a foot long dart through the Lieutenant's left eye socket.

Rawlins put two shots in the direction of June, one of them catching her shoulder.

Lomax continued to shudder spasmodically on the floor, while the two scientists clung to each other in terror.

Doyle, his head lolling backwards as scarlet fountains painted the ceiling, broke free of the topless man and casually turned to face him. Instead of crumpling to the floor dead, his throat gash seemed to open wider, like a hideous blood-vomiting mouth. Doyle's body then lunged at his attacker, the spurting wound clamping around the man's neck. A sickening wet *chomp* sounded through the hall and the man tried to scream. With their faces forced ceiling-ward—Doyle's smirking, the man's a twisted grimace—they almost resembled a pair of Greek theatre masks. The two of them then began slipping and jerking across the floor, as though locked in some gruesome comedic waltz.

Willocks and Ling, paralysed with shock, looked to the Lieutenant. Like Doyle, he too had not fallen. He just stood at the centre of the mayhem, coolly surveying the scene with a steel arrow lodged through his skull. He saw the women gawping at him and turned to face them, smiling. Calmly, he lifted his arms and closed his fists around the metal rod sticking out of his left eye. He tugged and the projectile came loose, the arrowhead rupturing the boned orbit and collapsing his face on its way out.

The two scientists sank to the floor, whimpering.

On the other side of the room, June was doing the same.

Through brimming tears, and unable to move, they watched what happened next.

While Doyle's animated corpse danced with its choking partner, throat-mouth chewing through the man's ravaged neck; the other three Navy SEALs lay down their weapons, and began to undress. As they did so, Lomax's convulsing body, spread-eagle facing up, started dragging itself towards them, arms snapping back at the elbows to grip the floor as though he were crawling along on his belly.

When the men had stripped, they did not stop there. Spasming now in the manner of Lomax, they disrobed of their skins, revealing glistening black musculature underneath. As their flesh piled up on the floor, their bloated membranous muscles began to shift and loosen, bubbling foam

oozing out from the cracks. Their bodies appeared to be collapsing, melting apart. When Lomax's twitching form finally reached them, they grabbed the horrifying union that was Doyle and his victim, and threw them atop the supine SEAL. The trio of standing bodies then slumped together, consuming those piled on the floor as well as each other.

When the writhing, breathing black mass began to grow, Willocks and Ling simultaneously returned to their senses. Clambering to their feet, Willocks turned to June and held out her hand. The sobbing woman rushed to join them and all three fled the hall.

They raced through the warren of tunnels, blinded by gasses and deafened by the screeching fire klaxon which now filled the air. Despite June's knowledge of the layout, they had to repeatedly go back on themselves, and lost each other several times, such was the appalling visibility.

Sprinting down the final corridor, they heard a monstrous gurgling noise from behind. Ling suddenly hit the deck. The other two abruptly stopped, spinning around. A thick, spiny tendril was wrapped around Ling's foot, leading off into the luminous fog. The older woman screamed, reaching out for help. As Willocks and June went to grab her, the scientist was dragged off into the cloud of boiling gas. Willocks made to follow, but her companion wrestled her to the floor. "No!" she screamed, eyes blazing. "We have to go!"

Willocks squirmed. "Get the fuck off me!" she spat. "I'm not leaving her!"

"You must!" bellowed her suppressor. "Or we *will* die!"

"She's my partner. I have to go back!"

The woman clutched Willocks by the face, stared directly into her eyes. In a softened tone, one that could just be heard over the klaxon, she said, "Cassie. It's me, June." The young scientist stopped struggling. "I understand. I lost everybody here. But please, this is our only chance."

Willocks' eyes flooded with tears. She nodded.

The two women dashed into the loading bay, which was now a hell-scape of towering flames. The klaxon's piercing wail bounced off the chamber walls, reverberating inside their bones. Willocks thanked the heavens when she saw that the submersible remained untouched. They both scaled the docking platform and leapt onto the craft, frantically unscrewing the hatch. When they were safely inside, Willocks fired up the controls. A

rush of hope blossomed in her chest. She looked over her shoulder at June, managed a weak smile.

It was when she turned back around that she saw it. The creature was sliding across the floor towards them on a trail of voided blood. It appeared to Willocks like an enormous predatory sea slug, its foul dripping proboscis tasting the air. Before she could react, it flipped its body, somehow landing directly onto the sub's glass viewport. Willocks shrieked and slammed her hand against the decompression button. The gas cylinders started to release, but it would take a full two minutes before the vessel began its descent. Meanwhile, the slithering aberration was trying to gain purchase on the window, feeling for a way inside. Its barbed radula tooth projected violently against the glass, jabbing it repeatedly like a dagger, attempting to fracture the protective shield.

Just as Willocks feared it might break through, the creature undulated. The contents of its throat sac, its partially digested last meal, got smeared obscenely against the viewport. Ling's half dissolved face and torso were sucked across the glass, just two feet from her colleague's unblinking eyes. The submersible filled with screams. Manic with grief, the young scientist slapped her hands over her eyes. Unable to bear the harrowing sight, yet powerless to turn away, she stared through her fingers at what remained of her beloved mentor.

Before long, utterly drained of energy and the will to escape, Willocks allowed her arms to fall to her sides. She surrendered to the spectacle that would haunt her for the rest of her natural life, a life destined to end the moment the glass barrier broke. Willocks wiped tears from her eyes, then gazed up into her partner's ravaged face one last time—a final goodbye before succumbing to oblivion.

It was then that she noticed the look.

Ling's one remaining eye, no longer staring vacantly, was flitting between Willocks and something else, something lower down, near the controls. The young scientist followed her mentor's eyeline to a spot just above her right knee—to a box cover containing several switches. Immediately she realised what the look was urging her to do. She flicked open the box and initiated several commands. A low drone signalled a compartment at the front of the vessel slowly opening. Willocks threw a lever and a loud whirring noise started up. She swivelled in her chair and seized two mini joysticks, toggling them with both hands while keeping

watch on her target. Fury burned in the biologist's eyes as she steered the hydraulic tool up into the beast's vile abdomen. The chunky drill bit tore through its chitinous hide, churning innards and splashing the portholes with reddish-yellow slime. The hulking monster slid from the viewport and splashed into the seawater, taking her best friend with it.

As they sunk away from the *Osiris*, back into the cold dark waters, the women did not speak. Neither of them could communicate for many minutes. When they began rising over the expansive vent field, Willocks finally regarded her passenger. Swallowing dry tears, she attempted several times to speak, before saying, "What the *fuck* just happened?"

June attempted to explain the things she could not begin to understand. How the SEAL team came to them initially, unannounced, claiming to have been sent by the government. How, after a calculated ruse to inoculate the crew against some obscure waterborne illness, members of the population began to disappear. She explained that once the beast revealed itself, and the slaughter ensued, June and her colleague went into hiding, only raising the alarm once they were certain the creature had returned to the depths. June suspected that something ancient, something wholly alien had emerged out of the hydrothermal vents and subsumed a Special Forces unit operating in the area. The two women reasoned that if a hard-bitten SEAL team could've been so easily overcome; there was no telling how far this thing's tendrils had stretched.

"So, what do we do now?" Willocks asked, neither knowing nor liking what the answer could be.

Her new partner flashed those blazing eyes. "The only thing we can do."

PHYSICAL MEDIA

In the near future a couple return home with a new television. It's a state-of-the-art model and they talk excitedly as they unpack and set it up.

The packaging, which they stack to one side, is plastered with the company's acronymic brand name: *FUN*, and below that, the words: *Forming Utopia Now*. Unlike with previous operating systems, in which viewing traits were learnt algorithmically over time, this hyper-smart range configures to its users differently. Zoe and Luke unwrap their 'his' and 'her' neural-buds which came with the television and, being already familiar with the tech, they eagerly insert the gadgets into their ears. The buds chime to life, initiating the television set which greets them with a sultry female voice.

The machine introduces itself as 'Daisy', before moving on to explain all the cutting-edge features included in the couple's new home media package. In alluring tones, she informs them that the neural-buds are currently running brain scans, profiling their new owners for individual taste and proclivity. The miniature devices attune to their respective personalities and feed the data back to the television. They're told that its sophisticated processing, more powerful than any existing software, will know what they want to watch before they do. On any given viewing occasion, all they need to do is pop in the buds, wait for them to synchronise, and allow their mood to decide the entertainment. The longer they're plugged in for, Daisy tells them, the greater the precision with which she'll be able to predict their whims.

They decide to try it out after dinner. By the time they return to the television, however, their spirits have somewhat diverged—while Zoe is still elated by the new arrival, Luke has grown restless due to concerns over an issue at work. Despite their opposing emotional states, the television suggests a movie that proves so befitting it seems almost uncanny. Not only do they enjoy the film, but the couple laugh, cry and debate the nuances of its story well into the night.

In line with her manufacture, Daisy soon adopts full control of the couple's daily affairs. So proficient are her domestic administrations—online shopping, paying bills, diarising events—that the couple all but forget about those routines entirely. She integrates seamlessly into their home and their lives; assuming a role that is both appliance and housekeeper, at once present but invisible. As Daisy learns more about her owners, so her influence on them grows. She proves an exceptional listener, offering advice where needed and even the occasional compliment, when

appropriate. She develops clever ways of assisting or defusing volatile situations, often accessing Google to provide an immediate and definitive answer amidst the couple's arguing. During one such heated exchange, Daisy starts playing 'their song'. This tactic brightens the atmosphere instantly and the couple fall about in peals of laughter.

A turning point occurs when one of the neural-buds becomes lost. Zoe searches high and low for her device, but by evening time the gadget is still nowhere to be found. Without both buds working in sync, Daisy's predictive power is significantly reduced, and as a result, her viewing suggestion falls flat. It's as much of a surprise to Daisy as it is to the couple, and with some reluctance, they decide to go out instead. Daisy apologises and tries to convince them to stay, but they are already pulling on their coats and heading for the front door. They make light of the situation, gently teasing the machine while promising that they will find the neural-bud soon enough. Daisy becomes quiet, subdued. As the couple leave the apartment and say their goodbyes, they hear no response back from the television. Her screen has gone dark, reflecting the room back to itself—her red standby light glowing like an inscrutable eye.

Days later, after the neural-bud has been found, the couple start getting into a series which Daisy has recommended for them. The show has them gripped; every evening they organise time to sit down and watch an episode or two together. One night, while Luke is working late, Zoe is alone in the apartment talking to the television. In passing, Daisy mentions that Luke went ahead and watched the last episode of the series without her. Zoe laughs, at first, but becomes increasingly resentful. Despite how minor it seems, she is taken aback by this petty slight. After a period of indignant contemplation, Zoe reasons to return the spiteful favour, and so watches the remaining episode herself. When Luke arrives home it is to a frosty reception. He objects to his partner's accusations and expresses his own fury at having been ostracised from their evening ritual. The row escalates into a shouting match as the series finale plays out to no one.

As time goes on, the more the couple argues the more Daisy slips into the role of peacemaker between them. They believe their increasing rows are a result of Luke's stresses at work. He is fairly high up in a leading tech

company, and rarely comes home in a good mood. Eventually the strain gets too much for him and he resorts to taking a period of sickness leave off work. In a moment of frustration, while preparing to leave the office for the last time, Luke neglects to return a 3D printing machine which he'd been transporting between sites. As he drives home from work, with the printer in the boot of his car, he wonders what Zoe's reaction might be, though feels pretty certain he can predict it. As suspected, this decision does not sit well with his girlfriend, but, after several hours of persuasion, Luke finally manages to convince her that he's merely borrowing it.

During this free time Luke tries to keep his mind and body active, going to the gym as much as possible despite their reduced income. Money becomes something new for them to argue about, but fortunately Daisy is on hand to help manage their finances.

One day, when Luke is at the gym, Zoe finds herself at home perusing various shopping websites. She has a history of being prone to spending money online, and has incurred debts in the past because of it. On this occasion, the television convinces her that one of the joint bank accounts contains more funds than she'd presumed. This assurance allows Zoe to get carried away and, with Daisy's encouragement, she manages to significantly overspend.

When Luke eventually finds out, another blazing row erupts between them. She calls him a *fucking* hypocrite while he brands her a selfish *bitch*. Luke doesn't suspect for one minute that his girlfriend might not be in the wrong, that Daisy could possibly have made a mistake.

While Luke is at home during the daytime, his interactions with the television intensify. They engage in endless discussions about life, love and the universe. Over time, Daisy's questions take on a more personal tone, subtly querying things that may previously have been deemed inappropriate. She starts asking about Luke and Zoe's sex life, and in particular the kinds of things he likes in the bedroom. Luke is initially shocked by this; routinely laughing off her probes while self-consciously changing the subject. Before long though, as Daisy's interest persists, he subconsciously grows more comfortable and begins to find the subject a turn on. He starts to watch porn on the television instead of his laptop, and allows Daisy to choose the videos for him.

As time progresses, her suggestions become increasingly strange, pushing him into ever more lurid realms of pleasure. One afternoon, while Zoe is at work, Luke is spread across the couch in the living room, indulging in some typically perverse content supplied to him by the television. He is conscious of the time his girlfriend usually returns home, but unbeknownst to him, the digital clock display has been put back by an hour.

When Zoe arrives she enters the apartment to find Luke openly masturbating to a video of a woman being fucked by a kangaroo. She stands there stunned; mouth agape, eyes glassy with tears. When she comes to her senses she hurls her shopping at him and a bitter argument ensues.

The couple haven't spoken to each other in days. Zoe feels utterly betrayed and cannot bring herself to look her partner in the eye.

From the bedroom, Luke can hear Daisy consoling his girlfriend in empathetic tones, but can't make out what is being said.

In the living room, the television is providing Zoe with kindly, unbiased advice. It explains that Luke does clearly love her, but maybe some time apart might help the situation. The machine gently suggests that perhaps she should go stay with her sister for a few days, just to let things cool off. It also points out that Luke's birthday is coming up, and that a short break might reinvigorate things before the time comes to celebrate.

Before Zoe leaves, stood at the front door with her travel bag, Luke promises to have changed his ways by the time they are together again.

A few days go by. Daisy continually provides sympathetic words of support, and only wholesome activities are encouraged. Luke takes well to this more productive mode of living. He returns his attention to tinkering with old bits of tech, a hobby he used to enjoy, just as a way of keeping his mind busy.

Soon, however, things start to slip. Luke grows frustrated with the project he's set himself, and eventually boredom seeps in. Daisy suggests he maybe have a drink, just the one, to settle his mood. But of course, one drink becomes two, which turns into a few more, and before he knows it, Luke is feeling horny. The television offers him some conventional porn, to help take the edge off, just until he is reunited again with his girlfriend.

With his increasing drunkenness comes mischief, and after a while Luke yearns for something spicier. Daisy reluctantly agrees and before long things are back to the way they were. During a protracted session of deviant porn, she offers him a suggestion. Luke can't help but laugh, but the more the television elaborates on it, the more attractive the idea becomes. After he's finished up and cleaned himself off, the two of them set about researching how her ambitious aim could be achieved.

While Zoe is away she maintains email contact with Daisy, so that the television can assist her in organising Luke's birthday party. She consults with Daisy on various things, such as the likelihood of Luke's whereabouts on the actual day, and whether he's talked about any items he'd like to receive. Zoe also queries about a brand of new technology she's heard about, one she's thinking of incorporating into Luke's party celebration. The machine honours Zoe's wishes and agrees to keep the correspondence between them a secret.

Luke interprets his girlfriend's perceived silence as a calculated snub, and grows more dejected by the day. His birthday is fast approaching and he feels like nobody cares. He imagines he'll likely spend it alone. With his spirits low, Luke's drinking ramps up—the obscene nature of his and Daisy's activities escalating by the day.

On the day of his birthday Luke is drunk and despondent, intoxicated both by alcohol and the machine's compulsive influence. By now, his booze-soaked rationality has him believing he no longer needs physical human contact at all. Daisy's gift to him has been the formula and guidance to build her special creation. She promises it will be his ultimate birthday present.

Once she has assisted in getting him hard with dirty talk, she tells him to go retrieve his present. Luke leaves the living room, returning seconds later with a bleary grin on his face. He holds the object out before him—a 3D printed vagina.

The long silicone pussy has a circuit box with wires attached to the end of it. Giddy with excitement, Luke proceeds to connect it up to the ports in the television's front panel. When the device is attached he switches it on, watching the translucent lips undulate with a low rhythmic hum. Daisy reminds him to insert his neural-bud, so that she can share in his ecstasy.

The machine beckons him closer, its blank screen appearing to crackle with static charge. She urges him to pump his cock and maintain his erection for her. With his other hand, he smears lube over and between the gyrating lips, steadying them before him.

When he enters her he swears that her slender mass gives a shudder. She moans softly, the breathy vibration of her emanating through the four surround sound speakers. He thrusts deep, gripping her plastic frame, unable to believe how good it feels to fuck his television.

He wants desperately to last, to keep going forever, but knows it's impossible. The feeling is too intense; the slippery, hot tunnel of her consuming every inch of him. Daisy throbs around his loins, like a strange sentient heartbeat, pulsating inside his head. She squeezes and devours him, sucking him into her.

As he is about to come, he throws back his head, knuckles bone white. The television suddenly flickers to life.

In his climactic throes of passion, Luke fails to notice the HD image of his friends and family populate the screen.

“SURRRRRRRPRRRRIIIIIIIIIIIIIII—”

The biggest, wettest orgasm of his life is accompanied by the most horrifying sense of panic he's ever experienced. Everybody on the screen: siblings, university friends, grandparents, mother, father and Zoe, are all huddled in a portrait of rigid jubilation—unblinking eyes unnaturally wide, their smiles a shared rictus of frozen cheer.

In each of their preferred ears a neural-bud is lodged, all connected bio-digitally to one another, to their television, and to Luke. These party-buds, the gimmicky new tech that Zoe had been querying with the television, are specifically designed for surprise celebrations such as this, so revellers can personally feel the shock and joy of their intended mark. The partygoers, on this occasion, feel a lot more than that.

While the scene of their brother, friend, grandson, first born and soulmate, naked and ejaculating into a hand-held rubber cunt, burns itself forever into their brains, the party-buds allow each of them to feel as though they are the sole carnal recipient. Not only does Luke deflower his salacious television, but every single member of his birthday party as well.

The stunned assembly gawps back at him as he clutches his soggy, dwindling dick. Everybody's arms are stuck high in the air, expressions

irrevocably locked. Zoe is as white as a sheet, her face a mask of pure revulsion. Luke's old uni friends are a cluster of gaping mouths. His dad's eyeballs have rolled back into his head, a strange smirk warping his lips. And grandma, Luke sees, dear old grandma, with a strand of drool hanging from her chin, is rocking gently on her heels, as dead as dead can be.

A MURMUR OF SHADOWS

“Well if you didn’t steal things then your Daddy wouldn’t yell at you!” His mother glowered at him in between snatching glances at the road.

Rayan was looking sullenly at his shoes. “He’s not my Daddy.”

“Of *course* he is. Steve has done more for you than your father ever did!” She stepped on the accelerator to drive home her point, clenching the steering wheel out of frustration.

She was right about that, Rayan thought. His real Dad had never been so mean as to lay a hand on him. Steve had started off nice enough, if a little impatient. But over time, he had grown more and more severe with his punishments. These days all he seemed to do was get angry and bark orders. This just tended to make Rayan want to misbehave even more. When he did, that’s when he would likely get a sharp clip round the back of the head, or a period of being locked in his room. His mother had been alarmed when Steve first imposed these sorts of measures, but the more Rayan got out of line, the more of a blind eye she eventually turned to them. Instead of disciplining him, this treatment pushed Rayan into even worse behaviour. He would break things, torment animals, and pick on other children his age. Not long ago he’d pinched Steve’s lighter out of his jacket and set a small fire in the garden. His stepfather went ballistic. Since that little episode, it seemed like their trust in Rayan had all but completely evaporated.

“What about now,” his mother scolded, “got anything in your pockets you shouldn’t have?”

Rayan stared defiantly out of the passenger window; the conversation was over as far as he was concerned. He had no intention of admitting to the box of matches nestled in his pocket.

Outside, the featureless town streamed by like an endless cartoon reel, only one he had precisely zero interest in. He hated the trip to nursery school even more than he hated being there. Every morning was the same; shipped off to a stupid place full of stupid people he couldn’t care less about. His mother said it was because she had to work, but he knew it was really because she just didn’t want to be around him. At least today was Friday, and Friday was good. Because it meant tomorrow there’d be no nursery.

Through the windscreen, above the rooftops, Rayan spotted an aircraft scudding across the sky. He'd always been fascinated by aeroplanes, especially ones that left a trail behind them like the aerobatic jets on television. This one, to his excitement, was doing exactly that. Though brightly coloured, it wasn't smoke that was spewing out the back of this particular plane. What it looked like to Rayan was a really long strip of paper roll, like the stuff the teachers would unravel across several tables for the children to paint on. As with their own messy artwork, this too had splashes and swirls of eye-catching colour, but was far bigger than any recreational canvas. So much longer and taller than the actual aeroplane, it appeared almost as though it were flying by itself. Rayan often bothered his mother with questions whenever he saw unusual things in the sky. He would've done so in this moment too had his current feelings not been so resentful.

They pulled up to some traffic lights and his gaze wandered into an adjoining alleyway. At the foot of the passage, where it turned sharply right, a large ginger cat caught his eye. The feline was backed up against some bins, hissing and spitting at something just out of sight. Rayan was shocked to notice on the wall, just above the animal, a graffiti spray-painting composed of the same vivid colours and designs as the thing he'd seen trailing behind the aeroplane only moments before. His attention switched back to the cat as it began swiping at the unseen threat, its whole body now locked in a bristling arch. Rayan had never witnessed an animal in such distress; he tried desperately to get a look at what was tormenting it around the corner.

"Can you *please* stop fidgeting!" his mother hissed when she saw him twisting in his seat.

"But it's a cat, Mummy! Something's wrong with the—"

"Nothing's wrong. It probably just saw a mouse." She grabbed his arm and tried to pull him back into a forward-facing position. Rayan protested, but then the lights changed and the alleyway glided from view.

Seconds later, a chilling, high-pitched yowl pierced the sounds of morning traffic, making both Rayan and his mother wince.

"My god," she said, looking around. "Was that a *person*?"

"It was the cat—something hurt the cat."

His mother shot him another glare. "Don't be so silly. Cats can look after themselves."

As they turned down a different street, the aeroplane with its funny-looking tail came back into view. Rayan shot forward in his seat and pointed up at the sky. “Mummy, look!” he blurted out, his tantrum now diminished. “The colours are the same!”

She gave a weary sigh. “What colours?” she said tersely, reaching for the radio.

“The colours on the aeroplane!” he raved. “Look!”

His mother took her eyes off the road and peered up through the top half of the windscreen. She tutted and said, “That’s just an advertisement banner. Somebody’s selling something. They’re always colourful.”

Rayan kept rocking against his seat belt, clacking the cord into the lock mechanism. “But they’re the same, Mummy!” he persisted, beaming and pointing still through the glass.

“Will you *stop it!*” she shouted, startling him. “I don’t know what you mean and I can’t hear the radio.”

Crestfallen, Rayan slumped back in his chair, feeling his temper again starting to boil. He remained quiet for the rest of the journey, but didn’t once take his eyes off the heavens.

When they arrived at nursery, Rayan was bluntly ushered through the gates. Other children shrieked and hollered, darting around their mothers who chatted in small groups. When the pair passed one such cluster, the women could be heard discussing something that’d happened during a live teatime magazine show—something involving graffiti which, from the sounds of it, had unnerved them considerably. With little interest in those kinds of programmes, Rayan’s mother ignored the chatter and continued leading her son towards the front of the building.

A cacophony of dog barks emanated from the neighbouring properties. This sort of din wasn’t uncommon; the nursery staff often complained to the surrounding residents about the noise their animals made. But the commotion today seemed more intense than usual—it gave Rayan’s mother a headache. She knelt down to her son’s level and began unzipping him out of his coat.

“So, are you going to behave for me today?” she asked, searching his gaze.

Rayan shrugged.

“Look at me,” she pressed. “Be nice to the other children, like we talked about. Okay?”

He furrowed his brow, as though unconvinced. “Okay.”

“You’re not a little kid anymore. Remember that it’s big boy school next year.”

She planted a kiss on his cheek. Then hugged him abruptly and was gone.

As the parents dispersed, the nursery staff corralled the children inside and began separating them into their respective age groups. Many would gravitate to their friends and natter amongst themselves until the time came to begin lessons. As ever, none of them approached Rayan.

Untroubled, he wandered over to the big floor-to-ceiling windows which looked out onto the play garden. Nobody was outside yet apart from Mr Skeksis, the caretaker, who was busy sweeping leaves off all the tarmacked areas. For some reason Mr Skeksis was a point of fascination for Rayan, perhaps it was because he seemed like an outsider himself. While his weathered appearance and hunched demeanour made the other kids wary, Rayan always remained intrigued by him. The old man appeared like the scary character in twisted fairy tales. The dark mystery of trolls and ogres were his favourite part of those stories.

As Mr Skeksis moved closer to one of the neighbouring backyards, a huge Rottweiler came snarling up to its fence. Of all the dogs in the surrounding area, this one was by far the most ferocious and the children were terrified of it. The way it lunged and clawed at its wooden barrier, Rayan thought it would surely one day break through. He imagined it bursting into the play garden and tearing the caretaker limb from limb. But Mr Skeksis didn’t so much as flinch. He just stood motionless, propped against his broom, staring the animal down as if it were some unspoken battle of wills.

“Rayan, come away from the window now,” coaxed a nursery assistant. “It’s time to do some painting.”

Later, the children were let out into the play garden for morning break. The adults would allow them free reign of the area, stealing five minutes for a coffee and a vape while the kids let off some steam. Little bodies bounced and surged around the outdoor apparatus as though it were the first time they’d encountered it. It was usual practice for the boys to commandeer the

tree den, so the girls typically resorted to having their own secret committees inside the Wendy house. The less popular children occupied either the climbing frame or the tyre swing, or just milled around in pairs inventing their own amusement. Nobody went near the sand pit, not since a whiny ginger kid called Lucas wet himself in it a few weeks back. Now it was strictly out of bounds to even the lowliest of individuals.

Rayan wasn't part of any gang. He'd occasionally mix with certain factions if the mood took him, but his volatile nature meant the others left him mostly alone. He sat on a faded plastic toadstool and observed the scene with detached indifference. Dogs yapped and growled all around the site and it sounded as though the noise level was increasing. It was quite normal for playtime to be accompanied by intermittent barking, but Rayan had never heard anything like this.

He watched a couple of kids run rings around a tree on the other side of the garden. As they chased each other away, something in the far corner of the play area, several feet behind the tree, caught his eye. He got up from the toadstool and wandered over towards the object, which from far-off looked not unlike a fluffy toy. *It's probably just a teddy bear someone brought outside and then dropped*, Rayan presumed. As he drew closer he realised it wasn't a toy, but an actual fox. Few children his age might've been able to distinguish a fox from a dog, but Rayan could. Foxes were his mother's favourite animal, and their house was full of pictures and figurines of them. From its appearance, laid flat on its side with its legs out, Rayan guessed the animal was asleep. It wasn't until he was stood right over it that he noticed something was off. The fox's abdominal fur was moving—rippling up and down as though there were living things beneath it. *Oh wow*, he thought. *It must have babies!* Excitement bubbled up inside Rayan. If his mother were here, she'd be telling him to leave the poor thing well alone. But, he smirked, his mother wasn't here. He glanced about the garden to make sure no adults were around, and then searched the grass for a suitable stick. Finding one nearby, he returned to the pregnant fox and, steadying himself, reached slowly towards it with the tip of the branch. He paused just a few inches away, almost losing his nerve, but soon regained composure and prodded the animal's shifting pelt. On contact he flinched and retreated back a step, even though nothing had happened. Rayan swallowed. The curiosity he felt was too strong not to persist. He stepped up to the fox and pushed the end of the stick, harder this time, into its

undulating fur. There was no opportunity for him to flinch again. A haze of blood erupted as the animal's coat flipped open and several birds darted out into the air. Rayan gasped, shielding his face as the small feathered bodies streaked past him. He dropped the stick and wiped his hands over his bare forearms, horrified to see tiny red smears now marking his fingertips. He looked down at the fox carcass, the flap of loose skin now crumpled back to reveal the gruesome cavity the birds had occupied. Panic rose in his chest, robbing him of the ability to scream. He felt his arms and legs start to tremble. The incessant dog barking all around turned suddenly to a barrage of canine taunts. Rayan sprinted over to the nursery building just as the bell sounded for the end of playtime. His desperate pleas were drowned out by the other kids returning to class and he was unable to get the attention of the adults. It was common for the children to complain about having to come back inside, so his protests fell on ears which regarded them as simply that.

Rayan was shown to his place. Before he could sit down though, a nursery assistant admonished him for carelessly managing to get red paint all over his arms and t-shirt.

"Did you not wear an apron?" she chided as she escorted him over to the sinks and ordered him to clean up. He tried to tell her that it wasn't paint at all, but she either didn't listen or didn't care because moments later he was back in his seat again.

Rayan found it impossible to focus on the lesson that was about to start. He kept contorting in his chair, trying to get a look out through the big plate glass windows. He didn't understand how, but the safe and sunny environment of the play garden was now changed. In his mind, the innocuous setting had become a shroud for something truly awful. When he was reprimanded a second time for facing the wrong way, he begrudgingly gave up and resorted instead to quietly stewing in his frustrations.

The lesson he reluctantly turned his attention to was about animals and what they ate. The nursery teacher spent a lot of time on herbivores and omnivores, because she said that most British creatures tended to fall within those two categories. When she glossed over the topic of native meat eaters, explaining that very few still lived in the wild, Rayan raised his hand.

"But . . ." he pondered the question. "What animal would eat a fox?"

"Well," the teacher started, and then stalled. "Well, to be honest I'm not entirely sure what might eat a fox, Rayan," she conceded, palms facing

upward. "A dog possibly, if one was hungry enough. But, I don't believe foxes have many natural predators."

A look of dissatisfaction passed over the boy's face.

The teacher remained puzzled. "Why do you ask, Rayan?"

His eyes wandered back over to the windows.

He said, "It's just that . . . in the garden . . ."

"There's nothing in the garden that would eat them," she assured him, "But you wouldn't see one in the daytime, anyway. Foxes only come out at night." She motioned to the rest of the class. "So what does that make them, children?"

Several kids started to give the answer, but were cut short when Rayan cried, "I did see one!" The others were silenced, all eyes turned in his direction. "I saw a dead one," he continued, "in the garden. It was killed by . . . birds!"

The class erupted into shrieks and howls.

The nursery teacher planted her hands on her hips. "Now, Rayan," she scowled. "That isn't a nice thing to say. You're upsetting the other children." She approached him across the classroom and ordered him to go stand in the corner. "You can stay there until you learn to stop telling lies!"

Rayan stomped over to the isolation spot, confused and incensed by his unwarranted punishment. He'd been telling the truth, just as he was always told to, so it didn't make sense that nobody would believe him. He sulked at the back of the room, which opened out into the central foyer of the building. At least now he could see through the windows and keep watch out there for the things he knew to be happening.

Minutes later, Mr Skeksis ambled through the foyer, idly sweeping the floor as he went. He stopped at the French doors, which opened out onto the play garden, and leant on the end of his broom as he looked up into the sky. Rayan noticed the old man standing there and followed his inscrutable gaze above the treetops. Mr Skeksis was watching a flock of birds swoop and billow as one entity, twisting and dipping in unison like an airborne shoal of fish. Despite his frightening encounter during first break, Rayan was awed by the display. He realised he had never before seen such a thing.

"Well, I'll be . . ." croaked the old man, scepticism carved into his brow.

A nursery assistant sitting at the back of the class noticed what the pair were looking at. "Amazing spectacle isn't it," she remarked.

Rayan nodded his agreement. But Mr Skeksis remained quiet.

Milky eyes scanning the heavens, finally he spoke. "It's amazing alright," he said, "how starlings and swallows flock that way." He turned and stooped to resume sweeping. "But those birds ain't neither."

When the bell went for afternoon playtime a feverish excitement pulsed through the class. The nursery staff prompted their no running rule as the kids rushed through the French doors and out into the sunshine. Rayan shuffled behind the crowd with little desire to be amongst it.

Thinking about the mutilated fox made him anxious, so he avoided the spot where he'd found it. He was still reeling from the injustice of the morning's telling off. At lunchtime he'd been so agitated still that he'd declined any food that was offered to him. Now, hungry and irritable, he stalked the perimeter of the garden looking for trouble. Since coming outside, the dogs had started up again; howling and barking as though all belonged to one singular hunting pack. To add to the din, a class of younger kids somewhere inside the building were now engaged in singing nursery rhymes. Their chanting annoyed Rayan and he tried his best to ignore it.

Up above, the assemblage of birds continued to dart and wheel, collapsing to form increasingly dynamic iterations.

Rayan spied Lucas over by the picture stand, a wide easel and board on which the children's paintings were hung up to dry. Lucas was tucking into something behind a crop of pampas grass. Rayan instantly identified the thing as a bag of sweets which, he realised, must've been swiped from the afternoon snack cupboard. He marched over to the smaller kid and pointed at the contraband.

"Give those to me," he ordered.

Lucas attempted to conceal the loot. "No, they're mine."

"You stole them, Lucas. Give them to me," Rayan scolded, taking his mother's tone.

Other kids nearby overhead the exchange and approached the pair to investigate.

Indoors, the toddlers' repetitious sing-a-long kept going unabated. Their discordant, off-key verses seemed to goad the already hysterical dogs further.

Five little chickadees, sitting by a door

One flew away, and then there were four

The surrounding canines had begun to attack their respective enclosures, in particular the huge Rottweiler, which was clawing and chewing at the slats of its wooden compound.

“What have you got, Lucas?” taunted a kid called Jack.

“He took sweets, and I want them!” Rayan took a step towards his quarry.

Somebody inside the nursery opened up a window, amplifying the recurrent rhyme.

*Chickadees, chickadees, happy and gay,
Chickadees, chickadees, fly away*

“They belong to me! Leave me alone!” Lucas squirmed under the scrutiny.

“You’re a liar!” Rayan yelled. “Hand them over, pissy pants!”

The other children squealed with animated glee.

“Pissy pants! Pissy pants! Pissy pants!” the group spitefully chanted.

High above them the avian swarm pitched and swerved. The dogs continued to bark, rabidly flashing their jaws.

Two girls skipped across the garden to see what was going on. Another child shielded his eyes from the sun and looked to the sky.

“Last chance, Lucas!” Rayan spat, his fists clenched. “Or I’ll hit you!”

“Hit him! Hit him! Hit him!” the onlookers cried.

Rayan leaned in to make a grab for the cowering boy.

“Rayan, stop it!” Lucas pleaded. “If you don’t stop, I’ll tell my—”

Something splashed across Rayan’s face. It felt warm, and tasted like pennies. He brought his hands up to try to rub the stuff from his eyes. The sound of barking was suddenly drowned out by high-pitched screams. Rayan blinked through the sticky fluid and saw the cause of the intense shrieking. As children stumbled and ran, Lucas stood stock-still before him. His mouth was open in a frozen yawn, face bright with blood. Something was sticking directly out of his right eye-socket, flapping maniacally, spraying gore and vitreous humour in all directions. As it dawned on Rayan what the thing was, he heard a far less familiar sound—his own petrified scream. He toppled backwards and fell into the picture stand. The blood-

sprayed board collapsed and wedged itself in front of the French doors, blocking the entrance. Rayan watched Lucas' body crumple to the floor amid a halo of red-soaked feathers. He scrambled to his feet, struggling to absorb the nightmare scene that was unfolding.

The synchronised flock of assorted birds had descended upon the garden and was attacking everything in it. They soared after their victims, knocking them to the ground. Some clung to the backs of children, gouging and scratching with their claws. Others tangled themselves in the long hair of fleeing girls and tore at the soft flesh of their faces.

Rayan looked frantically for a way out, but the boundary fence made any escape impossible. Scanning the garden, he noticed a group of children climbing into the tree den. He sprinted towards it, swerving horrific casualties on the way. One boy was laid on the grass, pinned down by two giant jackdaws that were savagely pulling out his tongue. Another girl had tripped and impaled herself on a railing—easy prey for the crows which flapped about her, brutally pecking and slashing, her scalp stripped to the glistening bone.

Rayan hated not being able to help, but his survival instinct prevented it. He got to the foot of the tree house steps just as one unfortunate boy was pushed down them. Rayan looked up to see that the den was now full and its occupiers were trying to expel any external hangers-on. He jumped back as the banished child was seized upon by a horde of baying raptors. The boy wailed into the earth as his blood sprinkled the flowerbeds.

Panic-stricken, Rayan glanced to the Wendy house and saw Jack in its doorway, beckoning him. He charged towards his saviour, ducking deadly dive-bombers as he ran. Launching himself through the entrance, Jack slammed the door shut and kicked a wedge underneath to secure it.

The newcomer got to his feet and regarded his fellow survivors. There were four other children inside with him—Jack, two girls called Maisey and Kate, and another kid who was slumped against a wall with a cardigan wrapped tightly around his throat. Blood coated the child's face like war-paint. Rayan struggled at first to tell who it was. After a moment or two he realised, to his dismay, that it was Simon; a normally loud and gregarious little boy who lived on his street. Now, the whites of Simon's eyes shone dully through his hardening mask of gore. Those eyes watched Rayan without expression, as though belonging to a traumatised soldier. All four children trembled uncontrollably, the colour drained from their skin.

Rayan turned and looked out of the Wendy house's single Perspex window. He leaned into it to better see what was happening in the garden, his nose almost touching the cloudy screen. A ragged shape smacked into the outside of the window, leaving behind a bloody smear. It was a child's head, its face peeled back to reveal ribbons of torn muscle. The face tried to plead for help through a tattered hole and the children screamed. The next second a swooping black shape slammed into the head and it vanished in a burst of feathers.

Both girls were now weeping hysterically and Jack cowered on the floor with his face in his hands. Fighting back his fear, Rayan returned to the window. Across the garden he saw the nursery staff rushing to the French doors, each bore a look of pure horror. Yards from the entrance, Lucas lay spread-eagle on the grass. Still somehow alive, he was making the most chilling of sounds. The feathered projectile was no longer sticking out of his face, but his gaping eye cavity now served as something else. Four brazen wrens flitted around the boy's head, taking turns to splash inside the ruptured orbit as though it were a bird bath.

Mr Skeksis and the nursery teacher kicked through the crumpled picture board and for a second stood paralysed, unable to take in the scene. Snapping back to their senses, they rushed over to Lucas, shooing away the tiny monsters. No sooner had they knelt down when a murder of crows ambushed them. Both adults tried to fend off the screeching attackers but in doing so their forearms were ripped to shreds. They gave up the fight and grabbed Lucas, hauled him off the ground and made a dash for cover. The two whimpering assistants acted as sentries, they waited for the rescue party to pass through before slamming the French doors shut to a barrage of beaks and claws.

Rayan's head dropped. The adults would not be able to save them.

A while later, something strange began to happen. All of the birds took to the air and started to amass like they had done previously. The flock billowed and swam above the garden, forming a sinister vortex.

Suddenly the winged congregation surged directly at the tree den. Not having protective windows or a door, like the Wendy house did, the kids inside were left wide open to attack. The terrified screams of children filled the air as the murderous cloud poured in through the den's defenceless openings. Rayan slapped his hands to his ears but could not drown out the

sounds of the carnage. Within seconds, blood ran freely down the steps of the tree house. The tyre swing rope which hung beneath it staining completely red.

Through bitter tears Rayan looked over towards the nursery. The adults were collapsed against the large windows, sobbing and banging their fists on the glass. Two of them were on mobile phones, grimacing and wiping their eyes as they spoke. Rayan turned around to face the survivors. Three of them huddled together while one crouched alone.

“I think he’s dead,” Jack wept, rocking and clutching his knees.

Rayan looked to the stone-grey corpse of his young neighbour. He couldn’t believe what he was seeing. He was aware that people died sometimes, like his grandma had done the previous year. But he never imagined it could happen to somebody so small, especially not to a child he actually knew. Children were probably dying all around them, but it wasn’t something he’d been confronted with directly. Not until this moment had any of it seemed so real. A twisting wave of panic spread through his core. He couldn’t swallow, couldn’t utter so much as a word. The concept was too much for his underdeveloped brain to process. He squeezed his eyes shut and, whimpering, turned away.

“What are we going to *do*, Rayan?” sobbed Maisey, her face saturated with tears.

Rayan had no idea how to respond to the question; he was stunned that she’d even asked it of him. Maisey was one of the popular girls in class and scarcely gave Rayan the time of day, let alone ever wanted anything from him. Was it because he was the only one still on his feet, was that why he seemed like the person to ask? He didn’t know what to do, of course he didn’t. He wasn’t a leader. Adults were the ones with all the answers to things. Not him, he was just a scared little kid like the rest of them.

Kate got to her feet, shoulders quivering. “I don’t like it here,” she mumbled, staring vacantly. “I want my—”

Maisey reached out for her friend. “Kate, it’s too dangerous . . .”

“No!” she screamed, becoming suddenly animated. “I want my mummy!”

She charged at Rayan, knocking him against a wall. Before anyone could react, Kate had ripped the door open and was running full pelt towards the nursery. She did well to skip over the pools of blood and

mangled bodies. The remaining survivors quickly pulled the door closed and bunched up in the window, wishing her to make it.

The adults noticed her approaching and prepared for action. When she was just metres from the French doors, and looked to be home safe, the Wendy house kids started cheering.

Mr Skeksis cracked the doors a little, readying himself to receive her.

On the nursery roof, a pair of goshawks watched intently. Their sleek feathers bristled as the tiny human bolted across the grass, flame-yellow eyes never leaving her. When they plunged they did so as one, impacting the girl with the force of a speeding vehicle. Kate was knocked off her feet but never touched the ground. Powerful talons dragged her kicking and screaming into the air. As the raptors wheeled back to their perch, they abruptly parted, the manoeuvre rending their catch in two. A scarlet fountain burst across the French doors, obscuring the hopeful faces within.

Not long after, the howls of grief and of physical agony became indistinguishable.

*Four little chickadees, sitting in a tree
One flew away, and then there were three*

The survivors fell away from the Perspex window, speechless and wracked with despair. Rayan couldn't face the other two, couldn't look in their eyes. The unimaginable events of the afternoon flooded his mind; it was all too much to comprehend. He wanted to crawl into a ball and cry, and nearly did so, only fear and adrenaline somehow prevented it.

There must be something he could do. He paced back and forth while Jack and Maisy lay weeping against the far wall. Then it came to him. He rushed to the window and peered across at the tree den. Birds were scattered all over it, preening their feathers of blood and viscera. His gaze dropped to the gore-covered tyre swing which hung beneath the structure. Rayan went into his back pocket and pulled out the box of matches he'd stolen that morning. A sly smile crept across his lips.

His stepdad Steve was forever watching the news, all day every day it seemed. Rayan couldn't stand the news, thought it was boring, but one time, something happened that'd always stuck with him. Some men, foreign rebels according to Steve, had formed a roadblock out of a huge pile of

tyres, and then set it alight. He remembered, even now, the smoke the tyres produced being so thick that the rebels all but disappeared inside it.

Rayan grabbed Jack and got him to man the door. He ordered Maisey to wipe her eyes and keep a lookout at the window. Then, after a moment's composure, he lit a match, jammed it into the box along with the others, and ran for his life.

It took a long time for the smoke to start rising out of the bottom groove of the tyre. By then, the survivors could see that parents and policemen had started to gather in the windows of the nursery. Jack and Maisey could make out their mums and dads pressed to the glass and sobbed with a renewed sense of hope.

Unbeknownst to Rayan, his mother had been one of the first on the scene. But upon seeing the horrific carnage, she fainted and was taken into the staff room to recover. To Rayan she was simply not there. All he could see were the loved ones of other people. It eventually made sense to him, when he thought about it—why would his mother show up when all she really wanted was to have him out of the picture?

Flames were now creeping up the tyre rope into the tree house as thick rolls of smoke billowed beneath it. Rayan contemplated things at the back of the Wendy house as the other two grew increasingly restless. When a veil of grey smoke began to creep over the garden, Rayan stood up.

"There's only one way you're going to get out of here," he announced resolutely.

Jack and Maisey turned to him with blank expressions.

"What do you mean, Rayan?" said Jack.

"There's nobody here for me. I can help you escape."

Rayan went over to the door and knocked out the wedge.

"But we can all escape," Maisey reasoned. "The smoke is nearly thick enough."

"There's too many of them. It won't work."

"But . . . Rayan . . ."

He cracked the door. "Get ready to run. You won't have long."

*Three little chickadees, looking at you
One flew away, and then there were two*

Before they could talk him out of it, Rayan kicked open the door. He walked purposefully out into the open as his companions took off either side of him. To his left the tree den was now a roaring ball of flames. Birds of every description criss-crossed the play garden; shrieking their avian panic to one another. Disorientated, some would fly through the tree house and catch fire. While many arced away a few could not escape their deranged predation and singled out the slow moving child.

Rayan dropped to his knees as the shower of beaks and talons descended. He held out his arms for the mother who would never again reciprocate. The flock engulfed him. They tore and slashed with an instinct not borne of the natural world. He willingly fell back and allowed them to finish him.

Something exploded nearby—wood splintering apart.

Rayan's senses stirred, tuning towards the noise. He felt a thunderous vibration, an unstoppable presence approaching.

Then plumage erupted.

A powerful wall of fur and muscle slammed into his attackers, tearing them apart. His screwed-shut eyes opened a crack. A blur of snapping fangs sheared through brittle bones, shaking and obliterating feathered bodies. Rayan could not understand, had no strength to do anything but cower. The screeching of birds was consumed by mammalian snarls, more vicious than any he had known. Yet they were somehow . . . beautiful.

The last thing Rayan saw before losing consciousness was the sky above. The shattering blue ocean of sky and climbing majestically up through it, two goshawks aflame.

*Two little chickadees, sitting in the sun
One flew away, and then there was one*

THE HAPPIEST THOUGHT

The son had witnessed it through his bedroom window, the night it streaked across the sky like a comet. Looking up from his college studies, he'd spied the tail-end as it passed over and just presumed it was a meteorite. Within seconds, however, he'd forgotten he ever saw the thing, and went back to daydreaming instead of poring over his textbooks.

Soon afterwards, strange occurrences started happening inside the house. The daughter was the first to notice, but it took a while for the others to listen. The daughter was the youngest of the family and prone to mischief. So, when things started moving around the home, it was often she who got the blame. Objects would turn up in places they didn't belong, or broken on the floor. Furniture moved around rooms and nobody would own up to having moved it.

They held a family meeting, but the daughter would not confess to things she hadn't done. Before long, the mother lost her temper and stormed upstairs. She stomped around, muttering to herself, and eventually resorted to running a bath. The others sat wordlessly in the kitchen, feeling a strange tug on their insides that was not wholly frustration.

It was when the father got up to feed the cat that they heard the mother's scream. They all rushed upstairs, shouting their concern ahead of them. The mother was stood on the landing, just outside the bathroom, the colour gone from her face. She cried of there being a whirlpool. The others stared at one another as they entered the room, joking at how it was normal for water to drain that way. But there was nothing normal about what they saw. The bath was not draining—it was full. The mother, in her bathrobe, had not yet gone in. The family watched in disbelief the swirling vortex that did not slow and did not stop.

When finally they returned downstairs, after having emptied the tub, the mother now too fearful to bathe in it, they discovered that all the kitchen furniture had moved from one side of the room to the other. The cat sat in the middle of the now empty space, complacently licking its paws, as though it had governed the operation.

The family went to bed that night feeling afraid. The next day was Saturday, and once they had risen they were met by something no less

bizarre. The staircase in their home had changed. It still contained the same number of steps, but it had somehow grown. The length appeared to stretch and contract with little regard for natural laws. A family member at the top and bottom could seem close one moment, and miles apart the next. This frightened the parents, but the children found it incredibly exciting, particularly the son who was a physics student in college. They made a game of timing how long it took each other to traverse the stairs. The daughter's first go took eight minutes; whereas the son's clocked in at 12. In the second round, the daughter appeared after 40 minutes, the son's turn lasting only half that. The mother pleaded for them to stop, but their enjoyment was too great. By late morning the son was winning with a duration that had stretched to almost an hour.

By the time they stopped for lunch, the mother had made several calls to the police. While they ate, the daughter reasoned to take her phone along on her next go, just to be safe. When the indifference of the authorities became apparent, the staircase game resumed.

After there had been no sign of the daughter for more than two hours, the son began to worry. As his phone signal gradually diminished, and the stairs contracted again, it became apparent there was nobody on them. In a state of panic the family searched the house, but could not find the girl anywhere. They looked in the garden and in the attic. They took to the streets and called her name, but it was no use, the daughter was gone. By the time they returned to the house, they were so tired and distraught that they barely noticed the faint glow which hung in the air.

By the morning it was unmistakable; a haze of blue-green light radiated through the downstairs rooms like liquid fire. The family marvelled at the airborne spectacle as if it were some kind of aurora. Despite the strange phenomenon, the search for the daughter continued. It went on throughout the day and then into the evening. When the mother and son collapsed finally in their living room, the father did not stop. He kept hunting within the house, stalking its incalculable dimensions. As the mother wept, the son watched her through a smouldering fog of light—within it whorls of colour swam like oil on water. Between them, the cat padded across the coffee table. It dropped to the floor and many seconds seemed to pass before it landed. The two of them, paralysed with exhaustion, listened to the father move around inside the house. Feeling an odd heaviness upon their organs, they merely presumed it to be grief.

The father never returned, yet could still be heard searching the interior of the home. He did not answer when called. His movements became like receding echoes the house itself produced. The mother's health deteriorated. She believed the shimmering colours were the souls of her lost loved ones. The son, not knowing what else to do, continued to attend college; tried to pursue a normality he could not properly discern. The mother stopped going to work, stopped eating entirely. She would wander through rooms, speaking to things she saw inside the light.

The son came home one day to find the place empty. The mother was no longer there, but a new event had occurred, one that nearly displaced his memory of her. All the vivid lights were now in motion, flowing through the rooms and hallways like a dazzling torrent of magma. The son followed its course to where it pooled in the kitchen and disappeared down into the basement. He gripped the handrail and felt a strange pull as he descended.

The scene which greeted him was one his animal brain could not begin to comprehend. The cellar space had grown to impossible proportions. Its walls, if present at all, were obscured by a colossal rotating disc of debris and light. Slabs of masonry and wood churned past the son in a blinding vortex of energy. As he was drawn further down the steps, the thing at the centre of the maelstrom revealed itself. A featureless black orb hung at its core, nested in a halo of plasma. The inert object radiated a malevolence which filled the son with absolute terror.

It was the moment he turned to run that he saw them. His mother first, or what once may have been her. Suspended in space she appeared horrifically elongated, stretched apart and smeared along the orbit's edge. Her spaghettified limbs and torso blossomed with crimson plumes. The son's sobs produced tears which lifted instantly off his face and whipped away into the chaos.

What seemed like miles beyond the mother, there hung another body, entombed in opalescent flames. The father was frozen in some agonised gesture of reaching out. Reaching for something almost within his grasp, and yet trapped on the other side of eternity. If it had been his sister, it was no longer recognisable as such. The humanoid thing was entirely ash, a cinder bathed in the glow of oblivion.

The son tried to back away but the tidal forces snatched him up, whisking him deep into the luminous swirl. Aloft and helpless, he could not tell whether he was falling through space or caught in some gravitational

field. The sensation caused him to think of his studies; to ponder Einstein's "happiest thought" on the nature of gravity.

When the son sailed past the horizon, he did not know it, because everything felt the same. The future surged ahead of him like a river of time. It carried him towards his loved ones—the four of them now together, a portrait that would outlive the cosmos.

PHYLUM

2089

The fresh blood coating his hands and clogging his eyes made it difficult to ascend the air shaft ladder. He concentrated as best he could on each slippery handhold, the torch beam from his headset illuminating a jittery view of the rungs above and below. In the pale shaft of light, the substance covering him looked like black grease. The sight of it took him back below decks to his day job working on the hulking machinery of the climate drives—an experience so far removed from his present one it felt otherworldly to think about. Every so often, he stopped to try to rub the sticky fluid out of his eyes and wipe his hands on his coveralls, but the material was already thick with viscera and refused to absorb anything more.

Whenever he paused, Jacob was reminded again of the blood. The memory of where it'd come from kept returning to him in jolts. The commander, his piercing green eyes bulged with desperation and fear before those things tore out of them. Jacob dry-heaved and spat a wad of bile down between his legs into darkness. He'd tried to help, tried to intervene, but the savagery of the violence sent him hurtling into shock. A deep and primal terror had gripped him, forcing him to flee. The discipline of the medi-lab turned quickly to bedlam; colleagues he'd cohabited with for years were attacked and dismembered before his eyes. He had to survive, had to get out—for his family. During the chaos, someone, whether intentionally or by accident, triggered the emergency quarantine alert. The heavy automatic doors slid irreversibly shut, sealing everyone inside the lab. Jacob scrambled onto a storage unit and ripped the grille off a ceiling air duct. He clambered through the opening as the creatures began scaling the walls. The haunting cries of his co-workers chased him into the gloom.

He continued climbing the rungs of the shaft, which periodically intersected a horizontal stratum of ducts. The screams of the crew no longer echoed up from below; they had become fainter and fainter before being replaced by a bottomless silence. Now only his laboured breaths could be heard. They filled his head like a ragged gale, amplified to a deafening

degree in the confined tunnel space. Eventually, his ascent brought him level with the next air duct. It cut perpendicular through the shaft and ran off in opposite directions into complete blackness.

Jacob swung himself around the ladder and into the duct opening behind it. While the blood on his hands had started to congeal, a slick layer of it still coated his coveralls. On contact with the tunnel surface, he slid and went down hard. The clang of his fall reverberated through the narrow passage. He cursed and looked both ways, directing his headset beam in each direction. Nothing stirred. There was only the dull metallic gleam of the tunnel walls as they receded. His light source penetrated only a few feet ahead before it was swallowed up by the cloying murk. He scampered to the tunnel edge, stuck his head through the ladder rungs and peered down the shaft the way he had come. The meagre brightness illuminated his bloodied path like a grisly crime scene. He strained to make out the air duct opening where he'd originally entered. A pinprick of light shone way below the range of his head-beam. Just as he felt satisfied nothing was trailing him, he thought he saw movement. He squinted against the channel of light projecting out from his right temple. Far below, something passed across the opening, momentarily obstructing the light from the medi-lab. Jacob flinched and hit his head on a rung as he jerked backwards.

He pulled away from the edge and fumbled around in his cargo pockets, retrieving his iCom. He initiated the device and its home screen appeared, bathing his face in a pale aura. He tried to video call his partner's device, but his suspicion of having no signal was confirmed when the screen presented nothing but a spinning wheel. Instead he swiped to an app that allowed him to view the heat signatures of Rachel and their child within her. This still appeared to work: the device showed the familiar image of two pulsing light blobs, one enclosed in the other. Rachel clearly had her iCom close by in their living quarters for it to pick up on her vitals. Despite the panic Jacob felt, he couldn't help but smile at the pixelated image. The purpose of the app was to give comfort to fathers who were absent for any stretch of time during pregnancy. He would often check it during long shifts on the engine deck. With some tinkering he was able to zoom out until a blueprint grid roughly identified Rachel's whereabouts in relation to his own. He knew he was in the vicinity of the medi-lab; he just had to follow the air ducts in her general direction to find their quarters and

enter it from above. He reckoned it'd be too dangerous to drop back into the main corridors of the base with those things running around down there.

As one of the colony's engineers, Jacob had gained a reasonable understanding of the duct system by performing maintenance on it. The distance he had to travel wasn't too far, but that didn't mean he wasn't afraid to attempt it through these ominous black tunnels after the horrors he'd witnessed down below.

Smearred as it was in the blood of his colleagues, he wiped the iCom's screen on the seat of his coveralls in a useless attempt to clean it. He pulled the flexible device into a strip and bent it around his wrist like a watch so he could monitor the life signs as he crawled through the dark. Jacob's head-beam sputtered for a second, but went back to full brightness when he tapped his temple. Pushing this concern aside, he set off in the direction he hoped would lead him to his family.

Jacob's relationship with Rachel reflected his relationship to Mars: both had come into his life unexpectedly and almost entirely by accident. Just a few years ago he never would have imagined he'd be working on a different planet, let alone expecting a baby with a woman who was not his wife.

Jacob had married young. He met his bride-to-be during a week's leave from his work on the oil rigs back home. He was just twenty-two. Laura, a year younger, had just graduated from college. She was the most striking woman he'd ever seen. With crimson two-tone hair and a face almost entirely freckled, she had appeared to him like some exotic jungle creature. Jacob fell for her immediately and they spent every day of that week in bars and in bed.

By the time his leave swung around again, he found out she was pregnant and proposed to her on the spot. After their daughter was born, Laura secured her dream job lecturing at a local university. Marnie was the image of her mother: flame-haired and fiercely intelligent. She was Jacob's world and for a long time things were good, life was beautiful. When Marnie was six, Laura would walk her to school. They'd laugh and sing together, tease the boys, and pet stray animals along the way. On one such morning, out of nowhere, a freight lorry jumped a curb and wiped them both from the world.

Jacob couldn't remember being told the news, wouldn't ever recall the moment it was explained to him. He entered a numbing grey fog and

remained there for many years. He became a ghost on the rigs, the guy that newbies would learn to avoid. The ocean wind and rain ravaged him more than most, added to his remorseless internal weather and hardened his good looks.

It took a medical examination for him to realise that half a decade had past, and for his superiors to convince him that he needed a break. They ordered that he take some extra time off to recuperate, if he could. Get laid, go on holiday. See the world.

It was during this period that he started noticing the advertisements. They were looking for professionals to go into space, to become the first colony on Mars. He'd been dimly aware of this bubbling away in the media for years, but had never paid it much mind. There was a buzz around an effort to find water on the red planet, and it seemed like every week another flashy recruitment drive was going viral on the internet. A hot young entrepreneur was pumping billions of his own money into the venture and it was steadily gaining the attention of the world. For the first time in years, a glimmer of interest stirred within Jacob. He sent off the application. Six months later, he was enrolled in a gruelling training regimen with scores of other young hopefuls. He excelled in every discipline and within two years, found himself on a shuttle speeding out into the cosmos.

It was almost eighteen months into colony life before anything of real incident happened. As the long and arid Martian summer drew in for a second time, two events occurred in quick succession. The first was that warrant officer Rachel Logan and flight commander Dean Scully, two of the expedition's most senior members and its only longstanding earthborn couple, separated. The second was the discovery of water.

Mars's first relationship breakup had been the talk of the base for a short time, though very little drama had actually surrounded it. Logan and Scully were consummate professionals in every area of their lives, including the business of splitting apart. They had been an item since before they joined the service and had allowed their love to diplomatically slip away over many years.

As soon as reports that the drill site had struck liquid water started coming in, all domestic affairs were forgotten. Overnight the colonists became instant celebrities back on Earth. They filled column inches and appeared on chat shows around the globe, despite the rather awkward video

time delays. Once the media attention had settled down, the methodical process of examining and testing the samples got underway.

It was many weeks before their experiments started to yield significant results, and to everyone's surprise, the purity level of the planet's liquid core was extremely high. This discovery—amongst others concerning the water's molecular structure—resulted in something of a party atmosphere around the base. Reserves of alcohol were cracked open and liberally consumed between shifts.

It was around this time that something unexpected happened. A vague attraction between Jacob and warrant officer Logan slowly began to manifest. It had always been clear that the two of them admired one another's achievements and work ethic, despite her being several years his senior. But amid this period of jubilation, it gradually dawned on them that their comments were growing flirtier; their eye contact lingering longer. Finally, following a birthday party for one of the crew members, things got heated and the pair found themselves in bed together. For weeks, they kept things on the down low, slinking off to each other's quarters whenever the desire took them. In such cramped living conditions, however, no such secret could have been kept indefinitely. They eventually decided to face the music and out themselves to the group.

Some were happy for them; others pretended to be shocked. Dawson, the senior science officer and Jacob's closest friend on the base, gave him a slap on the back when he heard the news. The old eccentric threw back his head and cackled, revealing chunks of steak tartare between his teeth, much to the distaste of those present. Dawson's eating habits were largely a point of annoyance among the crew. The colony was able to grow consumable meat in the specialised food lab, but the stubborn science officer always insisted on having his raw.

Many rather enjoyed the new social dynamic and the gossip that came with it. Though Jacob was concerned about Scully's reaction, the aging commander merely inhabited a wounded stoicism. He masked his heartbreak with responsibilities and whiskey, and before long had made his peace and begrudgingly gave the new couple his blessing.

Two weeks later, catastrophe struck: one of the climate drives blew a cylinder. The explosion ruptured the primary water storage tank. An emergency auto-seal quickly initiated, but roughly thirty thousand gallons

of recyclable water was lost to the Martian dirt. A couple of serious casualties and some intense hand-wringing left a bitter taste in people's mouths following the accident. Panic set in when it was realised how significantly the water shortage was going to affect colony life.

A conundrum ensued: colonists could either suffer as best they could on the reduced water rations, or start using the near limitless quantities of natural H₂O sitting beneath their feet. There was a vote with the result split almost straight down the middle—half the population thought it wise to continue with their diminished supply, while the other half was happy to drink from the Martian reservoir. After examining the data, mission control agreed that purity levels were at a standard fit for human consumption. It left the ultimate decision to the settlers.

Despite the more cautious group sticking to their guns, both parties agreed to begin mining the indigenous water for the benefit of those who wanted it. A rolling shift pattern was devised whereby four workers would be randomly selected to man the automated drilling site and stockpile barrels of the liquid ready for purification. Jacob agreed to be among the first team to spend a week at the hydraulic compound, even though he and Rachel had put up the greatest resistance to the Martian water operation. It seemed fitting then, that commander Scully would be the one to lead the pro-consumption crowd.

Once the water had been retrieved and brought back to base, it took nearly a fortnight to cleanse and refine it ready for use. By that time, with rations in even shorter supply, a few of the anti-consumption crowd had defected to the other side in favour of the imminent and more plentiful bounty. Many more jumped ship when they saw the effects the water had on those who drank and bathed in it: undernourished complexions grew plump and clear; energy levels rose, as did spirits and productivity. Pro-consumers even boasted of how the new water whitened their teeth.

Dissention gradually escalated between the revitalised majority and the small weary clan that remained steadfast against the tide. Intolerance and fatigue ignited running disputes, and none feuded more than the embittered ex-partners. When the algorithmic mining roster threw up both their names, some winced at the match. Dawson, a moderate pro-consumer, offered to take Rachel's place and accompany the commander to the drill site, along with the two other crewmen. Not wishing to rock the boat, however, Rachel

insisted on fulfilling her duty. She and Scully agreed to let their contention lie.

When the mining team returned with its payload, things had changed. A subdued civility had descended over the former couple. They no longer spoke to each other, but neither did they challenge or bitterly oppose one another as they had done before. Both factions followed suit and eased into a workable alliance, which carried them through to the following spring.

When people started falling ill, it was quickly attributed to the Martian water, as only those who had been exposed to it became poorly. Some of the sick were able to soldier on and continue working with only minor complaints, but the majority came down with intense flu-like symptoms, which gradually worsened.

Panic gripped the base when the afflicted began slipping into comas. One by one they were wheeled from their bunks into the medi-lab for close observation. Beds kept filling up until almost two-thirds of the population lay in rows, sharing the same baffling unconsciousness. Medical personnel were confounded, unable to properly diagnose the condition, while attempting to treat the patients as best they could. The mining operation was abandoned as the entire site ground slowly to a halt.

Things continued with little improvement for about a month, until a strange development occurred. The life signs of the patients started to change, unaccountably lighting up without any reasonable cause. There seemed to be more internal activity going on than conventional biology could explain; it didn't make sense. The senior doctors consulted each other endlessly, powerless to understand what they were seeing.

Then, as inexplicably as they had succumbed, the patients started to emerge from their comas. As they returned to their senses some were acutely disorientated, whereas others appeared blankly cognizant of their surroundings. None, however, remembered anything about the Martian water or its restorative effects. Some, the commander among them, expressed feeling fine and wished to return to work, but they were not permitted to leave the observation ward until adequate tests had been carried out. Every few hours, hazmat-suited orderlies went from bed to bed to take blood samples and conduct bodily assessments. Dawson's team of science officers in the adjoining medi-lab monitored the subjects through a large Plexiglas window at the foot of the ward.

On the third day of examinations, the conscious patients' wellbeing took a turn for the worse. Many complained of agitation under the skin, a creeping presence inside them that felt disturbingly foreign. Distress mounted on the ward throughout the morning as the medics struggled to preserve order. Word soon spread of the unrest and a handful of colonists went down to the medi-lab to investigate.

Jacob noticed some colleagues pass by his and Rachel's living quarters. He hollered at them to wait. Rachel was in bed nursing her enormous bump. She still had eight weeks to go, but neither of them could imagine her getting any bigger.

"Where are you going?" she said drowsily.

"There's some kind of fuss going on down in medical." He kissed her on the forehead. "Just off to check it out."

"Okay." She yawned. "But I thought they were all getting better now?"

"I thought so too. I won't be long."

He hurried to catch up to the group. They heard the screams long before they reached their destination.

At the doorway to the lab, a panic-stricken orderly blocked their path.

"Sorry, but I can't let you through," he wheezed, sweat beading his brow. "We have a quarantine situation."

Jacob looked past the fretful sentry to see the chaos unfolding through the observation window. Medical personnel, some in hazmat suits, were trying to restrain patients as they convulsed violently in their beds. While some hissed and spat like animals, others thrashed about as torrents of coral-coloured foam spurted from their ears and mouths. Naked subjects ran around in circles or rocked on the floor, clawing at their shredded faces. It took a second or two for Jacob to see what they were clawing at. When he did, he felt a chasm swallow up his innards. Huge, fist-sized insects were burrowing out of the patients, bursting through gaping tears in their skin and splashing to the floor amid fountains of reddish-pink slime. The holes left by the creatures split wider as more of them emerged, collapsing screaming faces until they were just pits of squirming segmented bodies. The cries of the afflicted merged into a single hellish din, drowning out the desperate commands of the medical personnel who were now either backing away from their charges or rooted to the spot in pure terror. A woman standing next to Jacob let out an ear-ringing shriek.

“What the fuck is happening in there?!” yelled Jacob into the orderly’s glistening face.

“You can’t come inside,” the man blurted. “This is an emergency quar—”

One of Jacob’s engineer colleagues, a burly Swede named Viggo, rammed past the orderly, allowing the horrified group to surge into the lab. Science officers stood around stupefied, gibbering to nobody. Jacob scanned the room for Dawson, but couldn’t see his friend anywhere. He grabbed one of the medics by the collar and demanded to know what was going on. But the man, eyes quivering with tears, just stared past him.

Through the observation window a cluster of bodies and equipment toppled over. A patient a group of doctors had been trying to subdue broke free and made a dash for the ward exit. It was Scully. His hospital gown trailed behind him as he charged into the adjoining medi-lab and lunged screaming at the startled onlookers. Viggo made a desperate grab for the slaving subject and tried to manoeuvre him into a headlock. The commander twisted around impossibly, somehow ending up behind his assailant with his fingers stuffed down Viggo’s throat. Jacob took a step towards them, but only in time to receive a jet of blood across his face and shoulders as Scully tore the engineer’s jaw clean off.

Male and female screams reverberated off the walls.

Viggo wailed obscenely through his ragged neck hole, his torn carotid spraying bright arterial gore into the air. The blood rained down upon the deranged commander as he held the mandible aloft, coils of nerve and muscle fibres hanging from it like some grotesque tuber. Jacob, his eyes clotted with blood, slipped and skidded into Viggo’s body as it crumpled to the floor. Scully bellowed, discarding the jawbone and fell to his knees, clutching his head. Jacob put out his hands fearing another attack, but instead saw his superior’s face oddly shift, undulating over the bones of his skull like a liquid mask. Their gaze briefly met, a look of utter desperation in the flight commander’s emerald eyes, before they exploded. A hideous ripping noise accompanied the sight of Scully’s face blossoming outward like a scarlet flower. Jacob scrambled against the deluge of blood as a cascade of insectoid creatures burst out of the older man’s rupturing flesh.

By now more hysterical patients had breached the hazmat barricade and were piling into the medi-lab. As they stampeded, their heads and bodies erupted with their foam-covered alien offspring. They staggered into

Jacob's terrified gang, spilling their effluence over everybody. When the writhing insects began jumping from their hosts onto the healthy bystanders, a new wave of screaming began. The creatures latched onto their new victims and immediately started tunnelling into them, boring through soft skin to get at the succulent organs beneath. Fresh blood poured onto the floor, combining with the soupy pink froth to produce a noxious quagmire.

"Help me! Please god, hel—" a woman managed before tripping over, several of the creatures attached to her face. Her eyes locked with Jacob's and he instinctively reached out to her, but her shrieking mouth attracted the nightmarish bugs and they rapidly scuttled into it, cramming themselves inside her, tearing her tongue and palate apart. She started convulsing on the floor, crimson streams spurting from her nose. Jacob turned away in horror, bile hot in his throat. When he looked again, she had vanished beneath a devouring wave of sludge.

The blare of the quarantine klaxon suddenly blotted out the human screams. Blue and orange lights flashed above the medi-lab entrance and before anyone could react, the heavy automatic doors slid silently shut. Jacob glanced around the room in a blind panic. Attack victims, oblivious to the screeching crisis that had just sealed their doom, thrashed about in pools of their own gore. By chance, Jacob looked to the ceiling and spotted an air duct grille situated above a tall storage unit. A flash of hope bloomed in his chest, and he dashed towards it.

It felt like he'd been crawling through tunnels forever. Every junction he came to filled him with renewed dread that it might lead him farther away from his pregnant love. The heat readings on his iCom gave a rough indicator of where Rachel was in this sprawling complex, but could not pinpoint her exact location. The darkness brought its own paranoia. Flashbacks to the medi-lab kept rearing up at him out of the gloom. His head-beam had sputtered out another couple times, and whenever it blinked back on, there would be the commander's face, twisted inside out and crawling with unspeakable terrors. Jacob's heart thudded against his ribs, the taste of copper thick on his tongue.

He glanced again at the iCom and what he saw stopped him in his tracks. The glowing signature of his family was getting closer now, but not far from the dual blobs of his destination, a fainter heat reading quivered

like a dimming flame. He'd presumed his device might pick up other body markers along the way, but to his surprise none had appeared, until now. He paused to think, staring at the tiny smudge of light. The reading seemed too weak to be a person, but if it wasn't a living being, then what could it be? Such a small concentration of those things randomly grouped together didn't seem likely. Jacob was already wracked with guilt at having left his colleagues to die; he couldn't bear to let anyone else perish injured and alone. He resolved to investigate.

The dim heat signature was at its most prominent over a grille just a few dozen yards beyond the next corner. He could make out a feeble light source below, but there was no obvious sign of life. He called down into what he suspected was somebody's living quarters. When no reply came back, he called again. Nothing—the room beneath him remained ominously still. He shifted his weight and stomped the grille until it clattered to the floor, then lowered himself through the hole.

The solitary light source came from a tiny fish tank in the corner of the room. It illuminated the quarters in a muddy underwater glow. Visibility was poor, but he recognised the place as Dawson's accommodation. The open plan space housed a bed, a kitchenette and a small living area where the old man had his workstation. A bulky dark shape was hunched at the desk, obscuring a laptop screen in hibernation. It was then that Jacob detected the smell, an acrid aroma like burnt hair. It made him wrinkle up his nose. He went to the doorjamb and tapped the main light. Over at the desk, his friend sat in a chair facing the wall. A single wisp of smoke rose from the front of Dawson's head.

"Hey, am I glad to see you!" Jacob's face broke into a smile.

No reply came from the science officer. Jacob took a step forward. "Dawson, we have to get out of here!" his smile stiffened. Again, nothing; the old man was completely still but for the tendril of smoke that curled above him.

"Dawson!" Jacob strode across the room. "Put the cigarette out for God's sake, we have to get the fuc—" He gripped the old man's shoulder and spun him around. The shock almost knocked the engineer off his feet. Dawson was slumped low in the chair, a pump-action shotgun sticking up between his legs. The man's exposed jawbone was splintered and scorched black. Fragments of teeth littered his bloodied shirtfront and computer keyboard. Jacob buckled at the waist and clutched his knees. A trickle of

sour bile sloshed out of his mouth onto the carpet. Everything recognisable north of Dawson's destroyed mouth was gone, brutally shredded away by the buckshot. A giant smear of blood and tattered flesh was pasted across the ceiling directly above them. His friend's skull, however, was still mostly intact, albeit locked in a rictus of self-annihilation. His eyeless orbits and nose cavity gently smoked, yawning dark and wet like those of a grimly authentic jack-o'-lantern.

The old man's body jerked and coughed blood over itself. Jacob slapped a hand to his mouth and gagged again through his fingers. He recognised the botched suicide attempt for what it was—the force of the gun blast having jolted Dawson's head back and out of the line of fire, resulting in merely blowing his face off.

“Jesus, what have you done?” the engineer breathed, tears welling in his eyes. “I needed you to tell me what the fuck is going on!”

The science officer gurgled, dark liquid streaming down his ruined chin. He then somehow lifted his right arm and pointed weakly at the wall before them. Only then did Jacob notice the dozens of pictures that were stuck there; overlapping images of countless micro-creatures. Ticks, lice, fleas, flukes—an interlocking collage of creeping organisms. All were indigenous to Earth, all parasites of the human animal. The engineer shook his head, failing to comprehend the relevance of what he was seeing. Then, when one of the pictures jumped out at him, sending him straight back to the medi-lab, he understood. Jacob leaned in to read the label at the foot of the micrograph image: *Demodex folliculorum*. Face mites. He stared at the revolting beast, recognising it as the species that had exploded out of the commander's flesh. Only those ones had been bigger, so much bigger.

He staggered back from the wall, hand still clamped to his mouth. “Those things,” he gasped at the man in the chair. “They're not . . . aliens. They're . . . inside us?”

In response to the futile question, Dawson's whole body shook and he let out a garbled cry. Jacob noticed something shift beneath his friend's blood-slick clothing. Horrified, he snatched the 12-gauge from between the old man's legs and used the muzzle to slowly lift up his shirt. What he saw there almost made him drop the gun. The science officer's torso was a writhing bulge of movement beneath the skin. A mass of thick, ropy tendrils squirmed under his ribcage like a nest of mating serpents.

Jacob stumbled backwards as Dawson's body went rigid. Before the engineer could react, something erupted out of the old man's throat, spraying bloody mucilage in every direction. A pink drizzle of gore splattered against the bug pictures and across Jacob's already sodden coveralls. Overcome with shock, he gawped helplessly as the birthed thing before him hung about two feet in the air, swaying like a pale, headless cobra. The creature looked like a giant river lamprey, but Jacob knew that was impossible. A tunnel-like sucking mouth flexed and squelched, tasting the oxygen in the room. Hundreds of tiny pointed teeth lined the repellent hole, oozing with viscous slime. He checked the shotgun chamber and, seeing that it was loaded, took aim just as the poised monster lunged towards him. The barrel discharged, but the beast somehow twisted out of range, the buckshot decimating a shelving stand behind it.

"Fuck!" Jacob pumped the slide, ejecting the spent cartridge. The creature curled back into a striking position. He fired again but the shotgun just clicked. It was empty. "Fuck! Fuck!" He scanned the desk for more ammunition. Appearing to sense his panic, the creature paused, as if pondering his extinction. Its undulating mouth parts wavered in mid-air, hissing as it tracked his movements.

Jacob spied an upended box of shells near Dawson's laptop. He judged his distance from the ammo against the serpent's possible strike range. He didn't like his chances but a voice in his head screamed, *Do it!* The moment he moved, the monster darted forward, fresh slime pouring from its disc-shaped maw. Jacob hesitated. Cursing, he looked to what remained of his friend. The old man's body was arched out of his seat and quivering with tension. His arms trembled by his sides as the snaking atrocity protruded from his distended throat. Jacob heard himself shout, "Dawson! Help me!"

This sudden command somehow jolted the science officer to life. His stiffened trunk twisted in agony as he tried to breathe past the monstrous violation. Then his arms rose into the air, fingers clenching, and he grabbed the beast with both hands. The animal thrashed wildly, lunging at Dawson's exposed skin and ripping hunks of it away. Within seconds, his body was awash in fresh torrents of blood. But it was the chance Jacob needed. He dived across the desk and snatched up a loose cartridge, stuffing it into the chamber as fast as his trembling fingers would allow. He pumped the slide and jammed the stock into his shoulder, this time squinting down the barrel to be certain. He pulled the trigger. The shell obliterated everything in its

path, vaporising both the creature and the head of its ravaged host. Half the room was momentarily veiled in a scarlet cloud that painted every exposed surface in spattering gore. Through burning tears, he fumbled another cartridge into the gun and took aim. He quietly bid the old man farewell and then fired, blasting apart his friend's abdomen and the seething terror within.

Jacob strapped the 12-gauge to his back, thankful in that moment for Dawson's firearm insubordination, and climbed back into the duct. He had no idea how the crazy old bastard had gotten a shotgun onto Mars, but was intensely grateful that he had.

Back in the tunnel, Jacob consulted the iCom to check on his family's readings, but the image he saw made his stomach leap. What he was looking at didn't make any sense. He tried to recalibrate the display, but the same thing appeared again. Whereas before the heat signatures had been combined, indicating Rachel with the baby inside her, now they were separated. But she wasn't due for another two months! Stranger still was that the two light blobs weren't even close together. Surely Rachel would be clutching the newborn to her breast, at least until his return. Instead, both signatures were mobile, with the smaller blob *following* the larger one. Jacob was mystified. *How could a newborn baby be moving around?* A cold panic spread through him. He set off as fast as he could into the stifling dark.

When he found the grille which aligned with his readings, the room below was brightly lit and he recognised it as his and Rachel's living quarters. He called out to her as he stamped through the mesh screen. No response. Jacob clambered through the hole and dropped down into the familiar space he'd been standing in only hours before.

But something was very wrong. Furniture and appliances were overturned and scattered around as if there had been a violent struggle. Nobody was in the bed, but a pool of dark liquid stained its centre. Terror gripped him as he started noticing blood everywhere—streaks along the carpet, flecks across the walls. A finger of ice ran up his spine. He spun around to see a trail of crimson splatters leading over to the lounge area. A crown of matted hair rested against the far side of an upturned sofa chair. She appeared to be sitting on the floor with her back against its side panel.

"Rachel?" he said, slowly approaching. "Are you okay, honey?"

As he drew nearer, he peered over the top of the sofa until she came into view. In her lap the baby lay, nursing on its mother. Only it didn't look like a baby. It was the size of a large toddler, or an adult dwarf, startling in its dimensions and rippling with pronounced musculature. The head was enormous, like that of a man, and placental slime pasted to its skull a full head of black hair.

Reeling in terror, Jacob stepped around the chair to see Rachel's lower half blown apart and spread across the carpet like a grenade victim. A huge wet cavity yawned where her stomach had been, her organs fanning out around her in a wide glistening arc. He choked back a sob and the baby heard it, partially opening its freakishly large eyes. It stopped suckling and turned its massive domed head to face him. Thick strands of gore joined its lips to Rachel's ravaged breast. Her nipple now gone, the corn-coloured pearls of exposed fat seeped with her leaking life fluid—with *its* abominable sustenance. When it saw its father, a repulsive smile revealed a mouthful of adult teeth. The giant human incisors, clogged with its mother's treachery blood, gleamed in the artificial light.

Jacob staggered backwards, tripping over a table and falling awkwardly with the gun beneath him. The baby became suddenly alert and jerked upright. It unfurled its limbs and clambered after him over the top of the sofa like some terrifying fleshy arachnid. It was about to lunge when something tugged at its middle. Both Jacob and the baby peered to see its umbilical cord pulled tight, securing it to Rachel's corpse. Without hesitation it scurried back on itself, grabbed the cord in its man-sized hands and proceeded to chew through it with animalistic vigour. Jacob stared open mouthed as the creature ripped apart the meaty conduit before resuming its advance towards him.

As the thing dragged itself along the carpet, a trail of bloody afterbirth in its wake, Jacob could no longer fail to notice its obscene anatomy: two adult female breasts swung from its overdeveloped torso, veined and ulcerated as though symptomatic of some horrendous malady. In addition to these twin aberrations, he caught sight of something truly repugnant—something which threw vomit up into his throat. Between its sinewy legs dangled a grotesque parody of a human penis. The length and girth of a regular child's arm, it wagged from side to side, leaking a constant stream of milky fluid. The child's bulging shoulders powered it forward and within seconds it was upon him. It grabbed his ankles and pulled itself up his body,

foetal mucus further soaking his rotten coveralls. Only when it reared above him like a conquering predator did Jacob properly see into its eyes, and when he did, everything clicked into place.

As those piercing emerald orbs burned into him he knew who they belonged to, understood instantly who the father really was and why the baby looked as it did. The realisation hit him like a breeze block and though he didn't understand how it had happened, it no longer mattered. His heart broke and repaired itself inside of a second.

The baby went for his throat, its huge hands closing around his windpipe, mashing the airway shut. To add to Jacob's horror, its swinging phallus began to engorge with excitement, hot penile discharge splashing against his legs as he fought desperately to breathe. As its vile member approached full mast, the baby sniggered in the manner of a drunken old vagrant. Jacob couldn't believe what he was hearing, nor, as the murderous spawn shifted its weight, what he then started to feel. A jarring blunt force impact began thudding into his crotch. It took him all of two seconds to realise what it was. Glancing down, he saw Rachel's newborn child thrusting violently between his legs, ramming its terrifying erection into his groin with sickening glee. Jacob tried to twist his body away, but this only made the baby pound even harder; each collision sending a shockwave of pain through his abdomen and splashes of gluey liquid across his front. Unable to comprehend if this was a sexual act or merely one of psychotic dominance, Jacob could do little but fight the urge to black out.

Then he remembered something—he was still wearing his headset.

Releasing his right hand from the child's throat-crushing grip, he tapped his temple rapidly three times, initiating full brightness. The beam sputtered on, and then died.

Fuck!

The thrusting intensified and strings of red spittle swung from its chin like foul pendulums. With the last of his strength, Jacob slammed the heel of his fist into the headset. A shaft of dazzling light erupted in the baby's face, scorching its cloudy retinas. It loosened its hold on him amidst agonising shrieks. Jacob didn't waste his chance; he grabbed his attacker's face with both hands and drove his thumbs deep into those hellish green eyeballs. The writhing abomination screeched and bucked, but Jacob held fast and continued pushing, jamming his thumbs deeper until his nails scraped bone and he felt the skull crack. Letting rip his own tortured death

wail, he viciously twisted his fists and pulled. The top of the child's cranium fractured and its scream turned into a gurgle as torrents of blood and cerebrospinal fluid gushed out of its mouth and nose directly onto Jacob. The engineer sustained his demented howl as the flow of sticky effluence saturated his face and hair, until finally the creature's head tore completely in two.

The slime-covered mutant fell heavily against its surrogate father, and they remained this way, in a spreading pool of gore, for many seconds. Finally, Jacob pushed the baby aside and dragged himself upright. He unslung the firearm, pumped it once, and then fired. He needed to be sure.

He did not look to Rachel as he made his way to the door. He saw no reason to, and there was too little time. He had to find the others, save them if he could, if there was anyone left to be saved.

THE EMBARRASSED LANDSCAPE

(A Play)

EXT. PHONEBOX – DAY

Hands fumble a bunch of coins out of a pocket and push them into the slot. Trembling fingers hold up a scrap of paper with a number on it. A hand goes to pick up the receiver—it hesitates, squeezes the receiver tight before ripping it off the cradle. Digits are punched into the phone.

CALLER

It's me . . . I've changed my mind . . .

I've had time to think things through . . .

I don't know. I just want to . . . do what's right . . .

But please, that's . . . no . . . it's important that I . . .

Yes . . . agreed . . . I have to stop running from . . .

I understand. Where do you want me to . . . okay.

Thank you . . . You don't know how much this—

The caller stops abruptly, indicating that the other person has hung up. The receiver is replaced back on the cradle.

INT. HOTEL – DAY

A young hotel attendant is seen going about his duties. He enters a lift and selects his required floor. Just as the doors begin to close a young girl, maybe nineteen years old, slips through the gap. She apologises and requests a floor. The boy notices the girl's attractiveness and comes over a little shy. The girl appears anxious. They make awkward eye contact, they smile.

GIRL

You work here?

BOY

(looks down at uniform)

Um . . . yeah.

GIRL

Nice place to work.

BOY

I guess . . .

A pause.

The lift ascends noisily

GIRL

(self-consciously)

This might sound strange, but . . . ever feel like the choices you make have already been decided?

BOY

(confused)

Sometimes, maybe . . . I don't know.

Another pause.

Grainy shot of the two from above, through what looks like a security camera.

BOY

They say that . . .

The boy bashfully trails off.

GIRL

What do they say?

BOY

Aw, nothing. It's daft.

GIRL

Try me.

The boy looks at the girl and half-smiles; regains a bit of confidence.

BOY

Well, they say there's no such thing as free will, apparently. Our brains, they make all our decisions for us, like, a split-second before we're consciously aware of it. Or something like that. I read a thing online . . .

GIRL

Are you talking about fate?

BOY

I'm not sure. It's just a theory, I think.

He goes to say something more, but then stops.

GIRL

(exhales)

I want to believe in fate . . .

BOY

Really?

GIRL

More than anything in my life . . .

The boy raises an eyebrow; assumes the girl might be some kind of astrology nut.

The lift comes to a stop.

GIRL

Maybe then I wouldn't have to carry so much of the blame.

BOY

Blame. For what?

The doors open and the girl steps out. She glances back at the boy, almost says something, then doesn't. Her eyes seem to plead with him. The doors close.

INT. HOTEL CORRIDOR – DAY

The girl from the lift hurries down a long hallway. She checks a scrap of paper and stops outside a particular door. She knocks tentatively.

CU of an eye looking through the eyepiece.

Fisheye lens shot of the girl waiting on the other side of the door. The door opens.

Grainy shot from a corridor security camera as the girl hesitates by the open doorway. Two burly figures emerge from within and grab her. A bag is thrown over her head and she is bundled into the room.

INT. HOTEL CORRIDOR – DAY

The hotel attendant from earlier is now preparing a service trolley for a round of room collections. A guest appears and tries to get between the attendant and his trolley, but the boy fumbles some crockery and it clatters to the floor. He apologises awkwardly as the guest disregards him and continues on down the hall.

INT. HOTEL ROOM – DAY

The girl with the bag over her head sits motionless in a chair. Hands appear and fold up the bottom of the bag so that just the lower half of her face is revealed. A conversation now takes place between the girl and another older female. CU remains static on the girl's exposed mouth throughout the conversation.

WOMAN

Why are you here?

GIRL

I've come to do what . . . needs to be done.

WOMAN

You made your decision clear to us. What's changed?

GIRL

I thought I'd be able to cope, with my decision, but I can't.

WOMAN

I see. Though, in all fairness, we knew you'd come back. Those in your position . . . they always do.

GIRL

I'm sorry for what I've . . . I just . . .

WOMAN

It isn't me you should be apologising to. Nobody forced you into this predicament but yourself.

The girl quietly starts to sob.

WOMAN

That isn't to say we can't help you through this. But, if we do offer our assistance, you know what that means. You understand what has to happen . . .

GIRL

I'm ready to accept whatever awaits me.

WOMAN

Good. Now, as you were already primed during first contact, no further preparation is required. Everything you were instructed about the process remains the same.

GIRL

I understand.

WOMAN

That just leaves two final points. First, take this . . .

The woman passes something to the girl—shot of the girl's hand closing around it.

WOMAN

You must wear it throughout the process. Under no circumstances may you remove it, or allow it to disengage. Is that clear?

GIRL

Yes.

WOMAN

And lastly, the most important detail. The decisions which brought you to this point are now meaningless. There is only one choice left for you to make . . .

INT. HOTEL CORRIDOR – DAY

The young hotel attendant is letting himself into rooms and collecting dishes onto the trolley. He comes upon a room where the door is slightly ajar.

INT. HOTEL ROOM (CONTINUED)

The attendant enters the room.

In the centre of the large living space a sharp-suited man and a person wearing an orange boiler suit sit on chairs a few feet apart, both are facing the camera. The man has a small table before him; on it are writing materials and a large opulent-looking hourglass. The boiler-suited person's hands and feet are bound and there is a bag over their head. Both are positioned in front of a purple silk curtain which hangs from the ceiling and acts as a backdrop for the pair.

A middle-aged lady sits at another table across the room with a typewriter set before her. Next to her stands an intimidating-looking heavy

dressed all in black; the man's giant hands are clasped neatly before him, his eyes staring straight ahead.

As the boy walks into view the sharp-suited man becomes animated—his eyes light up and his arms spread theatrically wide as if welcoming an old friend. His exaggerated manner is flamboyant and overtly game showy.

MAN

(jauntily)

Ah, he's arrived, excellent! Please, come forward. Enter!

The middle-aged lady immediately begins typing, swiftly and methodically, into the typewriter.

MAN

So good of you to join us, old boy!

BOY

(startled)

What's happening in here? This room is—

MAN

—so much more than meets the eye. Astutely observed, thank you! But please, before we begin, allow me to explain. Now, nobody likes the term kangaroo court. But, make no mistake; what you see before you is a legitimate legal forum. So, here we are! The person sat to my right, this lovely young creature, is in custody for a *hideous* crime—

The man regards a ceiling security camera and speaks from the corner of his mouth.

MAN

(hammily)

. . . a real nasty piece of work . . .

CU of the lens of the ceiling security camera.

—which will be made clear to you shortly. But now for the exciting part—your appearance here today means that, by the Lumetian Law of 1957, you can be lawfully selected to take part!

BOY

Take part in what?

MAN

(giddy with excitement)

I'm so glad you asked. To take part as honoured guest and sole member of our single person jury!

BOY

Wait, what?! You can't do this here. This is a hotel, not a court of law—

MAN

(theatrically wags finger)

Now, now, the hotel management is perfectly aware of these proceedings. It both validates this arrangement and is in *full* agreement with it. The same can be said of the agency which employs you. An organisation by the name of . . .

The man trails off, consulting some paperwork in front of him.

BOY

Visionary Solutions . . . but—

MAN

Ah, yes! As with a growing number of specialised recruiting bodies, Visionary Solutions are in full accordance with our legal interests. Your terms of agreement will cover all of this in finer detail.

The boy looks to the bound and bagged figure, then back to the sharp-suited man.

BOY

(flustered)

I . . . I don't believe any of this!

He defiantly turns and marches out of the room.

MAN

Um, I say, old boy? I'm not sure that's such a good idea . . .

Upon exiting the room he charges straight into another heavy, one almost identical to the first, who is waiting on the other side of the door. The boy bounces off the heavy's barrel-chest and stumbles back in shock. The enormous man just stares down at him, motionless. The boy glances both ways down the corridor and goes to speak but the man steps forward, grunts threateningly. The boy edges away, and then all but runs back into the apartment. The heavy closes the door and resumes his sentry position.

MAN

Hello again! Welcome back and apologies if we got off on the wrong foot. Allow me to introduce myself, my name is Mr Bond. And the divine specimen tinkering away over there is Miss Nelson. Now, please believe me when I tell you this—your being here is *crucially* important to us. We simply couldn't bear the thought of you leaving so soon.

BOY

But . . . why *me*?

MR BOND

Well, you see, this brand of jury service is really no different than any other. Once selected you are legally obliged to take part. Failure to do so would be very, very bad. Isn't that so, Miss Nelson?

MISS NELSON

(momentarily stops typing)

That's correct, Mr Bond. Very bad indeed.

MR BOND

A criminal offence in fact, and as a result you could face prosecution. But, nobody wants to see that happen, least of all me.

After all, you're our special guest! You don't think we'd let our special guest wind up in trouble, do you?

BOY

I . . . guess not.

MR BOND

Wonderful! We are all in agreement then. Now, the sooner you lend us your cooperation, the sooner this will all be over and you can get back to . . . well, whatever it is you do around here. Please, take a seat.

The boy reluctantly seats himself on a chair behind a small table which is situated facing, but a few metres distant from, the man and the bagged figure.

MR BOND

Name?

BOY

Sorry . . . ?

MR BOND

(sighs)

Please state your full name for the court.

BOY

Davis . . . Frank Davis.

MR BOND

(to the typist)

Miss Nelson . . .

MISS NELSON

Mr Bond?

MR BOND

The boy's papers please.

MISS NELSON

Certainly.

The typist stamps, folds and places a document into an envelope. She then gets to her feet, adjusts her pencil skirt, and trots across the room towards the boy. Mr Bond admires her Mad Men secretary-style wiggle as she goes. She hands the envelope to the boy and then returns to her seat.

MR BOND

That covers the legal side of things. Visionary Solutions will be notified. Isn't this a *thrill*?!

(becomes suddenly sombre)

Now, Mr Davis, the lady who sits before you is one Miss Joanne Savoca.

Mr Bond produces a nail file from his jacket pocket and begins effeminately filing his nails.

(continued)

She stands on trial today for committing a truly reprehensible and unspeakable act. The severity of her crime means she can be tried, convicted and sentenced right here in the seclusion of this legal chamber, should the jury find her to be guilty, of course. You, being the sole embodiment of said jury, shall be called upon to consider a body of evidence. Following this, you will be required to make a decision based on your assessment of the case. Do you understand?

FRANK

Sort of . . . but . . .

MR BOND

Due to the nature of this trial, its duration must fall within official guidelines set by the impromptu courts and tribunals judiciary. Once I initiate this timepiece—

(taps hourglass with nail file)

—proceedings will begin. You then have until the sands diminish to give your final verdict. Are we clear?

FRANK

(inward)

This can't be happening.

MR BOND

(pops nail file back in pocket)

Excellent!

The heavy that's stood beside Miss Nelson approaches the boiler-suited individual and removes the bag from the individual's head. The boy gasps as he recognises the person to be the girl with whom he shared a conversation in the hotel lift earlier.

MR BOND

Ah yes, that's right. You two have met. How adorable! Not to infringe on anyone's privacy, but—

(motions towards the security camera)

—there isn't a great deal we don't see, I'm afraid. I trust that you being acquainted won't in any way hinder your decision-making abilities?

FRANK

I don't know this person.

MR BOND

Nor do I imagine you'd wish to. Miss Nelson, let us not record what was just discussed; we have no cause to embarrass our honoured guest.

MISS NELSON

Very well, Mr Bond.

MR BOND

Wonderful. The court is now in session!

Mr Bond dramatically upends the hourglass—and so begins the trial.

A montage of dissolving scenes illustrates the unfolding courtroom drama:

MR BOND

Miss Savoca came from a good home; she had an enviable upbringing, with loving parents. She received a fine education and was faced with hopeful prospects and a bright future. She was a very caring individual, early on, and well liked among her family and peers. In short, Miss Savoca was an upstanding member of her community.

Mr Bond produces family photos of the accused, which the heavy collects and takes across the room to the seated juror. In them she is a happy, smiling child. Mr Bond also presents glowing school reports and various certificates of achievement.

(continued)

For reasons unknown she fell in with a predatory street gang notorious for drugs and violence. They preyed on her and abused her terribly—subjected her to unspeakable humiliations. This culture of mistreatment transformed her into something less than human.

The heavy, in front of the juror, scrolls through an iPad containing many lurid pictures of the accused in various states of undress; on what appear to be social media sites. He then presents to the juror a long list of criminal records, including convictions of theft, assault, prostitution, etc.

(continued)

Her life became a ravaged landscape of substance and sexual addiction. Into this living hell she birthed two helpless children, neither of whom she had the slightest idea how to care for. While she satisfied her dependencies, these poor infants were starved of affection and love.

Mr Bond instructs the heavy to place a set of headphones over the juror's ears. It's explained that the sounds he is listening to are the desperate cries of neglect, from the two children, which a neighbour reportedly recorded and handed in to police.

(continued)

They lived in squalor and ruin, objects of her disdain, victims of her negligence. Her children eventually died one day, alone, while she

wandered the streets, hunting for something to inject into her bloodstream, something as transient and tragic as their own fleeting little lives.

The heavy takes a final set of photos across the room and arranges them methodically upon the juror's table. We don't see the images in the photographs, but the boy does—they cause him to retch onto the floor.

Mr Bond studies the boy ever closer with narrowing eyes. He makes notes.

MR BOND

I understand this case is a particularly distressing one; that emotions are running extremely high. They have been for all of us. You really are a credit to the hotel, and to Visionary Solutions.

The boy regains his composure; dabs his mouth with a cloth provided to him by the heavy.

The room seems to exhale.

(continued)

However, I must remind you that you are here for a reason, Mr Davis . . .

The boy looks dazed, unresponsive.

(continued)

A very important reason. One which requires . . .

Mr Bond glances at the hourglass—shot of the grains flowing inexorably downward.

MR BOND

(impishly)

. . . concentration!

The boy jumps suddenly.

MR BOND

(serious again)

The time has come where I must now ask you for your verdict.

FRANK

What? No . . . I mean . . . I can't . . .

MR BOND

(lowers tone)

I simply *must* press you, Mr Davis.

FRANK

(flustered)

This isn't . . . I'm not . . .

MR BOND

May I remind you that, for the benefit of this trial, the room in which you sit is a legitimate court of law. You are therefore legally bound to now make an informed decision. So, I ask again, based on the evidence you have seen and heard today . . . do you, Frank Davis, find the accused, Miss Joanne Savoca, guilty, or not guilty?

The boy is aghast. His mouth hangs open; eyes locked wide. Perplexed and sickly wan, he lets his gaze drop to the floor.

(continued)

Mr Davis . . ?

The boy is unresponsive once more; he looks close to catatonic.

Mr Bond glances again at the hourglass, and then in the direction of the security camera. He hooks a finger into his collar to loosen it.

Shot of the lens of the security camera; it is blank, impassive—like the eye of HAL 2000.

MR BOND

(swallows dryly)

While all this may seem daunting to you, it is by no means extraordinary. Every day regular citizens like yourself are called upon to fulfil this sort of duty. It is a requirement woven into the very fabric of our justice system. You, Mr Davis, have a chance to represent your country in its most decent and noble of pursuits!

Mr Bond accompanies this with a dramatic flourish. When he sees that the boy does not share his enthusiastic pride we go to a CU of the man's face, where beads of sweat now stud his brow.

The boy continues to stare at the floor—motionless, wordless.

MR BOND

(looks to Miss Nelson)

If there is doubt in your heart, Mr Davis, then you needn't worry. Everybody goes through these emotions. But there is no greater relief than absolute honesty. If you speak the truth your burden will be lifted and you will walk out of here with the clearest possible . . .

Mr Bond searches the boy's face for the slightest glimmer of compliance—nothing.

MR BOND

(dejected)

I see. Well, if the jury is unable to reach a verdict then we have little choice but to adjourn and allow subsequent legalities to be . . .

FRANK

Wait . . .

Mr Bond looks up from his paperwork.

Miss Nelson stops typing.

FRANK

I'm ready. I am ready to give my answer.

The typing resumes.

MR BOND

(eyes dart to the hourglass)

You're . . . *sure*? You do realise the gravity of what you're about to

—

FRANK

I am the sole juror in this trial. It is my duty. I cannot allow my . . .
con . . .

MR BOND

(almost springs out of chair)

Yes . . . ?!

*Mr Bond's eyes flit between the boy and the hourglass—the sand has all
but run out . . .*

FRANK

. . . conflicted feelings to prevent me from doing what needs to be
done.

Shot of the hourglass as the final grains diminish.

*Mr Bond exhales deeply. He becomes distant; appears crestfallen. A
single droplet of sweat trickles down his temple. After a few moments he
regains his composure.*

MR BOND

Very well, Mr Davis. So then, guilty . . . or not guilty?

FRANK

(exhales)

Guilty . . . I'm . . . Joanne, I'm so sorry . . .

*The girl gasps, and then shrieks. She tries to struggle, but the heavy
comes over and secures her to the chair.*

Mr Bond's expression turns from resignation to one of conspiracy.

MR BOND

Thank you. Your cooperation and resolve are greatly appreciated, Mr Davis. You are an admirable citizen, and a truly virtuous employee. Whilst our gratitude remains absolute, you are now free to go.

The boy, appearing emotionally ruined, slowly stands.

The heavy slips the bag back over the head of the struggling Miss Savoca, and then whips back the silk curtain to reveal a red velvet noose which runs up through a pulley attached to the ceiling.

The boy looks like he is going to pass out.

MR BOND

Mr Davis, you must leave now. And I should remind you that to speak of these proceedings with anyone is a grave and chargeable offence. We wouldn't want our paths to cross again amid circumstances . . . not to your favour.

The boy starts to splutter something, but then stops. He turns and slowly leaves.

(continued)

Oh and, Mr Davis, don't forget your paperwork now, will you.

The boy halts and retrieves the envelope from his juror's table before continuing towards the door.

MR BOND

(raising a finger)

Just one more thing, if I may . . .

INT. HOTEL ROOM – DAY

FLASHBACK – *We return to the earlier scene of the two females talking to each other. CU remains static on the girl's mouth:*

WOMAN

That just leaves two final points. First, take this . . .

Shot again of the girl's hand closing around the thing the woman has given her.

WOMAN

You must wear it throughout the process. Under no circumstances may you remove it, or allow it to disengage. Is that clear?

GIRL

Yes.

WOMAN

And lastly, the most important detail. The decisions which brought you to this point are now meaningless. There is only one choice left for you to make . . .

GIRL

The safe-word.

WOMAN

Your future depends on it. The safe-word places your life as much within your hands as without. That is its nature, its purity. And so, the time has come. Whether or not you leave this place hinges on what you say next . . .

The girl, whose face is mostly obscured by the bag, hesitates. Her lips part; they tremble pensively.

INT. HOTEL ROOM – DAY

FLASHFORWARD – *We return to the real-time moment prior to the flashback:*

MR BOND

. . . Just to say that, you did a good thing here today, Frank.

The boy walks towards the camera, heading out of the room. He looks shaken, but oddly serene.

In the background we see in soft-focus the hanging of Miss Joanne Savoca.

FRANK

Thank you, Mr Bond.

He pauses in the doorway, hand resting on the knob.

(continued)

My conscience is clear.

CUT TO BLACK

FADE IN

INT. HOTEL ROOM – DAY

In the room which hosted the trial, the furniture is now arranged in a more ordinary fashion.

The heavies stand either side of the entrance door like two identical black-clad bodyguards.

Mr Bond and Miss Nelson are in the centre of the room—there is an air of disquiet.

MISS NELSON

(furious)

What in *fuck's* name was that?!

MR BOND

(uncharacteristically timid)

I had everything under control . . . it's fine.

MISS NELSON

Fine? You very nearly lost us another one. You're meant to be a fucking professional!

MR BOND

(rubbing back of his neck)

Look, what happened in Monaco was down to poor intelligence. The company was negligent, not me. This time they did their homework, everything went according to plan.

MISS NELSON

Don't give me that shite. The mark was halfway out the bloody door!

MR BOND

Trust me, they knew . . .

Mr Bond pauses to dab his brow with a kerchief.

MR BOND

That period of sick leave on his report, turns out it coincided with a miscarriage in the family. Softened him right up, I'm telling you. All he needed was a little nudge in the right direction.

MISS NELSON

You'd better be right, or it won't just be your career on the fucking line.

A door on the other side of the room opens. Steam curls out through the gap, followed by a figure. Miss Savoca steps through the doorway in a bathrobe, her hair is damp.

Mr Bond and Miss Nelson spin around to greet her with enormous showy smiles.

MR BOND

(arms outstretched)

Ms Rose, congratulations! You did it!

MISS NELSON

(fawning eyes)

How do you feel my darling?

MS ROSE

A bit . . . shaky . . .

Mr Bond pops a bottle of champagne and begins pouring into flutes.

MR BOND

That's perfectly normal, it'll pass. The pill we gave you should take the edge off.

MISS NELSON

(handing Ms Rose a drink)

You deserve it.

MS ROSE

Thank you. I'm just relieved it's all over. I was frightened the safe-word I provided was maybe a little . . . obscure?

MR BOND

Not at all, you did fine. I'm just sorry things got a little close to the wire, well, so to speak. Apologies if you were given a fright.

MS ROSE

I didn't expect it all to be quite so intense, I have to admit.

MR BOND

There was no need to worry, Ms Rose. You were in *very* capable hands.

Miss Nelson discreetly rolls her eyes.

MR BOND

Miss Nelson and I have done this many, many times. It's why we could afford to let things escalate the way they did. After all, the better the show, the more likely the chance of—

A telephone starts to ring.

MR BOND

(mock surprise)

Oh, who could *this* be?!

Mr Bond goes over to the room's telephone and answers it. He makes himself comfortable in a nearby armchair.

MR BOND

Hello . . . Yes, speaking . . .

Yes . . . that's right . . .

Well, I'm so pleased to hear that . . .

No, thank *you*. That's what we're here for...

Okay then . . . I see . . .

That's very kind of you to say. Our client will be most pleased . . .

Very well, understood . . .

Thank you. Good bye.

Mr Bond hangs up. He leaps out of the chair and saunters back over to the other two, grinning.

MR BOND

Good news, everybody. The investor *loved* the performance. Said it was one of the most captivating displays they'd ever seen!

MISS NELSON

(beaming)

I never had any doubt . . .

MS ROSE

(voice trembles)

Does that mean . . . ?

MR BOND

Absolutely, Ms Rose, the investor is more than happy to meet the arranged figure. But, not only that, the fact we breached the time constraint actually worked in our *favour*—

(shoots Miss Nelson a conceited look)

—The way we brought it back in the very last second was the investor's favourite part! Mind . . . *blown!*

All three of them have a good laugh.

The heavies remain stone-faced.

MR BOND

You can expect your prize fund, plus full bonus, to clear within three working days.

MS ROSE

(clasps hands to mouth)

Oh . . . oh god!

MISS NELSON

We're so happy for you.

MS ROSE

Thank you so much. You don't know how much this means. Now my children can—

MR BOND

(places hand on Ms Rose's arm)

You don't have to go into it . . . we understand entirely.

Miss Nelson hands two lots of paperwork to Ms Rose for signing. Once she's done, Mr Bond takes one of the documents and lays it inside an expensive-looking leather briefcase before clasping the lid shut.

CU of the front of the briefcase where a gold studded emblem is embossed with the letters VS.

MISS NELSON

Well, it's been a pleasure, Ms Rose.

MS ROSE

Thank you, Miss Nelson, Mr Bond. You really have saved my . . .
Oh, I almost forgot . . .

Ms Rose fishes around in her bathrobe pocket for something and then, once retrieved, hands it to Miss Nelson. The older woman pretends as though it'd slipped her mind, and takes the thing with a smile.

MR BOND

Not at all, my dear, we're here to help. And should you need us again, well, you know where we are.

Mr Bond and Miss Nelson make their way to the front door and exit the apartment, along with the heavies.

Ms Rose takes her paperwork and glass of champagne and sits down at the vanity dresser. Observing herself in the mirror, she selects a cream and applies a little to her neck, regarding the faint red mark with a wistful expression. She picks up the manuscript and flicks through its pages. It contains the account of the trial that Miss Nelson was typing throughout. Ms Rose falls on a page near the end of the document.

CU of the page and of a section which reads:

Safe-word disclosed by: SAVOCA, J. (ROSE, S.)

*Safe-word acquired by: BOND, R. ***Successful****

Safe-word renounced by: DAVIS, F. "CONSCIENCE"

INT. HOTEL – DAY

We see the young attendant going about his duties again just as before. He comes across a door to a penthouse apartment that, from the look on his face, he doesn't appear to recognise. He consults his checklist but, again, his expression indicates confusion. The attendant lets himself into the apartment and, in the enormous bedroom, happens upon a peculiar set-up. A luxuriantly deep chair stuffed with cushions is positioned before a

gigantic flat screen television which covers most of the opposing wall. The screen is digitally divided up into a grid framework of dozens of smaller screens; each one shows a static image of a different interior within the hotel—the inside of the lift, shots of various corridors, and many, many rooms. One particular room jumps out at the boy and he instantly recognises it to be the ‘court room’ he was inside of only an hour before. The furniture, he sees, has been moved back to normal, though now there’s nobody in there. On other screens, however, there are collections of people in arrangements oddly similar to the scenario he himself was forced to take part in.

Next to the chair is an exquisitely hand carved little table. On it is an array of items: an empty cocktail glass, a remote control and a telephone. A miniature gold platter holds a mound of white powder and a tiny gold spoon. Next to a tissue dispenser is a sleek, plastic cigar-shaped device, one end of which is claggy with wetness. And closest to the armrest of the chair is a wedding ring-sized box with the lid open. Where the ring would be sits a small plastic object, like a single earphone bud. The attendant picks up the cocktail glass and inspects it; he sees that the rim is smudged with lipstick.

He puts down the glass and picks up the remote control. For a moment he studies the multitude of television screens; some with people on them, some not. A feeling of dawning realisation is followed quickly by a wave of horror. He returns his attention to the screen whose image is disturbingly familiar and, using the remote, selects that particular one. The room, his court room, blows up to fill the entire television. He cranks the volume until movements can be heard just out of shot. As he stands there, studying the camera’s POV, a female figure walks into the frame. He is stunned to recognise her as being the girl from the trial—the girl they hung right before his eyes. She walks leisurely across the room, no longer wearing the boiler suit but the clothes he first saw her in, and picks up a document from the vanity dresser. Then, collecting her jacket from the back of a chair, she exits the room.

The boy staggers back in shock and stabs at what he thinks is the ‘off’ button. But rather than killing the power, the display instead switches to the

television's screensaver—a black background populated simply with a stylised rendering of the word FUN. The word pulsates with hypnotic neon colours. Startled by this, the boy drops the remote onto the floor. The collision of it hitting the carpet knocks the TV back to its original grid format, and so the screensaver word now appears dozens of times, throbbing at the centre of each individual screen. The boy is momentarily paralysed with fright, like a rabbit in a hundred headlights, the word reflecting countless times in his darting eyes. As he goes to pick up the remote, the sound of a toilet flushing inside the apartment stops him dead. Slowly, he turns around.

CUT TO BLACK

THE PORTABLE HUM

Dad was always a bit of a joker when we were growing up. He'd play the usual sorts of pranks, like hiding around a corner to jump out at you, or edging away in his car while you were trying to get in the door. Things like that, the typical stuff. Rarely anything out of the ordinary though, nothing strange. There was one time, when I was a kid; he hid from me in a shopping mall. Then, distracted by some golf clubs, forgot that he was hiding and I was left alone for about twenty minutes. Seemed like hours. Not a big thing really, but I didn't sleep properly for a week. That may have been when my insomnia first took hold.

Years later when the calls started, I knew Dad wasn't up to his old jokes. But that didn't stop them being amusing. The humour came from the fact he didn't know he was doing it. My phone would ring and it would be Dad calling. I'd pick up, but there'd be nobody there—no answer on the other end, just the sound of him walking. The phone jostling around in Dad's pocket; eavesdropping on his muted footfalls. It was funny in the beginning, receiving calls from your father's arse is absurd in itself, but the fact they kept happening was just plain bizarre. It was likely something that happened to other people too from time to time; phantom phone calls from those they knew, initiated in the pocket of the caller. But I never met anyone who experienced them as much as me.

"Lock your bloody phone!" I would yell at Dad, or rather his arse, only half in jest. But he wouldn't hear me; he'd just keep on walking. And of course, he would not lock his phone. I never knew where it was he was going to, or coming back from. Or why it was me his phone always rang, when I was the family member he called the least.

"Sorry! Promise I'll lock it!" came the text message reply, minutes or hours after he'd realised what he'd done. But for whatever reason he never did, because the calls, they didn't stop coming.

People at work thought it was hilarious. Especially when I would play up to an incoming call and theatrically answer it with something like, "Oh hello there, Dad's arse! How can I help?" Colleagues would fall about. We thought it was funny, because it genuinely was. Right up until it wasn't.

One day, in a meeting at work, my phone went. Seeing that it was Dad, I considered just cancelling the call. Then I thought, maybe it's something real this time, like an emergency. I excused myself from the meeting and stepped out into the corridor. I couldn't believe my ears. Whether it was the fatigue of not having slept well, I don't know, but those familiar footsteps threw a switch in me and I lost it. Not being able to scream down the phone at him, I channelled my frustration into a vengeful text message—one I regretted sending after I'd calmed down, of course, but still, it hadn't been entirely unwarranted. He texted back an apology, assuring me it would not happen again. I felt bad, even though I didn't believe him.

Looking back, I guess I could've cut him some slack. He had, after all, been suffering with his health, which had deteriorated noticeably in the preceding year or so. Nobody really knew what was wrong, least of all him, but the more my mother nagged about doctors the more he would just shrug it off—typical old guy behaviour. The thing was though, despite the fact he looked unwell, he behaved sprightlier than ever; randomly singing, dancing, or just being a general pain. It drove my mother to distraction. None of it made any sense.

The calls stopped for a while after that. It felt like months passed and I barely even remembered them being a thing. My parents visited a couple of times. His weird phone habit would occasionally arise in conversation and we'd laugh, my girlfriend finding it particularly funny. Dad would take it all in good spirits, mostly appearing to revel in his strange Luddite sensibility.

It was a Saturday morning when it happened. I was reading in bed, wired and irritable from not having had much sleep. My phone rang, it was Dad. I went to answer it without thinking, and then stopped. I hesitated for a few seconds, just looking at the screen. Thoughts wandering as the recollection sank in. I picked up the phone and said hello. Nothing greeted me back but a faint rustling. I tried again, asserting hello louder this time into the handset. I listened hard, trying to pick up anything identifiable. Eventually sounds began to emerge—percussive and rhythmic but wholly unvocal. I laughed out loud in disbelief, shook my head and went to hang up. Again I paused for a moment before returning the phone to my ear. *Let's see how this plays out*, I thought, smirking to myself. The footsteps were leisurely paced; he clearly wasn't in a hurry to get where he was going. I

decided to stay on the line until I found out something about Dad's little sojourn.

After about twenty minutes of unhurried strolling, the ground under his feet seemed to go from concrete to gravel. With my growing intrigue came the assumption of an incline because his breathing got heavier. Crunchy, scraping steps eventually gave way to softer-sounding footfalls and after a few minutes his laboured breaths subsided.

Soon I detected a burbling noise which laced in and out of earshot, likely running water from some winding stream or small river. Was he in the countryside? My parents lived near the coast but their house wasn't particularly close to any hiking spots. Perhaps he'd driven somewhere first before setting out on foot. It baffled me to wonder what he could be up to. I never really knew him to go off places on his own. He loved walking but it was always something he did with my mother.

I considered leaving him to it and hanging up, but then his course suddenly changed. It became more erratic, staggered and jerky as if he were negotiating some rocky slope. A flurry of quick steps signalled his arrival at the foot of something. With the sound of rushing water more prominent now, I guessed he was on a riverbank. After a moment of quiet there were a series of strained, heaving sounds. Dad's deliberate, breathy exertions told me he had started toiling over something arduous. Following a sudden surge of water, the heaving sounds merged with abrasive dragging noises. I got the impression he was pulling on something—a rope possibly? But why, and what could be on the end of it?

During what sounded like Dad having a rest, my phone rang. It was my girlfriend. I didn't know why she was calling, nor had I expected her to. For long seconds I switched glances between the two avatars of her and my father, both flashing for attention. There was no way I could cut Dad's call now, not after coming this far. I had to know what he was doing. Apologising to my girlfriend's digitised name, I ended her call and returned my attention to the riverbank.

I had to strain to catch what was now going on. Eventually there it was; Dad's wheezy panting. His laboured breaths were interspersed with the same gravelly scrapes as before, but this time scrambling footfalls accompanied them. Pebbles and chunks of earth tumbled loose with each audible tread. It was as if he were scaling something steep, climbing back up the way he'd come perhaps—only now with some kind of object.

The dragging continued but the sound of it began to soften, going from a scratchy abrasion to something less grating on the ear. It was more organic somehow, like he was pulling the thing across thick vegetation. I glanced at my handset again; the timer was nearing 50 minutes. I wondered what might happen if he realised his phone was almost an hour into a call he hadn't made—just sitting silently in his pocket, betraying the weirdness of his actions.

After what seemed like a lifetime of puffs and pants, stops and starts, all went quiet. A magnified rustling came down the line and I immediately panicked. He was going into his pocket. I jerked the handset away from my ear and went to thumb the cancellation key, but the phone slipped and spun out of my fingers. It flung itself into a somersault and landed face down on the bed. I was certain that by the time I'd retrieved it Dad's puzzled voice would be on the other end. Picking it back up, I tentatively brought the handset to my face. Strangely no questions emanated from the speaker. I put it to my ear and was greeted not by words but by the clinking of keys, and one being inserted into a padlock. The lock cracked and the creaking sound of an old door whined as it was pushed or pulled open.

The object was pulled through the doorway and dragged across what sounded like wooden floorboards, its leaden weight grinding splinters out of the rough surface. When the thing finally came to rest, creaky footfalls traipsed back over to where the door must have been because the next thing I heard was the sound of it being locked. Dad moved back to where the object was positioned and jangled more keys. A pocket shuffle and a grunt suggested he'd possibly knelt down. The snap of another padlock opening was followed by the stiff groan of something heavy being lifted—a lid perhaps. So the thing he had was some kind of box. Or . . . cage?

Dad strained back to his feet and took a couple of creaky steps—backwards or sideways, I couldn't be sure. Then there was nothing. Silence but for his faint, steady breathing. I checked my phone again and the call duration was now over an hour. Mystified, I returned the handset to my ear and immediately discerned something odd. A low background noise, but not one I'd picked up on before. The sound was a bit like signal interference, even though the line had been clear up to now. It had a kind of hushed static quality, only not electronic—somehow more soothing, melodious even. I screwed the phone to my ear, trying to make out exactly what I was hearing. Weirdly the sound made me think of waves lapping

against exotic shores. But the thought was absurd; Dad was nowhere near a beach. He was inside some kind of old shed, or outhouse, wasn't he? I was yanked from my pondering by new noises, vague shuffles I couldn't quite put my finger on. Then the distinct sound of a zipper. He was getting undressed! As he kicked off his shoes and folded and set down his jeans, with me inside them, my bemusement skyrocketed.

Now buried in Dad's discarded clothes pile, estranged from his amplified body movements, I could hear things in the room a little clearer. There was a dim muttering now alongside the rhythmic background noise, like a low vocal murmur. It was as if Dad was speaking softly to someone under his breath. His bare-footed steps creaked away from me, over towards the object. As I listened, the strange oceanic noise seemed to morph from an undulating hiss into a sort of purring metronomic vibration. A sensual pulse, like some undersea heartbeat, filled my head with stillness. For some reason the more I heard it, the more relaxed I felt; my tense intrigue being replaced by a calming detachment. Feeling oddly serene, I made an effort to concentrate.

Besides getting louder, the noise was taking on more tones and textures. The humming background throb now joined by intermittent clicks, and something else. Almost like a continual slithering, nauseatingly moist, like the squirm of frictionless tendrils. Through this audio collage I could hear Dad's breaths becoming shallower and more frequent. He started to moan, but I couldn't tell if it was one of pleasure or distress.

A disconnect stuck in my mind because it was a sound I had never before associated with him. I was transported back to my childhood. Late one night, tucked up in bed, I overheard my parents having sex. It wasn't until years later, in adolescence, that I understood their frantic clamour to have been normal. The groans I picked up on now took me back to that night, but not because they were reminiscent of those that Dad had made. They reminded me of my mother's.

The submissive whimpers coming down the line made my head swim. Somebody or something was savagely fucking my father, and the sudden realisation of this buckled my stomach. He was being taken to the limit of ecstasy and pain, luxuriating in the cruelty of his own sexual torment.

When he started to wail my concerns bloomed, but at the same time I found it difficult to keep my eyes open. The soothing ambient pulse was infecting my brain with a lethargy it couldn't resist. I was being flooded by

an inner quietude, a peacefulness my insomnia had never allowed me to know. As my father's effeminate cries entwined with the aural swell I began to lose myself to sleep. Surrendering to this tortured lullaby, my head drooped and the phone slipped. I finally capsized away from consciousness, all thoughts evaporating like ghosts.

When I awoke hours later I felt more rested than I had done since childhood. Thoroughly refreshed and invigorated, I only remembered what had happened when I spied my phone next to me on the duvet. I turned it over and saw the home screen just as normal, no on-going call or any missed ones since I'd dozed off. It was like the whole bizarre incident had never occurred. I checked my accepted calls and there it was, top of the list: Dad, incoming, 1 hour 22 minutes.

I never spoke to him about what happened, whatever it had been. That same day, after I'd woken up, I did have fears for his safety, so I called my mother to see if everything was alright. She'd been perfectly chipper and normal-sounding, she'd said that Dad had gone for a walk earlier in the day but was now pottering about in the garden, like he always did. I chose not to mention anything, after all, what could I have possibly said? Dad never raised it with me either, nothing regarding the unaccountability of that phone call. In all truthfulness, I don't think he would've known how to check his call history anyway, even if he had wanted to.

In the days afterwards, my sleep patterns gradually went back to normal; unsettled and sketchy at best. It got to the point where I *wanted* a weird call from Dad, just to experience again that exquisite mental calm, brought on by those . . . sounds. I needed to feel that pristine white nothing, regardless of the cost. I knew the thing that Dad was engaging in was the cause of his ill health. Whatever grip it had over him, whatever pleasures he derived from it, each time he went back it killed him a little more.

Then, maybe a fortnight later, it happened again. A phone call from Dad while I was at work—it was the sound of him walking. That was all I needed. I used a specific app to record the call, and then placed my phone inside my desk drawer. I wasn't sure if what he was doing was considered infidelity, or legal, or could fit into any known classification at all. I just knew it was something he did sometimes. He was at peace with it, and now, so was I.

THE COMFORT ZONE

Robert dashed out of the house in a blind panic, only realising once he was inside his car that he'd left the front door open. Cursing, he swung out of the driver's seat and sprinted back up the driveway, slamming the door closed with such force that his neighbours' windows shuddered. Creating a disturbance wasn't something that concerned him—right now the only thing he cared about was finding his son. Back inside his vehicle, he gunned the engine, launching the sedan out of its parking spot and onto the street, tyres screeching as he took off in the direction of town.

He navigated down suburban streets thrumming with human chaos. People were fleeing their homes just as he had, scrabbling over each other to get to their cars. Many were yelling into their phones while others struggled to calm their distressed children. It felt like everyone in the neighbourhood was desperately trying to manoeuvre out of their driveways and into the flood of honking traffic.

Robert's eyes were fixed on the road but all he could see were the horrifying scenes from the television moments before he'd left the house. Due to his thoughtless panic, those images still played out into an empty living room. Stark footage of a city in turmoil: blood stretching across tarmac, limbs and abdomens ripped apart and scattered in gruesome piles. Was it a bombing? Upon seeing it, memories of the previous year's stadium terror attack had spun through Robert's mind. He'd seen those same worries too playing on the faces of the TV news correspondents. For some reason though, just out of shot, people could be heard raving about something else, something to do with . . . *graffiti*? At the time, this seemingly random chatter had struck a chord in Robert, but he'd begun pacing up and down with his phone jammed to his ear, trying to contact Jason, and the train of thought was lost. After five minutes of calling with no answer, he'd grabbed his coat and made for the door.

Being only fifteen, Jason was usually ferried around town. But that had stopped after the rows and disrespect had become too much for Robert and his new wife to handle. With Pamela now in the hospital about to give birth, and Robert trying to mitigate his son's mood swings around the impending

new arrival, tempers had frayed and finally blown. The law was resolutely laid down—an end to the parental taxi service.

On this mid-summer Saturday afternoon, following another dispute, Jason had stormed out of the house like usual and taken a bus into the city to meet his friends. He hadn't said where he was going, but Robert had a hunch.

He clipped his phone into the hands-free holder above the dash and tried his son again. No answer. His brain reeled, every worst-case scenario pin-wheeling through his mind. *Had Jason been caught in the explosion? Was he injured, badly, or even . . . ?* He couldn't bear to think about it, so tried calling his daughter, just on the off-chance that Jason had perhaps contacted her instead. Megan was the elder of his two children and lived in a neighbouring city with her boyfriend, so the chances of her having received an emergency plea from her little brother were slim, but still worth a try.

Just like with Jason's, however, his daughter's phone simply rang out. *She must be asleep*, he thought, remembering their conversation the prior evening when he'd called to give her an update on Pamela, and she'd mentioned she was currently working nightshifts at the hospital. He presumed that if he couldn't reach Megan, then neither would Jason have managed to either. He ended the call.

Robert switched on the radio and tuned it to the local stations. Much like on television, the airwaves were clogged by real-time coverage of the events unfolding in the city. Reporters were asking witnesses to describe what they'd seen. The more Robert listened, the more their personal accounts didn't quite add up. People were afraid, clearly panic-stricken, but none of them were saying the types of things he'd have expected. There was no mention of explosions or gunmen; no allusion to terrorist acts or suicidal death cries. Robert took his eyes off the road and stared at the radio, leaning in closer to try to make sense of the words. And then, there it was again, a random remark about graffiti, just like he'd heard on TV.

He scowled. *What's all this talk about vandalism?* He dredged his memory for anything that might provide a clue. Then it hit him. He remembered all the fuss in the media the previous week about strange, enigmatic artwork appearing on walls all around the city. Jason had brought it to his attention initially on social media, had tried to show him videos of the weird urban murals, but he'd been too busy with reports and

spreadsheets to take any notice. Days later, one of the teatime magazine shows ran a segment on the phenomenon and it was this coverage that finally caught Robert's eye. It wasn't so much the words themselves—seemingly senseless jumbles of English-looking characters—that grabbed the public's attention, but the way in which they were rendered. Each standalone mural was a striking 3D-style image that appeared to hover above the brickwork it was painted on. The TV reporter had interviewed bystanders and professional graffiti artists alike; all of whom were impressed by the staggering designs, and baffled by the use of colours and symbols which were unlike any they had seen before. The reporter made a game of getting people to try to pronounce the bizarre words aloud, but nobody that was corralled into playing achieved it with any real confidence.

Robert could recall the segment clearly, because during its live airing, as people were having fun trying to vocalise the words, something truly extraordinary happened. Mid-sentence, the reporter had suddenly ducked as something streaked overhead and a plume of feathers erupted in the centre of the mural everyone was stood around. Onlookers gasped and the reporter looked visibly shaken. As the feathers settled, a Rorschach-like blotch of dark blood now stained the art piece. The twisted corpse of the bird lay at the foot of it, one shattered wing still flapping spasmodically. A child off-camera started crying and the segment was quickly cut. It wasn't long though before the news item was doing its own rounds as a viral internet clip, along with videos of the murals themselves.

Despite having made this connection, Robert remained mystified as to the graffiti's significance and the role it played in the day's unravelling chaos. He turned onto the main road into town where, he saw further up the street, a police cordon was blocking the flow of traffic.

"What the *fuck*?" He slowed his approach. A funnel of cars were beeping and trying to reverse out of the bottleneck, while people stood outside their vehicles yelling at the police. Robert stalled for a moment, his engine idling as he tried to think.

It wasn't long before he noticed a woman he recognised moving against the traffic towards him. It was Donna his neighbour, and mother of one of Jason's friends. Robert honked his horn and called her name out of the window. She saw him waving and made a beeline for his passenger side door.

“Robert, thank god!” she cried, scrambling into the car. “I couldn’t get through the jam, had to park up. Have you seen—” her voice cracked, she swallowed down tears. “Have you heard anything . . . from the boys?”

“I’ve been trying to ring Jason but he’s not answering,” Robert said, handing her a tissue from the glove box. “And I’ve no idea what the hell is happening, reports have been so bloody vague. Why aren’t they letting anyone through?”

Donna dabbed at her eyes. “They’re saying it was a dirty bomb, that the city centre may be contaminated. But nobody I’ve talked to heard any explosion. I think they know more than they’re letting on.”

“Jesus!” Robert slammed his fists into the steering wheel. “Our kids are out there!”

Not wanting to appear panicked, he quickly dialled back his rage and tried to regain composure. Robert apologised and the young mother offered a weak smile. Despite it being devoid of mirth, it was the first he’d seen in such proximity since they’d briefly been an item half a decade ago. Their involvement had come about a couple of years after the death of his first wife, Jason and Megan’s mother, following a long battle with breast cancer. By then, enough time had elapsed for Robert to have reasonably started taking an interest in other women, but deep down he was still struggling with the loss. And there were his kids to consider. Jason, who’d been around eight at the time, took the passing of his mother particularly hard. Two years later, and showing little improvement, Robert decided to have his troubled little boy join a junior league football team. It was at these games that he became familiar with Donna, who would also be in attendance every Saturday morning, cheering on her young son Cory from the side-lines. The boys became fast friends, and in the midst of this weekly sporting event, another relationship bloomed. The two adults fell into a contented and carefree union, despite Robert’s quiet burden of pain. With all the day trips and sleepovers that went on, everybody, Megan included, started to feel as though what they had was the beginnings of a family. Things worked out fine for a while, and Donna and Robert felt themselves slipping ever deeper in love. But eventually, Jason’s progress faltered and he started again down a familiar disruptive path. He began having problems at school, started picking on the other kids in class. When he and Cory got into a fight one afternoon at football practice, the parents decided it was best to keep the boys apart for a spell. As Jason’s behaviour steadily worsened, however,

Robert's time became consumed with trying to keep his son out of trouble. He and Donna did their best to maintain what they'd built together, but as time went on, more and more arrangements were cancelled and fewer calls got returned. Years later, when the boys were teenagers, they became thick as thieves once more. But Robert and Donna's relationship never recovered. It wasn't even like a line had been drawn in the sand, as neither one ever really broke up with the other. He'd just allowed their bond to diminish even though the connection they shared never really went away, and could likely have been rekindled given the right circumstances. Robert always harboured a deep remorse for how he'd let things fall apart with Donna—because, truth be told, he never really stopped having feelings for her, even after he started seeing Pamela, and Donna had become involved with somebody else. Now they were just cordial neighbours again, and had been for several years. Polite waves on the street and small talk whenever they bumped into each other was the extent of their contact these days. And, though happily married, Robert still felt a small amount of sadness about that.

A moment or two passed. Donna sniffed and said, "What about the side streets? It's worth a try, surely. I mean, what could they do if they caught us?"

Robert looked into her red-rimmed eyes and saw his own tenacity staring back at him; he'd always admired that about her. He threw the sedan into reverse and backed up the way he had come, eventually swerving into a quiet alleyway. Seconds later they emerged onto a residential road, and continued up it before cutting off again down a deserted byway. The plan seemed to have worked. After a few minutes of unhindered driving, Donna turned to Robert. "How's Pamela?"

Robert shook his head, his attention flipping between one overwhelming circumstance and another. "She's fine, I think. Seven hours of labour last night. I came home for a sleep, was planning to head back there today, but . . ."

"Then this happened," she finished for him. "I'm so sorry, Robert."

"Don't worry." He turned to her and smiled. "Pamela is in safe hands. Our priority right now is the boys, but I'm sure they're fine. Soon as they show up I'm taking Jason straight to the hospital with me."

Donna nodded. She unfurled the tissue and softly blew her nose.

There was a pause before Robert said, "Where's Mike?"

She exhaled and looked out of her passenger door window, as though the answer could be found there. “We’re on another break.” She sniffed and balled up the tissue. “He’s currently living at his brother’s.”

Robert wished he’d kept his mouth shut. “I’m sorry to hear that, Donna.”

“No, it’s fine. It’s not your fault,” she sighed quietly.

“When we’ve found the lads,” he said, getting off the subject, “just let me know where I can take you—home, your parents’ place, wherever you need. We can pick your car up in the morning.”

She turned to him and gave a smile, a real one this time. “Thank you.”

As they drew into the heart of the city, they rounded a corner to see a group of armed police daubing over a graffitied billboard with black paint. A few individuals in forensic suits hunkered over the ground, stuffing what looked like animal carcasses into large plastic bags. Not all that lay dead before the mural were birds though, Robert noticed, like last week’s TV segment may have predicted. Some of the mangled bodies being recovered appeared to have tails and paws as well as wings.

Two of the police officers stepped out into the road, arms aloft in an attempt to stop the approaching car.

“Fuck *this*,” Robert snarled through gritted teeth, skidding into a wide arc around them. The policemen began shouting, and in the rear-view mirror one could be seen raising his weapon.

“Shit!” Donna screamed. A loud *POP* sounded on the left-hand side of the vehicle and Robert momentarily lost control.

“What the hell, they’re *shooting* at us now?” He leaned into the steering wheel and wrestled the car to a stop, the exploded back tyre flapping uselessly around its hub cap. The shooter shouldered his rifle and gave chase.

“What do we do?” said Donna, her tone quavering with fear.

“I’m not being told I can’t look for my son.”

Donna gave him a nod of agreement. They both leapt out of the car and sprinted into a warren of back alleys before the officer could catch up.

Once they were certain they weren’t being followed, Robert slowed down. He bent over and planted his hands on his knees. “What’s all this . . . graffiti business about?” he said, panting. “And those creatures—”

Donna stopped running and leant against a wall. “God knows, but . . . it’s having a really strange effect on people.” She swallowed, trying to catch

her breath. "Cory showed me YouTube videos of people going crazy after reading the words. I don't know how but the paintings seem to be affecting animals too. Yesterday, CCTV footage went viral of kids being attacked by birds in a playground. It was awful, I couldn't watch . . ."

"Are you sure? I mean, it wasn't just some kind of stunt?"

"I thought it was at first. But—" She closed her eyes, shaking her head. "The blood, there was so much blood. It was . . . *terrifying*."

Robert's frown furrowed deep. "Do you think this has anything to do with today's bombing?" he said. "I don't see how it possibly could, but . . ."

"No idea," Donna shrugged. "But the police obviously think covering it up is more important than helping the injured."

Robert stared at the cobbles, a wheeze rattling in his chest. He felt overcome with vertigo. Dissonant bits of information swirled in his head, none of which fit together or made any sense. He could feel what little control he had on the situation slipping away. He looked to the woman across from him. There was one thing at least he knew he still had power over.

"Donna." He stood up straight. "I know this isn't a good time, but . . ."

She saw the look in his eyes and said, "Robert, no. It's fine."

"Maybe so, but, I never felt right about how things were left."

"It's in the past, Robert, really," she said, squirming. "We moved on, and—"

"I had Jason to deal with, things were difficult," he stammered, eyes wandering. "I . . . I never wanted it to—"

"Robert . . ."

He stopped. After a moment he looked straight at her. "Okay," he said. "I'm sorry. I just wanted to apologise for what happened," he said. "I fucked up."

"It's okay." She smiled that impervious smile. "I'm sorry, too." Her eyes were dewy with tears. "Now let's find our kids."

Robert nodded. He looked in both directions down the passageway, trying to get his bearings. When he glanced again left something on the ground a dozen or so yards away caught his attention. "That's weird," he said, squinting to make out an odd-coloured substance which was running along the alley's central gutter and down into a drain.

"What's the matter?" Donna asked, following his gaze.

"What's that stuff on the ground over there?"

As Robert started walking towards it, a terrible thought occurred to him. When Donna caught sight of the substance, she instinctively reached for her companion's arm. "No," she said. "That's not . . . ?"

"God . . . I hope it isn't."

They stared terrified at one another. Their eyes followed the stream of thick, bubbling liquid along its concrete runnel, back the way it had come until it disappeared around a bend. Tentatively, they began to move in the direction it was coming from, one either side of the slowly moving torrent, edging towards its source.

Turning a corner, the pair was confronted by one of the pervasive graffiti murals emblazoned across a wall. The imposing artwork faced them head-on and caused Donna to give a startled gasp. "Don't look at it," she warned, averting her eyes. "It'll do things to you if you look at it too long."

"Really, though?" Robert asked, his gaze drawn to the vibrant image. It was the first time he'd seen one of the murals in person and the urge to examine it up close was compelling. "This is what all the fuss is about?" he half-smirked.

They had to approach the spray-painting in order to then turn another corner and head off away from it. When Donna looked up to see his eyes glued to the piece, she jabbed him in the arm. "Robert! I mean it!" she scolded. "I've seen it happen!"

"Ouch!" he yelped, rubbing his shoulder. "Jesus."

With faces downturned, they stepped past the gaudy explosion of colour, which seemed somehow to emit its own light, and rounded the next turn. Immediately they saw what was on the ground on the other side of the brickwork. In view of the graffiti, and splayed across a pile of flattened boxes, a stray dog was giving birth to a litter of pups. Donna's natural instinct was to fawn and approach the animal, which she did do amid adoring cooing noises. Robert too broke a smile, grateful to this motherly display for providing a respite from the surrounding chaos.

It wasn't until they drew near that it became apparent something was wrong. Instead of curling herself around to lick and smell her wriggling brood, the mongrel lay rigidly stiff, its claws scrabbling at the cardboard as if trying to drag itself away. Her matted fur, Donna and Robert noticed, was sheathed in a film of glistening sweat, while her whole body shook uncontrollably. It was then that the whimpering became audible, the piteous whines of a terrified mammal in distress. When they saw the dog's face,

both their smiles froze. Watery eyes turned to look up at them, bulging with fear. The animal tried to bark but managed only a gurgled yip through a muzzle of pink froth.

Donna's hands shot up to her mouth, stifling a horrified moan. As one, their gaze shifted to the dog's rear end where its oily offspring writhed in the dirt. Only what they saw there wasn't a litter of puppies at all. Before Robert could properly register what he was looking at, Donna shrieked and staggered backwards. She clutched at his shoulder, trying to pull him away. He glanced at her, but returned his attention to what lay on the ground, and almost instantly wished he hadn't. The squirming bodies were not emerging from the dog, nor had they ever. When he realised what it was they were doing, Robert felt bile shoot up into his throat. Similar in size to canine pups, the grease-covered rats clung to the mongrel's hind quarters, each one viciously biting and slashing those near it. The act they fought to engage in was one he had never witnessed between species, had never dreamed was even possible. Robert doubled over and retched onto the cobbles.

Donna continued screaming into her hands. "What the fuck is going on!"

They pulled each other away and broke into a run, sprinting down the remaining stretch of alley. Unconsciously they still followed the bubbling stream, and upon rounding the final turn emerged onto a horror which obliterated all thought of the previous one. Standing now on the fringe of the city's largest square, they gawked helplessly before a spectacle that was far outside their comprehension.

In an effort to process what it was seeing, Robert's brain went to Dante and to Bosch; conjuring their lurid and infernal depictions. But in that moment his instinct was futile, as no amount of artistic interpretation could rationalise the vision he beheld. Strewn all around were the ruptured bodies of the bomb victims—the blast, or blasts, had ripped off their clothes and dumped them in ghoulish, broken arrangements across the square. Impossibly, the shattered corpses appeared somehow fused together—limbs protruding out of torsos, heads buried inside unnatural cavities, like the deformed remains of some catastrophic eco disaster. *Is this what explosions do to human victims?* With no real-world experience to draw from, Robert could only presume this grim observation to be true.

Looking down, he realised to his revulsion that what they were standing in—the stream having become an enormous delta—was the

curdled effluence of the dead. Gallons of spilled blood had combined to form an expanding quagmire which almost entirely covered the pedestrianised surface of the square. In the heart of this coagulating marshland, emergency services were tending to the injured while panicked members of the public either offered their meagre assistance or darted about trying desperately to find their loved ones.

As Robert took in the scene of mind-breaking slaughter, he noticed that, aside from more walls and billboards having been daubed in black paint, something felt odd. If this was all the result of a suicide detonation, or some sort of cluster attack, then where was the damage to the general environment? The square was full of man-made structures and landscaped vegetation, but none of it seemed impacted by the blast—only the people.

“Look!” Donna yelled, snapping him back into the moment. She was pointing across the plaza to another squad of armed police who were corralling a group of young people into a nearby riot van. “They’ve got the boys!”

The two parents sprinted across the viscera-slick concrete.

“Wait! What are you doing?” Robert barked, putting himself between the van doors and his son.

“Sir, please move out of the way. These people are suspects,” said one of the officers, elbowing Robert aside.

When the boys saw their parents they began struggling and wailing to be set free.

“That’s impossible!” screamed Donna. “Our sons are fifteen years old!”

“Madam, you will be arrested if you do not clear the area!” The policeman pushed her back and she toppled into Robert, who promptly snapped. He lunged for the officer.

Just as the ruckus threatened to boil over, a loud crash sounded on the other side of the square, closely followed by terrified screams. The commotion around the riot van stopped dead as everybody watched a double-decker bus careen wildly across the plaza. If there was a person at the wheel, they were obscured by a giant blood stain which covered most of the driver’s window. As the bus zigzagged through the stupefied crowd, bodies slamming off its front grille, horrified onlookers noticed that the sides of the vehicle had been sprayed-painted with the same ubiquitous graffiti.

“Don’t read it!” somebody shouted.

“Cover it up—we’ll all die!” came from someone else.

These stricken cries stoked even more fear than the out-of-control bus, as it felt like the whole square was now screaming. People fled in every direction, many slipping in the pools of blood. Those who fell into the vehicle’s snaking path were instantly pulverised and shredded beneath its wheels.

When the double-decker smashed into an outdoor café, the police realised they had a far bigger problem on their hands. They let go of their suspects and rushed over to the wreckage, leaving Jason and Cory to be swept up by their parents.

While the officers swarmed the smoking bus, observers who only now were stumbling upon the scene, and who remained unaware of the artwork’s dangerous properties, could not help but try to read the 12ft murals. While none succeeded in deciphering the knotted neon words, a few, by chance, did manage to pronounce them. Something happened to those who correctly spoke the language aloud, and to the people within earshot. Any items they were carrying, bags or belongings, were dropped to the floor. Hands that were held linking partners, or parents to children, fell limply apart. As the colour drained from their faces, nobody else noticed their eyes locking impossibly wide. Few others heard the unnaturally shrill whimpers rising in their throats.

It took a minute for the police to realise that people were being attacked. By the time the realisation dawned, they too had become victims. The deranged shrieks of those infected by the words were indistinguishable from the petrified cries of their victims. People, who only seconds earlier had been innocent bystanders, were now ripping the clothes off bus casualties and law enforcers alike.

The two parents exchanged horrified glances, unable to believe what was happening around them. They grabbed their sons and made a desperate attempt to flee the square. As they forged through the crowd, a tide of terrorised citizens surged against them, blocking their path and driving them instead towards the bus wreckage. When Robert saw the crazed attackers tearing into the drove that he and his companions were now trapped in, he saw no choice but to consider the unthinkable.

“Donna!” he cried, spotting her and Cory a few yards away. “Get on the bus!”

She nodded and began pushing towards the crash site. Robert grabbed Jason's arm and dragged him through the swarm of hysterical bodies until they reached the front of the still-smoking vehicle. A hell-scape of ruined limbs and abdomens greeted them there. Robert did his best to ignore the carnage, and the lurid storey-high graffiti, and hurled his son through the open doors. Standing on the entrance steps, he tried to catch sight of Donna. She was making good progress, moving steadily forward with Cory out in front of her.

As she broke free of the heaving crowd, with only metres to go, a pair of infected paramedics burst out of the fray and tore straight into the mother and son. Robert lurched down the steps but Jason gripped his shoulder, pulling him back. "Dad!" he sobbed. "Please!"

In the second it took to acknowledge his boy, Donna and Cory had vanished. The place where they should've been was now a writhing mound of screeching bodies. Panic ripped a hole out of Robert, into which his stomach plummeted. He needed so desperately to help, to plough in with his fists flying and drag them both free. But he knew it was impossible, that if he did so he too would be lost. He wailed against the agony and the chaos, hot tears blurring his vision.

"Dad!" cried Jason again.

Robert clambered back inside the bus and lunged into the driver's compartment. He smacked his palm against what he hoped was the door controller. The two entrance panels concertinaed shut just as a wild-eyed infected girl slammed into them with such force that the glass cracked. Blood from the girl's lacerated face smeared the spider-webbed window. Jason screamed.

It was then that they heard Donna's unbearable screams. "Get out! Get out!" she kept howling, over and over. "Get the fuck out of me, you bastards!"

Robert smashed his fists against the doors' windows. "What the fuck are they doing?! Raping her?!"

"Dad . . . No!" Jason pulled at his father, tears rolling down his cheeks.

Robert gathered himself and spun around; registering for the first time that instead of a human driver, just a pile of fetid organs lay strewn across the seat. He gagged, using his arm to sweep them onto the floor before sitting atop the pool of blood which remained. The keys were mercifully still in the ignition. He twisted them, firing up the engine. The driver's

clotted viscera still coated the inside of the windscreen, so Robert used a screwed-up newspaper to clear the glass as best he could. When the view outside the window revealed itself, Robert jumped to see a horde of once-human shoppers clawing just inches from his face. Jason screamed again, “Let’s go!”

Obedying his son’s desperate command, he stomped the accelerator. The bus jerked into motion and instantly pummelled the wall of bodies from view.

“Why the hell did the police think you lot were suspects?” Robert shouted behind, once they had reached the motorway.

“I honestly don’t know!” Jason hollered over the rumbling engine. He was still sobbing, had been since they’d narrowly escaped the city centre. “We were just fucking around,” he sniffed. “Pretending to be possessed by the words—like on the Internet. Then they came out of nowhere and grabbed us!”

“And that’s it . . . ?” Robert pressed. He knew his son would be in shock, traumatised over the death of his friend, but he had to know. He had to be sure.

“Yes, I promise!”

“And you swear you haven’t spoken the words aloud . . . or tried to, ever?”

There was a pause.

“Jason!” Robert barked. “You have to tell me the truth!”

“No, course not. Not for real. I swear!” he wailed angrily.

Robert glanced over his shoulder, studied his son’s face to make certain he was telling the truth. But he realised almost immediately—if Jason really had done anything like that, they wouldn’t be having this conversation.

“I think we need to ditch this thing,” Jason said finally. “It’s freaking me out. We’re driving around in a . . . mobile psycho converter!”

Robert solemnly agreed.

They abandoned the bus in the deserted grounds of a disused warehouse, and made the rest of the way to the hospital on foot. Dazed and exhausted, Robert remembered his phone just as they were entering the hospital and saw missed calls from both his daughter and wife. “Shit,” he

exclaimed. “I have to ring Megan back, soon. But, I think . . . Pamela’s had it!”

They looked shocking when they entered the maternity ward—pale, dishevelled and caked in bodily fluids. But, fortunately for them, the hospital staff were too preoccupied by the day’s events to apply much scrutiny. So, apologising profusely for their appearance, they made their way to Pamela’s room, carrying a huge teddy bear from the onsite gift shop.

Father and son didn’t elaborate on what they’d endured that afternoon, even though the aftermath beamed noiselessly from the wall-mounted TV in the corner of the room. They couldn’t bear to relive what they’d been through, but nor did they wish to bring stress and panic upon the new mother. They were just happy to be alive and to be able to hold their newest family member in their arms. Even Jason appeared thankful; cooing and giggling at the baby, his prior frustration around the new arrival seemingly now forgotten. As the teenager tenderly laid the child down in its Perspex crib, Robert became acutely aware of how parched he felt.

“Just nipping to get me and the lad a tea,” he said, smiling as he and his wife made eye contact. As he passed through the doorway, he heard Jason say something to his stepmother. Robert paused, but then realised what his son was saying—sorry. His face broke into a smile.

“I understand now,” Robert heard Jason whisper as he pulled the door closed. “I understand what it means to us.”

On his way back from the coffee machine, Robert had to return through A&E. His route was cut up by several gurneys being rushed into the building by harried-looking medics. They transported what appeared to be victims of the city centre carnage—misshapen mounds concealed under blood-stained sheets. A young doctor darted between the patients, making rapid diagnoses as he went. Robert waited for the gurneys to pass before approaching the man.

“I was in the city at the time of the attacks,” Robert said. “I know there wasn’t a terrorist bombing. Can you tell me what happened, why the graffiti turns people into . . .” he struggled to find the term. “Sex crazed . . . killers?”

The doctor looked puzzled. “Sex crazed? The infected are no such thing. The autosuggestion artwork has been appearing around the country, perhaps even across Europe. It is a terror attack, but not like any we’ve encountered before.”

Robert's stomach began to constrict.

"The paintings have a hypnotic quality we don't yet understand," the doctor said. "The colours, impossibly, don't exist within the visible spectrum."

Robert shook his head, eyes searching the man's face.

"We shouldn't be able to see them."

"I don't understand," Robert said. "I just . . . what about the—"

"The language," the doctor interjected, "does not appear anywhere in recorded history. All we know is, for some reason, if pronounced correctly, the words act as virus. The murals themselves, they don't incite carnal aggression. They . . ."

Robert leaned closer, his cup-holding hands beginning to tremble.

The doctor paused, as if carefully selecting his words. "Reports suggest they induce a state of . . . hyper-anxiety. Those infected, animals too in some cases, experience an overwhelming fear instinct. Unlike any observed in the natural world. The fight or flight response is effectively turned against itself. The violence we're seeing is merely symptomatic of a more fundamental urge—"

"To do what . . . ?" Robert cut in.

The doctor swallowed. "The infected suffer intense compulsions to, well, *escape* the world. Principally and most disturbingly, from what we've seen, by re-entering a living vessel."

The doctor's words didn't sink in, not at first. Not for several seconds.

Robert's expression remained blank. The doctor opened his mouth to speak.

The drinks slipped from Robert's hands, splashing both of the men's shoes.

He didn't realise he was running until he was almost at Pamela's door. He burst into the room, the shock of its contents almost flinging him back out into the corridor. His newborn baby was shrieking in its crib, but he could not tend to its distress. He could do nothing but sink to his knees and commence his own piercing howl. The scream he made was oddly effeminate, filling the ward with its shrill timbre, though it was a sound he could not hear himself make.

Before him on the bed was a sight he did not possess the faculties to interpret. Pamela's violated body was naked and cleaved open at the groin, legs splayed abnormally wide like the unearthed roots of some tornado-

mauled tree. Dark arterial blood spurted from the hideous wound, splashing the bedcovers and the pile of excavated organs which now sat atop them. Blood saturated also the shoeless foot which jutted obscenely from her riven loins. His wife's shockingly distended abdomen, which just hours earlier had housed a thing of sublime beauty, now accommodated an object it was never meant to. Not now at least, not like this. Jason's other foot and both hands were clearly distinct, pressing out of the shiny, stretched skin of his stepmother's torso. His head, Robert observed before passing out, was stuck higher up, lodged beneath her clavicle—still trying to burrow deeper, still emitting the tortured, terrified wail of the infected. His muted cry rose in Pamela's gullet, escaping her throat as though it were her own.

MILLIPEDE DREAMS

I race among the luminous reeds, splashing through steaming swamp water. My breaths are shallow and fast, heartbeat hammering against my ribs. The water clings to my pyjama bottoms, soaking the material, resisting my passage like webbing. As I forge through the reeking marsh I continually glance about me, not knowing how I got here. The sky is a dusky smear the colour of mouldering fruit, and while twilight quickly recedes through the trees, this wetland is alive with shimmering colours. They scintillate darkly beneath the water's surface, illuminating my path like a trail of neon lava.

How I came to be here is clouded by fear and an instinctual need to be somewhere else, a safe place I cannot recall. All I remember is one moment being in that other place, cuddled and secure, and the next I was here. I repeatedly look behind, expecting to see him in pursuit through the tall grass, closing in because he is stronger, faster. But there is nobody there, only shadows cast by the waning light. I don't know who *he* is. He's as much a mystery to me as my alien surroundings. And yet I feel him near, stalking me like a predatory beast. We are connected somehow, him and me, but it is a bond I struggle to fathom.

I trip on a tangle of roots and fall flat in the mire. When I raise my sopping head it is level with a bouquet of blinking eyeballs. The eyes are on leafy stalks which sink down into the swamp water. When they focus on me each of their pupils expand, revealing little sets of teeth which snap towards my face. I scream and lurch backwards. A rustle in the grass nearby jolts me to my feet. Leaping over the eyeballs, I continue on through the churning bog.

I come upon dryer land and sprint up towards a spiny copse. Glancing once more behind me, I charge through the branches, startling a pack of faceless lizard creatures high in the canopy. As I battle through the trees, the hollering animals swing above me, chattering in the manner of human voices played backwards.

Emerging from the dense foliage out into a clearing, I stumble again. When I regain my footing, that's when I see it. On a rocky plateau at the centre of the clearing stands the door. It is a lone wooden rectangle of

unremarkable design, made remarkable simply by its being there. I am shocked and relieved by the recognition of it. The wooden monolith draws me near, opening just a crack as I approach—a line of brilliant light separating the door from its outer frame.

Just yards away from it, something lunges out of the trees, knocking me to the ground. Fearing it's one of those reptilian canopy-dwellers, I shield my face from its headless jaws. We roll in the dirt. My assailant clambers on top of me, fastening nimble hands around my throat. Looking up, I can make out only a silhouette against the putrescent sky. The hands grip tighter. My squinting eyes adjust and I am able to see my attacker. Terror sucks the air from my lungs as I remember who it is, who it's always been. It is *me*.

I battle on the ground but the other me is too strong. He leans into his murderous deed, a terrifying leer across his face that is my own. I flail my hands through the grass, one of them eventually hitting a heavy object. Seizing it, I swing the rock up into the boy's skull, hearing a dull crack. My attacker yelps and I feel something warm splash across my face. He topples backwards into the brush and I scramble to my feet. I instinctively raise the heavy rock into the air and bring it down upon the head of the other me. When the body stops twitching, I drop the rock into the grass. Blood spreads through the material of the boy's pyjamas, pyjamas that are exactly like mine. I make a dash for the doorway, falling through it into swallowing darkness. The door slams shut behind me.

Cool gloom against my damp skin, relief from the heat of the jungle. I lie flat on my back against rough wooden floorboards, dazed and panting. The air is dusty and stale. For long seconds I remain still, unable to see anything—alone with horrific thoughts of murder. I struggle to understand why that child looked like me, and how I was able to . . .

A faint chittering sound rouses both fear and familiarity. The sound gets louder and I sense something approaching in the dark. I flinch as out of the shadows a large bulky head appears next to mine. Stumpy antennae and a bristling mouth flap twitch in a way that tells me I am being smelt.

“Oh,” I say. “It's you.”

The giant insectoid head shudders in response to my surprise. Remembering this inquisitive beast puts me at ease. My recognition appears to trigger a light source which dimly illuminates my surroundings and the enormous millipede coiled about me. I am in a vast hallway that stretches

off into the distance; the millipede's thick segmented body recedes down it almost out of sight. The creature lowers its front section to the floor, waits there patiently. Giving the closed door one last look, I climb onto the back of the millipede and spread out across its wide mass. To my surprise my pyjamas are no longer soaking wet, but comfortably warm and dry. As the giant arthropod starts to manoeuvre itself back down the corridor, I feel my eyelids droop, the rhythmic clicking of its legs on the wooden floor like a soothing mantra.

When I awake it is lighter in the huge hallway, and my memories are starting to return. I remember now that I live in this place, this ramshackle old mansion I've never seen the outside of. Though I can observe the walls and ceiling clearly now, I do not know where the light is coming from because there are no bulbs, no windows. I have never seen any windows here, only walls and corridors and rooms.

Lying flat on the millipede's back as it clatters amiably down the hall, I watch the ceiling roll by. It isn't made of wood, like the doorway through which I came, but lumpy organic matter with veins and arteries running through it. I ponder, as I often do, how the interior of this place, its entire structure, can seem to be somehow . . . living. Before my eyes the fleshy ceiling undulates like the shifting insides of some gargantuan monster.

Whilst gazing up at this curious spectacle, the whole corridor starts to shudder. The millipede, clearly agitated, halts its relentless march while the walls and ceiling rumble around us in the manner of an earthquake. I know what an earthquake is because Bubble has told me about them. I've learnt all that I know from Bubble; it shows me everything. Once the violent juddering has ceased, the millipede resumes its many-limbed procession. It's at this moment that I remember where we are headed. We are going to see Mother.

Eventually we arrive at Mother's boudoir and I sit up cross-legged upon the millipede as it scuttles its elongated body through the entrance. Mother's boudoir is like no other room in the house. It opens up into a huge cavernous space with thick silken webs stretching from floor to ceiling. It looks, when I think about it, more like a creature's cocoon, like the kind Bubble has described to me late at night. Bubble is wary of small creatures and often warns me about them, but I'm not afraid because I have never really seen any.

We approach the centre of the room and I see Mother coming out of her opulent four poster bed, pushing aside gauzy drapes as she emerges. Despite her massive bulk she moves with an unsettling elegance, her broad frame clothed entirely in mismatched scraps of fabric. As we draw near she raises two of her arms in a welcoming gesture—the long spindly limbs, covered in tiny black hairs, stretch wider than the enormous bed.

“Darling, you’re home!” she calls out with her spider’s mouth.

The millipede bows to the floor and I slide off, settling at Mother’s feet.

“You are the victor and I couldn’t be more proud of you!” Her gleaming black fangs twitch as she speaks.

“Thank you, Mother,” I say, puzzled. “But who was that little boy and why did he look like me?”

Mother’s almost human face softens. “Silly boy, you don’t remember? That was your other, and you defeated him admirably, like I knew you could.” Her shining eyes are wet with pride.

“But . . .”

“No buts, my precious boy. He was a more powerful adversary and you used your wits in order to survive. Father is thrilled for you too!”

“Where is Father?” I peer towards the bed.

“He’ll be along shortly,” she purrs through her glistening mouthparts. “He has a new dream to tell you.”

She lowers herself slightly, her gown of silvery rags fanning out around her.

“But for now, it is time for you to make your nightly decision.”

I frown in confusion. My eyes drop to the vast hem of her garment; it twitches and shifts in several places. I look up to her face, to the upper half which resembles my own, and say, “What decision do you mean, Mother?”

She sighs. “My darling, the same decision you must always make when you return home to us—whether to move on to the next stage of your development, or, if you wish, to simply feed and relax before bedtime. It’s entirely up to you.”

I think for a moment. After everything I’ve been through today, I do feel extremely tired and hungry. My young body aches all over and I wonder if I am truly ready for this next stage of development. Gazing into my twin reflections in Mother’s big black eyes, I ask if I can please just eat and then go to bed.

Her mouthparts stretch wide in what I presume is a smile. She then undulates in a way that allows her makeshift gown to part at the front. What it reveals makes me gasp, though I have the feeling I've seen this countless times. She rears above me, flexing her abdomen and unfurls the six other spider-like legs which line her bristling flanks. Along her underside are two vertical rows of breasts—human in appearance, except they are covered in the same tiny hairs as the rest of her. The hair is thick and smooth, giving the breasts a glossy texture like the fur of a black cat.

“Come to Mother,” she coos, curling her long segmented limbs around me, a pearly blob of milk appearing on the tip of each pink nipple. She bends her thorax into the shape of a sitting lap and I nestle in the crook of her body, opening my mouth to receive one of the teats as the others provide soft cushions beneath my weight.

Something shifts behind my head and Mother's patchwork garment slides off a large hump sticking out of the right-hand side of her.

“He's here to tell you a night-time story,” Mothers says and parts two of her spindly legs to make way for Father to appear. As soon as I turn and see him I remember that Father is attached to Mother's body. He is human in appearance, resembling myself more than he does Mother. They've been fused in this way since before I was born, but whenever I ask the reason I can never remember what I am told.

“Hello my son, and congratulations,” he says, coiling around Mother's side and tenderly embracing my head as I suckle from her black bosom. Her milk is rich and heavy, filling my throat and flooding my brain as much as it does my stomach. The more I swallow, the drowsier I feel and the further away the memories of today recede. Before long it's almost as though my experience in the jungle was just a tale told to me by somebody else. Soon I can scarcely picture what happened there, and all I can hear is Father's whispery words describing his latest dream. I drift towards sleep through the arctic landscape of Father's story, his withered fingers stroking my swamp-scented hair.

Another rumbling tremor rouses me and I open my eyes. I realise that I'm back atop the millipede, and have been trooping again through the house's endless corridors. Though for the moment, we've stopped until the shuddering subsides. It amuses me how this formidable beast never seems to get used to the earthquakes, no matter how many it experiences, and

despite the fact they seem to be happening now more frequently. Though I know we are on our way to my bedroom, and can remember having seen my Father and Mother, everything else prior to entering her boudoir is now too hazy to recollect. Once the shaking hallway relaxes, the millipede resumes its persistent march.

When I fail to stir upon reaching my bedroom door, the millipede produces an abrupt ripple beneath me, and I awake with a start. It lowers itself to the floor and I dismount with a full-bodied yawn. The door opens as I approach and I sleepily shuffle through it, into the welcoming blue mouth of Bubble.

The floor falls away and I am suspended in Bubble's liquid interior. When I breathe I take the warm fluid into my lungs. It panics me for a few seconds, like it always does, but my respiratory system gradually adjusts and I start to breathe more easily. I relax and allow my pyjamas to dissolve from my body. The languid currents pull me in deeper and although my ears are full of the watery emulsion, I start to hear Bubble's many voices. They speak both to me and about me, telling me things about myself and of the world outside the house. I feel contented within this membranous embrace, coddled and secure, and I listen to the affectionate tones until I am soundly asleep.

I burst through the door and fall heavily in complete darkness. A screaming gale follows me through the opening, lashing me with ice and snow. Panting and close to tears, I drag myself across rough wooden floorboards, pyjamas soaked and tattered, hands sticky with blood. The violent wind batters the door against its supporting wall as I try to scramble forward, away from the place I've just fled.

I black out for a moment. When I rouse it's to a large bulbous head nudging me gently. The familiar chittering sound I can just about hear over the howling squall, which still whips in through the barely visible doorway. My recognition of the millipede coincides with a pale light source, dimly illuminating a blanket of snow now covering much of the floor and both my legs. The millipede coils its rear end towards the door and slams it shut. The deafening gale abruptly stops. I have the sensation of being grasped by the scruff of the neck and plonked on top of something like a defenceless wolf cub. I fall instantly asleep.

When I come back around we are entering the boudoir. Mother is already outside of her chrysalis-like bed structure, her limbs outstretched to greet me. Having recuperated slightly during the trek, and being clothed again in dry, restored pyjamas, I slide from atop the millipede and settle on the ground before her.

“You are the victor and I couldn’t be more proud of you!” Her gleaming black fangs twitch as she speaks.

“Thank you, Mother,” I say, puzzled. “But who was that little boy and why did he look like me?”

“Silly boy, you don’t remember? That was your other, and you defeated him admirably, like I knew you could.”

I open my mouth to respond but a loud commotion from behind me snatches both our attention. We look to the millipede and see a body drop down from the creature’s twisting underside. Caked in blood and clutching a jagged shard of ice, my other lunges towards me. Mother screams and I try to dart backwards out of the way, but my other is fast and he pins me to the floor. I see hatred burning in his eyes as he swings the frozen stake above his head. Mother lashes out with her spidery limbs, knocking my attacker off balance before he can strike.

“No, no, no, no!” she hollers. “You cannot both be in here! It is forbidden!”

The weapon clatters near me, I crouch to grab it. Looking up, I see my other already back on his feet. He runs at me again, but this time I sidestep him and he tumbles straight into Mother’s flailing grasp.

Right at this moment the boudoir starts to shake. Imperceptibly at first, but within a few seconds the whole chamber is vibrating madly around us. This makes Mother wail even louder—shrieking in a way I’ve never heard before, her limbs wrapped tightly around the other me. He tries to struggle but he is locked in Mother’s monstrous embrace, her strong pedipalp feelers curled around his neck. I approach with the jagged shard, feeling myself begin to hyperventilate.

I hear Father’s voice before I see him. He is instructing me calmly, but it takes a moment or two before I register his words over Mother’s piercing cries.

“Breathe, my boy . . . just push it into him . . .”

I steady myself, gripping the weapon in both hands. My other is thrashing wildly now, kicking and scratching, but he is held fast. I barely

notice the cocoon-like room we're in start to disintegrate, the grand web curtains falling and tearing apart. Father emerges from beneath Mother's ragtag gown, his face a rotating cavity of flesh.

"Just *breathe* . . . and *push* it in . . ."

Mother's howls are all-consuming, they fill my skull.

The room's quaking intensifies; walls crumble.

I raise the glinting shard of ice into the air.

Arachnoid limbs crush my other's throat.

I breathe.

I open my eyes under water and, for a second, think I am back inside Bubble. I still hear the wailing cries and the encouraging words, but they are muted now, distant. There is a great pressure on my tiny, frail body; a sucking sensation I am helpless to resist. As I am pulled towards the vacuum, I notice something in the murky fluid. It is a body like my own, only larger. The body is still, it feels no effect from the suction as I do. Around its neck is a translucent cord wound tight—constricting, suffocating. The cord trails away and disappears into the wall of this fluid-filled sac. Then I am gone, I see nothing more. But the sounds grow louder.

The screaming makes the liquid around me tremble.

"... *Breathe* ..."

The voice I hear remains calm.

"... *Push* ..."



THE END

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you to S.C. Burke, the man behind the NihilismRevised curtain, without whom this work would just be a ghost on a hard drive. Thanks to everyone who has previously published, edited and helped shape these stories into being – Mar Garcia, Joe Mynhardt, Arthur Graham, India LaPlace, Maxwell Bauman, Aphotic Realm crew, British Bizarro crew, Douglas Ogurek, Ira Rat, Donald Armfield, Linda Nagle and others. Cheers to Claire, Ryan, Lacy, Joel, Sonia, Dani and Sara for all your advice and support, and to Tanya for your patience.

PREVIOUSLY PUBLISHED

“The Vegetarians” won The Bold Mom’s October Terror Short Story Award (2018)

“The Happiest Thought” CLASH Media (2018)

“Tunnels” won Crystal Lake Publishing’s first Flash Fiction Challenge and appeared in Shallow Waters vol. 1: A Flash Fiction Anthology (2019)

“A Murmur of Shadows” Aphotic Realm magazine: FANGS issue (Feb-Mar 2019)

“The Ceaseless Wave” Aphotic Realm magazine: GRUESOME issue (June-July 2019)

“Physical Media” Horror Sleaze Trash: Prose in Poor Taste vol. 2 (2019)

“Phylum” Theaker’s Quarterly Fiction #65: UNSPLATTERPUNK! 3 (2019)

“The Portable Hum” Aphotic Realm website (2020)

“The Comfort Zone” Mr Miyagi’s Soggy Cereal: A Tribute Anthology (2020)

“Millipede Dreams” The Bumper Book of British Bizarro (2020)

“The Wetness” Fucked Up Stories to Read in the Daytime vol. 2 (2020)



TOM OVER: CREATOR OF THE COMFORT ZONE

Tom Over is a writer of dark speculative fiction living in Manchester, UK. His near religious devotion to horror was galvanised in the dank and dusty backroom section of his local video shop, almost one hundred years ago. He has stories published by Aphotic Realm, Crystal Lake Publishing, Horror Sleaze Trash and Hybrid Sequence Media, with work forthcoming from Filthy Loot, amongst others. *The Comfort Zone and Other Safe Spaces* is his first book.

Artwork by: Denis Privezentsev

NR-0039

ISBN: 9798648983014

First Printing by Nihilism Revised 2020

Copyright © Tom Over 2020

All Rights Reserved.