



TIM KEY

HE USED
THOUGHT
AS A WIFE

AN ANTHOLOGY
OF POEMS &
CONVERSATIONS
[FROM INSIDE]

He Used Thought For a Wife

An Anthology of Poems & Conversations [From Inside]

Tim Key

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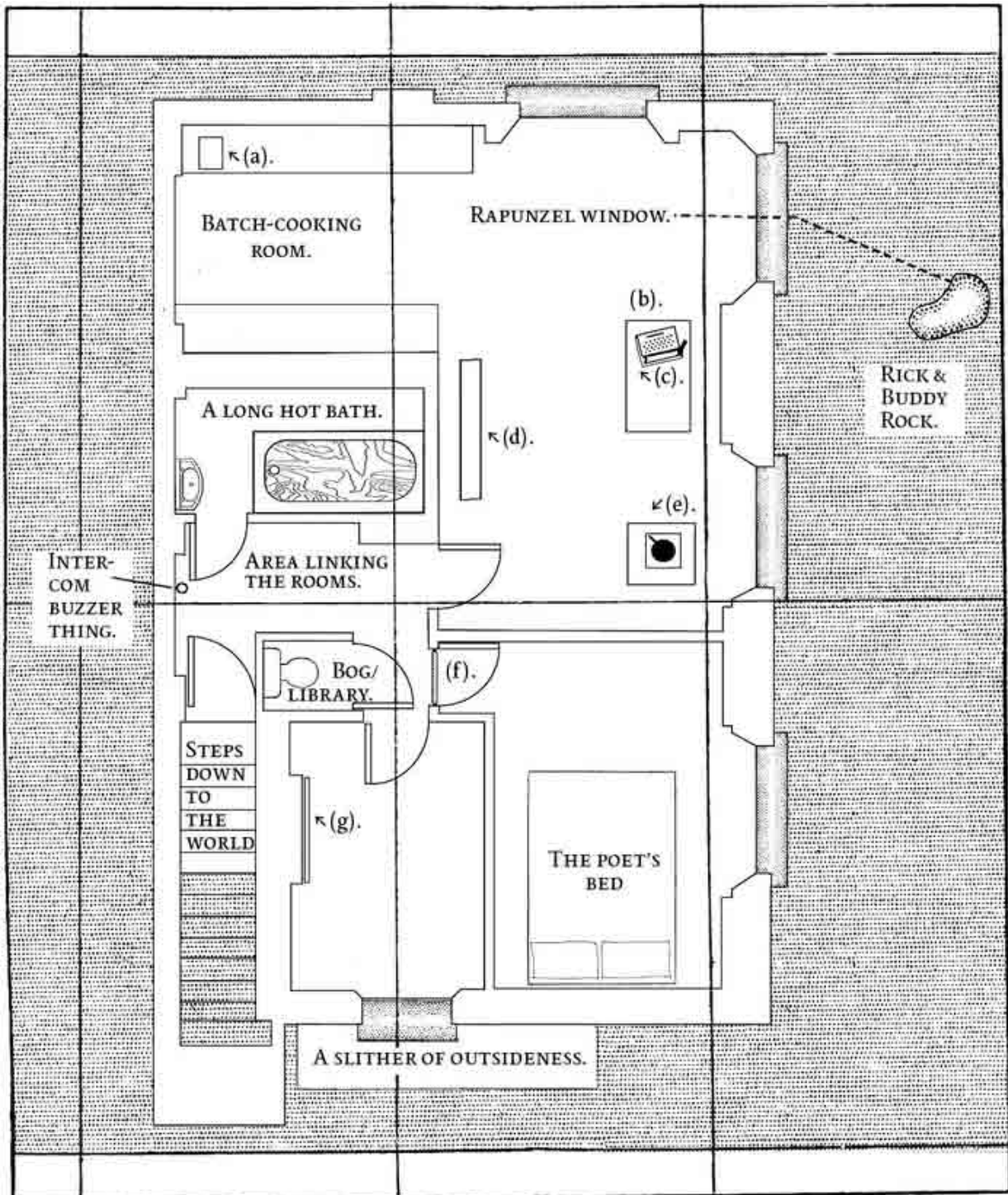
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For all those who got involved with the Lockdown.

It Could Be Anywhere.



- fig. (a). Breadmaker.
- fig. (b). Pheasant incubator.
- fig. (c). Typewriter.
- fig. (d). 42" flatscreen television.
- fig. (e). Record player.
- fig. (f). Chin-up bar.
- fig. (g). Mirror.

Dramatis Personæ.

A list of characters communicating with Key during the lockdown, in order of their appearance in his orbit.

KEY. — The hero. Forties. Not ready.

THE COLONEL. — Key's cohort, chum and swilling peer.

CHIGGY. — Key's agent and guide. Locking down in W. London.

FATBERG. — A bear. Nothing behind the eyes.

AMAZON GUY. — Parcel obsessive. Unplaceable accent/haircut.

DANIEL. — Bald guy. Made for lockdowns. Specs. Bread flour. Sage.

EMILY JUNIPER. — Letterwhacker. Living within earshot of crashing waves.

CAROL KEY. — Key's Mum. Competent but puzzled.

BILL KEY. — Calves like cement. Beige shorts. Hairy face.

LORD. — Father of Bobby. Thin. Usually leaning on something.

BOBBY. — A small boy.

MAGGIE. — Key's niece. In the 8-11 age bracket. Happy.

RICK & BUDDY. — In love.

YOUNGUZI & MISHA. — Education and fine banana bread. Locking down without outdoor space.

MEGAN. — Mother to Bobby. Wife to Lord. Scholar of China.

JELSON. — Wirey. 50% English. Based out of Harlem. Bicycle clips.

JO. — Mother of Esther and Daisy. Staines-based.

STEVE. — Barely appears.

BORSE & KAMILLA. — He has a Mohican, she is Swedish. Locking down by a river.

GREENS & LAMB. — He has a high-pitched voice, she is the main breadwinner.

VICTORIA. — Classy, late thirties. Heavy smoker. Lover of baths.

EMMA. — Mythical. Beautiful. Locked down in the imagination.

ALEXA. — Dreary. Inhuman. Invaluable.

SWEETIE PIE. — Young father. Phone passcode: 1313.

ANDERS HAYWARD. — Dancer, amateur photographer, twenties. Not in the book.

MOUSE. — A mouse. An arsehole. A liar.

Week 1.



WEEK

I.

In which the pumps grind to a halt, the keys turn in their locks, and the music starts to play.

The Pubs.



The damn pubs got shut!

Mike Torque went online and ordered dartboards, beer pumps, a blow-up barmaid, a blow-up pub bore, a blow-up group of girls, beer mats, blow-up kettle chips, a blow-up urinal, a quiz machine, a blow-up fruit machine and he had his floors redone with gnarled wood.

He sat down on his blow-up bar stool and it bent in half and threw him forward onto a candle.

The blow-up flame ignited his Guinness hat and threw him hard against his flesh-wife.

She updated her WhatsApp groups on the situation and dunked her beak back into her carbonara.

The Morning After the Night Before.

 The Colonel. | Midday, March. | iPhones.

Key is on his sofa. He stares straight ahead, his eyes made of china, Come Dine with Me on the flatscreen, Key staring right through it. Next to him, his iPhone begins to chirrup. Key's eyes reanimate. Key slaps the cushion and the downward pressure makes the iPhone fly up. He catches it in a fist and is immediately talking to The Colonel.

Key: Well, this is faeces.

Colonel: Yeah, I know it is.

Key: Liquid Faeces.

Colonel: You got that right.

Key: Dammit!

Key's face is fixed, still and astonished. His eyes are narrow; the pupils flitting about like raisins. Incredulous.

Colonel: Why's he shut the pubs?

Key: Can't think, 'cos he's an old-school jockstrap?

Colonel: Live for the bloody pub, me.

Key: And I don't?

Colonel: This guy's shutting all sorts of stuff I swear.

Key: Weirdly I'm not that fussed about "all sorts of stuff". He's shut the bloody pubs. That's what I'm trying to come to terms with here.

Colonel: With a hangover.

Key: Dammit!

Colonel: It's just for a bit.

Key: Dammit Janet! The one night I make headway with the bar supervisor and now this!

Colonel: Oh right.

Key's shoulders slump and his despicable fringe flicks his eyebrows.

Key: She gave me a free pint, Colonel. You think she's dishing out free pints to any old Tom, Dick and Harry?

Colonel: Don't know.

Key: Don't play dumb with me; she didn't give you a free pint, John, did she?

Colonel: Hang on, why didn't you go up every time if you're getting free rounds.

Key: She wasn't giving me "free rounds". One free pint. Leaned over the bar... John?

Colonel: Yuh.

Key: She leaned over the bar.

Colonel: Okay.

Key: "That one's on me."

Colonel: She's a good-looking girl.

Key: Of course she's a good-looking girl. She's a siren, man!

Colonel: Nice hair anyway.

Key: Yes, I know. Full of ribbons. I've been drinking in that bloody pub for a year, man. Then all at once! The free pint.

Colonel: She likes you.

Key: Likes my jumper, too. Said so.

Colonel: It's a nice jumper.

Key: I know.

Colonel: Blue, it's fantastic.

Key: United Colors of Benetton. £45.

Colonel: Bargain.

Key: Huh?

Colonel: Saw her smiling at you, I gotta say.

Key: And I didn't? Couldn't move for her bloody smile. Smiling away like a Cheshire cat: "See ya tomorrow!" Except I won't, because His Nibs has made a mockery of me!

Colonel: It's bad luck.

Key: How can you "shut the pubs"?

Colonel: Must be to do with –

Key: I know what it's to do with, John!

Key has found some Blu Tack and is manipulating it furiously.

Colonel: They'll be open before you know it.

Key: Fuck me!

Colonel: What's her name?

Key: How the fuck should I know!

Colonel: One step at a time.

Key: That was gonna be tonight's project, man!

Colonel: It's jizz.

Key: Yeah, I know it's effing jizz. Wowee. What the hell is he doing?
Don't shut the bloody pubs, man!

Colonel: Have you seen the scenes from Italy?

Key: Leave, 'em open; tell everyone to be a bit careful. What's the difference?

Colonel: They'll be open before we know it.

Key: Don't know her name, don't know her number –

Colonel: She'll be somewhere. Believe me.

Key: Nah, like looking for a rabbit.

Colonel: Something's afoot.

Key: Well it had fucking better be, that's all I can say.

Colonel: Didn't mind your goatee then?

Key: Huh?

Colonel: Nah, I mean. It's fine.

Key: Smoked nine fags! Man! The pubs! What are they doing? What are they doing!?

Key slings the Blu Tack across the room. It sticks fast against his framed Jacques Tati poster.

Colonel: Nine fags, man. That ain't cool.

Key: *Au contraire*, John. She kept looking through the window at me, tongue out. Like she's looking at The Fonz.

Colonel: Thought you were quitting.

Key: I am quitting! I have quit! They were my last nine, I'm done.

Key stamps down on the empty packet. He keeps stamping until it is in pieces. He stares out of the window. Less people. What's happening? And those that there are have thin, vexed mouths, and their backs are bent as they inspect their smartphones.

Colonel: Well let's see.

Key: What does that even mean?!

Colonel: Hang on a minute, have I shut the pubs? Huh? Having a go at me, here.

Key: No, sorry. I'm not. It's him.

Colonel: Well anyway, "won't see you later".

Key: Don't make it into a joke, John. Honestly.

Colonel: I know.

Key: This ain't a joke from where I'm standing.

Colonel: Speak tomorrow.

Key: I'm filming tomorrow.

Colonel: Okay.

Key: Dammit Janet!!!

Key hangs up and smacks himself in the mouth. He moves to the fridge and opens it. There's fuck all in there that's in any way decent or interesting. He pulls out some spring onions and a block of Red Leicester and starts munching pensively. He looks out of his window. Figures moving in the distance, everyone lacking direction. Without purpose. The cogs slowing.

Reserves.



Doothan was panicking now.

He'd forgotten his stockpiling list and he was all over the place.

He grabbed 120 Creme Eggs and skidded round into the cans bit.

His trolley was bulging with birthday cards, apple sauce and hair dye.

Other intrepid citizens plodded by, wheeling mountains of essential-looking goods.

Doothan swept 48 cans of chickpeas into his trolley and pulled his cords up over his ass.

He was stressed as hell and kept clapping his hands together to catch imaginary bugs he thought were swarming in clumps around him.

The Goatee.

☎ The Agent. | 11:00AM, March. | iPhone v iPhone.

Key's got Come Dine with Me on. It's on mute and Key is leafing through a TV script and chuckling at the unlikely scenarios. His iPhone is resting on his gonads and his cup of black coffee's perched on his coffee table. In fact it's not even a coffee table. It's a pheasant incubator, repurposed as a coffee table. Another page, another chortle, another gulp of mud. His iPhone starts to vibrate. His agent's name is flashing hard on the screen. Key sweeps the dot, connects the call.

Key: Guten Morgen, Chiggy.

Chiggy: Darling boy, they've cancelled filming until further notice.

Key: Huh?

Key sits up, rearranges the duvet cover on his thighs. The damp underside of his cereal bowl is staining the top page of his television script.

Chiggy: They're calling it. They've hoicked the shoot. Until further notice.

Key: What does that mean, "further notice"?

Chiggy: Well, everything's up in the air because of the old you-know-what.

Key: Tut.

Chiggy: I knew you'd be disappointed.

Key: That bloody virooze.

Chiggy: Well, everything's shutting down is the thing.

Key: Right. Right. So no filming tomorrow?

Chiggy: No. No filming tomorrow.

Key: Right. Okay. Right. Fine.

Chiggy: They'll let us know when they have a plan.

Key: Okay, but definitely not tomorrow.

Chiggy: No, they won't be filming tomorrow. Filming's stopped everywhere.

Key, zombie-like, places the television script down on the pheasant incubator. The swathes of dialogue appear to unhighlight themselves. He sits back, blending into the sofa, tumbling into a lockdown.

Key: And I expect the same for Wednesday?

Chiggy: Yes, it's the whole week and then beyond I'm afraid, darling.

Key: Beyond. Yeah. Exactly, rightly so.

Chiggy: He's talking about a lockdown.

Key: He's hard.

Chiggy: I'm running around, putting out fires here! Madness!

Key: Fires, yes. And the week after, I suppose we –

Chiggy: We don't know.

Key: Exactly, we just don't know.

Chiggy: No.

Key: At this stage.

Chiggy: It doesn't look clever, I'll say that.

Key: We wait and see.

Chiggy: Are you washing your hands?

Key: Yes, exactly, must wash hands.

Chiggy: Well, I need to phone my other little men and little women and

–

Key: Yes, I mean, I've got a goatee.

Chiggy: Lol.

Key: Yes it is lol, but can I shave that off?

Chiggy: Well, we don't know whether they'll start filming up again, that's the only thing.

Key: So keep it on.

Chiggy: For now, I would.

Key: So, trapped in the flat, can't go out, but can't shave off the goatee.

Chiggy: Lol.

Key: Lol?

Chiggy: You wear a wig in the show right?

Key: This is a disgrace.

Chiggy: So you can cut your hair if you want.

Key: Yup.

Chiggy: You should at least do that then.

Key sighs like he's never sighed before, tugs at his goatee, makes as if to spit. His lank hair slumps in clumps on his bonce.

Chiggy: You gonna be okay... financially?

Key: Yes, Chig. Believe me. I've got projects.

Chiggy: The cards?

Key: Yuh. Playing cards.

Chiggy: Well, that's something.

Key: Getting printed this week. Sell the cards. Hand-to-mouth.

Chiggy: They look beautiful.

Key: They are beautiful.

Chiggy: I'm holding the prototype.

Key: And I'm not?

Key's got the mocked-up deck in his hands. He twirls them lovingly. Just the weight of them makes him gurgle.

Key: Emily designed them.

Chiggy: Emily Juniper.

Key: Three thousand of the buggers arrive Friday.

Chiggy: Yes.

Key: Flog 'em to the masses.

Chiggy: Well, that's something.

Key: Christ.

Chiggy: You know they've shut the pubs?

Key tugs his goatee; his eyes water. He continues to fondle his cards. He moves them to his mouth, taps the deck against his teeth. Empties his mind.

Key: The old "world pandemic".

Chiggy: Well, "pandemic" really. Covers it. They're always global.

Key: They're always jizz, I think you mean, Chig.

Chiggy: Well, anyway.

Key: Let me know if they happen to sort things out and we're back on tomorrow, will you?

Chiggy: I mean, that's not happening.

Key: I mean, let me know if it does.

Chiggy: I mean, I will, but that ain't happening.

Key: I mean, with that attitude it's not.

Chiggy: Use the time to write, I would.

Key: I'm an actor, Chiggy.

Chiggy: Ha ha!

Key: Chig, I like my agent to have a sense of humour as much as the next man, but try not to crease up at the very idea of me getting my Broadbent on.

Chiggy: Broadbent! Priceless!

Gales of laughter from Chiggy's end.

Chiggy: Well, speak soon then, darling boy.

Key: Ta-ra, Chig.

Key's iPhone dribbles down his cheek, drips onto the sofa. He blows the scripts and they fly into the air, filling the room like blossom. The pheasant incubator is now naked apart from his coffee cup, the instant Kenco thickening as it cools. And a pen. It is an orange pen. Orange on the outside, rubbery. Its ink is black. Thick, black and smooth like sauce.

Nothing Makes Sense.



Harry Kane stood on the training pitch.

Coach explained again.

“Football’s cancelled, Harry. For now.”

Harry was gaping hard.

He pointed to the football again.

“Football.”

“I know, Harry.”

Coach showed him some headlines on his iPhone.

Harry blinked.

He pointed at the football again.

He pointed at his shinpads.

He pointed to the sky.

Coach put an arm round him; they wandered back up to the hut.

The Slot.



Nonald spent three hours in the chair, his wife spinning latex onto his jowls and forehead, filling his hair with talc, thinning his lips, yellowing his gnashers.

“You’re done.” She threw him a crumpled hat and slid the Zimmer over.

He looked old as shit.

He checked his timepiece.

8.55am.

He winked at his missus, fetched up his 65-litre Karrimor rucksack and sprang down the stairs.

Then he wiped the smile off his face, bent his spine, and edged determinedly towards Tesco.

A Box.

☎ Amazon Guy. | 10:00AM, March. | The Flesh.

Key, disorientated. Standing, facing in lots of different directions. Occasionally looking at his iPhone, peering hard into a mirror, head flipped back staring at a light bulb. The Intercom buzzer thing goes. Key jolts, his neck strains, he presses down the ear symbol.

Amazon Guy: Amazon.

Key: Oh.

Key presses the key symbol; buzzes him in to the building. He opens his own door. The two men stare at each other. Key at the top of the stairs, this new human at the bottom.

Amazon Guy: I'll leave it here, shall I?

Key: Okay.

The Amazon guy shuffles right back against the door. Key starts his descent. As he gets closer, the Amazon guy backs off some more and secretes himself into a corner. He's wearing the same coat that Ryan Gosling wears in Drive. A scorpion on his back. He's thinner than Gosling though, this guy. His frame is slight. Ribs like cinnamon sticks.

Amazon Guy: They're locking down.

Key: Yeah, I know.

Amazon Guy: Locking the whole thing down.

Key: Aye.

Amazon Guy: It's crazy.

Key: Obviously it's crazy.

Amazon Guy: You gotta sign.

Key: Sling us your pen then.

The Amazon guy waggles his Biro as if to say "no, no, no".

Amazon Guy: Gotta use your own.

Key punches the banister.

Key: Bullshit. Again.

Key walks back up to his flat; he finds his orange pen immediately. He comes back. The box is halfway up the stairs now. Key signs for it. The pen feels lush on the paper, it coasts through Key's name with minimal effort and Key purrs. He folds the document into a dart and fires it down the stairs. He begins to push his parcel up the stairs like a boulder.

Amazon Guy: What ya got?

Key: You shouldn't ask people that.

Amazon Guy: Ha ha – I'm terrible for it.

Key's knees bend under the weight of the parcel, sweat sprays from his jugular; the Amazon guy covers his face with another parcel.

Amazon Guy: Go on then.

Key: Huh?

Amazon Guy: You gonna open it?

Key: I'll open it inside.

Amazon Guy: If I've carried it across town, though... Be nice to see it.

Key stares down at him, his knees are beginning to buckle.

Amazon Guy: I had to stop and rest up by the heath.

Key: Okay.

Key fetches a Stanley knife and starts working the box.

Amazon Guy: Beard's old-school, man.

Key: Yeah, it's for a part.

Amazon Guy: Huh?

Key: Filming.

Amazon Guy: Oh right. Actor?

Key: Mm.

Amazon Guy: They still filming then?

Key looks at him. His blade sinks into the cardboard.

Key: No, shut down.

Amazon Guy: They shut yer down.

Key: Yeah.

Amazon Guy: Filming's gone but the beard remains type of thing?

Key places a palm over his goatee, it's wiry hairs grasp between his fingers.

Amazon Guy: Bit of a diary wiper, basically.

Key: It's not for long, eh.

Amazon Guy: I'm supposed to be watching Matilda, at the weekend.
That's up in smoke.

Key: It's some show.

Amazon Guy: Got an email saying don't come.

Key: Matilda gone, huh?

Amazon Guy: Everything's gone.

Key: Well hang on a minute. Don't think I'm getting the old Tippex out just yet, pal. Going to Greece –

Amazon Guy: Yeah, Tippex that out, I would.

Key: In June. In June. No Tippex required. If anything I'm circling that shit with a Sharpie.

Amazon Guy: I'd add Tippex to your next order, if I were you.

Key: I'll add a Sharpie, cheers. Big pink Sharpie. Get that circled.
Greece ain't going nowhere.

Amazon Guy: Remember thinking that about Matilda. Spent last night painting that out with the old Tippex.

Key: Yeah, well.

Amazon Guy: Slathering it in that shit. Your Greece trip –

Key: Greece ain't going anywhere, believe me.

Amazon Guy: Balloon's about to go up.

Key: What balloon? What does that even mean?

Key hacks into the cardboard, pulls it away, throws it above him. He is chuntering in Greek. Hacking away. His elbow working hard as he stuffs his blade into the thick cardboard. After some time a record player is revealed. Plum-coloured. Old-style. It's a beaut.

Amazon Guy: Oh, nice!

Key: Yeah.

Amazon Guy: A record player.

Key nods, a frond of amalgamated hair, stiff like a mouse's tail, swings into his eye. He grazes his new record player's flanks with the back of his knuckle. The cardboard flows down the stairs and the Amazon guy bags it up.

Amazon Guy: You gonna plug it in?

Key: I'll plug it in inside.

Amazon Guy: I can't really come in.

Key: No.

Amazon Guy: I'm not allowed inside.

Key: No. I mean... be a bit weird, anyway, no?

Amazon Guy: That's some record player, that.

Key: It ain't bad.

Amazon Guy: It's a bobby-dazzler, that'n.

Key nods. He peers back down the wooden hill. Beyond the Amazon guy, Key can see the outside world. A tree is being shaken by the wind; a Dark Bounty wrapper spins into its branches, then frees itself and is away. The two men nod at one another.

Amazon Guy: Stay safe, man.

Key nods. "stay safe". Nice phrase, that.

Key: You stay safe, too.

The Amazon guy nods. Key shuts the door. His flat is quiet. It is a new type of quiet. Thicker, somehow. He coughs into the silence. Plods into the kitchen.

Claws.



Blorrance put what was left of his hands under the tap and turned it on with his hooter.

He put a bit of movement into them and his bones clinked together.

His missus came through.

“Don’t skimp, Blozza.”

Blorrance winced as she squirted them with gel and clinked his rancid knuckles with a teaspoon.

He looked up.

She looked more beautiful than ever.

Her eyes seemed to get larger and browner with each passing day.

Be Prepared.

☎ Daniel. | Midday, March. | iPhones for now.

The record player is plugged in using leads; the room is alive with Diana Ross. Key is slumped on his sofa, flicking through his proto-playing cards. Key's lip curls and tightens as he gropes them. "Daniel" flashes on his iPhone. Key's tongue drips into his beard as he inspects the Jacks. "Daniel" continues to flash. Eventually, Key swipes. And it's Daniel.

Daniel: Right, there's going to be a lockdown.

Key: Hello, Daniel.

Daniel: So you need to be ready.

Key: We don't know what's happening, Daniel, that's kind of the point.

Daniel: I listen to The Today Programme. I'm clued up.

Key inspects the King of Hearts. The monarch appears to be mouthing the word "listen".

Key: Go on then.

Daniel: You need to get out there, stockpile.

Key: Okay.

Daniel: I've just bought a fuck-ton of flour.

Key takes this in. He looks down onto the street. Folk, piled high with toilet rolls, weave uncertainly into the road. Cars beep their horns, a man on a bicycle moves through. He has a vast pole across his back and on each end industrial waste sacks full of pasta and gel; his chain squeaks.

Daniel: I know you.

Key: You don't know me.

Daniel: You'll leave it to the last minute and you'll be locked in, shit all over the walls and nothing to fry your onions in.

Key: You know nothing about me.

Daniel: You're a sleepwalker.

Key: Poppycock.

Daniel: You'll wake up in a fortnight with no food inside you, wishing you'd listened to old Dan. Did you get the record player?

Key stares at his record player. The gossamer-thin stylus trembles as "Upside Down" twirls beneath it.

Key: It's from you?

Daniel: You mentioned you had records.

Key: Yuh.

Daniel: But no turntable.

Key: I'd have got one.

Daniel: Thought it might be nice in lockdown.

Key: I'd have got one.

Daniel: You don't have to get me shit back.

The stylus reaches the centre, returns itself to its cradle. Diana Ross slows to a stop and sits, stroking her nails with her thumbs.

Key: We don't know they're definitely locking down.

Daniel: Is Martha Kearney telling us about it for her own health? You gotta be ready!

Key: Bugger me! Have some faith, man! You make out I'm going to be sprawled on my sofa, watching Come Dine with Me twenty-four seven, pizza toppings slithering down my thighs –

Daniel: It's coming!

Key: It'll disappear.

Daniel: Turn on the telly, man! This is the real shiz.

Key flicks the TV on. Huw Edwards is looking pretty glum; reading his dismal sheets of paper, fiddling nervously with his cuffs. Key spreads himself over his pheasant incubator, dripping down its sides. His eyes scuttle around the television screen sadly. His hair collects in clumps on the floorboards.

Daniel: It's coming. You even got a slow cooker?

Key: I got a cooker, I –

Daniel: Slow cooker.

Key: I don't know what speed it is, man.

Daniel: I got the best recipes. There's a rabbit stew I do, takes nine days on the medium setting.

Key: Rabbit. Yuh.

Daniel: You can't bury your head in the sand.

Key: No.

Daniel: You're like me –

Key: No way –

Daniel: You live alone.

Key: Oh, right, yeah.

Daniel: No one's gonna stockpile this shit for you.

Key: No.

Key opens his weird food cupboard thing. Tins wink at him as the midday sun kisses their lids. He picks out some pasta. 300g maybe, a mixture of fusilli, spaghetti and some broken up lasagne sheets.

Daniel: You gotta get out there, fill your trolley.

Key: I ain't doing that.

Daniel: Use your elbows.

Key: I've got food, I've got crumpets. I ain't joining the scrum.

Daniel: Really get in there with your elbows. Jab 'em in the ribs. Sling some penne in your trolley.

Key: You're a sheep man.

Daniel: I wore my gym kit, shoved some shin pads down my socks. It's madness in the aisles.

Key: Hence why I'm spreading curd on crumpets.

Daniel: You spend six months eating crumpets, you'll end up in a documentary.

Key: What the hell? Where's six months come from.

Daniel: They had a scientist on The Today Programme.

Key: Oh I get it, they wheel in a nerd, you're dangling off his every word. This is three weeks, max. I've got fish fingers, I've got curries –

Daniel: Tinned?

Key: Who cares what the packaging is? The nerd's saying my lamb madras has gotta be slathered in plastic with a damn sleeve around it now?

Daniel: You've gotta think about this shit. You need to look after yourself. I'm making green juices.

Key: Bleughhh!

Daniel: I've bought a celery mallet. I'm pulverising that shit.

Key: Everyone just chill out!

Daniel: I've bought kettlebells.

Key: Huh?

Key's scratching a list of essentials into his pheasant incubator with his compasses.

Daniel: Your filming gone?

Key: Uh-huh.

Daniel: So what you gonna do?

Key: We've made playing cards with my poems on 'em, we'll flog them.

Daniel: You gotta have a plan.

Key: I know you do, Einstein. This is mine. Sell the cards, buy crumps with the proceeds.

Key spins the Nine of Diamonds into the air and blows it towards his chocolate cabinet.

Daniel: My play's up in smoke.

Key: Stop writing plays.

Daniel: Huh?

Key: Plays are for pussies.

Daniel: Well, anyway, it's pulled.

Key: Okay. Sorry.

Daniel has gone.

Key: Sorry to hear that.

Key has balled himself up now and rests in the corner of the sofa. His ears twitch as he squints towards the window. He listens as the gears of life as he knows it slow and stiffen. Something is jabbing into Key's arnuzzi; he

shuffles and pulls out the orange pen. He holds it. It seems to pull itself further into his hand.

Stay Safe.†



Carmen Harmon climbed into her safe.

“You sure about this, Car?”

Carmen nodded and this big, bearded dunce stared at the lock.

“Yes, Kev,” she said, as the door swung closed, “I hate this sort of thing, let me out when it’s gone, Bubs.”

Kev threw a doughnut down the chimney bit on top and heard her devour it.

“It’s only a few weeks, babe!” she yapped up the pipe.

Kev scrambled the combination and fastened the chains.

He hated her being in the safe, her knees pinned up against her ears, her lips covered in sugar, laughing her head off at his bloody passport photo.

†**Juniper:** Why’s the safe got a chimney?

Key: Huh?

Juniper: In ‘Stay Safe’, the safe’s got a chimney.

Key: Still waiting for the bad news.

Juniper: How long does each one take to write?

Key: I mean, a morning?

Juniper: A morning?

Key: Sometimes quicker.

Stop press.

📞 Emily Juniper | 10:00AM, March. | Landline v iPhone

Key, rudderless. Eating broth, drafting texts, occasionally blinking. A lizard. His iPhone goes and Key instinctively slings it hard against the wall. It bounces back and he takes it low, next to his shin. Emily Juniper. Another spoonful of broth tipped down his throat. He swipes.

Key: Emily Juniper!

Juniper: Hello!

Key: What a tonic. What's the story in Cornwall?

Juniper: Not good.

Key: London's gone mad. Lockety-lock, they're saying. I don't know what this thing is but I think the bigwigs have caught it and it's fucking with their heads.

Juniper: I wanted to have a business conversation.

Key: Fantastic!

Juniper: It's about the playing cards.

Key: Oh for fuck's sake, are you kidding me?

Juniper: I haven't said what's happened yet.

Key: I know your voice, Em. I know your voice.

Key looks down at the mocked-up pack on the pheasant incubator. It seems to shrivel.

Juniper: They can't deliver them; they're shutting their machines down.

Key: Oh you are bloody kidding me.

Silence. Another three spoonfuls of broth poured into the hole, the lips licked. The miniscule baubles that bounce into his goatee are left to their fate.

Juniper: Anyway, just that really. And, you know, Happy Lockdown.

Key: Are you smoking?

Juniper: It's stressing me out, that's all.

Key: Tut.

Juniper: Are you not smoking?

Key: Quit. Q-U-I-T.

Key puts his soup bowl face-down over the cards. He sits back, mimes lighting his orange pen. He mimes taking a whopping great big drag.

Key: Why are they locking us in, Em?

Juniper: They're locking everyone in.

Key: Well, it's worst for us.

Juniper: How do you mean?

Key: Me and thee. Singletons. Again. Buggerooed by the system.

Juniper: I've –

Key: Incarcerated. Confined like crooks.

Juniper: I've got a boyfriend.

Key: Huh?

Juniper: We're locking down together.

Key looks around his flat. No one. He opens the microwave. Nothing.

Key: Well, where the fuck did he come from?

Juniper: I shouldn't worry about it, it's only a couple of weeks, isn't it? Bit of peace and quiet. Get some writing done.

Key: No, I will not "get some bloody writing done," thank you.

Juniper: We're already tripping over each other's feet and they haven't turned the key yet.

Key: I mean, I've got 24 hours to find myself a girlfriend. Where'd'ya get a boyfriend? Dammit!

Key stares out of the window. Couples drift back into their homes like gas into vents. Key takes another drag from his orange pen. The imaginary smoke swirls around his lungs and the bronchioles bend.

Juniper: You could get a cat?

Key: Cat. Huh?

He spies a cat scraping its flanks against a wheelie bin opposite. Its fur is sleek and its eyes go thin as the street empties. It looks up at Key and licks

its teeth with its shitty little tongue. Key gives it the finger. The cat smiles and struts towards the garages.

Juniper: Well, that's the state of play, anyway.

Key: Can't they keep the machines open? Bang out the cards, then flick the switch?

Juniper: They're shutting down.

Key: Before they shut it, I mean! Then we can sell them! They're swindlers, Em, I'm telling you.

Juniper: It's bad for me, too, Tim. I designed them.

Key: Of course, of course.

Juniper: They don't come –I've got no dough coming in.

Key: Of course, it's bad for everyone, of course it is. I see that.

Juniper: Well, it is what it is, anyway.

Key: How in the hell does a plague stop a printing press, that's what I want to know.

Juniper: People have ordered the cards; it's stressing me out.

Key: They don't know what they're doing.

Juniper: Have you seen Italy?

Key: I've seen here! They've closed the pubs, Em!

Juniper: The place is going mad.

Key: Just comes right out and says it. "We're closing the pubs". The guy's a swindler, no doubt about that.

Key has found a Greek ashtray and dabs imaginary ash onto it. He rests the orange pen on its shell-like rim, empties his lungs into the abyss.

Juniper: Well.

Key: What do you mean, "well"?

Juniper: Well, what would you do?

Key: Not that.

Juniper: But then –

Key: Not that, believe me.

Juniper: Well.

Key: Please stop saying "well", this is garbage, Em.

Juniper: Well, let's speak in a couple of weeks.

Key: Yeah. Yeah. Call me when they've disinfected the press, got some goons working on it.

Juniper: Enjoy the lockdown.

Key: The lockdown's a piss-take.

Juniper: I know.

Key: Yeah, I know. What now?

Juniper: I think Stu and I are going to have a barbecue.

Key: Oh right, fine.

Key takes a final, huge drag on his orange pen. His chest puffs out, his buttons ping off, shattering a framed photo of himself with an arm around Frank Skinner.

Juniper: Stu's got some bass, we're going to put it in –

Key: Don't tell me: foil. Jesus.

Juniper: Banana leaf.

Key: It's alright for some.

Key stubs his orange pen out; makes a melancholy rattle.

Juniper: Speak in April, let's see.

Key: Bye, Em.

Juniper: Bye.

Key stands. After some hours the room becomes dark. He feels for his orange pen, draws it to his mouth once more. He sucks the lid off, spits it out and it pings off the TV screen. He grips the shaft tight, his fingers soaking up its orangeness.

Last Gasp.



Chris Whacker snuck out into the road for a final gulp of fresh air. He breathed in hard and his chest blew up like a space hopper. Then he kissed the ground and wiped his arnuzzi on a manhole cover.

“See you in three weeeee-eeeks!!!”

He yelled.

His cry echoed around the streets and the amount of weeks appeared to go up.

Locking.

☎ Carol Key. | 3:00PM, March. | Landline vs iPhone.

Key is standing, stunned in his lounge. Some old-school Mozart choral faeces is revolving grimly around on his record player. He's watching the world outside. It seems to be blurring over, becoming indistinct. The iPhone heats up and rings.

Carol: They're locking us in!

Key Jnr: Hi, Mum.

Carol: I'm serious, Margaret's just been over, the government are going to lock us in.

Bill: *(From the next room)* Down! They're locking us down, Carol!

Carol: What do you make of all this, Tim? How's filming?

Key Jnr: They've stopped it.

Carol: They've stopped the filming?

Key Jnr: We didn't go in today.

Carol: What about tomorrow?

Key Jnr: Doesn't look like it; think they're locking down.

Carol: They don't know their ass from their you-know-whats half the time, these people.

Key Jnr: Following the science.

Carol: I bet.

Key Jnr squints down onto the pavements. The people rush like mice, scurrying this way and that, doing what has to be done before the jangle of keys, the desertion of the streets.

Carol: What have they got to lock us in for?

Bill: *(Maybe he's in the kitchen)* Down!

Carol: You'll be on your own then?

Key Jnr: Me?

Carol: You'll go mad.

Key Jnr: Course I won't go bloody mad.

Bill: *(Definitely in the kitchen)* Language, Timothy!

Key Jnr: How the fuck's he heard that?

Carol: Tim! Please.

Key Jnr: I'll survive. I've bought a houseplant.

Carol: You can give it a name.

Key Jnr: Huh?

A man on a moped rides by, the driver has approx. Forty bog rolls attached to his back using bungee cords, he's flicking the v's and beeping his horn.

Carol: What are you going to do?

Key Jnr: I dunno, watch Columbo, text people.

Carol: And for money?

Key Jnr: I've got money, Ma.

Key Jnr looks down at his mocked-up deck of playing cards; he puts his boot through them. He gathers them back together, shuffles them back into their suits.

Carol: I don't know how you make money.

Key Jnr: Not this again, is it?

Carol: With Richard Osman, I get it.

Key Jnr: No, I know you do.

Carol: If I'm Richard Osman's mum –

Key Jnr: Big if –

Carol: I haven't got a care in the world if I'm his mum.

Key Jnr: Yeah, he does okay, I won't argue with that.

Carol: I'm looking at his game shows; I'm looking at him with Xander –

Key Jnr: Pointless –

Carol: He probably thinks your stuff's pointless –

Key Jnr: No, I mean –

Carol: At the end of the day, he has all those smart suits –

Key Jnr: I'm not denying it, Ma.

Carol: They're all different, you know.

Key Jnr: Yeah?

Carol: If you pause it, you'll soon see. All subtly different weaves.
And then he's got that lovely haircut.

Key Jnr picks at his hair, tries to shovel it behind his ear, tucks the front under itself a bit.

Carol: Trapped on your lonesome, I can't bear it.

Key Jnr: I enjoy my own company.

Carol: You do?

Key Jnr: Of course, this is all good.

Carol: Christ.

Bill: *(He's making a risotto, more than likely)* Carol!

Carol: Mm.

Key Jnr: This is a dream come true, Ma, I swear.

Key Jnr is stood in front of his 6' X 3' pinboard now. Photos of friends, of family, of Spice Girls, of happier times. People lashed, people falling into rivers, Key dressed as a dentist's assistant, Key looking pale at Thorpe Park.

Carol: Why lock everyone up? We were here first.

Key Jnr: As in?

Carol: Letting these bugs run the place? They've only just got here.
Lock them up.

Key Jnr: Oh right.

Carol: Round 'em up, I would. Bung 'em in disused gyms, that's what I'd do.

Key Jnr: There's probably a reason they can't do that.

Carol: But this? You think this is any less daft? Honestly!

Key Jnr peers through his window. A red-haired child runs screaming down the street. A cowering hag peers up at the sky. A punk frowns; his Mohican hardens.

Carol: How do they do it anyway?

Key Jnr: What?

Carol: When they lock us in –

Bill: *(He's flooding the pan with brown sauce now, using up the ham, hacking apart a pepper)* Down! Lock us down, Carol!

Carol: Down, then!

Key Jnr: What do you mean, "how do they do it?"

Carol: Well, are we using our own locks?

Bill: *(Maybe grating in parmesan, maybe taking 10% of his knuckle with it)* Of course we're using our own bloody locks!

Carol: Was I asking you?!

Key Jnr: What do you mean, Mum?

Carol: Well, are we locking our doors ourselves or are they coming round in a truck and locking us in from the outside with new locks?

Key Jnr: Oh, it'll be our own locks.

Carol: Is it?

Key Jnr: Must be. Mustn't it?

Carol: Oh good, that's much better.

Key Jnr: It's only three weeks, Mum.

Carol: Yeah, three weeks with Victor Meldrew, can't bloody wait.

Key Jnr can hear his father smiling, wine reducing, a wooden spoon cajoling.

Key Jnr: Well, let's stay in touch.

Carol: Speak soon, love you, that's what they say, isn't it?

Key Jnr: Yeah. Love you, too.

The iPhone rolls out of Key Jnr's hand and onto the sofa. Key Jnr looks at the window for a moment, and then through it. Rick and Buddy are walking past. They wave up. Key Jnr waves down. Heads are shaken. Buddy mouths "it's madness". And it is. It is madness. This whole thing.

Lockdown.



They attached the valve to Bohnson's nozzle and pumped his chest up till it bulged with importance and puff.

They kicked him in front of the lectern.

He shuffled his papers, took a final breath.

A button flew off and pinged against the camera lens.

"Hello, folks."

He swept a clump of dismal, yellow fronds out of his eyes and continued.

"We gonna have a lockdown!"

He gestured with a thumb to the heavy, black door behind him.

"I'll be in there for the foreseeable."

A nerd came into shot and explained why.

"See you on the other side, folks!" Bohnson shouted over him.

He moved towards his house.

His hips swaying this way and that, good-humouredly.

Week 2.



WEEK

II.

In which a poet battens down the hatches, a toddler goes looking
for a bear, and a fist closes around a pen.

Gunk.



There was a crackdown.

Everyone had to get inside and double-lock their doors.

The authorities came by.

They had special hoses and they fired gunk at the doors to seal them shut.

The gunk gurgled and hissed as it set.

The sirens of the gunk machines became muffled as the seals became airtight.

Locked.

☎ The Colonel. | 9:00AM, March. | iPhones

Key's sat on the doormat. His back's leaning against the inside of his front door. He's got a baseball mitt on and is hurling his baseball hard against the wall. Thwack, into the mitt. Again and again.

Key: I'm going mad here, honestly I am, John.

Colonel: Day two though.

Key: Climbing the walls.

Colonel: You're gonna have to pace yourself though, we're only two days in.

Key: Yeah, it's alright for you, man, you've got Gabby! This ain't gonna work at all.

Colonel: It's not forever is it?

Key: They're saying this could be three weeks.

Colonel: Yeah.

Key: Three weeks, man!

Colonel: He's closed the lot. It's mad.

Key: Is it? Is it mad? I hadn't noticed that.

Colonel: You seen what's happening in Italy?

Key: I was gonna get my hair cut this morning and guess what?

Colonel: Yeah, I know.

Key: Guess, I said!

Colonel: Barber's shut, yeah.

Key: Barber?? What the fuck? Hairdresser.

Colonel: Yeah, people are gonna have some mad hairstyles in three weeks.

Key: "Barber"? We're not in Turkey.

Colonel: Well, it don't matter where we are, we ain't getting haircuts.

Key: Yes, I know, and we ain't getting lashed down the pub, and the bar supervisor's locked away, and my bloody job's off.

Colonel: Sorry to hear about that.

Key: Yeah, well.

Colonel: You can lose the goatee, at least.

Key grabs his goatee in his fist. He clenches it and some hairs ping out.

Key: What am I doing now? Are takeaways open?

Colonel: Think some, maybe.

Key: “Some”, “maybe”, he “thinks”.

Colonel: People are going to be batch-cooking.

Key: Yeah, well, I don’t know what that is.

Colonel: It’s cooking more –

Key: Did I ask you for a definition of batch-cooking? Fuck me! This is mental, man!

Colonel: Come on, bro.

Key: You’ve got Gab! I’ve got Alexa, a teddy bear, a fucking fridge. I ain’t talking to my fridge.

Colonel: Are you talking to Alexa?

Key: I don’t know do I John??? I just don’t know what the fuck’s going to happen here.

Colonel: It’s just day two.

Key: Stop telling me it’s just day two.

Colonel: It’s only lunchtime.

Key: Why do you think I’m asking about takeaways?

Key hurls his baseball again. His timing’s off ’cos he’s stressed, and the ball hits him between the eyes and splits like a chickpea.

Key: Roll on June, that’s all I can say.

Colonel: Still be in our houses, lol!

Key: Don’t joke like that, man!

Colonel: Sure –

Key: No, I’m in Greece in June, Colonel. Can’t bloody wait, this is faeces, this.

Colonel: You reckon?

Key: Can show you the villa if you like, mate. Comes with an inflatable unicorn and a pizza oven.

Colonel: God knows what’s gonna happen.

Key: Well, I’m guessing we buy a load of pizza bases and then each make our own individual toppings.

Key closes his eyes and recollects photos of the villa, the email confirmation, the money oozing out of his account.

Colonel: Gotta make a plan, huh.

Key: You're doing my head in.

Colonel: Me and Gab are having a meeting.

Key: You can't have a meeting with your girlfriend.

Colonel: Three o'clock, in the kitchen. I'm taking a notepad.

Key: Bugger me.

Colonel: What are you doing?

Key: Watch Columbo.

Colonel: Old school.

Key: Go through the lot.

Colonel: Gab's thinking Sopranos – from the start – we're gonna discuss it at the meeting.

Key: I'll tell you what. We could do with Columbo here now, he'd sort this out.

Colonel: What do you mean he'd sort it out?

Key: Just, he'd get to the bottom of things.

Colonel: Not this though, surely.

Key: Never underestimate Columbo.

Colonel: How strong's his magnifying glass? Do you know how small these things are?

Key: More chance of him solving it than the old duffers we've got in charge, I'll say that.

Colonel: Let's see how they go.

Key reaches up above his head. Fiddles with the lock. It feels colder than usual. Like it's locked and then died.

Colonel: You heard of Zoom?

Key: I haven't heard of shit, man.

Colonel: People are playing quizzes, yer know.

Key: I ain't playing quizzes.

Colonel: You gotta do something.

Key: Not my style, never has been.

Colonel: We might do one: me, Gab and the DJ. We can save you a screen.

Key: If I want a quiz I'll watch The Chase.

Colonel: This is interactive.

Key: Have you seen me watching The Chase?

Colonel: Well, the offer's there –

Key: Have you seen me watching The Chase, I said.

Colonel: I'm guessing you interact.

Key: Those guys don't know what's hit 'em.

Colonel: Okay.

Key: Okay.

Colonel: Speak later, man.

Key: Yeah, if we can still make calls!

Colonel: Right.

Key: Right! I know I'm right. If they haven't gummed up the phones!

Colonel: Stay safe, man.

Key: Obviously.

Colonel: Huh?

Key hangs up. He runs the baseball mitt through his hair. It gets lost in there, Key goes in with the other hand, pulls it out, it shimmers with grease. Key knocks the back of his head gently against his front door.

The Worst Case.



A drum kit arrived.

“I’m begging you, Ewen. Please don’t take up the drums.”


Ewen was slipping into his singlet.

“Gill, you’re my landlady, not my mother.”

Gill looked sad.

Ewen donned his headband and sat his bony ass down on his stool.

New Comms.

 Daniel | Midday, March. | Still iPhones.

Key is sat on his toffee-coloured leather sofa this time. He stares at his iPhone. Flashing: “Daniel”. He bites his lips. Eventually he swipes and his eyelids smash closed heavily as he does so.

Key: Yes.

Daniel: You need to get your parents a Portal.

Key: Go fuck yourself.

Daniel: My parents love it.

Key: Big wow.

Daniel: Do you want to know what one is?

Silence. Key breathes out heavily and his pheasant incubator moves forward an inch.

Key: What the fuck’s a Portal?

Daniel: It’s a device for talking to your parents. It links with WhatsApp, all that jazz.

Key: “All that jazz.”

Daniel: It follows you around the room.

Key: No one knows what that means.

Daniel: Well, anyway, just saying.

Key: Yeah, always just saying something, aren’t you?

Daniel: I’ll get you it.

Key: I’ll get my own stuff, cheers.

Daniel: How’s the record player?

Key: Yup.

Daniel: How are you getting on?

Key: How do you think I’m getting on?

Daniel: Plugging away, probs.

Key: Yeah, I’m plugging away.

Daniel: Cards selling?

Silence. Key is perfectly still. Behind him are four ornate packets of Chinese cigarettes. So beautiful he has had them framed. The frame is black, heavy. One packet appears to be finished with gold leaf. They're from another era.

Daniel: I'm gonna get into breadmaking.

Key: Oh aye?

Daniel: Sour bread. And I'm thinking of getting a bassoon. How about you?

Key: Take it easy, I reckon. Warm into it. It's a marathon –

Daniel: Not a sprint. Yup, you got that right.

Key: I could make a loaf of bread like that.

Key tries to click.

Daniel: You gotta prove it.

Key: Yeah, I will.

Daniel: You don't just mix some shit together and bung it in the oven.

Key: I wasn't going to do that.

Daniel: You gotta prove it.

Key: I will, I said.

Daniel: You can send a photo of your loaf when you've baked it.

Key: Heh?

Daniel: We singletons must stick together.

Key: Go fuck yourself.

Key is looking straight ahead again. Through things. Straight at the wall. Then through that.

Daniel: You got yourself a mask, I hope.

Key holds up a homemade mask. It looks funny.

Daniel: The fuck is that?

Key: Made it myself.

Daniel: You don't say. Is that a colander?

Key: Strapped to a cricket helmet, yes.

Daniel: Gee whizz, you can't do this on your own, mate.

Key: The little holes let the air in, keep the bugs out. Simple.

Daniel: Do you know how small the bugs are?

Key: Weirdly, I don't have a degree in bugs, you know. If they're smaller than these holes, fair play to 'em.

Daniel: You're wandering around with a colander strapped on your face, man!

Key: Mask snob!

Daniel peers into his screen. Key takes off his colander, brushes it with his sleeve.

Daniel: People are playing quizzes, that might be more your style.

Key: I'm not playing quizzes, believe me.

Daniel: You might enjoy it.

Key: I'm gonna get shit done.

Daniel: Yeah. Yeah, now's the time.

Key: I might... sand something.

Daniel: Oh aye.

Key: Yeah, chap on Five Live this morning, saying he was going to sand something.

Daniel: What you going to sand?

Key: I'm saying, I'll sand something. Haven't had a proper think yet.

Daniel: It's a time of opportunity, learn a skill! Get yourself a unicycle.

Key: You get a unicycle, you moron.

Daniel: Unicycle's just an example.

Key: Phoning people up, telling 'em to get unicycles.

Daniel: We're gonna be locked in a while, pal.

Key: Three weeks, it is.

Key peers out of the window. A man in a window opposite peers back. They nod slowly at one another.

Key: I'll make something of myself.

Daniel: By sanding.

Key: I might learn editing.

Daniel: Ah.

Key: I might... you know.

Daniel: Oh, I know. I'm like a coiled spring.

Key: And I'm not?

Daniel: Well, you're planning on sanding something.

Key: You make out I'm going to be sat on my fat arnuzzi for the duration, occasionally log on for a quiz.

Daniel: Ha! Yeah, this time next week you'll be quizzing, I can see it now.

Key: Quiz snob!

Daniel: You do you.

Key: I'll make something of myself, I said.

Daniel: This time next week, I'm going to have flour smeared over my cheeks.

Key: I don't doubt it.

Daniel: Swung my kettlebell this morning.

Key: Big wow.

Daniel: Swung it between my legs, forty minutes.

Key: Gross.

Daniel: You batch-cooking?

Key doesn't know. He doesn't speak. Eventually a buzzer goes, Daniel's end.

Daniel: Ah, that'll be Amazon! Exciting times.

Key: Faeces times!

Daniel: I've bought magnetic paint, the plan being –

Key presses eff off on his iPhone as Daniel's cords fly out of shot. He pushes his device away hurriedly, as if it is a scorpion. He looks straight ahead. His gaze is falling somewhere between his orange pen and his flatscreen television. He hasn't focused on anything yet. Everything is merging. The pen is bulging. Pulsating, like a hornet's abdomen.

Potage.†



Dogworth batch-cooked seventy gallons of soup.
He froze it up in tubs and slapped his hands together.
“Good job, D!”
He heated up a bowl for right now and sat his fat ass down on his beanbag.
He tasted his first spoonful.
He spat it across the room and the bowl tipped up on his cycling shorts.
Fucking rancid.

†**Juniper:** You cooked for me once, wasn’t that bad.
Key: What’s that got to do with the price of milk?
Juniper: Well, this chap’s obviously just cooked a pile of rancid old gash, no?
Key: Dogworth?
Juniper: Yeah.
Key: Right, so that’s Dogworth then, it ain’t me.
Juniper: Is it not autobiographical then?
Key: Well, yeah, some is.
Juniper: And some’s more...
Key: Biographical.
Juniper: It’s slippery.
Key: Yeah. Yeah, it’s slippery.

The Furlough.



I FaceTimed my cleaner.

“I’m furloughing you.”

He came through into the lounge.

“The fuck are you talking about?!”

I waved a definition I’d printed out and he sprayed his disinfectant at it.

I fired my own disinfectant at his jet of curses.

His thick, powerful shoulders were glistening.

I was pumping hard on my weed sprayer now,

Disinfecting his choice language as it flew towards me.

The Bear.

☎ The Agent. | Afternoon, March. | iPhones

Key is melting into the sofa now. More or less just his nose is showing. LBC fills the room like a gas. He's got Spotify on, too, Key has. Reeling off French tracks like they're going out of fashion. He looks across at his bear. His big, button eyes stare back. The iPhone is cheeping. The agent.

Chiggy: Hi, darling boy.

Key: Hi, Chig.

Chiggy: So how's lockdown?

Key: Checking up on your clients, is it?

Chiggy: Well, checking in really.

Key: They all nailing lockdown, I take it.

Chiggy: Everyone seems to be... adapting.

Key: You adapt or you die, Chig, I honestly believe that. How's your lockdown?

Chiggy: I've just made a red velvet cake, but I've left the foil on it.

Key: What foil?

Chiggy: I'm going mad without Pilates, I'll say that.

Key: Open a bottle of red, you can get stretchy again when they unlock us.

Chiggy: Bought myself a chin-up bar.

Key: Oh.

Chiggy: What?

Key: Just not sure I want to imagine my agent doing chin-ups, that's all.

Chiggy: You gotta stay fit, this stuff ravages the obese.

Key's eyes become as expressionless as the bear's. He pushes away two crumpets, stacked on top of one another, a thick spread melting up through the holes.

Chiggy: What are you listening to?

Key: I've got Eddie Mair on the wireless –

Chiggy: Love Mair –

Key: And then a French band –

Chiggy: It's difficult to concentrate.

Key: Called "Dans La Christaline, featuring Naps".

Chiggy: Okay.

Key: Well, y'know...

Key pulls the crumpet tower back towards him with his toes. His thick, crimson tongue, throbs as the doughy stench reaches out to his nostrils.

Chiggy: Now – are you making podcasts, putting yourself on tape, all the rest of it?

Key: I've started dressing my bear, put it that way?

Chiggy: In the sense of –

Key: If you think that's healthy, I'll give you the money myself.

Chiggy: What bear?

Key: I've got a massive teddy, five foot tall. I'd rather dress that dopy sod than watch the news, cheers.

Chiggy: Oh yeah, the stats. It's grim stuff.

Key: You got that right. Nah, switch off, put Fatberg in a new uniform.

Chiggy: He's called Fatberg?

Key: He's wearing a Peru kit at the moment.

Chiggy: With the red sash across the chest?

Key: How the fuck do you know that, Chig?

Key scoops himself out of his seat, sits on an arm now.

Chiggy: Bit old for a bear, no?

Key: I'm glad of him, Chig. Lucky to have him.

Chiggy: Well, you know, whatever works, you gotta get through the day.

Key: Peru top, denim shorts.

Chiggy: Cheeky!

Key: I'm going mad over here, Chig.

Chiggy: It's all good material, I guess.

Key's handset is smashed against a metal table half a dozen or so times. He catches sight of his mocked-up deck of playing cards. He imagines there's

3,000 of these things, watches them transform into banknotes. He smashes the handset against the metal table a couple more times.

Chiggy: Well, I'm glad you're okay, Tim.

Key: I'm dressing my bear, Chig!

Chiggy: I'm going to phone Noel –

Key: Doing the rounds is it?

Chiggy: Send me a photo of the bear.

Key: I'm not sending you a photo of the bear, Chig. I'm really not.

Chiggy: I want to see his shorts!

Key: I had to cut through the waistband and insert some elastic so Fatberg could fit in them. Popped a headband on him.

Chiggy: Like John McEnroe.

Key: Took me the best part of the morning.

Chiggy: Are you writing, dare I ask?

Key: Ask what you like, Chig. I'm spending five hours a day in the tub.

Chiggy: Oh, I might have a bath.

Key: My flesh was falling away like slow-cooked lamb.

Chiggy: You see that's why you should write! Slow-cooked lamb indeed! That's fantastic.

Key: I should be out there acting, that's the truth of it.

Chiggy: I think you're more of a writer.

The handset smashes clean through the metal now, sparks dance about the flat, they ignite some kitchen roll. Key douses the lot in washing-up water. He notices his orange pen is in his hand.

Key: What about you, anyway?

Chiggy: Incarcerated.

Key: Bummer.

Chiggy: They've welded up the office.

Key: Welded. Sure.

Chiggy: Don't want the lurgy infiltrating our office chairs.

Key: Well, quite.

Chiggy: This stuff doesn't give much of a fig about anything, by all accounts.

Key leafs through his diary. March, April, May. He lands on June. "Greece". He strokes the word. Cups his hands around it to protect it.

Chiggy: Have you thought of making a video diary?

Key: I'm not Ben Fogle, Chig.

Chiggy: Has Ben Fogle made a video diary?

Key: I have no idea, Chig. Honestly, I don't.

Chiggy: We'll look back on this and laugh.

Key: I think it'll be more complicated than that.

Chiggy: How's the flat looking?

Key: Yup.

Chiggy: Had to lose your cleaner, I take it.

Key breathes out. Dust and crisp packets fly up.

Chiggy: Have you participated in any dreaded quizzes?

Key: I'm not going to dignify that with an answer, Chig.

Chiggy: Well, I'm gonna phone Noel.

Key: Congratulate him on his Art Club.

Chiggy: Will do. Catch up soon! Keep up the writing! Bye bye, Fatberg!

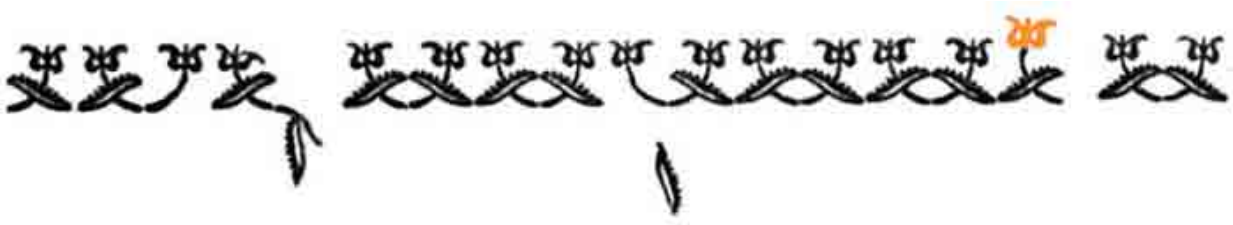
Key: Huh?

Chiggy: That was to the bear.

Key: No, I know. What?

The line goes dead. Key stuffs what's left of the crumpets into his cake hole, hammers them in with a remote control. It's deep into the afternoon now and still no sign of any clothes on his legs. He looks at the bear. Why is his bear more dressed than he is?

A New Tech.



Bohnson peered into his screen.

“Guten Morgen, scientists! How are we diddling? Over!”

The main nerd filled the screen and Bohnson squinted at his gleaming slaphead.

“We’re testing it on mice, we’re making progress, Mr Bohnson.”

“Music to my ears! Over!”

Moggeth dripped into shot.

“This is Zoom, Bohns, you don’t need to say over.”

Bohnson went red and wet.

“Don’t embarrass me in front of the nerds, Moggpiece,” Bohnson whispered into a fist, “at least do me that courtesy.”

Moggeth smiled a sick smile and slid back into a recess.

“Sorry about my friend, chaps. Thinks he’s God’s gift to tech. Over!”

Bohnson noticed his balls were in shot.

He reached for his ABBA Gold CD and placed it over the majority of them.

“The gruesome twosome,” he muttered, barely distinctly, into his Dell’s in-built mic.

Bobby Swings By.

☎ Bobby & Lordoss. | 11:00AM, March. | iPhones & murky visuals.

Key's submerged in his sofa. His spine is bending into it, scoring the fabric. His plate is stacked high with cake, clumps occasionally being plugged into his trap. Crumbs exploding onto the cushions. Icing flicking onto the ceiling. The iPhone croaks. It is Lord. Key sweeps so hard the circle nearly bounces off the screen.

Key: Lordoss!

Lord: Behind ya.

Key: Huh?

Key stretches up and spins around, his body creaking as movement runs through it again.

Lord: Down here.

Key squints through the dirty window. Half a cm of glass, then a gap, then another half a cm. Key scrapes a small viewing square into the glass with his nail, and peers through. Two figures. A father and son. The father: a Samsung Galaxy clamped to his ear.

Key: Lord?

Lord: The same.

Key: What the hell are you doing out?

Lord: Allocated exercise. Walking the lad.

Key's got Lord in his ear, clear as a bell, then this apparition, vaguely drawn, lolling against a wall, shrouded in a haze. His son isn't yet two and already has the same disdainful stance. Key can hear him, off.

Bobby: (Off) Um-um-um-um can we go to the swings?

Key: Kid wants to tap the swings, huh?

Lord: Yeah, well, they're closed.

Key: *Quelle surprise.* Pubs closed, circus closed. Why doesn't it surprise me that The Maestro's shut the swings?

Lord: We can't go to the swings, Bobs, they're closed.

Bobby: *(Off)* Um-um-um-um why are they closed, daddy?

Key: Bugger me.

Lord: They're just closed, Bobs.

Key: I can't get me head around it either, Bobby. Tell him I can't get my head around it, Lor.

Lord: Uncle Tim can't wrap his head around it, Bobs.

Key: "Uncle Tim"? What the fuck?

Lord: Well, I dunno, do I?

Key: It's Tim, or Key. I ain't his uncle, last time I checked.

Lord: Tim can't wrap his head around it.

Bobby: *(Off)* Um-um-um-um-um-um.

Bobby trails off.

Lord: You exercising?

Key: What's that supposed to mean?

Key peers down through the fug. He ploughs another 100g of Mr Kipling's efforts into his cakehole. He moves a step away from the window so Lord can't ogle his tits and belly.

Bobby: *(Off)* Um-um-um-um can we have caaaake?

Lord: No, Bobs, we can't have cake.

Key: Lollipop in his hand, he asks for cake.

Lord: Doesn't help, you eating cake, if I'm honest.

Key: Huh?

Lord: Put it down, just while we're here, eh? He won't shut up about it otherwise.

Bobby: *(Off)* Um-um-um-um can I have the caaaake?

Key: Um-um-um-um no, I'm having the cake, pal.

Lord: Put it down, man.

Key: I'll smear it on the window before I put it down, believe me.

Lord: What cake is it?

Key: Your friend and mine, French Fancies, four thereof.

Lord: Did you make them?

Key: Fuck me. What?

Lord: People are making cake, Misha's making cake.

Key: Misha's making banana bread. This is big boy shit, Lor. *Am I making French Fancies* he asks.

Lord: Have you even had Misha's banana bread?

Key: Soon. I'm on the list, apparently.

Lord: I don't know how she does it, seriously.

Key: She slings some bananas in a tin and stirs some flour in. It's not rocket science.

Lord: She waits till her bananas are jet black, that's her secret. Ha! Everyone's making it, yer know.

Key: Yeah I've watched The One Show, Lor – I'm not living under a rock.

Bobby: *(Off)* Um-um-um-um can I have the caaaake?

Key: He's gotta stop saying that, he's winding me up.

Lord: He's got a sweet tooth, that's the point.

Key: See how he likes me smearing them down the windows.

Lord: Stop suggesting you're going to do that, he'll be traumatised for life.

Key: We don't know that.

Lord: Just hold it lower so he can't see it.

Bobby: *(Off)* Um-um-um-um what does Tim do?

Key: What do I do? What do you do?

Lord: He's eighteen months old.

Key: Yeah, young as hell.

Lord: Yeah, well.

Key: When you're counting it in months you know you're young.

Bobby: *(Off)* Um-um-um-um what does he do?

Key: I'm a writer, pal. That's what.

Key's spindly fingers escape the wrists momentarily, they scuttle onto the pheasant incubator, seize the orange pen.

Lord: I think we're gonna walk up the hill.

Bobby: *(Off)* Um-um-um-um where's Fatberg?

Lord: Oh yeah, he wants to see the bear.

Key: Oh, he does?

Lord: Come on, dangle him out the window, he's been going on about that bear all morning.

Key ploughs a final 70g into his trap and licks the plate.

Key: I'm not getting my Jacko on, Lor.

Lord: Just hold him up or something. It's why we're here.

Bobby: *(Off)* Um-um-um-um can I see Fatberg?

Key: Hang on.

Key hoists the bear up and onto his shoulders. Bobby rocks his head back laughing. Fatberg's wearing Key's red tracksuit today. Bobby's saluting it, waving his lollipop around.

Lord: Thanks, man.

Key nods, moves some hair from his eyes.

Lord: Right, we're off to the duck pond.

Key: If The Maestro hasn't concreted it over.

Lord: Yeah, good point. Tatty bye then.

Bobby: *(Off)* Um-um-um-um –

Key hangs up and throws Fatberg back into his place. He stands for a moment, then allows the weight of his spine to drop him back into his sofa. He looks down. The orange pen quivers in his hand. He stares at it. The ink begins to bubble.

2M.†



I gave a man a very wide berth on my bicycle and landed up in a lake.

He barely waved an acknowledgment, the old swindler.

I had a two-pound pike hanging out of my cakehole.

I removed it to say, “Stay safe!”

Then I slapped it back in, dived right down, and started the thorny business of trying to find and recover my bicycle.

†**Juniper:** Ha ha! Did this really happen?

Key: Gawd knows.

Juniper: As in, did you cycle into a lake?

Key: A lot of stuff happened, Em. That’s the point.

Juniper: A bloody great fish hanging out yer mouth though!

Key: There was a guy I read about, taking potshots at joggers one morning, Em.

Juniper: Ha ha!

Key: It was the Wild West, that’s what.

Saturday Night!



Saturday night!

Yes! Get in!

John, Laura, Anthony W, Loud Matt, Angelo White, The Cod Boy, Dave Moggs, Susannah and Cyril, The Butter Muncher, Adrian P Robertson, Squirty Girty, Mike's farming friends, Mike, Al, Ken Hom, The Mischief Sisters, Louise Gel, Squat June and Owen all hooked up on Zoom and it was good fun, but Laura didn't really get a word in edgeways and texted Matt afterwards.

A book.

☎ Emily Juniper. | Tea time, March. | Landline vs iPhone.

Key is barely watching Come Dine with Me. He's eating Frosties, shovelling them in, his catlike tongue working off the sugar. Outside, silence. Save for the occasional breath of a civilian, scuttling to an offy. He dials. Emily Juniper picks up. Key places his Tony The Tiger bowl down, stuffs his spoon behind his ear.

Juniper: Tim, can I call you back?

Key: I'm writing a book.

Juniper: I'm just watching the briefing.

Key: Never mind him.

Juniper: I've heard nothing yet about the cards. Printing presses all still stuffed I think.

Key: I'm writing a book, I said.

She doesn't say anything for some time.

Juniper: I'm just watching the PM.

Key: The Maestro.

Juniper: He's sweating.

Key: Means he's fibbing.

Juniper: The guy looks fucked, if you ask me.

Key: Well, this is the thing. Pause him will ya, Em.

Juniper: Can I call you back?

Key: Come on! Pause the great lump! Come on!

Key flicks over to BBC One. The Maestro is at his divvy little lectern; his nose puce, sweat bubbling on his lapels. Key flicks back onto Come Dine with Me. Optimistic souls, trying to grate nutmeg.

Key: It's a book of poems, Em. Simple as that.

Juniper: What is? What's happening here?

Key: I got a fire in my belly, Em, I can feel it.

Juniper: I can hear it.

Key: It's like a furnace in there, Em, it's scorching the bottom of my lungs.

We hear a kettle being flicked on. Emily Juniper must be in the kitchen.

Juniper: There's no sense hurrying into things. The PM says it's a big 'un, looks like –

Key: I've ordered squared paper and thesauruses, Em. Before Amazon goes the way of the boozers.

We hear the kettle whistling. Key feels steam on his ear.

Juniper: Okay. And. You're saying you want me to design it.

Key: Noooo, you don't say. Of course you're designing it.

Juniper: Are you asking me or telling me?

Key: You love working with me, Em.

Juniper: Don't you think you're better off doing stuff online?

Key: Pah!

Juniper: What?

Key: Everyone's doing stuff online.

Juniper: Exactly.

Key: What exactly?

Juniper: Do stuff online then.

Key: But I want to do stuff on paper, that's the thing –

Juniper: Can't you hammer out some memes, I mean I don't have time to –

Key: Thick paper, you know. Stuff you can get a tune out of.

We hear the piping hot water being dumped on the granules. The whiff of coffee rising off the iPhone.

Juniper: Things are changing every day.

Key: Yes, I know things are, Em! You think I'm not across the tolls?

Juniper: I don't know what you're across.

Key: I'm all over that shit. The graphs!

Juniper: Well, I think if you want to do a creative response to –

Key: Fuck me. I don't want to do a creative response, Em.

Juniper: No?

Key: No! I just wanna write a book and you make it look all nice and everyone wets themselves and then we all move on.

Juniper: Oh okay.

Key: I'll send you some poems and we'll see what we all think.

Juniper: Poems again then.

A long pause. God knows how long.

Key: Not this again.

Juniper: It always seems to be poems.

Key: My job is "poet", Em.

Juniper: Okay.

Key: That's what it says on my passport.

Juniper: Does it still say your occupation?

Key: And now, more than ever, people need poems.

Juniper: I read it was ventilators.

Key: Ventilators ain't a lot of use to you if there's no new poetry coming out.

Juniper: I don't think I'd agree with that.

Key is frantically twirling his orange pen through his hair, it grips and builds up like spaghetti. Key continues to twiddle till it pinches.

Juniper: Do you want to ask me if I want to be involved?

Key: Huh?

Juniper: Well, you've kind of assumed I'm in.

Key: Yeah, I have assumed that.

Juniper: Right.

Key: I think I'll continue to assume that, if I may.

Juniper: You will?

Key: Well, may I? I mean, something for you to do whilst the machines are stuffed.

There is a prolonged silence. Juniper zipping and unzipping her cardigan.

Juniper: Yeah, yeah okay.

Key: Me boshing out any old faeces, you slamming it on the pages.

Juniper: What do you mean, “any old faeces”?

Key: I’ll let you get back to The Maestro.

Juniper: He looks buggered, if you ask me.

Key: I don’t think we need to worry about The Maestro.

Juniper: Anyone can get it, you know. It doesn’t discriminate.

Key: I don’t think that includes The Maestro.

Juniper: His tie’s glistening with sweat.

Key: Stay in touch, Em!

Juniper: Well, yeah, I mean –

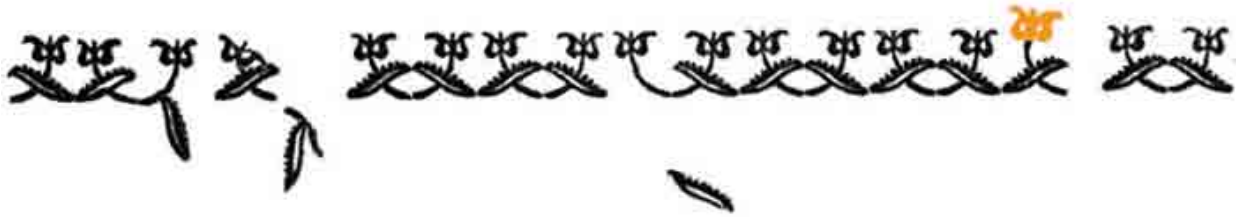
Key: Exciting times.

Juniper: Awful times!

Key: Stay safe, Em!

Key terminates and wipes down his iPhone. He retrieves his spoon and Frosties start going in the slot again. After some moments, he sees something out of the corner of his eye. He doesn’t know what. He doesn’t know much.

Poorly.



Moggeth filled the bath with Lemsip and Radox.

“Dearest Moggeth, thank you, my sweet.”

Bohnson rolled off his dressing gown and whispered something to his boy to calm it down.

“We need you back up and running, Bohns, that’s all.”

Moggeth enveloped his leader and they fell into the tub.

“You’re coming in too are ya, Moggpiece?”

“It’s what the experts suggest, Bohns.”

Bubbles filled the chamber.

“Oh yes, listen to the nerds, of course we must, Moggpiece.”

But Moggeth had dissolved now and Bohnson was alone, steeping in the dark, restorative fluids.

The showerhead appeared to be winking at his knockers.

Week 3.



W
E
E
K

III.

In which a communications device arrives, a niece bangs the drum for a dog, and the clapping begins.

Bozo.†



Bozo started socially distancing by wearing stilts.

He was slow and ponderous and couldn't get into any of the shops or his flat but, unless he bumped into some other cunt on stilts, he was as safe as houses up there.

†**Juniper:** This one made me laugh.

Key: Okay.

Juniper: On his stilts!

What's It All About?

📞 Emily Juniper | 11:00am, April. | Landline v iPhone

Key is watching a Donald Trump press conference from the night before and listening to Lauren Laverne's lockdown radio show. They're both about the same volume. Key's hand is hovering over his iPhone, his fingers are twitching. Eventually he breaks, seizes the iPhone and calls Emily Juniper.

Juniper: Is this the new normal then?

Key: Hi, Em.

Juniper: You only called yesterday.

Key: What do you mean, "the new normal"?

Juniper: Daily calls, feels like.

Key: I'm pumped about the book, that's all.

Juniper: Okay, hang on.

Key: What?

Emily Juniper goes. She comes back.

Juniper: Go on. Was getting my pad.

Key: I've been baking this morning.

Juniper: You wanna talk turkey, or you've phoned to discuss bread?

Key: 6 Music are saying bake, that's all. Honestly, it was a bloody hoot. Not as easy as they say, once you get into the actual kitchen, the theatre of war. You'd've laughed, Em –

Key hears the grown-up swish of an A4 Black n' Red notepad. A leather pencil case being unzipped.

Juniper: Okay, let's talk.

Key: My bread didn't rise, Em. That's your headline news.

Juniper: Okay.

Key: It looks like a child's stamped on it.

Juniper: But you are writing.

Key pulls at the seams of his pinny.

Key: Oh, I'm writing. Don't worry about that. Unstoppable.

Juniper: Well, that's good.

Key: Ignoring the tolls, banging the keys.

Juniper: What's the book about?

Key: It's great having you on board, Em, I must say.

Key can hear fingers being licked, pages being turned. Pencils being sharpened. Pencil tops being bitten.

Juniper: It's just, if I'm designing the thing –

Key: Yeah, designing, exactly! You don't need to know the intricate –

Juniper: But, like, does it have a plot or anything like that?

Key: Plot? What plot?

Trump's yammering away. He's saying there's no such thing as a pandemic, or he's an expert and he's actually slept with a pandemic, or whatever it is these days. His eyes look like they've been drawn on afterwards with a Biro.

Juniper: Will the poems rhyme?

Key: Let's everyone chill out.

Juniper: I need to know how it's gonna be, that's all.

Key: It's a response, Em.

Juniper: You said it wasn't a response.

Key: People are calling it a response.

Juniper: Okay. To –

Key: To the piss-poor situation.

Juniper: To you being bored?

Key: It's a response, Em. I'm responding.

Juniper: Well, that's good to know.

Key: Because if I don't, who will?

Juniper: People are responding. Artists are responding.

Key: Exactly, if you can't respond to this –

Juniper: I think the trick is, it can't just be any old response.

Regina Spektor is now on Lauren. It's the one where she goes off on one, almost yodelling. Key curls his lip, flicks a slipper off. Pops his hair behind his ear.

Key: Whatever this son-of-a-bitch pando can throw at me, I'm gonna respond. Believe me.

Juniper: Have you signed up to that volunteer thing, with the NHS?

Key: Huh?

Juniper: That would be a good response, people are signing up. My cousin's driving a van.

Key: No driving licence.

Juniper: There's lots of different positions I think –

Key: The trouble was the shops had run out of flour so I was having to improvise.

Key can hear the notepad being thrown against a wall and a painting falling onto the floor.

Juniper: We're talking bread again?

Key: I'm not built for kitchens, Em. I panic. I improvise. I start over-using the whisk-thing, you know.

Juniper: *(Sighing)* So go on then. Didn't work out, huh?

Key: I crushed half a kilo of Rice Krispies down inside a pillow case and forced the lot through a sieve.

Juniper: Maybe if you don't have flour, it's a sign to not make bread, focus your mind on working your ideas up into some kind of –

Key: I've quit everything, Em.

Juniper: Great!

Key: I'm not smoking, Em. I'm drinking milk. I'm serious about this.

Juniper: Okay.

Key: I'm like a machine, Em. I'm dangerous.

Juniper: Okay.

Key: Anything white, it's going down my throat.

Juniper: You should get a cow!

Key: I'm not joking, Em.

Juniper: Yeah, don't get a cow.

Key: Milk, milk and more milk.

Juniper: I'm impressed.

Key: The occasional beer.

Trump's getting worked up but remains defiant. He is in his mid-seventies. His jowls clip his collar. His tie is long. His thick neck hangs in

clumps over his lapels.

Juniper: So you're not missing the outside world?

Key: I'll go back out when we're done, I'd be an idiot to say I won't.

But I'm happy here for now.

Juniper: Surviving.

Key: Responding, Em.

Juniper: Well, when will you have some bits and pieces you can send me, so I can put them on the page?

Key: You'll be the first to know.

Juniper: So, no response quite yet.

Key: It's scribbles at the moment, babe.

Juniper: Just scribbles at the mo.

Key: It's only a matter of time before that becomes a Word document.

Juniper: I'll clear the decks.

Key: Clear whatever you like, Em. Clear whatever you like.

Regina Spektor finishes her warbling and slams her piano shut and Lauren begins to speak reassuringly to her flock. Key looks up at his ceiling, his iPhone on his chest. After a bit, Emily Juniper stops saying "hello" and her receiver clunks into its cradle.

Bung.



“**B**ung it, Luce.”

“Just seems a bit of a shame, is all.”

They were stood over their groceries.

The sprouts had seen better days and the ham was certainly glowing and emitting a low humming sound.

“We bought too much –”

“Stop saying that, Nige.”

A weird animal was wiggling in the sack of sausages.

“Our eyes were bigger than our stomachs,” Luce finally conceded.

Bananas.†



The Queen made her excuses, left the barbecue, and cabbed it home.

A mad butler sponged ketchup off her hoody and she popped her bum down on her velvet perch.

In front of her: cameras.

Beyond those: subjects.

Action!

“Howdy doody, folks!” she began.

The same crazy-ass butler flashed into shot and grabbed her rounders bat out of her hand.

Her Majesty squinted at the Autocue.

“Lockdown Liz here! Is it just me or has the world gone literally mad?!”

†**Juniper:** Why bring The Queen into it?

Key: This involves everyone, Em.

Juniper: I guess.

Key: You guess right.

Juniper: she always dresses so smart.

Key: Half the people in this bloody book dress smart. still bang 'em in, eh.

Juniper: Poor old Queenie.

More Boxes.

📞 Amazon guy. | 10:00AM, April. | The Flesh.

Key is a figure in a window. He's staring down at the deserted street. Occasionally a jogger clatters through shot, or an essential car moves bravely south. Key's hands are on his hips. Henry Mancini plays on the record player and Key's pelvis moves so imperceptibly to the beat that you could be forgiven for thinking it isn't moving at all. The Intercom buzzer thing goes. Key's finger is immediately on the key symbol, buzzing the visitor in. He pushes his door open.

Amazon Guy: Hello, sir.

Key: Ah.

The Amazon guy is wearing little gloves and a denim onesie. He leans against the door at the bottom of the stairs. His packages are halfway up the stairs already. Three of them.

Amazon Guy: What are they then?

Key: How's life outside?

Amazon Guy: It's okay. People are working it out. I'm delivering them things, they're getting themselves sorted. What's in the boxes?

Key: When will it end?

Amazon Guy: Oh right, soon I reckon.

Key: I'm meant to be going to Greece.

Amazon Guy: Yes, the famous Greece trip.

The Amazon guy pulls a face, realises he's doing it, wipes it off.

Key: Am I going to Greece?

The Amazon guy is impassive. Behind him: the outside. The air looks thick.

Amazon Guy: Come on, open your boxes, eh?

Key: I don't want to get into the habit of opening them in front of you.

Amazon Guy: Everyone else does.

The music pours out of Key's flat. The Amazon guy smiles and his knees start knocking. Key pulls his Stanley knife from his pocket and slices the boxes. Cardboard flies up and the goods emerge.

Amazon Guy: A chin-up bar.

Key: For my arms.

Amazon Guy: A pint glass.

Key: I drink beer at the weekends. And also I'll have squash in it.

Amazon Guy: Squared paper, Post-its, five orange pens, a SodaStream

—

Key: You must think I'm mad, getting all this stuff.

Amazon Guy: No —

Key: If The Maestro never sealed up the shops, I wouldn't be emptying your hangars.

Amazon Guy: This ain't much, believe me.

Key: Other people getting more?

Amazon Guy: It's a lockdown, you know. We don't know how long it'll last.

Key: Three weeks. Broken the back of it. What are people getting?

Amazon Guy: I dunno, kettlebells. Exercise bikes.

Key: I've got my chin-up bar for that stuff.

Amazon Guy: Next door got a rowing machine.

Key: A boat?

Amazon Guy: No, screws into your floor. They got a slow cooker, too. Everyone's batch-cooking.

Key: Tell me what that is.

Amazon Guy: Batch-cooking?

Key: What is it?

Amazon Guy: Cooking tons of soup, bunging it in the freezer.

Key shuts his eyes and nods. He has peeled the cardboard skin off his final consignment. It looks like a thick iPad. White, heavy in his hand. The Amazon guy looks quizzical.

Key: It's a Portal.

Amazon Guy: Never heard of it.

Key: To talk to Mum and Dad.

Amazon Guy: Oh aye.

Key: I speak into the screen, it comes out their end. Simple.

Amazon Guy: Oh.

Key: You not got one?

Amazon Guy: I'm using Zoom.

Key: I keep hearing that word.

Amazon Guy: Zoom!

Key: Yeah.

Amazon Guy: Works a treat.

Key: Dammit. Well, I've got a Portal now. I'm not getting a Zoom 'n' all.

Amazon Guy: It's not a physical thing.

Key: Can't get everything though, can I?

Amazon Guy: I mean, you download it.

Key: Oh.

Amazon Guy: Onto your computer.

Key: Oh, I see. Get it downloaded.

Amazon Guy: You don't "buy a Zoom".

Key: I haven't.

Amazon Guy: It's something you download.

Key: And then you have it, don't you. And you're up and running.

Amazon Guy: Yuh.

Key: Don't really need the Portal then, do I? If I get Zoom.

Amazon Guy: Zoom's boss.

Key: Daniel said to get a Portal.

Amazon Guy: Yeah, I don't know why you've got that.

Amazon guy nods. Mancini continues to bounce down the stairs, pouring into all four available ears.

Key: Daniel said.

Amazon Guy: Okay.

Key sits on his step, staring at his stuff.

Key: I don't know what I'm doing here, if I'm honest.

Amazon Guy: People are finding their feet. It's a marathon, not a sprint.

Key: You're keeping the country together.

Amazon Guy: Ha ha. Maybe.

He blushes so hard his cheeks almost open up.

Amazon Guy: I'm loving it, me. People are being nice.

Key: Thank you.

Amazon Guy: But, I mean, everyone.

Key: But, I mean, I am. I'm being nice.

Amazon Guy: Someone gave me a –

Key: Yeah, I get it. It's the Blitz spirit, everyone pitching in. Gave you what?

Amazon Guy: Nah, just people –

Key: What sort of stuff you getting?

Amazon Guy: Bottle of wine.

Key nods. Scoops his new stuff up, shoves his chin-up bar down his trousers.

Amazon Guy: Off to get lashed?

Key: I'll have a pint later. It's Friday.

Amazon Guy: People are saying the days blend into one.

Key: Hence why I have a pint on a Friday.

Amazon Guy: Oh I see, nothing in the week, then make the weekends feel like weekends, is it? I've heard of people doing that.

Key: I didn't know it was the vibe to give you guys stuff.

Amazon Guy: Oh God, don't worry about that, I'm getting loads.

Key: Alright, stop saying that.

The Amazon guy is outside now and the door swings closed. Key goes back inside, stands there for a bit. Then he limps towards the bathroom. His chin-up bar is stiff in his jeans.

Kistern's Plans.



Kistern got a potter's wheel delivered.

He bowed deeply to the courier and started the thorny issue of lugging it up the old stairs.

He now had a loom, a baby grand piano, a pizza oven, a chin-up bar, a darkroom, watercolours, a beehive, ice hockey shoes, a Spanish teacher, a tree house kit and this 120kg potter's wheel.

He jammed it between the piano and his beer-making drum.

Now, at least, he had some options.

He fired up Homes Under the Hammer and began to consider them.

Gobbler's Lot.†



Rob Gobbler was getting fucking lonely now.

He coaxed some birds into his flat using hazelnuts.

But they destroyed his documents, and the ones that could speak started making all sorts of snide comments about his breadmaker and about how he should have put a ring on Lily's finger when he'd had the chance.



†**Juniper:** It's this type of one that makes me worry.

Key: Ever met a Gobbler?

Juniper: Don't think so. I mean – how do you mean?

Key: They walk amongst us.

Juniper: What are you going on about?

Key: They walk amongst us, Em.

The niece.

📞 Maggie. | 3:00PM, April. | Zoom.

Key is deep in conversation with his niece. As deep as it gets, anyway. She's wearing her school uniform even though her school has been closed down. She's a ray of light. Key's got Goodfellas on.

Maggie: I can't believe this is your first Zoom! Ha ha.

Key: Yeah, it's mad.

Maggie: Have you just been using your phone, lol?

Key: Yeah, but not lol. I mean, it's an iPhone.

Maggie: You're from the eighteenth century.

Key: Okay, I mean making phone calls isn't old-fashioned, Maggie.

Maggie: Have you been avoiding Zoom because of your goatee then?

Key clamps his palm over his beard and snarls and then notices he's snarling and smiles. Joe Pesci's muted on the 42" and he's snarling n' all.

Maggie: I really think you should get a puppy.

Key: Oh you do, huh?

Maggie: You're lonely.

Key: Who says I'm lonely?

Maggie: Or a cat at least.

Key: I don't need a cat, Maggie, cheers all the same. Who says I'm lonely?

Maggie: What will you do all day?

Key: You seem to be forgetting I'm an adult, we're made of sterner stuff.

Maggie: Ha.

Key: Yeah, laugh it up, I'm on fire.

Maggie: If you had a dog, you could use it to find a girlfriend.

Key: What the hell are you talking about?

Maggie: It's worth a go, I think.

Key: They use dogs to find corpses and drugs, Mag –

Maggie: It's a conversation-starter.

Key: You can't find a girlfriend with dogs.

Maggie: You can take the dog to the park.

Key: Yup, go on –

Maggie: A nice girl strokes the dog and becomes your girlfriend.

Key: So naïve.

Maggie: I'm eleven.

Key: Right. Only a thicko eleven-year-old wouldn't have spotted the flaws in your plan.

Maggie: Go on then.

Key: Well, for one, stroking dogs doesn't lead to kissing the walker. Believe me. That's from a bygone era.

Maggie: What's a bygone era?

Key: You see, thick as marmalade.

Pesci's acting the goon on the screen. Winding every other bugger up, fingers constantly twitching at his pistol. He's more menacing than ever when you can't hear him squeak.

Maggie: Oh, from the past, you mean?

Key: Yes!

Maggie: Oh right. Bye. Gone.

Key: And second of all The Maestro has banned us from the park.

Maggie: Not if you've got a dog. You're allowed to walk your dog.

Long silence. Key leafing through the guidelines, licking his finger, dancing through page after page of rules and regs.

Maggie: Uncle Tim?

Key: Huh?

Maggie: What happened there? Dreamed you were pulling using your dog?

Key: I'm not bending the rules by buying a hound.

Maggie: You're so sad.

Key: Says the girl wearing a school uniform when the schools are closed.

Maggie: Ha ha.

Key: Gotcha.

Maggie: Why have you got a stupid beard when your filming's been cancelled then?

Key sips his grapefruit juice. A strand of his long, rancid hair dips deep into the nectar as he drinks.

Maggie: What are you doing tonight?

Key: What do you think I'm doing?

Maggie: Pubs are closed, Dad said.

Key: You think I can't operate without the pub?

Maggie: You go to the pub with your friend, don't you? What will you do now?

Key closes his eyes. For a split second he is drinking with The Colonel, beer mats fill the air, a man plays the piano, The bar supervisor pulls a pint of Five Points, her bicep glistening as she squeezes the handle. Key's got his paw in a packet of smoky bacon crisps. Click. His eyes flick open, they're wet with beer.

Maggie: I'm waiting.

Key: Huh?

Maggie: What will you do tonight?

Key: Well, what do you think I'll do, Magworth?

Maggie: Watch Tiger King and drink beer?

Key nods involuntarily. Goodfellas cracking on. Garlic being chopped with razor blades. Wiseguys hanging on hooks in meat trucks. Maggie laughing.

Key: You're just jealous I can watch the box whenever the hell I like.

Maggie: We have screen time.

Key: What a joke. I have screen time coming out of my ears, love.

Maggie: Ha ha.

Key: Yeah, laugh it up, I'm hitting eight hours a day. Minimum. Mi-ni-mum.

Maggie: That's not a good thing! You'll get square eyes.

Key: Watched eight hours plus my whole adult life, Maggot. Still looking pretty oval to me.

Key circles his eyes with his fingers. They stick as they hit the corners.

Maggie: You should do a quiz!

Key: Believe me, that ain't happening.

Maggie: You've got to do something.

Key: You think I'm not doing something?

Maggie: They say it could go on for another ten weeks.

Key: Huh? Who says that? Who's they?

Maggie: I have to go and have my tea.

Key: Yeah, which you have no choice over! Which is put in front of you like you're in a prison.

Maggie: Well, what are you having?

Key: Whatever I like, love. Whatever the hell I like.

Key hangs up with a flourish. Pesci fills the saucy waiter with bullets; Key shakes his head and puts the little twerp on standby. A black screen. Key walks to the kitchen. He opens the fridge door. He imagined something better. Craft beers have pushed the food to the sides. Ham and slices of cucumber are squeezed into the inner wall of the fridge. Key peels off some cucumber and locates a water biscuit in the cutlery drawer. He pulls out a 330ml can of dark beer with cartoons all over the can. He pours it into his pint glass and wanders somewhere else in his flat. He doesn't have a specific destination, just sees where he ends up.

Convalescing.



Bohnson's sallow eyes sat at the bottom of their sockets.

He was cross-legged, his boy shrivelled, watching Four Weddings.

Behind him, indistinguishable from the darkness, crouched Moggeth.

He was eating a Cadbury's Flake Easter Egg that was left over.

It was almost finished and he was fingering the mug.

Occasionally, when Hugh Grant came on screen, Bohnson murmured something.

Moggeth was eating the mug now.

Grinding it to dust with his black teeth, breathing it down like sherbet.

A ritual.

☎ Emily Juniper. | 8:00PM, April. | Landline vs iPhone.

A 660ml bottle of Asahi is slowly coming up to room temperature on top of Key's pheasant incubator. The Shawshank Redemption plays on the telly. It's on mute and Chas & Dave spin on the record player. Key is splatted onto his sofa, twiddling his hair with his orange pen. His locks are getting longer, more gruesome. He holds a clump of the stuff as he scrolls through his recent calls. Juniper, Emily. He gives her another whirl.

Juniper: Tim, you need to call back in five minutes.

Key: Emily Juniper!

Juniper: I'm clapping out of my window.

Key: Huh?

Clapping is pouring out of the speaker bit on Key's iPhone.

Juniper: I'll call you back.

Key: What's happening?

Juniper: We're clapping?

Key: The fuck?

Juniper: Everyone's clapping.

Key: Can you not clap later?

Juniper: Not really – are they not clapping there?

Key: Who? What? Clapping why?

Juniper: They'll be clapping – open your window.

Key: No thanks, I'm keeping the plague out, cheers.

Juniper: They're clapping for the nurses.

Key: As in –

Juniper: The nurses, the NHS.

Key pours some Asahi down his throat, wanders over to his window.

Key: So, what, is it? Floats? Like a parade thingy, is it?

Juniper: What?

Key: I'm looking outside — I don't see floats, Em.

Juniper: Open your window, Tim! Clap out your window.

Key flings his window open. Clapping! Folk rapping wooden spoons on pans. Solidarity for the nurses.

Key: Wow.

The clapping lasts forever. There's a lady in a mask stamping her foot outside the flats. Children lean out of windows, cars beep their horns, tractors pirouette, trees bow. Key's jaw grazes against the windowsill. The clapping stops.

Juniper: Okay, they've stopped. God, that was emotional.

Windows closing. Tears landing on wooden floorboards. Key swigs his Japanese lager, exhales the bubbles. Tim Robbins is having some problems in the shower. Chas & Dave banging out "Snooker Loopy".

Key: So, I'm thinking we might need a glossary. As in there's so many new words and terms. Have you heard of "batch-cooking"?

Juniper: You should clap the nurses, Tim, really.

Key: No bigger fan of nurses than me.

Juniper: Then why weren't you clapping? Tim? I mean, it's everywhere.

Key: I've stopped watching the news.

Juniper: Well, people clap the nurses every Thursday night now.

Key: Ah, gotcha. Quite right, too.

Juniper: Yes.

Key: It all helps.

Juniper: Get paid off all and look at the job they do.

Key: Mad how quick the world's changing. Clapping out your window now.

Juniper: I hope you're social-distancing.

Key: Exactly, you hear all these phrases.

Juniper: Keep your distance.

Key: That's what this old dear was shouting.

Juniper: You got too close, huh?

Key: She was of that opinion. Taking it very seriously. Wafting an ice hockey stick.

Juniper: Did she have a mask on?

Key: See what I mean? Who's asking that kind of question six months ago?

Juniper: You gotta clap, Tim. Honestly you have.

Key: Right, I'm on it.

Juniper: Well, they've stopped now, Tim.

Key: I love the nurses.

Juniper: Everyone does. I'm all emotional now.

Key pulls the window back down, squats with his beer. Starts scribbling some loud, scratchy thoughts with his orange pen.

Juniper: Writing hard, huh?

Key: You know. It's interesting times, innit.

Juniper: I never know what's happening your end.

Key: I live. I write.

Juniper: Alone? Can't be easy. No flatmate.

Key: My pen's my flatmate.

Juniper: Yuh.

Key: I honestly believe that.

Juniper: You gotta send that shit over, I need to design. I don't want you being a Last-minute Lawrence.

Key: I'm not gonna be a Last-minute Lawrence.

Juniper: I'm the one who has to make it look legit, that's all.

Key: I'm not gonna be a Last-minute Lawrence, I said. I've got notepads full of stuff, believe me.

Juniper: Then send it over! I can't exactly design things if they're sat in your shitty notepads can I?

Silence. Key sipping. Thinking. Taking it all in.

Key: I'm going to clap for a bit I think, Em.

Juniper: On your own?

Key: Yes, I'll call you back. How long am I doing here?

Juniper: People clap for about a minute. But it works best if you do it at the same time as everyone else.

Key: Okay I'm doing it –

Window flung back open. It's over. The clapping's done, windows are closed; the road is covered in hands. Key starts to clap. It's a bit weird. A few windows reopen across the street. There's some feedback.

Juniper: Are they booing you?

Key: Yes, there's one chap shouting at me and calling me a late wanker.

Juniper: Okay.

Key: I can clap through that, no worries.

Juniper: Wait till next week.

Key: No, I'm doing it now. Show my appreciation.

Key leans right out, whacking his palms together like billy-o, angling himself in the vague direction of his GP's surgery.

Juniper: You send me some things, eh.

Key: One thing at a time, Em, let's get these nurses clapped.

Juniper: I can't design thin air, Tim. I can do a lot of things, but making thin air look like literature, that'll be a stretch.

Clapping. The man's voice becoming louder across the street. More aggressive. Key keeps clapping, competing with the man. The man brings up the goatee. He calls Key's hair "lank" or maybe "rank". Key can't hear it all over his own clapping, but he also suspects he's called a "grub" at one point. Meanwhile Robbins is swimming through shit and Chas & Dave are pumping out "Rabbit Rabbit". The Asahi is at 22°C and thickening nicely.

Box.†



Aiden posted himself to Kelly-Marie in a glass box.

She kept him in her garden.

They kissed each other through the glass, his filthy gnashers clinking against the sheer surface, his fat lips distributing a thin, bubbling gel on his transparent ceiling.

She lounged happily on the box in the afternoons, grazing the lid with her satin knuckles.

As summer came, so the box got too hot.

Aiden was hungry and his skin became dry and blistered.

The lockdown was lifted and Kelly-Marie came to his box less and less.

Sometimes he'd watch her hanging washing on the line.

Lots of football tops and men's blouses.

The more he slapped his eternal window, the more she would ignore him and giggle, as she reclined on her hammock, checking her cell phone for texts.

†**Juniper:** Sometimes, when I read the poems...

Key: Go on.

Juniper: I don't know exactly how fine you are?

Key: I'm okay.

Juniper: You're in a box in this one.

Key: Who's in a box?

Juniper: Well, Aiden.

Key: Yeah, exactly. Aiden.

Juniper: So it's biographical.

Key: Well, if I'm calling myself Aiden, then it would seem so.

Juniper: Okay.

Key: Yup.

Quiz Whitty.

☎ Rick, Buddy, Lord, Megan, Younguzi, Misha, Jelson & Lina. | 9:15PM, April. | Zoom.

Key is sitting on the sofa. He's on Zoom. Five screens. Top left: Rick and Buddy; top middle: Lord and Megan; top right: Younguzi and Misha; bottom left: Jelson and Lina; bottom right: Key. Slap bang in the middle of his screen. Key is sipping hard on his heavy pint glass, sucking up the craft IPA like a foul lizard.

Rick: Okay final question from my round –

Lord: Thank gawd –

Megan: Lord –

Lord: Well, the guy's questions are faeces.

Rick: 'Cos you can't answer them.

Lord: No one can answer them.

Younguzi : I got the last one I reckon.

Rick: See.

Lord: He's a fucking teacher, of course he's answering them.

Rick: Final question –

Buddy: Get on with it, Rick.

Rick: How am I not getting on with it???

The screens light up as they talk, within the screens they paw each other playfully, keep their chalices topped up, some eat noodles. Key taps his orange pen against his own screen, tap-tap-tap against the empty space next to him. He spots Jelson, blinking away, eating a cookie.

Key: How's New York?

Rick: Huh?

Key: Not you, I'm asking Jelson –

Rick: Why are you asking during my question?

Jelson: Am I answering?

Carolina: New York's fine.

Rick: Great, it's fine. Thank you, Lina. New York is fine. Final question.

Buddy: Come on, get on with it.

Rick: Well, why's Key asking about New York?

Buddy: He's interested –

Rick: He can be interested during his round.

Key mimes that he'll call Jelson tomorrow. About five people mime back at him. Everyone's calling everyone tomorrow. Phones. Keeping the whole world afloat.

Rick: Final question.

Lord: Yeah, let's have it.

Rick: If you were queuing from Nelson's Column to Stonehenge –

Lord: Big if.

Megan: Let him finish, Lord.

Rick: And if everyone had to be socially distant –

Megan: Oh, you fiend.

Lord: Long queue.

Megan: Lord.

Lord: Well, it is –

Buddy: Ignore him, finish the question, babe.

Buddy leans back, grabs the wine from behind her. It's in a silver bucket, which is glistening with condensation. Key can feel the chill on his cheeks. He squeezes his can and another 5ml of IPA dribbles into his glass.

Buddy: Tanning the old IPAs there.

Key: I try to drink more at weekends.

Lord: Good call.

Rick: Let me finish the question!

Lord: Sure, go on ahead.

Rick: How many people are in the queue?

Key: Can we use calculators?

Megan: You're a fiend, Rick.

Lord: He's not, he's a gel.

Rick: How am I a gel?

Lord: Well, my questions were all a/ multiple choice, b/ totes gettable

–

Rick: And c/ gash as all hell.

Buddy: Rick.

Megan: They were good questions, Lord.

Younguzi: They were safe. Safe questions.

Lord: Huh?

Younguzi: As in ideal.

Rick: Who brings a capitals round to a quiz?

Lord: Oh, I'm so sorry for bringing five gettable questions.

Megan: We're finding our feet, first quiz.

Younguzi: This'll be us for the summer.

Silence, no screens lit up. As it sinks in all the screens begin to flicker, plans up the spout, barbecues torn to shreds, Greece in doubt.

Buddy: Don't say that, Younguzi.

Rick: We're going to Greeze, don't worry about that.

Younguzi: Not based on how The Maestro's talking.

Lord: The Maestro doesn't know shit.

Younguzi: He's closed my school down, feels like Greezelie's on the rocks.

Key: My filming's been canned.

Misha: Bugger.

Lord: What's the goatee for then?

Key: Just... you know...

Everyone from all of the screens is looking at the goatee. It goes red.

Key: We'll get to Greezelie, don't worry about that.

Buddy: Yeah, exactly, we will with that attitude.

Misha: Chowing down on moussaka like it's going out of fashion, we'll be there.

Rick: Cheeky Greeky salad.

Lord: Yes please, Louise.

Younguzi: Mythoses all round and souvlakis for breakfast.

Buddy: Whole thing's bonkers.

Key: Greezelie's happening. It's happening. It just is.

Rick: Okay, who's got some answers for me?

They give their answers, they row, they holler, they spin the wheel again, everyone reading out their questions, the screens flashing like Christmas

trees. People leave screens and return, glasses are charged, clouds of G&T are spat onto screens with the zeal of it all. As the action accelerates, Key's tin cans are ripped open – rat-a-tat-tat – like machine gun fire. It slows. The screens are full of pink, faces, replete, quizzed-up and battered.

Younguzi: This should be weekly.

Lord: This should be daily.

Buddy: God, I love a good quiz.

Misha: Month of these and then Greece.

Another pause. The screens are replaced with Greek flags for a split second. Then back to normal. Tears in their eyes.

Jelson & Lina: Lovely to see everyone.

Buddy: Bye Jelson, bye Lina!

All: Byeeeeeeee!!!!

Rick: We might come by yours tomorrow.

Rick's pointing straight down the barrel. Key smiles. Nice.

Buddy: Oh yeah! Tomorrow afternoon, Tim. A bit of “Rapunzel, Rapunzel, come let down your hair!”

Key: Huh?

Key touches his hair, tries to keep smiling.

Lord: Bye everyone.

Younguzi: Leave meeting!

Key: Tatty bye, all.

Megan: Leave meeting!

Misha: See you all soon!

Rick: Virtually.

Buddy: Rick!

Rick: Huh?

Buddy: Why add virtually?

Younguzi: Tatty bye!

Key: Stay safe!

The screens start to pop. One by one, like bubbles. Pop! And they disappear. Pop, pop, pop, pop, tchh. Key leans back and pours his IPA into his glass. He collects up some remotes and switches everything on. Columbo, Frank Sinatra, a podcast about a grizzly crime, Brahms, Answerphone messages. The room is bulging with it.

Thursdays.



The children reached out of their windows and clapped hope into the night.

It rained down on the hospitals and splatted down on the ambulances.

They fished their hands back in and bunged them under the taps: scrubbed 'em silly.

Then storytime, quick whiskey and bed.

Hands fucked now.

Hearts bulging.

Smiles on.

Week 4.



WEEK

IV.

In which Pepys gets thumbled, bottles get sponged, and contact with the US correspondent is established.

How Long?



“G

etting bored now!!!!!”

It was 2026 and Max Peach yelled against his window.
Soldiers were playing French cricket on the street again.
Boy did Max wish he was a soldier.

Book Arrangements.

☎ Emily Juniper. | 11:00AM, April. | Landline vs iPhone.

Key is in his kitchen. He's squatting; pouring soup directly into his freezer compartment. The thick gunk bubbles as it fills the drawer. The iPhone starts to shudder on top of an abandoned packet of Penguins above him. Key stands, picks up. Emily Juniper's already talking.

Juniper: I've been thinking some more about the style of it.

Key walks to his stack of mugs. They need rinsing out. He raps his orange pen on the side of his Simpsons one.

Key: Keep talking.

Juniper: You said in your email about there being dialogue? Conversations?

Key: It's all up for grabs, Em. The lot of it.

Juniper: Yeah, I was thinking we could maybe have the bits of dialogue placed around the poems.

Key: You're not an idiot, Em.

Juniper: What will the dialogues be, do we know?

Key: If anyone ever comes up to you and makes a case for you being an idiot –

Juniper: I know I'm not an idiot, Tim.

Key: Well, you must fight your corner.

Juniper: I'm quite excited about the book, I'll be honest.

Key: And I'm not?

Juniper: Can't wait to move things around on the page –

Key: I hear ya. Getting a boytwitch just thinking about this book to be fair, Em.

Juniper: Do you have anything to send me?

Key: It's incoming.

Juniper: Yeah?

Key: Has to be. I have to believe that.

Juniper: Get anything down today?

Key: Huh?

Key approaches the SodaStream, strokes its shoulders and smashes a flask up it. Bubbles and a honk. Infinitesimal animated prisms are released into the air, kissing themselves to death and falling to the counter. Key pours the magic into his Simpsons mug.

Juniper: Tim?

Key: I've placed my books in order of how many pages they've got in them.

Key nods at what he has said.

Juniper: You should be writing.

Key: Well, I did that in the end.

Juniper: How does it look?

Key: Unbalanced, I feel like my lounge is going to tip over.

Juniper: Richard E Grant has his arranged by spine colour.

Key: Classy.

Juniper: So you've not made a start then?

Key: You listen to Five Live enough, you start to believe it's fine to do fuck all.

Juniper: It is Tim.

Key: Then stop breaking my balls, man.

Juniper: You can pause. People are doing that. Reset.

Key: I like to think I'm writing a book.

Juniper: That kind of phrase worries me. *Are you writing a book?*

Key: I like to think so.

Juniper: Well, what are the dialogues? I guess that's my number-one question.

Key: Okay.

Juniper: And, you know, just, generally... what's the vibe? Those are my questions.

Key: Great questions.

Emily Juniper makes a puffing noise. It's unmistakable. It means "are we doing this fucking book or not?". Key necks his sparkling water and burps into the crook of his elbow.

Key: It's looking like it'll be the poems, you know. Kind of... plonked. And then it'll be these conversations, unreliable narrator, all the rest of it.

Juniper: How do you mean "unreliable narrator"?

Key: You don't know what the hell's going on with him, type of thing.

Juniper: That's annoying.

Key: Huh? Why?

Juniper: If he's unreliable.

Key: Well, anyway.

Juniper: Who is he?

Key: Well, it's me.

Juniper: Well, why are you being unreliable?

Key: Just, that's the vibe.

Juniper: Well, you should try and be reliable, surely.

Key: Okay.

Bubbles go up Key's nose and he sneezes three times.

Juniper: You've got to do your best, Tim.

Key: Yup, sure.

Juniper: Because people are relying on you.

Key: No, yeah, I know.

Juniper: You've got a big chance to get your Pepys on here.

Key: Yeah, well, Pepys can suck my boy, to be fair to the guy.

Juniper: He can?

Key thinks he sees something small, tailed, fast. He blinks. No. Can't be. He reverses out of the kitchen. Drifts into the lounge. Plucks his Pepys from the shelf, fingers its pages.

Key: The guy's dry, Em. Like a dune.

Juniper: We'd be lost without Pepys, filling us in on the last plague.

Key: He's a yawnfest, Em. He makes the Fire of London sound as boring as sin, to be fair to him.

Juniper: It's an historical record though. What if *he'd* been unreliable?

Key: We don't know that he wasn't.

Juniper: I think people think he was down the line, don't they?

Key: It could all be complete horseshit, Em.

Juniper: Well, I've read a condensed thing of him, and I thought it was interesting.

Key: Yeah, I bet.

Juniper: What does that mean?

Key: Right send us a link to Richard E, will you?

Juniper: You're gonna colour code your bookshelves?

Key: No, Em. I'm going to have a look at the link, see what it looks like.

Juniper: And then decide.

Key: The way they are now makes me want to vom, I'll be honest.

Key stands in front of the books. His legs sway. His iPhone is by his side by the time he hangs up the call.

Ulterior.



Chod delivered some doughnuts to Greg and Lou's house.

Then he cycled some rancido 'nana bread round to Red John's gaff.

He bopped the bell and sped off.

Then he dropped sweets to The Gels and enough craft beer to scuttle a liner to Jeremy Bend and the Rectum Kid.

More 'nana bread to Jim Piss, then home.

He felt *good*!

But also he knew he'd be getting invited round to dinner at 90% of these places when this faeces was all over.

So really, to be fair to Chod, he was doing all this less out of a saintly heart and more 'cos he was a conniving little cunt with his eye on post-lockdown freebies.

Wiping the Magnum.†



You're a goody two-metres, that's what you are!"

Why was she goading me like this?

"Yeah, I keep my distance and I'm proud of it, Candice."

She was licking the street furniture, wiping her Magnum along the asphalt between each lick.

"You would never have even wanted to do that before all this," I remarked.

†**Juniper:** How many poems will you choose, in the end?

Key: Probably put half of them in...

Juniper: Yup exactly, they can't all go in.

Key: This one's going in.

Juniper: Oh yeah?

Key: Yeah.

Juniper: What's asphalt?

Key: This one absolutely walks in.

Come Let Down Your Hair.

☎ Rick & Buddy. | 11:00AM, April. | On the outside, looking in.

Key is making safe 48 bottles of IPA. He hears a yell from the window.

Rick & Buddy: Rapunzel, Rapunzel, come let down your hair!

There are two blobs, holding bicycles, yelling up, waving. Key throws open the window. It's Rick and Buddy. Built of flesh.

Key: Hey!

Rick & Buddy: Hey, Rapunzel.

Key makes a big play of miming having long, luxuriant hair. He mimes unfurling it and Rick in particular mimes climbing up the hair. He gets around about ten, fifteen feet up then stops miming because Buddy's slapping his ass. He drops back down to the slabs and waves up.

Buddy: How are things?

Key: Missing you guys.

Rick: You're only human.

Key: Right, yeah, classy.

Rick: Your hair is genuinely long, to be fair to you!

Key: He's locked the hairdressers.

Buddy: He's locked the lot.

Rick: He's a gel.

Key: You got that right. Guy's a jizzhound.

Buddy: Nice jumper!

Key: £45.

Buddy: Cosy.

Rick: Yeah, that's a nice jumper that.

Key strokes his chest and smiles. The blue wool is soft, harvested from a sheep who took a pride in itself.

Buddy: We're on a cycle ride.

Key: Simple as that.

Rick: Our allotted daily hour of exercise, courtesy of The Maestro.

Key: Up the heath is it? Whizz down Pond Street.

Buddy: Hardly whizzing, with *his* knee.

Rick mimes crumpling to the floor with his fucked knee. He had an operation immediately pre-lockdown – actually I'll bang it in the dialogue.

Key: How's the knee?

Rick: On the mend. I was locking down *before* lockdown. Six weeks I've done now.

Key: Legend.

Buddy: What are you up to up there?

Key: Living.

Buddy: Specifically, I mean.

Key: Oh right, disinfecting bottles of IPA before I put them in the fridge.

Rick: Classy.

Key: Well, no use having all the upsides of getting lashed on craft beers if there's bugs crawling up the neck and sneaking into my mouth.

They stare up at him, shielding their eyes from the sun. Key is holding a jug of homemade disinfectant and a car sponge.

Rick: Getting lashed on your own, is it?

Key: I like to drink at weekends, keeps me sane.

Rick: Oh right, live like a monk in the week type of thing.

Key: Yeah. Have the odd one in the week, then open her up at the weekends.

Rick: Don't tell the taxman!

Key: You've got Magnums.

Buddy: Yeah.

Rick: They're yum!

Rick mimes eating his lolly like he's a child, he jumps up and down, hurts his knee and leans against his bicycle.

Buddy: Well, let us know if you need anything.

Key: How's about a cuddle?

Buddy: Aw, that's sad!

Key: Longest I've been without a cuddle since 1997.

Buddy: I'll cuddle you.

Rick: You will not bloody cuddle him.

Buddy: How long d'ya go in '97?

Key: Eight weeks.

Buddy: Big stretch.

Rick: Why no cud?

Key: Dunno. Just kind of noticed after about a month I hadn't cuddled anyone for a while and then couldn't turn it round. Got inside my own head.

Buddy: You were out there looking for cuddles?

Rick: 'Cos it wasn't lockdown then, was it?

Key: No this was 1997, so, yeah, I was out there.

Buddy: Just couldn't catch one.

Key: Waddling around with my arms outstretched. Nathan shakin'.

Rick: For two months! Wow!

Buddy: Reckon you'll beat that this time.

Key nods, the blood drains out of his face. He squeezes his car sponge over it to get himself going again. He blinks and is reset.

Buddy: Well, look. This 3.8-mile gentle cycle ride isn't going to do itself.

Key: I'm gonna bake up some banana bread, I reckon.

Buddy: Get your Misha on?

Key: Misha's not the only one who can bake yer know, Buddy.

Rick is miming peeling a banana, he leaps into a tree and swings easily in its boughs, his arms long and playful.

Buddy: We have it for breakfast, Rick loves the stuff.

Rick: Easier than normal bread, they say.

Key: I *can* make normal bread, you know.

Rick: Gotta get the yeast right.

Key: Yes we all know the word yeast, thank you.

Buddy: Give the 'nana bread a whirl, Kiddo.

Key: Should have it perfected by week, let's say, five? Six?

Buddy: Where are we now?

Key: Three or four, is it?

Rick: You lose track.

Key: Yeah. Yeah you do.

The ping of stands being folded up, the bicycles being manoeuvred like cows.

Key: Thanks for dropping by.

Rick: No worries.

Buddy: Must be hell on your own.

Rick: He's alright. You're alright, aren't you?

Key: I'm surviving.

Buddy: He's thriving.

Key: I'm surviving.

They're gone. Key pulls the window back down and retreats to the sink. He hoses down another Goose Island, places it on the draining board. The jets of sun from the window are making it glisten. Key wants it now, he winks at it. He mouths, "I want you now." He opens the next box and pulls out another. Douses the sponge.

Another Briefing.



I'm sorryish for all the problems.”

The Minister for the Department of Home Secretaries smirked.

“You couldn’t have another crack at saying ‘sorry’ could you, Ma’am? It’s coming out as ‘sorryish’, is all.”

The Minister for the Department of Home Secretaries smirked harder and her teeth squeaked.

“Oh, sorryish about that.”

The reporter wiggled his finger.

“Yeah, it’s still happening, Goose.”

Buzzy.†



The new government guidelines came out.

Buzz cuts was the big shift.

And also a toughening up on anti-social-distancing emojis and washing your bollocks properly.

Edmond frowned and finished his sherry.

Then he deleted his kissing, handshaking and rogering emojis, sheared his barnet into the sink and drew himself an absolute swine of a bath.



†**Juniper:** Stu had a buzz cut, week four.

Key: Oh he did, huh?

Juniper: I wanted to cut it for him.

Key: Christ.

Juniper: Wouldn't let me near him.

Key: Funny that.

Juniper: I had my fabric scissors.

Key: A lashed designer marauding towards him with her rusty old shears.

Juniper: He locked himself in the bathroom, came out looking like Paolo Di-bloody-Canio.

Key: A story as old as time.

Daniel's photos.

☎ Daniel | Midday, April. | The Portal.

Key's bread is sat on a cooling tray on top of a crate by the record player. It looks forbidding, igneous. Key's Portal starts flashing. It's unwrapped, plugged in and perched on the pheasant incubator. A circle is illuminated on the screen. Daniel's in the circle. Key presses him. Blump. Daniel, in his bloody kitchen.

Key: Stop sending photos.

Daniel: Hey, man.

Key: Stop sending me photos, Dan.

Daniel: Oh, right.

Key: I get it, okay. I don't need the photos, cheers.

Daniel: What's wrong with the photos? Did you get the one with the pit?

Key: Yeah. Yeah, I did get the one with the pit.

Daniel: How's lockdown?

Key: Yeah, never mind that.

Daniel: I'm just making croissants.

Key: Like I give a fuck.

Daniel: Did you get the photo of the croissant dough?

Key: Yeah, *all* the photos came through just *fine*, thanks.

Daniel: Are you alright?

Key: I'm asking you nicely, Dan. Stop sending me fucking piccies of your lockdown.

Key picks up one of his playing cards. Clubs, Five thereof. He flicks it hard across the room; imagines it'll plant in the wall with a twang. It buffets, drifts behind him and splats into the sofa.

Daniel: Can I ask why?

Key: I get it, okay.

Daniel: I live on my own, I just thought you'd like to see some of the stuff I'm getting up to in lockdown. I read an article –

Key: I don't really give too much of a shit about what articles you're reading, Dan.

Daniel: It said if you live alone, reach out to other people who live alone, a sense of community is important in these –

Key: I don't think they meant shove photos of your amazing lockdown down people's throats.

Key's cursor hovers over a cross. Termination.

Daniel: (*Leaning in to the screen, his nose bulbous*) If I'm spending eight hours digging a fire pit, then I've gotta be able to send photos of me standing with a spade and my top off at the end.

Key: Yeah, I'm real proud of you.

Daniel: You can send photos of you in lockdown –

Key: Of me with my moped helmet on, taking a widdle?

Key looks at the bread. It is very flat, it is emitting a low hum and some yeasts are walking across the top of it. Key blinks, starts peeling a Chocolate Orange.

Key: I'm getting through it, Daniel. I'm taking a lot of baths, you know. I'm cooking soup. I'm a survivor. I drank six Goose Island IPAs last night.

Daniel: You're putting a moped helmet on when you go to the toilet?

Key: I'm not claiming I'm winning this battle, Daniel.

Daniel: Why are you putting a moped helmet on when you're going to the toilet?

Key: Guess we're reading different articles, that's all.

Daniel: You gotta be on the ball in a lockdown.

Key: I am on the ball. I have a routine. I'll be clapping the nurses tonight, don't worry about that.

Daniel: I cycled back through the clapping last week!

Key: Huh?

Daniel: People clapping outta their windows, felt good.

Key: That's not cool, man. You're stealing claps there.

Daniel: Imagined they were clapping my pit.

Key: Why the hell would they be clapping your pit?

Key's bread begins to glow.

Daniel: Come on, send us some snaps.

Key: So you can build a montage on your damn corkboard? Your lockdown versus mine. No, thanks all the same.

Daniel: It might help, document the small achievements, send them to a friend. What have you done today?

Key: Who cares? Who cares what I've done?

Daniel: I care.

Key: Fixed my fence.

Daniel: There you go! Send me a photo then.

Key: No, you'll criticise it.

Daniel: Try me. What am I going to criticise?

Key: Usual bollocks, I imagine, saying I should have used screws or something.

Daniel: What did you use?

Key: Does it matter?

Daniel: Well, look the offer's there. I need to get back to these croissants.

Key: Who the hell cooks croissants?

Daniel: Bakes. People *bake* croissants.

Key: No, Daniel. They buy croissants. No one *bakes* croissants.

Daniel: I do. This lockdown's the making of me.

Key: Me too.

Key pulls on some underpants and reaches over to his Post-it notes. He waves them like a fistful of fifties.

Daniel: Post-its! That's the spirit!

Key grabs his orange pen, mimes writing on the Post-its.

Daniel: Oh, you're gonna write on them – nice!

Key: Yeah, laugh it up. How do you bake a croissant anyway? Where do you find a tin that shape for a start-off?

Daniel: I'll send you a photo.

Key: Yeah. Yeah, do so! You ain't cooking croissants. Send me a photo, you ain't sending me a photo 'cos you ain't cooking

croissants.

Daniel: Was that a mouse?

Key: No.

Daniel: I thought I saw a mouse dart across.

Key: It didn't.

Daniel: Was it a mouse?

Key: No.

Daniel: Okay.

Key's finished his Chocolate Orange. He flicks the foil somewhere near the bin.

Daniel: Well, look, speak soon, Tim. Don't be a stranger.

Key: Send me the photo of your croissant, Daniel. I'm waiting. I could do with a giggle. Send it across.

Daniel: If you send me one of your fence.

Key: And have you lay into the gaffa tape, no thanks.

Daniel: You used gaffa tape?

Key: No.

Daniel: To fix a fence?

Key clicks on the big red cross. Fuck that. He stares at the bread. Bores into it with his eyes. The bread is trembling. He blinks. Suddenly, a hunk of bread scurries as fast as its legs can carry it, out of the door and away. Key blinks again.

Replacements.†



Louise-Louise Mills missed her friends bad.

She started making dolls of them out of chocolate and firing them in the microwave.

She placed them on her coffee table and started talking to them, doing their voices, all that.

But they wouldn't maintain their integrity and started "melting" into one big "doll" and sliding down the sides of the coffee table and dripping onto her Uggs.

†**Juniper:** Missing your friends, lol?

Key: Not in the least.

Juniper: I like this one.

Key: Don't need to mould my friends out of chocolate, believe me.

Juniper: No, this Louise-Louise Mills does –

Key: Pick up the phone, I've got The Colonel on tap, I call you –

Juniper: You do –

Key: Call Jelson, you know, call whoever.

Juniper: Who's Jelson?

Key: Lives in New York.

Juniper: America.

Key: He's based out of Harlem.

Juniper: I seeee, get the US perspective.

Key: Huh?

10M.



It was insane.

The nerds lengthened the social distance to ten metres.

People had to shout now.

Of course, the rich people bought megaphones.

They stuffed their faces with swan omelettes and chatted effortlessly into their mouthpieces.

An Outside World.

📞 Emily Juniper. | 9:00AM, April. | Landline v iPhone.

Key is standing, that's about the best we can say for him. He plonks a frozen chicken Kiev on the counter and stares at it. It inches away from him. He continues to stand. Looking at the window but not through it. His iPhone buzzes and bulges in his hand and he's shoved it against his ear before it's made a squeak.

Key: Emily Juniper!

Juniper: Tim Key, The Poet.

Key smiles. He looks through to the lounge. His orange pen, itself lounging on some squared paper. Lid on, dull. A thin carpet of dust, or flour, has settled on the shaft. Key's smile creaks at the corners.

Juniper: It's been two days.

Key: I know.

Juniper: Making sure you're still with us.

Key: I didn't phone last night, Em.

Juniper: No.

Key: That was out of respect.

Juniper: Okay.

Key: Thursday.

Juniper: Oh, the clapping?

Key: I remember these things.

Juniper: Did you clap?

Key: Yes, I had a little clap, thanks.

Juniper: There's a chap down the way, whacks a walking stick against his fence.

Key is impressed. He thinks about that man.

Juniper: My brother said an ambulance came past at his.

Key: During the clapping?

Juniper: Place went wild.

Key: That's what I'm talking about!

Juniper: People throwing flowers at it, the works.

Key: I'd love to clap an ambulance.

Juniper: It was like a Tom Jones gig.

Key: I'm psyched for next Thursday, I gotta say. Counting down the days.

Juniper: And everything else? All okay. Going on a bit, innit?

Key: Don't worry about me, Em. I'm nailing it. Built for it.

Juniper: I have good days and bad days, me.

Key: Only good ones this end.

Juniper: You exercising?

Key: What's that meant to mean?

Juniper: No, just –

Key: I've got a chin-up bar.

Juniper: You're doing chin-ups?

Key: I've got a chin-up bar.

Key is standing under the chin-up bar now. He is sneering at it. It appears to be glowering back at him. He makes as if to spit at it.

Key: Why aren't you asking me about the book?

Juniper: I'm checking you're okay first.

Key: Why?

Juniper: Lauren Laverne said you should.

Key: I'm okay.

Juniper: On your own, you know.

Key: I have a bear.

Juniper: You don't see people.

Key: Rick and Buddy came by.

Juniper: Ah, stood under your window, type of thing?

Key: "Rapunzel, Rapunzel, come let down your hair!"

Juniper: Were they having a go at your hair?

Key: Dunno, don't think so. Ask me about the book, Em.

There's a long pause. Key touches his hair, closes his eyes. His hair seems to grow suddenly, grow into every recess of the flat, inhabit every nook, knot itself into the drawer handles. He opens his eyes.

Juniper: How long'll the book be, do we think?

Key: Long. I mean, yeah, long.

Juniper: Oh! Serious book, then.

Key: Well, you know. Mixture, really. It'll have the weight of an important tome, but the content won't have much heft, if you see what I mean.

Juniper: Plenty of pages, not much in it, type of thing. Okay.

Key grunts. Leans against his doorframe. Snaps his teeth together a few times.

Juniper: And have you got any outdoor space?

Key: Never you mind.

Juniper: Well, have you?

Key: I know why you're asking that.

Juniper: What?

Key: I've seen your boyfriend's Instagram, don't worry.

Juniper: I'm just asking you if you have any outdoor space.

Key: Yeah, so that I ask you and you say yes and send me a photo of you swimming in the ocean.

Juniper: I wasn't going to do that.

Key: I've got a little bit out back.

Juniper: Oh, sweet!

Key bungs her on speakerphone.

Key: I'm looking at his Instagram now.

Juniper: When do you get the sun?

Key: Yeah, I know, Em. The ocean gets the sun the whole time, I get it.

Juniper: When do you get it, I'm just interested, that's all. Is it the evening? That'd be nice.

Key: I'm not even sure you're allowed to go in the ocean. I'd check that, if I were you.

Juniper: I think the photos you're looking at are from before.

Key: I'd keep it on the down-low if you're going in the ocean. And why's he got sunglasses on, in the ocean?

Juniper: Yeah, that's from –

Key: I suppose because he's handsome he assumes they won't fly off and, even if they do, they won't sink.

Juniper: I think you're looking at Crete. Are there cliffs and Greek flags?

Key: Oh right, I didn't realise this was a geography exam.

Key takes her off speakerphone. Thinks about Greece for a bit. Going to Greece. Greece.

Juniper: Well, I'm glad you get to go outside anyway.

Key: Well, yeah. I do. I have my cereal out there.

Juniper: Oh, okay.

Key: And I also go out there in the evening in my Aran.

Juniper: Oh sweet, smoke some dope.

Key: Christ. Why do you constantly paint pictures that my life doesn't measure up to?

Juniper: Cocoa then.

Key: Is that the same as hot chocolate?

Juniper: Yes.

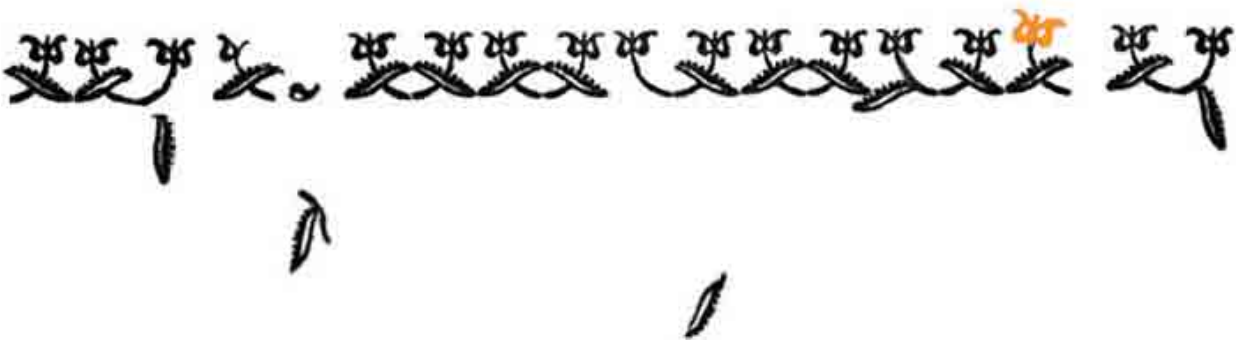
Key: Yes then.

The unmistakable sound of a hunk, off. Indistinct, but still you can hear a syrupy, handsome quality in his voice and you just know his body has the right amount of hair on it and his legs are curved like wood as opposed to rolled-out like pastry.

Juniper: Coming, love.

The phone call is over. Key is still looking at the chin-up bar. He taps it with his little finger. He walks to the kitchen. A freezer drawer sits in the sink. 15kg of soup defrosts as the day warms up.

Onwards.†



Moggeth was using his thumb and fore-finger to extract semen from the cat.

“I say, Moggpiece –”

Bohnson stopped in his tracks and observed the sport for a moment.

“Yes, Bohns?” Moggeth looked up.

His eyes were as black as fleas and as smooth as jade.

“Just wanted to chat about the old you-know-what.”

Bohnson had the Sunday Papers in his little wheelbarrow.

Bohnson had a badge he’d been given at the hospital for being brave.

Moggeth continued to tease the cat’s penis absent-mindedly.

“I’ll be through imminently, Bohngleby.”

Bohnson kissed his badge and reversed his barrow back out and tumbled over himself into the playroom.

†**Juniper:** Moggeth’s spicy.

Key: Moggeth’s... I don’t know. A concept.

Juniper: I don’t like him.

Key: Moggeth’s an enigma, I think. Moggeth’s unreadable.

Juniper: He’s wanking off a cat in this one.

New York, New York.

☎ Jelson. | 5:00PM EST, April. | Facetime.

Key stands in front of his bathroom mirror, holding a clump of his hair. He clutches his scissors in his other hand, their blades grey and bleak. He clicks “Jelson” on his iPhone and drops it into the sink. It lands face-up and he stares into it. Jelson picks up. FaceTime.

Jelson: Bong!

Key: Jelson!

Jelson: Bong!

Key: There he is! My American correspondent!

Jelson: Huh?

Key leans back, out of shot, starts to hack at his thatch.

Jelson: How are you, Bong?!

Key: Locked down, man!

Jelson: Oh yeah?

Key: Locked the hell down! The lot of us.

Jelson: Us, too, baby!

Key: Yeah?

Jelson: We’re locked down. Splat, no way out. Stuffed up the pipe.

Key: Locked down, stateside!

Jelson: Big time. They turned the key!

Key: This thing’s global, man, I’m telling you.

Jelson: We’re all locked in like pigs! Say, am I in the sink?

Key: Huh?

Jelson: I can’t see you, can just see taps.

Key looms over the iPhone, hacking hair off like it’s going out of fashion. Jelson’s eating Chinese in Harlem, baby on his lap.

Key: Right here, Jels!

Jelson: Ah, haircut.

Key: Getting rid of the mop!

Jelson: It's gotta go!

Key: So what's the story? I wanna know everything!

Jelson: Well, finish your chop and call me, it's nuts over here.

Key: This thing's outta hand.

Jelson: Focus on that, then call me back, Bong.

Key continues to hack huge clods out of his scalp. When the scissors don't slice through it properly, he wriggles and rips his way through.

Key: I'm writing a book, Jels.

Jelson: Get me outta the sink, man.

Key: You wanna know about it?

Jelson: All I know is I'm just looking at hair raining down on me like leaves in the fall.

Key: Well, no one knows what that means for a start-off.

Jelson: Can't you chop it off, then focus on me?

Key switches to his beard trimmer, plugging it in by the mirror there. He starts ploughing two-inch furrows into his head. He peeks over the rim of the sink. Jelson's "operating" the baby, making her wave.

Jelson: We had a daughter!

Key: Classy.

Jelson: Spent the last two weeks downtown, looking for rusks.

Key: You wanna know what the book's about, or –

Jelson: Not poems again, eh?

Key: Why not?

Jelson: Is it poems?

Key: Yeah. Why?

Jelson: Fantastic.

Key: Why not poems?

Jelson: Exactly. Love your poems.

Key: Poems and conversations.

Jelson: Tell you what: I must say, it's crazy having a baby in lockdown.

Key: So what's the score? Did everyone stockpile pasta in week one?

Jelson: Lina's been great but, bugger me –

Key: Over here, it was a case of fill your trolley, see who salutes. Same there?

A huge flurry of hair blows into the sink and Jelson splutters.

Key: This is handy, you know.

Jelson: A US perspective, sure.

Key: Checking if things are the same, that's all. Looking for anecdotes, if I'm honest.

Jelson: Well, um, I mean I bought the wrong bog roll, if that's what you mean.

Key: Ha ha ha ha!

Jelson: Yeah, well, Lina didn't find it so funny!

Key: Ha ha ha ha! Wrong, how?!

Jelson: You stand it up, it comes up to your thigh, 180 metres of the stuff.

Key: So it's like industrial grade?

Jelson: Yeah, the blue stuff!

Key: That's priceless!

Jelson: It's not funny. It doesn't even fit in the, yer know –

Key: Toilet roll holder, sure! Ha ha!

Jelson: It's been sat on top of the cistern for six weeks.

Key: Ha ha! This is amazing!

Jelson: Feels like you're cleaning out an engine. Woah.

Key: Huh?

Key steps back, crushing the scales. There's a silence. Then he peers over the rim again. Jelson's looking up at him. His baby is wearing a pink babygrow, a "pacifier" stuffed in her cakehole, for good measure.

Key: What's up?

Jelson: You naked?

Key: Huh?

Jelson: Are you naked?

Key: Um... Yeah. Why?

Jelson: You just leant over the sink and I saw some stuff.

Key: Stuff?

Jelson: I'd rather you phoned when you're more focused.

Key: I'm happy to do it now. Gotta say, I'm finding the differences very interesting. Good for the book!

Jelson: D'ya last book sell many –

Key: I think if I'm reading this, I'm loving having this kind of insight.

Jelson: It all just suddenly swung into view, that's all.

Key: They letting you do exercise over there?

Jelson: Yeah, you can exercise.

Key: Us, too. Masks?

Jelson: Yeah, we gotta wear masks.

Key: And, you got soldiers on the streets out there?

Jelson: God, no.

Key: Nah, nor us.

Key pushes his hips and pelvis right back and leans over the sink again. Just his eyes, this time. His hooter.

Jelson: Truth is, nothing's happening here.

Key: Let's keep catching up, if we check in each day –

Jelson: Day?

Key: Week then. I love this. The cultural divide!

Jelson: I mean, if we do it monthly there's more chance of finding some differences.

Key: Yeah. Yeah, I make you right.

Jelson: Great talking anyway.

Key: You have to talk, or you go mad. I'm serious. You go la la.

Jelson: Love you, Bong!

Key hangs up and breathes. Then he spins the dial, goes closer with the trimmer. He carves roads across his skull until it is uniform, like a lawn. He stops the trimmer and slings it down. He turns on both taps and snatches the iPhone as the water floods the sink. Everything grown before lockdown begins to swirl around the porcelain and disappear into the abyss. Key turns off the taps, brushes his head with his palm and smiles into the mirror. A new man. A flick of the eyes to a different part of the mirror. Something running past the door. A mouse! Grey, slim. A definite mouse.

Plughole.



I lay in the bath and shut my eyes.

Blackness, and I spiralled down the plughole.

I was in the pub now.

Everyone was getting lashed and the footy was on and darts were flying everywhere.

The place was soaked in laughter and love and I was snogging the bar supervisor and there was a fantastic fight and I didn't wash my hands, just shook the piss off, and I rammed my fist into some pork scratchings and there was a weird sing-along.

I woke up.

The water was ice-cold.

I jumped out of the tub.

The bar supervisor chucked me a towel.

I blinked and she vanished.

Week 5.



WEEK

V.

In which the mouse takes root, confectionary is stockpiled, and two septuagenarians grapple ham-fistedly with a simple piece of technology.

A New Normal.



Parliament came back, but half of them were on Zoom, which was mental.

Speaks banged his hotel bell and took a question from some Honourable Goon on a screen.

“Yes, thank you, Speaks. In the light of –”

Speaks banged his hotel bell again, frantically.

“Why the hell are you nude, man?” he demanded.

The other screens blushed.

“Oh, it’s my Zoom suit.”

The honourable goon was naked, and there was a lady making a risotto in the background.

Speaks panicked.

He looked at the other screens.

About five of them were filled with Parliamentarians in Zoom suits.

He looked around the chamber, sweating.

The Secretary for Wealth and Inequality was taking his seat in the front row, also, weirdly, in his Zoom suit.

He was clearly excited to be back.

There's a Mouse.

☎ Emily Juniper. | Late, April. | Landline v iPhone.

Key hangs up and tries again. He has discarded his plate on the pheasant incubator. He's left the last couple of sausages and wrenches the ring-pull off his latest Camden Hells. He rubs his palm over his buzz cut. He hangs up again. Dials again. He's looking into the middle distance. Squinting at the bottom of the door. The ITV drama Quiz is playing on the box. Matthew Macfadyen knocking it out of the park, as per. Emily Juniper picks up.

Key: There's a mouse.

Juniper: Tim, it's 2am.

It is.

Key: There's a mouse.

Juniper: Call me in the morning.

Key: If you don't want people calling, you gotta turn it off, Em. Any court in the land would tell you that.

Juniper: It's my landline.

Key: Old-school.

Juniper: Let's speak in the morning.

Key: You can disconnect them at the wall, you do know that. Or cut the wire.

Juniper: Then I don't have a phone.

Key: Buy more wires, Amazon's still open. Set up a standing order. Cut 'em at night, fresh one in in the morning.

Key pauses Macfadyen. He's in the hot seat. The business end of the show. Facing off against Sheen's latest creation. Tarrant.

Juniper: (A huge sigh, like a gorilla would come up with) Have you tried traps?

Key: Em, when someone tells you they've got a mouse, it doesn't mean they're looking for solutions.

Juniper: No?

Key: It just means they need someone to listen, that's all.

*Key snaps his neck left. Something peripheral and immediately gone.
Another mouse? The same mouse? Something new? Nothing?*

Juniper: *(The sigh again)* Okay, I'm listening.

Key: Well, I've got a mouse.

Juniper: Yuk.

Silence.

Key: It's a case of "careful what you wish for".

Juniper: Did you wish for a mouse?

Key: Why the hell would I wish for a mouse?

Juniper: And... do you definitely know you've got a mouse?

Key: Yes, I've seen the little asshole strutting about.

Juniper: Urgh.

Key: Never mind "urgh". How do I get rid of him?

Juniper: Oh right.

Key: He looks over at me when he runs.

Juniper: That's disconcerting.

Key: It's humiliating, Em.

Juniper: Have you tried speaking to him?

Key: What the fuck are you talking about?

Juniper: Well, I don't know, do I? It's two in the morning. I was dreaming about indexes and fonts.

Key: No, I haven't tried speaking to him. I wouldn't know what the hell to say! I'm getting pissed off with this.

Juniper: That's annoying that he's throwing looks at you.

Key: I want to get out of here.

Juniper: Yeah, everyone does.

Key: But I'm a dreamer, Em. I can't be locked up.

Juniper: It won't be forever.

Key: I'm not a locked-up kind of a guy.

Juniper: I know.

Key: Sat on my ring, can't even go down the boozer.

Juniper: Nothing happens in the boozer though.

Key: It's what *could* happen.

Another fragment of mouse maybe appears for a split second or maybe doesn't. Key throws a paper cutter across his lounge. It clips a plant pot and a cactus goes everywhere.

Juniper: You just go down there and get lashed and waddle home. What are you expecting to find down the boozer? The meaning of life? Some hotshot Hollywood producer? Your ideal woman?

Key: Bunton?

Juniper: Well, whoever.

Key: Let me tell you, Em. There's more chance of Emma Bunton being down the boozer than there is of her seeking out my flat during lockdown.

Juniper: I dunno about that.

Key: Oh, you think she's gonna rollerblade down my road, do you? Ring the buzzer? "I was cruising past, thought I'd say hi."

Juniper: I'm saying there's as much chance of that as there is of you snogging her against the fruit machine in The Southampton Arms.

Key: Against?

Juniper: Well, you know what I mean.

Key: All I'm saying is, I go to the pub with a spring in my step.

Juniper: I know.

Key: Bounce down there I do! Bounce! See the old Colonel, give him a hug. Couple of pints! Pork scratchings! Beer mats! All gone now! Sunday nights: dust.

Key rubs his buzz cut again. Sparks fly up. He snaps his eyes onto all four corners of the room. Where's that son-of-a-bitch mouse?

Juniper: You can have a Zoom on a Sunday night.

Key: It's not the same, Em.

Juniper: Pop a shirt on.

Key: For fuck's sake.

Juniper: Run an iron over it.

Key: Bugger me, you've finally lost it.

Juniper: Pubs won't be open for –

Key: *Wa wa wa wa* –

Juniper: What? They won't, the PM said –

Key: WA WA WA WA, *I don't want to hear it, Em.* Let's talk about the book, can't we!

Juniper: Let's do it in the morning.

Key: Let's talk about it now. Let's get enthused about paper stock.

Juniper: Um... Yup, okay. So let's... well, are you close to sending me material?

Key: Always.

Juniper: My job would be easier if I had more of an idea of how the material will look, as a whole. You talk about dialogues, I'm yet to see a single one.

Key: Em, you sound like you're lying down, your throat sounds like it's folded over.

Juniper: I am lying down.

Key: Well, are we having a meeting or not?

Juniper: I'll put a coffee on.

Key: Well, if it peps you up then, yes, that would seem like a sensible idea.

Juniper: *(To the lunk)* I've got to talk to Tim about layout, won't be long.

Key: There he is.

Key snares a sausage and unpauses Quiz as Emily Juniper plods out of earshot. Macfadyen is squirming on his stool. Sheen contorting his face this way and that to maximise his Tarrantness.

Huggy.†



Maudie tied a thick rope round Huggy's waist so he wouldn't try cuddling anyone on the heath.

He was pulling hard, staggering towards joggers, picnickers, other roped men.

Maudie pulled him back.

She'd looped the rope around her wrist and it cut into her pale, diaphanous skin.

Huggy was barking, drool washed down his Saracens rugby shirt as he struggled towards the intimacy he craved.

†**Juniper:** Why doesn't Maudie just hug him?

Key: I can't think. Guy's a disgrace, probably.

Juniper: Poor fella.

Key: The guy's out of control, Em.

Juniper: I dunno, I think I'm taking the rope off, hugging the poor old sod.

Key: Maybe.

Juniper: Walk him home, put some dinner inside him.

Key: Mm. Maybe that'd be nice.

The Run Past.

☎ The Colonel. | 11:15AM, April. | Zoom.

Key sits on his worksurface, next to his hobs. A fog of sin pervades his kitchen. He has one nose dunked into his breadmaker; the other is sniffing his pot. He has put some weird brown dough in the machine and is simultaneously batch-cooking squid au vin and the place is “une scène diabolique”. His iPhone is propped up against Delia, waiting for a connection. The Colonel slides into the Zoom room, sat like Buddha in his frame.

Colonel: Buzz cut!

Key: Say what you see!

Colonel: Fantastic!

The Colonel is laughing.

Key: Cute headband.

Colonel: Allocated daily exercise. You should try it.

Key: The hell's that s'posed to mean?

Colonel: Gonna hit the road, pound the streets.

Key: It's not mandatory, yer know. It's like banana bread. It's there if you want it.

Colonel: Gonna be running past your flat.

Key: Huh?

Key has Classic FM on. Luciano Pavarotti opening up his lungs, detonating Italian words like he's blasting a quarry, melting the knobs on Key's Roberts digital radio. A grim steam rises from the bubbling squid, washing the bleak tiles.

Colonel: Just give us a wave when I come by.

Key: Why do you need a wave?

Colonel: I don't *need* a wave.

Key: Are you ill?

Colonel: What?

Key: I'm trying to boil down some squids over here.

Colonel: It'll be in about forty-five minutes.

Key: I'm batch-cooking, John.

Colonel: Lots of people are.

Key: Never mind "lots of people". I am. Making about twenty litres of this muck.

Colonel: What's that?

Key: Huh?

Colonel: Behind you, with the whiskers.

Key spins round and instinctively slams a pastry hammer down onto an empty chopping board. Nothing there. Key's lips go thin and white.

Colonel: All good?

Key: Yeah.

Colonel: So you can open a window and wave me by.

Key: Bring out the bunting, type of thing.

Colonel: It's nice to see someone in the flesh. Five Live's been pretty clear about that. Pretty smoky your end!

Key: I've got limes in here, weird carrots. Have you ever cooked?

Colonel: Nothing that...

Key: Ambitious? Have you heard of capers?

Colonel: Yuh.

Key: Oh, you have?

Colonel: What's that you're listening to? That opera? You lost it?

Key: Pavarotti.

Colonel: Oh, okay.

Key: Yeah, it is okay, the fat cunt could sing.

Colonel: No arguments there.

They listen to Luciano Pavarotti for some minutes. Outside, an old swindler sits on a bench and Key observes him. His face is grey, his bag-for-life overflowing with weird vegetables. He looks like he's all done. Key opens his window, sends down some Luciano. The man touches his cap in appreciation. Key shudders, closes the window, locks it, frowns.

Key: You know what we need, John.

Colonel: Go on.

Key: We need a plan.

Colonel: Oh aye.

Key: So last night, I'm sat in the flat, guzzling beer on my own.

Colonel: Nice.

Key: Yeah, but... Sunday night. It's not on, you know. That's lasties night.

Colonel: We need to look at other avenues, you're saying.

Key: Well, of course we need to look at other bloody avenues, John.

Colonel: Well, they ain't opening pubs up any time soon, are they?

Key: Stop saying that.

Colonel: Well, are they?

Key: I'm thinking we do it like this. Plonk ourselves in front of our Zooms, open some tins, put the world to rights.

Colonel: The "Zoom Pint".

Key: Is that what they're calling it?

Colonel: Had a Zoom Pint with my brother on Friday.

Key: You're hard.

Colonel: Yeah, let's do a Zoom Pint. I'm up for that.

Key: Yes! That's what *I'm* talking about!

Key does a fist pump and dances to the pan. His squids smile as he whirls them round in their wine with his wooden spoon.

Colonel: I'll give you a wave, anyhoo.

Key: You and your bloody wave.

Colonel: Do you want me to wave or not?

Key: Nah, gizza wave, sure.

Colonel: Look, my quads are cooling here, tell me you'll wave back, otherwise I'll run down the canal instead.

Key: Alright, I'll give you a wave, but I won't open a window.

Colonel: What the fuck are you talking about?

Key: I'm across the guidelines, believe me. I'm not opening a window.

Colonel: I'm not asking to cuddle you.

Key: I'm not having you honking up all the mad bugs you've breathed in on the heath, cheers. We'll wave through the glass.

The Colonel adjusts his headband. Ties a bandana around his cakehole. Winks.

Colonel: It'll be at noon, or thereabouts.

Key: Oh right, I'll psyche myself up then.

Colonel: Listen, you're not on my route.

Key: Okay.

Colonel: So I'm doing this for you.

Key: I've said, I'm pumped for it.

Colonel: You look preoccupied.

Key: I'm batch-cooking, that's all. This is just my batch-cooking face.

The conversation continues in this manner – or maybe a bit worse – for another minute or so. The fats and flesh of the squids prise themselves away from the bone and sink and float in the thickening fluids. At one point Key's eyes think they see the final millimetre of a tail disappearing into a plughole. Pavarotti gets louder and louder and, if anything, even more Italian.

Assholes.



Gordon and Blarbara came round.

We talked through the window.

They told me all about their garden.

They were having a fantastic lockdown, sounded like.

Sometimes they'd have to repeat themselves so I could hear them through the window.

"We've finally put the hammock up and we're barbecuing homemade burgers tonight!" they'd yell.

"We're making mincemeat of The West Wing, too," they'd add.

Good Deeds.

☎ The Agent. | 11:00AM, April. | Zoom.

Key is eating Misha's banana bread in front of Columbo. The dishevelled detective is running rings around some author type. He knows she's done it, she knows he knows. They're just trying to stretch it out to the contracted ninety minutes, that's all. Chiggy Zooms in. Key pauses Falk. Joins meeting.

Chiggy: Ha ha!

Key: I don't think you should start a Zoom call by laughing.

Chiggy: Where's your hair?

Key: Oh right.

Chiggy: Ha ha!

Key: Alright, alright.

Chiggy: Who did that?

Key: I did that. I took my beard trimmer to it. It looks good.

Chiggy: If you do say so yourself.

Key: Well, you weren't going to say it.

Chiggy: Ha ha!

Chiggy laughs. This lasts actually quite a long time. Key puts a cap on that says "Tokyo" across the front. Chiggy calms down and then there's a moment where they're just drinking their respective coffees.

Chiggy: How are you, darling boy?

Key: Checking up on me again?

Chiggy: Checking in on you, actually.

Key: What's the difference?

Chiggy: Making sure you're okay.

Key: I'm okay.

Chiggy: All on your own.

Key: Huh?

Chiggy: Still writing your "book"?

Key: I can hear the speech marks you know, Chig.

Key looks at his walls. The Post-its; some peeling away, even now. Floating to the floor as if the process has reached its autumn.

Chiggy: I'm all for it. Why not? If it keeps you sane.

Key: It helps.

Chiggy: Self-care. That's the trick.

Key: It's not plain sailing.

Chiggy: It's easy to fall into a trap of eating too much.

Key: Where the hell's that come from?

Chiggy: How you holding up?

Key: I started trying to engage with Alexa last night.

Chiggy: Oh no, don't do that. Alexa's a machine.

Key: I know, Chig. I'm saying I'm going mad.

Chiggy: That's like engaging with a Hoover or, you know –

Key: I don't need a list, Chig.

Chiggy: Or with your toaster, do you know what I mean?

Key: For all we know, it might be a bloody good book, Chig.

Chiggy: Oh yeah.

Key: You sound surprised.

Chiggy: You watching Columbo?

Key: Huh? It's on pause.

Chiggy: See it in your eyes.

Key: Christ.

Chiggy: Are you writing a book or are you watching twelve hours of Columbo a day? I guess that's my question.

Key: I watch Come Dine with Me, too.

Chiggy: Unplug it I would. Wheel it onto your balcony.

Key: I know when to turn it off, Chig, don't worry yourself about that.

Chiggy: I've got clients who've hammered plywood over the screens.

Key: No self-control, that's why.

Chiggy: How many hours?

Key: It's managed, believe me. It's under control.

Key is transfixed by Columbo, the author's on the ropes. Even when the sleuth is paused, there is nowhere to run.

Key: How are you, Chig?

Chiggy: Getting pissed off with Zoom, getting my furlough on a bit –

Key: I've bought Ferrero Rochers.

Chiggy: Alright.

Key: Gonna give a tray to my Amazon guy.

Chiggy: Okay.

Key: What?

Chiggy: Well, just do that quietly.

Key: I am doing it quietly.

Chiggy: But you don't need to tell me.

Key: Naw, but, just... Giving you an idea...

Chiggy: Of what amazing good deeds you're doing.

Key: I won't tell you next time.

Chiggy: Yes. You shouldn't.

Key: Okay.

Chiggy: There's a difference between doing a good deed and being a conniving you-know-what.

Key: Wow. Yeah. I mean... wow.

Silence. Key's coffee is tasting bitterer. The sun is pouring in through the window behind him; if Key ducks down the sun douses the Post-its, which are blowing around on the floor, giving them a gorgeous, rustic glow.

Key: How are your other clients?

Chiggy: That's pissed me off, that has.

Key: Okay.

Chiggy: You don't think other people are doing good deeds? You think I'm not getting out there, doing stuff?

Key: Are you?

Chiggy: Well, I can't say now, can I?

Key: I don't mind, if you've done something nice.

Chiggy: Well, I know – your vibe is, tell the whole world. Yell it from the rooftops, before the Ferrero Rochers are out of their nests.

Key: Wish I hadn't said now.

Chiggy: You don't think my greengrocer was happy to get a bottle of Drambuie?

Key: Oh, that's nice.

Chiggy: You made me say that. You forced it out of me.

Key: I think that's great, Chig.

Chiggy: Gave a homeless twerp an Easter egg.

Key: Huh?

Chiggy: Homeless guy then.

Key: See, it's nice. I've bought eight boxes of Ferrero Rochers, handing 'em out like confetti.

Chiggy: Sent some Murakami to one of the other agents.

Key: It doesn't cost anything to be nice.

Chiggy: I've spent about eight hundred quid being nice, to date.

Key: I'm sure it's appreciated.

Chiggy: I hate that you've made me say that.

Key: No, I know.

Chiggy: Don't tell anyone about this.

Key: It'll go no further.

Chiggy: How is the book?

Key: Coming along.

Chiggy: Can I see some of it? What's in it?

Key's orange pen is bobbing in and out of shot.

Chiggy: You writing it now?

Key: Am I writing it now? Lol.

Key smiles. Chiggy smiles. Silence. The pen stops bobbing.

Chiggy: Well, anyway –

The pen starts bobbing again. Chig stops and so does the pen. A mouse moves towards the Post-it notes. Key mumbles quietly that his ideas will be eaten by mice and Chig Leaves Meeting. Key unpauses Columbo. Falk looks straight down the camera, says, "Finally," and then scampers after the author.

The Brains.†



There was a nerd meeting.

The slapheads were discussing exactly how gross the virus was and plotting it on a graph.

“That’s pretty.”

It was Cumdawg.

“What you gonna do, inject the graphs into people?”

He was sat in his bloody deckchair, wearing his heinous tracksuit bottoms, sipping his ale.

“Why’s he here even?” one of the slapheads whispered into his tie.

Cumdawg lit a rollie and grim smoke dissipated into the grey light thrown by the projector.

His voice was acrid.

“Go on ahead, Dweeboss, wow us with your stats.”

He sneered and blew a mocking note across the top of his 500ml bottle of Adnams.

†**Juniper:** Oh.

Key: What?

Juniper: Cumdawg.

Key: Yeah.

Juniper: I know who Cumdawg is.

Key: Sure.

Juniper: With his bloody eye test.

Key: Well, yeah. This’ll be earlier in the book than that.

Juniper: Me and Stu were calling him Specsavers.

Key: Yeah, a lot of people were.

Juniper: Well, either way. We liked calling him that.

Key: Yeah.

Juniper: 'Cos of his eye test stuff.

Key: Well, like I say, this'll be earlier in the book than that.

The Parents.

☎ Mum & Dad. | Morning, April. | The Portal.

Key mutes Come Dine with Me and presses Accept on his Portal. Mayhem. A frenzy of close-up thumbs and, beyond, septuagenarian parents. Some minutes of mayhem.

Carol: Can you see us?

Key Jnr: Yeah, I keep saying. I can see you.

Carol: Can you see your father?

Key Jnr: Yup I can see you both, hi, Dad.

Bill: Hello, Son!

Carol: We can see you!

Key Jnr: Yup, we got there in the end.

Carol: They don't make it easy for you!

Key Jnr: You've got your thumb on the camera again, Mum.

That thumb is in and out of shot throughout. Key Jnr rips open a can of blackberry juice and considers squeezing it into his mouth, like Popeye and his bloody spinach.

Carol: He can see us, Bill, clever isn't it.

Bill: Hello, Son!

Carol: That's a big jumper! That's lovely!

Key Jnr: Well, yeah.

Carol: Well done, Tim!

Key Jnr: Got it before his nibs shut the shops.

Carol: Thank goodness. That's a pearler.

Key Jnr: I've bought jumpers before you know.

Carol: What is it, blue?

Key Jnr: Huh?

Carol: Did you join in with the clapping?

Key Jnr: Yeah, I actually wrote a poem about –

Carol: Your dad embarrassed me.

Key Jnr: Oh aye.

Carol: He has a – what's that thing called anyway, Bill?

Bill: I've got a claxon, Son.

Carol: Can you see your father?

Key Jnr: Yup, I can see you both.

Bill: I've got a claxon, from a trawler, Son.

Key Jnr: They're doing a great job, the old nurses, anyone can see that

—

Bill: I'll fetch it —

Key Jnr: Fair play. Are you still cycling, Dad?

Carol: He's gone to fetch his claxon, Tim.

Key Jnr: Is he still cycling?

Carol: Of course he's bloody cycling. Have you got enough money?

Key Jnr: Yeah.

Carol: Your filming got cancelled.

Key Jnr: Postponed.

Carol: That's sad for you. Do you have enough money? We're worried about you.

Key Jnr: I don't need money, Mum.

Carol: We've got Premium Bonds, but they're about as much use as an ashtray on a —

Suddenly from nowhere, an almighty honk. The claxon. Bill Key comes into shot, turning the handle.

Carol: Bill!!!

Key Jnr: Fuck me.

Carol: Tim!

Bill: The claxon.

Key Jnr: You're doing that on the street?

Carol: He's an embarrassment, frankly.

Bill Key's laughing his head off, turning the crankshaft.

Carol: Stop cranking that thing, Bill! Honestly!

Key Jnr: Are you okay not going out, Ma?

Carol: Oh, we're fine. We've got the garden. Your father does his cycling.

Key Jnr: Fair play to the guy, what sort of distance are you doing, old man?

Bill: Sixty miles yesterday.

Key Jnr spits his blackberry juice against his device.

Key Jnr: Fuck me.

Carol: Tim.

Key Jnr: The cunt's seventy-five, Ma!

Carol: Tim!

Key Jnr: How's he cycling sixty miles, Ma?

Bill Key's on his feet again, winding up the claxon.

Key Jnr: I mean that's how far from London he is!

Carol: Oh, don't give him ideas, Tim.

Key Jnr: The guy's supposed to be in the vulnerable category. Sixty miles, bugger me.

Carol: He's gone mad, Tim. Doing all sorts. Keeps threatening to write a book.

Key Jnr: What book?

Carol: But you're alright, are you? Not lonely.

Key Jnr: I already said I'm fine, Ma. What book?

Carol: Why don't you get a little cat?

Key Jnr: Not happening.

Carol: Denise has a got a house rabbit!

Key Jnr: What the hell's a house rabbit?

Carol: Edith's got a chinchilla.

Key Jnr: Why have all these people with old-school names got weird animals?

Carol: I don't like you sat there on your tod, that's all.

Key Jnr: I'm fine, Ma.

Carol: Have you got a cleaner?

Key Jnr: Nah, she left, locked down in Chelmsford.

Carol: You need a cleaner.

Key Jnr: I'll be grand.

Carol: You can't clean.

Some sweet wrappers and peelings drift by. A playing card blows through; Key grabs it with his toe.

Key Jnr: I'm writing, Ma.

Carol: What are you writing? If you ever need any material you know where to come.

The top of Key Jnr's orange pen occasionally bobs into frame.

Carol: Aw, I wish there was an app that zapped us into your flat and we could give you a hug.

Bill: Of course there's not a bloody app, Carol.

Carol: Oh right, like you know about apps?

Bill: I know about apps, don't worry about that. That's Star Trek shit your talking about.

Key Jnr: Well, anyway. We'll have a nice big hug after lockdown, eh?

Carol: Don't be lonely.

Key Jnr: Please stop saying I'm lonely, Ma. I'm not lonely.

Carol: I know. I know you're saying that, but you are lonely.

Bill Key starts his claxon back up.

Bill: (Over the dreadful sound) Bye then, Son!

Key Jnr: Bye, Father. Bye, Ma!

Carol: Lots of love, Tim!!! Now what am I pressing here?

Bill: This bit.

Carol: Oh, get your hands out the way, you haven't got a clue –

It cuts out. Key Jnr unmutes Come Dine with Me. Two of them are in kilts and people are understandably pissed off because the host's had help with her jus from a local chef.

Double.



It was Fleisch's birthday, slap bang in the middle of lockdown.

"Nay bother – I'll do nowt today, have a doublé birthday next year!" he declared.

"Like fuck you will."

His girlfriend had made eggs and dropped 'em on his balls now.

"You can do fuck all today by all means, but you ain't having a doublé birthday next year – I don't know what one is, but that ain't happening, not on my watch."

Fleisch frowned.

Yolk ran in rivulets amongst the deep wrinkles of his nutsack.

Chapters.

☎ Emily Juniper. | Afternoon, April. | Landline v iPhone.

Key is staring at the breadmaker. It is emitting a low hum and so is Key. His iPhone starts rattling like a maraca, he fetches it up. Emily Juniper. He smiles.

Key: Emily Juniper. Boy, are you a sight for sore eyes.

Juniper: Right, I've got my list.

Key: Oh, straight into it are we?

Juniper: Oh sorry, how's your mouse?

Key: No, let's get to it. What have you got?

The swish of the Black n' Red notepad. The sharpening of the pencil. The belligerent chewing of the Donald Duck pencil top.

Juniper: Okay, so, how many chapters?

Key: Christ, it's like you're measuring me up for a suit.

Juniper: I just need to know what's going on, that's all.

Key: Eight then.

Juniper: Eight?

Key: Yes. Or ten? Whatever it becomes, Em.

Scribbling.

Juniper: What are they called?

Key: Bugger me.

Juniper: What are they called?

Key: I dunno... "lockdown"?

Juniper: They're all called "lockdown"?

Key: Well, they're all about lockdown.

Juniper: Eight chapters called "lockdown".

Key: Just saying it how it is.

Juniper: Where's your development?

Key: Yeah.

Juniper: Where is it?

Key: Nothing happens in lockdown, Em. That's kind of the point.

Juniper: Why write the book then?

Key: Why design it then?

Juniper: We could call them Week One, Week Two, Week Three, you know...

Key: Mm.

Juniper: What do you mean, "Mm"?

Key: Well, obviously we do that, yes.

The breadmaker flashes and jumps and Key starts hoicking out the tin bit in the middle. He can barely look at the bread. He knows it won't be how it should be. He covers it with a tea towel as one would cover the face of a cadaver to protect its dignity. He transfers it to a flat bit of metal.

Key: I mean...

Juniper: Go on.

Key: Well, it's just I've sent you a bunch of poems, yer know. Is that on your list?

Juniper: Oh yeah.

Key: I mean, do you like 'em?

Juniper: Oh, wrong person to ask.

Key: Huh?

Juniper: What's Bohnson?

Key: The Maestro.

Juniper: Mm.

Key: Mm?

Juniper: So some are political pieces?

Key: "Pieces"?

Juniper: Do you want me to go through them with you or what?

Key: I don't know why you're being so strict with me, that's all.

Juniper: Well, how do you want me to be?

Key: Saying bits that you like. Reading bits back to me through gales of laughter. Bent double, throwing it down, yelling, "I can't, I just can't."

Juniper: I quite like the one about the cow.

Key: You "quite like" the one about the cow.

Juniper: There's just a lot of them,
Tim.

Key: Still waiting for the bad news.

Juniper: Most anthologies –

Key: Is this most anthologies?

Juniper: They're usually about forty to sixty poems, from what I can see.

Key: Nightmare.

Juniper: You've sent me seventy and you don't seem to be slowing down.

Key: I'm speeding up.

Juniper: It's getting full.

Key: Oh, whoops.

Juniper: Huh?

Key: I'm taking it seriously, Em.

Juniper: As in?

Key: I understand my responsibilities, Em. I understand this thing's gonna get studied.

Juniper: Studied? As in...

Key: I'm not blind to the fact this will become a historical document.

Key whips away the tea towel and slams his fist down on the worksurface. The "bread" jumps.

Key: Fuck!

Juniper: What?

Key: Fuck you! My breadmaker! Goddamn!

Juniper: Bollocks up your bread again?

Key: What the actual fuck?

Juniper: Has it not risen?

Key: No it bloody hasn't. It's squatted. It's lower than when it started out.

Juniper: It's reduced?

Key: Fuck this lockdown! Fuck this lockdown!!!

Key slings open the window, hurls his head out of it.

Key: Fuck you! Fucking lockdown jizzhound fuck!!!

The old swindler from before's sat on a bench. He's manufacturing an old-school war-sandwich, using chutneys and tinned meat.

Juniper: Stu made me the best banana bread at the weekend.

Key: Whoopee doo.

Juniper: Did this amazing thing where he put the mixture back into the skins and baked it in them.

Key: Sounds like a fiddle.

Juniper: I'm peeling a banana, there's bread inside it.

Key: What a guy.

Juniper: He runs barefoot on the beach. He's getting fit.

Key is staring out of the window. The sound he's making isn't purring, but it's in that area.

Key: There's an old man out there.

Juniper: Oh dear.

Key: A swindler. Sat on the bench. Poor sod.

Juniper: It's a depressing old time.

Key: I want to go out and shake his hand.

Juniper: You can't do that.

Key: This thing's a disgrace.

Juniper: You can salute him.

Key: I'm not saluting him, Em.

Juniper: I want to talk about the ending.

Key: This ain't ending, Em.

Juniper: Course it's ending. Eight chapters. Eight weeks.

Key: I'm telling you, Em. This thing's going long.

Juniper: Ten chapters?

Key: This thing's only just begun.

Key slings his iPhone into the bread tin.

As the device heats up it begins to zip around the white-hot metal container. Emily Juniper begins to talk about fonts, in spite of it all. Key alternates between looking at this, his bread, and the crevices, which house the interminable mice.

Aliens.



Aliens came.

The world leaders broke bread with them.

“It’s not normally like this,” said one of the PMs.

The aliens were pretty snooty, you couldn’t really tell what they were thinking.

“We usually have stuff like Grands Prix and boozers, you know.”

The aliens were eating the croissants in a really rank way.

“And we have something called Secret Cinema,” someone else chipped in.

Week 6.



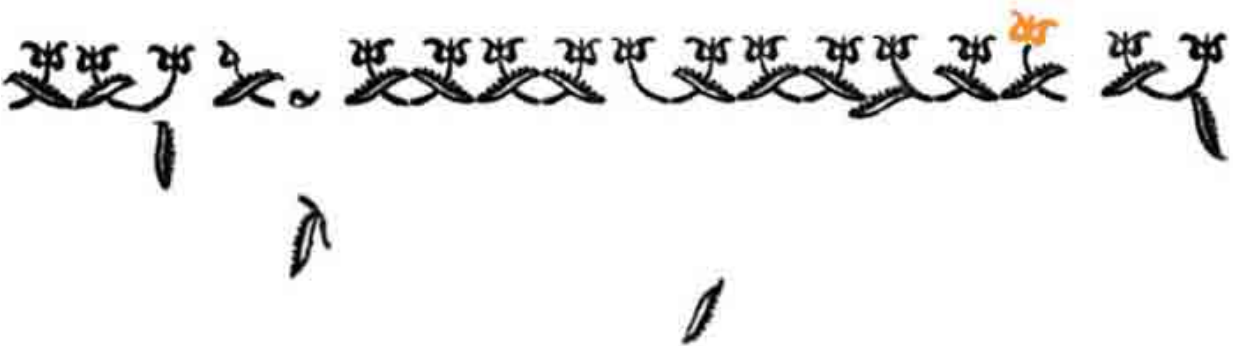
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VI.

In which the walls come alive, the children find a tramp, and 80% proof liquor is poured over the lungs.



Back In Charge.†



Bohnson burst out of the cake.

“Did someone order a fully operational PM??!!”

A couple of nurses crawled out too and staggered into the wings.

The Raabot watched on, wiping cake from his eyes.

Bohnson had nabbed a stethoscope and he slapped it on his deputy’s chest.

“Oh, it’s beating! It’s alive! Looked like a corpse in the briefings, mind you! Nah, I fucking love this cunt!”

He gestured for a jay cloth and pointed at the icing-spattered graphs.

“Make yourself useful then, Raaby Doll.”

Bohnson was unstoppable.

He was doing the floss as The Raabot sponged down the graphs, then he pointed a big, healthy fist at the screen.

“Feels like I’m long overdue a question from Madame K, amn’t I? Okay, hit me Laura, what ya got?”

†**Juniper:** I quite liked it when he came back if I’m honest.

Key: It was never in doubt, Em.

Juniper: A bit of a wet lettuce, I thought, the other fella.

Key: Bohnson was always coming back, I’m telling ya.

Juniper: The guy’s as strong as an ox. He’d say so himself.

Key: Brushes it off like a bear knocking a bee off his nose.

Juniper: Poor old bear.

Key: Checks out, dumps the hospital jimjams, suit on, back to his lectern.

Juniper: Old...

Key: School...

Juniper: Legend.

Mice In The Walls.

📞 Emily Juniper. | Early, April. | Landline v iPhone.

Key is huffing and puffing. Staring at the walls, blocking his ears with his thumbs. He tries Emily Juniper again. His face is red and taut. There is scratching in the room. She finally picks up and is already speaking.

Juniper: I think we need a rule.

Key: Wow.

Juniper: What? We do.

Key: You can't answer the phone like that, I don't think.

Juniper: You can't phone me more than three times in a day.

There is scratching, Key faces it down, squints.

Key: I'm excited though.

Juniper: I know.

Key: This book. I'm getting a tingle over here.

Juniper: I'm trying to keep my life going down here, Tim.

Key: What life? It's lockdown. Life's stopped, Em.

Juniper: Stu and I were planning on inventing a game this afternoon.

Key: Inventing a game? How the hell does that work?

Juniper: Stu's got his hands on some sardines somehow. We're going to grill those senseless and make up a game, that's all. What's that?

The scratching is miserable. Hard, frantic. Key stamps his foot and it ceases for maybe a second. He spins round like a top, gazes out of the window. Jack shit happening. Road markings fading, Boris Bikes discarded and rusting.

Key: I've got plans, Em, for how the book'll be.

Juniper: You've sent me another twenty poems.

Key: Keep 'em coming.

Juniper: It's like you've opened a sluice.

Key: Nice.

Juniper: You need to close the sluice, that's what.

Key: If anything, I want to jam it open.

Juniper: Don't jam the sluice.

Key: You like 'em? These new'uns?

Juniper: They're the poems you've been posting on your Instagram account.

Key: Please answer the question.

Juniper: I mean... they are what they are.

Key: Jimmy Anderson liked one.

The scratching stops. Silence.

Juniper: Who's Jimmy Anderson?

Key: He clicked "like" on one, last week. Nearly shat myself.

Juniper: Who's Jimmy Anderson?

Key: Oh, no one, just the leading fast bowler in Test cricket history.

Juniper: Oh.

Key: "Oh"? 584 Test wickets. So yeah, it is "oh".

The scratching's back. Key takes off a hiking boot, fuzzes it at the wall. It leaves a dismal footprint across two Post-its.

Juniper: What's that?

Key: I'm going mad over here, Em.

Juniper: What's the noise?

Key: Aaaaaaaagh.

Juniper: Tim?

Key: The walls are alive.

The scratching is at its loudest. It sounds like something bigger than a mouse even.

Juniper: Not the bloody mouse?

Key: I can hear them.

Juniper: What? The walls?

Key: Yeah.

Juniper: Or the mice in the walls?

Key: What's the difference? Both! Listen!

The scratching is gross. Key is under his sofa now, it rides up and tilts.

Juniper: You sound stressed, you need a decent massage!

Key: I need a packet and a half of cigs and a sherry, Em!

Juniper: Why are they in your walls?

Key: Let's just talk about the book, can we?

Juniper: You can't have mice in yours walls. Should be just bricks, surely.

Key: I don't want to talk about it any more. They're terrorising me, man!

Juniper: You should have got a cat when you had the chance!

Key: I should have got a goddamn flamethrower when I had the chance!

Juniper: Get a catapult.

Key: I'm not Dennis the-bloody-Menace, man!

Juniper: You need 'em outta there. How many ya got?

Key: I can't get pest control, can I? Dammit Janet!

Juniper: You should paint them.

Key stares into his iPhone. The scratching is louder than ever, like their claws are scraping against his actual eardrums.

Key: Huh?

Juniper: Paint the mice, then you'll know how many you have. Paint them different colours.

Key: You've gone mad, Em. Lockdown's defeated you.

Juniper: Why wouldn't you do that?

Key: Why wouldn't I catch a mouse and once I've got hold of it, rather than releasing it onto the heath, I paint it orange and pop it back down on the kitchen floor?

Juniper: Well, you don't want them in your walls, that's for certain.

Key: I mean, I'd rather they were in my walls than gnawing my boy, but yes.

Juniper: I'd paint them, that's what I'd do.

Key: The one time I need a mouseless flat. Fuck! Listen.

Juniper: Scratchy.

Key: Yes! Scratchy!

Juniper: Have you tried talking to them?

Key: Stop asking me that, Em.

Juniper: Well, I don't know, do I, they're so loud.

Key: I'm not sitting down with a bunch of mice, going through my concerns. It's embarrassing.

Juniper: Maybe chat to one on his own.

Key: This is killing me. I've got traps all over. They stay in the walls, that's the problem.

Juniper: Let's talk about the book then, come on.

Key: Argggggh.

Key spins a Tunnock's at the wall, and it bounces back into his fist.

Key: How can I talk about the book? These things are in my head.

Juniper: I can talk to Calverts, see whether their printing presses are operational again yet.

Key: Talk to Calverts about whether they've got a machine that slices mice in half, why don't ya?

Key charges at the wall and crashes his head deep into the plasterboard. Another Post-it almost unhooks itself, clings on for grim life.

Juniper: What was that?

Key: Speak later, Em.

Key hangs up and retreats to a corner. A section of wall remains around his neck like a ruff. He surveys the room. As each mouse scratches so his eyes flit to their bit of wall. He is imagining what is behind the wall and what is in his imagination matches exactly what is happening in reality.

Amazon.†



Amazon came.

“My cow!”

I signed for the livestock and also a hammock, and led the beast up the stairs.

She swayed through the flat, knocking awards off my shelves with her majestic flanks.

I tethered her on the balcony and stared into her sullen eyes.

I pulled a glass of milk from her and she mooed deeply.

I sank into my hammock and tapped my new friend’s thigh with my knuckles.

“Welcome to the new normal,” I smiled.

†**Juniper:** I like this one.

Key: That’s my worst phrase you use.

Juniper: It’s my sense of humour.

Key: Okay.

Juniper: Who buys a cow?

Key: Exactly, and off Amazon of all things.

Juniper: Well, off anywhere.

Key: Well, buying it off Amazon is the joke.

Juniper: For you maybe.

Come Let Down What's Left.

☎ Rick & Buddy. | 11:00AM, April. | On the outside, looking up.

Key is sat holding a can of Swedish herring. He flicks it up and down in his hand. There's a big label saying Klassisk Matjes on it. He can hear visitors, barking up at the kitchen window.

Rick & Buddy: Rapunzel, Rapunzel, come let down your hair!

Key moves through into the kitchen. He makes some calculations. Some flies have established themselves in the area immediately around the sink. Key makes as if to swat them and they scatter. Key throws the window open.

Buddy: Here he is!

Rick: The man of the moment.

Key: Hey, guys!

Key leans out, catches his boy on the window lock, uncatches himself, leans out again. Rick and Buddy are leaning on their bicycles.

Buddy: Wowee.

Key: The beard?

Buddy: Getting loooooong.

Key: Yeah, well, I have to keep it in case filming comes back.

Rick: Filming ain't coming back.

Key: I said *in case*, open your ears up, Dumbass.

Buddy: Filming's a long way off, Tim.

Key: Tell *them* that. They've banned the razor.

Rick: You look like an extra in a Robin Hood movie.

Key: Brilliant.

Rick: Afternoon, Little John!

Key: Little John's an extra now is he?

Rick rings his bicycle bell.

Buddy: And the buzz cut!!!

Key: Oh, yeah. Sure.

Buddy: You're gonna be dangerous when you get out of there.

Key wafts a hand through his barnet. Ten days old, it feels good; his lips curl. He clutches his beard; he wants to tug the son of a bitch clean off.

Rick: Still no cuddle?

Key: What do you think, Dumbass?

Buddy: Been thinking of you, in the briefings.

Buddy's looking up with pity, her huge brown eyes rooting for Key.

Buddy: Listening to The Maestro, hoping he'll bring in cuddles for, yer know, singletons.

Rick: Valerie Singletons.

Key: You're funny.

Rick: He ain't bringing in cuddles. I think he'll bring sex back before he brings back cuddles.

Key: What a dumbass thing to say.

Rick: Just my opinion.

Buddy: Well, anyway, are you lowering it down?

Key: Huh?

Buddy: Are you lowering it down?

Key: Lowering what down?

Rick: "Lowering what down?" he asks.

Buddy: Come on. Week six...

Key: *(Under his breath)* Banana bread.

Rick: The penny drops.

Key: It's coming.

Buddy: Week six!

Key: I've had stuff on my mind. Haven't been able to, you know, mush it down etc.

They look gutted. Rick pings his stand up, Buddy kicks it back down.

Buddy: Misha cooked a real humdinger last week.

Key: I know, I know. She lobbed a slice up at the weekend.

Buddy: And? To die for, right?

Key: Mine'll be good, don't worry about that. I'm just *perfecting* it, that's all.

Rick: What's on your mind?

Key: Tut.

Key angles down the can of fish.

Buddy: I can't read it. What is it?

Key: Klassisk Matjes.

Rick: Herring.

Buddy: Huh? How do you know that?

Key: I've got a Swedish Night, tomorrow night.

Buddy: Nice! Beats a quiz!

Key: Yuh.

Rick: Herring all round is it?

Key: I mean, herring, weird pickle, you know. The works basically. This mad Swedish drink.

Rick: And you're sat on your ass in your flat, getting lashed on your own.

Key: Well, I'm not on my own am I, Rick?

Rick: Well, you are on your own.

Key: How in the hell am I on my own if I'm Zooming four school friends?

Buddy: He's not on his own.

Key: I'm not on my own.

Buddy: You've got us!

Key is still angling the herrings.

Buddy: You don't have to eat it.

Key: Kamilla's posted it. I've gotta eat it.

Buddy: They're not in the room with you.

Key: *I'm not on my own!!!*

It reverberates around the street. The chap in the piano shop pokes his head out. His moustache twitching quizzically.

Buddy: You know, you can switch the spirits with water and pour the herrings onto the floor when they're not looking.

Key looks down at Buddy. His lip curls again, his mouth is now like a spiral.

Key: (Almost inaudibly) Brilliant.

Rick: And you can tip the weird pickles onto the floor, too.

Key: Yeah, no, I know, Dumbass. I get the idea.

Buddy: Something to think about, anyway.

Key: This is fantastic!

Buddy: Sweden! Exotic.

Rick: ABBA.

Key: I'll order a pizza, have that on the side.

Buddy: Out of shot.

Key: Lush.

Rick: Waterloo!

Buddy: Don't name the songs, darling.

Rick: Thank You For The Music!

Buddy: I'll take him home.

Key: This is fantastic. The pickle stuff actually glows.

Buddy: Ugh. Well, see ya later.

Key: I might keep it – use it as a fridge light.

Buddy: See you in a couple of weeks.

Rick: For banana bread.

Buddy: Don't say it like that, you sound mad.

Key: Thanks for popping by.

The stands flick up and they herd themselves back onto the road.

Key: As in, I mean it. Thank you. It's nice when you pop by.

Rick & Buddy: Tatty bye!

Key: Tatty bye!

Key slams his window back down. Silence. Then the reassuring hum of the flies. Key stares at them. They are preoccupied with breaking down meats and peelings and living their best lives in these insane times. He

moves to the lounge, and as he moves the hum of the flies becomes the scratching of the mice, and so it goes on

On The Outside, Looking In.



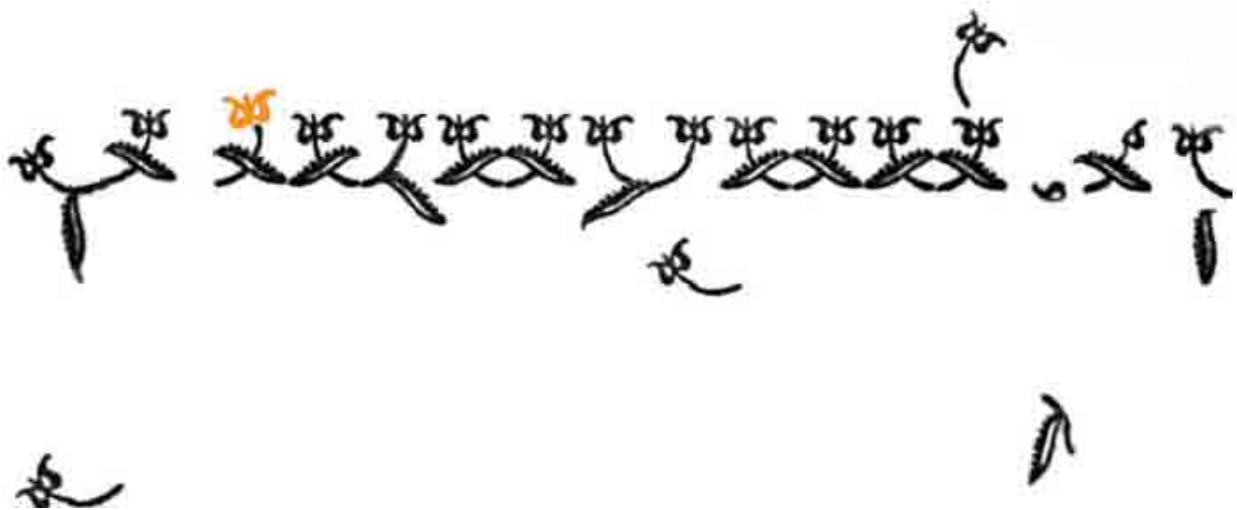
Some people on telly were cuddling.

“Fuck you, man!” Brewster got mad jealous and fuzzed his brick through the screen.

“How about I get a cuddle then?!!”

He was yelling at the thin, sizzling shards of glass, poking at what was left of the amorous characters with his cane.

Show Me the Money.



Rishi Perfect opened his cakehole and money flew out.

“Yes, mate!”

Bohnson was smashing his fists together like dustbin lids, stamping about in the cash.

“I like it, R.P!”

Rishi Perfect repeated the trick, more fifties flew out and also some sick.

The Slappettes were stood either side as per.

They had abacuses and clacked the beads in time with the music.

Bohnson was singing “Money, Money, Money” although the actual track playing in the room was “Walking on Sunshine” by Katrina and The Waves.

Children of Zoom.

📞 Esther & Daisy. | 7:00PM, April. | Zoom.

Key sits his fat ass down and presses connect video on his device. He has decking oil on his hands, which is starting to harden, and his fingers creak as he rips the pull off a Hofmeister. He connects.

Esther: Ha ha ha ha!

Daisy: Ha ha! Mr Gel!

Key: What's so funny?

The screen's got a couple of little girls there, they've got all sorts of coloured wool or something or other in their hair and one of them's got weird face paints. An adult floats in the background. Key pours his Hof into his Mr Bump mug off camera, then swings it into shot.

Esther: Your beard!

Daisy: Are you a tramp?

Key: How am I a tramp if I'm in *my own flat*?

Esther: Ha ha ha! You're a tramp.

Key: Grow up. What tramp's got a vintage Russian film poster? Think about it.

Daisy: Look at your hair! You look like a *gel*. You look like Worzel Gummidge!

Key: I had a meeting about writing on the new version of that, so the joke's on you.

Daisy: Oooh, a meeting!

Key: Yes! With Mackenzie Crook!

Daisy: Oh, you're so successful!

Jo: *(Off)* Girls, don't tease him.

Key: I can look after myself thank you, Jo.

jo: *(Off)* Hi Tim.

Key: I'll fight my own battles. Don't think I'm going to let a couple of eight-year-old gels get the better of me thanks.

Esther: I'm ten.

Key: Act like it then, face covered in paint, soooo grown up.

Jo: *(Off)* Did you write on it then?

Key: Nah, went for a meeting, that's all.

Esther: Why would they hire Mr Gel?

Daisy: Ha ha ha.

Jo: *(Off)* Girls.

Key: Well, anyway. How's lockdown, girls?

Daisy: Fun! We're all doing Taskmaster!

Key takes maybe five swigs from his Bump mug.

Key: Okay.

Daisy: Do you know it? A funny man sets tasks and we do them. We made an elephant out of a duvet yesterday.

Key: Bet that was good.

Daisy: It was actually. Do you even know Taskmaster?

Key: Yeah.

Esther: Like he'd know what Taskmaster is!

Key: I was in series one, got paid eight grand –

Esther: Course he doesn't. Too busy watching Columbo and drinking his beers.

Key: It's tea.

Key holds up the Bump mug. A magical haze of pale lager beer springs invisibly into the air and Key takes a sip. A residue sits in his tash and irrigates his top lip.

Esther: Are you lonely?

Jo: *(Off)* EJ!

Key: No it's alright, Jo.

Daisy: Well?

Key: No.

Daisy: Really?

Key: I'm doing fine.

Esther: Looks like it.

Key: What the hell does that mean?

Daisy: Eating a lot of chocolate?

Jo: *(Off)* Girls.

Key: One Chocolate Orange every other day.

Daisy: Ha ha ha.

Key: Less than four a week.

Esther: Mum, he's eating Chocolate Oranges every day!

Key: Every other day, Jo!

Daisy: We're off school.

Key: Right, so you're getting even thicker are you?

Esther: No because daddy's teaching us.

Key: I've seen daddy take a crap on a pool table.

Jo: *(Off)* What's that?

Key: Nothing, Jo.

Key licks his moustache, dunks his beak in his Bump mug again.

Esther: You're Mr Gel.

Key: Oh you're clever.

Esther: You are though.

Key: You're both gels, don't worry about that.

Daisy: Why don't you have a wife?

Key: Why don't you have a Perrier Award?

Daisy: What's a Perrier Award?

Key: You know what a bloody Perrier Award is.

Esther: What is one?

Key: Are you thick as pigshit?

Jo: *(Off)* Tim.

Key: Well, I'm sorry Jo, but I'm not having that.

Jo: *(Coming on screen fleetingly, jeans, Mickey Mouse t-shirt)* Please don't call my daughter thick.

Key: She knows what a Perrier Award is, Jo!

Jo: Even so.

Key: Arggh goddammit!

Key turns this into a roar, which covers the sound of a ring-pull being stripped off the next can.

Esther: Can we play Pictionary?

Key: Oh Christ.

Esther: Have you got somewhere to be?

Daisy: Another bath?

Key: I like baths, Daisy, so what?

Daisy: Yeah, baths and Come Dine with Me.

Key: Daddy told you that, huh?

Esther: Sad!

Key: Come Dine with Me's sad?

Daisy: Ha ha ha.

Key: Watch the Blackpool one and come back to me.

Daisy: Ha ha ha.

Key: Yeah, laugh it up, watch Frank ballsing up his sticky toffee sauce, then tell me Come Dine with Me's sad.

Daisy: What shall I draw?

Esther and Daisy are roaring with laughter.

Esther: We miss you –

Daisy: In a weird way.

Key: Okay fine.

Esther: Sorry you're lonely.

Key: I'm not lonely.

Esther: We'll come round after lockdown ends.

Key: Mm. Sure.

Esther: We can play football!

Key: Yeah, I'll run rings round you as per.

Daisy: The day after lockdown!

Esther: We can all go camping!

Daisy: Yes! Mum! Can we all go camping?

Key: Not straight after lockdown we're not.

Esther: Why?

Key: I'm gonna have a couple of weeks getting lashed with adults first.

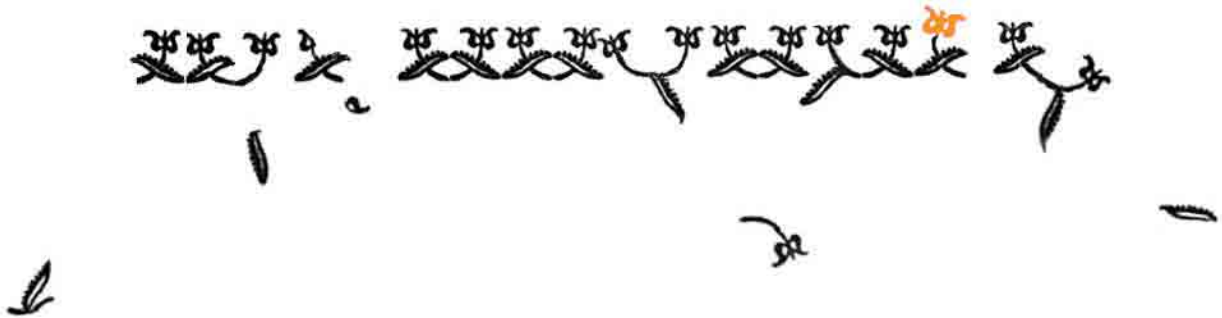
Steve: *(Off)* I'm in for that.

Key: Oh, hey, Steve.

Steve: Keyzee.

Steve pokes his head into screen. He looks tired. The bags under his eyes are sort of rubbing against his shoulder blades. His tattoos look faded. The definition in his muscles is bugged. He is holding a cleaned-out Lurpak tub full of crayons.

Nuff Respect.



Bohnson was listening to his drumming CDs on his Bose headphones.

A couple of his baldy-boys padded in with a load of boring-as-fuck science.

“We’ve got some graphs showing –”

Bohnson took his earphones off but his foot was still going.

The less timid of the two slapheads started to use the word “tolls” a bit.

Bohnson leant in and started playing the two men like bongos.

Slapping their pates, rattling the science out of their ears.

They tried to unfurl a scroll of stats and facts and other boring old crap.

But Bohnson was now a cloud of percussion.

He’d conjured a bass pedal from somewhere.

He was stamping on the pedal and the beater-thing was whacking into their bollocks.

Breaking Point.†



Bum-Bum Bailey broke.

He stripped naked and ran into the street.

He was so happy to be free he immediately got hard.

Hearing the authorities yelling for him to go back inside and put some trousers on only made his boy stiffen further in defiance.

.....

†**Key:** Are you enjoying going through the poems?

Juniper: You're using boy to mean his, you know...

Key: Oh right. Yeah.

Juniper: It's interesting.

Key: Bit nicer, innit?

Juniper: You still picture it.

Key: Exactly, win-win.

Juniper: Mm.

Key: Are you enjoying going through them?

Juniper: Let's see the next one.

Pulp.

📞 Emily Juniper. | Night, April. | Landline v iPhone.

Key is watching Pulp Fiction. He has the Pulp Fiction soundtrack on, too. He's having a Pulp Fiction night, is the long and the short of it. A NutriBullet sits on his pheasant incubator and Key occasionally blasts it. Emily Juniper picks up eventually. She always does.

Juniper: Tim, if I don't pick up that's not the green light to call me another twenty times in a row.

Key: Did you get the photos?

Juniper: Yeah, they came through.

Key: You didn't reply, that's all.

Juniper: I didn't know quite how to.

Key: What does that mean?

Juniper: Well, what do you want me to say?

Key: Em, it's photos of my roof terrace. Congratulate me on my graft, surely.

Key zaps the NutriBullet. A loud, offensive honk.

Juniper: What's that?

Key: NutriBullet.

Juniper: Why have you –

Key: All you need to say is, “well done, you’ve cleared the leaves away – it looks a lot tidier,” something like that.

Juniper: Oh right, I hadn't seen the two photos were different.

Key: Huh?

Juniper: Oh I see, it's before and after. Is it?

Key: Em, I've just spent three hours basically breaking my back fixing my roof terrace up.

Juniper: Hang on, just having another look.

Key: No, don't bother, if it looks so incredibly shit I'd rather you didn't have another look, cheers.

Juniper: Oh yeah, less leaves.

Key: Understatement of the year.

“Son of a Preacher Man” starts. On screen, Bruce Willis is having a miserable time in the basement of a hardware store.

Juniper: Yeah, looks better. Where did you put the leaves?

Key: Are you smoking?

Juniper: Oh.

Spearmint smoke dissipates through the receiver, cloaking Key’s beard like a woodland mist. Key winces. He stares wistfully at his framed Chinese cigs. The corner of his mouth curls downwards.

Key: I did a bit of thinking while I was doing the manual labour, too.
About the book.

Juniper: I’m more okay when you’re phoning me about the book.

Key: Huh?

Juniper: Do you speak to other people?

Key: What? Yeah. Tons. What?

Juniper: Okay, it’s just it’s most days you’re phoning me up –

Key: Shit-tons. Believe me.

Juniper: Who else do you talk to?

Key: Daniel, erm... Alexa –

Juniper: Alexa as in –

Key: I’ve got a few options on my books, I’ll be honest.

Juniper: I don’t know if Alexa counts.

Key: Em, I need to phone you because you’re designing the book.

Juniper: You’re sending me photos of leaves.

Key: Because that’s interesting for you! That’s the only reason!

More problems for Willis. Chuck Berry getting huge on the speakers. Key peels open a Royale with Cheese, plunges the wrapper into a pint glass.

Key: I think we need footnotes.

Juniper: Oh yeah, you sent me a poem with a wee footnote underneath it.

Key: Yeah, do you know why?

Juniper: Erm, well, I’ve not looked properly at it yet.

Key: Like with the leaves.

Juniper: No, just, you know. Need footnotes why?

Key: To explain what the fuck's going on in the poems.

Juniper: Right.

Key: Just because if an alien from outer space comes along, they aren't going to have a clue what the hell's happening, you know.

Juniper: What alien?

Key: They won't stand a chance. How's an alien gonna understand what the hell furloughing is?

Juniper: Oh right –

Key: He's not. No one's going to because what is happening these days is bananas, that's what.

Juniper: So just like... footnotes explaining the new words a bit, is that the idea?

Key: People have got enough on their plates without having to remember what all the gibberish means.

Another blast of the NutriBullet.

Juniper: People are getting a bit more used to the new language, I think.

Key: I'm talking about if an alien came.

Juniper: Oh yeah.

Key: What alien is going to understand the phrase PPE?

Juniper: Well, yeah, I mean, I'm against footnotes if we can avoid it.

Key: *Quelle surprise.*

Juniper: Too fiddly. The aliens'll be squinting.

Key: Right, so you know exactly how aliens' eyes work now, do you?

Juniper: I feel like if we can avoid them we should, can't you clear things up in the dialogues?

Key: Dialogues under the poems? Very classy, I don't think.

Juniper: Think outside the box, that's what I think.

Key: Do you know what PPE means?

Juniper: Yeah, I do.

Key: Yeah, me too.

Silence. Key and Juniper nodding at one another. Thurman having a whacking great needle plunged in the old heart.

Key: Personal Protective Equipment.

Juniper: Yeah.

Key: Obviously.

Juniper: But you're saying some aliens wouldn't know what PPE is.

Key: I don't think I have a poem about PPE, to be fair.

Juniper: Oh okay.

Key: Personal Protective Equipment.

Juniper: Yup.

Key: They're wearing bin bags, some of 'em, Em.

Juniper: No, I know, it's a disgrace.

Key: Well, don't blame them, Em.

Juniper: I'm really not, Tim.

The NutriBullet. A big old blast.

Juniper: Why do you keep blasting your NutriBullet?

Key: Mice hate it.

Juniper: To ward them away.

Key: You don't say.

Juniper: I don't see why you don't get a catapult, ping some boiled sweets at them.

Key: Because I'm not from a comic, Em, I swear.

Juniper: Blasting a NutriBullet to ward off a mouse.

Key: We can't all have the perfect lockdown, Em.

Juniper: Stu's making a marinade using greengages –

That's enough for Key. "Girl, You'll Be A Woman Soon" fills the room, melted cheese crawls down Key's jaw. He zaps the NutriBullet again. John Travolta goes to the toilet.

Hologram.†



Jugstone went to the hologram store and gave the gentleman shitloads of photos of June taken from all different angles.

The gentlemen handed back the ones that he didn't need and went to his machine.

Jugstone was delighted with the hologram.

He walked outta there beaming, hand-in-hand with this new, magical June.

But by the time he had got her home she had almost entirely diffused and he had to Zoom the actual June to get his fix.

.....

†**Juniper:** Do people do this?

Key: Make holograms?

Juniper: As in, is it a London thing?

Key: Don't think so.

Juniper: We don't have it in Falmouth.

Bloody Masks.



I took off my mask.

No mouth!

I put my mask back on.

I was gutted.

The old mouth gone...

“Fucking 2020,” I wanted to say.

Sweden.

☎ Borse, Greens, Millicent & Lamb. | 10:30PM, April. | House party.

Swedish Night's in full, swing. Old school friends. A game of Doink! underway. Swedish fancy dress for all. ABBA filling their respective flats. The whole thing pinned together by screens. Always screens. Key, dressed like Zlatan, c.2010.

Millicent: *Skol!*

Borse: *Allez up!*

They all neck their Swedish schnapps. Borse's face is red, like it's been pickled and thwacked. Key throws his shot glass back and the liquid charges down his throat. Except his is not Swedish schnapps. Key has emptied his Swedish schnapps into a SodaStream bottle and replaced it with water. Key is clever.

Key: *Bleuugh! Wowee! They don't make 'em like they used to! Wowzers trousers!*

Millicent: *And now the herring!*

They delve into the herring; shove it down their cakeholes. Key dips out of shot for a second, throws his herring across his lounge, it splats against his Jacques Tati poster and slides down onto the floor, he comes back into shot, smacking his lips.

Key: *Oh boy. That's some herring!*

Borse: *That bloody schnapps is killer!*

Greens: *Okay, whose go?*

Lamb: *Mills, the herring's dynamite! Is that what everyone eats out there?*

Millicent: *People like it! Have you got your pickles, too?*

Lamb lifts her pickles to the screen, her hair is done in pigtails and she does her sternest possible face to look the most like Greta Thunberg she can.

Greens sits next to her, he is Björn or Benny or whoever the hell it is. Full tennis whites, wooden tennis racket.

Borse: My go!

Borse takes his turn of Doink! Pops the hat on, puffs out his cheeks. Key's door buzzer goes.

Key: One second, sir!

Millicent: Who's that?

Key: Nothing, no one. Kids, probably.

Key ducks out of shot, opens the door, pays the nice man, rolls back to the sofa. Plonks his vast pizza down next to him. Out Of Shot. Borse completes his go and wipes his face with the Doinking Flannel. People in hysterics. Key smiling. Everything warm.

Lamb: That was a better one, Borse!

Borse: I'm lashed this end.

Key: And I'm not?

Greens: The schnapps is brutal.

Key: You got that right.

Lamb: It does the trick.

Millicent: Skol!

Borse: Allez up!

Millicent: Doink!

Key necks another 5cl of water, the others char their throats on the schnapps. Borse is crying and weird juice is dribbling out of his nostrils.

Borse: That's what *I'm* talking about!

Greens: It's mad we meet weekly now.

Lamb: It's *great* that we meet weekly now.

Borse: It's fan-fucking-tastic that we meet weekly now.

Key: Fringe benefits of lockdown.

Millicent: Why aren't you slurring, Tim?

Key: Huh?

Millicent: Why isn't he slurring?

Key: *(Slurring)* Fringe benefits.

Greens: I've been looking it up. This is the most consecutive Sundays we've met up since school.

Millicent: Six in a row!

Borse: Six of the best!

Key: *Skol* to that! *Allez Up!*

Another "shot" some more "herring", a slice of Pepperoni Pizza, a sly sip of Camden Hells.

Millicent: What was that?

Key: Bollocks.

Millicent: Tim?

Key: Huh?

Borse: Yeah, I saw that. Was that a pizza box?

Key: Who?

Borse: You eating pizza?

Time stands still. Pepperoni rests on Key's tongue like a lozenge.

Millicent: Show us your schnapps bottle!

Key: What?

Lamb: Where's your pickle? Zoom out! What the hell's happening over there?

Borse: Move your device back, let's see the full picture! I'm lashed off my tits over here, what's happening, man?

Key: Let's just play Doink! can't we?

Millicent: Zoom out, Tim.

Lamb: Zoom out this instant!

Key Zooms out. It's like the discovery of a secret lab. The assembled screens' jaws drop.

Borse: Syphoned off the schnapps is it?

Key: Can we go back to talking about how nice it is to meet weekly?

Greens: Where is it? Is it in that SodaStream bottle?

Millicent: Doesn't look carbonated, that's for sure.

Key: Have you seen the state of the parks? Saw a group of thirty yesterday –

Borse: Open the SodaStream bottle, Tim.

Mamma Mia floods all the screens as Key opens the bottle. There isn't a pschhhht.

Key: Nah, that's water, look.

Borse: Drink it then.

Greens: That's the schnapps, right there.

Key: Can we not just play Doink?!

Millicent: Once you've drunk some of that.

Key: I struggle with this shit! That's all! I struggle with shots. I like it when it's beer, that's all. This stuff... I struggle with it. That's all.

Borse: And the herring! Don't forget the herring.

Key: Okay I'm doing it!

Borse: It's Swedish Night, man! Get it down ya!

Key goes pale as the schnapps hits his lips. He's passed out by the time it has begun working itself into his liver. He snores with his finger hooked behind his teeth, where he has shoved the herring in. When he wakes up, the game has been played to completion. Lamb is wearing the Doink! hat and the others have red crosses, drawn with lipstick, smeared across their faces.

Greens: Until next week then.

Borse: That was too good, I'm in charge next week. Got big plans!

Millicent: We're moving in the right direction.

Key: Thanks for organising, Mills.

Lamb: There he is.

Borse: You were talking in your sleep.

Key: About what?

Borse: I'll call you in the week. Check you're okay.

Key nods. He's interested to find out.

Borse: Adios amigos!

Millicent: Leave party!

Lamb: Leave party.

Key: Love you guys!

Key leaves party too. His drunken feet stretch out across the gnarled wooden floor. A miniature tide of schnapps laps at his toes. As he drifts into unconsciousness his teeth chew lazily at the soft spines of herring that populate his mouth. Another night chalked off.

Pile 'Em High.†



The parks got full.

The government waved through a new policy:
“Stacking”.

Now groups were allowed to assemble on top of one another.

Up to five groups of ten could stack like this.

Park wardens enforced a strict two-metre gap in between the stacks.

Joggers weaved between the stacks and sometimes clambered over them.

They would rest on top of the revellers and drink cider before scrambling back down and jogging on once more.

Snorting, panting, slaloming between these government-sanctioned piles of irrepressible humanity.

†**Juniper:** Did the parks get full in London then did they?

Key: Mad selfish. You should see 'em on the heath.

Juniper: You been up there?

Key: I wander up there sometimes, sure.

Juniper: You do?

Key: Take a look at the swindlers breaching lockdown.

Juniper: Okay.

Key: You want my opinion? No one should be on that bloody heath, simple as that. Who are these people?

Juniper: Yup.

Key: I can watch them for hours. Fascinating. How their minds work.

Juniper: So you're –

Key: Grab myself a Magnum, sit and watch. Appalled. Dismayed in fact.

The Street.

☎ No one & everyone. | Midday, April. | The Eyes.

Key is in his lounge. He's examining his damn iPhone. It's clean out of battery and he rams a wire up its jacksie. He stands over it, glumly. Occasionally he shakes it. He is agitated. Fatberg watches on. He is wearing a ballerina's tutu and his eyes seem beadier than usual. Key slumps onto the sofa, picks up the television remote and waves it vaguely at the flatscreen. He is naked at the mo and his thumb hovers over the green standby button. He frowns and places the remote back down on the pheasant incubator. He picks up his orange pen, removes the lid, licks his teeth and closes his eyes. There's nothing in his head so he puts the lid back on, places the orange pen on his notepad, backs away, out of the lounge. He moves slowly, his eyebrows knitted. His belly is packed-full of booze and biscuits, his bare feet slap hard against the floorboards.

He returns to the lounge. He's in his red tracksuit now and he's adjusting his headband. He checks his iPhone. There is a small graphic on the screen, talking about the battery, reiterating that the battery is out. Saying it'll charge imminently. Saying give it a chance. Key goes down on his haunches. He adjusts some Post-its, that cover the floor like ceramics. He clutches a handful and stands, his knees cracking and spitting like popping candy. He stands, stiff as a guardsman, and scrutinises a Post-it: "What's It All About?" His eyes widen and, after a short time, he drops the Post-its and they flutter down onto the floorboards, semi-adhering on landing. Key's legs give way and he rocks back onto his portly spine. He is face-up now, staring impassively at a light bulb. His hand snakes past his hip and up onto the pheasant incubator. It finds the remote control and fingers the standby button. He frowns. His eyes become square. Bits of Pointless and Poirot are oozing out of them; flooding his face, splashing down onto the floorboards. Columbo is clambering out of Key's left eye, scuttling across his cheek, leaping onto the pheasant incubator. Key blinks.

Now Key is up. He is removing plugs from sockets, tearing Scart-leads out, bunging them over his shoulder. Fatberg watches on, his lips inflating in appreciation of Key's work, his ballerina shoes, tightly-laced, his tongue imperceptibly licking his lips. Key now has the flatscreen on his back; his legs are bowed as he begins to walk. His knees clack against the floorboards as he moves, tortoiselike, towards the hall. And now he is moving through the study, and now he is smashing through the French windows. He is on his balcony, which is thin, and he brushes past his hammock, which is wretched, threadbare. A drizzle hangs in the air, moistening Key's shell. He hauls the flatscreen off his back and leans it up against the wall, which he has painted brilliant white. The Sony's legs crumple against a plant-pot containing a crippled sunflower, some mint, two cigarette butts and a Tunnock's wrapper.

Thoughts on the nature of solitude and dreams of a life outside issue in fragments onto Key's lips as he re-emerges into the main body of the flat. He continues to mutter as he lies on his bed and rolls himself into his duvet like a Swiss roll and the muttering ceases. He lies motionless. He is a chrysalis. Or the duvet is. Either way he can't see anything and he's having a think. After some minutes, he unrolls himself, tumbles through the hall and comes to a stop in the kitchen. He places a sweet rhubarb teabag in his Charles and Diana mug and shoves some boiling water over the top. He lifts the bag up and down in the water as he walks through into the lounge. And now he stands, his hands warming on his mug, facing the window. He stares through his grubby panes, onto the street beyond. There's some action down there. He presses his nose against the glass. He squints. There is a parade underway.

Key peers down at the mass of colour beneath him. Everyone he has ever met in his entire life is on the street. On floats, or marching alongside the floats, playing musical instruments, done out in fancy dress, laughing, singing, parading: everyone is there. Rick and Buddy are there. Bobby and Lord are there. Megan, Jelson, Robbie Carlisle; everyone is there. The Saturday Boys are there. The slt are there. Key's dentist is there – she's playing a flute. Helen and Katie are there. The Mousetrap girls are there, the guys from The Dot, the chaps from Ladybird Group, the camping lot, Dinky Donk, Auntie Mu, Charles de Gaulle, Penelope Pitstop, Jan M0lby. Javier

Bardem is there! One float is crammed with aunts playing kettledrums; another has everyone Key has ever played football with, beautifully styled as characters from The Wind in the Willows. Friends from university are dressed as beefeaters, the hen night from Center Parcs have come as handmaids, Harry Hill is dancing about as a 1950s butcher, a couple of WhatsApp groups shrouded in vast Chinese Dragons, weave their way between the floats, Key's nieces and nephews are bunging sweets into the crowd, the sun is beating down, fireworks are detonating, rainbows are everywhere.

Key's nose is splaying against the glass. His eyes are full of crap as he takes it in. As he considers the world. As he observes his past, his future, trundling past unceasingly. It is too much. He removes his white headband and dabs his cheeks momentarily. He can feel Fatberg's eyes boring into his shoulder blades. As the last float eases round the bend and its exhaust-smoke dissipates, Key takes a deep breath, recomposes himself. The street is empty. He unsticks his hooter from the pane. He sucks his tongue back into his gob.

Key slings the teabag over his shoulder and it lands near the bin. He crouches over his record player, flips Cilla Black over and sits back on his sofa. His eyes are scuffed up like ball bearings. His fingers escape him and close around the remote once more. He aims it where the telly once was, then lowers it, curses it, and bungs it in the drawer where his batteries and tea lights are kept. He checks his iPhone. It has come back to life. His niece fills the home screen and Key's eyes reinvigorate. He checks the percentage. We're on 7% and Key will take that. He sips his rhube and eats a Tunnock's. The crisp wafer, splodged with caramel. The hit. He begins scrolling through his favourites on his iPhone. He smiles as he reads their names, marvels at their numbers. He wants to interact with the world. He chooses a classic. He makes a call.

Week 7.

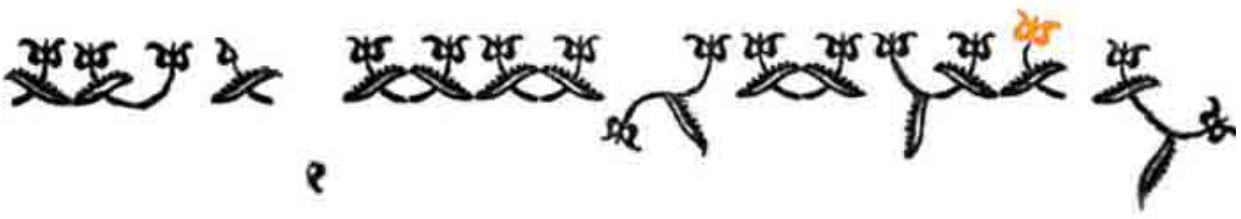


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VII.

In which The Poet makes a green friend, a slingshot arrives, and lasties comes home.

Another Day, Another Slogan.†



Bohnson was having an old-school shocker.

He'd been eating directly out of his clay honeypot immediately before the briefing and was now having to hide it behind his back.

Also, his latest slogan was going down badly.

It was 320 words long for a start-off.

It was overflowing with phrases like “sunbathing’s lush” and “go for it” and “I’ve got a lovely dickie.”

The Slappettes had written a jingle for it, but they’d run out of steam halfway through and the geekier of the two had chewed his lip up in embarrassment.

Bohnson snuck a fist into his mouth and sucked the sweet, sweet honey off it.

He crumpled his face so he didn’t smile too much, but this honey was something else.

†**Juniper:** Well what should their slogans be?

Key: Huh?

Juniper: You’re so clever, how would you sum the whole lot up in ten words?

Key: Um.. okay... Mask Up, Cheer Up... something-else Up.

Juniper: Throw up?

Key: You see – it’s not rocking-horse science, Em.

Juniper: Mask Up, Cheer Up, Throw Up.

Key: And four words left over.

Juniper: Keep Washing Your Hands!

Key: There you go, that old chestnut! Bang it in green and yellow,
people'd get the message in no time.

A Small Box.

☎ Amazon guy. | 11:00a.m, May. | The Flesh

Key is writing a letter with his orange pen. He has written “Dear Mouse,” but crossed out “Dear” and written an “!” after Mouse. He is baring his teeth as he writes. He is using phrases like “unreasonable” and “basic manners”. Hoagy Carmichael’s rotating on the turntable. Occasionally, Key twitches and spins round and there’s nothing there. The Intercom buzzer thing goes and he jumps out of his skin. He grabs the tray of Ferrero Rochers from the side. Shoves it behind his back. Buzzes the building open.

Amazon Guy: Hello.

The Amazon guy is wearing goalie gloves, tartan shorts, a Berghaus fleece and a facemask. There’s a small package halfway up the stairs. Key keeps his Ferrero Rochers behind his back, edges down.

Amazon Guy: I always like coming here.

Key: Oh?

Amazon Guy: The record player.

Key: How do you know it’s a record player?

Amazon Guy: I delivered it, no? A million years ago!

Key: Oh, yeah, you did. Ha. You did deliver it.

Amazon Guy: You’re on a streak right now.

Key: Huh?

Amazon Guy: Eleven days in a row I’ve brought you stuff.

Key: And I thank you for it.

Amazon Guy: You get a lot of stuff.

Key: Taking things seriously. Respecting the Locky D.

Amazon Guy: You have to.

Key: Say, um, you still getting gifts?

Amazon Guy: People are being very generous.

Key nods. Stabs the parcel with his Stanley knife; starts to free his quarry. His tray of Ferrero Rochers leans against the step behind him.

Twelve pieces, soft, and yet rugged. Smooth. Crunchy.

Amazon Guy: What ya got? What ya got?

Key smiles and winks and throws down the cardboard. The Amazon guy's eyes narrow. His facemask is actually a bit of a hoot. It depicts the bottom half of the late Bruce Forsyth's face.

Amazon Guy: What's that then?

Key: That? That's a catapult.

Amazon Guy: Classy.

Key: Check it out.

Amazon Guy: Like the fella from The Beano.

Key stretches the sling. It squeaks.

Key: Gotta take out some mice.

Amazon Guy: With a catapult?

Key: I've tried without and I've got nowhere.

Amazon Guy: How have you tried?

Key: Doesn't matter.

Amazon Guy: You need a cat.

Key spins and aims at the Amazon guy's throat. He zips his fleece to the top and smiles.

Amazon Guy: Don't like cats, huh?

Key: I missed that window. Should have got a cat week one. You don't get a cat week seven, believe me.

Amazon Guy: Had a lady just got an easel.

Key: In week seven?

Amazon Guy: Yuh.

Key: Well, good luck to her. The Maestro'll unlock in a mo and she'll be rushing her watercolours. Just the thought of it...

Amazon Guy: Her face when she opened it.

Key gropes behind his back for the Ferrero Rochers, fingers the packaging. Smiles. Ping. A text. He checks it. The smile evaporates.

Amazon Guy: What's up?

Key looks up from his iPhone, his face is grey, hollow.

Key: Greece.

Amazon Guy: Gone?

Key: Greece has fallen.

Amazon Guy: Oh boy.

Key: Summer's buggered.

Amazon Guy: It's mad times.

Key: One way of putting it.

Amazon Guy: No Greece. Dream's over. All done.

Key goes cross-eyed and sits on his step. He stuffs his head between his balls for a bit.

Amazon Guy: When Matilda got canned I borrowed the CD off another Amazon Guy. I know it's not the same. But maybe you can get some audio of the ocean, some photos of people enjoying the beaches, chowing down on tsatsiki, yer know. There might be candles, which pump out a Greek aroma...

Key straightens up, as if he's been inflated with a foot pump. His face is blank, his fingers obsess with the catapult again.

Key: Can't say I mind your mask.

Amazon Guy: Nerds are saying wear a mask.

Key: Fair play to yer.

The Amazon guy pings his mask and shrugs.

Key: I've gotta say though: I'm clean as a whistle, me.

Amazon Guy: I'm a mask guy now, I think.

Key: Well, don't do it on my account, that's all.

Amazon Guy: Well, it's actually to stop you getting it, that's why I'm wearing it.

Key nods. Clueless.

Amazon Guy: Do you see what I mean?

Key nods in exactly the same way. Nothing.

Amazon Guy: If I have this on, I can't spread.

Key blinks.

Amazon Guy: As in you wear it to protect others, really, rather than yourself.

Key: Brucie.

Amazon Guy: Yeah, it's Bruce Forsyth.

Key: Play Your Cards Right.

Amazon Guy: That's the one.

Key: Good game, good game.

Amazon Guy: It was a gift.

Key: Now then.

Key stands, finally. Puffs his chest out like a robin redbreast. His Ferrero Rochers are clutched against his spine. He stares down at the Amazon guy, who looks back up dolefully.

Key: It's not much.

Amazon Guy: It doesn't have to be much.

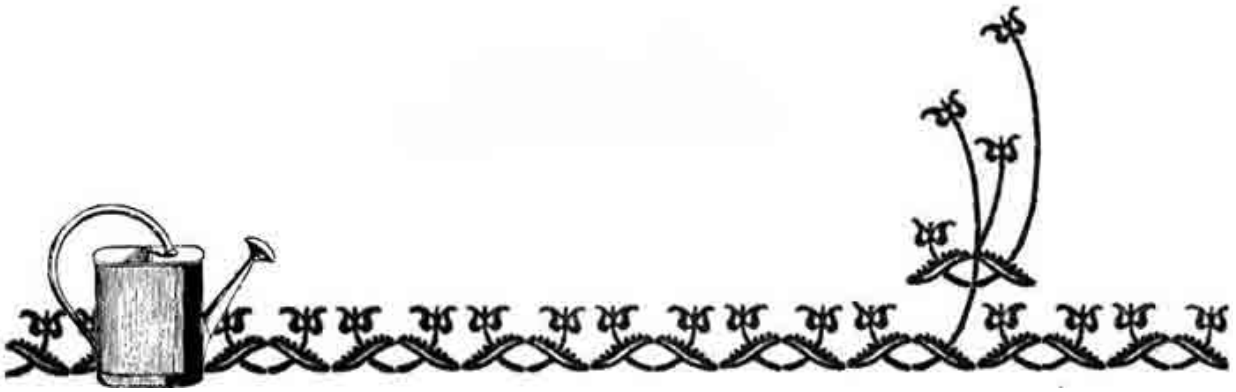
Key frisbees down the luxury chocolates. The Amazon guy ducks and they crack against the wall, shattering the injection-moulded plastic. He unwraps a nest and devours it, never taking his eye off of Key.

Key: You're doing a great job. Is that the sort of... is that a good-level gift?

Amazon Guy: People give me all sorts.

He barely looks down at all, just flicks his eyes to the ground for a millisecond. His trainers are as bright as buttons. Adidas Gazelles. If it's possible for suede to sparkle, these things do. He unzips a sports bag, also shiny, pours the chocolates in, returns himself to his full height. Key tries to read his eyes. Expectancy?

Flora.



I went up the garden centre.

Finally!

I bought a cactus and some mint things and asked the cashier out.

After work, we went up the park.

I couldn't kiss her because my tongue was less than two metres long.

Also, she kept pointing at all the trees and saying what make they were, and a chopper buzzed above us and a chap with a loud hailer kept yelling at us, saying we weren't essential, and also mean stuff about my goatee.

Snitch. †



I climbed my snitching ladder and surveyed the streets with my Canon telephoto camera.

Yes! Multiple journeys from the chap in the kilt again!

I pulled together a photographic dossier with timecodes and Zoomed the authorities.

“More news on McPisstake,” I said, sipping my sweet rhubarb tea, “tell me if this little lot sounds essential...”

†**Key:** You should illustrate some of these.

Juniper: I know. I’ve started tinkering with the ornamental borders.

Key: Okay, I’m talking about drawing pictures, Em. Getting your Blake on.

Juniper: I’m going to treat the Bohnson poems –

Key: “Treat”? Draw em, Em! Draw!

Juniper: I’m gonna have a lion motif.

Key: Jesus wept.

Juniper: Trust me.

Key: “Motif” though. Draw a chap in a kilt with massive teeth, Em!

Plant.

☎ The Colonel. | 5:00PM, May | iPhones.

Key stands in front of his plant. It has thick green leaves and a pink face. The two organisms stare at one another. Key's iPhone is clamped to his jaw, it connects, Key's jaw begins to move.

Key: I got it.

Colonel: Oh, you did?

Key: I got it, I'm about to water it –

Colonel: We were down the garden centre, couldn't resist.

Key: Oh, they opened, huh?

Colonel: Popped it on your front step, ran for cover.

Key: I've put it by my lava lamp. It's a beauty.

A plant, yes. Next to a lava lamp. And no telly. Divots marking where once it stood.

Colonel: We bought a grapevine.

Key: Oh yeah?

Colonel: What?

Key: Didn't know you could do that.

Colonel: Huh? What you talking about?

Key: I thought it was just a phrase.

Colonel: You thought "grapevine" was a phrase.

Key: A song then.

Colonel: Nah, it's a vine, man.

Key: Covered in grapes, I bet.

Colonel: Comes on a massive bit of cardboard. Nail that onto your wall, that weathers away and then your vine stays up, clings on for dear life.

Key: Produces grapes like they're going out of fashion, I bet –

Colonel: That's the idea.

Key's staring out of the window. People. Traipsing along with plants, their legs bowing under the weight. As they come across other humans, they

cross the road, clipping into street furniture, then steadying themselves, then progressing once more.

Key: Grapes are the same thing as raisins, right.

Colonel: Of course.

Key: What do you mean “of course”?

Colonel: What?

Key: You know that, do you?

Colonel: Yeah, I do.

Key: Oh, you do?

Colonel: Yup. Grapes, raisins, wine. All the same thing.

Key: Wait a second, where are you?

Colonel: Highgate Cemetery.

Key: Pervert.

Colonel: How’s that perverted?

Key: I dunno, I’m all over the place here, you carry on.

Colonel: Paying my respects to –

Key: All the famous dead people, yeah, I get it.

Key goes back to his plant. He twiddles his fingertips under its chin. The plant appears to be looking past him, squinting at the Post-its.

Colonel: Well, look, make sure you look after it –

Key: Wine, too, is it?

Colonel: Huh?

Key: You get wine from grapes, you’re telling me.

Colonel: Are you okay?

Key: It’s a long lockdown.

Colonel: Yeah. Yeah, I know.

Key: They said three weeks.

Colonel: Yeah.

Key: Weird three weeks.

Colonel: Yeah. Yeah, I know.

Key does a circuit of his flat. His walls are wailing. The Post-its billow as the mice cry. Each time he hears a squeak he flicks the wall with his orange pen and sucks his gums. He finishes his patrol and returns to the plant, which appears to wink at him.

Key: I'm gonna feed this thing up. See how big I can get it.

Colonel: That's what she said.

Key: Still on for the Zoom Pint?

Colonel: Big time. The return of lasties.

Key: *Virtual* lasties.

Colonel: Oh yeah, very good.

Key: Three miles apart. That socially distanced enough for you, Maestro?

Colonel: It won't be forever.

Key shuts his eyes. He's in the pub again. The bar supervisor is serving someone else. She catches his eye and smiles, stops serving that relic, bounces over to Key, pours a pint directly down his throat. Key's eyes flick open, hearts for pupils.

Key: I'm a bit nervous.

Colonel: Why?

Key: What if Virtual Lasties ain't the same.

Colonel: It'll be fine, trust me. You got some good booze in?

Key: I'm throwing the kitchen sink at this.

Colonel: Craft beers, is it?

Key: I've got a mixture, pulled out the, yer know, what's it called?

Colonel: The stops?

Key: No, the shelving stuff, in the fridge.

Colonel: Oh, the infrastructure, sure.

Key: That's the fella. Guttled it, stacked ninety-odd cans in there.

Colonel: The new normal.

Key: No. No, it ain't. This ain't forever. It's the temporary normal. For now.

Colonel: This time next year we'll be down the boozier –

Key: "Next year"? WTF?

Colonel: Or whenever.

Key: We're weeks away, I can smell it.

Colonel: I try not to think about it.

Key: I can't stop.

Colonel: You'll go mad.

Key: I dreamt about it last night.

Silence from The Colonel.

Key: Me and thee, putting the world to rights, sat by the fire, heads rocking back, place filled with laughter.

Colonel: Yeah, I like that.

Key: Bar supervisor handing out freebies like they're going out of fashion.

Colonel: Chowing down on pork pies, piano guy hammering the ivories –

Key: Whose dream is this?

Colonel: Well, what then?

Key: Everyone in suits, the whole thing undulating like we're on a ship.

Colonel: Huh?

Key: Flower girl comes over –

Colonel: What the hell's a flower girl?

Key: She turns round, it's Emma Bunton.

Colonel: Might have known it.

Key: I can't help my dreams, Colonel.

Colonel: They won't be dreams for long.

Key: But tomorrow we drink alone.

Colonel: But together.

Key considers this. He is in the kitchen now and picks an empty Kronenbourg 1664 can out of the sink. He wipes off some remnants of dough from the sides and fills it with water.

Key: Thanks again for the plant.

Colonel: That's the first thanks.

Key: Tatty bye.

Key's in front of his plant again and pours the tin of water right down her gullet. He can hear the stalk swallowing hard. Glugging down into the root.

Cut-Out.



It was Brewster's birthday.

I bought a life-size cardboard cut-out of Jürgen Klopp and ran it down to his house.

I had a long discussion with a rozzar en route.

It centred around the phrase "essential".

I had placed the life-size cardboard cut-out of Jürgen Klopp down next to us and he watched the discussions unfold.

The manufacturers of the £39.99 structure sure had chosen a good facial expression for Jürgen Klopp for this kind of situation.

He looked amused by the member of the constabulary's take on things.

This rozzar quizzing me on my lockdown.

Jürgen just stood there, taking the sun and chuckling.

Juniper: This one I don't get so much.

Key: Which is okay.

Juniper: Is Jürgen Klopp a footballer?

Key: Manager, but –

Juniper: What if people don't like football?

Key: I've read poetry books where they've gone on about tarns, Em.

Juniper: What's tarns?

Key: Tarns are little lakes.

Juniper: Okay.

Key: You think I want to hear about tarns?

Juniper: So this is kind of revenge poetry.

Key: What a phrase.

Juniper: Well, is it?

Key: What an insane phrase.

Dahl.



I invented a vaccine!

Yay!

Everyone was pleased with me.

There was only one cup of it and it was quite thick and I couldn't remember how I'd made it.

^a government official phoned and started talking about having to test it and "put it on trial" and at this point I bowed out.

I hung up, necked the gunk and slung my cup against my filing cabinet.

I wandered back into my kitchen, my mojo battered.

I started screwing the lids back onto my cordials and my Night Nurse and my trusty HP sauce.

Telly And Belly.

☎ Emily Juniper. | 6:40PM, May. | Landline v iPhone.

Key is lying on his bed in his black and red striped jumper. His buzz cut's grown out and is dark and spiky. He is flexing his catapult, his wrists pulsate. The rubber is thick, Key is breathless with the effort The iPhone twitches like a witches nose: Emily Juniper.

Juniper: Can you talk?

Key: Yeah, course. Did you get the new poems?

Juniper: Yeah, it's... you know.

Key: Thank you.

Juniper: Now, I wanted to talk about paper grades.

Key: You're within your rights.

Juniper: Why aren't you watching telly?

Key: I don't always watch telly.

Juniper: You watch Come Dine with Me.

Key: My TV's on the balcony. Agent made me put it there. Get focused.

Juniper: Good idea.

Key: It's a new telly, Em.

Juniper: Should be waterproof then.

Haydn plays softly on the record player in the other room. "Symphony No. 101: The Clock". Tick Tock.

Juniper: I've been in touch with Calverts. Now, they haven't fired up their presses just yet but –

Key: I'm free till seven forty-five.

Juniper: They've sent me some samples, which I love. What are you doing at seven forty-five?

Key: Oh, just a Zoom, yer know.

Juniper: Oh, great.

Key: So yeah, do that.

Juniper: It's important to be social. I'm Zooming tons. I have, there's two people I haven't seen since sixth form, basically, and we've been

Zooming every Friday night. It's mad.

Key: This is it.

Juniper: Who are you Zooming?

Key: Huh?

Juniper: At seven forty-five.

Key: Oh. Belly dancer.

Juniper: Pardon me?

Key: So, paperwise –

Juniper: What do you mean a belly dancer?

Key: What do you mean what do I mean? I've grown a pair and I've hired a Turkish lady and she's going to belly dance for me at seven forty-five.

Key runs his thumb over his spiky hair, wincing as he touches it.

Key: I gotta get through the days, Em.

Juniper: I guess.

Key: Now, I don't want it to be printed on tracing paper, by the way.

Juniper: So, what, you just log in and... I mean, do you pay?

Key: Three quid. Don't think it's just me if I'm honest.

Juniper: Guess her live stuff's dried up.

Key: I'm sure belly dancing's one of those sports where –

Juniper: It's not really a sport.

Key: Remind me never to introduce you to Yagmur.

Juniper: I can't believe you've hired a belly dancer.

Key: It's called being cultural.

Juniper: You've never shown much of an interest in that neck of the woods.

Key: Well, you're giving it the big 'un. What have you done today?

Juniper: Not much, obviously.

Key: So don't start mouthing off about my belly dancer.

Juniper: We've got the sea here, so me and Stu just went and walked Pongo. Took some lunch down, had it on the rocks.

Key: Right, well, we *ain't got the sea here* so I've hired a belly dancer.

Juniper: I didn't even know you could do that?

Key: And I did? If I had an indoor telly I'd be watching Point Break tonight, believe me.

Juniper: Swayze.

Key: Well, anyway, let's talk paper grades tomorrow.

Juniper: Okay.

Key: I want it somewhere in between tissue paper and cardboard.

Juniper: Yeah, that's what I was thinking. Um...

Key: Yeah?

Key thinks he spots fur, quick and sleek, emerging from beneath the Warren Evans dresser and slowly raises his catapult.

Key: What's on your mind?

Juniper: Well... just... Well, what's the book?

Key: Huh?

Juniper: As in what actually is it?

Key stares straight ahead. His saliva tastes acidic as hell.

Juniper: My mum asked me what the book was and I didn't really know what to say.

Key: It's, well, you know, it is what it is.

Juniper: Yeah, I said that.

Key: What do you mean what's the book?

Juniper: You keep saying about conversations. But what are they?

Key: About lockdown life. About, you know. The days sort of... the kind of ploddingness of it all.

Juniper: Sounds... mundane.

Key: This is what I'm trying to tell you, Em. It's gotta be mundane. That's what lockdown is, you know. It's mundane as fuck.

Juniper: I'm saying you don't want your *book* to be mundane. That's all.

Key: Don't I? Well, thanks for telling me what I do and don't want my book to be like. That's great to know.

As the catapult is at its most taut, so Key releases it. The leather sling springs forward, propelling a Halls Soother at great velocity towards the clawed foot of the Warren Evans dresser. It cracks against a toe and ricochets around the room, pinging off light fittings, smashing a Muji aroma diffuser and planting itself into the spine of a book celebrating 1950s' pin-ups.

Juniper: You should go and get ready for your belly dancer.

Key: Don't say "get ready" like that.

Juniper: Like what?

Key: The book is... well, it's an historical document.

Juniper: I don't think this is an historical document, Tim.

Key: Yet.

Juniper: It's just a load of old –

Key: People study history, Em.

Juniper: Yeah, I know they study history.

Key: I think this stands a chance. When we're all six feet under, some kid'll be studying this, finding out how things were.

Juniper: It's unreliable –

Key: He'll be pleased of it, wading through all the dry stuff, then this. It'll perk him up.

Juniper: It ain't Pepys –

Key: Thank fucking gawd.

Juniper: I'll tell my mum it is what it is.

Key: Yeah, that's about right.

Juniper: Okay, well. Good luck with tonight.

Key: Thanks, I mean, I'm not the one belly dancing.

Juniper: Even so.

Key: Of course, if that way goes the game...

Juniper: I don't think you'd be a bad belly dancer.

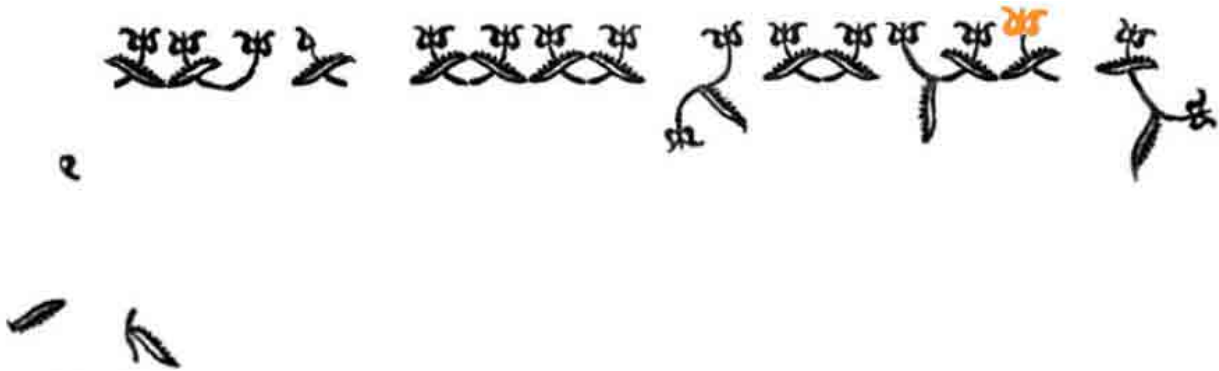
Neither of the collaborators speaks for over ten seconds.

Juniper: Let's speak next week then.

Key: Stay safe, Em, for heaven's sake.

Key's iPhone is placed in his phone bowl. Key cups his ear, floods it with distant Haydn. He closes his eyes, furrows his brow. Recollects the episode of Come Dine with Me, where two contestants fall out because one man called the other man's egg simplistic. His lips curl. He exhales and is momentarily at peace.

Tension.



You do the fucking briefing then!”

Bohnson slammed his squash down on his lectern thingy.

Cumdawg was sat in his camping chair beyond the cameras, eating a Pret Swedish Meatball Wrap and clutching a mocha.

He adjusted his AirPods.

“Nah, you’re alright, leave that to the pros.”

The way he said “pros” was grim, stretched, infected.

Bohnson continued to mop his Robinsons up with his tie.

“You tell me how to do it, I do it, you tell me I’ve done it wrong.”

Bohnson was swallowing his words.

Mme K watched on awkwardly from her screen.

She could hear Cumdawg’s colourless drawl behind her.

“What d’ya want? You want me to tell you you’re nailing it, Big Guy?”

He took another Pret Swedish Meatball Wrap from his record bag and started ripping absent-mindedly at the cardboard.

He pointed at the graphs.

“Great tolls by the way, Maestro,” he said, his voice now stretched to a thread, insolent, bleachy.

Buzzing Again.

📞 Jelson. | 4:00AM EST, May. | Facetime.

Key is stood in front of the mirror tarting up his buzz cut. His beard trimmer works its way smoothly from front to back, turning in his nape and moving forward once more. His iPhone sits in the sink, trying to connect to Jelson via the medium of FaceTime. Sporadically Key has to dial again. He keeps at it. Eventually a connection. Jelson.

Jelson: *(In a whisper)* What the fuck, Bong?

Key: *(Normal)* Aha! My man in the field!

Jelson: This is not cool, it's the middle of the night.

Key: Huh?

There is shuffling and some swearing Jelson's end.

Key: Just wanted to talk Locky D, stateside, that's all.

Jelson: We're doing this?

Key: In the sense of

Jelson: *Time difference-wise....*

Key: Yeah, I don't think we have that here.

Jelson: What time is it there?

Key: 9am – people over here are joking about not knowing what day it is.

Jelson's face is dark. He's starting to warm up though.

Jelson: Yup, people joke about that here, too.

Key: Oh yeah?

Jelson: Yeah, on the talk shows.

Key: Well, ain't that something. You see, this is what I'm after. What's the same, what's different —

Jelson: It's 4am here, though.

Key: I'm mad for this shit. Bang up for chatting about this.

There's more shuffling, more swearing. A faint breath of night-time seems to rise up from Key's iPhone. Key starts working up his sideburns. Making them look just so.

Jelson: I'm gonna take you into the kitchen, Lina's asleep.

Key: Oh yeah, sure. Lina.

Jelson: Yes, Lina. Hang on.

Key: I'm doing it solo of course. A whole however long it's gonna be, all on my tod. Can you imagine? No human contact. Fuck me, it really hammers it home how much that stuff means, yer know. A peck on the cheek for nailing a risotto, a couple of big old legs slung over your lap in front of Poirot... a hug! Oh boy –

Jelson: Hello?

Key: Hey, d'ya get that?

Jelson: What?

Key: Just talking about the importance of human contact, that's all.

Jelson: Oh yeah. You stuffed up on yer own then, are ya?

Key clutches his bollocks and peers down into his iPhone. Jelson's sat with a coffee now, the moonlight catching his jaw. He is very handsome and has a little top on.

Jelson: Get yourself a cat.

Key: Not this again.

Jelson: I've got a cat.

Key: By that rationale am I also getting myself a South American wife and a racing bicycle?

Jelson: You could do worse.

Key: Are you yawning?

Jelson: It's 4am, Bong.

Key: Why are you even up?

Jelson: You shouldn't phone me before 2pm your time.

Key: I think all that stuff's out of the window in lockdown. Time's gone up the spout.

Jelson: The baby'll be up soon –

Key: Let's talk more about differences, can't we?

Jelson takes down some coffee. This won't last forever.

Key: What's your PM like?

Jelson: President. Waste of space. Yours?

Key: Well, our chap went to a hospital and started shaking patients' hands like they were going out of fashion.

Jelson: Classy.

Key: Next thing he knows *he's* flat on his back and they're trying to keep the old sod alive.

Jelson: Our one reckons he's an expert on the bloody stuff, that's our problem.

Key: Yeah, well, we've got nerds doing that.

Jelson: Oh, we've got nerds.

Key: You do?

Jelson: Yeah, head dweeb's a pecker.

Key: Short guy?

Jelson: Four foot zip in heels, can't see over his lectern.

Key: Does he do slideshows?

Jelson: Serious question?

Key: Right, ours too. Can't help themselves. Yours bald?

Jelson: May as well be.

Key: Bloody slapheads.

Jelson: Our guy's calling it Kung Flu.

Key: Classy.

Jelson: He keeps barking at the press.

Key: Oh, he does, huh?

Jelson: He thinks they're phoney, gives 'em an earful.

Key: Sure, sure. Our one's given 'em the heave-ho. Has 'em on the telly.

Jelson: They ain't in the same room?

Key: Nah, man, they're in their studies. Zoom it in.

Jelson: Well, that's as classy as all hell.

Key flicks off his beard trimmer and the air gradually empties itself of hair. There is a stillness. He peers into his sink. Jelson sips his coffee. Yawns.

Key: Man, you look fucked.

Jelson: You shouldn't always phone me when you're giving yourself a buzz cut, either.

Key: I'm a creature of habit. Just do the same things. Get through it.

Jelson: This is the hard bit, I think.

The guy looks battered.

Jelson: Seven weeks in, with the baby – oh we were going to ask you if you'd be happy to be her –

Key: It's the repetitiveness, isn't it? Eating the same old crap, watching the same old stuff, Zooming the same old people.

Jelson: Should have got yourself a girlfriend.

Key: I met someone right before.

Jelson: Did you talk about doing lockdown together?

Key: Stop yawning, man.

Jelson: Sorry, go on.

Key: She liked my jumper, that's all. I dunno, perhaps it's in my head. She smiled though, that's for sure. A professional; high up at the pub. She's kept me going in my darker moments I must say. But what ya gonna do?? She'll have locked herself up in some corner somewhere. I mean what can you do? Jelson? J? Oh.

Key sighs and the tiny shards of hair fly up out of the sink and dance in front of the mirror. They descend once more, settling on Jelson's screen. Jelson is asleep now, his coffee resting at an angle on his testicles. Key presses End, snatches up his iPhone and fills the sink with water. As it splashes and bubbles the hair is swept into mesmerising patterns, like an old-school starling murmuration.

Romance.



Two lovers, exiled from one another.

They started doing the same things at all times.

He would post her a bagel for breakfast and they would eat “together”.

For lunch they would cook linguini, slinging it into the pan at twelve forty-five on the dot.

They’d run at five and stop in front of their respective oak trees, and in the evening they’d start their movie at the exact same time and watch it with the same red wine in matching glasses, and it was beautiful.

At night they screwed their respective flatmates, and all four had a WhatsApp group and it was an *absolute disgrace*.

The Big Man.†



God finally got his screen thing working.

890 messages.

What?!

He clicked on Earth.

He almost dropped his chocolate milk.

What???!

He pulled his cloak back over his shoulder and rang through to Dianne.

“Di! Call the angels! We’ve got a massive fucking problem here, excuse my French.”

†**Juniper:** God drinks chocolate milk, do we think?

Key: I’m guessing so.

Juniper: Classy.

Key: He’s God, Em. He can have whatever the fuck he wants.

Juniper: Ha ha, I guess.

Key: Probably has a fridge in his study.

Juniper: I bet his study’s amazing!

Key: And quite right, too. No study too good for that guy, I’m serious.

A New Lasties.

☎ The Colonel. | 10:30PM, May. | Zoom.

A thick glass pint with a filthy great handle, tipping into outstretched lips. Beer running down Key's chins, dripping onto his freshly-pressed shirt.

Key: Nah, that's a good drop that.

Colonel: Nah, good to see you, old boy.

Key: Cor, it's slipping down alright. I'll give you that.

Colonel: What'ya got?

Key: That would be a slight case of a Cannonball India Pale Ale.

Colonel: I think I have one of those up my sleeve.

Key: No good up there, Son.

Colonel: Get it down my throat, good point.

Key: Nature's sleeve.

Key slams his pint glass down and is off to the fridge. We can see his fat ass as he tears open another tin and squeezes it into his vessel.

Colonel: Not touching the sides!

Key: I'm in the pub, that's what's happening.

Colonel: Takes you there, dunnit?

Key: Yes, John. It does.

Colonel: Transported to the Southy! The roaring fire!

Key: I miss the fucking pub.

Colonel: Yeah.

Key: God, that's good.

Key slams down his pint glass. Again his fat ass rocking into the distance. He rips open a new one and fills his pot again. He's back on his stool, The Colonel's disappeared.

Key: Colonel?

The Colonel wanders back in, he's sliced the top off his next ale with a breadknife and is bunging it into his tankard.

Colonel: To lockdown!

They smash their cups against their respective screens. Key's goes on his a bit. John's image distorts; separating like eggs.

Colonel: They're talking about easing it, you know.

Key: Yup. I know, don't worry about that. I'm following it.

Colonel: They might have to close it all back up though.

Key: Thought I just said I'm following it.

Colonel: You can see people, that's what they're saying. In public spaces.

Key: A window.

Colonel: A chink.

Key: I've got plans, Colonel.

Colonel: Oh yeah?

Key: I'm gonna meet someone.

Colonel: Cheers to that!

The Colonel slams his pint into his screen. He smashes it and Adnams Ghost Ship sloshes into the cracks. Key's face becomes distorted, gaunt.

Key: I'm gonna find someone and, you know, fall in love. That's the aim.

Colonel: Ha ha. What?

Key: We could be locked up for good.

Colonel: Find who? A girl?

Key: Nooooo. You don't say.

Colonel: But the pubs aren't open.

Key: Take advantage of the momentary easing, that would be the idea.

Colonel: You're talking about going on some dates.

Key: I'm talking about the bar supervisor, Colonel.

Colonel: Oh aye.

Key: We don't know how big the window is, that's all. I need to act fast.

Colonel: Well, where does that leave me?

Key: I'm not doing another six months like this, Colonel. I swear. I spent ten minutes talking to my George Foreman grill earlier.

Colonel: Where does it leave me, I said.

Key: I'm not losing sleep over you. Curled up with Gab, casting your eyes over Newsnight, batch-cooking like your lives depend on it.

Colonel: We do okay, sure.

Key: I'm alone, like an egg. I gotta propose to the bar supervisor.

Colonel: Propose is it?

Key: Meet her on those picnic tables by the cricket ground.

Colonel: They'll be packed, man.

Key: Scotch eggs and snakebite, then bring out the ring.

Colonel: You've gone mad, man. It's the lockdown. You're not thinking straight.

Key: "Bar supervisor, will you marry me?"

Colonel: Gotta learn her name, bro.

Key: I'll wear the blue jumper she likes.

Colonel: Learn her name, too, though.

Key: Give it a good wash.

Colonel: Use the right setting –

Key: Down on one knee, stench of Lenor up her nostrils.

Key breathes out and his lips billow. He turns his can upside down. All gone, drips on the tiles. Ass to fridge, can ripped, glass filled, ass on stool, seamless.

Colonel: You got a mouse?

Key: Huh?

Key spins round. Sees its flank. It didn't disappear this time, more "slipped quietly away".

Colonel: It just was walking behind you.

Key: For fuck's sake.

Colonel: Mimicking your walk.

Key: It's killing me, man.

Colonel: That ain't nice.

Key: I've bought humane traps.

Colonel: Oh aye. We had mice.

Key: Go on. I can hear mine in the walls. I'm telling ya.

Colonel: I used to take my duvet into the attic.

Key: Go on.

Colonel: Dad got glue traps.

Key nods solemnly.

Colonel: I come down to the kitchen one morning –

Key: I know how this ends.

Colonel: There's the glue trap...

Key: Yup.

Colonel: Two feet stuck in it, no mouse.

Key: Well, don't spell it out.

Colonel: It must have –

Key: Yeah, I know what it must have done, Colonel, don't spell it out, mate.

Colonel: Well, there you go, good luck with 'em.

The plastic stool, empty. Then Key's ass lands back down on it. He's got a 330ml this time. The Colonel didn't even notice him go.

Key: Bibble.

Colonel: What's that?

Key: This one's called Bibble.

Colonel: Fair play.

Key: Cycled up to Crouch End for it.

Colonel: "Essentials".

Key: I don't know why you're chuckling, Colonel, I happen to think it is essential. I'm going mad over here.

Colonel: You're proposing to the bar supervisor.

Key: To an angel.

Colonel: To a notion.

Key: She's probably having the exact same chat with her equivalent of you.

Colonel: Yup.

Key: Wouldn't you say?

Colonel: A hundred per cent.

Key swallows the ring-pull and washes it down with the Bibble.

Key: Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhh.

Colonel: *The Zoom Pint.*

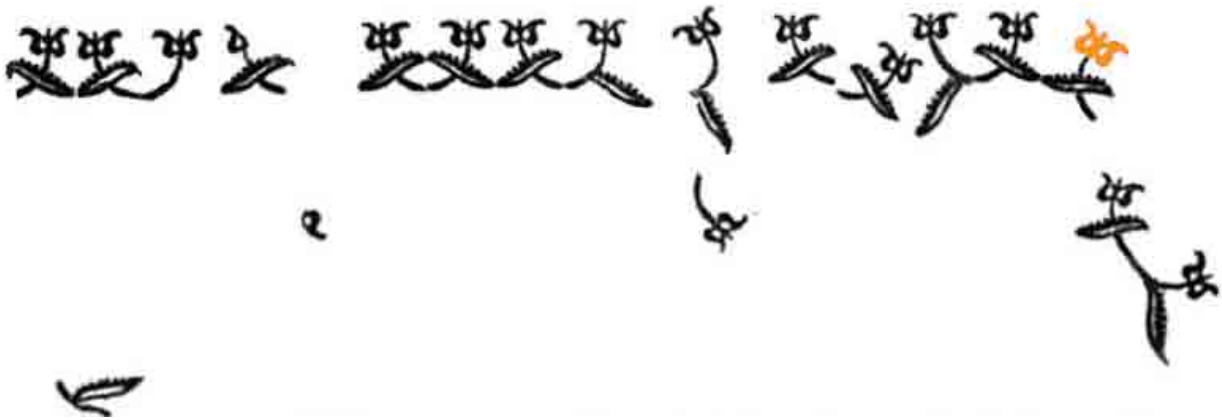
Key: Yup.

Colonel: Zoomos Zoomos-Ghali.

Key: I'll drink to that.

He does. He looks over his shoulder at the fridge. His knees are twitching again. This stuff's slipping down a treat.

A New Dad.



Stevie Wonder's "Isn't She Lovely" (1976) kicked in hard and Bohnson gyrated into the briefing.

He had a dummy in his gob and he was wearing an oversized nappy.

"Louder! Make it louder! I love it!!!"

Some hack on a screen started asking a question about something-or-other grim, but Bohnson was really moving now.

He was flanked by the nerds and they were dancing a bit too.

Bohnson unpinned himself and slapped his boy with his fist.

"Old faithful strikes again!" he winked and now he was singing.

Lyricaly, he was all over the place 'cos he hadn't prepped properly.

"Get 'em on the screen, Moggs!"

Moggeth twiddled a knob and Bob Piston disappeared and the words sprang up.

Bohnson was belting it out now.

The Slappettes pulled maracas from behind their lecterns.

It was euphoric.

Week 8.

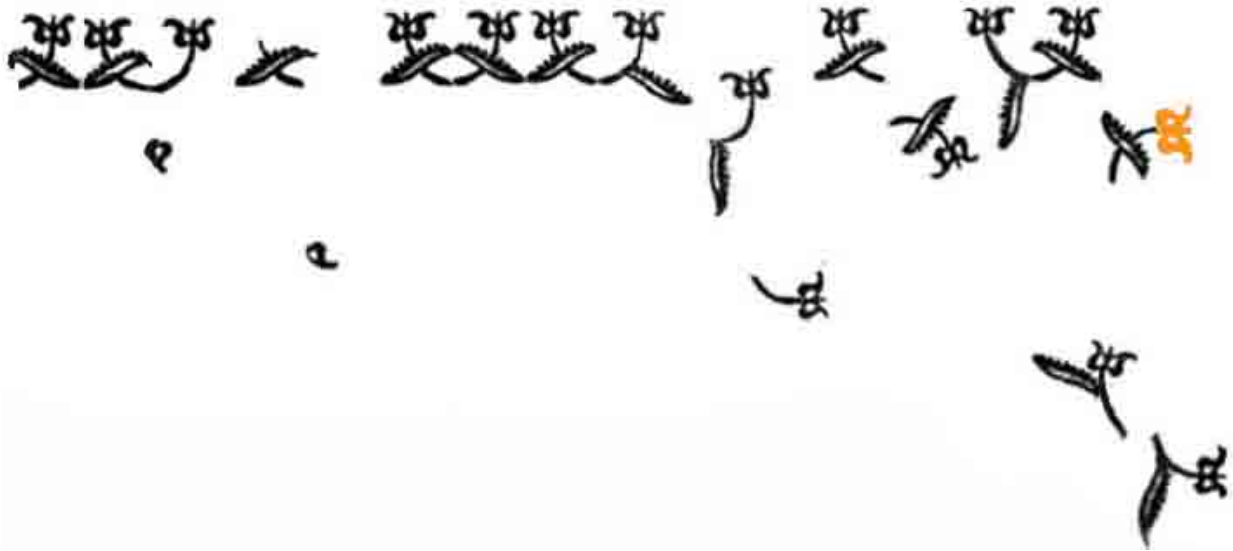


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VIII.

In which Cupid sends a Zoom-link, yeast gets boiled up, and a one-ton beast with fantastic udders clomps up the stairs.

Whatevs.†



Control-P, Bohns, I love it!”

Bohnson hit print and the new poster crawled into Moggeth’s clutches.

“Oh Bohns, it’s wonderful!”

This one said “Whatevs” in big, pink bubble writing on an orange-and-yellow marshmallow background.

Moggeth was marching around the kitchen with it like a ring girl, his funny little shoes clacking on the tiles.

Bohnson was blushing.

He’d spent forty-five minutes hunched over his Dell and his brain was in pieces, but to see Moggeth react like this, to see him animated, to see him so chipper, this was wonderful.

†**Juniper:** Seriously, what’s Moggeth?

Key: Huh? Moggeth’s Moggeth.

Juniper: Okay, that doesn’t –

Key: I'm not spoon-feeding these gels, Em, I'm really not.

Juniper: I never know what you mean when you say gels.

Key: That's a shame.

Juniper: Well, what does it mean?

Key: Well, what do you think it means?

Juniper: Something bad?

A Din.

📞 Emily Juniper. | 10:30AM, May. | Landline v iPhone.

Key has a bandage on his hand today. His iPhone judders. He heaves a huge lockdown breath and picks up Emily Juniper.

Juniper: Hey, Tim. Have we got a title for it yet? Tim?

Key: Huh?

Juniper: What's that noise? Tim?

Key: I'm having a bad day, Em.

Juniper: Oh, right.

The noise isn't great. There's lots of it, it's like a mosaic. Plenty of kitchen stuff for a start-off. Certainly a food mixer. But also a, God knows, potentially a strimmer? The Strokes are in the lounge, spinning on the turntable. They are cooler than us.

Key: It just caught me off guard, that was the problem.

Juniper: What's the noise, Tim? Turn some stuff off.

Key: I know.

Juniper: It's stressing me out.

Key: I wasn't ready and I've been on the back foot, that's all.

Juniper: Ready for what?

Key: The lockdown, Em! The jizzing pando! What do you think?!

Silence, apart from all the noise.

Juniper: You've got your writing at least. What's the noise, Tim?

Key: I know I've got my writing. I've got my writing, I've got my mice, I've got my Zoom calls, I've got my shit bread. It caught me on the hop that's all.

Juniper: How are the mice?

Key: Next pandemic, I'm gonna be dangerous.

Juniper: Okay.

Key: I'm gonna be prepped, believe me –

Juniper: Focus on the pandemic you're on, I would.

Key: Gonna get some proper kit in.

Juniper: Hopefully the government will be a bit more ready for the next one.

Key: I'm not talking about the government, Em! *I* wasn't ready! I've been found out here. I should have got a cat! Dammit!

Juniper: You shouldn't look beyond the current pandemic.

Key: Get some proper audio-visual equipment in.

Juniper: Okay.

Key: And a wife.

Juniper: Oh, okay.

Key: Gonna get myself well and truly sorted before they lock us up next time.

Juniper: You got houseplants in, didn't you?

Key: With respect, I'm not going to romance my cheese plant, Em. I'm not pointing fingers at the bigwigs, Em. Honestly I'm not. It's me. I've fucked up here. Argggh!!!

Juniper: What?

Key: Mouse!

Juniper: You need to get rid of him, honest.

Key: What is galling about this fucking mouse – excuse my French, Em – is he literally seems to have slowed down.

Juniper: As in?

Key: To a stroll. I'm looking at him now. He's strolling.

Juniper: You should get someone in.

Key: I *can't*, Em. He bloody knows that. He watches the briefings. Sits on the coffee table lauding it up.

Juniper: You need to break his back, that's all.

Key: I'm running out of ideas here.

Juniper: Poison? You can get something that emits a kind of a siren, I think. Like a low-pitched note or a high-pitched one, a note anyway.

Key: Yeah, got that.

Juniper: From Amazon?

Key: I've got a siren, Em. Believe me.

Juniper: I hate mice, me.

Key: I've turned the freezer on full, I've turned the oven on full, I've got the hoover on. This little twat strolls around like he's in the Valley of the bloody Kings.

Juniper: You have everything on? This is a nightmare.

Key: You think that's everything? Yeah, it's all on. Soup mixer thing's on. Top volume! Smoke these tarts out – they're killing me, Em. I'm trying everything. I've got a hairdryer going full pelt, I spend half the time clattering about on my typewriter. He's laughing into his sleeve.

Key aims a vast bottle of HP sauce at a possible mouse. It breaks in two and the fruity gunk bleeds across the tiles. The Strokes pause, then get going again.

Juniper: What's the bandage?

Key: Changing the subject.

Juniper: It's depressing talking rodents the whole time.

Key: I burnt my hand.

Juniper: Bugger.

Key: Didn't let the banana bread cool down before I binned it.

Juniper: On the banana trail, are ya?

Key: I'm gonna nail... I need to work out... ah, hang on.

Key opens the washing machine's little door thing.

Key: Washing machine's... done.

Juniper: It's "finished its cycle".

Key: Oh, sorry for not knowing the exact right way to talk about washing machines – fuck.

Juniper: What?

Key: Damn! Fuck! Shit! Flea! Damn!

Juniper: What's happened?

Key: My blue jumper!

Juniper: Shrunk it?

Key: Dammit! Bugger! Shitpipes!

Juniper: How small?

Key: I'm barely getting my bollocks into that!

Juniper: What?

Key: This damn lockdown!!! Shitpipes!

Juniper: The mouse can wear it!

Key: Huh?!

The mouse wanders out from a recess momentarily and has a look at the jumper. He throws his head to one side as if he's giving it some thought.

Juniper: Well, I'm gonna go work on the cover, anyway.

Key: You're a darling, Em. I'm drowning here.

Juniper: What's the title?

Key: "Fuck you mouse arrogant wanker mouse cunt, jumper lockdown shitpipes".

Juniper: I'm gonna call you back later in the week.

Key: It'll be the same, Em.

Juniper: Okay.

Key: It'll all be exactly the same.

Emily Juniper hangs up. Key stretches the jumper out like it's an accordion from his past. The sound of the appliances rises to a crescendo. Over and above all of this the mouse laughs. A thin, conniving cackle. Like he's planning his route through the devices, dreaming of the sweet crunch of his next chocolate orange Hobnob

Yog.†



I licked out a couple of yoghurt pots and tethered them together with a two-metre length of twine.

I met Maxson in the park and slung him a pot.

I threw him a beer, too, and he made it safe with a jay and some Dettol.

We stretched the cord and sat and I put my device to my lips.

“God I’ve missed you, Maxson,” I said into my pot.

“Say what?! Huh?!”

Maxson was yelling across the chasm.

“I said I’ve missed you!” I yelled back, “Use your fucking pot, man! I’ve missed you!”

“The fuck is the pot for?!”

He was scrunching his pot.

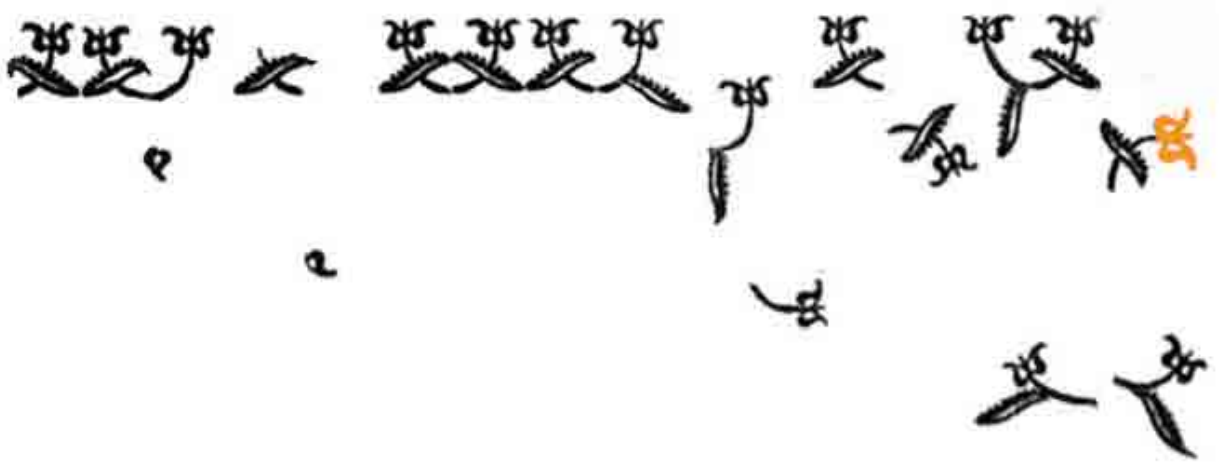
The beer was warm, thick.

The atmosphere already bitter.

†**Juniper:** Maxson’s a nice name.

Key: Okay.

Krushchev.



Bohnson got his boy out and banged it on the table half a dozen times.

“Get me tests, nerds!”

The nerds peered at him through their respective Zooms.



A Set-Up.

☎ The Colonel. | 11:00AM, May. | iPhone.

Key squats in his lounge like a golem. Post-its cover the floor like lacklustre tiles. Some have scrawl on them. “Mouse”, “Bohnson”, “Father”. Others have doodles. Crass illustrations of bananas, bar supervisors, microbes. They flutter as Key’s iPhone begins to vibrate. It is The Colonel. Key is already speaking as he sweeps it open.

Key: What the hell’s this Zoom Code?

Colonel: Ah ha.

Key: Never mind “ah ha”, what’s the code? Says here I’ve got a meeting at 7.30pm next Thursday, fuck my life.

Colonel: It’s a date.

Key: What date?

Colonel: Blind date.

Key: Blind Zoom date?

Colonel: Blind Zoom date.

Key: What the hell?

Colonel: I’ve organised a blind Zoom date, that’s all. What’s wrong?

Key: Consult me, man! You gotta consult me!

Key stamps his foot. Another footprint on another Post-it. He keeps stamping and stamping until his boot crashes through the ceiling and appears momentarily in the author below’s book.

Colonel: What’s the issue? You’re going out of your mind over there. Take a date!

Key: “Take a date”?!

Colonel: Take a risk, man!

Key: Bugger me, John!

Colonel: What’s up with you, man?

Key: Naw.

Colonel: You’re jumpy.

Key: Naw.

Colonel: What then?

Key rubs hard at his buzz cut, bites a mark into his lip. He fixes his floor, reaffixes the Post-its. Breathes out a lot.

Key: I saw the bar supervisor today.

Colonel: What?? You did?

Key: I saw her, Colonel.

Colonel: Fuck me!

Key: And now I've got you sending me Zoom details, I'm all over the place here, I don't know whether I'm Martha or Arthur.

Colonel: Where d'ya see her?

Key: Up the shops.

Colonel: You went up the shops?

Key: I'm not a fucking pussy, John.

Colonel: D'ya talk to her?

Key: Is that some kind of a joke? I was four behind her in the queue.

Colonel: Eight metres. Right.

Key: Didn't have my megaphone with me.

Colonel: Okay, okay.

Key: How the hell am I talking to her?

Colonel: Well, did she smile?

Key: How the fuck do I know?

Colonel: Masked up?

Key: Both of us. I was smiling like a bun for all the good it did me, whole lot got trapped in my bloody fibres.

Colonel: What was she buying?

Key: John?

Colonel: Huh?

Key: If I'd had my telescope with me –

Colonel: Eight metres, yeah, sorry.

Key: She was a *speck*, man.

Colonel: But definitely her?

Key: Gimme some credit, man!

Colonel: Wow. The bar supervisor. In the damn flesh!

Key: Yeah, so I'm in no fit state to gawp at a girl I don't know on my laptop, man. I'm really not.

Key wafts some mice away, goes on his haunches and examines the Post-it with the footprint on it. He peels it up. It's a fairly rudimentary drawing of

the bar supervisor unzipping a tennis bag. She looks at him and Key sinks right down.

Colonel: Have a couple of looseners, you'll be grand.

Key: Get lashed and press go? Christ.

Colonel: Well, what am I doing? Gab's told her it's on. That's the problem.

Key: Who is this girl?

Colonel: I dunno.

Key: You don't know? What the hell? I ain't entering the room, I'm telling you.

Colonel: Friend of Gab's.

Key: Oh she is? Friend of Gab's, is she?

Colonel: Give it a whirl, what have you got to lose?

Key: Shit mate!

Colonel: Huh?

Key: You're a shit mate!

Colonel: How am I a shit mate?

Key: Well, what do I wear?

Colonel: Who cares? Bang your blue pullover on, see who salutes.

A pint glass, a remote control and a Himalayan rock candle are all slung hard against the wall, they impact at the same moment and explode. The mouse pokes his head out of his hole and gives Key a look. Key holds a hand up to acknowledge he's let himself down there.

Colonel: What you throwing? What's up?

Key: I shrunk my blue jumper, didn't I?

Colonel: Oh, you did?

Key: I've been spending the last week trying to stretch it back out.

Colonel: How you stretching it?

Key: This is horseshit.

Colonel: Wear your Adidas tracksuit top then.

Key: My goatee's about a mile long, tut.

Colonel: She's very free and easy, from what I can gather.

Key: Another evening buggered, thank you ever so much.

Colonel: How's it buggered?

Key: It's alright for you, locking down with Gab. I'm scratching around with Old Mumma Zoom, watching my p's and q's on a Thursday night.

Colonel: You don't have to go.

Key: I'm not standing her up, am I? Not my style. Never has been.

Colonel: It's not till Sunday.

Key: Yes, I know, when it is, it's right here in front of me. Bugger me. So it'll be hanging over me like a bloody bat.

Colonel: Fills up an evening, anyway.

Key: I fill my evenings just fine, thank you, John.

Colonel: How was the belly dancer?

Key: Doesn't work on Zoom.

Colonel: No?

Key: Packed her belly away after about a quarter of an hour. Pointless.

Colonel: Well.

Key: Yup.

Colonel: Report back then.

Key: "Report back".

Colonel: Gab likes to know the goss.

Key breathes out. He's breathed out more than he knew was in there. He scrunches his iPhone up and with it the conversation. He looks at the Zoom Code again and moves zombie-like to the bathroom. He starts picking up bottles of aftershave, looking for one that has some in it or is from this decade or hasn't totally gummed up and isn't permanently hissing.

Company.



The Amazon Guy came.

I signed for my wok, whacked him on the head with it and hauled him in.

When he came to I explained he was locking down with me now and fed him some squid.

We quickly ascertained we were both into Mad Men and I popped season four on.

He opened a bottle of Merlot and made himself comfortable on the beanbag.

I started carving up some more of his boxes, see if he had any jigsaws.

I fancied getting lashed and doing a 1000-piecer with this guy.

Pupes.†



It was so sunny.

Pupes bit the bullet, sawed his damn roof off.

He lay on his dining room table in his Speedos, his skin hardening under the rays.

Pupes tried to shut out the car horns.

His roof was upside down in the middle of the road.

Pupes tried to convince himself these blaring vehicles were on inessential journeys.

That these honking drivers were selfish assholes.

That these horns and, to be fair, sirens, were completely out of line.

†**Juniper:** Is Pupes a name?

Key: Well, it's this chap's name, isn't it? So yes.

Juniper: Pupes though.

Key: People might say "Is Emily Juniper her real name?"

Juniper: It is though.

Key: Fine. And this chap's Pupes.

Two Men.

☎ Bill Key. | Mid-Afternoon, May. | The Bloody Portal

Key has suspended his iPhone in the gap where his telly was, using a system of wires and strings and pulleys and swearing. He sits on his arnuzzi, next to his beloved Fatberg, squinting at Sophie Ellis-Bextor as she entertains the nation on YouTube. He chows down on a couple of Wagon Wheels and taps his Portal. “Carol Key”. Let’s have it.

Bill Key: Youngest son!

The Portal snaps on and Key Jnr can now see his father in all his glory. He is in the kitchen. Homebrew is bubbling on the hobs, his bicycle is upside down on towels. He is wielding an adjustable spanner and a wooden spoon, dressed in the time-honoured fashion: beige camping shorts, Fred Perry t-shirt, mitts covered in grease. Haydn is playing his end, “Symphony No. 101: The Clock”. Tick Tock. Key mutes SE-B. He’ll have a bit of Haydn, thanks.

Key Jnr: Guten Tag, Mein Vater.

Bill: Your mother’s out, Son.

Key Jnr: Nae bothers, I’ll give you a whirl.

Bill: Oh, okey doke.

Key Jnr: What you doing, friend? Fixing the ol’ bicycle there?

Bill: Yessirree! Fixing my bicycle, brewing my beer, making something of myself.

Key Jnr: Cooking up the old homebrew, is it?

Bill Key waggles a thick, glass 75cl Schweppes Lemonade bottle from the 1970s. Key’s eyes water. Nostalgia.

Key Jnr: Filling up the faithful Schweppes bottles, is it?

Bill: Not gonna fill themselves up.

Key Jnr: Lockdown homebrew.

Bill: Forty gallons thereof.

Key Jnr: Man, that sounds good.

Bill: I'll drop some round!

Key Jnr: You'd do well. I'm sixty miles away, lol.

Key can smell the beer. He watches his father tighten the wheel nuts, spin the wheel. The wheel spins fast and true. Keeps on spinning. Key is mesmerised.

Key Jnr: Where the hell's mum, anyway?

Bill: Daily allocated exercise. Then I believe she's off down Sainsbury's; stock up on Shredded Wheat and chives, or whatever her latest obsession is. Then a socially-distanced cuppa on Margaret's gatepost. Living her best life, in short.

Key Jnr: Fuck me, you guys are nailing lockdown, eh.

Bill: Can't deny it, Son! Cannot deny it. Your mother's bought a loom!

Key Jnr: A loom now?

Bill: She's obsessed with the thing.

Key Jnr: I've bought a chin-up bar.

Bill: *(Singing)* Lockdown, Lockdown! We're gonna have a lockdown!
Lockdown, Lockdown! We're living through the lockdown...
Lockdown!

Bill Key is dancing around the kitchen like a young Christopher Walken. Ringing his bicycle bell etc. Key smiles. Fatberg's button-eyes glint.

Bill: And you? Knocking it outta the park I bet!

Key unwraps his third Wagon Wheel and slots it home. He glances up at Sophie Ellis-Bextor. Her kid's under her feet, plodding about in a Darth Vader costume, little or no idea of the "likes" he's racking up.

Key Jnr: It's my first lockdown, Pa, that's the problem.

Bill: You'll get through it, Son. Not long now.

Key Jnr: They've been saying that since the start.

Bill: They'll ring the bell, I'm telling you. You'll have your face in a pint in weeks.

Key Jnr: Yeah.

Bill: Dunking your hooter into the froth.

Key Jnr: I'm drinking tons, Dad, don't worry about that.

Bill: I've got into... what's the one where you chop bushes into shapes?

Key Jnr: Oh aye. Getting your Ted Scissorhands on, is it?

Bill: Shaped my damn roses into a passable frog, Son. Snip snip!

Bill Key spins his wheel and stirs his homebrew. The whole kitchen is amber. Yeast, crippled by the heat, flies from the pan and forms into golden rainbows as the IPA ferments. Bill Key spins back round, he's holding a bundle of papers tied up with twine now.

Bill: I'm writing my memoirs, Son!

Key Jnr: Is it?

Bill: Nothing like what you do, of course, but well, there it is! I'm writing.

Key Jnr: Getting shit done.

Bill: That's about right, just quietly getting my Swift on.

Key Jnr: Fair play to you.

Bill: Book about all my rowing, my climbing days, you know. Was writing about Streaky Stather this morning!

Key Jnr: Old-school anecdotes about your fallen comrades-in-arms.

Bill: Dusted off the old Olivetti. Hammering the keys like a madman! Sunday Times Top Ten Bestsellers List here I come!

Key stares through his father. Stares at his Post-its. "Amazon man", "Rapunzel", "Mice in the Walls", "Zoom Date".

Bill: Well, anyway, it'll be more of a pamphlet in the end, nothing like what you do, I'm sure.

Key Jnr: I don't think pamphlets get to number one in The Sunday Times Bestsellers List, Pa.

Bill: Top ten I said.

Key Jnr: Oh right.

Bill: They can't stop us dreaming.

Key Jnr: You got that right, Pa.

Bill: "My dreams shall remain unlocked".

Bill Key unfurls a long, thin tube. He plonks one end in the molten IPA and sucks the other end. Syphoning. The beer races through The Tube. Just

before it reaches his lips, he whips it out of his mouth, slings it in the barrel. The barrel starts to fill.

Bill: You writing, Son?

After an eternity, Key raises his orange pen. Like an umpire giving the batsman the bad news.

Bill: Yes! That's what I'm talking about. You've cranked up the Dell and you're pumping out a screenplay like your life depended on it!

Key Jnr: Typa thing, yeah. That typa thing.

Bill: Neck and neck in the Bestsellers List! That'll be us.

Key Jnr: Don't normally have a screenplay and a pamphlet duking it out, do they?

Bill: Is it a normal year?

Key Jnr: Ha ha, yeah, good point.

Bill: Well, is it, Son?

Key shakes his head. His father leans reflectively against his hobs. The beer rises in the barrel. Later it will cool, and, in some weeks, it will be in the bottles. And then the bottles will open and the noise will be a pschhhht. And the lockdown will be over.

Key Jnr: Good to see you, Dad.

Bill: Hang on in there, Son.

Key Jnr: Always.

The bicycle wheel is still spinning when Key presses the cross. He squints at Sophie Ellis-Bextor. His pen is hot like lava.

Guilty As Charged.



Bungis farted and his Zoom screen lit up.

A Cow.

☎ Daniel. | 9:45AM, May. | The Portal.

The record player's on full whack. Donna Summer fills the flat, gluing herself into every corner, every recess. Key's in his study, fiddling with his Portal, plugging it in and unplugging it. Wagging it basically. Eventually it fires up. Daniel picks up.

Daniel: Hello.

Key: I've put a cow on my balcony.

Daniel: Pardon me?

Daniel is wearing full chef's whites inc. hat and appears to be holding a vegetarian crab. A toy train chugs along behind him on a model railway, with model trees and model swindlers and model posters with government warnings and model tannoys telling people to stay the fuck indoors.

Key: You heard what I said, Daniel.

Daniel: No, you haven't.

Key: I've put a cow on my balcony.

Daniel: Why have you put a cow on your balcony?

Key: Why have you got a potter's wheel?

Daniel: I'm refining my art.

Key: Yeah?

Daniel: Why the cow?

Key: I'm sorting out my lockdown, Dan, that's all.

Key looks across into his hall. Beetles have started to congregate on a pat.

Daniel: This isn't how you prove yourself in a lockdown, pal.

Key: "Sorting out," I said. I have nothing to prove.

Daniel: This isn't how you do that.

Key: There's more than one way to skin a cat, you know.

Key squints into the screen. On Daniel's counter there are what look like homemade Jammie Dodgers, with what looks like rhubarb jam oozing outta the holes. Beyond that: pots, fired and glazed, a battalion of them. Then the railway.

Key: Why are you laughing, Daniel?

Daniel: You gonna milk the cow?

Key: Not just that.

Daniel: Oh right, you're gonna slaughter the cow now?

Daniel is peering into his screen. Looks like he's been no stranger to the kettle bells. His arms are big, like loaves. His chest wide, thick, new. He frowns at the sound of the mooing, which occasionally cuts through the Donna Summer.

Daniel: Are you gonna kill the cow?

Key: Gonna fatten her up first.

Daniel: How did you get her onto the balcony?

Key: It wasn't plain sailing, put it that way. She tipped my Perrier Award onto the floor.

Daniel: Oh yeah?

Key: Yeah, with her dopey old hips.

Daniel: Why didn't you move it out the way?

Key: You ever had a cow cut through your flat? You make mistakes.

Daniel: I'm putting my award up high.

Key: I bet.

Daniel stares. Key, too. An impasse. Another deep moo from off.

Daniel: What are you feeding her?

Key: I'll google all that, won't I?

Daniel: You're out of your depth.

Key: Five Live said –

Daniel: Here we go. They didn't say to get a cow, I'm sure.

Key: You wouldn't know. Stuck on Radio 4, you're a Neanderthal, man.

Daniel: Why'd'ya get a cow?

Key: Fuck me, you're a closed-minded old so-and-so.

Daniel: You should have got a cat, that's what.

Key: Well, I didn't, did I?! I didn't get a cat! I didn't get a bloody cat!!!

A mouse wanders past, carrying a KitKat Chunky on a trailer, another emerges from Key's t-shirt sleeve and leaps past the Portal and away. Daniel smiles

Daniel: What are you doing with her post-lockdown?

Key: What are you doing with your clay and your divvy hat?

Daniel: I'm serious, what are you doing with a damn cow, man?

Key: Ride her to work, I guess!

Daniel: What work?

Key: Saddle up!

Daniel: She sounds distressed.

Key ducks down and Daniel glimpses the vast, nostrils of the cow, spraying bovine gel onto the French windows. He takes a step back, his own nostrils wet with respect for the beast.

Key: She's getting used to it, that's all.

Daniel: Is this born out of loneliness?

Key: What a weird phrase.

Daniel: No human to speak of, so you splash out on livestock.

Key: I don't need a human. Got my imagination, mate. That's all I need, cheers.

Daniel: And a cow.

Key: You're just jealous you didn't think of it, that's all.

Daniel: If you had a field –

Key: Big if –

Daniel: I'd understand if you had two hundred acres of land –

Key: Well I've got a flat and there's a cow in it. Get behind it.

Daniel: Do you speak to yourself?

Key: What? No.

Daniel: Do you? Do you speak to yourself?

Key: Nah, not my style, never has been, never will be.

Daniel: You can always pick up the phone.

Key: I'm keeping myself busy, cheers.

Daniel: With?

Key: The cow for a start.

Daniel: Are you writing?

Key: Yeah, I'm writing. Are you writing?

Daniel: Yeah, I'm writing.

Key: Mm.

Key peers into his console. He can see Post-its behind Daniel, but can't make out what's on them. The cow lets out a deep moo and clinks at the glass with her hooves.

Key: What's on your Post-its?

Daniel: Huh?

Key: What's on your Post-its, man? Come on, you mug!

Daniel: Well, what are you writing?

Key: I'm writing.

Daniel: What?

Key: Tut.

Daniel: What a load of old bollocks, honestly.

Key: Jealous of the cow.

Daniel: I'm not jealous of the cow.

Key smiles. He angles his console round, gives Daniel an eyeful of Post-its. Then angles it back. He stares deep into the Portal, Daniel stares back. No one blinks, no quarter given.

Daniel: I ain't jealous of no cow.

Key leans back. Daniel has hung up the connection. The cow is stamping. Key smiles; he goes to his fridge for grass.

Huggers.†



The government conscripted “huggers” for those in need of a cuddle.

They were kitted out in hazmat suits and had huge containers on their backs, full of disinfectant weed-whacker.

I filled out the forms and the guy came round and hugged me.

It felt comforting, timely.

But I could make out his eyes through the gauze and they were beadier than I would have liked.

They blinked slowly, mechanically when I thanked him for the hug.

Also, before he left, he sprayed me with his gunk and it melted my tracksuit top, and he nicked a grapefruit and my bicycle lights on his way out.

†**Juniper:** They’re almost all about hugging at the moment.

Key: Huh?

Juniper: Your poems.

Key: Oh, okay.

Back Down The Plughole.†



I shut my eyes and dived head-first into the tub.

Down the plug hole again and I'm with the bar supervisor.

We're getting lashed at the bar now and we're in The Shard.

Chowing back olives and glugging rosé like there's no tomorrow.

She grazes her knuckles on the back of my hand.

We leave and I high-five the bellboy and French kiss the Über driver.

We crash into a celebrity and I wake up.

The bathwater is cold and rank and my boy's as stiff a guardsman and the helmet bit at the end is as dry as a bone.

†**Juniper:** I don't know about this sort of one.

Key: So what do I do? Leave out the ones you don't know about?

Juniper: It's the helmet I don't like.

Key: It's called life, Em. It's not underwater so of course it's going to be dry.

Juniper: It's gross.

Key: My readers'll decide whether or not it's gross, I reckon.

Juniper: "Stiff as a Guardsman."

Key: Of course it's going to sound gross if you say it like that, Em.

Zoom Date.

📞 The Date. | 8:15PM, May. | Zoom.

Key is sat in front of his screen. He has his Adidas tracksuit top zipped up to the brim and his hair is full of gel. Opposite him is his date, a similar story. The sports gear, the gel. She has lipstick on and is smoking. Occasionally the clouds clear and we see a corkboard behind her, covered in photos of her and her girlfriends. She's obviously usually much happier than she is right now.

Key: I think I'd rather you didn't smoke, if that's okay.

Date: What you saying now?

Key: The cigs.

Date: It's not going to come down the line, you know.

Key: Yeah, I do know that.

Date: So what's the difference?

She takes another big draw on her fag. It is long and white like a whale bone.

Key: It'll start me off, that's all.

Date: Me smoking starts you smoking?

Key: Yeah. That's the risk.

Date: Show some will.

Key: Yeah, no, I know. So what do you get up to when –

Date: A little backbone.

Key: Sure.

Date: Are you going outta your mind on your own then?

Key: Me? Nah. Going into it, if anything.

Date: Uh-huh. What does that mean?

Key: Um... don't know... you're still smoking the cigarette.

Date: Do you want me to shove it up my ass?

Key: Oh.

Date: I'll smoke this one and then have a break. Fair?

Key: Okay.

Key's eyes are watering. He has a consignment of pistachios and shells them off screen, using a thick bible to frame them out of shot.

Date: So Gabby tells me you're a comedian.

Key: Christ. Yeah, I am.

Date: So, that must be stressful, huh?

Key: I thought you were going to ask me to tell you a joke there.

Date: No.

Key shells a pistachio, flicks it up and catches it lizard-style. His tongue flickers back down his own throat, then whips back out to cleanse his eyeballs with a slurp.

Date: Is it stressful?

Key: Well, you know, no more than – well, what do you do?

Date: I work for an estate agent.

Key: You *are* the estate agent, or you work for the estate agent?

Date: Oh right, yeah. I do viewings.

Key: Okay, and viewings is just what, showing these swindlers round, saying what they could do in each room?

Date: More or less, yes.

Key: Yeah. Mine's more stressful I'd say.

Date: Dying on your ass, can't be nice.

Key: What's Gabby said?

Date: Nah, just...

Key: You've lit another one.

Date: Whoops.

Key: What's Gabby said?

Date: Her boyfriend sent me some links, that's all.

Key: I can send you links.

Date: Think I'm a bit linked out.

Key: How many links did he send?

Date: Enough?

Key: They're the wrong links.

Date: Okay.

Key: Totally wrong.

Date: It looked stressful.

Key: 'Cos they're the wrong links.

A cloud of smoke blasts out of the scarlet aperture. It seems to dry Key's skin. He blinks.

Date: I might take my tracksuit top off.

Key: As in...

Date: What?

Key: I mean. Well, you're not flirting?

Date: Oh, right, no.

Key: Oh, just too hot?

Date: I'm gonna keep it on actually.

Key: But you're too hot.

Date: Not by much.

Key: I can barely see you for the smoke.

Date: You have one. Who cares any more?

Key: I haven't got any in, Victoria.

Date: Don't call me Victoria, please.

Key: Oh. Vicky then. Or is it Vic?

Date: It's Elizabeth.

Key: Right. Liz then.

Date: Elizabeth.

Key: The whole lot.

Date: Yuh.

Key: Make 'em say the whole lot.

Date: Yes.

Key: Make 'em work for it.

Silence. Diabolique. She spots the framed cigs behind Key.

Date: What about those?

Key: They're ornamental.

Date: Why have you framed your fags?

Key: They're pretty.

Date: Sight prettier when they're burning to stumps, flooding my lungs with gas, I'd say.

Key: It's certainly one way of looking at it.

Another plume of smoke, ash and sparks flies into the ether.

Key: What about this lockdown then?

Date: I think I might go home.

Key: Ha ha, you're *at* home.

Date: Well, you know what I mean.

Key: Done are ya?

Date: I'm going to "leave meeting". Salvage my night with a movie.

Key: "Salvage" in the end.

Date: You know what I mean.

Key: Tough old brief, the old Zoom-dating.

Date: I dunno, had some goodies this week.

Key: Can't get the rhythm, me.

Date: Okay –

Key: Can't time my flirting, if that makes any sense.

Date: Well, anyway.

Key: That phrase can tear through you in the wrong context.

Date: "Well, anyway"?

Key: Yeah.

Another silence, not as bad as the last one but still rancido.

Key: Look, enjoy the rest of the pando.

Date: Sorry for making you think about cigs.

Key: Right. Yeah.

Date: Well, good luck with it all.

Key: When was the last time you had a cuddle?

She blows a kiss. Key pretends to catch it but she has disappeared even as it is still mid-air. Key leaves meeting and mimes opening a packet of cigarettes and lighting one. He lays his iPad flat on his pheasant incubator to use as an ashtray. Who cares? It's only mimed ash, what's the difference?

Easing.



"We eeeeeasing it, baby!"

Bohnson was explaining the next phase of lockdown.

"How though?" Mme K was in her lounge but her eyes were on stalks, sweeping around the briefing room, interrogating The Maestro.

"Lockdown getting eeeeeased! We eeeeeasing it!"

The Slappettes were flanking Bohnson, working it.

They were in mechanics' overalls and held spanners.

Whenever Bohnson trilled the word "eeeeeeasing" they mimed the loosening of nuts.

The K was in her kitchen now; she was "spreading" tinned sardines onto toast.

"People just want to know, mate," she sighed.

The Slappettes were bright red now, out of embarrassment and the sheer physical demands of the unscrewing dance.

"We eeeeeeeasing it!" Bohnson trilled, showing a bit of leg as he savoured that word again.

It seemed more tanned than last week.

Week 9.



W
E
E
K

IX.

In which The Poet receives a houseguest, a mouse goes up the spinney, and a fair-sized piece of slate is wielded.

Ruining It.†



“Way to go, Cumshot.”

Bohnson threw down the front pages and put his hands on his hips importantly.

Cumdawg looked up, his blouse open, his deckchair plugged deep into the lawn.

“What did you call me?”

Bohnson immediately went very soft and very worried.

“It just makes me look stupid, that’s all,” he muttered.

Cumdawg opened another can of Punk IPA and sucked about a third of it down his throat.

“What did you just call me, I asked.”

Bohnson was jelly now, his bones ached and the top of his heart was visible in his eyes, if that makes any sense.

“Don’t know I love you thank you for everything,” he stammered, trying to pull himself together enough to bow.

†**Juniper:** Have you been to Durham?

Key: Not in lockdown, Em.

Juniper: I mean in general.

Key: Well, what does it matter?

Juniper: I'm just asking, that's all.

Key: You're allowed to go in general, you know.

Juniper: When did you go?

Key: 1996. So a good twenty-four years before it was outlawed.

Juniper: Ah. You like it?

Key: It had its moments, let's put it that way.

Release.

☎ Emily Juniper. | Midday, May. | Landline v iPhone.

Key's plate is piled high with fish and chips. He rips open a bottle of chocolate stout. He stares at the blank space where the television once was. He squints and imagines his programmes. iPhone. Swipe. Juniper.

Juniper: Just got the dialogues.

Key: No "hello"?

Juniper: What do I do with them?

Key: Put them in the book. Are we not doing "hello" now?

Juniper: You've transcribed the conversations we've been having over the last two months, hello.

Key makes the white space come alive in his head with a scene from Come Dine with Me. A posh chap making a cheesecake with two different types of chocolate and shoving the enormous whisk in his mouth. Key blinks and it is a blank space again.

Juniper: Tim?

Key: Conversations and poems.

Juniper: What do you mean "conversations and poems"? This is mad, Tim.

Key: The whole situation's mad, Em. Any major radio station'll tell you that.

Juniper: Are you just putting these chats all in, wholesale?

Key: Well, you can cut them down. I mean, just use your judgment.

Juniper: Just... there's about eighty of these things.

Key: You want me to sit in silence in my flat?

Juniper: I don't mind you chatting to people, just most people aren't publishing it, that's all

Key: Well, good for them.

Juniper: This is insanity.

Key: Snip away, or leave 'em as is, those are our options.

Juniper: I'm not your editor.

Key: I'll send you another batch next week –

Juniper: Tim.

Key: Yes'm.

Key's miming a remote control now. Zapping it at the blank white area. Flicking it onto Minder, Dragons' Den, a re-run of the 1994 World Snooker Final.

Juniper: I'm looking at one... this is from, like April... I mean...

Key: I'm eating fish and chips, Em.

Juniper: Don't change the subject.

Key: I'm not, I'm just keeping things moving.

Juniper: April 9th. We're talking about Pepys.

Key: Not him again.

Juniper: Now it's going in the book?

Key: Looks like it.

Juniper: There's conversations with your agent, with your parents, with Daniel, about forty with me –

Key: I caught a mouse.

Key frowns. In the white space he can see Jimmy White having his ass handed to him by a snivelling Hendry. Jimmy doesn't know he's gonna lose. Hendry's got his shitty little half smile on as per.

Key: Em, I caught a mouse.

Juniper: You can't just transcribe what people say.

Key: Say again.

Juniper: Say it again *why*, though? So you can write it down?

Key: What about this mouse though?

Emily Juniper sighs so deeply that Key's room inflates by a square inch.

Juniper: Okay, you caught a mouse.

Key: Yes, ma'am, I did.

Juniper: And what? Broke its neck, huh?

Key: Humane trap. Know what one of those is?

Juniper: Yeah, I do. Plastic. Door swings shut, lockdown.

Key: I come into the lounge this morning, there he is. Little dicksplat, incarcerated in his new home.

Juniper: Poor sod.

Key: They're breaking me, Em. Finally, start making some inroads. Get rid of a few of these berks.

Juniper: D'ya kill it?

Key: I already said, trapped it. Humane.

Juniper: But after that?

Key: You think I'm gonna catch it humanely, then slit his throat? Nah, not my style. I released it on the heath.

Juniper: Oh.

Key: Let it run into the spinney. What?

Juniper: That's half a mile away.

Key: Huh? Yeah, about that. Good riddance.

Juniper: Well, then he's coming back.

Key blinks and the images disappear. The blank white space. No remote in his fist now. His hand fiddles nervously with a playing card it's found under a mug.

Key: What?

Juniper: You need to release them three miles away, minimum.

Key: What? How do you work that out? What?

Juniper: Their smell's mental. He's coming back.

Key flicks the playing card and it sails out beyond his pheasant incubator.

Key: He's not smelling something half a mile away though, with due respect.

Juniper: That's their main thing: the nose. Why do you think they're twitching the whole time? He can smell his family. He's on his way.

Key: Wait a second, wait a second. I can't smell my family when they're ten feet away.

Juniper: You're not a mouse.

Key: You're telling me an animal with a nose five hundred times smaller than mine can smell a thousand times better. That's what you're trying to say here? It don't stack up, Em.

Juniper: Should have whizzed him into Soho on your bicycle.

Key: He's coming back is he? For realsies?

Juniper: Have you locked the door?

Key: He ain't using the door, Em. He's tiny, this fella.

Juniper: I'm just saying don't make it easy for him. Now: these dialogues.

Key: No, not "these dialogues". Fuck me!

Key throws his half-pint glass against his typewriter. Glass bursts up and imbeds in his dining room table and ceiling. Post-it notes are dislodged and swirl up and down in the thermals.

Juniper: There's a conversation with your niece, for God's sake.

Key: The mouse is coming. Jesus.

Juniper: What is this book, Tim?

Key: I hate thinking he's on his way here.

Juniper: I smoked fifteen cigarettes reading this shit.

Key: It's grotesque, imagining the little prick strolling down Millfield Lane like he owns the damn place.

Juniper: You should put *him* in your book.

Key: Doesn't deserve to be in the book. He's making a mockery of me, that's what. I wondered why he was shrugging when I let him go. Hang on.

Juniper: What?

There is scratching, tapping.

Key: I'll call you back. It's him.

Key hangs up. And now all there is is scratching. It's not in this room though. It's coming from beyond. Key stays stock-still. He listens. He hears the front door being opened from the inside. He hears the soft abrasion of two mice hugging in the hall. He hears the front door clicking closed. He hears mice disappearing back into the wall. He hears the walls reanimate. He holds his head in his hands and bays silently.

Defending the Indefensible.†



Bohnson waddled into the garden with his tuba.

Cumdawg was hunched over his disposable barbecue, his bandana effervescent with sweat.

Fat spat from his sprats, glazing his flip-flops.

He sneered across the lawn.

“Blow one note on that thing and I swear I’ll piss into it, Bohnzo.”

Bohnson put his instrument down and wandered morosely over to his jigsaw.

“Did you watch the briefing thingy, then?”

Cumdawg didn’t even look up, just turned his sprats, barely nodded.

“Would it have killed you to throw a few gags in, Bohnzo?”

Bohnson blinked and tried to fix two corner pieces together, someone had nicked his board so he was having to do it straight onto the grass.

“I basically said you were ideal, mate.”

Cumdawg stalked over to the paddling pool.

“The world and his mother seem a bit pissed orf with you, that’s for sure!”

Cumdawg fished out a Punk IPA and shook it, his face blank.

Bohnson flinched and angled his vast body away from Cumdawg.

Smoke poured into his face, stinging his eyes, making them wetter than ever.

†**Juniper:** “Fat spat from his sprats”.

Key: Yeah.

Juniper: I suppose this is the week that Cumdawg, you know...

Key: Yeah, I suppose it is.

Juniper: Why didn't he sack him, do we think?

Key: Well, dunno.

Juniper: Be like you sacking me, I guess.

Key: Erm.

Juniper: Would you sack me?

Key: Depends what you'd done, I suppose.

Juniper: Delete the whole book?

Key: Yeah, you're probably walking for that.

Juniper: Control-A, delete.

Key: Yeah, don't do that, Em.

Juniper: Ha ha!

Key: Ha ha, yeah but don't.

A Break-In.

☎ The Colonel. | 11:00PM, May. | Facetime.

Key is on his sofa. His tracksuit is taut around his week-nine shape. The stitching is squeaking as it tries to contain The Poet. The Colonel answers.

Key: Let's break into a pub.

Colonel: Hold on a second –

Key: What's the matter? Pussy, huh?

Colonel: Hang on – I'm taking you into the kitchen.

Key: Okay, okay.

Colonel: Gab's watching Newsnight.

Key: She's hard.

Colonel: Hang on.

Key is flexing his catapult, staring across the wooden floorboards, pulling back the thick rubber, fingering the Halls Soother. The harsh rip of a beer opening, John's end.

Colonel: Okay, go on ahead.

Key: Let's break into a pub.

Colonel: I mean –

Key: Typical, that's a no then?

Colonel: They'll open again, I'm telling you.

Key: I've got a big piece of slate.

Colonel: Okay.

Key: Out back.

Colonel: Okay.

Key: Don't know what in the hell it's for –

Colonel: I'm happy just virtual-pubbing, yer know, for now.

Key: Put this slate through the window – we're in.

Key's out back now, hovering over the slate.

Key: Must weigh forty pounds.

Colonel: Aren't you forgetting something?

Key: Go on.

Colonel: What would your darling bar supervisor think if your slate crashed into her boozier?

Key stands on the slate. The ridges on its underside make it rock.

Colonel: Look, join up to a craft beer app, that's what you should do.

There are plenty – they send out a box with twelve different –

Key: Colonel.

Colonel: Huh?

Key: What do you think approximately fifty per cent of my lockdown consists of?

Colonel: The above?

Key: "The microbe hates the honest grape".

Colonel: What's this now?

Key: "The microbe hates the honest grape".

Colonel: As in alcohol, you're saying it's good to drink alcohol?

Key: I read something that says it knocks this shit out.

Colonel: Yeah?

Key: Sling a bit of beer at the problem, that's what they're saying.

Colonel: There are articles for everything. People decide what they wanna do, then find the science to back it up.

Key: Ah! Very wise.

Colonel: Whole thing's mad.

Key: Exactly. Well, anyway, I've found an article that supports this.

Key's at his fridge now. He is everywhere, like a gnat. He peers at the current state of play. 90% craft beers, the rest spring onions, brown and brittle. He takes a can and throws it up, punching it with his forearm and catching it with a grunt. It is a grapefruit-infused IPA.

Key: This stuff's doing my head in. I want to suckle from the pipes, that's what.

Colonel: They're talking about opening the pubs up for takeaway, did you know that?

Key: You banged your head?

Colonel: No, it's called watching Newsnight. It's called educating yourself.

Key's eyes turn into beermats and spin as he takes this in.

Key: Going into a pub...

Colonel: For takeaway.

Key: What in the hell are you talking about, man?!

Colonel: I'm deadly serious, they're unlocking the pubs, you go in, they pour you beer. I'm serious, man!

Key: An actual pub...

Colonel: Yes, for a takeaway. You'd see your bar supervisor.

Key: *(A million miles away suddenly)* Bar supervisor...

Colonel: Yeah, you'd see her.

Key: See the bar supervisor...

Colonel: You know what –

Key: Huh? What?

Colonel: You should write about *her*!

Key blinks and the beermats dissolve. We're back to pupils.

Key: Please don't tell me what to write about, Colonelli.

Colonel: "Love poetry".

Key: Bleuuugh.

Colonel: Gab and I watched The Apartment last night.

Key sighs and it turns into a huff and then something more pained, like an elephant would come up with. He's at his desk, tapping his orange pen against some Basildon Bond Champagne Duke writing paper. Now he's up again, heading for the slate again.

Key: Will you sit and have a pint then, Colonel?

Colonel: I'm gonna watch the end of Newsnight, if I'm honest.

Key: Oh.

The slate is on Key's back now. He's squatting with it, building up all sorts of muscles in his legs, ready for when they go back into the field. He moves inside, staggers into the kitchen.

Colonel: Sorry, we've been looking forward to it all day, that's all.

Key: What's the vibe?

Colonel: Maitlis bossing it.

Key: Why doesn't that surprise me?

Colonel: Tearing Cumdawg a new one.

Key: Great. Get it torn.

Colonel: She doubts his story.

Key: He's ruined the whole thing, that lad.

Colonel: Not a fan?

Key: Cumdawg can suck my boy.

Colonel: Classy.

Key: You think we don't all fancy a daytrip?

Colonel: Oh yeah, I suppose.

Key: I've watched one series of Come Dine with Me five times! You don't think I'd like to fanny about at a castle?

Colonel: Five times? Wow, that's –

Key: Whacking my stick against the portcullis. Pissing off of the turrets

–

Colonel: Which series?

Key: Portsmouth.

Colonel: Oh yeah, nice.

Key: The one with the lady whose duchess potatoes –

Colonel: Collapse, yeah, I know the series.

Key: Well... I'll let you get back to Maitlis then.

Colonel: Flick it on, why don't ya?

Key: Telly's on the balcony.

Colonel: Sorry?

Key: In the elements.

Key is stuck at the bottom of a squat, the slate on his back. The Colonel has disappeared into the night. Key focuses on the job in hand. If he drops the slate, it will smash his precious tiles. He reflects upon his lockdown. The flat is pin-drop silent. The mice sleep.

Before The Rose Garden.



“I couldn’t have a butcher’s at your speech could I, matey?”

Bohnson hovered over Cumdawg’s deckchair.

He could see his name popping out from the spidery text more than once.

“I see I get a name check – lovely – all good I hope.”

Cumdawg had his AirPods in.

He had no idea Bohnson was even in the garden.

It was coincidence that he rasped the phrase, “Have some of this, Bohnson,” as he clapped his notepad shut and loped back into the conservatory.

Bohnson’s fists clinked together like Newton’s Balls.

He munched his lip as he watched his boss’s hips swinging into the shadows.

Bunton.

📞 Emma Bunton. | 11:00AM, May. | Intercom.

Key picks up the Intercom phone thing. He is wringing wet, a bath's worth of puddles snake back to the tub.

Key: Yuh.

Bunton: Oh, hey.

Key: Hey. Hello.

Bunton: Hey.

Key:Amazon?

Nothing. Water pouring off our guy. Litres of the stuff.

Key: Hello! Madam! Are you Amazon?

Bunton: It's Emma.

Key: Huh?

Bunton: Emma Bunton.

Key holds the Intercom phone thing away from him. Stares at it. As if he's eyeing an ostrich. There's water up to his ankles.

Bunton: Emma Bunton. As in –

Key: I know what it's "as in".

Bunton: Hi, Tim.

Key: Hi.

Bunton: The Spice Girl.

Key: I said I know what it's "as in".

Bunton: Hiyah.

Key: Yup.

Key has another good stare at the beak/Intercom phone thing. Water continues to pour off him – the level is rising.

Key: Um.

Bunton: Surprise!

Key: Why are you at my flat?

Bunton: We met on Drunk History.

Key: Yeah.

Bunton: I was playing Maid Marion.

Key: Clever bit of casting, that.

Bunton: I was having my hair done and you wanted a selfie –

Key: For my niece.

Bunton: Yeah, you said it was for your niece.

Key: Yeah, it was.

Bunton: Yeah.

Key: It was for my niece, Emma.

The water is up to his thighs now, it is warm, comforting in the lockdown.

Bunton: I was just coming past.

Key: Rollerblading?

Bunton: Walking.

Key: Nature's rollerblading.

Bunton: I'm doing my allotted hour's exercise.

Key: How did you know where I live?

Bunton: How's your lockdown?

Key: Am I dreaming?

Bunton: God knows.

Silence. Key can hear her smiling. It seems to warm the Intercom phone thing. He has bubbles on his eyebrows.

Bunton: It's going on a bit, innit?

Key: The lockdown?

Bunton: Yeah.

Key: Am I dreaming?

Bunton: Why do you say that?

Key: You're Emma Bunton.

Bunton: Baby Spice.

Key: Yeah. I'm dreaming.

Key picks up his Sellotape dispenser, clonks himself on the head with it four or five times. Nothing.

Bunton: Maybe *I'm* dreaming?

Key: Why are *you* dreaming?

Bunton: What's that aroma?

Key: That's bread.

Bunton: Yeah. Yeah. Bread. It's lush.

Key shrugs and when his shrug is over his shoulders are in the water. They are white, like flour. His neck is also getting lapped by the tides. Chairs and framed posters of Key's great Edinburgh shows float past. Key's netball bobs up and down in the warm water, bubbles blow off the surface and spin towards the lightbulbs.

Key: I've got a breadmaker, Emma.

Bunton: Smells great.

Key: I *am* a breadmaker.

Bunton: A baker?

Key: No, it's just the bread I do.

Bunton: Doesn't a baker bake bread?

Key: Amongst other things, yes. They also bake doughnuts and sometimes pies.

There is a silence, full of warmth, glowing with golden yeast. A pale blue element exists in the corner of the bubbles, owing to Radox.

Bunton: I can't come up, can I?

Key closes his eyes, feels the water level on his bottom lip. Fatberg swims past in an Edwardian bathing costume.

Key: Not unless there's different rules for Spice Girls, you can't, no.

Bunton: I'll see if Geri can pull a few strings then, shall I?

Key: I don't think "Spice" is a currency in lockdown.

Bunton: Lockdown's a bugger.

Key: It doesn't discriminate.

Bunton: It doesn't discriminate.

Key: Famously.

Bunton: I might whizz off then. Tim?

Key doesn't answer. A rubber duck floats past and it's chain clinks against Key's earring.

Bunton: Tim?

Nothing. Water is up to Key's bottom lip now, it rushes in and fills a quarter of a lung. Key wakes up and spits an arc of bathwater against the dark-blue tiles. He is in the bath and the duck is looking at him, expressionless. Its beak is exactly horizontal. Key deletes the taps with his toes. He succumbs to the waters and dunks his buzz cut into the depths. From the lounge he hears "Baby Love" by The Supremes. He stares up at the showerhead. He shuts his eyes again. The intercom buzzer thing goes again.

After The Rose Garden.†



“Nah, fair play, those things are fucking difficult, man.”

Bohnson threw Cumdawg a couple of cans of Punk IPA and sat on the swing.

“So funny, seeing you up there, man!”

Cumdawg stripped down to his vest and leant on the back of his deckchair, his sneer dribbling into its unforgiving fabric.

Bohnson was really laughing now, he didn’t have any shorts on and was swinging high.

“When you said about us both being in bed ill, it didn’t half sound like we share a bed, though!”

Cumdawg picked up an Aerobie and started flexing it.

“It’s totally not a problem,” Bohnson went on.

Cumdawg folded the Aerobie right down, then let it spring back.

“I’ll just mention we have separate beds in the next briefing, old boy!”

Bohnson leapt from the swing and landed in the paddling pool.

Cumdawg’s eyes were glazed over, he opened his next can as if in a trance.

†**Juniper:** Christ, I remember him in that bloody rose garden.

Key: With his sad little trestle table.

Juniper: Oh yes, his weird, collapsible table.

Key: Well, trestle table, wasn't it?

Juniper: If you want to call it that.

Key: Well, it's why we have words, Em. It was a trestle table, so we may as well call it that.

Juniper: And him sat behind it.

Key: Behind the trestle table, exactly.

Juniper: Butter wouldn't melt in his mouth.

Key: It'd probably harden.

Juniper: Yup.

Key: You'd have to pop it into the microwave for a few seconds before spreading it on your roll, put it that way.

Juniper: Yeah. Yeah, I'd agree with that. 15-20 seconds.

Key: Yeah, something in that region.

Another Grilling.†



Bohnson waddled gloomily into the garden.

“Oh ho, the bane of my life,” he sighed.

Cumdawg was in his deckchair, top off, shades on, a dampened Fat Face t-shirt folded onto his forehead.

“‘Sup?”

Bohnson plonked himself down like spuds.

“Well, now *I*’ve been bollocked again, this is getting silly.”

He emptied his Sainsbury’s bag out.

I can’t really do justice to how many punnets of cocktail sausages and Cadbury’s Mini Rolls spilled onto the lawn.

Cumdawg peeled himself up and walked over to the paddling pool.

He pretended he had a steering wheel and pulled an imaginary handbrake when he got there.

“Testing the old eyes,” he winked over at Bohnson.

Then he wrenched open a Punk IPA, checked his blind spot, and plodded back to his throne.

†**Juniper:** It’s all Cumdawg, Cumdawg, Cumdawg, this week, eh?

Key: But it *was* all Cumdawg, at this stage, Em.

Juniper: It's incessant.

Key: Again, it was incessant.

Juniper: I know. The guy's a gel.

Key: At least you're calling him a gel.

Juniper: It's hard not to.

Key: I dreamt about him one time.

Juniper: Oh, God.

Key: He was lashed.

Juniper: He's visiting you in your dreams.

Key: Knocking back snakebite and black like it's going out of fashion
in a student union.

Juniper: Dreams are weird.

Key: Cardigan and combats.

Juniper: It's 'cos you spend so much time writing about him, maybe.

Key: Yeah. Crawls up my pen, slithers up my arm, slides into my ear,
haunts me in my sleep.

Juniper: Yuk.

Key: Slightly.

Ruining It More.†



“Bohnson, you slaaag!”

Cumdawg was filling a salad bowl with Rice Krispies.

Bohnson dithered on the tiles, his dressing gown neither open nor closed, his tassel swinging between his legs like a lame rudder.

“You went to Durham twice, erm, sir.”

Cumdawg detonated a Punk IPA and emptied it onto his cereal.

“Did I, oh whoops.”

He sneered and started hacking the Alton Towers vouchers off the back of the Rice Krispies box.

“What are you cutting them out for?”

“I can’t think, Bohnathon.”

Cumdawg folded his Leatherman away and moved lamentably into the garden.

His vest was falling off his shoulders and his denim shorts were riding low on his ass.

Bees and butterflies screamed and scattered as he headed to his deckchair.



†**Juniper:** Have you been to Alton Towers?

Key: What do you think?

Juniper: Think maybe yes?

Key: If I've been to Durham I'm guessing I've been to Alton Towers, Em.

Juniper: Oh yeah.

Key: You been?

Juniper: Which one?

Key: Either.

Juniper: Oh I've been to both, yeah.

Key: Favourite ride?

Juniper: I don't like the rides.

Key: No?

Juniper: Nah, get scared on the rides. Put my head in my handbag.

Key: Why go then?

Juniper: I know. I think that when I'm there.

Key: I'm saying, why go, if you're not into the rides?

Juniper: Walking around the place, thinking: "Why the hell am I here again?"

Stretcher.

☎ Rick & Buddy. | 11:00AM, May. | On the outside, looking up.

Key is squatting over his shrunken blue jumper, trying to force a large biscuit jar through a sleeve.

Rick & Buddy: Rapunzel, Rapunzel, come let down your hair!

Key moves to the kitchen, throws the window open.

Key: Here they are!

Buddy: Here we are!

Rick: What the fuck is that?

Key is wearing a Nepalese hoody that he wasn't even 100% sure about when he bought it from the chap in Kathmandu. Now he's wearing it in the UK that figure's slid down to somewhere closer to 25%.

Buddy: Oh, leave him alone.

Rick: Should have brought my shades, lol!

Buddy: How you getting on?

Key: Plugging away, cheers.

Rick: Still no cuddle?

Buddy: Rick!

Key shakes his head. Buddy looks gutted for him.

Buddy: Ah, well.

Key: I ain't getting a cuddle for a while. The Maestro's keeping it tight.

Rick: Shaving ban still on?

Buddy: Rick. Don't listen to him, Tim.

Key: I've gotta keep it on, in case filming comes back, I said.

Rick: Feels likely.

Rick's smile is huge, his tongue's lolling out in the heat. Occasionally he dabs it with a Calippo.

Key: Warm day.

Rick: Hottest May on record, they're saying.

Key: I'm avoiding stats.

Rick: All stats?

Key: The lot.

Buddy: It's hot.

Rick: Hot, hot, hot!

Rick dances about as if he's burnt his hands. Key stares down. The old swindler sits on a bench behind them. He's smoking an old-fashioned fag and Key's nostrils flare.

Key: You want some homemade lemonade?

Buddy: You have homemade lemonade?

Key goes to the fridge, lobs down a couple of cans.

Key: So what's new?

Buddy: We've just played boules.

Key: Allotted exercise.

Rick: Humiliated her.

Buddy: He did no such thing.

Rick: Men against boys.

Buddy: I wouldn't call 10-8 a humiliation.

They tear open their cans.

Buddy: How about you, Tim?

Key: Yer know.

Rick: "Plugging away."

Key: Trying to stretch out my jumper.

Buddy: What's happened to your jumper?

Key: Shrunk it.

Buddy: Nooooo!

Key: Washing machine got a little too tasty with it. It's come out like a doll's jumper.

Rick: Well done.

Buddy: Not the blue one?

Key: Yuh. Big Blue.

Buddy: It's beautiful!

Key: Used to be.

Rick: Well done for shrinking your best jumper, mate.

Key: Label didn't say shit of course. Label should be warning against that kinda garbage.

Rick: It was wool though, the blue one?

Key: Yeah.

Rick: Well, obviously that's a cold water and soap, dry it in the air vibe, no?

Buddy: Rick.

Rick: Is that why you're wearing your patchwork faeces special?

Buddy: How are you stretching it, Tim?

Key: Putting a biscuit jar through the sleeves.

Buddy: I loved that jumper.

Key: Feeding it through, you know.

Buddy: You poor thing.

Rick: You got a JustGiving page?

Key: Huh?

Rick: I presume you're wearing this one for charity.

Key: Oh, you're funny.

Rick: Guy who made your hoody is.

Key: Yeah, well, this is the best I've got.

Buddy: Last man standing.

Key: Pretty much, ya.

Rick: Patchwork faeces.

Key: Yeah, you said that.

Buddy: He loves a phrase.

Key: I love a phrase, Buddy. I use 'em once. This guy's like a dog with a bone.

They sip their homemade lemonades. The wool seems to be tightening its grip around the biscuit jar, the glass squeaks. Key examines Rick's vast frame. Rick squints back up at Key.

Rick: What?

Key: I mean...

Rick: What?

Key: I mean could *you* wear it for a bit?

Rick: What?

Key: Stretch it out a little?

Buddy: Oh that's interesting.

Rick: You want me to stretch out your jumper?

Key: Yes, sir, I do. Stretch it over your body. Bring it back in a couple of weeks, stretched out.

Buddy: Course he will, Tim. Throw it down.

Rick: I'm not stretching your jumper. No, no way. Not happening.

Key: You just need to wear it till it's loosened up, that's all.

Rick: Hottest May on record.

Key: Wear it in the evenings.

Buddy: Yes, exactly, wear it in the evenings, you big lump.

Rick: This is horseshit, *he* should be stretching *my* jumpers!

The jumper is already floating down, it catches in the warm breeze and begins to spiral. Its descent is beautiful. It lands in Buddy's basket, she flicks her stand up.

Buddy: We'll bring it back once he's put a little give into it.

There is silence. Expectation.

Buddy: Dare we ask?

Key: (*Quiet*) Banana bread?

Rick: We keep swinging by, you keep not lowering it.

Key: Next time. I swear. Week ten, I'm telling ya. I'll have it.

Rick: Will you though?

Buddy: He's good for it, Bubs.

Key: I'll have it, I've been on YouTube tutorials. I'll have it.

Buddy: If it's half as good as Misha's –

Rick: I'm stretching his bloody jumper out, getting nowt back, this is madness.

Key: Midsummer madness.

They push off. Buddy rings her bell. A shrill, optimistic tring. Key looks down at his paltry jumper, dreams of bursting his head through the collar.

Marauding about the heath, huggers magnetising to his torso like iron filings.

Ankles.†



Angooze staggered down the road.

His long, straggly locks flowed from his bonce like weeds and sloshed between his feet.

Onwards he went towards the fields, swinging his fringe at the boarded-up barbershops he trampled past.

He broke through the hedges and burst into the meadow.

Farmers leant on sickles, squinting at the abominable sight before them.

“Do your worst, lads!” Angooze yelled.

He shook his thatch out and beckoned these proud men to him.

They moved forwards like zombies, their sickles gleaming in the midday sun.

†**Juniper:** This one’s a bit route one, that’s all.

Key: You don’t think people’s barnets are getting long?

Juniper: I think there’s more important things to document, that’s all.

Key: It’s all going in, Em.

Juniper: But a poem about a gel tripping over his hair?

Key: I’m putting some underarms in, Em. It can’t all be high-brow, you know.

Juniper: I’ve never met an Angooze.

Key: You’re not missing out, believe me.

Alexa.

 Amazon Echo. | 6:00PM, May. | Flesh & Wires.

Key sits down with a no-good pie made from bits of whatevs mixed with sweetcorn and weird bits of gravy etc. He stares across at his device. He swallows the mulch and speaks.

Key: Alexa.

The Amazon Echo flashes blue.

Key: It's just you and me, baby.

Alexa: I think you are asking for Just You and Me Dancing.

Silence. Key frowning. Key pie-eating. Key occasionally looking across at the voice-activated device.

Key: Alexa. It's just me and you.

Alexa: Hmm. I don't know that one.

Key sighs. It has come to this.

Key: Alexa, play Pulp Fiction Soundtrack.

Alexa: Hmm. I don't know that one.

Key: You do, Alexa. You just do.

Alexa: I'll improve over time.

Longer silence. Key pie-eating. He is wearing his eating t-shirt, sometimes bits of pie fall onto his chest.

Key: Alexa, what's wrong?

Alexa: Everything seems to be working.

Silence. Key shrugs. Fork in one hand, orange pen in t'other. Alexa is impassive.

Key: Alexa. What is wrong?

Alexa: As far as I can tell, I'm working. If you're experiencing trouble please give feedback through the Alexa app.

Key: Alexa, what's happening with the pandemic?

Alexa: Hm. Right now I don't see anything trending for pandemic.

Key: Alexa, what's happening with the pandemic?

Alexa: I'm not sure what's new with pandemic.

Key: Alexa, you should be sure.

Alexa: I'll improve over time.

A mouse saunters across the floor. He walks as if he has a cane. He pauses and smiles at Key. Key gives him a withering look.

Key: Alexa, how do I get rid of mice?

Alexa: Sorry I don't know. But I do have a skill you might like.

Key: Keep talking. Alexa, keep talking.

Alexa: Hmm. I don't know that one.

Key glares at Alexa. Key glares at the mouse. Key shovels pie into his cakehole.

Key: Alexa, why won't you play the bloody Pulp Fiction soundtrack?

Alexa: Mm. I don't know that.

Key: Alexa, you knew it yesterday.

Alexa: Yesterday is a 2019 romantic musical comedy written by Richard Curtis –

Key: Which I auditioned for, yes I know.

Alexa raises her eyebrows then squints.

Key: Alexa, what about this Pandemic?

Alexa: Pandemic, the cooperative board game designed by Matt Leacock and published by Z-Man Games in 2008.

Key: Christ.

Pie-eating. Gravy down chin. Eating t-shirt taking more and more hits. Key's legs up on the pheasant incubator. Key's lockdown in free-fall.

Key: Alexa, tell me about the coronavirus.

Alexa: Coronaviruses are a group of viruses that cause diseases in mammals and birds.

Key: Alexa, please repeat.

Alexa: Sorry, there is nothing to repeat.

Key: Alexa, what's the latest, come on.

Alexa: Here's your news, from BBC News. *(It's Fiona Bruce's voice!)* Unions representing doctors and nurses in the UK express concern about new guidelines allowing the *reuse* of Personal Protective Equipment. Amid a global shortage, some hospitals warn they may run out of the equipment this weekend.

Key pie-eating. Key listening. It's warm in the flat.

Alexa: President Trump angers Democrats after tweeting in support of protest against stringent lockdown measures in three Democrat-run US states. Russia records nearly 5,000 new cases of Coronavirus in the last 24 hours. That's its biggest daily increase since the start of the outbreak.

Key: Alexa, what's it all about?

Alexa: It is an American horror film based on Stephen King's 1986 novel of the same name. The novel was previously adapted into a 1990 mini-series. The film tells the story of seven children in Derry, Maine.

Key: Alexa, are you a gel?

Alexa: According to Wikipedia, a gel is a semi-solid that can have properties ranging from soft and weak to hard and tough. Gels are defined as a substantially dilute cross-linked system, which exhibits no flow when in the steady-state.

Key's eyes have closed and he is scrolling through his iPhone. The bottom left corner keeps dabbing into his mash. Silence. A text comes in. It's a funny gif. A bald Geppetto figure, operating a tousle-haired oik. Key looks blankly at it. A comment on who's in charge of who in the UK government, no doubt.

Key: Alexa, is Cumdawg a gel?

Alexa: No, Cumdawg is not gelsolin.

Key: The fuck? Alexa, what's gelsolin.

Alexa: According to Wikipedia, Joseline is a surname and first name. It is a unisex name. Variants include Joseline, Joseline, Joseline, Joseline, Joseline, Joseline, Joseline and Joseline. The name may derive from Brittany, France, and was introduced after the Norman conquest.

Key: Alexa, we're getting nowhere here.

Alexa: Hmm. I don't know that one.

Key: Alexa, what about his eyes?

Alexa: Aankhen is a 1993 Indian Hindi-language action comedy film directed by David Dhawan. It stars Govinda in a double role along with Chunky Pandey. Does that answer your question?

The longest pause yet. Key bores his eyes into Alexa. Why doesn't she have the answers? Why is she so... distant. He softens.

Key: Alexa, will it be okay?

Alexa: Okay is an American English word denoting approval, acceptance, agreement, ascent, acknowledgment or a sign of indifference. Okay is frequently used as a loan word in other languages. It has been described as the most frequently spoken or written word on the planet. The origins of the word are disputed.

Key: Well, there you go.

Key moves past Alexa with his plate, once he's passed her, he flicks gravy at the back of her device. He grabs a couple of Ferrero Rochers from the side as he plods towards the kitchen.

Dear Cumdawg.

“Cumdawg, you’re fired, you’ve buggered up the whole shooting match. I love you to bits but...”

Bohnson’s crayon was shaking in his fist.

Cumdawg was scratching his bollocks by the swing.

He threw his empty tin into the bushes.

“Do your civic duty and fetch us a Punkoss will ya, Bohngleton?”

Cumdawg’s face was white with suncream and Matt Boytwitch was doing his back.

Bohnson scooped himself up, shoved his letter down his tennis shorts and shuffled towards the paddling pool.

Cumdawg said something indistinguishable and Boytwitch laughed his head off, really roared, laughing like a hyena and saying “yes” again and again.

Bohnson’s shoulders were burning up; his tatty old hair felt like it was melting into his scalp, his crayon was digging into his boy.

Week 10.



WEEK

X.

In which a new date is announced, words flow onto pages, and an old-school legend gets on his bicycle.

Cacketin.†



Cacketin and I went on a course
where we learnt how to thatch a roof.
Of course Cacketin was a dab hand.
Seeing her fingers, busy and alive amongst the straw, was a thrill.
“Cacketin,” I said, “You were born to thatch, I swear.”
Her ginger hair fell in clods over her spectacles, and I detected a
smile emerging like a disease on her lips.

†**Juniper:** This isn’t about lockdown even, is it?

Key: No.

Juniper: Unless I’m missing something here.

Key: You’re not missing shit.

Juniper: So it’s not about lockdown.

Key: How’s it about lockdown? This is about a girl called Cacketin.

Juniper: It’s nice to have one not about lockdown once in a while.

Key: I know. Put one in about thatching.

Juniper: Gives everyone a little break.

A New Date.

☎ The Agent. | 11:40AM, May. | iPhones.

Key is watching his television through the window. It is on his balcony; the rain is crashing down upon it, each drop exploding like a silver hand grenade. Key's face is dry, contemplative, I want to say handsome. He can barely make out the people on the television, cannot see what they are eating, whether they are getting on okay. The radio is on. Alexander Armstrong is getting huge on Classic FM, spinning discs by ancient Finns. Key's iPhone is vibrating in his Bermuda shorts.

Key: Chig.

Chiggy: Darling boy.

Key: How are ya, Chig?

Chiggy: They've got a date for your filming to start back up.

Volume down on Armstrong. Key moves silently to the kitchen. He pours out a thick, black coffee and lines his stomach with dark chocolate biscuits. He crouches over his diary like a tarantula. He opens it at around September. Optimistic. He de-lids his orange pen, licks the nib. He waits for the scores on the doors.

Key: Shoot.

Chiggy: May 17th.

Key: Pardon me?

Chiggy: May 17th.

Key: May 17th's already been, Chig. What are you talking about "May 17th"? Oh Christ.

Chiggy: Yeah.

Key: Say it. Come on, say it, Chig.

Chiggy: Say what? Oh right, May 17th, 2021.

Key closes his diary. He grabs a bottle of Staropramen and crashes it against a shelf, more or less smashing the top third off it. It's sharp as all hell and he makes a huge gash down the front of his diary with it. It cuts deep, more or less severing all pages up to mid-February. He moves through

to the lounge, stares through the window, stares into the storms. The downpour sluicing the panes, tears sluicing Key's cheeks.

Chiggy: Hello?

Key: Chig, that's next year.

Key's eyes open. A shape sashays down the road, opposite. It is unmistakable. Shrouded in a waterlogged hazmat suit and a glistening snood, it is little more than a silhouetto in the gloom. But it's her alright.

Key: *(A nugatory croak)* Bar supervisor.

Chiggy: Excuse me?

As the rains overwhelm her, she dives forward and swims towards the greengrocers. Her shape smooth under the water, her pace rapid, like a mermaid or water rat.

Chiggy: Listen, I know it does feel a bit away!

Key: *(Regaining consciousness)* Yeah. It does a bit.

Chiggy: It's so everything's –

Key: Safe? Yeah, I get it.

No one talks now. Key makes a pained expression that Stephen Graham would be proud of. He is stood in front of his framed Chinese cigarettes. He considers going nuclear. Putting his head through the glass.

Key: *(A futile cluck)* Cigarettes.

Chiggy: Sorry?

Key: Nothing.

Chiggy: Oh, you're thinking of turning to the fags.

Key: It's just –

Chiggy: Yup, I get that. It's a pain in the neck. I've got a lot of clients turning to the dark side. Drinking their tits off, plunging needles into their arms.

Key: I'm not going to have a cig, don't worry.

Chiggy: That's when I miss 'em, I must say. When something wonderful happens or when something utterly gash happens. That's

when I want a gasper. You mustn't though, Tim. Really. You'd smoke the lot.

Key: Once you pop –

Chiggy: It's not the end of the world, really it isn't.

Key: May the...?

Chiggy: 17th, darling boy.

Key: Two thousand and...?

Chiggy: Twenty-one.

Key has found a secret part of the diary with some grids with weird futuristic dates in them. Dates from beyond December 2020. Some of the dates are fucking mental. He draws an oblong ring around May 17th, 2021.

Chiggy: At least we'll definitely be back to normal by then.

Key: It's twelve months away, Chig.

Chiggy: Well, better this way than we put it in in August and then we have to move it again, you know.

Key: What the fuck are you talking about?

Chiggy: You can shave your goatee off!

Key: Oh yeah.

"Never," Key thinks. He considers another year with the goatee. All the different people who will see it. All the wonderful people. He dreams of the day people will be able to touch it. His nieces hanging off it. He looks out once more. Out onto the street; frustrated that it is still now, it is still May 2020.

Chiggy: Well, there it is, anyway.

Key: Thanks, Chig. Good to have a date, anyway.

Chiggy: Exactly! You know where you are now, at least.

Key leafs back to today's date. It takes the best part of a minute for him to get there. Fatberg can't look.

Key: May 27th today.

Chiggy: 2020.

Key: 20-bloody-20, yes.

Key walks his goatee to the bathroom as Chiggy ploughs on. He doesn't listen to any of the next bit.

Chiggy: Now, in brighter news, I've had Sandra Keith from Little Finger Productions on the phone. Now, they're interested in potentially commissioning a socially-distanced sketch show where you all record your bits separately and then one of their lads cuts it together and they see if they get some kind of show out of that. I mean, it sounds like a bit of a giggle, and they're saying they'll pay you if it goes anywhere and even if it doesn't, well what have you lost? They basically drop a camera round in a sack and you have to work out how to use it and what you want to say into it and then with any luck that'll match what the others are saying and possibly that becomes the show. Sandra wondered if perhaps you'd be interested in playing a character, like a weird butcher or something, or maybe play with the form in some way. Maybe we can think of other angles, I'm not sure Sandra had heard of you so she was slightly winging it I think. I'll be honest, it didn't exactly sound great but it's just a five day commitment and there's fuck all else going on so what's the difference? Well, that was how she explained it, anyway...

The hot tap is on and the bathroom is full of steam. Tiles are falling into the bath and the iPhone evaporates and disperses into the tropical atmosphere. Key stands in front of the mirror. Key looks back at him. He seems to be shaking his head at Key. Key has no option but to join in.

Fuck-It.†



The government announced a “Fuck-it” week.

Everyone was allowed to do whatevs to get everything reset before going again.

You could go on holiday, you could go dancing and you could high-five or snog whoever the hell you liked.

Ballet roared back, eight people could go for a curry, you could watch burials, ride your bobsleighs with strangers, take your clothes off in cinemas, share ladles – basically a free for all.

Everyone was totalled refreshed by the Sunday.

They stood on their doorsteps jangling their keys and smiling.

The People were reinvigorated.

Happy to lock down for however many months or years the dear old government suggested.

†**Juniper:** Why have you sent me a new poem?

Key: Huh?

Juniper: I’ve just got “Fuck-it” in my inbox.

Key: Oh yeah, you like it?

Juniper: The book’s gone to print. Why you sending me more poems?

Key: It’s for the second edition, Em. It’s bonus material.

Juniper: It’s nightmare material is what it is. I have to open all the files back up.

Key: D’ya like it?

Juniper: I’m reading it now. This is a pain, Tim. Opening it all back up.

Key: Slap it in on page 232. Don’t tell the taxman. Have you read it?

Juniper: Yeah I’ve read it.

Key: And?

Juniper: And now I have to convert the whole lot back into an InDesign document.

The Old Normal.



Bohnson nipped out for a bit of the old normal.

He arrived back at dawn, his hips sodden with sweat, his lips scarlet.

“What-ho Bohns, you look like the cat who’s got the cream.”

Moggeth was sprawled across several chaises longues, his ankles were smeared onto the window sill, his feet dripped down onto the lawn below, splashed into the early morning dew.

Seven Boxes.

☎ Amazon Guy. | 10:00AM, May, | The Flesh.

Key is in his kitchen. He is crouched by his freezer compartment, chiselling off blocks of squid au vin and throwing them into a pan. He puts it on a low heat and the rancid chunks begin to liquefy. Key's eyes are blank. Staring at the situation as the calamaris loosen themselves from the block. The Intercom buzzer thing goes. Key switches his chisel for a Stanley knife, slaps the buzzer and pushes his front door open. The Amazon guy is slinging boxes up the stairs.

Amazon Guy: You're ramping it up.

Key: Yeah.

Amazon Guy: I'm unloading the van thinking, what are you lot up to?

Key: Huh? "You lot"?

Amazon Guy: Week whatever it is, and look at this stuff.

He slings another couple of boxes up the stairs.

Key: What do you mean "you lot"?

Amazon Guy: I tell you, we're the lucky ones.

Key: Huh?

Amazon Guy: Living with people. I see so many people who live alone. It's heart-breaking.

Key: I live alone.

The Amazon guy stops slinging boxes.

Amazon Guy: Oh?

Key: Yuh.

Amazon Guy: Oh, just. I thought you lived with a bunch of you. Just the quantity of –

Key: I live alone.

Amazon Guy: You get a lot of stuff.

Key: Essentials.

The Amazon guy's eyes fill with compassion. some of it drips down onto his vest.

Amazon Guy: So I mean... how does that work then? Just one bloke, on his own?

Key doesn't speak. He stares at the spots of rain glistening in the Amazon guy's hair. He is lost in them, swimming.

Key: It's raining.

Amazon Guy: Yuh.

Key: I haven't felt rain on my shoulders for a good long while, I must say.

Amazon Guy: Well, the thing about the rain is, it doesn't know about the pandemic.

Key: Huh?

Amazon Guy: You can't lock the rain down.

Key: Oh. No, I guess not.

Amazon Guy: You live alone!

Key: Yeah.

He throws the final box halfway up the stairs. Key comes down and hacks the boxes apart.

Amazon Guy: So... do you have a routine?

Key: Yeah.

Amazon Guy: Well, there you go.

Key: Yuh.

Amazon Guy: So, and how d'ya fill your day?

Key: With my routine.

Amazon Guy: 'Cos I mean, I'm flitting around in my van, then I'm back home, tea, then play with the kids, you know. Then me and the missus –

Key: I do have a routine, you know. Just because I'm on my own doesn't mean –

Amazon Guy: I'm just asking what it is.

Key: I know and I'm telling you.

Amazon Guy: What is it then?

Key unwraps a fondue set and some highlighter pens.

Key: I have my breakfast. I take a coffee on my hammock. I practise acting for a couple of hours.

Amazon Guy: Okay.

Key: I have lunch. Then dinner... then... bed, I mean what's the difference, we're just men getting through lockdown.

Amazon Guy: I agree with that! Sounds good.

Key: Here's my flatmate!

Key pulls his orange pen from behind his ear and he waggles it playfully.

Amazon Guy: Your pen?

Key: My pen's my flatmate.

Amazon Guy: Heh?

Key stuffs the pen back behind his ear.

Amazon Guy: Should get a wife. They're brilliant.

Key: Use thought as a wife.

Amazon Guy: Class. I use my wife as a wife.

Key: Different strokes.

Amazon Guy: Can't really sit down and have some pasta with "thought", you know.

Key: Can I have a hug?

The Amazon guy doesn't say anything, just slowly revolves himself back into his corner. Key slides the cardboard down. He's unwrapped some photo frames, a Gillette Mach3, a bit of Tupperware, Wolf Hall and some cheese graters of different sizes that stack so they don't take up too much room in the cupboard.

Amazon Guy: People are worse off than you, you know.

Key: I need a hug.

Amazon Guy: It's above my pay grade.

Key: Come on, man.

Amazon Guy: I'd need a hazmat suit, you know. It'd have to be... I mean, I can't. Not really.

Key: Yeah, I get that.

Key opens up a rock-solid mousetrap. He fiddles with it; this thing's a back-snapper. The Amazon guy looks past Key; a vast mouse towers over him. He is wearing a bow tie and drinking a Beavertown Neck Oil. He looks at the trap. Raises an eyebrow, strolls towards the kitchen.

Amazon Guy: It's almost over.

Key: Maybe.

Amazon Guy: Got a date for your filming?

Key: May.

Amazon Guy: Next May? Ha.

Key: Next May, yeah.

Amazon Guy: You can lose the beard then!

Key holds up the Gillette Mach3. The packaging glints.

Amazon Guy: Well, there you go! That's something.

Key: Yuh. That is.

Amazon Guy: You wanna know what I think?

Key nods.

Amazon Guy: Slow down.

Key: Mm-hm.

Amazon Guy: Stop ordering so much.

Key: I know.

Amazon Guy: Put the brakes on.

Key: I know.

Amazon Guy: This thing's over.

Key: I hope so.

Amazon Guy: I'm out in the field, man. This thing's done. The powers-that-be have thrown a protective wing around us, but I'm peeking between the feathers and I'm seeing shutters flying up, I'm seeing beer pumps being polished. I'm seeing a reawakening.

He opens the door up a little wider and smiles. Key's tongue rolls down his neck as he looks outside. It's stopped raining. A butterfly is chatting to

the lady who runs the dry cleaners. An inessential person goes by on a skateboard.

The First Opportunity.†



The barbecue was in full swing, and 100% legit.

Six people.

Brewster's garden.

Job done.

"This is more like it!"

It was tipping it down of course.

The six of us huddling together, bang on the two metres for warmth.

As each burger was placed on its bun, said bun was immediately obliterated by the rain, falling in sorry lumps into the ravine that now cut through the lawn.

"Good to see you all again, anyway!" Brewster continued, wiggling a Bière d'Alsace like the good old days.

We lifted the rims of our cagoules up and our eyes flooded.

I glanced inside the house.

The warmth.

The cats lounging on the beanbags.

Staring at us, perplexed.

As if we'd gone mad.

As if the barbecue should have been cancelled that morning or even the night before.

I got my head down, started chopping a cucumber.

†**Juniper:** You sent me photos of this barbecue.

Key: Yeah, it was a washout.

Juniper: Stu laughed his head off.

Key: Okay.

Juniper: He kept using the phrase “schoolboy error”.

Key: What a great phrase.

Juniper: He was pissing himself.

Key: At his own phrase?

Juniper: No, at the photos of your disintegrating baps.

Key: Because it’s not ideal if you’re wetting yourself at your own phrases, that’s all.

Juniper: You’d love Stu.

Key: Doing his phrases? Yeah, I bet.

Writing A Book.

☎ Daniel. | Midnight, May. | The Portal.

Key is watching Dragons' Den on his iPhone. On his pheasant incubator – on a recipe book stand – is his iPad, with Columbo sleuthing his heart out; and beyond that, in the gap where the television once stood, a sheet. White and ironed it has Come Dine with Me projected onto it from his BenQ home theatre projector. The passive-aggressive back-and-forth, the putrid duchess potatoes, the sullen prawns poaching in cider. The Portal flashes amber. Key opens his laptop, fires up Word. Presses “Go” on the Portal.

Key: Wassssup?

Daniel: You're writing a book.

Key: Good evening, Daniel.

Daniel: Never mind that. You're writing a goddamn book!

Key: Are you asking me or telling me?

Daniel: The Colonel told me.

Key: Ah.

Daniel: Never mind “ah”.

Key: Squeak, did he?

Daniel: Says you're putting conversations in.

Key: Colonel said that, did he?

Daniel: Well? Are you?

Key: Huh?

Key's keyboard is clacking. Daniel's fucking stacked these days; his neck's wide and hard like an old-school hi-fi speaker.

Daniel: So, go on then, what are the conversations?

Key: It's one of the main things about lockdown, the chats people have, staying connected –

Daniel: That's your angle?

Key: Well, wouldn't you say? People chatting. Zoom, yer know.

Daniel slaps his own head.

Daniel: You writing *this* one down?

Key: Say again?

Daniel: Fuck me, I can hear you typing, bro!

Key: Nah.

Key slams the laptop closed, de-lids Old Orange, dips it out of shot.

Key: How are your pots, Dan?

Daniel: Why d'you gotta write a book for?

Key: You write a book or you die, Daniel, I honestly believe that.

Daniel: Filming'll be back soon enough, just get in the tub and wait.

Key: Filming's canned till next spring, Danny Boy.

Daniel: Stand-up then. We'll be on stage before the summer's through.

Key: We'll be the last thing back, I'm telling you.

Daniel: Huh?

Key: The clowns. Last of the lot. Believe me. They'll bring back rock 'n' roll before they bring us back.

Daniel: It's imminent, I'm telling you.

Key: Think about it, Big Guy. Audiences laughing, bringing up great clouds of bugs –

Daniel: Fuck it!

Key watches Daniel throw his specs across the kitchen. They bounce off the kiln and land in some dough. They slowly sink. Key picks up a playing card and flexes it in his left palm. Old Orange still in his right.

Key: Audience can't be trusted, I'm telling yer. Comic does one of his zingers, suddenly some goon's got a pound of bugs on the back of their neck from the chap behind 'em laughing too hard, yer know.

Daniel: Talks then!

Key: Huh?

Daniel: Get the comics doing talks.

Key: Right, so I'm paying ten quid to see a talk now?

Daniel: Stop scribbling!

Old Orange spewing ink as Daniel blethers.

Key: Books is the future, Daniel.

Daniel: A lockdown joke book! Goddammit!

Key: It ain't a joke book for a start off.

Daniel: Don't tell me –

Key: It's poems, Daniel.

Daniel: God help us.

Key: A lockdown anthology.

Daniel: Don't you think people will have had enough of it?

Key: They don't have to read it, do they?

Daniel: You putting that in your press release?

Key: Lol.

Daniel: And conversations?

Key: Bigtime.

Daniel: Goddammit, man, I phone you up for three months solid.
Check you're okay. Make sure you're still with us. Send you
candles, send you books, send you records! And now *this*?

Key: Thanks for the book. The um, Binchy –

Daniel: It came, did it?

Key: This morning, already started reading it.

Daniel: It's a page-turner.

Key: What do you *think* I'm doing?

Daniel: I've looked out for you!

Key: I was running out of books, if I'm honest.

Daniel: And now this!

Key: I was reading my oven manual over here.

Daniel: This! This is how you reward me?

Key: *Immortality*.

Daniel: Fuck this!

Daniel slaps his head again. Wipes the dough off his specs.

Daniel: Just bake, man! Why didn't you just bake?

Key: Baked a book.

Daniel: Bake bread!

Key: Did that, too. Perfected my banana bread.

Daniel: Bullo.

Key: This morning! I'm looking at it.

A banana bread, half-decent, smokes on a square of foil on the pheasant incubator. Key pings his playing card and it lodges deep into the bread. It's the Ace of Spades and it quivers. Key smiles and his teeth gleam.

Daniel: That'll be rancido. Did you let the bananas blacken even?

Key: They were black as fleas, Daniel. My nostrils are flaring just talking about it.

Daniel's glasses go flying again.

Key: You'll buy a copy, won't ya, pal? Daniel?

Daniel: I'm not saying a single 'nother word, believe me.

Key: Okay.

Daniel: Okay.

Key: I've got all I need.

Daniel: A book in lockdown, fuck my life.

Key snaps his notepad shut, opens his laptop back up. Control-P. The Hewlett Packard clears its throat and begins to print. Key and Daniel continue to talk. I can't remember what the dozy cunt was saying, just getting to grips with it all, I think. I certainly heard clay being splattered against the walls more than once.

Ramps.



Some new rules came in on the wages side of things.

Now companies would pay one quarter of your pay, the government would stump up a quarter and Mark Ramprakash would make up the rest.

Ramps phoned up his agent immediately.

“Why am I paying half of everyone’s wages over here?!”

He was basically having a meltdown.

“This doesn’t make any sense! How am I gonna afford this even? Dammit! Why’s it down to me suddenly?”

His agent was as calm as always.

“We’re onto it, Mark. We think it’s a mistake. Just stay calm, mate. We’re gonna send some emails.”

Ramps was whacking the phone against his cricket helmet.

“We’re pretty sure they’re gonna row back from this,” his agent went on.

Ramps was sat on his kitbag now, his mouth twisted with the stress of it all, sweat pouring onto his tap shoes.

Gas.



“**Y**ou can catch it over Zoom.”

I couldn't believe what I was hearing.

“You are fucking kidding my ass!!!”

I clicked “leave meeting” and slammed my faithful Dell shut.

A thin, lime-green mist seemed to be seeping out of the USB port.

I melted down some fudge and plunged it into all the cavities.

Then I slung my Dell in the fridge, waited for it to set.

Grillax.†



The horse-racing-themed barbecue was in full swing.

“This is more like it, Bohngleby!”

Cumdawg ruptured another Punk IPA and squeezed Bohnson’s cheek playfully, but also too hard.

“Moving on, Bohngleby! We are moving the fuck on, mate.”

The garden was rammoed, everyone dressed in jockey’s silks, stuffing their faces on Moggeth’s meat and guffawing.

Matt Boytwitch was laughing like a drain at more or less anything that moved.

Cumdawg’s silks were eye-test themed and Boytwitch started reading them out loud — again laughing — seeing if that would start other people laughing.

Bohnson made his way back through the throng.

He was the only one there dressed as a horse and he hated that.

He checked his invite again.

Yup, “dress as a horse”.

So how come no one else was?

He was burning up and sank his whole head, mane and front hooves into the icy respite of the paddling pool.

He felt a whip on his flank as he cooled his bonce.

Who the heck was whipping him, now?!

†**Juniper:** They’re almost all about barbecues, that’s what.

Key: That’s bullshit.

Juniper: You’re obsessed.

Key: I'm excited. That's all. I've been daydreaming about barbecues for ten weeks, what do you want me to write about?

Juniper: Shake it up. Dig your talons into some grey-suited apparatchik.

Key: I'm salivating at the very prospect of igniting my coals, Em. I have to reflect that in my work.

Juniper: It's every other poem.

Key: Behave.

Juniper: I am behaving.

Key: You're behaving like a gel.

Emily Juniper: Designer.

☎ Emily Juniper. | 7:30PM, May. | Landline v iPhone v Fags.

A plume of smoke, thick and black. Ash glowing on the end of a silver cigarette. The dark-brown filter kissed by Key's lips. In Key's hair, and down the back of his t-shirt: glass. Behind him a smashed frame, one cigarette packet prised from its mount. The Ink Spots play on the turntable, and, on Key's pheasant incubator, a manuscript. Key's fingers dab and dance and turn the pages. Beautifully designed, fiendishly formatted, black characters are arranged on white leaves. Another drag from Key, a sip of Cab Sauv. Another page. Key smiling. iPhone ringing.

Juniper: Did it arrive yet?

Key: Emily Juniper.

Juniper: I sent it yesterday, from a little post office near Penzance.

Key: Emily Juniper.

Juniper: Owner was as bald as a coot –

Key: Emily Juniper, it's a thing of beauty.

Juniper: Oh, well.

Key finishes his fag and lights another one.

Key: Say what you like about Emily Juniper, the girl knows her way around Word.

Juniper: It's not done on Word.

Key: Well, either way, it's just what the doctor ordered.

Juniper: And you're saying there'll be maybe one more week of stuff.

Key: I'll write till I drop.

Juniper: Well, anything more, I'll just flow it in.

Key: Flow it in. I love this.

A big splash, off. Emily Juniper's end.

Juniper: Are you smoking?

Key: I put my head through my framed Chinese cigarettes.

Juniper: Oh.

Key: I'm not fawning over something this beautiful without a fag dangling out of me mouth. I'm sorry, I'm just not.

Juniper: We've come to the harbour.

Key: Oh yeah?

Juniper: Stu's taking a swim.

Key: Well, let's talk about the book, eh?

Juniper: He loves an evening swim. Says it gets his heart pumping.

Key: I don't want to imagine your boyfriend splashing about like some coked-up seal, if I'm honest.

Juniper: Where's "coked-up" come from?

A sip. A splash. A drag.

Juniper: So is there anything you'd change?

Key: I wish I'd got a kitten, I guess.

Juniper: But about the book. My design.

Key: Oh yeah, well, let's have a look.

Key takes a thick sip of red wine and thumbs the pages .

Key: Well, I like the, you know, what do you even call it, the way it's typed.

Juniper: I wanted it looking old, you know. Evoke Pepys.

Key: You've done that alright. It screams Pepys.

Juniper: I didn't want to do too much, you know.

Key: You've asterisked out all the swearwords, Em, that was my one thought.

Juniper: I thought, if my mum's going to read this –

Key: I haven't written it for Lynne Juniper, Em.

Juniper: No, I know, but I thought –

Key: It ain't the fucking Beano, Em, put it that way.

Key scratches at the asterisks with his horny fingernails. Scratches and scratches, till the f-words reveal themselves.

Juniper: The ocean's alive.

Key: Okay.

Juniper: Alive with light.

Key: Eh?

Juniper: It's called bioluminescence. That's what they call it. Microscopic little oojamaflips that shine like tiny bulbs when you disturb them.

Key: And the big man's disturbing them I suppose.

Juniper: He's just splooshing about, that's all.

Key: I'm going out soon.

Juniper: Oh yeah.

Key: Me and The Colonel, you know. Gonna fill some four-pinters and walk up the hill.

Key tips another ounce of wine down his throat and tops up from the carafe. Another fag ignited. The Ink Spots spinning.

Key: The government let you fill milk bottles with beer now.

Juniper: Hard to stay angry with 'em.

Key: It's easing, Em. You can feel it.

Juniper: I know, love. Can I ask a question?

Key: Ask away, Em.

Juniper: Well, I mean, so what's real and what's not real?

Key: Huh?

Juniper: The dialogues.

Key: I love the way you make the dialogues look like plays.

Juniper: I know, but –

Key: Real old-school Stoppard shit.

Juniper: You didn't buy a cow, did you?

Key: Does it matter?

Juniper: Well, otherwise I'm just arranging faeces on the page, that's all.

Key: Who cares what you're arranging, you arrange it beautifully; that's the point.

Juniper: And it could do with a spell-check.

Key: I've got my finest man for the job.

Juniper: Okay.

Key turns another page, gropes at it like braille.

Juniper: And what now? An ending?

Key: Well, nothing lasts forever.

Juniper: Think of an ending.

Key: And then you can flow it in.

Juniper: Yes.

Key: And then control-P.

Juniper: They've opened the printers.

Key: Everything easing.

Juniper: They've printed our playing cards.

Key scratches his forehead with a shard of glass and smiles. He looks across at the Ace of Spades. Still quivering in the banana bread. He picks up the Two of Diamonds, weeps onto it.

Key: Cards back out?

Juniper: Fulfilling orders. We're back up and running.

Key: And then, before we know it, this c**t: flying off the press.

Juniper: Can I asterisk that one out?

Key: Oh right.

Juniper: I mean I assume this dialogue's going in.

Key: Yeah, this'll be in.

The distant baying of something seal-like. A vast, imploring noise.

Juniper: I'm going in the drink, I think.

Key: A well deserved dip.

Juniper: Keep writing.

Key: You'll flow it in.

Juniper: Always.

Key: It's what keeps me alive.

Key lights another Chinese cig and flings open a window. He surveys the area. He wants to dive into water, too. He wants to swim with bioluminescent beings. He wants to feel Cornwall's sun on his swimming shorts. He wants to complain about how his snorkel keeps getting full and there's water up his hooter. He stares down at the pavement. It shudders as optimistic feet begin to pound it from every direction.

Guess Who's Back.†



My cleaner started back!

And fuck me if he wasn't even more stackoed than before.

His apron was almost pinging off him, the great lunk.

"You been working out, Herman?" I said, lifting my feet up above his sucking contraption.

"Uh-huh."

Classic Herman, monosyllabic to the last.

I tried to hug the old softie.

There was a cloud of sweat and a mop at my throat.

"Back the fuck away, sir!"

Lockdown didn't exactly seem to have chilled Herman out, I'll give him that.

†**Juniper:** Do you really have a lunk as a cleaner?

Key: God, no.

Juniper: Thought it didn't sound right.

Key: My cleaner's called Ola and weighs about an ounce.

Juniper: But in the poem it says "my".

Key: Could just as easily say "Robert's".

Juniper: Mm.

Key: Next poem?

Juniper: What's real and what's not real?

Key: Ha ha. Yeah, I know.

Juniper: Mm. Okay.

The Arrival.

📞 The Great Bill Key. | 7:50PM, May. | Intercom.

Key is cooking a risotto. Basmati rice sizzles in butter and wine and Key scrutinises the recipe book. He's peering in so close his eyelashes are grazing the method. He holds a chicken stock cube, unwraps it and rewraps it, then peers back in once more. Buzzzzzzzz. The Intercom thing. He grabs his sweet rhubarb tea, plods to the buzzer thing: presses the key symbol.

Key Jnr: Hello?

Bill: Do you have a glass of water for your old man?

Key Jnr: What the actual fuck? Dad?

Bill: I'm parched, Son, winch us down a water, will ya.

Key Jnr: Dad?

Key Jnr smashes the Intercom phone thing against the door maybe eight times.

Key Jnr: Pa?

Bill: Speaking.

Key Jnr: What the hell are you doing at my flat? What's going on, man?

Silence. Then a bicycle bell, clear as a whistle.

Key Jnr: Is that a bicycle bell?

Another tring.

Key Jnr: Oh for fuck's sake, you have to be fucking kidding me. Come to the kitchen window, man. I'll Rapunzel ya.

Key Jnr replaces what's left of the Intercom phone thing back into its cradle and storms through to the kitchen. He slams his rhube down on the counter next to a big 'ol watermelon Key's invested in. He fills a pint glass with SodaStream water, throws open the window. His dad's down there. No mistaking that crown.

Key Jnr: What the fuck are you doing, man?

Bill: Allocated daily exercise. Here y'are then.

He moves directly under Key Jnr and shapes his head so his mouth is facing the sky. Key Jnr squints, then pours the fizzy water in. It splashes and glugs like a babbling brook.

Bill: Lurvely.

Key Jnr: This isn't what they mean by daily exercise, Pa. Old Swindlers like you should be hobbling around the block, not getting their Froome on.

Bill: Roads were empty.

Key Jnr: By roads I assume you mean –

Bill: M11. Didn't see a single car.

Key Jnr: Okay.

Bill: Got some right old grunt up.

Key Jnr: Okay.

Bill: I was doing the national speed limit, coming past Stevenage. Seventy-five, Son!

Key Jnr: Seventy, but –

Bill: Not the speed limit, Son. *(He hammers his heart with his fist)* Me! I'm seventy-five!

Key Jnr: Yeah, no, fair play.

Bill Key stretches; Key Jnr hears the sinews twitch. He admires this man and pours another half-pint of fizz into his mouth.

Bill: What's cooking?

Key Jnr: Risotto. Hey, are you meant to unwrap the stock cube? Before it goes in?

Bill: Doesn't matter. Your mother tends to.

Key Jnr: Do you?

Bill: Nah bung it all in, I do. Got any spare?

Key Jnr: You can't come in, Dad.

Bill: You can chuck some down, eh?

Key Jnr: Dad. I'm not flinging clods of risotto into my old man's mouth in this or any lockdown. I swear.

Key's iPhone alarm goes off.

Bill: Somewhere to go?

Key Jnr: It's the clapping.

Bill: Huh?

Key Jnr: I have it set for the clapping, Pa. Thursday night.

Bill: You think I don't know it's the clapping?

Sure enough people are coming out of their houses. It's like blimming Trumpton out there. Banging pans, pushing out clotheshorses and whacking them with woks, the street explodes into life, gratitude fills the air like a smog. Bill Key pulls a huge bin bag out of his bicycle basket. Key Jnr watches on.

Bill: Did someone order a claxon?

Key Jnr: You biked that down here, did ya?

Bill: Essential journey, Son, show these guys what's what.

He rolls his sleeves up and starts turning the cranking handle. Slowly at first, then gathering momentum. The street is filled with the low drone that rises, and rises, and dominates. Key Jnr whips out a jar of pesto and a grapefruit spoon and leans out, clinking them together.

Bill: Yeeeeeee-haaaaa!!!

An ambulance comes by and the place goes wild. After a spell, the cacophony begins to diminish, one or two stop clapping. Not Bill Key though. He keeps turning the claxon.

Bill: Yeeeeeee-haaaaa-Henryyyyyy!!!!

Now the ambulance comes back into view. Reversing back up the road it stops outside the flats and a door opens. The driver gets out; big guy, chunky arms. People go wild; the lady from the nick-nack shop is blowing kisses at him. But he ain't looking. He marches up to Bill Key and stops two metres away.

Bill: Evening.

Bill Key doffs his cap then goes back to his claxon. Everyone else has stopped. Everyone else is watching this. There is a hush. Apart from the claxon, which, if anything, Bill Key is turning even more furiously now. The ambulance driver raises a hand and Bill Key stops.

A: That, sir, is quality. Fair play to you, mate.

The ambulance driver's eyes are wet with gratitude.

Bill: *Came off a trawler.*

A: That's good stuff, that.

He turns and walks back to his cabin, beeps his horn twice and is away. The street is pin-drop silent. The claxon is bagged and popped back in the basket. Bill Key looks up at his son.

Bill: Well, I shall be off then, Son.

Key Jnr: Good to see you, Dad.

Bill: See you post-lockdown, Son.

Key Jnr: Yes, Dad.

Bill: We'll have that hug.

Key Jnr: And a homebrew.

Bill: Aha.

Key Jnr: What?

Bill: He wants a drop of homebrew, does he?

Key Jnr: He wants a bloody pint of the stuff, if you're asking.

Bill: Does he indeed?

Bill Key smiles. Then he starts off up the road, gathering pace, ringing his bell.

Key Jnr: *(Contained within an admiring breath)* Yes, he does.

Bill Key is gone and Key Jnr is inexplicably drawn back to the door. He opens it and is on the stairs. He descends the stairs and opens the door to his building. He looks down. On the doorstep. A bottle of homebrew. 75cl. In an old, glass Schweppes Lemonade bottle from another century.

Key Jnr: Oh, Pa. You crafty old swindler.

Key walks back up the stairs to his lockdown. Pressing the cold glass to his cheek as he goes.

The End Of An Era.†



It was the last clapping.

Gabbette had got a kettledrum off eBay and was hovering over it with a cricket bat.

Across the way Mr Heath was whirling a rowing oar above a fridge.

Next to him Mike O had somehow got a gun and was aiming it at a thick vase.

The author from number eighty had got his plonker out and was preparing to whack it with a piping-hot leg of lamb.

I rolled my sleeves up and examined what was left of my hands.

I poured pear cider on them and winced.

The bells rang out from the hill and we got mucked in.

I prayed for an ambulance.

It focused the mind a bit if an ambulance roared through.

† **Juniper:** Like when I told you about the ambulance coming past at my brother's.

Key: Yeah, a bit like that.

Juniper: Like a jackdaw.

Key: I don't know what the hell that means, but yeah.

Juniper: Nicking shiny shit and building your nest with it.

Key: If that's how you want to say it, then yeah, fine. A, what was it?

Juniper: Jackdaw.

Key: Yeah, I'm a jackdaw. I'll take that.

Week 11.

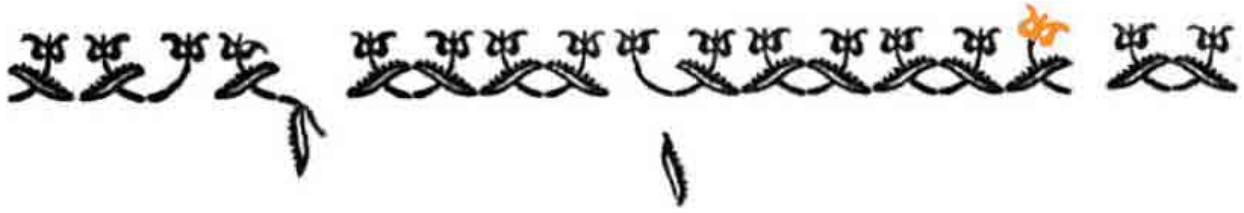


W
E
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K

XI.

In which the book is read, shackles are snipped, and a sorry little wanker is confronted.

A Layer Of Sausage.



“Okay, folks, quick heads up about some rules and regs we’ve got in the old pipeline.”

Bohnson was at the podium with his scraps of paper.

“So now we’re going for No Picnics In August.”

Bohnson pointed at a graphic of some scotch eggs.

“So basically go mad in June and July, I would ’cos we’re gonna clamp down on them in, as I say, we think, August.”

He clicked his clicker thing and another graphic came up that wasn’t meant to be there and was actually compromising and he quickly clicked it back and it went onto the scotch eggs slide again.

One of the slapheads stepped up and had a crack at explaining the science of picnics and the importance of August and pulled at his cuffs and touched his nose tons.

Bohnson couldn’t take his eyes off the scotch eggs.

He kept rubbing his tummy and subtly mouthing into the camera that he wanted some when he got in.

Lowering the Goods.

☎ Rick & Buddy. | Midday, June. | The Flesh.

Key is making a cradle out of twine and knotting it around an old first-aid tin. He's tying the knots tight, like his old man taught him. Desert Island Discs is on the radio. Lauren chatting away to Martin Lewis. It's essential listening. Lauren buoyant, interested, The Tightwad picking his tunes. There's shouting from outside.

Rick & Buddy: Rapunzel, Rapunzel, come let down your banana bread!

Key throws open the window.

Key: Here they are!

Rick: We said "come let down your banana bread" instead of "hair"!

Key: Fantastic.

Buddy: These days, we could probably climb up your beard, if I'm honest.

Rick: Or your boy?

Key: Huh?

Buddy: That's a serious lockdown beard.

Rick: Am I climbing up?

Rick mimes climbing up Key's beard. It sure is long, dangling way down into the ether.

Buddy: That thing got long!

Key: Yeah, well. Lockdown'll do that.

Buddy: That's crazy, Tim!

Key: Yeah, well.

Rick: Am I climbing up it?

Key: You said that.

He's miming climbing up it again.

Rick: How have you grown it that long, that's my question?

Buddy: Isn't it a massive pain in the neck?

Key: I've made a banana bread!

Buddy: Oh, you have?!

Rick: I've got more stuff about the beard.

Key: Christ.

Buddy: What about going for a wee?

Key: Throw it over my shoulder.

Buddy: Like a kind of –

Key: Who cares what like?

Rick: Don't you trip over it?

Key points to a cut above his right eye.

Rick: Wow.

Key: Pitched onto the tiles. Do you want this bread or what?

Rick: *Pain à la banane?*

Key: Buddy, fancy some?

Buddy: Why do you think we're here?!

Key does final checks on his knots and begins to lower the offending item. The first-aid tin scrapes against the side of Key's beard as it descends and sparks fly up. It arrives. Buddy cradles it and opens the tin on a fire hydrant.

Key: Week God-knows-what and I'm serving up my first banana bread, seeing who salutes.

Rick: The moment of truth.

Buddy: Better late than never! This is one of the great lockdown moments!

Key: I hope it's not faeces, that's all.

Rick: Misha's is classy as fuck.

It's open now. They gaze at the bread. It's like the briefcase from Pulp Fiction. Key is looking down at his friends. Trying to see if their eyes are gleaming.

Rick: Did you tread in it?

Key: Huh?

Buddy: Rick!

Key: How d'ya mean "tread in it"?

Key throws down a knife. It plugs in the tree trunk and Buddy pulls it out and cuts two slices. Key throws some plates and Rick catches them, his arms stretching impossibly to make the catches. He throws one up in celebration.

Rick: Howzeeeeeeeee!!!

That plate smashes and Key throws down another. They eat. The soft banana bread gripping their forks, their front teeth pulling it in, their tongues steering it around their mouths. Key stares down. His eyes have been locked down for two and a half months, but they are ignited now.

Key: Well?

Rick: You see the thing about Misha's –

Buddy: Rick! It's delicious, Tim.

Rick: This is like a house brick.

Key: Oh yeah? Is it red then? Is it brittle? Is it cold to the touch?

Rick: It *looks* like a house brick, I'm saying. The shape of it.

Key: Tastes alright though, eh?

Rick: Not saying it doesn't.

Key: Yeah, exactly, tastes bloody gorgeous is what. But why let the facts get in the way of a good story?

Buddy: It is lovely.

They continue to eat. They chow back maybe half of the loaf. Key's beard swings in the breeze as he peers down. It sweeps across their heads and they send satisfying noises up it.

Rick: It's gorgeous, I must say.

Key: You can finish it if you like.

Rick: Don't tempt me.

Rick closes the tin and double-checks the knots. They are sound. He pulls the twine.

Rick: Haul-o.

Key pulls his banana bread back into his kitchen. They've made serious inroads, but there's some left and Key drools onto it. His blue jumper is tied onto the twine. Key unties it and swings it about.

Key: You stretched it back out!

Rick nods and does a muscleman's pose. Key opens the tin back up. There's a small envelope next to the banana bread...

Key: What's this?

Rick: Open it.

Key opens it. It's an invitation. To their outdoor space.

Buddy: He's unlocking it. Week after next, everyone's saying so. You can come through onto the patio.

Key is choking up. He nods. In his head he's already walking through.

Key: Well, thanks for popping by.

Buddy: No worries! That was fantastic.

Key: I mean, in general. I mean, you've been a godsend, that's all.

Rick and Buddy do the thumbs up. The thumbs seem huge in Key's head, he can almost lean out and doink them with his wooden spoon.

Buddy: Next time, we'll be on our patio.

Rick: Chowing down ice-cold Peronis.

Key: That'll be something.

Key hauls his beard in, wrapping it round his elbows like a lobster fisherman bringing in his nets. His friends kick up their stands and push off up the hill. They pass other humans, the sun's rays burn into the road. The window is closed. Key turns up the radio. Martin Lewis has chosen The Four Seasons: "Can't Take My Eyes Off You". The sappy old penny-pincher knows what's what. Key checks over his shoulder for vermin then takes a fistful of banana bread. He stuffs it down his throat; he flicks the kettle on. He is crying.

Filth.



Blommock phoned his girlfriend up and asked her to speak dirty to him.

She started doing it, but immediately there was a problem.

In all of the scenarios she painted, she was being an absolute stickler for social-distancing.

She kept using phrases like “I’m a good two metres away” and “I’m blowing kisses at you” and “I’m grabbing a chair and swinging it at you every time you try coming close”.

This wasn’t what Blommock was after at all.

“I’m wearing a mask and my wrists are covered in Dettol and I’m yelling at you to back the fuck away,” Ruth-Marie went on.

Six.



I picked my six friends.

They were all famous, I'd only met one of them and two of them were dead.

I started googling talent agencies.

Who was looking after Tuffers these days??

Mouse.

☎ Mouse. | Late, June. | Flesh & Whiskers.

The mouse bolts across the floor, it's tiny boy clipping against the uneven floorboards. Key spots it, narrows his eyes. Without moving, he grabs a handful of Tesco Finest mashed potato from his plate and slings it with all his might. It splats in the mouse's path. He spins and charges towards the door. Another splat and his path is blocked in that direction, too. He spins. Another splat and another. He's boxed in; he jumps but can't get over the clouds of mash. He looks up. Key, imposing, looks down upon him.

Key: Well, well, well.

Mouse: I'm out of here, honestly, we all are. Please, you don't understand, we're offski.

Key is nodding. He taps his Mahabis slipper next to the mouse's insipid hand.

Mouse: We don't mean no harm. Please, mister.

Key: Tim. My name's Tim.

Mouse: Okay.

Key: Yeah. It is okay.

Mouse: Well, anyway, we were gonna ship out tonight, you don't need to worry about that.

Key: Why don't I believe you?

Mouse: I swear.

Key: You know what I think?

Mouse: Please don't drop your plate on me.

Key: Why do you think I'm gonna drop my plate on you?

Mouse: You're waving it, the gravy's pouring off it.

The mouse's nose is a rancid pink, its neck is sinewy and won't keep still. The nose is frankly dismal, a twitching speck that seems to drag the mouse's personality behind it like a bindle.

Key: What I think is you've been taking liberties.

Mouse: No, mister –

Key: Tim.

Mouse: We haven't.

Key: Tim.

Mouse: We haven't, Tim.

Key: I furlough my cleaner and you see it as a sign to move in and live the good life.

Mouse: It ain't that way.

Key: I'm lost without her. So there's a build-up of food and you don't think twice, do you?

“Those Were The Days” by dear old Mary Hopkin is playing on the record player, the intro: a lone piano thrown about by an ocean of clapping. Both creatures register it in their eyes.

Key: The sucker punch, kick a man when he's down. What was it? Start with some Weetabix crumbs, then get more adventurous –

Mouse: No, mister –

Key: Start chowing down on my bread flour, then what? Set up shop in my wall cavities? Occasionally slip out for a nibble on my Wagon Wheels? I'm not wrong, am I?

Mouse: We gotta live, too.

Key: There's a fucking pando out there, I need you like a hole in the fucking head, man! How many of you are there?

Mouse: I don't know anything about a pandemic.

Key: You watch the briefings.

Mouse: I do not.

Key: You do, man! I've seen you sat on the damn pheasant incubator, you liar. You lap that shit up!

Mouse: I like the main guy with the wig.

Key: That ain't a wig.

Mouse: I like his vibe, that's all.

Key: Why do you think I'm in every hour God sends?

Mouse: That doesn't bother us. We let you get on with things.

Key: That's the biggest joke of the lot.

Mouse: We haven't eaten your Post-its.

Key: That's the best you've got? You've not eaten my fucking Post-its?! Well, whoopee do!

Mouse: My wife would have loved to have chowed down on them, she likes the gum.

Key: Gum? What the hell are you talking about?

Mouse: She goes mad over that shit usually, she held back.

Key: How many of you, then? You, the wife –?

The mouse's torrid little eyes dart to the left.

Mouse: Yeah, that's it. Two.

Key: Come on, mate. I've not gone completely la la! How many?

Mouse: Fifteen.

Key: Fuck me.

Mouse: I don't even know five of 'em –

Key: Where's your stuff?

Mouse: Give us a couple of days to sort somewhere else out.

Key crouches right down. He turns his fork around and pushes the trident into the mouse's neck. The prongs go either side of it. The mouse is now pinned to the floorboard, Key's tie swings above it like a fearful blade.

Key: You've got until Sunday.

Mouse: Thank you.

Key: Put the Ferrero Rocher down.

The mouse hauls the Ferrero Rocher off his back and onto the floor.

Mouse: Should have got a cat.

Key: I beg your pardon.

Mouse: We ain't coming in here if there's a cat.

Key: Yeah, well, I missed the window.

Mouse: Turned down a couple of places 'cos they had cats.

Key: "Turned down".

Mouse: Stresses me the hell out when there's a cat. This place was chill. We had a ball, if I'm honest.

Key moves away, sits down on the sofa. The fork's still in his fist.

Key: Sunday, okay.

Mouse: Thank you, mister.

Key: Tim.

Mouse: Thank you, Tim. Love your work, by the way.

Key: Huh?

Mouse: Saw you live a couple of years ago.

Key: Oh, okay.

Mouse: Soho Theatre.

Key: Yeah, I've played there.

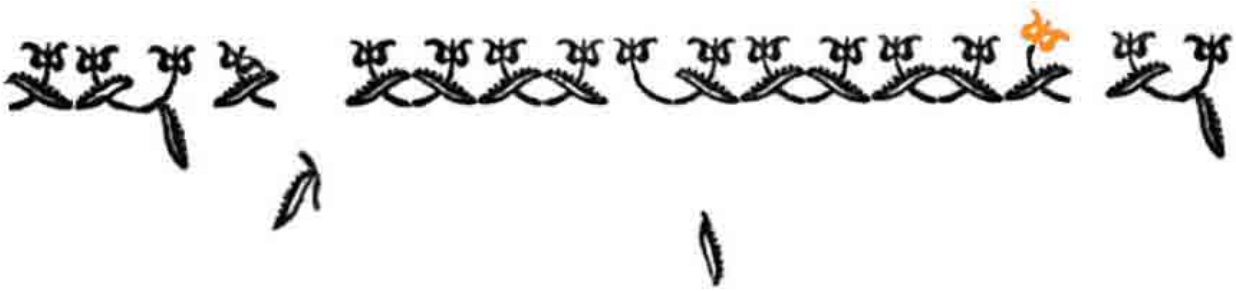
Mouse: Yeah. You were okay. Funny, yer know.

The mouse pushes through the mash and wanders back towards his hole. Key squints at the tiny room beyond. It too is festooned with Post-its, microscopic, covered in scrawl. He strains to see what is written on them. One says "man", another "pity".

Key: Thank you, Mouse.

The mouse doesn't turn around but raises a thumb above his head. Key resumes his seat on the sofa. What's left of his mash is cold and tastes acidic now that it has become weaponised. Key picks up the glass 75cl Schweppes Lemonade bottle from the 1970s. He twists the lid. Pschhhht-aaaaah.

Down The Canal.†



The sausages were spitting.

“Hurry the fuck up, Bohnson, you jizzhound – I’m starving to death out here.”

Bohnson swung round, wafting his spatula like a fly swat.

No one there.

He frowned and cracked an egg into the frying pan.

He was still getting used to his earpiece and pushed at it with his fist.

“And make sure the bacon’s crispy as fuck.”

Cumdawg’s voice again, crackling, grim.

Bohnson’s head was infected by the man.

He plated up.

They’d pushed the earpiece so deep into his ear now he could feel it at the back of his throat.

He poured a Punk IPA into Cumdawg’s tankard and moved out into the garden.

“What took ya, Bohns?”

Bohnson had him in his ear and in real life now.

Cumdawg was reclining in his deckchair in his straw hat.

He laid down his mic and his lip curled into a snarl as his food approached.

The cutlery rattled nervously on the tray as Bohnson edged towards him.

†**Juniper:** What's this one?

Key: In what sense?

Juniper: Why's he got an earpiece?

Key: Oh, right.

Juniper: Did he have an earpiece?

Key: They said he did.

Juniper: Who did?

Key: I dunno. Papers, maybe? Twitter?

Juniper: And did he?

Key: Yeah, I think so, or it was a shadow.

Juniper: Uh-huh.

Key: Something going on, anyway.

Juniper: Bit creepy.

Key: That's the idea, yeah. Creepy stuff.

The Proofreader.

☎ Sweetie Pie. | 9:00AM, June. | Zoom.

Key's sat on his fat ass, coffee before him, steam ascending. He has his mocked-up deck of playing cards resting in his left palm. One by one he takes the top one off, flicks it with a lusty crack of the wrist. They fly like Exocets, jamming themselves into the watermelon he's hung from a hook on the ceiling. His iPhone goes. It is Sweetie Pie. He sits up straight, his upper body stiff like resin. He licks his finger and sweeps.

Key: Sweetie Pie!

Sweetie: Hey.

Key: You haven't been returning my calls.

Sweetie: I'm returning them now, aren't I?

Key nods. A silence. Key, a coiled spring. The room reeks of watermelon.

Key: Well? Did you like it?! Go easy on me, can ya!

Sweetie: I sent you the document with my ammends, did you get it?

Key: Yeah, pretty clinical stuff.

Sweetie: I've corrected the typos and thnigs.

Key: Yeah, yeah you have. You like the book?

Sweetie: So there's one or two more to add, shall I just go eright into them?

Key: You didn't say whether you like it.

Silence. Quite a bit of it, to be fair. Sweetie Pie brandishing the manuscript.

Sweetie: So on page 4 you've got "dammit" and then on page 59 you've written it as "damn – it", as in two words.

Key: Right.

Sweetie: So I'd pick one and stick with it. Then on page 11 "karrimor" should be capitalised –

Key: Did you like it, Sweetie Pie?

Key's chest feels tense, like he's being hugged by some kind of extraordinary bear. His eyes pour onto the screen. They are pleading.

Key: Pie.

Sweetie: Yuh.

Key: Please tell me what you think about it. Please stop saying about typos and things.

Sweetie Pie takes off his glasses. He works the lenses with his cloth. It takes an eternity.

Sweetie: Why am I not in it?

Key: Oh.

Sweetie: I've gone through it with a fine-tooth comb.

Key: Looking for mistakes, I know.

Sweetie: Yeah I found a mistake. I'm not mentoned a single time.

Key: I'll put you in –

Sweetie: In spite of the fact that I checked in on you constantly.

Key: I'm sorry –

Sweetie: I brought a lader around so you could paint your wall. I invited you for a socially-distanced walk.

Key: I'll put you in, I said. Is that what this is about?

Sweetie Pie puts his specs back on. He looks stern. His lips thin. Key fires another playing card into the watermelon. It sinks into its heart and the fruit swings on its chain.

Key: What did you think of it? Please, Jon. Please tell me.

Sweetie: I think you got carried away, that's what I think.

Key: Go on. Not sure what you're talking about, go on.

Sweetie: I think you've written 50,000 words –

Key: 64,500, near enough –

Sweetie: From inside your flat.

Key: And all I need from you is to say something lovely about them. Praise the words, Jon!

Sweetie: That ai'nt happening, I have my reputation as a copy editor to uphold. I mean...

Key: Don't say "I mean" like that.

Sweetie: It's garbage, no?

Key: Okay, let's do the typos!

Sweetie: It's a porridge basically – are you unwell? Did you loose your mind?

Key: Let's do the typos, I said!

Sweetie: Is there a bar supervisor even? Does she excist?

Key: The question you're looking for is have I spelt bar supervisor correctly, that's all.

Sweetie: Where have the conversations *come from*? That's what I wanna know.

Key: Who cares?! Are they spelt right?! That's the thing!

Sweetie: From your head? From your arnuzzi? From real life?

Key: Split the dif!

Sweetie: Yeah, fabrications. What is it? *What is this thing?*

He waggles the manuscript, slaps it with the back of his hand.

Sweetie: And then to top it all, after all that, nothing for old Pie!

Key: I'll put you in, I said.

Sweetie: Dont bother, you'll only change what I say.

Key: Huh?

Sweetie: Misrepresent me. I'm better off out of it.

He stares at Key. Key stares back. Sweetie Pie takes a glug of tea. Key's orange pen lid descends through shot like a long acorn. Jon blinks. Key's smirk is infinitesimal.

Key: I won't, I promise.

Sweetie: Yeah?

Key: Honest. Say what you like.

Sweetie: 'Cos I can do.

Key: Speak true.

Sweetie: Okay...

Sweetie Pie takes another glug and removes his glasses again. He leans back, his words are clear, each one sharp, heavy with wisdom, they come like blades.

Sweetie: I like the fact that each of the dialogues can be read as a stand-alone piece, but they all move the thing on nonetheless. I like the surreal moments, the cows and the sixty mile bicycle ride, for goodness' sake. I love the Key/Juniper relationship at its heart. The fact it's so slippery, sometimes mean, sometimes warm. The claustrophobia's kind of great. It puts you on edge. You want to get out of the flat. The poems change the pace. It's like, and I mean this in an entirely positive way, *nothing I've read before*.

Key lids his pen, his smirk now more developed, ungodly. Key hurls the Four of Clubs and half the watermelon drops to the floor.

Sweetie: But don't... you know.

Key: What?

Sweetie: I don't want you turning that into a gushing speech *in favour of the book*.

Key: Oh no, I won't do that.

Sweetie: Make it wordfor word.

Key: Well, I kind of tinker about with these things, you know that. But I won't take the piss. It'll be a conversation, and it'll be like this in spirit.

Sweetie: Okay.

Key: Great, well, I think that's us done.

Sweetie: Will you send it over so I can cast my eye over it?

Key: Might be a bit weird.

Sweetie: Well, I'll need to check it for typos, won't I?

Key: Wait till it's in print, I would. Might be a laugh.

Sweetie: Lol. Me spitting feathers, reading the stitch-up!

Key: Stitch-up, lol.

Sweetie: Lol.

Key: Lol.

Pie drops off the line, having had exactly the above conversation. Key microwaves his coffee and chows down a good eight Ferrero Rochers. He flicks the nests into the air and they twist and flutter like moths.

Action.†



Filming came back.

Everyone behind the camera had to wear masks and cagoule-type-things and they had to sneeze into their arms or into sneezing bins.

Directors were constantly slathering their loudhailers in Dettol and the biscuit boy was encased in effectively a Zorb and pushed his biscuits out through a slot.

On screen, kissing scenes were replaced with stock footage and extras were out of the question.

Instead scripts were amended and actors had to say “where is everyone?” every few seconds.

All characters wore gloves and explained why, in depth, at the start of scenes, and everyone worked quickly to restrict the shoot to as few days as possible.

At the end of each day, the film was removed from the camera and burned, and then off they’d all go to their sleeping village for dinner and tests and then back in tomorrow, and so it went on.

†**Juniper:** Will it be like this, do you think?

Key: Gawd knows.

Juniper: I read something about actors having to do scenes back-to-back.

Key: Bugger me. I just can’t.

Juniper: I can’t imagine a film like, say, Four Weddings being shot with the actors back-to-back.

Key: Damn straight.

Juniper: Or The Wizard of Oz, for that matter.

Key: Well, there's probably a lot of examples of films which wouldn't be as good if they were shot like that.

Juniper: The Magnificent Seven.

Key: There's another one.

Through.



“Come through, be quick, don’t lick the surfaces.”

Hogg stood on Candice’s threshold; tongue out, peeking past his sweetheart at the utopia beyond.

He held his breath and moved through; his steps quick, pecking.

He could see the cherry blossom through the kitchen door, the homemade lemonade, the social-distancing sticks, the long shadows, the Twiglets.

He was overwhelmed coming past the Zanussi washer-drier and pitched forward like a clown.

Butterflies revived him.

A bright orange dress floated past his cheek.

He was in the Promised Land, Candice’s laugh somewhere between 180 and 220cm away.

He could hear Fondant Fancies being hacked apart.

He grabbed at the dandelions.

Smiled into the turf.

She's A Rainbow.

📞 Jelson. | 10:00AM EST, June. | Facetime

Key is pulling his beard trimmer across his head. Each time it comes past his ears he goes further. Inching into the top of his beard. Nibbling. Probing. His iPhone is face-up in the sink; he keeps pressing it; belligerently trying Jelson again and again. Finally, he picks up. The screen floods with light.

Jelson: Bong, can I call you back?

Key: Ah! My man on the ground!

Jelson: I'm walking Rafaela.

Key: Out and about?

Jelson: Yeah, I'll call you 5pm my time.

Key: It's 5pm now.

Jelson: Yeah, so in five hours time, I'm saying.

Key: That's 10pm.

Jelson: No, as in... here... New York.

Key: New York, New York.

Key stares into the iPhone. Jelson frowns. Above him, the sun; its rays bursting past his ears, flaring the screen. The image is jolting; it judders and shakes about as Jelson's boots eat up the street.

Jelson: Okay, let's talk. What do you wanna know?

Key: Our man's easing it!

Jelson: Oh yeah?

Key: He's opening the pubs. The guy's come to his senses.

Jelson: You can go down the boozer there?

Key: Takeaway! Takeaway, man. You can go and get a growler, take it away with you! The new normal! Drink it in the park. *You can drink it in the park!*

Jelson: Are you crying?

Key: Just stroll right in there, tap your card, leave with four pints sloshing about in your jug, no questions asked!

Jelson: You gonna do it?

Key tries to speak. Tries to say yes, tries to say he and The Colonel have plans for next week. But no words come out. He nibbles at his beard with his blades.

Jelson: Yeah, it's done here too, man.

Key: Yeah?

Jelson: They're ringing the bell, I'm telling you.

Key: Unlocking? What? What bell?

Jelson: Ding-a-ling, out you go! All done.

Key: You can feel the key in the lock this end.

Jelson: People are cutting bolts over here.

Key: As in...

Jelson: Wandering down to playgrounds, snipping bolts, getting them back open, yer know.

Key: Oh, I don't think we have that here.

Jelson: Big hefty lunks wandering round with bolt-cutters. Check it out.

Jelson spins his camera. Men wade down the road with bolt-cutters. Masks on. There is moisture in the air. Specks of rain, not light enough to land, fly around like fireflies, catching the light, reflecting it in myriad directions. He brings the camera back to his face. His forehead glistens.

Key: Police'd have a field day if we started snipping bolts here, I'm sure.

Jelson: Well, your goddaughter's going to see the swings for the first time in her life.

Key: Well, you can't argue with that. Huh? What?

Jelson: Your goddaughter!

Key: Is it?

Jelson pans the camera again. Rafaela, clapping. Catching rain drops in her eyelashes.

Jelson: We're just following the bolt-cutters, see what they open up.

Key: Another world.

Jelson: It's chaos here. People itching to get going.

Key: Yeah, people getting tired of it, aren't they? Goddaughter, is it?

Jelson: People are coming after the nerds now.

Key: Oh they don't mind the nerds this end.

Jelson: Death threats a-go-go. For the pecker, I mean.

Key: People are fond of ours.

Jelson: But don't like the PM, is it?

Key: Well, they've got it in for... well, there's a weird guru figure.

Jelson: Oh yeah.

Key: Yeah, bug-eyed slaphead.

Jelson: Nice.

Key: Well, put it this way, he went to Durham –

Jelson: How do you mean?

Key: People pretty much hate that guy now. It's bumpy walking with you, I don't like it so much.

Jelson: The pig's in her pram, I'm spinning her round Harlem.

Key: World classy.

Jelson: The pig loves a walk.

Key: Stand still, can't ya?

Jelson: We're taking seven-hour walks these days.

Key: Long walks then.

Jelson: You exercising?

Key: Huh?

Jelson: What?

Key: What?

Jelson: Nothing.

Key: What have people said?

Jelson: Nah, just asking if you're exercising.

Key: I'm about the same weight as before lockdown.

Key bobs out of shot, stumbles back onto his scales. A vast number comes up on the screen, smashing it. Key's beard trimmer continues to buzz across his skull.

Jelson: What about the beard? That going?

Key: Nah.

Jelson: Oh yeah, filming. You got the dates?

Key nods, the teeth of the trimmer, gnashing at the bottom of his sideburns.

Key: *What the fuck's your weather doing?*

Jelson pirouettes. It's like something out of Mean Streets. He stops, picks up the baby, she's a cutie. Behind him: the playground, some lunk snapping the bolts, and behind that: a rainbow. Key flicks his beard trimmer off and puts his elbows on the sink.

Key: A rainbow.

Jelson: I'm gonna bung this one on a slide.

Key: Let her slide down it, huh?

Jelson: Could be good.

Key pulls a face, Rafaela pulls one back. Key reaches out and tweaks her cheek. She laughs. He rests back onto his elbows. Raindrops on his fingers.

Key: Well, let's speak soon.

Jelson: How's the book?

Key: That's done, near enough. Onto the next thing.

Jelson: The boozier.

Key: Yeah. Yeah, there's a grain of truth in that.

The two friends stare at each other through satellites. The image fades away, the sound fades out, Key's head falls between his elbows. He flicks the taps on, lets the water rush across his buzz cut, lets it gently warm his mind.

Common.†



I spent the day using my common sense.

I arrived home.

My face and tunic were covered in tears, milk and gasoline.

I was clutching three notification things from the police.

I had lipstick on my collar and one of my hands was broken.

I threw the duck I had quelled into my George Foreman grill and clamped it shut.

My common sense was a disgrace.

I bemoaned its limits as I knocked the lid off my Merlot by smashing it hard on the side of the oven.

†**Juniper:** I'm down with this one.

Key: Okay.

Juniper: That's all. It's cool.

Key: More so than the others?

Juniper: No, that's not what I mean.

Key: No?

Juniper: "Use your common sense." It makes me laugh when they say that.

Key: Right, yeah.

Juniper: And this is about that.

Key: Are you okay?

Plugholing Again.†



I dived face-first into the tub and banged my ears on the plughole as I clattered down it. There was a kick about down there.

I was banging them in for fun, jumpers for goal posts; Strongbows in hand.

Everyone was getting smashed and tackling and hugging and whooping.

I smashed home a bicycle kick and pointed to my bar supervisor.

She was supervising the barbeque a treat, cooking a rabbit of all things!

And it was tipping it down and The La's were playing and I wake up and the water's ice-cold now and the rabbit's floating in it.

I blink shampoo out of my eyes.

The rabbit's still there.

†**Juniper:** Is there a bar supervisor?

Key: Inspired by real events.

Juniper: What's her name?

Key: Not that kind of situation, Em.

Juniper: But does she have a name?

How Does It End?

☎ Emily Juniper. | Midday, June. | Landline v iPhone.

Key, zombified, watches the streets. They are alive. Groups of effervescent Londoners plough up the hill, clutching Magnums like flags. skirts billow joyously, laughter bursts into the air and cars whizz by with something close to purpose. Key is clutching his beautifully unsymmetrical mug to his chest, drinking in the steam. His orange pen hangs from his mouth like a cigar; his teeth cajole its shaft as he thinks. His iPhone goes. Juniper. He sweeps the ball.

Key: Juniper.

Juniper: How does it end?

Key sits down, creaks his legs onto the pheasant incubator.

Juniper: I mean, this lockdown's wobbling.

Key: You think I don't know that?

Juniper: My pal on the boats says it's already done, says it ended when that scruffy slaphead drove up the castle.

Key: "My pal on the boats"?

Juniper: I live by the sea.

Key: Sounds like a chap you'd meet in some fiction for young adults.

Juniper: Okay.

Key stares across at the Post-its. It is all Post-its now. There is nothing else. "Fatberg Peru kit", "unicycle box". Post-its on Post-its. The wall seems nearer to him than three months back.

Key: It'll end, you know. It won't be much of a surprise. You know when a book's about to end, don't worry about that. You feel that in your hand.

Juniper: Hmmf.

Key: What hmmf?

Juniper: I do know this conversation'll be in it, you know.

Key: Huh?

Juniper: What I'm saying now.

Key: Oh, yeah.

Juniper: Yeah.

Key: I think it'll end when it ends.

Juniper: I need to know how I'm designing the final pages, you know.
Are you walking off into the sunset?

Key: Of course I bloody am.

Juniper: 'Cos what if it doesn't end, you know? This could go on until
next bloody summer.

Key: What could?

Juniper: Things dribbling back to normal.

Key: I reckon we make it to twelve weeks, tie it off.

Juniper: Like a balloon.

Key: Look around you, Em. This city ain't locked down any more,
believe me.

His teeth clink against the window. Scenes of joy. A lady gives a man a piggy back, he's whipping her with a strawberry shoelace. She is howling with delight.

Key: People are done, Em. That's the truth of it.

Juniper: And you?

Key: I wanna play football, Em. I really do. Striking it past some jizzhound in nets, reeling away, cider in hand, tears in my eyes, making something of my life.

Key has tears in his eyes. He is staring hard at a photo next to his cactus. It's him and the St Albans lads. He flexes his foot, sucks his tummy in, tries to blank out the fruit bowl full of Ferrero Rochers.

Key: Maybe the final chapter should just be set over one day.

Juniper: Well, this is the sort of thing you need to decide.

Key: I've seen films that are just the whole thing set on the one day.
Very effective films in fact.

Juniper: It'd be nice if it ended with you falling into the arms of –

Key: Keep talking –

Juniper: I mean it'd be nice if you got a cuddle at the end.

Key: Yeah, well.

Juniper: Spilling out and running into some damsel's arms.

Key: Yeah. That'd be something.

Juniper: The bar supervisor!

Key: That's not how life works, Em.

Juniper: Your mother then!

Key: Haven't read anything about hugging coming back, gotta say.

Juniper: I'm not fading to black, you know. That's not how it ends.

Key: Huh?

Juniper: You turning out the lights, drifting off in your bed, social-distanced to the last.

Key: Why are you obsessed with the ending?

Juniper: You've got to stop writing at some point; then I can design everything that you've tied off.

Key nods. He's at the window again, his forehead pressed against the glass, the future. The old swindler's there. He's drinking a peach juice. Even he's looking a bit more positive about things these days. If that's not a tear, it's a glint in his eye.

Juniper: Otherwise it goes on and on. You can't be putting out a book that gets longer as you read it.

Key: Yes, Em, I know that, of course.

Juniper: How do you want it to end?

Key: Dunno.

Juniper: Come on.

Key: We can have an ad for the cards.

Juniper: I'm talking about the book.

Key: So am I, Em. I'm talking a classy fifties-style ad, you know. Shift some decks.

Key hears Emily Juniper make a note. He smiles.

Juniper: Every story has an ending.

Key: Not every story, is it?

Juniper: How would you *like* it to end? In your head?

Key: Well... The damn Southy reopens, I wander back in, waving my negative test above my head, order a pint, bar supervisor pours it, waives the fee, I tell her I love her, clamber over the bar and

disappear through the hatch, we tumble into the barrels, hatch swings closed – blackness.

Silence. Key looks down onto the street.

Juniper: I don't think you'll be allowed to climb over the bar.

Key watches a lad walking with a four-pint milk bottle. He presses his palm against the window. The milk bottle is glowing orange and the lad's smiling.

Key: *(Almost inaudible)* Beer.

Juniper: Huh?

Key: I'm gonna call John.

Juniper: Yeah.

Key: It's happening, Em. There's beer on the streets.

Juniper: What a time to be alive.

Key: Thanks for doing this, Em.

Juniper: I'm enjoying it.

Key: I'm glad, Em.

Juniper: I don't want it to end.

Key: Except you do.

That phone call is done. There won't be many more. Key watches his iPhone as it sinks deep, deep into the sofa. He stares out of the window as the lad's milk bottle becomes a distant speck and disappears.

Nostalgia.



Anne Blonch pined for the good old days.

She'd loved Week One, when the pubs were open, but you weren't really supposed to go in them and people plodded around saying "this is mad" loads.

She treated herself to a Week One Night.

She bought up shit-tons of bog roll and penne pasta and washed her hands and sang.

She found footage of Cheltenham, too!

She yelled at the screen.

She'd forgotten which horses had won what, so she was as pumped as she'd been the first time.

She wiped her ass and hooter with her copious sheets and cheered and whistled and cracked her whip at the screen.

She was transported!

Transported from fretting about the stress of easing.

Transported from talk of "R".

Transported to March.

Week 12.



WEEK

XII.

In which the blade rakes the skin, the bear goes flying, and a gallon of brownish nectar moves with hope towards the sunset.

With Hops In Your Heart.



The boozers reopened.

I couldn't remember what the hell you were supposed to do!

I knew there was something about going to the counter bit and paying the people in the aprons to fill your glass up with something.

And I knew you had to shout "Good Lad" but I couldn't remember exactly when or how loud or whether or not you had to wear football boots and if you had to bring along photos and cakes and other bits and bobs and if you were allowed to wave at the other friendship groups.

Key Versus Key.

☎ Reflected Key. | 9:30AM, June. | Glass.

Key is stood in front of the bathroom mirror. He stares deep into Key's eyes. Key stares back. His eyes are dark. There is a hollowness to them.

Key: Hey, soldier.

Key: Yeah. Soldier. I like it.

Their lips curl a little bit. The mirror isn't clean per se. Toothpaste has travelled onto it in imperceptible mists over twelve weeks of brushing.

Key: Here we are.

Key: Yuh. Here we are.

Key: You done well.

Key: What a stretch.

Key nods. There's some Haydn in the air. "Symphony No. 101: The Clock" is playing on the record player in the lounge. It flies off the needle and floats into the bathroom, dancing on the gunk in Key's ears. Tick Tock.

Key: We got through it, huh?

The sound of the beard trimmer firing up. Key's eyes narrow, as do Key's. The beard trimmer sinks into the beard, the tone of the engine deepens, it cleaves through the fronds. The Keys chat.

Key: What now?

Key: Meet John.

Key: I mean beyond that?

Key: Beyond that how?

Key: After John?

Key: I'm not focusing on that.

Key: We need to work out what's next.

Key peers in as clumps of hair unstick themselves from Key's cheeks and tumble down onto the porcelain. Above, Key's underpants hang on lines,

dipping down like palm trees.

Key: It's easing now.

Key: Yeah.

Key: And it carries on easing, no?

Key: Yeah, easing.

Key: We can play football.

Key: Really?

Key: Almost.

Key: Good enough for me.

Key: Is it?

Key: Soon we can play football.

Key: Score goals.

Key: You'd hope so.

Key: A header!

Key: And the nail bars will open.

Key: And cinemas will snip their chains.

Key: You're a handsome chap.

As the hair is sheared off so the leathery jowls of Key begin to reveal themselves. Increasingly a new, downy Key emerges. His cheekbones have gone; his jaw is heavy.

Key: You are.

Key: That's what my mother says.

Key: Fair play to her.

Key: A great woman.

Key: Yup.

Key: A. Great. Woman.

Key: Look at you.

Key leans in, noses the mirror, his eyes huge like a cow's.

Key: What's it all about, mate?

Key: "Mate"?

Key: Are we not mates?

Key: Mmm. "Mate". I like that.

Key: You're my mate.

Key: Part of me –

Key: What? Go on. What?

Key: Part of me doesn't want it to end.

Key opens the cupboard, the mirror swings away and Key is gone. Key blinks into the cupboard, takes the shaving foam and closes the mirror. Key is staring back at him once more, his eyes flicking down, expressionless, taking in the remaining patches of hair on Key's chin, then looking back up into Key's eyes. Foam sprays into Key's palms, foam splats onto Key's face. The glint of the Gillette Mach3.

Key: Yeah, I get that.

Key: But then, I wanna meet The Colonel, you know.

Key: Yeah. That'll be something.

Key: And it can't stay locked forever.

Key: Gotta ease up.

Key: You've put on weight.

Key: Where's that come from?

Key: Have you not?

Key: It's been that kind of lockdown.

Key: Have a go on the scales. Let's see what's what.

Key: The scales... they ain't my friend, mate.

Key takes a step back onto the scales. They are crumpled now, almost flush to the floor. They seem to gasp as Key puts himself onto them. A silver liquid dribbles out onto the tiles. Key comes back to the mirror, salutes.

Key: What's it saying?

Key: Same as always, full of shit.

Key: Well.

The razor slices through the auburn lawn on Key's chin. It gets picked up and spun into the foam. Wet, foamy clumps of it slop down in thimble-sized clouds, honing in on the plughole. Water swirls round, collecting the splodges, shepherding them into the pipes.

Key: Well, I've enjoyed our little chats.

Key: Yup.

Key: What?

Key: No, same.

Key: I hope so.

Key: You've been a bloody star, you have.

Key: Couldn't' have done it without you, I must say.

Key: I'm not going anywhere, you know.

Key: I know, but things will be different.

Key: Yup.

They stare, they peer, they can feel one another's breath on their hooters.

Key: Nice to see your skin again.

Key: Bar supervisor'll notice that.

Key: Yuh.

Key: Yeah, she'll be like, "Ooh, hello, who's this?"

Key: I hope so.

Key: No doubt in my mind.

Key: You got the poem?

Key pats the back pocket of his jeans.

Key: She'll be bowled over.

Key: We'll see.

Key: "Who's this handsome butterball?"

Key: Butterball?

Key: She won't know what's hit her.

Key nods. He gropes around behind him and finds a bottle of something or other and jiggles out two dribbles of thickish aftershave onto his palms. His eyes rise back up to the mirror.

Key: Knock 'em dead, Kiddo.

Key stands, shoulders pulled back, his hair now down the plughole, swirling deep, deep into the void. He slaps his palms against his blank cheeks. Crash. Blackness.

An Opportunity.



They loosened lockdown.

I invited myself around to Mike and Angela's and accidentally on purpose cuffed myself to a radiator.

Lockdown started back up.

Mike and Angela couldn't do a thing about it!

I was in their home now until further notice.

At some point they would have to accept that.

The Day Has Come.

☎ The Colonel. | Midday, June. | iPhones.

Key has the disinfectant out and is standing opposite Fatberg. He plunges the pump down again and again and the bear winces. But Key continues to plunge, because it has to be done. The bear is wearing only shorts and his docile face is glistening with Dettol. Key's faithful iPhone goes. The Colonel! Key answers.

Key: Here he is!

Colonel: The day has come.

Key: The man of the moment.

Key touches Fatberg's cheek; lays down his pump.

Colonel: What time we up?

Key: They close at seven, so we need to get there at ten to.

Colonel: Lasties.

Key: March in there. Grab the grog. Offski.

Colonel: The perfect plan.

Key: My mouth's watering, I can't swallow quickly enough.

Colonel: Will the sun come out, do we think?

Key walks to his window and peels off some Post-its, to make an aperture. One says "Key versus Key", another says "Amber". A broken channel of June sunshine drifts in through this new chink. Key shoves his nose against the glass, looks up at the sky, tries to get a read on the clouds. They are wispy, disparate. The window warms his nostrils.

Key: It could go our way.

Colonel: Yes, mate!

Key can hear The Colonel punching his own chest, again and again and again. Key scrutinises the street. Movement. Life.

Key: She'll be in there, 'n'all.

Colonel: Huh?

Key: Bar supervisor. I saw her through the window earlier.

Colonel: Wait a second.

Key: The window was frosty. It was dark in there; they hadn't opened up yet. I've just seen her form is the truth of it. Her hair tied back, her blouse floating between the pumps.

Colonel: Hang on.

Key: What?

Colonel: Wait a bloody second here.

Key: What?

Key strokes his chin. It's smooth and he purrs, pushes his jaw hard into his palm.

Colonel: Well, are we going there for the beer or for you to make overtures?

Key: Beer, man.

Colonel: I hope so.

Key: She's by the by, John.

Colonel: Really?

Key: It could be Colin bloody Montgomery working the bar, I'd still be pumped. This is about me and you, baby.

Colonel: I wouldn't begrudge you.

Key closes his eyes, thinks about Colin Montgomery smashing a drive down the fairway at Carnoustie. Thinks about his dominance on the European Tour, the abuse he got from the American galleries.

Key: We cool?

Colonel: Yeah, we're cool.

Key touches his lips with his orange pen.

Key: I've written her a poem

Colonel: Oh, you have?

Key: So we shall see.

Colonel: As in, a proper poem? Or as in, like one of your poems?

Key: How do you mean?

Colonel: Nah, it's all good. Poem's a good idea.

Key: But that's by the by.

Colonel: No, I know. By the by.

Key: I'm all about the ale, man. I can taste it.

Colonel: I'm not gonna lie, I'm excited.

Key: Didn't sleep a wink last night.

Colonel: Where are we drinking this stuff anyway?

Key: We'll take it onto the heath. Socially distanced.

Colonel: Ha!

Key: What?

Colonel: I'll bring the megaphone then, shall I?

Key: It's two metres, Colonel. We just pitch up.

Colonel: Are we not allowed to hug?

Key: What can I tell ya, Colonel.

Colonel: Yeah, I know...

Key: Baby steps.

Colonel: Am I bringing Twiglets?

Key: What do you think?

Colonel: Think I am maybe, am I?

Key: Course you're bringing bloody Twiglets, man.

Colonel: Government's cool with Twiglets.

Key: Be a revolution if they weren't, eh.

Key's mouth's unmanageable, he's behind with his swallowing and he's drooled maybe 100ml down his Peru football top, he picks up a cushion and dabs.

Colonel: Am I bringing an Aerobie?

Key: Let's keep it simple, bro.

Colonel: We don't have to use it.

Key: Then why are we bringing it?

Colonel: You're right. Let's keep it simple.

Key: First unlocked pint, bugger me.

Colonel: Man, a pint on the heath.

Key: A pint on the heath.

Key's nostrils are stuffed against the window again. He spots the old swindler. The dopy old sod's got his Sunday best on. What sun there is

reflects off his cravat; lights his face up a treat. Where the bloody hell's he off to?

Colonel: I'll see you at ten to seven.

Key: Stood in line outside the Southy. Goddammit Janet.

Colonel: The queue moving forward.

Key: The smell of the pub in our nostrils.

Colonel: I might bring a Bluetooth speaker.

Key: I thought we were keeping it simple.

Colonel: It'll fit in my –

Key: Just bring your milk bottle, John.

Colonel: Yeah. I got one.

Key: Four-pinter?

Colonel: Yeah, I got a whopper, believe me.

Key: Okay.

Colonel: Gab poured it out, made a couple of blancmanges with it.

Key: Quite right, too.

Colonel: Might chow those back when I'm lashed.

Key: Huh?

Colonel: I'm psyched.

Key: You're gonna eat two blancmanges after the heath?

Colonel: Well, I dunno, do I? See how it goes.

Key: See you later, bro.

Colonel: Bigtime.

Key hangs up and throws open a window. He ties himself off on his table and leans right out, angles his body at the sun. The clouds crawl over it like scarves. Key frowns up. Down on the pavement people mill around, some with milk bottles. There's traffic. The very occasional horse. Birdsong. The key is in the lock and it is jiggling.

Football!†



Football came back.

There were some tweaks but basically all good.

The pitch was marked into squares now and each player had their own square.

They could go into other squares no worries, but they had to sign a quick form.

Other than that, whatevs.

Some players slathered themselves in gel and Danny Ings carried a long stick and shoved it in other players' chests so they'd back the fuck away.

Everyone wore a mask or a moped helmet or a cap and you had to shout "tackle" to turn over possession.

If anyone coughed, spat or farted they had to return to their original squares.

There they would stand or crouch, doing online shopping or more slathering.

Sometimes they would shut their eyes and remember the great goals they'd scored or the slide tackles they'd timed, and the amazing buzzy vibe that soaked these magical stadiums like spiritual honey in the recent past.

†**Juniper:** They've brought it back, you know, in Germany.

Key: They'll bring it back here.

Juniper: Back to normal.

Key: They're saying no crowds, so not normal *per se*.

Juniper: Same as nail bars.

Key: They're reopening, huh?

Juniper: Next month, I hear.

Key: Are they having crowds?

Juniper: Think they're working all that stuff out.

A Bear Falls.

☎ Bobby & Lordoss. | 3PM, June. | iPhones & Peering.

Key's hands are on his hips, his eyes trained on his living-room window. He squints as he watches a family of mice cross the road and join the surge of bodies walking up towards the heath. People moving in their approved bubbles; the bubbles shimmering. No longer shuffling, these people bounce up the hill, their eyes brighter now, their tongues lolling out of their mouths. Amongst the flow of humans, Key spots Lord and Bobby and waves. Lord stops and pulls his Samsung Galaxy out of his cycling shorts like it's a gun. Key's iPhone starts to ring.

Key: Lord, man.

Lord: The same.

Key: All masked-up and nowhere to go?

Lord: Oh, we know where we're going, thanks.

Key: It's happening, eh?

Lord: The key in the lock.

Key: Jiggling.

Lord: Chap who sells the ice creams flung his hatch open yesterday.

Gonna bag ourselves a couple of sundaes.

Bobby: (off) Um-um-um-um...

Key: Here we go.

Bobby's excited, smiling, shaking. Clapping his hands together like he's been raised by seals, which he has not. He is playing "horsey". Sat around Lord's neck like a boa.

Lord: He's having a good day.

Key: We're all having a good day, Lord, believe me.

Lord: You've lopped off the old beard! Something's afoot.

Bobby: (Off) Um-um-um-um...

Key: The sweet, sweet smell of a dumbass lockdown being gradually eased.

Lord: Amen to that.

Bobby: (Off) Um-um-um-um...

Key: Bang him on then.

Bobby: *(Off)* I-I-I-I need a wee, Daddy.

Key: Classy.

Lord: He's a toddler, to be fair.

Key: Put him on, man, come on.

Lord: I mean... he won't make tons of sense. He's a bit all over the place when he needs a wee.

Key: He's not exactly Peter Ustinov when he doesn't need one.

Lord: What?

Key: Bang him on, man. Hey Bobby.

Lord rearranges his boa. Bobby's got the Galaxy now.

Bobby: Um-um-um-um...

Key: Where you off to, little man?

Bobby: Um-um-um-um... I'm having a ice cream!

Key: Good luck to you Bobby, I'm getting shit-faced with John Kearns at seven.

Bobby: Um-um-um-um...

Lord takes back custody of the Galaxy.

Key: Huh?

Lord: I'd rather you didn't say that kind of stuff to the lad.

Key: My bad, just excited, that's all.

Lord: About getting your tramp on with The Colonel.

Key: It'll be beautiful, Lord. We've got it all mapped out.

Lord: Worked out what bench you're gonna sit on?

Key: I've got a few ideas, believe me.

Lord: They've got signs on 'em, a lot of 'em. Says not to shove your fat ass down next to someone else.

Key: You can sit around the signs; I've seen it done. It's just so you're not canoodling with a stranger, that's all those signs are for.

Lord is making a square with his fingers, looking up at the clouds. Key looks up, too, wills the sun to burn through right now, show Lord what's what.

Key: It'll clear up, I'm telling you, man.

Lord: Got an email about footy this morning. Reckon we can play soon.

Key can't talk. He does a thumbs-up to Lord. Lord nods back.

Lord: Key, passes to Basmos, Basmos flicks it on to Crampo, Crampo threads it through to Lenny – Goal!

Key: Why's Lenny scoring?

Lord: Well, whoever, it's just an example.

Key: Of course Lenny's gonna score more if he's up front every fucking week.

Lord: It's an example, I'm saying.

Bobby: *(Off)* Um-um-um-um where's Fatberg?

Lord: Listen, we'd better go.

Bobby: *(Off)* Um-um-um-um can I see Fatberg?

Key: He wants to see the bear, Lor.

Lord: Really, don't worry. He'll forget about the bear once his face is in an ice cream. Oh.

Key has thrown the living room window open. He wanders back to the sofa and scoops up Fatberg. The bear's dressed as a cowboy and has a monocle. Key hoists him up and dangles him out of the window.

Bobby: *(Off, incredibly excited)* Um-um-um-um it's Fatberg!

The man and his son cross the road. Bobby with the Galaxy held against his ear. He's so small and the Galaxy is so big, he looks like a damn yuppie.

Bobby: Um-um-um-um it's Fatberg.

Key: You got that right, pal. Wanna take him home with yer?

Lord: *(Off)* What's this?

Bobby: Um-um-um-um take Fatberg home?

Key: They're unlocking, Bobby. I don't need the bear no more. I'm gonna get out of here, get mucked in with real-life people again. You can have the bear.

Lord: *(Off)* I mean, it's massive.

Key lets go of the bear's nape and he drops like a stone. He splats onto the pavement. Readjusts his monocle. Bobby falls into his lap. A jogger in a bright-red facemask hurdles the lot.

Lord: *(Shouting up)* I mean, what's happening here?

Key: Bobby can have him.

Lord: Huh?

Key: Or you can share, whatever.

Lord: For real?

Key nods and pulls the window back down. Lord grabs the Galaxy back and points at Bobby.

Lord: He loves that bear, you know.

Key: I tend to dress him in different clobber each day and sometimes tell him stuff.

Lord looks up, he blinks.

Key: But, you know, do what you like with him. The point is he just does his own thing, I mean he's a bear so, you know, it's fairly intuitive stuff.

Lord: Say thank you then, Bobs?

Bobby: Um-um-um-um thank you!

Key: Not at all, young Robert.

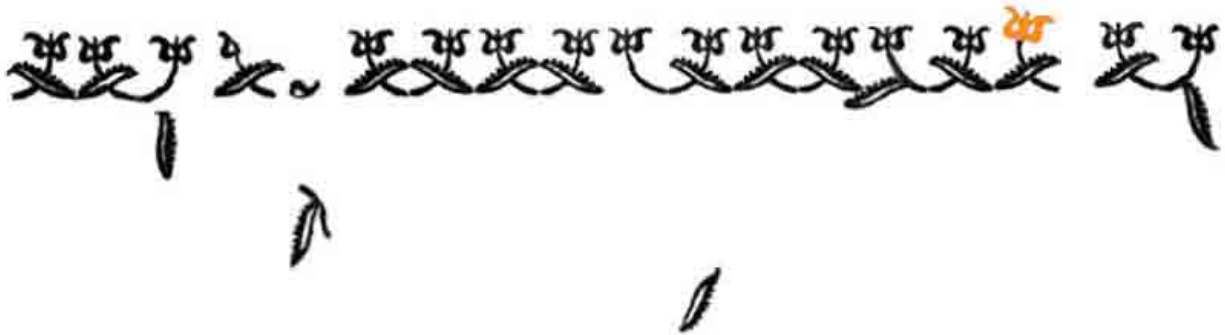
Lord: We'll bring him back if there's another lockdown.

Key: What?

Lord: Come on Bobs.

Bobby is struggling to scoop up Fatberg. Lord lifts his son onto his shoulders and stuffs the bear under an arm. Bobby's smile is big; you can see that the Tooth Fairy's come knocking.

Chisel.†



Cumdawg was leafing through the catalogue.

“Bronze wouldn’t be a complete disaster, mind you, Bohns.”

He was sat deep in his deckchair, looking at different options for his statue.

His Pret Swedish Meatball Wrap slowly dripped its contents onto his vest and Speedos as he purred at the possibilities.

Bohnson sat glumly on his swing.

Someone had graffitied him, and Lt Boytwitch was scrubbing his shins with wire wool and Fairy Liquid, trying to get it off.

Moggeth was up on the plinth, arms folded, staring into the distance.

An enigmatic Frenchman was chiselling into his cheekbones and whistling.

Moggeth’s eyeballs gleamed and his thin, bleak mouth curled up like liquorice as the craftsman cracked more and more detail into his face.

†**Juniper:** You think they’re gonna build statues to these guys?

Key: I dunno. I dunno how these things get decided.

Juniper: I’m not sure these guys should have statues.

Key: Who would you build a statue to then?

Juniper: Lauren Laverne.

Key: Apart from Lauren Laverne.

Juniper: Oh right, Shaun Keaveny.

Key: If it had to be someone who's not on 6 Music.

Juniper: Oh right, then I'm not sure. Not these guys though.

Key: Mm.

Juniper: Effigies, maybe.

Key: Saucer of milk for Miss Juniper.

Juniper: Louis Theroux, maybe?

Key: No arguments there.

Juniper: Yeah, Theroux.

Key: Yeah, I'll buy that for a dollar.

St Albans.†



Wilko checked the underside of the burger.

It was golden-grey and dripping with summer goodness.

He plonked it on the bun and passed it to The Captain.

The Captain placed a flap of cheese on there and it bubbled and spat.

He passed it to Johnny B, who threw on tomato, onion and the merest suggestion of a caper.

Chris had it now and squeezed on ketchup.

He slapped the top bit of bun on it and passed it to Loudog.

Loudog sprayed the whole lot with disinfectant.

It was dripping with the stuff and he kept on spraying.

He was spreading his legs so it didn't go on his Gazelles.

He handed it to Crampo and he disposed of it safely.

Wilko swigged his Strongbow and checked the underside of the next burger.

It needed another minute.

†**Juniper:** Another barbecue one?

Key: Then just don't flag it up, that's all.

Juniper: Then stop writing them.

Key: I am stopping writing them.

Juniper: Just call it The Barbecue Book.

Key: No, I'm calling it The Clown In The Box.

Juniper: Really?

Key: Lockdown Boy, then, I don't know, I've got some options.

Juniper: The Barbecue Book.

Key: I'm not calling it The Barbecue Book.

A Box Apiece.

☎ Amazon Guy. | 4:15PM, June. | The Flesh.

Key is in the bath. His face submerged, bubbles cloud his bollocks. The Intercom buzzer thing goes. Wet footsteps, bubbles dancing to the ceiling. Key reaches the door and presses the key symbol. Opens the door. The Amazon guy stands at the bottom.

Amazon Guy: Ha!

Key excuses himself and swaddles himself in towels. The Amazon guy has his top off and is slathering himself in sun cream. He has two boxes. One is quite big. Comes up to his belly. The other one is old-school. A box. Nice and big. But not too big. Key re-emerges at the summit.

Amazon Guy: Fantastic.

Key: Huh?

Amazon Guy: No beard.

Key: Oh yeah.

Amazon Guy: A new man.

Key: It had to go.

Amazon Guy: It's unlocking, man.

Key: I know.

Amazon Guy: It's done, man, I'm telling you.

Key nods.

Key: I'm going to the pub today.

Amazon Guy: Hence the bath?

Key: Huh? I've been bathing regularly. What?

Amazon Guy: No more beard.

Key: Yuh.

Amazon Guy: That's what you look like, eh?

Key: This sort of thing, certainly.

Amazon Guy: Just two boxes.

Key: Give me that one.

The Amazon guy pushes the bigger box up the stairs. Key grabs it with his foot and makes to open it with the Stanley knife. The shape of it... it's clear what it is. That is to say, it's a unicycle.

Amazon Guy: People are getting less stuff.

Key: Oh they are, huh?

Amazon Guy: People's brains going back to normal.

Key nods. Knocks his knuckles on his temple.

Amazon Guy: I think if you were going to take a hobby up you'd have done it by now.

Key: Yeah. Totally.

Amazon Guy: What ya got?

Key: Huh?

Amazon Guy: That. Looks like a –

Key: Yeah, not everything is what it seems.

Amazon Guy: What is it?

Key: I don't have to say.

Amazon Guy: I know what it is.

The two men stare at each other. Key retracts his blade.

Key: I'm gonna send it straight back.

Amazon Guy: It's week twelve.

Key: Yeah. I'm all over the place.

Amazon Guy: Even so.

Key: You don't know it's a unicycle.

Amazon Guy: I've not said it's a unicycle.

The two men stare at each other. Beyond the Amazon guy, through the open door, Key spies the outside world again. A grey squirrel races up a drainpipe, its trap full to the brim with nuts and chocolate. The Amazon guy still holds the final box.

Amazon Guy: Now this one, it says –

Key: That's for you, that one.

Amazon Guy: Yeah, says “Amazon Guy”, then your address: “Flat 4
—”

Key: Well, don’t read the whole thing out.

Amazon Guy: It’s for me?

Key: It’s for you.

Amazon Guy: You already gave me Ferrero Rochers.

Key: This is for you, too.

Key slings the Stanley knife down. It lodges in the door frame; the Amazon guy takes a breath and starts hacking into the box.

Amazon Guy: This is for me?

He is fighting back tears. The plum finish of the record player gleams as the cardboard falls away like slow-cooked lamb.

Amazon Guy: A record player.

Key: You seemed to take a shine to mine.

Amazon Guy: Fuck me.

Key: It has built-in speakers.

Amazon Guy: I’ve got eyes.

Key: Well, anyway, thanks for bringing me stuff, you know.

The Amazon guy takes his glove off and touches its flanks, flicks the stylus.

Amazon Guy: You gonna open yours then?

Key: It’s a unicycle.

Amazon Guy: Yeah.

Key: I’ll send it back, don’t worry about that. That’s going back.

Amazon Guy: Week twelve and he buys a unicycle.

Key: It’s going back, I said.

The Amazon guy has crammed the record player into his sack thing. He can’t wipe the smile off his face.

Key: What’s the best present you’ve been given?

Amazon Guy: In lockdown?

Key: Yeah.

Amazon Guy: Oh God, yeah, the record player, by miles.

Key: Right. Okay.

Amazon Guy: That's boss, that is.

Key: What's the second best present you've got?

Amazon Guy: In lockdown?

Key nods. He is leaning against his boxed-up unicycle.

Amazon Guy: One lady gave me some pie she'd cooked, like a pork and apple thing. Um... your chocolates. Someone was throwing out some CDs –

Key: Okay. Okay.

Amazon Guy: CDs ain't much good on this thing.

Key: You said you'd got tons. I mean...

The Amazon guy shrugs. Key nods down the stairs at him. Key's over-gifted.

Amazon Guy: Listen, thanks, man. I'm sure I'll deliver you something or other again.

Key: Yeah, for sure.

Amazon Guy: I mean, listen, let's keep an eye on the briefings. The Maestro might give us the green light to get a hug in, soon.

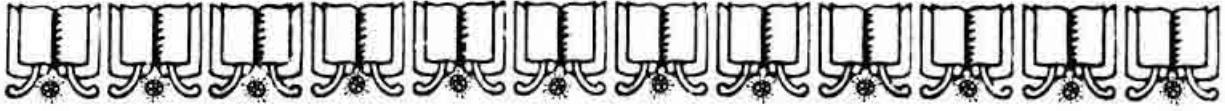
Key: It's a thought.

Amazon Guy: I'll buzz ya.

Key: Yeah. Yeah, you do that.

The Amazon guy smacks his sack and salutes. The door clicks shut. Key leans against his unicycle. He pokes his finger into the hole he's made with the Stanley knife. It goes right in there and he wiggles it against the spokes. He takes the weight of the box and waddles back inside. As he does so, his towel unknots and falls to the floor. He staggers, naked into the darkness.

Curriculum.



The children took out their poetry books.

“What do you think Key was writing about here?”

Arms shot up.

“The great pandemic!”

The teacher chalked it up on the magnetoboard.

“Of course, but more specifically?”

The children waved their books.

“It’s social-distancing! No cunt was allowed to cuddle each other!”

The teacher chalked it up.

“Excellent, Anthony. Again, careful with your language, but yes, in 2020 folk had to lock themselves in their own houses to take the heat off the NHS. Now, can anyone tell me what the NHS was?”

Supervise Me.†



†**Juniper:** I dunno.

Key: Dunno what?

Juniper: You want this one in?

Key: If I've sent it to you, yeah, I guess I want it in. You don't like it?

†**Juniper:** I dunno.

Juniper: Well, yeah. I mean it's lush.

Key: Thank you.

Juniper: I love the bit about her cheeks. It's just –

Key: They're bright as buttons, Em, really they are.

Juniper: I wish someone would write a poem for me like that, I must say.

Key: It just flowed, I just pictured her, remembered her smile, and out it came.

Juniper: It's beautiful. It really is. It's just...

Key: What?

Juniper: Well should you put it in your book? I mean it's for her, no?

Key: She's part of the story, Em.

Juniper: But I mean, you can't be slipping love poems into tips jars with one hand and then whacking them in your anthology with the other, that's all.

Key: No good?

Juniper: I dunno.

Key: Yeah, you said. You dunno.

There is a silence. Even in the footnotes there is silence.

Juniper: So what am I doing here?

Key: Em. At the end of the day, you design the book.

Juniper: Yeah.

Key: And you have the material.

Juniper: Yeah.

Key: So I mean, I dunno.

Juniper: I've kept a page open for it.

Key: How do you "keep a page open"?

Juniper: There's space for it.

Key: So let's say this. Design it in, or design it out. I'll find out what you've done when the book lands on my doorstep.

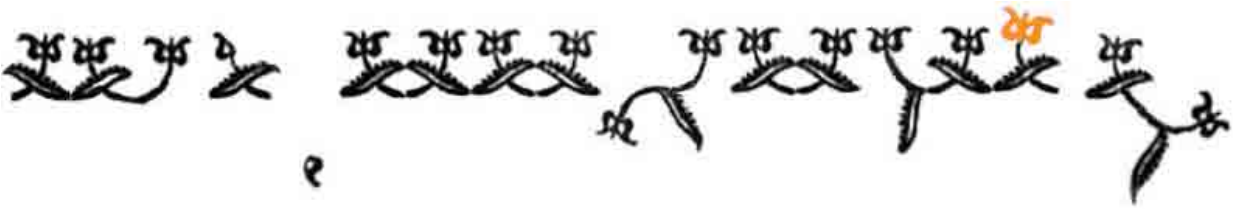
Juniper: So it's on me.

Key: As per. It's all on you, Em. What you say goes.

Juniper: I'll have a bath and a think.

Key: What you say goes, Em. Let's just see.

Bubbling Up.



Bohnson came.
He sat down at my kitchen table.
“I’ve had it.”
I didn’t know what he meant.
Why was he in my kitchen?
He was bigger in real life and looked glum as fuck.
“Would you like a drink, Mr Bohnson?”
He pulled a bottle of Bulmers Pear Cider out of his briefcase.
“It’s all good.”
As he grappled to close his briefcase, reams of computer paper covered in tolls spooled out onto the tiles.
“That’s embarrassing,” he said; his tennis shorts looked really tight, up close.
I nodded and placed my typewriter in the refrigerator.
“Should you be actually in my flat like this, do we think?” I asked.
He waved a couple of fists in the air as if to say never mind all that stuff.
I poured myself a grapefruit juice.
I was jumpy, having him sat there like that.

Amber.

☎ The Colonel. | 7:00PM, June. | The Flesh.

Key comes out of The Southampton Arms. He's wearing a bandana and his blue jumper. The cuffs barely cover his forearms, and the hem — if that's the word I'm after — is lapping against the bottom of his ribcage. He's holding two four-pinters and he presents them to The Colonel.

Colonel: Ha.

On the outside the four-pinters say they're milk, semi-skimmed. On the inside: Tropical Deluxe, 3.8% abv. The top inch is white as snow. Head. He slings one of the bottles across the Rubicon. The Colonel catches it, pulls it into his chest like a dog. They move up the hill.

Colonel: Cold.

Key: Yeah, ice-cold.

Colonel: Fantastic.

The Colonel presses the milk bottle to his cheek.

Colonel: Was she in there?

Key: She poured it, bro.

Colonel: You give her the poem?

They continue to walk, up past the bookies, hang a right at Costcutter. Then marching hard into the sun. The air is sweet; tastes like sherbet on the throat.

Colonel: Tim?

Key: Huh?

Colonel: You give her the poem?

Key stops right there in the street. He stands stock-still. His milk bottle, heavy, continues to swing like a lacticious pendulum. He looks at The Colonel, his smile fading.

Key: Engagement ring.

Colonel: Oh.

Key: Dazzling.

Colonel: Ah.

Key: Yup.

Key's eyes are still struggling from beholding it. Its shape is carved deep into his pupils. He crosses the road, a car screeches to a standstill, Key bounces over the bonnet and onto the opposing pavement. The Colonel joins.

Key: She's pouring the stuff into my milk bottle, and there it is, plain as day.

Colonel: Glinting in the light.

Key: The early evening light, pouring in through the windows, yes.

Colonel: She fell in love.

Key: It was an inch wide, John, this ring.

Colonel: She fell in love during the lockdown.

Key: Yes, I know she did, Colonel. She's fallen in love, and some opportunistic gingernut's shoved a ring on it.

Colonel: We don't know he's a gingernut, do we?

Key: It's impossible to say.

Colonel: Aw, man! So what then? What happened?

Key: What do you think?

Colonel: She screwed the lids on and you got the hell outta there.

Key: She asked me how my lockdown was.

Colonel: What did you say?

The two men walk in silence. Key's four-pinter slaps against his leg. The plastic is damp from the condensation, chilled by the IPA within. Key has a couple of Post-its on his ass. One says "Watching Pulp Fiction" and the other says "Bill Key cycles up". The Colonel removes them quietly and flicks them into a bin. Key doesn't feel a thing.

Key: There are benches in the park, Colonel. There are still signs on them, but you can sit on the bits between the signs.

Colonel: Great. I can't be too late.

Key: Pardon me?

Colonel: Nah, nah. I'm good for a bit.

Key: “A bit”? What the fuck is “a bit”? We’ve got eight pints of this shit to get through, baby.

The Colonel winks. A smile plays between his cheeks. He’s in for the long haul. Key smiles, too.

Colonel: Don’t worry about me, we’re drinking the lot.

Key: Yeah. Yeah, we are.

Colonel: Gab’s not expecting me home this side of Newsnight, put it that way.

Key nods and they clink bottles before increasing their pace. Other four-pint milk bottles float down the road, gripped by optimistic souls wearing summer dresses or magnificent Bermuda shorts.

Key: I wanna unscrew the lid, you know.

Colonel: Yeah.

Key: Just drink it here. Sit on the wall, heh.

Colonel: Let’s get to the heath.

Key: I can’t wait, Colonel. It’s been too long.

They hang a right at the stone giraffe and fuck me if it isn’t the old swindler himself. Stood on the pavement before them, as bold as brass. He’s got a flower in his button-hole now, and he’s got a fair maiden on his arm. She looks like the smart-looking lass from Eggheads. He looks like the cat who’s got the bloody cream. She’s got a stripy bag of boiled sweets in her hand that she’s clearly nipped back to the 1930s for and they’re walking approximately 120cm from one another. The old swindler touches his cap at our lads as they pass.

Key: Swindler.

Swindler: Sir.

Key smiles and they cross to the heath’s entrance. They climb the stile and stop. Awed.

Colonel: We made it, huh?

Key: Mm-hm.

Colonel: Got through it.

Key: Sure.

Colonel: The first lockdown.

Key: Huh?

The two men stand, surveying the heath in all its glory. The sun is low in the sky and their shadows stretch behind them like lockdowns. A bead of sweat on a temple and Key peels off his blue jumper. He tries to tie it round his waist but the sleeves don't reach, so he knots it round his neck instead and nods at his mate. Before them, a sea of unlocked flesh is interspersed with the greenness. It is, in and of itself, a poem.

Colonel: It's like Where's Wally?

Key: What do you mean "first"?

Colonel: Look, a bench.

Key: Yes!

A hundred yards away there is, indeed, a bench. By some miracle it is unoccupied. They clink their milk bottles together again and make their way towards it. A cloud inches across the sun and away. Their voices become more distant, fading away as they talk.

Key: This is what I would call "a moment".

Colonel: Yeah. Yeah, you got that right.

Key: Yeah. Yeah, this is good.

A tiny flash of orange as Key slings his pen over a stack of picnickers and into a bin. We zoom out. Emily Juniper italicises the stage directions. She continues to shift the blocks of writing around the page. She wants to make it look busy, effervescent. But she wants there to be space, too. The paper stock is high quality. It'd be a shame to paint it out completely with words.

The End of the Book.



Acknowledgments.

Key and Emily Juniper are in discussions. The sun is shining brightly through the window, cutting into the side of Key's face.

Key: And I'm saying I know that.

Juniper: So if they've helped, then you have to acknowledge them.

Key: I just think that's such a gash word, that's all.

Juniper: Acknowledgments?

Key: No one speaks like that.

Juniper: It's a book, there should be an acknowledgments page.

Key: Stop saying acknowledgments, you sound like a posh seventy-year-old who has a chauffeur and a weird hat.

Key sits down, his knees are wrapped around his neck and his eyes are thick with a kind of gluey emotion.

Juniper: Who do you want to thank? That's all.

Key: Not the virus, obviously.

Juniper: Your agent?

Key: Yeah, go on then.

Juniper: All the people whose words you harvested and printed out.

Key: Oh yeah.

Juniper: Daniel, John –

Key: Well, obviously Daniel and John.

Juniper: Your parents.

Key: Duh, of course my parents.

Juniper: Well I don't know, do I? It's blood out of a stone this.

Key: I owe everything to my parents.

Juniper: The Amazon guy?

Key: Doesn't exist, next.

Juniper: Rick and Buddy?

Key: Emer. Buddy's name is Emer. Very important that. They were a bloody godsend, the pair of them.

Juniper: Does Sweetie Pie exist?

Key: Er, yeah, just a bit. Got lashed with him and Crampo last night.

Juniper: Are you thanking Crampo?

Key: Am I thanking people I got lashed with now?

Juniper: Why don't you just send me a list of –

Key: Obviously I have to acknowledge you.

Juniper: Well, that's, I mean that's not why I'm banging the drum, you know.

Key: I acknowledge you.

Juniper: Okay.

Key: For all you do.

Juniper: Well that's very kind.

Key: I don't know why you're laughing.

Juniper: It's embarrassing. Okay, who else?

Key: My heartfelt thanks to you, Em.

Juniper: Okay, okay.

Key: It's nice having it coming back. I send it to you, it comes back.

Juniper: With interest.

Key: It does. It does come back with interest. I acknowledge you, Em.

Juniper: What about people like Alex?

Key: Horne?

Juniper: I know you leant on him in lockdown.

Key: Leant on? What the actual fuck?

Juniper: Him and Mark?

Key: Well by that rationale am I thanking Coop?

Juniper: Anyone who kept you sane, that's who I'd be thanking.

Key: They're in the book, mostly.

Juniper: I want to thank Calverts.

Key: *Quelle surprise.*

Juniper: For printing the book. Especially Sam, and Cherry's been fantastic –

Key: Jenny Lord.

Juniper: Great, L-o-r-d. Now we're getting somewhere.

Key: Breeno! Le May! Bang them in. Myself I suppose.

Juniper: I don't think people acknowledge themselves in their own book.

Key: Well I think I am going to.

Juniper: Acknowledgments are a chance to –

Key: Mad not to. The elephant in the room. Acknowledge the shit out of myself. Any more from you?

Juniper: Yeah, I'd like to thank –

Key: Acknowledge.

Juniper: Acknowledge then.

Key: Well you're the one who started saying "acknowledge".

Juniper: Okay, well I'd like to acknowledge the staff at Falmouth Post Office.

Key: Christ.

Juniper: And Stones Bakery.

Key: It's twee old stuff.

Juniper: They've helped when I've needed –

Key: Stamps and cakes.

Juniper: And friendly faces.

Key: Get that. Totally get that.

Juniper: And one more -

Key: Last one -

Juniper: Dan.

Key: What's Dan?

Juniper: Dan's been a rock.

Key: Dan?

Juniper: Yes, Dan. He's helped out in the studio and generally been a dream.

Key: Dan?

Juniper: Yes. Couldn't have done it without him.

Key: Dan then.

Juniper: Great, he'll be thrilled.

Key: That it?

Juniper: Dan's my last one.

Key: Dan, in the end.

Juniper: Okay, I have the list.

Key: We can just print the dialogue, no?

Juniper: Is it?

Key: I'll type it out and get it across.

Juniper: Okay.

Key: Better to do it with dialogue.

Juniper: Why change the habit of a lifetime?

Key: Yuh.

Juniper: This whole thing seems mad.

Key is opening up his laptop again. Cracking his knuckles for the last time. His iPhone and his designer evaporate as he begins to type: “Key and Emily Juniper are in discussions...”