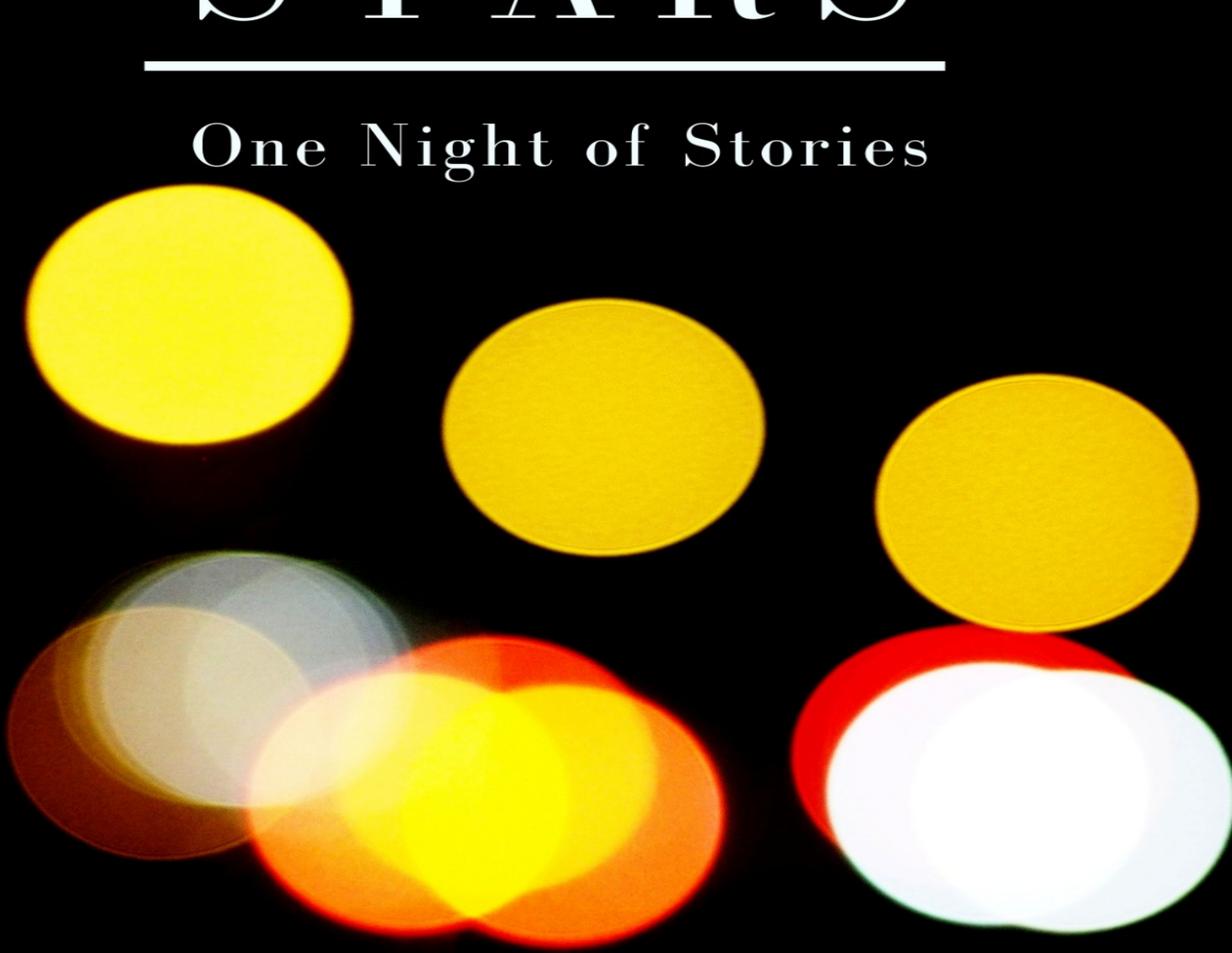


AMBER STARS

One Night of Stories



DAVID RALPH LEWIS

Amber Stars:

One Night of Stories

by David Ralph Lewis

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For my Honeybee

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10:01 pm

The car has been freshly valeted. There's a scent of pine, an artificial illusion of fresh air. Still a lingering sour scent from last night though. Ah well, you can barely notice it. I get myself comfy. After all, I won't be leaving this chair for hours.

I would usually head straight to Tolwood, but tonight I swing by Little Wren as the first pickup was radioed through earlier. I have been told the fare will meet me in the centre, nothing else. Luckily, Little Wren is a tiny village, a few houses and a road, not much else. As I swing down the main street, I see her lounging on the war memorial. Hood up. Eyes glued to her phone.

She barely looks up from the blue screen as she gets in the front seat.

'King's Head?' I guess. She nods and grunts almost imperceptibly. Thought so. All the kids go to the King's Head these days. It's the place to be. This girl is really young as well, barely eighteen. Hopefully not younger. She reminds me of a more sullen version of my daughter Kelly who is seventeen and getting drunk every weekend. I know I did exactly the same when I was her age, but I still worry about her.

As we drive, she alternates between staring out of the window and poking at her phone. She barely even notices I'm there. The kids are always ungrateful. If it wasn't me, her dad would be expected to ferry her around with little thanks.

I don't even try to chat to her. It's always the same with kids. Ask about their night or where they're going, who they are seeing and they clam up. Like it's some big secret. We adults know they are going to get smashed out of their skull. I think back to when I did it and realize I was probably as unsubtle as they are.

I wonder why this girl got in the front. Seems a waste really if she isn't going to chat. Part of the reason I started moonlighting for the cab company was because I love a natter. Of course, there were other reasons as well, like Kelly's looming university tuition fees. But chatting was a big part of it. This child is too self-involved to have a chat as she barely notices the world around her.

We pass the rest of the trip in uncomfortable silence. When we pull up the King's Head she scrambles in her bag for a moment. It seems to take a long time to find a tenner. She doesn't seem to have any money. Oh no, she's going to run, I realise just a moment too late. I dart my hand to lock the doors but I'm too slow. She has opened the door, jumped out of the car and run down the street, as fast as she can. I think about chasing her, but it won't solve anything. She's young and probably doesn't have the money anyway. I'll call it through to the office and get her put on the blacklist

I sit in the car watching the thin skeletal figure disappear down the narrow streets. Her hood slides off and I see her perfectly bald head reflecting the street lights.

Welcome Home

You are drunk in the town you grew up in. Once upon a time, this would not have been unusual but you haven't been back here in a while. The visits grew less and less frequent. Friends got married or moved away. They settled down and had children. You were left on the outside.

You are stumbling through the streets you know so well. Which turn you take is just instinct at this point. Left, then hard right. The shops are different to the ones you remember from years before. Water covers the cobbled roads, but you do not slip. Even now, all these years later, you know where to step and where to stagger and weave. The shops may change but the streets don't. You know them intimately. You've stumbled blindly through them, been sick on them, pissed on them. You own these streets.

Turning the corner, you come across the Golden Swan. Finally. It's been at least three minutes since the last pub and you have a mouth as dry as the Sahara. You know you shouldn't have another, but bugger it. It's the Golden Swan. The strange little sign is still swinging outside, although it is not lit up. Odd. This fact reels out of your mind as you go to open the old oak doors.

They don't open. As you look through the windows now, there's no sign of life. The lights are all out. The bar fridge lights are in darkness. There are no tables. The whole place has been gutted and mocks you with its emptiness. You rap on the doors, but your heart isn't in it. You read a sign on the door which says "Foreclosure of lease". You don't read any more

Not the Golden Swan. This was always your local, whenever you came back at Easter or Christmas. You would see everyone there. All the old gang. You would smile at each other and catch up, then everyone would get on with the very serious business of drinking yourself into oblivion. Then you would smile and say its funny how no-one has changed. But of course everyone had in their own small and imperceptible ways. Still, for a brief moment you would feel eighteen again, like no time had passed.

Now the Golden Swan had finally stopped laying eggs. The landlord had pissed all the profits away and it had finally gone under. You aren't surprised, but you still feel an ache at the loss.

You stand and give the pub a final salute, for years of service to drunkards and fools.

So where do you go now? The Anchor turned into a gastro pub years ago. You never liked it anyway. The Kingfisher is a pigsty, worse than the Swan. You are too old for the Phoenix. You know that much. It is full of teenagers drinking neon coloured drinks and being sick into each other's shoes. No thanks. You remember it as Kacy's anyway. When that burnt down it was the worst thing that ever happened to this miserable little town.

It's going to have to be the King's Head, isn't it? You don't like the place. No-one does. It's clean and peaceful but it's run by a chain so it has no character whatsoever. They even let kids in during the day. That's not right.

You sigh. As the only place left in town, it will have to do. At least they serve General's.

You let your feet carry you onwards. You try to think of who else is in town. On Thursday you sent a message to the old gang, saying 'I'm going to be around for a few nights if anyone fancies a bevvy?' Not a single person got back to you. You thought you would hit the town anyway and see who was around. There had to be someone out. Not everyone was married or staying in and being boring, were they?

You turn a corner. You had your first kiss there on that park bench. Georgina maybe? Izzy? You definitely kissed Georgina on that bench. But you can't remember if she was your first kiss. Or just one in a long line of girls you were briefly infatuated with.

A shiver runs through you. You should have brought a coat. You forgot how the wind hurtles itself around these narrow streets.

Still trying to think of someone who might possibly be out tonight, you draw a blank. Well screw them all, you think, if they want to be boring, that's their problem.

The King's Head. Finally. It's still got lights on, thank God. It looks warm and inviting from the outside. So you walk through the doors into the open embrace of a familiar spot.

In the pub, you blink for a few moments at the sickly yellow light. The walls groan at the huge amounts of people stuffed into a tiny place. It is heaving with young people. There's no-one over twenty in the place. You stare around at all of them. Where did they all come from? They all seem so identical with perfectly maintained hair and gleaming smiles. Button down white shirts and jeans for the gentlemen. Tight black dresses and too much make-up for the ladies. There's a steady buzz of voices and shouts and flirting and calls to get another pint in please mate, that'll be great, and people planning to go on to the Phoenix and people doing shots and yes, people drinking neon coloured drinks full of sugar.

It never used to be this busy. Even though they let kids in, it used to be an old man's pub. A couple of regulars propping up the bar all night. A few groups of older ladies having a sherry. It was never a particularly trendy place to go. You feel the ground shift under your feet.

A few hideously smooth faces turn and leer at you. What are you doing here, old man, they seem to say. This is our territory now. You still think of yourself as a young man, because you're only thirty one, but these children seem totally alien to you. All of them seem to have a natural confidence and poise that you always lacked at their age. They have been beamed down from another dimension to make you feel inferior.

Any other time you would turn and scarper. But you're drunk. Since you got kicked out of the last pub you are thirsty and in desperate need of some more booze to fuel you on your journey to oblivion. So you ignore the staring kids and push through the throng to the bar. Or as close as you can get.

What are you doing here? There won't be anyone you know. Everyone has their own lives now. Why did you come out into your home town with no plan? Why did you drink past the sixth pint? That's madness. You should have eaten. You should have at least made plans with someone before coming out. But you didn't.

There is a space at the bar. You slip in sneakily. Nicely done. Now you're just waiting for a pint. The bar is crammed full of people. Tenners are being waved, faces are screaming out for their sweet nectar. No matter. You can just wait here. You've done the hard part in getting to the bar.

A girl next to you smiles. Can't be much more than twenty at the most. You feel like a lecherous old man as you smile back. Now your drunken body has looked her up and down. You are disgusting. She's far younger than you. But your mind races with possibilities and explicit ideas. Could you? No. You couldn't. The state you're in, probably nothing will work anyway.

Never mind that. The barman has come to you, ahead of everyone else who is waiting impatiently. That's right. Still some justice and order in the world you think.

'Pint of General's bitter,' you say.

'What?'

'Bitter'

'We don't serve it.'

They always used to. Had a deal with the local brewery just outside Tolwood, on the road to Millden. Shipped it in cheap. You have a thirst that only a General's will satisfy.

'Any ale?'

'Sorry.'

‘Just beer of some sort. Any kind will do’

He stares you up and down. Got a live one here he’s thinking. What’s an old man doing in a pub like this? You feel a sinking in your heart as you realise nothing is going your way again.

The barman throws a pint of lukewarm piss in your general direction and mumbles a price. You respond with a handful of shrapnel dragged out from some forgotten pocket and press it into his hands. He looks at for a moment, sighs, then rings it up. There is no change. You guess you gave him the right amount.

You pick up your pint and turn around. And there she is again.

She’s definitely giving you the eye this time. You know it’s wrong, but even as you think that, you can’t help but smile back. Your mind stayed the same while your body got older. You are perpetually stuck at nineteen and there’s no changing that now. So when she smiles, your body is yearning for her whilst your mind is calling you a filthy old pervert.

So you find yourself turning to her and saying ‘Hey there, how’s it going?’ And before your mind really registers what’s going on, you are smiling and laughing with her. You keep staring at her eyes. A light hazel. You are convinced they are the most beautiful things you have seen in your life. You realise you have not heard a word she has said.

‘Sorry?’

‘I said, I like older men.’

That's it. This is a dream. Clearly, you are asleep right now. Because no one really says that, except in letters to the editor, or soft-core films late at night. It explains a lot really. The closed down pub. The lack of your mates. You are dreaming, it is as simple as that.

But this dream is unusually detailed. You can see each strand of this girl’s hair, brown with hints of blond in it. You can see every part of this

bar. You can see this girls beautiful hazel eyes. Each individual speck in the iris. The way her pupils dilate slightly. You can't stop watching. No. This is no dream. It is just stupid reality once again.

She's looking at you now. She's staring with an intensity that suggests she just asked a question and is waiting for your answer. But you didn't hear it, did you? You were too busy drowning in her eyes, lost in potential dreams.

'Yes?' You venture, hoping against all hope that that your answer is in some way related to the question she just asked. She just stares at you with worry in her eyes and a question on her lips. It passes. She laughs.

'Really?'

Then for a moment you see yourself through her eyes. What adults looked like when you were her age. Old. Worn down. Your hair is greying. You haven't shaved. You look a mess. The mere fact you're old gives you some sort of authority. Not much though.

A huge bloke at the bar is yelling 'Oi! Been waiting here for ten minutes! Is someone going to serve me?' You realise you haven't said anything in some time. You want to flirt a bit, see where this goes but what comes out is:

'How old do you think I am?'

You aren't doing it to flirt. You're weary. The question hangs there for longer than it should. You shouldn't have asked it, but you did and that's pretty much the story of your life up to this point.

She giggles 'I dunno, forty five?'

The words hit you like a punch to the gut. You feel sick and reel back from the blow. Forty five? You have let yourself go haven't you? Now she's trying to laugh it off like a funny joke. She thinks she's underestimated and given you a compliment. You're already walking away, through the throng

of people, to some sort of haven. You want to find a hole and throw yourself into it. Instead, there is a small table that's free for some reason. It will have to do. You sit yourself down and put your pint in front of you. Try to ignore all the young people milling around having fun. You stare at the bubbles rising quickly to the top of the unappealing pint.

You have drunk some of it. You don't remember doing that, do you? The proof is there. A third of the pint is missing. You slowly pick it up. Raise it to your lips. You have a tentative sip, half expecting it to be poison. It's just fine. Completely unforgettable. Your taste buds don't seem to be working because it tastes like water with only the memory of beer in it. Even though it tastes like piss, you battled hard to get it, so a couple of sips relaxes you a little. Not much. It helps to take away the sting of the insult.

There has to be someone out. There has to be. You take out your phone and scroll through the contacts. Person after person you haven't spoken to in years. People you didn't much like in the first place but hung around with because they were there. There are a couple of decent friends in there, but you haven't spoken to them in a while either. You moved away and forgot about this town. You can't just come back and expect life to be exactly the same.

You put the phone away, defeated. There's no-one around. You have to accept that. They are all tucked up in their houses, watching University Challenge or Country File, or they are round the in-laws, or they are staying in London because they have to catch up with work but they promise they'll be home at a reasonable time, darling.

What happened? This used to be your town. You used to be able to walk into any pub and have people who would greet you, who would maybe stand you a pint sometimes. You used to rule these streets. You used to have the key to this town. You moved away, thinking of bigger and better things. You lost touch with where you come from. Now you don't recognise the pubs you used to drink in. When did you get lost and old

An incoherent shout makes you look up from your pint. It's that massive bloke again. He is no longer at the bar, he's talking to the girl you were just trying to chat up. This can't end well, you note to yourself with a sigh of resignation. You should get up and go. You should find another pub. There must be another. Move your legs. Get up. Do it. You're so weary though. This pub is warm and you're sat down quite comfortably. It's probably nothing.

Out of the corner of your eye, you see him walk over. Brilliant. Still, you don't move. You take a long sip of your pint, enjoying the swill despite its complete lack of taste. You're still staring straight ahead when you notice he is right beside you, looming over you like a mountain.

'Oi Mate! Mate!' You do not turn to look at him. You are not his mate and never will be. What a ridiculous greeting you think.

'You were chatting up my girlfriend mate'.

There you have it. Of course, she wouldn't just be interested in an old man. It had to be some revenge thing. Of course. She was just using you to get back at her boyfriend. Figures.

'MATE!'

So you drag your head round to look at the mountain that is stood beside you. He is huge. He has a white t shirt on which is breaking apart as it cannot contain the huge amount of muscle this guy is lugging around. Shaved head, of course. He's got that unwavering stare, looking at you with pin-point eyes. Just waiting for a response. Any sort of response will do, so he can pull you off the chair, throw you to the ground and start swinging punches wildly. Your body is already tensed for the impact. You can feel bruises developing already. Get out of here. Now.

She stands there, not saying a word.

You've never been in a fight before. You aren't sure how you avoided it. In all your years of drinking, it has never progressed to the point where

actual punches are thrown. Maybe you were always able to diffuse the situation before it got violent. Maybe you just haven't done anything worth getting into a scrap for.

You still have time to run. To take your pint and get out of there. Or leave it. It tastes like drain water anyway. Why aren't you running? Your body is aching to escape. To get away. But your mind is a radio turned to static. You sit there a moment. Take a sip of your pint. Then look over to where the mountain looms.

'I'm tired,' you hear yourself croak out.

'You fucking what mate?'

You have no response, to that. You won't dignify that with an answer.

He grabs the back of your chair.

Final Course

After dessert, Samantha suggested the ladies attempt to summon a demon. It was the sort of crazy stunt her dinner parties had become known for in recent months. A final cap on the night after the excellent food.

Even so, there was an uncomfortable silence after Samantha suggested it. As the only one who still attended her parish church, Pam was particularly uncomfortable. She didn't say anything, but her slight cough and glance around at the other ladies made it clear she disapproved.

'Oh! How delightfully random,' Mary said, not her usual jovial self. Typically, she threw herself into any activity, but this seemed to be too extreme for her. Her muted attitude was noted by the rest of the group. For another long moment, there was the stunned absence of speech.

'Maybe not a demon. That might be the wrong word. Ghost perhaps. Spirit,' Samantha insisted. She went to her oak cupboard and pulled out a battered old Ouija board. There was general relief. That was fine. The ladies could understand that. At least there would be no sacrificing goats or dancing naked around a fire. The night was a bit too cold for that and mostly they didn't think it civilised to be running around in the altogether.

Still though, some people needed convincing. Debbie was worried it might be dangerous. They might be messing with forces beyond their control. Pam looked triumphant at being vindicated.

'It's God's kingdom,' she kept saying. 'Not ours.'

Mostly though, everyone wanted to give it a try. It was Samantha's party and it would be rude not to at least give it a go.

Samantha went to the kitchen to fetch five large candles she had bought from town that morning. Whilst she was searching for matches in the stuff drawer, she allowed herself a small smile. This would be such fun.

She had met the other ladies whilst she was waiting outside the small village school for Joshua. Samantha had started chatting to Mary a few times. They grew quite friendly and at some point Mary started to invite her to coffee mornings. These were decent. Tolwood had an abundance of coffee shops and tea rooms. There she met the others and got on reasonably well with them all. It was nice to get out of the house. Soon, the ladies were planning dinner parties and new meet ups, sometimes with partners, but more likely just the women, so they could get together and discuss the more scandalous gossip over canapés and white wine. Samantha did not especially like white wine, preferring red, but there seemed to be an insistence that ladies of a certain age drank chardonnay and gin, nothing more.

This night was just for the ladies. Joshua was sleeping upstairs. Her husband had made himself scarce as he usually did when the ladies got together.

Finding the matches, she took the large candles through to the dining room. She lit each one then placed them equidistant on her round table, smoothing the tablecloth as she did so. It wasn't quite a pentagram but it was close enough. After setting the mood, she topped up everyone's wine. They all seemed more relaxed, but there was still a tension. Something unsaid. We shouldn't be doing this.

Samantha turned out the lights. The dining room was plunged into near darkness. The candle light flickered around the room, creating new shadows. It took a moment or two for their eyes to adjust to the absence of light. The previous muttering and whispers were replaced with a hush. Samantha's house was outside Tolwood, in the surrounding countryside. There was no traffic noise, no hubbub from the pubs, or from other houses. Beyond the orange flickering of the candles, the darkness and silence seemed solid like a wall around them.

‘Is everyone ready?’ They all nodded.

‘I still think this is a dangerous business,’ came the one sour reply from Pam.

Everyone put down their wine and leant forward, placing fingers on the central pointer. The Ouija board was dusty, with letters written in a dated, ornate style. The edges were frayed and yellowing. Who knows where Samantha had dug it up? Most people decided it was a family heirloom or a charity shop find.

A sharp, deep breath from Samantha jolted everyone to attention. She spoke in a commanding voice:

‘I call upon any spirits here present to reveal yourself to us. By the ancient magick I summon you. If you are here amongst us, speak. We will listen.’

There was a silence. The pointer didn’t budge an inch.

‘I call upon any spirit here present to make yourself known. Are you amongst us?’

Another moment of waiting. Mary let out a nervous giggle.

‘Oh well. That’s-‘

The pointer swung to yes, as if attracted by a magnet. The sudden movement jerked many people across the table, almost knocking over a wine glass.

It hung on the yes for a moment then swung round to other letters. Samantha called out the words as the pointed oscillated rapidly between them.

‘I... AM... HERE. Welcome oh Great Spirit. What is your name?’

Again the pointer spun round the letters, moving rapidly between them.

‘B...E...L... Greetings oh wise Belial!’

Pam took her finger away from the pointer. She stood up and shot everyone in the room a bitter glare. It was the same disapproving stare whenever the conversation inevitably swung round to sex or scandal. Far more intense this time. For a moment, it looked like she was about to launch into a lecture on morality or sin. Instead, she clasped her hands together and looked to the sky. She quietly muttered some verses under her breath. Then she stormed out of the room.

Samantha knew Pam would disapprove but was still surprised at just how quickly she had snapped.

Everyone watched her march away, out of the dinner room. Everyone sat around the table when the front door slammed. Not one person stood up to comfort her or bring her back into the room.

Giving it a moment, Samantha coughed slightly.

‘Are you a ghost?’ Debbie piped up, before Samantha could get control of the situation. Another surprise. Debbie was usually so quiet and reserved.

The pointer swung round to NO.

Everyone gasped as one. They all watched it swing round to spell out ‘INCUBUS’. No one spoke it out loud. They just watched.

Some of them glanced at Samantha for advice. She looked as confused and scared as the rest of the ladies.

Debbie spoke up again. ‘What do you want from us?’

There was a pause. Then, lazily, the pointer swung round to spell out ‘YOUR SOULS.’

Everyone cracked at this. There was chattering and talking galore. They all kept their fingers on the pointer, unwilling to change anything. It was all

suddenly a bit dangerous and not so fun anymore. They all gawped at Samantha.

‘It’s ok,’ she whispered. ‘Just take your fingers away from the pointer. Everyone. On three. One’

As she started counting, the pointer jerked violently around the table.

‘Two’

It went even crazier, swinging past every letter, moving between yes and no, moving all over the board, pulling the ladies this way and that.

‘Three!’

As one, they all took their fingers from the pointer. It stopped moving. An unbearable stillness filled the room.

Each woman took a moment to compose herself. Samantha stared straight ahead, her eyes fixed at a point beyond the room. Then Mary’s shrill voice rang out, breaking the silence.

‘Well Samantha, what a... treat that was! So much more fun than the usual... gossip.’ She said it like she was mostly trying to convince herself.

In response, Samantha went limp, and then slumped forward onto the table. Her head lolled to the side.

‘Oh my god’

‘What’s happened?’

‘Are you OK?’

‘I know first aid.’

The ladies were in a panic. Just as Debbie was attempting to feel for a pulse, Samantha pulled herself slowly up from the table. The way her spine

rolled back seemed alien. Each vertebrae clicked into place like the movement of a mechanical insect. She looked like she was being pulled upwards by a string on the top of her head. When she sat fully upright, she gazed straight ahead. Behind her eyes was an endless void.

‘Samantha darling, are you OK?’ Mary asked.

Samantha turned slowly to fix Mary with a hollow stare. When she spoke, her voice was not her own.

‘Samantha is not here.’

The voice was deep and rasping. It sounded like a thousand flies all buzzing and swarming together.

‘Who is it?’ Debbie asked quietly, scared of the answer.

The thing that was previously Samantha just smiled a horrible broken grin and continued to stare at Mary.

‘Ok, stop now darling. It’s not funny any more. You’ve spooked us good and proper but it’s time to stop.’

The candle flame flickered. There had been no breeze before, but each lady felt a sudden chill. Their arms prickled with new goose bumps.

Again that voice, like sandpaper directly to the ears.

‘You mortal fools thought you could summon and simply dismiss me like a dog. I am not some wretched cur. You cannot just dispose of me. I am everywhere. I am omniscient and iniquitous.’

Again that breeze, whistling through the previously air tight room.

‘Stop now Samantha’ Mary said. Her giggle was still just there but almost masked by sobs. Samantha just smiled.

A terrible smell, like rotten eggs filled the room.

‘I will drag you all to hell.’

All the ladies wrinkled their noses. The stench was strong now, like sulphur. Everyone felt like retching. Some women were sobbing quietly. Others shook their heads in disbelief.

‘Do not doubt my power.’

Debbie just nodded. Mary stared into space, unable to process what was happening.

‘I am loose in this realm. I will rain destruction upon everyone. You are unworthy. I will-‘

What used to be Samantha was interrupted by the door bursting open. Pam strode back into the room brandishing a cross. She clasped a bible tight to her chest.

‘Begone foul demon. Leave this realm and return to whence you came.’

Samantha twitched and writhed in agony at the sight of the cross.

‘Leave and never return’

Samantha let out a long hiss like a cockroach.

‘The power of Christ compels you.’

Another inhuman scream, long and piercing.

‘The power of Christ compels you!’

Samantha held her arms out to the sky, then collapsed down onto the table and was quite still. As she did so, there was a huge gust of wind. All the candles went out.

For a long spell, nothing happened. Nobody dared breathe. Samantha stayed with her head on the dining room table. One by one, the ladies stood

up and headed out of the door; leaving Samantha slumped over the table, twitching sporadically. Not many of them said anything. Debbie mumbled something about having to get the babysitter home, then scurried out of the door. Mary stayed behind for a moment. For a long time it seemed as if she was searching for something to say. A way she could laugh it off. Instead, she just giggled, then the clip of her heels swiftly moved out of the room and the house.

Samantha waited slumped on the table for a long time after Mary left. She was fairly sure Mary was the last but it was hard to tell.

It had worked out quite well. They had all fallen under the spell. She allowed herself a smug smile of satisfaction.

Christ, she was bored. The endless dinner parties and drinks with the same group of ladies. All of them almost exactly the same, narrow minded and dull. They spoke about the same things, talked about the same people every time. Held the same slightly conservative views. All drunk white wine. They got a bit tipsy, but never completely drunk. Then in hushed tones they would confess that actually, they thought that really, there were far too many immigrants in this country. They weren't trying to be racist, heaven forbid, but England was full and they should maybe think about closing the borders. This was despite the fact the only person who wasn't white for twenty miles square was a Turkish barber in Milldene. He had been here since birth anyway and spoke in a strong Tolwood accent.

At least when the ladies got xenophobic it was something that Samantha could actively dislike. Otherwise, their continuous chatter wasn't offensive but just dull. The latest reality show. Can you believe that celebrity x did y? Using a z? With everyone watching? Maybe if Samantha was lucky, they would discuss the latest trash novel that you simply had to read. Or else they would talk endless nonsense about their children. She loved Joshua, but she didn't think he was a prodigy. She wasn't about to enrol him in sitar lessons, under five's Proust or children's zumba.

Endless drinks and dinner parties rolled out like this, without reprieve. Irrelevant nonsense after pointless anecdote. Sometimes Samantha felt like she wanted to scream. She had grown tired of it all. They were nice enough people but that wasn't really good enough. Samantha wanted excitement in her life again.

She couldn't tell when the idea had lodged itself in her brain. Once it was there though, it ate away every other thought like wildfire. She would get revenge. Introduce a bit of chaos into their otherwise dull existence.

Samantha raised her head from the table. Pam was stood there, still clutching her bible, glaring at her. Uh oh.

'Pam, what... what happened?' Samantha said, allowing her voice to go weak.

'Don't play stupid with me.'

'I'm... I'm not.'

Pam sighed. She walked out of the room for a moment and then dragged Samantha's husband in by the scruff of his shirt.

'Oh... what are you doing here, I thought..?'

'He was crouched by the door with a fan, some ice and some rotten eggs. I saw him on my way in.'

Her husband grimaced; annoyed that he had got caught. Samantha nodded at him. He turned heels and ran into the kitchen.

'Why did you do all of that exorcism nonsense then?'

'You'd went too far in front of the other women. I had to try and redeem you.'

Samantha was mute. She stared into space, hoping Pam would stop her judgmental bullshit soon. Of all the friends she had made since moving to

Tolwood, Pam was the one she liked least. She never seemed to embrace the limited fun the others were having. She barely drank, didn't gossip. Samantha never knew why Pam came along to the drinks and dinner parties. She always seemed to be on the outside, judging everyone else.

Pam got down on her knees next to Samantha. She actually got down on her knees. How ridiculous, Samantha thought. Pam grabbed Samantha's hand and held it tight. Her lower lip quivered. There were tears in her eyes.

'I will pray for you' Pam whispered.

'Oh fuck the fuck off you old bag.'

There was no pause in between her thinking it and the words tumbling out of her mouth. She couldn't stop it if she tried. It took her a moment to realise she had said it out loud.

Pam gasped. Quick as a flash, she drew her hand back as if to slap Samantha. It took all her Christian restraint to hold her hand back. Thinking better of it, she spat in Samantha's face instead

'There's no redemption for you.'

Pam straightened herself, then turned and stomped out of the dining room. Her heels clipped along the veneer. A moment later, Samantha heard the door slam.

She was left in her dining room, with only the memories of her revenge to keep her company. She sat alone in the darkness smiling at her prank. Soon, the smile faded and she was left alone.

11:16pm

Every Saturday night, things shift later and later, bleeding into Sunday as if there isn't any tomorrow. Some of the pubs have closed, but there aren't many takers. It's quiet for the moment, even though it's late.

Tomorrow, I've got to fix the fence in the garden. Look after Kelly with her inevitable hangover. I remember what it used to be like, going out on a Saturday without a care in the world. Seems like another lifetime ago.

I sit on the rank, light on, flicking through my newspaper. Got a novel in the glove box, but haven't got very far with it. Can't seem to focus properly on the words when I'm doing a night shift. In the last six months I've only made it through a couple of chapters. The newspaper keeps my eyes busy while I'm waiting.

A knock on the window jolts me out of the new and celebrity scandal. A middle aged couple are waiting there, dressed up to the nines. I wind the window down.

'Fenley' the man says. Of course. You need serious money to live in Fenley. They get in the back. He's dressed in a tuxedo, with a scarf casually draped around his neck in a way that suggests he is too drunk on fine wine to feel the chill of the night. She is in a long blue ball gown, with his Italian designer coat draped around her shoulders.

As soon as I pull off from the rank, he starts talking.

'Good night?'

'Not too bad so-'

'Good man. Good man. Been down the Town Hall. Know the owner there. Old school friend. He rustled up a special deal for the night. Filled the

hall out with guests and booze which was quite marvellous. All in honour of this lovely lady.'

He kisses her hand. I see her smile at him, genuine, warm. In the mirror, I see her eyes fixed on his face. She is enraptured. Won't look away even as we speed through the hills and fields. My Val used to look at me like that. Long time ago.

'Been married twenty years this year. Would you believe it? I certainly don't. Can't believe she'd have me, haha!'

There is genuine laughter from the woman. The whole journey back she doesn't say a word. Neither do I. Sure, I try to get a word in here and there. But for the most part, the rich bloke gives me his life story in a constant monologue. I just drive. She looks at him, smiling. Holding his hand like a safety wire.

I pull up down a long, dark lane and drive to the end. Quite a big house, not as huge as I would have thought. He spills out of the car, with her following shortly after.

'Nineteen eighty please mate' I call out of the window.

He stumbles back and throws a twenty at me. I take my time unfolding the crumpled note, hoping he will save me the hassle of getting the small change out. Instead, He watches me closely, snatching the twenty pence.

I turn around in the driveway. As I do, my headlights catch them, just for one brief moment. They are clasped together like teenagers, holding each other tight, trying to become one, to get beyond their bodies and merge together. Holding one another as if the rest of the world doesn't exist..

The Phoenix

Nestled between the newsagents and Boots was a nondescript black door. Above, a twisted mess of clear glass, a neon sign that lay dormant for most of the week. The door wasn't much to look at. Most people hurried past without looking at it. Bryony always stopped and stared, willing it to open for just a moment, so she could glimpse the legends and stories that lay within. Her mother always grabbed her hand and hurried her along.

‘You don't want to go there. Full of perverts and drug addicts.’

They would continue with the Saturday shop. Bryony always looked down at the floor. What if people from school saw her with her mother, instead of hanging out by the chip shop or in the park like they did? Doing the shop instead of talking to boys. If she couldn't see any of them, they wouldn't see her. She lived in fear of seeing Grace, or Laura or Katy, or any of them lot. Grace wouldn't be too bad. She was her closest friend. Or so she thought anyway. Almost every day Grace would bitch about the people in their class, which made Bryony wonder if Grace bitched about her.

The door was the only reason Bryony came into town every Saturday. On Friday and Saturday evenings, it came alive. The lights would fire up, casting a lava red glow onto the street below. People would queue past the Boots and down the street for a chance to get inside. At some ridiculous hour, the doors would open and everyone would spill down the stairs, to the untold treasures below. To strange new drinks and unheard music. It was a place where stories were born, where reputations were made, where battles were fought and lost. It was The Phoenix. The only club in Tolwood.

Katy met her current boyfriend in there. He was twenty one, but that was OK because Katy liked older boys. She'd had loads of boyfriends before him anyway and had sex so many times. Or so she claimed. Her current boyfriend had his own car and would often pick her up after sixth form. It didn't matter that he worked in the fish and chip shop, he seemed

impossibly adult. He didn't live at home either. He was part of a house share, if you could believe it.

One night in The Phoenix, Laura had got in a fight with a girl from Milton Park, a year thirteen. No-one knew what the scrap was about, but they knew this other girl was much bigger than Laura. But she had surprise and sharp nails on her side. On Monday she came into history with scars across her face and a smirk that simply said: I won.

Grace had got off with a boy from Hopkins Academy. She was on her own at the bar. Getting a drink. It was honestly like a film. She turned around and the crowd parted. He caught her eye and smiled, then pushed through the crowd of people. When he finally reached her, he whispered in her ear;

‘You are the most beautiful woman I have ever laid eyes on’

She giggled and the rest was history. Although she never got his number or even a name, so she couldn't find him on Facebook. All she knew was that he was a rugby player. He had short spiky brown hair and a tribal tattoo on his left arm. A tattoo! Can you believe it? That was a few weeks ago. She had been back to The Phoenix a couple of times, hoping to meet him again, but had no luck.

Bryony wasn't there when these stories happened. She never was. She only overheard the stories in the common room, whilst she was sitting quietly at the edge of the group, trying not to draw attention to herself. Every Monday would bring lurid stories of debauchery from the hallowed ground of The Phoenix. Bryony had never been in. She had never been in town late on a Friday or a Saturday. She imagined it constantly, seeing the sign illuminated and the door opened.

Saturday nights were spent inside. She read in her room, then went to sleep at a reasonable hour because her mum would check to see if her light was still on. It was torture, knowing the other girls were out having fun.

Grace had been asking her for weeks to go. Every time Grace asked, Bryony heard the voice of her mother in her head. 'It is no place for a girl of seventeen to go,' the voice would say.

'You are underage. And it's illegal. And I don't want you going and getting your drink spiked, or getting pregnant or worse. I'm trying to look after you. It's for your own good.'

So every time Grace asked her, Bryony would say no, she couldn't. She had plans.

This week Grace had asked her every single day. Bryony's mum had been particularly tyrannical that week, taking away supper because Bryony had slipped from an A to a B in a practise exam. Something had been stirring inside Bryony and she just wanted to see for once in her life what was behind that black door. She wanted to stay out late at night, whatever the cost. She wanted to descend into the depths where stories were made

So in a moment of weakness, Bryony said yes.

Grace had squealed and hugged her. The plan was swiftly made. Bryony would say she was staying over Grace's, just for a sleepover. They would stay at Grace's until Bryony's mum inevitably called to check up. Then they would head out. Grace's mum and dad were cool. They didn't mind. Her mum had even brought her wine. Grace just needed to keep her phone on and they wouldn't worry. They had got her driving lessons and promised her a car when she passed. They were so cool.

Bryony wished her mum would let her go to friends' houses on week nights. She wished her mum didn't start ranting and raving whenever she happened to mention a boy in her class. She wished her mum would allow her to go to a different university, instead of the local one in the nearest city. She was to live at home and concentrate on her studies, not be way laid by boys and parties. She didn't want to be stuck in this same town, year after year, watching the same people do the same things day after day, week after week.

Now she was in Grace's room. Getting ready for the night out. She couldn't believe it. Bryony was wearing more make up than she ever had in her life. Still the whispers came:

'Whores wear makeup Bryony. You don't want to look like a lady of the night, do you?'

Grace was talking about the boy she met. He was a really good kisser apparently. Well fit. A little bit older, but that didn't matter. The tattoo was really cool. It looked like interlocking thorns, but not rubbish, you know? With a giggle, Grace went to her cupboard and pulled out a bottle of sickly pink wine.

Bryony shook her head no. Grace said her parents didn't mind. Go on. She knew Bryony had never drunk before and took pleasure in seeing her squirm. Bryony was torn between the pressures of her friend and the voice of her mother in her ear.

'You shouldn't drink. It's the devil drink. Look at what it causes. Loutishness. People fighting in the street, falling all over themselves. Obscene, shameful behaviour'

Grace took a long swig straight from the bottle, before handing it to Bryony. Grace giggled again.

'What's the matter? You scared?'

That settled it. Bryony grabbed the bottle and took a long chug. It was sweet and bitter at the same time. There was a terrible after taste of rotten sweets and old vomit. Bryony gagged, but kept it down. Grace was taking almost manic glee in the corruption of her friend. She jumped on Bryony with hair straighteners, talking about who was going to be there and what was going to go down. Bryony listened quietly and tried to hold back the waves of nausea that swept over her.

She forced more of the horrible liquid down her throat, not understanding why anyone would choose to drink it. Maybe her mum was

right, it was poison. She wished she had never agreed to this madness. She could be in bed, reading and getting a good night's sleep. Sure, it would be lonely, but it wouldn't feel so deliriously unsafe like it did now. She felt like the world was spinning out of her control. When she stood up to leave the house she couldn't seem to get her balance, couldn't focus on anything at all.

'Oh dear! You really haven't drunk before have you?'

With Grace's help, Bryony staggered into the centre of Tolwood. It had never seemed so empty. All the market stalls were gone, all the shops were shut. None of the old ladies with shopping trolleys were around. No teenagers in the park, no bored office workers hurrying home, no one stopping and chatting to each other. It was peaceful. Bryony's mother had always told her it was unsafe, told her that on Friday and Saturday Tolwood turned into a riot. But there were no gangs of youths or drunks fighting in the street. Bryony stared with an open mouth at the town reborn as she stumbled along. One of the cobbles must have been raised because she tripped. She fell straight forward, managed to get her hands out in time but still skinned her knees.

Grace found it hilarious, of course;

'You are in a state! We better go straight to the club'

Grace helped Bryony up. She felt like a child, like a massive idiot. Grace's laughter only made her feel worse. Her knees burned with the shock of pain. Still, she had got this far. She wasn't going to cry.

So they stumbled through slumbering streets, past pubs filled with laughter and past boarded up shop fronts,. Through the town that Bryony knew so well, which seemed so strange and new. Grace led her to the door. The black door. The Phoenix. It was open. And Bryony could only glimpse a dark staircase that led down into the depths.

They joined the back of the queue. It was a cold night. Half the girls in the queue had skirts that didn't even try to reach their knees. She was sure

her mum wouldn't approve. Then Bryony thought to herself that her mother probably wouldn't approve of anything she had done that night. She would be shocked and appalled if she found out. Bryony would probably get grounded for months. The queue shrunk and the red neon sign dragged her ever closer towards the open entrance. She was powerless to resist it's siren's song. Grace was saying something to her, but she couldn't listen, all she could do was stagger forward clutching her five pounds tightly.

She was unable to catch the bouncer's eye. He would know she was under age, she would be turned away in front of all the watching eyes and everyone at school would know she was a freak, unable to get into The Phoenix. Her mum would have to be called to come pick her up.

They sauntered past the bouncer, a man with more neck than head.

'Evening Grace. Have a good one'

That was that. They were through. Bryony handed her five pounds over to some shadowy figure behind a counter and was finally walking down the steps into darkness. This was it. She was in The Phoenix.

It was so dark. Bryony could barely see anyone's face. Instead, there was just a writhing mass of bodies clumped together, all moving as one. The music was deafening. There was no melody, just a bass line. Maybe some drums sprinkled over the top. Bryony covered her ears, appalled by the roar of unknown music. She looked around her. Grace had gone. Vanished into the crowd. There were just bodies. Writhing. Dancing. Kissing. Downing drinks and cheering. It was horrible. Bryony couldn't cope. Why had she come here? What was the point? She was stupid. Stupid. And where was Grace? She had left her to suffer in this hell.

Grace arrived back, clasping two sickly green drinks. She flashed Bryony a smile that said it was OK, she was there. She mouthed something, but Bryony couldn't hear. She was too busy staring at all the people who were completely out of control and seemingly didn't care.

Grace handed over one of the bottles. It looked like radioactive waste. Bryony didn't think she would get any super powers if she drank it though. She shook her head. Grace was as ever, persistent and stubborn.

Bryony couldn't stop gawping. The girls wore nothing and were being touched all over. And it felt seedy and wrong. She should have listened to her mother and shouldn't have come here. Grace was handing over the bottle now and looking annoyed. Bryony didn't want to anger her, so took the bottle with shaking hands and drunk, deeply.

It wasn't as hideous as the pink wine. It was sweet. Almost too sweet. It was like drinking pick and mix. It felt like juice with sugar ladled into it. Bryony had another sip, but it was far too much. She looked down at the brew. Looked up at Grace who was yelling something in her ear. Then she ran full speed through the crowd, trying to find, hoping to find the toilets, but there were too many bodies in the way, too many writhing people, too many men with grasping hands, too many girls with painted on masks looming out of the darkness.

Finally she stumbled on the ladies. She burst through the doors and into the sweet relief of a cubicle, where she was sick. Liquid poured out of her. It burned. It tasted about the same going up as it did going in.

Someone knocked on the cubicle door.

'You alright babe? Need a tissue or something?'

Bryony was suddenly very still. She held her breath. It was agony, she needed desperately to get rid of the poison she had drunk, but this woman was waiting in front of the cubicle. There was a terrible moment when she thought the door would open. But the high heels clopped away. She could retch again in peace.

She finished, wiped her mouth, flushed the toilet and sat on the lid. What was she doing here? It was pointless. She didn't belong. Never one of the pretty girls or the popular gang. Why had she bothered? The world was spinning round her. Every time she dropped her head, it carried on going,

bourne by its own momentum. She closed her eyes. Instead of helping, that just made it worse, made it feel like she was spinning faster and faster and faster. She forced her eyes open to try and fight it. It didn't seem to help. Nothing did.

Her mother was right. Bryony knew she was.

'I don't want you to go there Bryony. I just don't. That should be enough. It's a wretched den of iniquity that is no place for a beautiful young lady like yourself. I have been in such places before and they aren't pretty. Drunks. Lascivious men who will paw over you like a piece of meat. You know they are only after one thing. I just don't want you going there and getting used and abused. I'm trying to protect you. It's for your own good. I don't want you to go there and that's final.'

Now she had come to the dreadful place, the pit in the middle of Tolwood filled with perverts and drunks and the stench of sweaty human bodies pressed together. Even the toilet was filthy, the toilet roll strewn everywhere in wet clumps, the seat falling off. The door had scrawl all over it: 'Kacey sucks anyone's dick-what a slag!' And under it in biro 'No I don't!' Her knees still burned, a reminder of the price she paid for disobeying her mother and trying to be cool for one night.

Bryony sighed. She would have to call her mother. She would drive out in her dressing gown and slippers to pick her up. Her mother would want to sit her down as soon as she got in and have a serious chat about exactly why Bryony had gone against her explicit orders, why she was really worried about Bryony, and didn't Bryony have A levels to study for? Bryony would then be grounded for God knows how long. Possibly forever. But it was the only way. She couldn't stay here. She couldn't.

She checked her bag. Phone was still there, thank goodness. Hadn't been stolen or dropped onto the sticky floor. She found her mother's number. Her finger paused over the call button. She couldn't do it. Not just yet. She thought of everyone at school seeing her mum pick her up from in front of the club. How she would be excluded even further. She would say

goodbye to Grace, then go into the cold night air, down the street, be picked up there out of sight.

Leaving the ladies, she was confronted by the wall of music booming over the crowd and through the floor. She could feel the walls shaking. It was horrible. Bryony walked to the edge of the dance floor and watched. They all seemed so happy. So lost in the moment. She wished she could let go and give herself completely over to the music like they could. To forget herself for one night and move her body to the beat in sheer pleasure. But she couldn't. She couldn't.

As she stood on the edge of it all, trying to decide what to do, she became aware, out of the corner of her eye, of someone watching her. She turned. There was a boy, a bit older than her, a few paces away on the edge of the dance floor. He was looking her up and down. Bryony caught his eye for a brief moment then turned away, almost giving herself whiplash with the speed her head spun round. Why was he looking at her? Was he planning to spike her drink and have his way with her? Was he going to grab her and not let go? She stared forward in mortal horror, hoping Grace or Laura or Katy didn't see. They would only take the piss. Poor little Bryony, unable to speak to boys.

She risked another peek. Oh god. He was coming over to her. He was smiling. She suddenly found a patch of the sticky floor fascinating. She studied every detail of the rough carpet and worn in chewing gum, willing herself not to look up. Eventually a pair of brown, flat shoes entered her vision. Still she did not look up. There was a terrible moment where it felt like the Earth had stopped spinning, the music had stopped playing and it felt like time itself had stopped.

Then he spoke in her ear, deep and rich:

‘Hey! Saw you standing there. Do you want a drink?’

Against all her instincts, she looked up. He was handsome, with brown hair and a chiselled face. Broad shoulders and tall. He didn't look real. He looked like a celebrity. Despite herself, she smiled at him. He smiled back.

It must have been a dare or a prank or something. Why was someone so beautiful speaking to her? Why were they interested? It must have been a joke. Bryony was painfully aware she hadn't said anything in response. With every second the silence grew more powerful. She had to say something. Anything. Even if it was just to tell him to go away, no thank you. She couldn't speak. Her mouth was glued together by unseen forces.

He leant over and whispered in her ear

'I think you are the most beautiful woman I have ever laid eyes on.'

Even as she looked at him and smiled like a lunatic, Bryony felt she had heard the words before. Somewhere. She glanced down at his arms. He was wearing a navy short sleeve shirt. And on the left bicep, there it was. An intricate black pattern. A tribal tattoo, with rose thorns. There it was.

Bryony froze. He thought she was Grace. He couldn't see in the dark, under the incessant flashing lights. Or Grace would see them together. Think Bryony was trying to steal her man. Or Katy and Laura would see her and take the piss, wondering why she wasn't saying anything. Still, he was a beautiful man. She thought people like that didn't exist in real life.

She smiled again. She didn't want to betray her friend. So she would tell him, politely, to get lost. She was about to say something, about to break the terrible silence when there was shouting near them. Bryony could hear the rage over the music. They both looked out into the sea of bodies. A space was cleared. There was a fight going on. One man was beating up another, smashing fists into the other man's sides. No-one was stopping it. Everyone was stood on the sides, cheering them on. Their faces were twisted into hideous masks. They were screaming for blood. Some were filming it on their phones, others simply pointing and laughing. The two men were not simply acting for the benefit of the audience. One man was beating the other senseless and it was serious. One raised his head for a brief moment and Bryony saw the blood trickling down from his face, thick and sticky. The other man raised his fist and slammed it into the other's face. Bryony

heard the bone crunch as the fist connected, saw the man's face crumple and his body give out under him.

Bryony turned to the boy with the tattoo. She took a step closer to him and rested her head on his shoulder, shielding her eyes. He smelt of Lynx and cheap hair gel. She stayed there for a moment as he put his arms around her, bringing her to his chest. He felt strong. There was a certain peace in his arms.

She looked up at him

‘Take me home.’

Occupied Territory

I wait in the entrance hall. Not my ideal vantage point but crucially I am close to the car park. Brian is my eyes in the sky, giving me intel about what is happening on the ground. I've been waiting for an hour and a half now. My legs are starting to cramp up. Patience is necessary.

Of the fourteen residents in this complex, I find it disgraceful that only two of us were prepared to stand up for what is right. When we bring justice to the terror that strikes at the heart of this residential block, then people will be rightly thankful. It should be a matter for the community as a whole to rally around. The problem nowadays is one of apathy in the face of intimidation and aggression. I for one will not stand for it any longer.

I think I see a shape move in the car park. Immediately I jump on the radio.

'Report the situation. Over.'

All I hear is a crackle at the end of the line. Blast. Have my eyes been compromised?

'Requesting Report. Over.'

Finally a response from the idle Brian. 'Sorry, was on the bog. Curry.'

I look again at the car park. The movement was Marcel, the cat from number 8. Damn.

'Keep vigilant, over,' I hiss back.

I noticed the abnormality almost a month ago. Action is slow if you put your trust in vague terms of 'Democracy' and 'Fairness.' I tried that route but got nowhere. Meanwhile the crime was still being blatantly committed in front of all our eyes, day after day. Was I supposed to sit back and just allow it to happen? Of course not. I had to take affirmative action.

I live in a small block of flats right in the centre of Tolwood. The flats are two sides of a courtyard, with other houses backing onto us, making a square. Within this courtyard, there are five parking spaces. That is all. Five. For ten flats. You can easily see where the problem lies. Space is at a premium.

One day, I came back early from work due to a disagreement with Kevin, my line manager. I will not go into the specifics, but needless to say he did not entirely share my point of view on a number of key issues. He told me I was too aggressive, which is rich coming from Kevin. But I digress. I had come home only to find, to my horror, an unfamiliar car parked in one of the spaces. No one new had moved into the block. It had remained much the same for the past two years. No. This was an invader.

I maintain they were the aggressor in this case. There are clear signs all around the courtyard that car parking spaces are for residents only.

That day I eyed it with suspicion, but decided not to act. Perhaps one the younger couples had purchased a new car. Or perhaps it was just someone temporarily taking shelter in our car park for some emergency. I was not prepared to judge yet. I am a reasonable person.

It was still there by the end of the week.

I made enquiries. Dropped round the neighbours' flats for tea and biscuits. The tea was universally unpleasant, the biscuits of inferior quality, but you must be prepared to suffer for what is right. Everyone had seen the new car, but no-one knew who owned it. They all assumed that another person within the flats had been flash and purchased it. No one had. Each person just sat back and assumed someone else would take care of it. All it takes for evil to prevail is for good men to do nothing. Do you know who said that? Einstein.

There is movement in the car park. I reach for my radio. Brian has not warned me. Maybe he has gone back to the toilet like some kind of slovenly animal. Tonight of all nights he decided to get a balti.

It's a figure, getting closer. I flatten myself up against the wall; try to blend into the shadows. The whole operation is reliant on stealth.

The figure is approaching the door now. I hold my breath. The door to the entrance hall slowly opens. He stands there. I can't see him properly. His face is in shadow.

They step into the entrance hall. So close to me. He looks in my direction.

'Trevor?'

It's Alan. Damn. I step out of the shadows.

'Hi Alan.'

'What are you doing lurking here?'

'Nothing. Just waiting for someone.'

'Right.'

It's a gamble but I think he buys it. There's a moment or two awkward silence before he nods and trots to his flat.

Alan is the head of the resident's committee. Completely ineffectual. Every residents meeting we have he just sits and mumbles something about there not being enough money in the pot. He barely even keeps minutes. He has no authority and as such I have no respect for him.

After I realised the invasion to our property and affront to our decent values, I made sure to bring it to the attention of the resident's committee. Alan argued there was nothing we could do. We had no signs that said we would clamp cars parked in our spaces. We could only hope that the criminal moved on shortly. I thought this was appeasement of the worst kind. We planned to just let crooks roam free, getting away with it. This might not be the end. Whoever parked their car in the space would tell their

friends. They would tell others. Before we knew it, the car park would be overrun with non-residents.

Of course, the whole tedious affair was put to a vote. I advocated for clamping the car or impounded it. Reason and sanity lost that day. Although clearly it was the correct plan of action, the resident's committee was too spineless to follow through. Alan had everyone in his thrall. The vote failed, eight to two. Only Brian and I were on the side of righteousness and justice.

After the meeting, I walked out into the courtyard, took my key out and dragged it down the side of the rogue Mini. I made a deep gash in the paintwork, a horrible jagged scar that shone silver through the black. Good. A couple of curtains twitched. Let them watch. None of them were prepared to take the direct action that was required. Cowards the lots of them.

‘Status report Brian. Over.’

I only have to wait a minute for the reply this time. Lucky me.

‘Err... still can’t see anything. Look, how much longer is this going on for?’ His nasal voice asks.

‘As long as it takes. Over.’

I stand in the corridor and stew. Brian is not as dedicated to the cause as I am.

In the resident’s meeting, he was the only one who was on the side of righteousness. I think it took all his courage to raise his hand against the majority. What I was proposing, even though it was morally right, was a bit of a stretch for him. I didn’t know much about Brian. Of all the residents, he was the only person who was a bit of an enigma. Lived by himself, late forties and balding. Overweight, of course. He was mostly private, didn’t say much to anyone else. Crucially though, his flat was on the second floor.

Two days after the meeting I knocked on his door. I invited myself in and explained. He was resistant, of course, but he reluctantly agreed to be

my eyes. He took a lot of convincing. I emphasised that I would do all the dirty work.

The plan was elegant in its simplicity. I would simply approach the criminal and talk to him, man to man. I would present him with a bill for the month he had for free. Three hundred pounds ought to settle it. He would pay the fine, and as such the flats would be in profit. We could then use that money to carry out much needed repairs. I would be lauded as a hero. Alternatively, if the rogue decided not to pay, he would hopefully be scared off enough so he would never return. It was fool proof.

I needed Brian to be my eyes on the car park. It was important to monitor it carefully, as by the time I exited my flat on the first floor, ran down the stairs and confronted the invader, he would likely be in his car and long gone. Brian is crucial to the whole operation.

Of course, Alan won't approve. There is no legal basis for the fine, only a moral one. Sometimes you have to go beyond the law in order to achieve what is right and just. Once the space is free again, Alan will understand.

I check my watch. Half ten. Still no sign of the invader. I sigh. Readjust my position by the wall, trying to get comfy. There is a moment of blissful silence. Then my radio cracks into life. Brian is babbling down the microphone, a garbled mess. His words are running into one another.

'The entrancenow-now! Gogo go! Trevorgo!' tumbles out of the radio.

I look. I can't see anything. The car park is empty. I think it's a false alarm. Then I see him. Not one of the residents. A stranger. Invading our car park. Taking what is rightfully ours. He strides towards the Mini. I open the main door and jog out towards him.

'Excuse me!' I shout. He turns round and looks confused, then swiftly looks shocked and worried as he realises he's been caught out. He stands stock still. Target acquired. What he has done is evil and he knows it.

‘Did you know this is private property?’ I call to him. That prompts him into action. He clicks the remote on his car. The Mini’s indicators flash orange. Then he starts to dash toward it, hoping to make a clean getaway. I don’t even think and I run after him. In an instant, I have caught up. I grab him, throw him to the ground and punch him in the face. Again and again. My hand feels numb.

I stop. He has blood streaming from his nose and his forehead. He hit the ground hard. He is unconscious. I didn't expect it to go like this. Regardless, he was the aggressor, I tell myself. He was the one who was unwilling to talk it through like gentlemen. I saw a direct threat to our well being and values and acted accordingly. He was uncivilised and started to run, which is a clear indicator of guilt. I had to take decisive action in order to keep him here.

None of the curtains seem to be twitching, thankfully. I can do without the prying eyes of the neighbours. They wouldn't understand.

'What happened? What did you do?' Brian screeches over the radio.

'Coming up. Over.'

'What do you-' I turn the radio off.

I pick up the man by the arm and wedge myself under his shoulder. Time to take evasive action. I drag the unconscious lump to the door. He's heavier than he looks. It takes about five minutes to get him into the hall, then another couple to drag the body into the lift. All the time I am scouting around me, hoping none of the other residents decide to stroll down the stairs. I am not ashamed of my actions. They were necessary. But the others will not understand.

While I'm pulling him out of the lift, he manages a stumbling walk. Good. I was getting tired of pulling his dead weight. I manage to get him to flat number 9 and knock on the door.

Brian opens it half an inch. I jam my foot in the door before he can react, push it back and drag the criminal's body in with me.

I drop him on the floor in the hallway. Brian's flat is drab and empty, a bit like him. Brian is freaking out, saying something about the police and the blood on his carpet and what happened and oh no, I didn't expect this. The invader is coming to, looking around him as if he is unable to comprehend where he is.

'Whaa...?' He keeps moaning. The blood on his head is thick and dark, although seems to be clotting now. Brian is babbling on.

'Be quiet. You knew the consequences,' I say.

I march into Brian's bedroom and open his wardrobe. So many black trousers, brown shapeless jumpers and sorry looking white shirts. Brian follows me in, yelling something about not being in here, it is his private space, I have no right. Blah blah blah. I search through the wardrobe for what I need. They are at the back on a separate hangar, all neatly laid out. I grab four of them and stride back into the hallway, shoving past Brian on the way.

The man has gone. Or that's what it looks like for a brief, heart stopping moment. Actually, he's round the corner scrabbling at the door, trying to escape justice.

I grab him and drag him through to Brian's living room. He stumbles quite easily, still spaced out.

'Where... am I?' he says.

I don't say anything in return. Brian is pacing up and down the room now like a caged animal. Some people just can't deal with duty or what is right and just. I force the man to the floor next to the radiator, and then I start to secure his hands to the pipes with the silk ties.

'I need those for work,' Brian says. I'm not really listening to him any more. He is spineless, apathetic and not willing to do what is necessary in order to achieve justice. Like the rest of the residents.

I tie the man's hands together. He moans. Brian shifts from foot to foot. He has stopped talking now, and instead stands and watches me. Another neck tie goes round the criminal's legs, to stop him kicking out. One last tie, a horrible blue and pink striped polyester number, goes round the man's eyes.

Panting, I stand up and sit on the sofa, facing the bound prisoner. I stare at him for a moment, catching my breath. All the exertion of securing the target, dragging him up the stairs and tying him down has caught up with me. My heart is pounding in my chest. I hear a high pitched tone. For a moment, I am light-headed. Not now.

I somehow manage to get my breath back with deep breaths. The feeling passes. I glance at Brian who is panicking. He's so sweaty, it's disgusting.

I look him right in the eye. 'Crunch time Brian. You have to decide whether you are on the side of righteousness and truth. The side that fights for what is just and pure. Or if you're everyone else, you're on the side of cowardice and apathy. What side Brian? You're either with me or against me.'

Brian stands there for a long time. He releases his breath in one huge gasp, then slowly shakes his head. He looks like he is about to cry. Pathetic. Instead, he turns and leaves the room. I hear his front door slam.

I am left alone with the criminal. Just me and him, in Brian's flat. I am glad it isn't mine. I recently had the cream carpet redone and it would be murder to get the stains out.

I kneel down close to the criminal. Get right up close to him, my face next to his.

'Why did you do it?' I whisper. I am still a reasonable man. He still has a chance to redeem himself. I am not heartless.

The man is sobbing quietly to himself.

'Why?' I ask. I am reasonable.

'I... I... thought they... were public'.

No. He cannot get away with an excuse like that. Pathetic. I stand up and kick the radiator. The sound of my steel capped boots colliding with the metal makes a huge clanging that echoes around the room. The noise is deafening. I kick and kick and kick. The man is screaming now, but his voice is barely heard over the noise of the radiator.

I stop. There is a ringing in the air. The man is whimpering.

'Why?'

'I don't know...'

I kick again at the radiator. Again, the noise is deafening.

'Come on. Don't lie to me. Why did you do it Kevin?'

'Who? My name's not Kevin..?'

I kick the radiator some more. Sloppy. Didn't even realise he was on my mind. Truth is, after I had that warning a few weeks ago things went FUBAR. This week, Kevin called me into his office. Said I was failing to set the example required for the company. Said my aggression had only gotten worse. He let me go. Which is definitely unfair dismissal. Now I'm not sure if I am able to afford the flat. This all flashes through my mind rapidly. I feel about two feet tall, in the playground with other kids calling me names.

The man is looking up at me with eyes that can't quite focus. I stand over him. He's not even saying anything now. Just whimpering under his

breath.

I smirk and head off to the kitchen.

I open up drawers and pull out knives, forks, matches, anything I can get my hands on. I am not going to sit idly by like the rest of the pathetic residents and let evil prevail in our midst. I am going to take affirmative action. He doesn't want to tell me so I'll force him to speak. I'll make him give up the names of everyone else he has told about our parking spaces.

I hear a key turn in the front door. I run to the corridor and barge my shoulder into the door, jamming it shut. There is a yelp from the other side. A hand is withdrawn just in time.

A deadbolt on the top of the door. I drag it across. I sink to the floor and sit for a moment, catching my breath. Again the light-headedness.

'Trevor?' A muffled voice comes through the door.

It's Alan. I've been sold down the river. I've been betrayed. I am the only one who will stand up for truth and light. Brian clearly doesn't believe in justice. The reason that this society is going to the dogs is that people aren't prepared to fight for what is right.

'There's some nice men here. They just want to talk to you.'

I see what has happened. Brian has gone to Alan. Alan has called the police. Spineless cowards, the lot of them.

I walk back into the living room. I drop my implements on the floor. No point in them now. I kneel.

'Why?' I say.

The man just shakes his head.

I let out a huge sigh. I can hear the thump on the door of the battering ram. Clearly, they are trying to get in.

I stand up and adjust my tie. I will explain it all to them. How this man trespassed on personal property. How I wanted to make things right. How he was breaking laws and I performed a citizen's arrest. Once they hear my side of the story, they will realise that I am the victim. I smile as they break through Brian's front door. They will understand.

Feels Like Forever

Four of us sit in the car, doing not much at all. We chat a little. Mostly we just sit. It's totally dullsville.

We're too young to get into pubs. Julie can, but she doesn't see much point going on her own. It's her car as well. Her birthday is in September, so she seems way older than me. Mine isn't until July. I have to wait almost a whole year before I can go into pubs and get served legally. I started driving lessons and they just seem to be taking forever.

As well as me and her, there's Nick and Caleb. Nick is alright. He's been going out with Julie for an eternity now. They are practically married. Julie still makes time for me though. Nick's a cool guy, into sport but not a dick about it, you know? Besides, he's besotted with Julie. Like, obsessed. You can see it in his puppy dog eyes.

Caleb mostly doesn't do anything, just stares out of the window. He hasn't said a single word since he got into the car.

Sure, I've tried to chat to him. It's mega awkward sat in the back seat with him not saying a single word. But every time I try, he grunts, or looks back out the window. Charming.

So there's an atmosphere here and it's all basically his fault. I mean, the three of us always drive out somewhere. I just don't see why they wanted Caleb to come with. He is totally the forth wheel.

Not a fan of his clothes either. Baggy black shirt. Dark wash jeans. Horrible shoes. His hair is thick and greasy, hanging down like oily curtains in front of his face. He never catches my eye either.

I've been single for two months now, so I see what Julie is trying to do. They invited him along so maybe we would get to know each other better. I'm really focusing on myself right now, you know? Besides, in a year I'll

be at uni or college or somewhere other than here and I really don't want to get into anything now. Seems like a long time away, but it will come round quick, or so I've been told.

There's some rubbish band playing on the radio. Nick looks at us both and smiles.

'Want a smoke mates?'

He pulls out a thick spliff from under his beanie.

The next moment there's ear splitting sirens and four police cars pull up, their blue lights lighting every inch of the empty car park.

'Shit. The pigs!' Julie shouts.

'Oh my god,' says Nick

'Be cool,' I say.

Caleb shakes his head.

At least twenty policemen, probably way more, are advancing towards us, guns drawn.

'Come out with your hands up'

We all look at each other and at the spliff between us. There's a horrible moment when we realise what's going to happen. We're going away for a long time. I think about my mum and my sister, how I might never see them again.

It's Julie who decides what to do. She turns the engine on with a flick, pops the car in reverse and slams the accelerator down.

'What are you doing?' I ask.

'I'm not letting these motherfuckers put me away.'

The policemen scatter. We don't hit any of them, luckily. There's a tiny gap between the police cars, totally just the size of Julie's mini.

'You're not going to make it!' Nick says

'Watch me.'

It's coming up, closer and closer. We hold our breath. Julie skids through the gap between the police cars. Sparks fly up as the car scrapes through. It's too tight. We're not going to make it. Julie keeps her foot on the accelerator. Then, somehow, we are through. Julie spins the car into a handbrake turn, hitting one of the police cars and setting off alarms. It doesn't matter. We are through.

We're facing down the road. Julie thuds the gear into first with a crunch and we speed off. The policemen basically don't know what's happened. We have a head start. As we speed down the road, I see them scrambling to their cars to follow us. A few stand in the road and shoot at our car. The back window is hit and shatters. I scream. So does Caleb.

We are long gone, leaving the pigs behind.

'Where are we going?' Nick asks.

'Anywhere but here.' She drives fast into the future, away from Tolwood and our old lives.

Nick waves the spliff in front of my face. 'So you want some or not?'

I shrug. 'Sure. Why not?'

Caleb just shakes his head.

We light the joint and stare out into the supermarket car park. No police. No guns. No high speed chase.

I don't know why the Saver's car park is the place to be. It's just, tradition now, you know? When Julie passed her test she took me and Nick

out for long drives. We couldn't really go anywhere though, not around here. We tried going out to the fields but it was way too dark and it looked like we were hooking up. Which, no offence to Julie and Nick, not really my bag. Not with them at least. Nick's too polished for my tastes. I like them a bit rougher. As for Julie, not into girls, so no thanks. Also they are both totally friends so it would be icky.

We settled on the Savers car park quite early on. We would drive out here and chat. Usually Julie, Nick and me. Sometimes others, depending who was around. We would hang out together. Been doing it about four months now. Seems like way way longer. When you look back it feels like yesterday, but every day feels like forever.

Nick takes a couple of small tokes from his spliff. Passes it to Julie, who seems to really enjoy it. She lingers over each puff.

Then it's my turn. Sure, I do it now and then. Julie and Nick seem to do it all the time. They are basically always stoned.

It's strong, but not unpleasant. I've learned how to toke it properly. The first time I smoked was here, in Julie's car, a couple of months ago. Of course, I coughed my lungs up. They both found it hilarious. I have a few tokes this time and lay back in the seat. Relax. Ahhh.

I offer it to Caleb. He isn't smoking. The rate the car is filling up he won't have to. He shakes his head and goes back to staring out the window.

So back to Nick it goes. He smiles an exposed, toothy grin, different to how he usually looks.

I look at Julie. She's grinning like that as well.

Their smiles are too big for their faces. Still they grow and grow. Caleb is staring at them as well. Freaking out. Their smiles have reached their ears now. Literally as wide as their faces. Still the smiles keep going. The edges of their grins disappear round the back of their heads. The smile gets all the

way around. I want to look away, want to run, but I can't stop staring at them.

Julie reaches up and pulls the skin from the top of her head clean off. It separates with a wet squick. Like, pulling your hand out of mud. Below the skin mask is a new face, or what seems to be a face. None of it seems to make any sense. Nick reaches up and pulls his mask off too. Again the same wet squicking sound. Again the collection of grey, pulsating organs that make up this creature's face.

They make some weird whistling sound that might be laughter.

'The invasion has begun,' the one who used to be Nick says somehow, although I'm not sure they have mouths.

'What have you done with my friends?' I ask. Again, the strange whistling that seems cruel and mocking.

'You have taken the technology. Soon you will transform.'

I look at the spliff in Nick's hand. Only it's not a spliff any more, it's an oddly shaped piece of metal. Covered in blinking LEDs. I think, oh no, I didn't. But I did. I pressed that to my lips.

My head is spinning. Everything seems out of focus. I wave my hands in front of my face and long trails are left behind. All I can hear is that whistling from the two creatures who used to be my friends.

I look at Caleb, who is clearly in the middle of a panic attack.

'You didn't have it, did you?'

He shakes his head.

'Run. Save yourself.' He looks doubtful. 'It's too late for me. Just go!'

Still he hesitates.

‘Go!’ I shout. He looks me straight in the eye for the first time that night. Then he leans in and kisses my cheek, very gently. He kicks the chair in front of him, sending the creature that used to be Julie into the steering wheel. It lets out a hiss like a kettle boiling, what I assume is pain. He’s opened the door and ran out into the night, to warn the world and to avenge my death.

It’s too late for me. I let out a low whistle. It sounds like laughter to my ears. I start to smile and keep on smiling.

There’s a moment of silence as we all enjoy the weed.

‘Good stuff Nick,’ says Julie.

‘Cheers babe,’ he says. They kiss. Maybe it’s the fact they are both stoned, but they seem to be locking lips forever.

‘Give it a rest guys!’ I shout. Don’t want them to remind me I’m not getting any. The only possible prospect in this car is Caleb, who is writing very intently in a small notebook. Probably some emo lyrics or something. If they meant to set me up, and I’m sure they totally did, Caleb is the wrong person. Not my type at all.

Nick settles down in his seat, enjoying the feeling of being baked.

‘Do you ever like, gaze at the stars and think, shit, there’s like, other worlds out there?’

Julie giggles, ‘What a load of rubbish.’

‘I do’

Julie just snorts. We all stare out of the window at the car park. Nothing is going on. It never does.

Tolwood is so dull. It’s literally the middle of nowhere. There’s nothing in the town. There are just fields around for miles. It’s basically the end of

the earth.

I wish I lived in a city. My parents are so selfish for wanting to live here.

I glance back at Nick and Julie. They are making out. Again. I let out an ‘Ugh’ but they don’t seem to notice. I don’t see how they can still be into each other after what, a couple of years? That’s age. They still play tonsil tennis. It’s so groce. I totally got bored with my exes. They were all so immature. So boring. Caleb is the same, a child.

He glances at me and smiles. Only for a moment though. Then he looks away.

‘God are you going to ever stop making out?’ I yell.

Julie and Nick finally break off from each other’s faces.

‘Chill out!’ Nick says. He passes the joint back. I shake my head.

‘She’s just jealous because she’s not getting any’ Julie smiles.

‘Exactly,’ I say. ‘Although, none is better than Sam anyway’

‘What were you thinking?’

‘You know, I’ve got no idea?’ I start to giggle. I can’t stop. It goes into a full laugh and I can’t stop myself. I’m laughing so much. The idea of me and Sam kissing and even having sex strikes me as totally hilarious. I think back on it and I just wonder what exactly I was thinking. We were never that serious, and I only saw him for a few weeks but it seems, like, so strange and weird to me that I would ever go there. It’s been two months since I split from him but I’ve changed so much it seems like a lifetime ago.

‘Who was Sam?’ Caleb mumbles.

‘My ex.’ I don’t want to go into the details here. Not when I’m feeling pretty relaxed and happy.

‘Tell me everything you know about this Sam character,’ Caleb says. He’s looking at me way more intensely.

‘What’s going on?’

He puts a finger to his ear. Nods. ‘Understood,’ he says. He seems more alert, more upright. I wonder if I’ve totally underestimated him. He starts to look good even.

He pulls out a badge.

‘You fools. I am with KGB. I take control of this vehicle, right now’

‘I thought the KGB were like, no longer a thing?’ Nick says.

‘Just what we wanted you to think.’

His voice has changed. The previous mumblings and grunts have been replaced by a confident swagger. There’s a Russian accent there as well, just a hint of it. How did we not hear it before? We were totally idiots.

‘Speak about this ‘Sam’

He points his watch at me.

‘This contains a dart. Full of poison. I press this button on side, it shoot out and hit you in neck. Death will be instant.’

To be honest, this is a real downer on the good vibe I was feeling.

Nick and Julie are frozen.

‘Drive.’

Julie is sobbing, but starts to drive. Caleb sits behind her, tapping her shoulder and pointing to direct her. All the time, the watch face is pointing towards me. I can’t keep my eyes off it. Now I study it, I can totally see the dart hidden in the watch face. There’s no numbers. Just the tip of the hidden

arrow, waiting to be fired. We proceed through empty streets. We realise now, too late, these streets are empty because other agents have cleared the area beforehand. Given their man on the inside a clear run to the pickup point

When we get out of Tolwood and into the countryside, Nick starts to weep. Julie shoots him a glare but it does nothing. She's terrified too, but too focused on driving to let it out.

Caleb makes us pull into an empty field. It's dark. Far too quiet up here, away from the town. We wait in silence for what seems like ages.

'What are we-' Nick starts. Before he can finish his sentence, Caleb leans over and pinches his shoulder in a precise, practised way. Nick collapses in his seat like all the air has gone out of him. He's out cold.

'Nick!' I say. Julie says nothing, just stares in disbelief at the crumpled body of her boyfriend.

'Be fine. Sleeping,' Caleb says.

Still we wait in the darkness. No-one says anything. We can't. The tension is so thick I feel like choking, you know? Too much.

Finally, we see lights in the distance. Hear the swish of rotor blades. A helicopter.

'Out of car. You both with me,' Caleb says.

Julie looks at me, her eyes wide with fear. Pleading with me, asking me to do something to help. Anything.

The fear has made me unable to think. I don't know what to do. Caleb beckons Julie to get out of the car. She clambers out and stands in the darkness, shivering.

Caleb backs out of the car. He opens the door behind him. As he does so he has to drop the face of the watch. I see my opportunity. I give him a swift kick to the face. Take that! There is a crunch. He screams in pain. I think I broke his nose. Oh well.

I grab the watch. Point it towards his face. He tries to struggle. His eyes go wide. I press the button. Bull's-eye. The dart hits his neck. Goes deep in. His eyes go wide.

‘What have you done?’

Then he slumps backwards, completely drained of all life. He’s gone. His lifeless body falls to the ground.

I clamber out of the car and Julie runs over to me and hugs me tight. But we can’t relax just yet. The helicopter lands in the field, really close to us. The noise of the rotors is deafening. The wind almost knocks us over.

As the rotors slow down, a door opens. Out step the Prime Minister and the Queen. I can’t believe it. Nor can Julie. They walk over to us.

‘We received word there was a rogue KGB agent in the area. We intercepted the pickup. But you both seem to have handled the situation well.’

‘One will see you knighted for this,’ The Queen nods.

For a moment I don’t know what to say. Then I curtsy.

Nick is saying something to me.

'Huh?'

'I said you want some more?'

'Nah I'm good'

'You were away with the fairies then.'

I nod. Hope that's the right response.

The car park echoes with the sound of fuck all. Caleb sits still scribbling in his notebook. It must be full of miserable rubbish. He has really filled it up with nothing.

'This time next year we're going to be at uni, or somewhere else,' Julie says sadly.

'Anywhere but here right?'

I feel odd. I don't know if it's the weed or what. Sick to my stomach. Suddenly sweaty. It hits me like a wave or something. This is going to end. In a year or two, I might not even know these people. Julie might be a stranger to me. I've known her since she was like, six, so it's going to be so weird not having her around.

I'm leaving this small town soon. Just got to get through my A levels and I am out into the world, into being an adult, into the unknown. It feels like I have been sat here forever getting stoned, but sooner than I realise, it's all going to go. Time has passed slowly this last year, but it's still gone by. Even in the last two months since Sam, I have changed. I'm going to look back at these days with joy. If I remember them. This unremarkable night, like so many, is going to fade into memory, into a story of what I used to do, to an anecdote, to a line or two. To nothing.

I look around at the people I share this car with. I can't bear it. I open the door, run out into the car park. I can't breathe. My chest is tight. It's too cold. I try to gasp. Each breath is short. I feel dizzy.

I stand in the car park and stare at the stars. It makes me feel even more dizzy and sick.

A hand on my shoulder. They keep it there for a moment. It's comforting.

I turn to see Caleb.

'I freak out sometimes with the weed too,' he says.

I just nod in response, not knowing what to say. Can't get the words out. Gasping too much.

We stay there for a long moment, just me and him. He strokes my back gently and my breathing slows. I take deep long breaths of the night air.

We stand in silence, watching the stars. So distant, but they seem totally close. He takes his hand away. I smile and he does too. He looks almost cute in the darkness.

'Come on,' I say.

We get back in the car. Nick and Julie have their tongues down each other's throats again. I groan.

Julie breaks for air and looks at me.

'Where do you want to go?'

'Let's just drive.'

She points her car at the stars and we set off at light speed for distant planets, unseen galaxies and new adventures.

1:06 am

Two lads slump into the back seats. Both dressed in the same uniform. Baseball caps pulled down over their eyes, sportswear and trainers. One is overweight and unshaven. The other is just bones and skin. His sharp eyes dart around the car. The overweight one stares out the window.

I ask where to, and one of them grunts out an address near Upper Wren. Great, a long drive with these clowns. I start the meter and pull away.

They aren't drunk, but they aren't sober either. Smoke clings to them, not tobacco. I open the window slightly. The cool night air rushes in.

'Good night lads?' I ask. Pointless really.

'Alright mate, alright,' the skinny one mumbles.

'What you been up to?' There's a long silence. I guess that's the end of that.

As we drive up the hills to Upper Wren, I reach over and lock the doors. Can't be too careful. That girl first thing has shaken me up a bit. Can't afford two runners in one night. The lanky guy would get clean away, but the other probably wouldn't get far. Still. Can't be too careful.

The dark plains pass us by, endless voids with no detail. I think about Kelly last night, throwing up in the car. Only seventeen and already binging like nobody's business. When she goes out I worry. Is she doing drugs, I wonder? Like tweedle dumb and tweedle stupid here. Even a small town like Tolwood isn't safe for a young girl, although my young baby is becoming a woman now. These streets used to be quite safe when I was growing up. No longer. I worry that she is going out into the town, where it's dangerous. It's due to young people, who all seem to be pent up balls of aggression. I see the same rage in Kelly sometimes.

Finally we reach Upper Wren. We pull up in a housing estate, winding our way through identical kit houses. The skinny guy whacks the headrest on my seat. My head bounces forward.

'Mate, mate, stop here.'

Resisting the urge to turn around and punch the lad like he did to my seat, I brake and pull to a stop. He hands a note to the other guy. They clasp hands, bump chests. Think they are in the middle of the ghetto, not just a small town in the countryside. They don't know how good they've got it.

'Later mate'

'Later.''

Even the way they speak is a stylized New York style, not the Tolwood accent. Learnt from rap songs and films.

I've seen the money change hands though. The overweight guy must be paying later. Didn't realise this was two drop offs. I open the doors and the skinny guy bolts out of the car. The other guy leans forward.

'Larch drive. Mate.'

No please or thank you. Other side of Upper Wren as well. Still, I shift the car forward.

It's a quick drive this time of night, hampered by the winding streets in the village.

I pull up at the end of Larch Drive. Turn the light on.

The overweight guy is still slumped forward. He doesn't look up.

'Alright. Larch Drive. That will be thirty six twenty.'

There's no response.

'Alright fella?'

Still nothing. It briefly crosses my mind that he might have kicked it. But his shoulders are juddering up and down. His back is rising and falling irregularly.

I reach back and shake his shoulder. He looks up at me with bloodshot eyes. Tears are streaming down his face. His stare is so intense it looks like it could burn a hole straight through me. When he speaks, it is measured and quiet.

'I love him mate.'

I don't know what to say. How can you react to that? I sit in silence for few long moments.

'Have... Have you told him?'

'Mate. Fuck's sake. Seriously?'

There's another eternal silence.

'Mate.'

He shakes his head. Wipes his tears on his sleeve. I pass him a tissue, which he takes with a simple nod. That's all. It's the end of the conversation.

He hands over a sweaty bundle of notes. As soon as I take them, he's gone. Out the car, down the lane and into his house. I barely see him get out of the car.

Got short changed again I think. Maybe it's just not my night.

I count the folded notes. Must be a hundred quid here.

A Big Adventure

Sally could hear her babysitter gently snoring in the living room. It was time.

She eased herself out of her bed, making sure to avoid the creaky floorboard. Bending down, she pulled out her school rucksack she hid there earlier, no longer filled with boring books and pencils. Instead, she had carefully packed two peanut butter sandwiches and a packet of crisps. These had been made earlier, while Mummy was getting ready to go out to work. Sally was meant to be watching tee vee, but instead had snuck to the kitchen. Quietly, she had climbed onto the counter, reached for the bread. Carefully lowered it down. Then the jar. She had almost lost her balance getting down, but managed to save herself at the last minute. Making the sandwiches turned out to be easy. Getting them to her room was a bit more difficult. She hadn't planned for that. She heard the creak of the stairs as Mummy walked down. Panicking, she grabbed the sandwiches and clutched them to her chest. She ran straight upstairs, past Mummy and into her room. She prayed and hoped that Mummy hadn't noticed. It worked. Mummy said nothing.

Now she was almost prepared and ready to head off. The sandwiches had been under her bed for hours, waiting for her to leave. She pulled on her coat and rucksack. Her gloves and hat were lost somewhere in the chest of drawers. Attempts had been made to find them, but proved fruitless.

Almost ready now. Just one thing remained. Eddie. Where was he? Sally looked under the bed, in the wardrobe, in the chest of drawers. He wasn't waiting on the bookshelf or hanging on the back of the door. Sally could almost cry. It was so close to being perfect, but she couldn't leave without Eddie. She needed someone to talk to, it would be lonely otherwise.

In frustration, she threw off the covers of her bed. There, looking up at her with sad button eyes, was Eddie. His brown fur was covered in crumbs. He had been hiding. Clearly, he didn't think the plan was a good idea. He

was worried. By hiding in the bed, he thought he could delay the inevitable. She hugged him tight.

'We have to be brave Eddie,' she whispered. A small stitched smile appeared, but she could tell he was still worrying.

Eddie was a good bear, even if he was a little old and worn. His fur was fraying slightly in patches. Sally had hugged him too much. They had known each other since Sally was a little baby. She didn't remember a time without him. Now she had a tight hold of him, she could begin her adventure.

It was Mummy's fault. She was never around any more. She never held Sally tight or told her a bedtime story. She was always at work or out. So if Mummy didn't want her, Sally would go out and find a new mummy and a new life. It was the only way.

Sally took a deep breath. She turned out the light and opened her bedroom door.

The house was scary in the darkness. Shadows lurked in the corners of the rooms, ready to pounce. It made the rooms seem much, much bigger than in the daytime. Every step Sally took onto the landing was unsteady, as she searched about for unseen ghouls and monsters. She glanced at Eddie. He was clearly not happy. He looked very uneasy, almost like he was going to be sick.

'Come on. It's easy. No ghosts here,' she whispered. She wasn't sure if she was trying to convince Eddie or herself. Still, it seemed to cheer Eddie up a little, even if he still looked glum.

The stairs were steeper than she remembered. She took each step slowly, working her way to the ground floor. It seemed to take forever. The hallway at the bottom was alien and unwelcoming. A sickly orange glow flowed in through the glass on the front door, from the street light outside. Sally quickly found her boots. Sitting on the bottom stair, she pulled them on.

Still wet from earlier, when she had been splashing about in puddles. Inside was dry and she tried to ignore the slimy outside.

For a moment she stood in the hallway, between two decisions. Stay or go. It wasn't too late. She could climb back into bed and she would be warm. She wouldn't have to go out into the night and cold. Or maybe she could go in the morning, when it was light. Although then people might see her and ask her where she was going. It might work, as Mummy wouldn't be there in the morning. Or she'd be there for five minutes before having to rush out the door to work. Sally wouldn't even get a kiss goodbye sometimes. She doubted Mummy would even notice she had gone. Maybe it would take her a couple of days to notice because she was so busy with work. By that time Sally would be far far away. She made up her mind. She was going to leave now to get a head start.

On tiptoes she crept to the living room door. She pushed it open just a crack, enough to be able to look in. The babysitter was sprawled on the sofa, snoring gently. Her eyes were closed. A book lay open on her chest. Sally did not like the babysitter; she was mean and would never let her stay up late. Sally didn't see why. All the adults stayed up late so why couldn't she? With the babysitter asleep though, there was no stopping Sally. She took a deep breath in. It was now or never. Trying not to look at Eddie's button gaze, Sally went back to the front door. In the amber light, she quietly, oh so quietly, escaped out of the front door and into the night air.

The street was stiller than she expected. Rows of cars were parked next to rows of houses that loomed over her. All the houses joined together to make a solid wall. Watching from above like glowing orange eyes on stalks, the street lights marked the way to go. The road seemed never ending, but she knew from dawdling on the way to school that it was quite short.

She held Eddie tight. His fur was flush against his body. He looked at her and seemed to say 'It's not too late. We can still go back'. Sally was resolute. Despite the cold air and the lack of people around, Sally was determined to push forward into the night. She wasn't entirely sure where

she was going, but once she got to the end of the street she knew she could get somewhere, anywhere away from her house.

Her rucksack on her back and Eddie clasped to her chest for protection, she set off on her adventure.

It took her ten minutes to get to the end of her street. When she got there, she had a choice. Left or right. For school she would go left. School wasn't too far from her house. So she decided to go right, into the unknown. To push deep into uncharted territory.

She walked for a little bit. She was cold. And hungry. She stopped for a moment in middle of the pavement. One of her sandwiches couldn't hurt, could it? Eddie sat briefly on the tarmac. Sally rummaged in her bag for the sandwich.

It was right at the bottom and a little squashed. She offered some to Eddie, but he wasn't hungry. He stared at her, still scared, still worried about the whole trip. Oh well. More for her. She wolfed down the first peanut butter sandwich, eating it in three bites. It was hard work, this adventuring business. The other sandwich looked tempting but she resolved not to munch on it just yet. She might need it for later.

Just as she was closing her rucksack up, she heard a horrible wailing coming down the street. A lone shadowy figure was staggering down the road. A monster! Sally quickly ducked behind a parked car, crouching down in the cold road. She held her breath and hoped against all hope that the bad man couldn't see her. She went to hug Eddie tight, but he wasn't with her. He was lying on the pavement. She caught his eye. 'Sorry' she whispered.

The figure was getting closer and closer now. Sally didn't have enough time to run out and grab Eddie. She could only hope the monster would not discover him. She wished that Eddie had got to safety and she was the one left in danger's way. The warbling got closer. As the monster approached, Sally could hear it was singing badly. It sounded like a cat screeching. The figure sang as it got closer and closer to her hiding place. It would find her hiding then take her home and the whole adventure would be for nothing.

Or worse, the monster would kidnap her and sing to her all day and all night. She was struggling to breathe now. Closer it came and closer still. Two monster's feet stumbling on the pavement. Thump. Scrape. Thump.

Sally held her breath. The figure was right next to her. It was standing over Eddie, but thankfully hadn't looked down. Eddie was completely still. Sally didn't want to make a sound. The monster stood for a moment, sniffing the air as if it could smell little girls who had run away from home. From behind the car, Sally could see the monster standing, swaying slightly. It was a man, his face twisted in a not quite smile. He was looking straight ahead, not at her. Sally was glad he wasn't a monster, but he was still scary. He scratched his back, took another looming step forward and continued on into the night, lurching down the street.

Sally waited until he had gone out of sight, until she could no longer hear his terrible singing, before letting her breath out in one big rush. She ran to Eddie, who was frozen in fear, and scooped him up into her arms. She was so so sorry. She never meant for Eddie to be in harm's way. Eddie's button eyes said he forgave her. She promised never to do it again. Eddie was her oldest and best friend in the world. It would break her heart if something was to happen to him. He pleaded with her. Let's go back. That's enough now. Sally knew the danger had passed and decided to press on. The pair continued down the maze of narrow streets.

She had to carry on. She had to. Sally knew this. She couldn't go back now. Her thoughts wandered to her Mummy. Maybe she had been too hasty. Maybe her Mummy would be sad when she came back home and found that Sally was not there. Maybe she would even cry. Sally hoped not. She hated it when her Mummy cried. The very thought made her feel sick to her stomach. She didn't think Mummy would, although the thought stayed with her as she carried on.

The night was forbidden and dangerous, but this peril only made her want to explore it more. It had a power the daytime never had. The streets she knew so well in the light of day seemed like another world. As her feet carried her ever forward she could feel her excitement growing. It was an

adventure. She was an explorer of the unknown. This was a good idea. Eddie's worried expression did little to stop her from skipping down the road into the night.

Just when Sally was feeling so good about the adventure, making her way through unknown streets, a pair of adults stormed out of one the houses, shouting at the top of their voices. Sally barely had time to duck behind a wheelie bin. She made sure to hold Eddie tight as she did so, not wanting to leave him in danger's way like she had before. Did they see her? She didn't think so. Hiding behind the bin was a safe place, at least for a moment or two

The couple were screaming at each other at the top of their voices. It was so loud Sally didn't know what the words were. One of them said, 'Go on! Leave then!' The other responded, 'Maybe I will!' There were a lot of bad words. Sally didn't know what they meant, but the way the adults spat them she could tell they were nasty. She covered Eddie's ears to stop him hearing some of the worst ones.

Their voices sounded like scary monsters. It reminded Sally of when Daddy was still around and he would shout at Mummy. Before he left. Sally hadn't seen him in almost a year. It was her last birthday, he had turned up and given her a present. They went for ice cream together, just her and Daddy. It was amazing. Mummy wasn't happy when they got back, even though Sally had such a good day. Mummy had screamed at Daddy and Daddy yelled back. Sally had run upstairs and watched in horror from the top. Eventually Daddy left by slamming the door. That was close to a year ago now. Maybe she would find him on her adventure. They could be happy together, without Mummy pursing her lips and getting angry. Although, she could barely remember his face, just a vague Daddy shaped blur when the memory should be.

This couple were more vicious, more violent and louder than Daddy ever was. Listening to them shouting gave Sally the same grinding feeling in her belly she used to get when Daddy and Mummy got really bad. She crouched behind the bin, feeling ill and shivering slightly.

She wasn't sure how long she was there. They shouted for a long time and were loud and scary. There was a wet thwack once or twice. Then some crying. She hated it. Daddy had left so long ago but the shouting made her feel like Daddy and Mummy were still arguing. She remembered that he was always nastier. When he left she was glad. Mummy told Sally it wasn't her fault, but Sally still felt responsible for being so pleased. Daddy was a bad man and she was glad he wasn't around any more. She decided didn't want to find him tonight. She would find another family, one who would love her and never ever shout.

The sobs stopped after a little while. Sally was still hidden behind the bin, clasping Eddie to her chest. He said nothing, but gently soaked up her tears. His fur was wet and matted. He didn't seem to mind. Her knees were knocking together. The night was clear and cold, with lots of twinkling little stars.

Peeking out from behind the bin she saw the couple were no longer shouting at each other. They were stood close together, holding each other tight. They were kissing each other and making wet sloppy sounds. It was disgusting. Sally never wanted to be an adult; she couldn't understand the things they did. Adults didn't make any sense. Not even Mummy.

Whilst the couple was busy making wet noises together, Sally decided to make a break for it. She grabbed Eddie and snuck out from behind the bin. Her feet moved slowly, trying not to alert the lovers. She crept away from the two who were so close they could have been one person. As she crept away, her feet didn't work properly and got tangled together. She tripped and fell. Eddie went flying. Her hands and knees were scrapped red raw on the tarmac. It hurt so much. She tried to stop her whimpers but it was too late. The woman disconnected herself and leered in her direction.

'Hey. There's a kid here.'

'Wha?' The man grunted.

'Nah really. Look,' and she pointed a yellowing claw in Sally's direction.

'Oh yeah. You alright there darling? What are you doing out this late at night?'

Sally stood staring at the pavement, frozen in place, not saying a word.

'You wanna come in an' call your mummy?'

That was it. The spell she needed to unlock her stuck legs. She turned around, scooped up Eddie and ran headlong down the street, ran without looking back, trying to ignore the cries and yells from the scary people that called after her, running and running with no idea where she was going, just as long as it was away from them and away from everyone who might stop her adventure.

Eventually she had to stop. She was in an unfamiliar street somewhere in Tolwood. Not sure where though. How far away from her house was she? She didn't know. The map in her head was all scrambled. That house looked familiar, but each of them looked the same in the dark.

Sally kept going. Through streets that all looked the same, past rows of parked cars and houses that were silent and empty. Tolwood was asleep. There was no one to help her. Still she stumbled blindly forward in the dark.

A left turn and now she was at a roundabout in an unfamiliar part of town. Cars streamed past, red and white light heading into the darkness. There weren't many at this time but they were going so fast. Sally sat on the ground. Her knees and palms were throbbing with pain. Mummy wasn't here to put a plaster on or kiss the scratches better. She didn't know where she was or how to get home or anything. It wasn't fun or exciting any more. She blinked back the tears but knew they would flow out soon; they were building up behind her eyes, unstoppable like a wave. Why had she left home? Why had she run away? She was a silly idiot she told herself, a silly silly idiot. The tears broke and she started sobbing, breathing hard and letting fear take her over. She had no home. She would be forced to live on the street with Eddie as her only companion. She would be freezing cold all the time. She would never be warm and would always be hungry. In between her sobs she thought of her nice quiet little bedroom with all her

toys and posters all over the walls. Her house where she could be safe. Dry. Mummy wasn't there much, but at least she was there sometimes. Now Sally would have no mummy, no room to call her own, no food, no way of ever escaping the maze she had fallen into. She was lost. She sobbed into her hands, her cries coming in big shudders that shook her whole body. Eddie looked on concerned, but it was not enough. Why had she been so stupid? She was a stupid idiot. She wept for what she had lost and what she had given up so willingly.

A car was parked next to her. It hadn't been there before. The engine was running. Through tear filled eyes, Sally examined the quiet blue vehicle. It was a taxi. As she looked, the door burst open. And there was Mummy. She got out of the car and picked Sally up and hugged her, hugged her so tight. And she was sorry. And she would never let Sally go. Sally was warm and safe and happy. She was crying double the amount now, more with relief. Mummy took Sally into the car and the taxi man drove them home. Her Mummy had been coming home from work and had passed the roundabout. She saw Sally next to the road and had stopped the taxi. Mummy had been working too much. Mummy didn't want to leave Sally alone again. She made a promise to hold Sally tight and love her and be there for her as much as she wanted. Mummy wasn't angry or annoyed at Sally. She was so scared. She held Sally tight all the way home, stroking Sally's hair. It was all going to be alright.

On the side of the road, Eddie was left in a puddle. His sad round eyes stared at the roundabout. He waited.

Banter

We are dressed to the nines and we are ready, oh we are ready my brothers, to take on this wretched little town, burst down its walls and become legendary. We are celebrities. Lock up your daughters, because the sluts want to lovingly suck on our girthy cocks. We are on the prowl for gash, booze and fights. Don't start a fight because there are more of us, we are hench and we will win.

We spend a couple of hours round Runt's flat, getting ourselves to the peak of perfection. In the week, whenever we can, we go down the gym. Work on our biceps to drive the skirt wild. More abs than you would ever believe. Got to be in top physical condition for the hunt. Hair got cut down the bossmans' this morning, lines grooved in the side. So sharp you could cut yourself. Splash of aftershave and we are ready to kick down the doors of this small town, take names and shake things up. Tolwood you vicious bastard! How many times have we crawled half naked round your streets, reeking of piss and vomit, covered in blood and unable to speak, still pushing on to the next pub and the next, chasing some bit of skirt or after some dickhead to fight? Too many times. Nail down anything valuable, because when we turn up it is carnage. We cause more damage than a nuclear bomb.

The King's Head is the first port we set sail for. Nod to the bouncer, new fella but he's been told the ropes. None of us shows ID or any of that bollocks. We practically keep this place running. Straight through the doors, into the comforting familiarity of ugly carpet and cheap lager.

'Oi oi!'

'Ciara you slag,' we call out. She turns and smiles at us. She wants it. Try as we might, none of us have ever been able to stick it to her. Keeps leading us on, the little cock-tease. A prize you can never hunt down. Shame really, as her body is tight. Face is nothing to look at, but if you're shagging her from behind who cares?

There's a queue at the bar. Busy one tonight lads. No matter. Like I said, we're celebrities. Legends. We demand a higher standard of customer service. We march to the glass collection area at the end of the bar. Ciara comes over.

'Usual lads?'

Course it bloody is. Round of Sambuca shots to start, pints for all of us and pitchers of vodka red bull to keep us going all fucking night. Once we start we don't stop. It's a lot of money, but fuck it; this is what we live for. This is why we slave away each week in terrible jobs, putting up with stupid bosses and unhelpful customers. On the weekends, we live.

Bit of a flirt with Ciara while she's pouring our drinks. Call her frigid. Teasing her about her boyfriend she supposedly has who lives in Wolverhampton, who none of us have ever seen and are convinced doesn't exist. Ask to see her tits. She laughs it off. Banter. Just a fried slice of cheeky banter.

Someone pushes past me in the shuffle to the bar and bumps my shoulder. I see the back of his head retreating into the crowd for a moment and think it's him. Nah. Couldn't be. Seems familiar though.

Once the drinks are served, we move directly to the serious business of getting absolutely annihilated. Shots down, we move onto the pints and pitchers, alternating between the two as we see fit. Marky Mark is the first to fall, pointing at Jim-Bob. Oh dear oh dear! Two finger penalty you cunt. Take it! Then Kev forgets to take the little man from off his pint. The little man drowned. Very sad. Moment of silence please. Runt starts laughing at this tragedy so oh dear! Double penalty. That's two fingers for Kev and four for Runt for disrespecting the dead. We're off. The race to the bottom has begun and by God we are going to smash the life out of tonight. This blessed evening is going to go down as one of the best Saturday nights known to humanity. When they come to write the story of this town, we will all be heroes my brothers, and today will be the shining moment of our triumph.

Jame-o keeps staring at some bird, must be the one he's shagging. Not going to speak to her though, not yet. The hunt has barely begun. Tonight is all about getting smashed with the lads. Maybe he'll butter her up later, when we're all nicely steamed. I call him pussy whipped, distracted from getting trolled by the skirt. He laughs off the banter, but doesn't give any back. Direct hit lads. Bulls-eye.

Back to serious business. Jim-bob falls this time. Two fingers for proper names. He calls Kev 'Ian', which is actually his name but none of us call him that since we found out his stupid middle one. Runt tries to get me to consume for using a proper name but 1. I'm explaining the penalty so I'm exempt. 2. I'm the alpha dog giving out the penalty so get to fuck.

We're running low. Get that slut Ciara to pour us another round. Sure, there's another barman but he's an old miserable bloke. Much better to chase after Ciara's gash, even if there is no chance of getting in there whatsoever. We nominate Runt to go pay for it all, for being an argumentative dickhead. He moans a little but he knows the rules. Accept your punishment like a man.

After Runt has gone, Jame-o pushes his stool to the floor and strides across the crowded bar. The way he shoves into people makes me think he's not just going for a slash. He means business. We watch as he crosses the bar, heading for some old bloke. That bird he's been shagging has been hanging around the ancient guy for a bit. Jame-o's talking to her now. This can only end badly. Slut. Can't she see what a fine specimen Jame-o is? All the pieces of skirt let you down in the end. The only people you can rely on are your brothers.

Now Jame-o's saying something to the old bloke, but the old bloke is having none of it. Don't think Jame-o is asking him the time either. The bloke's turned away, he's not even talking. This has the potential to go south very quickly.

'Drink up lads,' I say.

Right on cue, Jame-o pulls the guy backwards off his chair. The bag of bones and dust hits the floor with a splat. Then he just starts going to town on him, landing punch after kick after punch. I nod to the others. Point to the door. As one, we get up and leave. No game here lads. New direction needed for the pre-hunt. We make our exit sharpish, getting clear of the pub. Waiting for a moment outside, we see the new bouncer run in. See lovely Ciara on the phone. Runt's at the bar buying drinks. Forget about him. He's gone.

We walk, not run to the next pub. Don't want to arouse suspicion. The Kingfisher. Old man pub, but fine to lie low for a bit. Jame-o is a mad bastard. He didn't follow the rules. See, you agree it with everyone else, you plan it out, we got your back, no problem. We'll get the guy in one of Tolwood's many alleys. Start in on him where it's quiet and no-one can see. Less chance of getting caught. We'll do that, no problem. We're a pack, we work as a team. If you split off from your brothers and just start lamping on some poor bugger in the middle of a pub, with loads of gawping faces, we got problems. There's too many witnesses. We can't get involved. Sorry mate. We're not a pack any more. In that case, you stand alone and you face the consequences alone. Jame-o knows all that, but still did it. He's a mad bastard the best of times. Something about the scent of that girl's twat must have sent him loopy.

So we end up at The Kingfisher. It's more of a living room than a pub. Grotty tables that are always inexplicably sticky. Dim lights. Sad old bastards who sit on their own, drinking themselves to death. Wouldn't be our first choice, it's more of a living room for OAPs and alcoholics than a drinking establishment. The wrinkled, greying barman eyes us as we enter the pub.

He sighs.

'No trouble eh lads?' he says.

Course not. We're here to have a quiet drink. That's all. Not going to cause any trouble.

We sit down with fresh pints. We're all stunned. Haven't been on the pre-hunt long and we've lost two of our brothers. Jame-o has been left to face the pigs. Going to have some explaining to do. Poor Runt left behind in the fray. As we sit there, the dingy pub is illuminated by navy and red lights of sirens going past, in the direction of the King's Head. We are all unusually quiet. Stupid bloody idiot. We console ourselves with the fact he broke the rules and split from the pack. Still, this early in the night, it's got to be a downer.

We are sat nursing our pints. Then I see him. Passing by the window. Briefly. The street is dark and he's got a cap pulled down over his eyes so I can't be sure. It looks like him. I'm sure of it this time. Involuntarily, I snarl. He's got a nerve, showing his face in this town. This is my territory now. Has he got a death wish?

'Come on lads, we can still have a drink and a laugh,' Jim-Bob says.

I stare at him. 'What did you say?'

'We can have a drink and a laugh.'

'You did it again. Double penalty!' I point in the general direction of his pint.

'What?'

'You said the d word'

He shakes his head, but knows he's been caught out. He necks half his pint, everyone cheers and we're off. Back on the banter bus, driving to Banterbury. Course I pointed at Jim-Bob, but no one would dare pick up on that. I set the punishments, so I rarely have them issued to myself. Alpha dog. I do one now and then, show I'm still part of the pack.

They fall thick and fast now. Two for Kev, drinking with his right hand. Tut tut. Two fingers for Marky Mark, placing the precious beverage too close to the edge. Shame that. Has to be a thumb length away and I've got

very big thumbs. Another round barkeep! Keep them coming. We'll tell you when to stop. He grumbles and some of the old boys turn and look at us with yellow roaming eyes but we don't give a shit. They're just jealous because we're young and they're knackered old farts whose hunting days are behind them.

Two more for Kev! Pointing again. Then he forgets to take the little man from his pint once more. Christ, he is lining them up tonight. Another two for arguing back. You know what, by this point you might as well down it. So Kev opens his gob, glug glug glug and down the hatch the fizzy brew goes. Another round!

We are flying now, really steaming through the pints. The barman can't pour them fast enough. The previous unpleasantness has been long forgotten. Drink up my brothers because tonight we are immortal.

'Not in my pub you're bloody not,' the barman says. We look round the dingy pub. The old men are just glaring at us now. Some of them sigh and shake their head.

'Are you going to serve us or what?' I ask. The arsehole behind the bar shakes his head.

Well that's just great. Just peachy. Our money is no good to this establishment clearly. We drink up and head out into the night. Ungrateful git. Probably made more money off us than he's done all month. We weren't even being loud. Just you wait until we really get going. Still, we sunk a fair few quite quickly so the pub has done its job.

We stand around outside the Kingfisher. Everyone's milling around, wondering what to do. Critical point this. We either flake off one by one, citing home, or skirt, or some other bollocks excuse, or we push on for glory. Already Kev is looking the worse for wear, but Jim-Bob is too sober for his own good, looks like he might shove off home. Can't be having that can we?

‘Fuck it, let’s push onto The Phoenix.’ Everyone cheers. Let’s go fucking mental, let’s go fucking mental, na na na na.

Sure, it’s early. The Phoenix will not be warmed up yet. It’s where all the skirt goes. It’s got a decent bar. Most importantly, the bouncer is a matey of ours, gets us in for free. Who doesn’t want a free night surrounded by gash and listening to top tunes? If we’re early, no matter, we can just get smashed more.

Stumbling down the narrow streets, we see someone sat on the ground, puddle of vomit in front of him. Blow me down if it isn’t Runt. We thought he was a goner.

I stagger up to him and throw a quid at his feet.

‘There you go mate. Buy yourself a cup of tea or something.’

He looks up at me with pure hatred in his eyes. Clearly unable to take a joke.

‘Just banter.’

He somehow pulls himself up into a position that resembles standing.

‘You left me in the pub. With all that booze. Had to drink it all. Jame-o got arrested. Saw it.’

Not good this. Need to squash it. He’s angry and just far gone enough to start something. Runt is tiny and scrawny, hence the name. I can put him in his place if needs be. It’s important to remind him of his place. I am alpha dog, not him.

‘What are you going to do about it little man?’ I push his shoulder with a single brawny finger for emphasis. I bare my teeth. Everyone is watching. Runt knows that if he starts anything, the others will be on my side. That’s the thing. I’m the pack leader. You don’t turn against the pack, or you get bit. We’ve got sharp teeth.

'Oh, fuck off mate.' Runt says, still angry, still resentful, but he forces it into a laugh at the end. I slap him on the back. It's a release. The pack stands down. Everyone at ease. Just a drill.

We roll onto to The Phoenix. All the terrible cheap lager is having an effect now. There is a delay in my vision. Every step takes a second or more to register with my eyes, by which time I've moved on again. We stumble along quite happily. We are back together my brothers! There may have been setbacks. One of our pack has fallen but this night still has legendary written all over it. Plenty of skirt in The Phoenix. Banging tunes and cheap booze. There is plenty of time yet to get even more wasted.

Long queue at The Phoenix, snaking down the street. Starting early tonight. We don't care. We are celebrities, we are gods, if only for one night a week. Skip ahead of everyone else. People grumble but they are only unremarkable faces in the crowd, no true power like us. We are known to everyone here. We are legends.

Speak to Shaun at the door. We slap hands. We greet him. Long time no see! His same joke every week. We all enter for free, not paying. Shaun nods us through. I slip him a couple of tenners when the lads have gone through. He nods. Same again next week. A stamp on the hand and we descend down the stairs, right into it, into the centre of it all, the heart of Saturday night, the place where it all goes down.

It's a little quiet at the moment. Needs to fill up a bit. The queue is just for effect. Keep people waiting. A couple of birds awkwardly dancing on the floor. They're not bad looking, but this time of the night, probably best avoided. Got to wait and play the game. Got to see how the land lies before the hunt begins.

We head straight to the bar to continue loading up. Shots a-plenty. We line up Sambuca, then Tequila, back to Sambuca and then a couple of Apple Sours to wash it all down with. Each shot makes us howl in pain, but it's worth it.

The music is off. There's no thumping beats. What is this shit? Not even in the charts. Bollocks to it.

It's filling out now. We retire with some blue drinks to a table near the dance floor. A few more birds are dancing, tight arses on a few of them. Wonder if any of them will give me a blowie in the men's? If the walls of this place could talk, who knows what filthy details they would reveal? I've been sucked off by so many sluts. I've had my fingers in so many gashes in this club.

I look up from my drink. Suddenly it's half an hour later and I haven't realized. My head is spinning. Must have drunk more than I thought. Everyone's still at the table. That's loyalty to the alpha for you. The club is banging now, filled to the brim with tidy gash. We are here to conquer.

A filthy fitty catches my eye. Tight blue dress and a smile that says I will take you to heaven and back. I can't think about straddling her. I just want someone to hold me. I'm so alone.

Where the fuck did that come from?

I smile at her and she is practically dripping. As I prepare to make my move, someone else slides up to her. I know the bastard. It's him.

We all laugh at something stupid Marky Mark did, but I feel like I'm growling. He is an arsehole. Why has he come out tonight, into this town? He knows he is an enemy. We will rip him to pieces, tear him limb from limb.

He used to rule this town. Used to be number one alpha dog. We'd go out every Friday and Saturday, get loaded. He'd show us the tricks of the trade. How to talk to skirt. How to get them into bed with just a few questions. Gave us gear. Taught us how to neck a pint. He was older than us lot, but he took a liking to us. Proper lad. Gave out the banter as good as he gave it.

Only problem, he was a dirty fucking snake.

We were here actually, in The Phoenix. Before we got the bouncers on side. We were doing gear in the toilets. Getting all that lovely stuff up our hooters. There were three of us in there, him, Jame-O and me. Doing lines off the toilet seat, classy as all hell. It felt so good we didn't care.

His phone went off. A glance down at the text, and that was it. He looked up like a rabbit in the bloody headlights and before we knew it, he bolted out of there. Stood up and pretty much ran out of the cubicle. Coward. Didn't say a word to us. Just left us both there like a couple of limp pricks.

'Well that was weird,' we thought. Maybe he had a chance of a tug. Maybe someone had stood him a pint at the bar.

Next thing we know, the bouncers strode into the bogs, opened the cubicle door. They saw the gear. They saw us hunched over it. They picked us up by our shirts. Tore the sleeves. They kicked us out of the club and onto the kerb. They banned us from the club.

See, the problem wasn't that we got caught. You do stuff like gear you're bound to get found out eventually. We got banned from The Phoenix for a while, but the bouncers changed, new door staff got hired and after a while you can get back in. Didn't have the pigs on our tail either, so be thankful for small blessings. Nah, the problem was that he left us. No loyalty to the pack. You stand and die by your brothers. You all go down together. You don't leave the others in the stick like that, especially when you're top dog. What happened with Jame-o earlier was different. He went beyond the rules. This prick just buggered off with no warning. He should have stood with us.

We blanked him out of the group after that. Cut all ties. He tried to get back in contact but we were all clear. No one was to talk to him. He was dropped from the pack. Eventually, he stopped messaging. He knew the score.

My brothers were lost, confused and in need of direction. I took over as top dog. It was only natural.

Fucker has turned up again now. Why's he done that? Does he think he can just walk back into Tolwood and pretend nothing has happened? He's dancing now, moving on the floor next to the fitty I saw earlier. Smiling at the skirt. I know he's going to put the moves on her.

'You alright mate?' Marky Mark says. I come back to the room. I'm gripping the edge of the table tight.

'There,' I growl and point at the bastard, who is seemingly oblivious to us.

'Pointing. Two fingers.' says Jim-Bob. I don't dignify that with an answer. Jim-Bob follows my finger and falls silent.

As if this night hasn't turned to shit enough. Now this.

'We could...' Someone starts to say, but I'm no longer listening. All I can hear is my heartbeat raging and a low, guttural growl. He's leaning into the fitty in the blue dress now. She's laughing. Genuine, not faked because she likes the attention, but proper full on laughter. Now he gets closer and whispers in her ear. Runs a cheeky hand over her arse.

I snarl. I'm up before I know it. I push past the throng of people, through the crowd. Most move out of my way. I push the others aside like flies. I have no thoughts, just the red mist of instinct at this point.

Before I've even thought about what to do, I have reached him. I don't think he even sees me before I grab his white shirt and pull my fist back and slam it into his stomach. He doubles over. Goes to fight back but I lean in again and hit him again and again and there's suddenly space around me and there is blood over his shirt and people are screaming and I bring my fist back to smash into his stupid face and it connects and he's on the floor and still I hit and hit.

I'm panting. He's rolling on the dance floor, covering his face and moaning. The slut in the blue dress is staring at me in horror. I look around for the lads. They've all buggered off. Course they bloody have.

The bouncers grab me. I won't be dragged, I try to walk as much as possible. They're going easy on me cos I'm a legend in this town. Still have to make a show of getting rid of me for everyone else. Something like that they have to get the pigs involved. Got to really. So I'm not surprised when they haul me in front of the club to find a pig wagon outside.

I'm silent all the way to the cells. Silent when they book me in at the front desk. I know the rules. Keep your trap shut. Don't mention anything.

I sit in the empty cell. I'm not really thinking any more. It was stupid. After what happened to Jame-o. Fucking idiot.

After about ten minutes, the door opens. Jame-o gets thrown in. We eye each other. Don't say anything for a long time. I call him a psychopath. He spits at my feet. Normally, I wouldn't stand for such a blatant disregard of my authority, but the rest of the pack isn't here. We sit in silence on opposite sides of the cell. Some people just can't take the banter.

3:17 am

Tolwood sleeps. Lights have been turned out, people have gone to bed and a deep darkness covers everything. These are the honest hours, where if you're still up you find yourself saying fundamental truths that surprise you.

Tolwood is less peaceful than its surroundings. It's the eye of the storm here. The busiest time of any shift. The Phoenix has kicked out the last stragglers and closed its doors for another night. They stream down the streets in hordes to the taxi rank, pawing at fistfuls of greasy chips and rancid strips of meat stuffed in pita bread. All of them are drunk. No one sober lasts this long. There's piles of vomit cooling on the pavements, new found lovers clutching each other close to shield against the cold wind, lads starting on each other because they want to feel powerful.

Us cabbies barely have time to stop at the rank. Pull up, load your car with as many bodies as possible and get out of there. Even when people are drunk, they still queue. It's ingrained in them. You don't want to hang around too much or it starts to get nasty. Arguments break out. It's a difficult time.

I pull up at the rank. Four girls get in. I'm sure they weren't at the head of the queue, but like I said, I'm not going to hang around to find out. I make sure they are all in, then drive off away from the rank before asking where they are going. Millden they almost sing.

They ask me for music. I bung the radio on. Radio 4. Not exactly what they are after. Problem is, Tolwood is a bit far out, so it doesn't pick up many stations. I scan around and land on some commercial dance station. It's crackly, but it gets a cheer from the ladies at least.

All of them are drunk of course. They are all wearing feather boas. The one next to me has a pink sash. I don't even need to look to know it says 'Bride to Be'. The ones in the back giggle and chatter between themselves.

The hen stares at them, quietly contemplating. Her makeup is halfway down her face. One of the ladies has a black eye developing. Another has scratch marks all the way along her left arm.

‘Good night ladies?’

They all cheer. No idea why. Then they start singing ‘I’m getting married in the morning.’ To be fair, half cut as they are, they can still hold a tune.

I feel something on my thigh. It's the bride's hand. I glance at her. She is smiling at me.

I cough and shift my leg away.

Immediately, she starts to wail, big sobs that cause her make up to run further down her face

'He's such a bastard,' she says in between breaths. I hope she isn't talking about me.

The girls in the back all lean forward to comfort her. They stroke her shoulders and tell her it's alright.

'I don't want to marry Darren,' she wails. 'Stop the car.' I keep driving. 'STOP THE CAR!' She screams at the top of her voice.

This time, I press the brake and bring the car to a stop. It's the middle of nowhere. A windswept, dark field. The bride gets out of the car and runs into nothingness.

The rest of the girls are dumbfounded. One of them runs into the field, calling after her.

I'm left in the car with the other two. They whisper to themselves.

I turn the light on and the music off.

'Turn it back on!' one of them screeches.

'I just thought...'

'Nah. Leave it,' the other one says.

I stare out into the darkness of the fields. I can see two figures next to each other in the distance, alone in the vast expanse.

'Sorry guv,' the gobby one says.

'No problem.'

'I mean, about her. It's meant to be her hen do. She's meant to be happy. But she's had a face like a bulldog licking a nettle all night.'

'That's OK.'

We sit in silence for a bit. It's no longer awkward. They talk to each other. I'm tired. I always hit a point about this time in the night where I feel like I can't go on. I just want to crawl into bed and sleep for a week. Only the thought of putting Kelly through university keeps me pushing onwards. She doesn't know how lucky she is to go, thinks it's her right. Neither me nor her mum went. I started work at sixteen. Val at least got an A level. She started work at eighteen. We met in Tolwood in what used to be The Beehive, on a Saturday night, when we were out getting drunk. Now years later I'm still here, ferrying people around the towns and villages. Kelly is so lucky. She'll escape this town and get-

My train of thought is interrupted by the bride getting back into the car. She sits back in the front seat, focuses ahead into the night. Nothing is said. It doesn't need to be. Her friend climbs in the back and does the briefest of thumbs up to the other hens.

The rest of the journey passes without incident. When we get to the bride's house, everyone piles out. She stays behind.

She doesn't look at me as she speaks. Her voice is lacking any emotion.

'I want you to drive. I don't care where. Just start driving. I will pay you. I want to get as far away from Tolwood as possible. I don't belong here. I don't want to be here. I don't want to get married.'

'I can't do that.'

'I will pay you. Just drive. As far as possible away from here.'

Her mascara is drying on her face. She is no longer crying. She looks at me with wide, desperate eyes. If only it was that simple, but in my limited experience it never is. You can never just drive away from all your problems.

I honk the horn. Her mates come back to the car. She glares at me in disgust.

The Underworld

The world is uncomfortably quiet. The streets of suburbia have an orange glow, like flames. I'm sure I can smell sulphur. I'm not feeling completely with it to be honest. Definitely not. Another street, almost identical to the last one. Endless walking. I might be lost.

The seven pints and maybe... six whiskeys haven't helped matters. Twelve solid hours barely speaking to anyone. Just sat in the pub by myself. Was down The Kingfisher. Nice pub. They don't mind lonely old men staying there all day as long as they buy a pint or two. Warm as well. Sure, there were some young lads making noise, but once they left it was peaceful again. Wish I was back there.

I had a coat. I'm sure I had a coat.

Problem is see, it's not the first day I've done this. Not even the second. Or third. I can't remember how many days have fallen by the wayside since I started this. It's been two months maybe. Or three. I can't remember.

Something has to give soon. I know it does.

And now I'm singing. How long have I been doing that? We're caught in a trap... I can't something... out... Da da da DA! Something... something. I can never remember the words. The tune is what is important. I have a beautiful voice. Sonorous. Been told that before. Should have gone on the X factor, although I don't want to be one of the freaks that are ancient and decrepit and think they still have a chance of being idolised in Smash Hits.

I wanted to be a rock star when I was younger. When did the days fall away? It all went so fast. I've stopped singing now. Feels disrespectful to do in the dead of night. Feels like a graveyard here.

We are the dead. Or something like that, I forget. Maybe we're zombies, shuffling through this life to the next without really seeing anything or

speaking to anyone. That's what happened between me and Eva. We went for years without really talking to each other, each caught up in our own little world.

I don't know. I'm rambling, lost and cold. My coat. What happened to my coat? Must have left it in the Kingfisher. Will have to go back tomorrow. The cycle continues.

I hate myself sometimes.

So now I'm walking the streets of suburbia at god knows what in the morning, freezing my arse off trying to find my house. I have walked these streets plenty of times, but it wasn't dark then and I wasn't drunk. I did this when I was a teenager. It was fun then and it's not fun any more. I just drink enough to numb my nerves then stagger back home. It's awful. I thought when I grew up I would know what to do. I thought a plan would magically appear when I turned twenty one, telling me exactly what to do and how to do it. Instead I just feel more lost and more confused than before.

Been stupid really. Should really stop being stupid.

It started when I lost my job. Of course, it started long before that between me and Eva. When we stopped talking. When we stopped laughing together. When we became strangers to each other. But those are gradual, slight changes. You say one word less every day until you are both mute. But losing your job is a sudden change. You were employed. Now you aren't. The change is rapid and shocking. You can't do anything about it.

A smart man would immediately start looking for other work. As I have proved to myself time after time, I am not a smart man. So instead of going straight back to work, I thought I would take a couple of weeks to myself. Maybe a month. I had some savings. We could afford the house. Eva was working. We have no children to feed, so there was no immediate need to drag myself to a job I hated. So instead I thought I would take some time. I would re-tile the bathroom. That was my grand ambition and big plan for the time off. Eighteen year old me would laugh in my face.

‘Love... love will tear...’ I’m singing again. Without even realising it. Keep the evil spirits at bay.

The first day I measured the bathroom. Exact dimensions. I even drew a little schematic. I worked out how many tiles I would need for the shower, bath and the rest of the room. Then I drove to B & Q, spent far too long debating which tiles to get, but finally chose some simple light blue ones. The modern style that I hated but Eva liked. She didn’t know about my plan, I was going to surprise her. I picked out some grout and some tools, a hammer and some spacers for the tiles. This was going to be brilliant.

It was easy. I was on a roll. On the way back home I passed The Anchor and thought, why not? One can’t hurt. Seeing as I was doing so well. I parked up, then had a celebratory pint. Then another. And another.

I got a taxi back that afternoon. A bit worse for wear, but not drunk. Just on the right side of sober. She still smelt the beer on my breath and noticed the car wasn’t there. She didn’t say anything to me, but gave me a look that said she knew. Eva didn’t care enough to be disappointed, but I had somehow managed to annoy her in some new way.

The second day I woke up a little bit sore and determined to get on with the bathroom. Eva had already got up and gone to work without me noticing. I spent the early part of the morning showering, shaving, doing little tasks like that. Simple stuff. But by the time I dressed and got a bus into town to pick up the car it was three in the afternoon. When I got there, I made the mistake of walking the wrong way and I saw The Kingfisher and I thought to myself, the bathroom can wait another day. I’ve already wasted this one.

My house. I’m outside my house now. Not sure how I found it. I grip the gate tightly. Willing myself to open it.

Almost every day I would wake up and think this is the day. I would always find myself down the pub, drinking away my savings. I felt like I was pushing a boulder up a hill, only to have it come crashing down again. In the end, I just stopped trying. Weeks have gone by. I don’t do anything

now. I wake up on the sofa and Eva is gone. I stagger to the pub, walking because I think it counts as exercise. I sit at the bar, drink myself stupid, fall back home. Repeat. I don't want to do anything else. Because what else is there to do?

Eva never said a word to me about the drinking. We had become strangers long before that. Eating meals in silence, slumped in front of the TV most evenings, too tired to say anything. I don't think she cares what I do. I'm just someone who happens to be married to her, happens to live in the same house. We're linked by a ring and nothing else. I don't blame her though. I barely want to talk to me.

I open the gate and go up the path.

Coming home was a terrible idea. The gravel crunches under my unsteady feet. I knock over a flower or two. Fine. Whatever. I'll deal with it in the morning.

I've reached the door. The paint is scuffed. I meant to touch it up years ago.

Now I reach for my keys, an automatic reflex action. Only they aren't there. They aren't in my trouser pocket, because I left them in my coat, which I left in the pub.

Bollocks.

So what now? I could bang on the door to wake Eva up. She'd be asleep. She works for a living so needs her sleep. It's three or four in the morning. I don't know if she'd let me in.

With nothing else to do, I sit down heavily on the doorstep.

How could I be so stupid? How could I have forgotten my keys? Maybe some part of me didn't want to come back home. That sounds harsh. People have been through worse. Each day I come home there is the silent treatment. I could deal with it if Eva scowled or looked shocked or had a go

at me like some wives I know. There's nothing. Some days there is no acknowledgement that I'm in same room. I feel like a ghost haunting my own house.

My face is wet. I'm sobbing. Every time I breathe out the sobs get deeper. Now I'm sitting on my step, wailing like a child.

Where did it go wrong between us? I can't point to a single moment where it all collapsed. Over the years it got eroded until there's nothing left. Nothing.

I'm howling now. For a pain that has been with me for years without realising. I'm a fool. A drunken, stupid, ridiculous fool.

Where did all the time go?

I'm breathing deeply. Trying to stop the wailing. It's working. A bit. I slow each breath right down as best as I can. That's good. I look out to the orange streets. It's completely still. I don't know what time it is, only that the rest of the world is asleep.

Slowly, I pull myself to my feet. I glance up at the bedroom window. I'm sure I see the curtains twitch back into place. Is she awake? Is she watching me?

I find that hard to believe.

Even if she is, what gives her the right? I am an adult. I am an independent person. I am free.

Well then.

I sigh. Just like that, I make my decision.

I start to sing again. 'Love... Love will tear' something something. Got a lovely voice.

I walk down the path. Open the gate. Walk out into the night, back into the maze of suburbia, the endless houses, the empty streets and I just keep walking and I keep walking. I try not to look back.

*

Steve?

Steve?

What?

I heard something.

Just the wind. Go back to sleep.

Steve?

What!

It wasn't the wind.

Christ sake. It's... half three. Almost four

I know

I'm knackered.

I'm sorry

Just think! Bloody hell.

I just heard something and was scared.

Huh.

Steve?

What?

Will you go see what it was?

No, Pam, I won't.

Why?

Just the wind.

Please.

Go back to sleep.

OK.

Just the wind.

I know.

Go back to sleep.

Steve? Steve?

What?

It sounded like some kind of animal.

*

Looking back, I knew what Aiden was going to do. I just didn't expect him to do it that night. I thought it was a few months off. It's amazing how you can convince yourself that the sky is blue when in reality it's black and boiling.

I still loved him. More fool me. He was my first thought when I woke up. In the last few months it was mostly oh God, where is he, is he still alive? Has he been arrested? This was still a sort of love. As the days went on, I found it more and more difficult to tell him those three words. I wanted to. I just couldn't say it out loud.

Aiden always valued his independence. He was tender and loving and fun, but I knew deep down he yearned to roam. I could never understand him completely; never know the part that desperately wanted to wander away from his responsibilities and my loving arms.

Perhaps that is why I loved him, because he had a nomadic spirit.

So I saw him walking down the road, away from our house, away from our life and I wasn't surprised. He removed any hope that we might patch it up, or go to counselling or swing back into the same orbit. I knew then it was the end. Not sure how.

He'd been drinking more and more since he was unemployed. I never found out what he did to get himself fired. He never told me. Just came back one day and said 'I lost it'. We weren't speaking much by then. My words would stick in my throat and I grew silent. I gradually found myself closed off to him, like a flower bud at night.

I desperately wanted to tell him all my fears, my hopes, my thoughts and my dreams but I couldn't find the words. As the days fell by it got harder to know where to start. He wouldn't let me in. Aiden had been blocking me out, piece by piece for years, until there was no way to even have a simple conversation. My mouth felt like ash. My words were burnt twigs that stuck in my throat.

Some time before he left I started cleaning. I would get home from work and he wouldn't be there. So I would make myself a little dinner. Once I'd eaten, I would scrub the kitchen until my arms were sore. Other days I would clean the living room, or one of the bedrooms, or the bathroom.

The bathroom was the worst. There was a huge stain in the bath where the rot had built up over the years. The more I scrubbed, the larger the mould grew. I knew it was futile, but every night I would scrub and scrub and scrub.

Nothing I did had any impact. It was like trying to erode a mountain one piece of gravel at a time. I must have gone through every cleaning product

under the sun. No matter what chemical I threw at the stain, it remained, mocking my every effort to shift it.

I took to the internet. I tried every terrible home brewed concoction that people could come up with. I was googling it in my lunch break, trying to find some way to shift the stain. Baking soda? Tried. Vinegar? By the bottle. Lemon juice? Of course. None of it worked.

I hated that bathroom.

I don't know where Aiden went. Inevitably, he would turn up past midnight steaming drunk. I never spoke to him about it, but I was so worried. Every morning he would be slumped on the sofa and I wanted to wake him, to say 'I love you.' Each morning I would leave him sleeping. I don't think we exchanged three words in the months he was getting drunk. This was typical though. Before he started drinking, he would come home later than me. Flop on the sofa. Zone out watching TV and poke at the food I cooked for him. I would try to start conversations, but each time I was met with a grunt. Then he might sigh and go to bed early, or retreat into his office. Eventually I couldn't say a word to him. Not a single word.

I wanted to ask him about where he had gone to. I wanted to tell him that despite everything, despite all the pain he had given me I was still devoted to him. I loved him absolutely, without condition. We had a life together and I didn't want to be a stranger to him any more, I wanted to be a part of his life. How was his day? What had he been up to? Where did he go? If I could just start a conversation, the frozen wastes between us would thaw away and we could start to learn about the other once again.

I couldn't. I was too scared. It was like my voice had been stolen away.

On that night, I was in the bathroom, scrubbing at the stain and making no progress as usual. I was tired from work and I guess I didn't notice the time.

The gate clicked open outside. I checked my watch. Half three on a Saturday night. Other people were out enjoying themselves and I was

fixated on a stain. I got out of the bath. Turned off the light. If that was the gate, he would be walking through the door any moment now. I didn't want him to come to bed. As bad as it sounds, I didn't want him close to me when he was drunk. It would be easier if he just slept on the sofa.

This time he did not open the door, or stumble about the house, knocking things over, or collapse onto the sofa, sleeping in his clothes that reeked of stale alcohol and smoke. The door never opened.

I stood for a minute, hugging myself and not daring to breathe. It was so still in the dead of night. Nothing moved. I crept through to the guest bedroom. The flame coloured light leaked through a small crack in the curtains. Should I check? Would it be him?

A loud cry broke the silence. It sounded like laughter for a moment. He was pissed up again and found the world inexplicably hilarious. I gripped my arm harder, digging my nails into my skin. So he was going on the piss and enjoying himself, while I was at home on a Saturday night, working to keep the house looking respectable. I was earning all the money and Aiden never seemed to care, never gave me any thanks for it. He always resented the fact that I earned more money than him. He was a child. He had the cheek to sit on my doorstep and laugh about how great the world was.

I drew back the curtain to see his laughing, stupid face. I wanted to swear at him. All the worst possible insults went through my head. I was angry. I wanted to throw something at him. Stop him seeing the world as a joke. When I drew back the curtains, I saw Aiden sat on the doorstep, with his head in his hands. His body was shaking. I couldn't see his eyes, but I knew that tears were cascading out of them. Just like that all my anger vanished into the air. Poor man. He was in hell and didn't know it. Looking back, I suppose I was too.

I watched him for some time. It must have been ten minutes or so. I barely breathed. I didn't want him to look up and see me staring at him. He would resent it. Aiden was proud. I had never seen him cry, not in the twelve years we had been together. When his mum died he locked himself

in the bedroom and cried it out. He wouldn't let me in, emerging several hours later, red raw and flat of voice. I heard him, but had never seen him properly weep. It seemed like something had broken inside him.

Eventually, Aiden dried his eyes. Stood up. It looked like he had aged twenty years. He seemed suddenly fragile. He glanced up at the bedroom window and I ducked down, dropping the curtain and hiding from his gaze. I stayed there for a moment, not breathing. Then I risked another peek.

I couldn't see him at first. He wasn't on the porch. Instead, Aiden was stumbling down the road, away from the house. I could hear him singing to himself, not loud for drunken revelry, but tenderly for comfort.

As I watched him retreat, I knew I would never see him again. Days turned into weeks, weeks into years. I didn't have any hope left. I knew he was lost to me. Just like that he was out of my life.

I often replay that moment in my head. I think I should have banged on the glass. Or ran down the street to get him. Opened the window and screamed for him to come back. I didn't do anything. My voice failed me. I can still see him, bathed in orange light, swaying slightly, glancing back at the house one last time before he walked forward into memory.

Spinning

I strut onto the dance floor, put down my bags and breathe in. Home, bitches. The bartenders are setting up for the night. Alan is off shuffling papers around to make himself look important. The bouncers are getting drinks in for their long shifts ahead. I bring the music and the party.

This whole venture is built around me. Even though Alan doesn't like to admit it, I am the reason there are queues down the street every Friday and Saturday. The kids flock from all the surrounding villages to dance. I bring excitement and joy to their otherwise humdrum lives.

I head straight over to the booth and start to set up, getting out my decks, my mixer and my CDs, as well as a huge variety of cables. I glance around the empty room, with its worn leather seats and strange velvet walls. Horrible I know, but Alan refuses to change it. I keep telling him I've got some designs and could really bring this place into the twenty first century, but he keeps brushing me off. Tells me if we close, even for a week, he loses business. It's not worth it apparently. Unlike Alan, I know what a club should be and this isn't it.

When I was younger I was offered a trial spot in a club in London. I was excited of course. Only problem was, Alan offered me a rolling residency at the same time, just after he had brought the place and changed the name. A residency is better than a trial, no matter where it is. I hope every day he appreciates what a rare talent, what an artist he has in his midst. I make this place move. I make the velvet walls shake and the floor bounce. Overcoming these hideous surroundings, I manage to bring people onto the dance floor, which in turn fills his pockets as the punters buy expensive booze to keep the party going. I am more than just a DJ. I am an artist. Could have been in London playing sold out mega raves but instead I'm in Tolwood. He's got a bargain here for sure.

Course that was quite a few years ago. It has been ten years since I was offered that trial. Times change. Musical taste evolves faster than anything

else. That is why I've kept my ear to the ground. Although my hair is going a little grey, I know the current trends and drop a few into my set now and then. No chart music though. Or as little as Alan will let me get away with. No one wants to hear that. The best sounds are from the underground. I bring that to Tolwood. It is why the club is always busy.

When The Phoenix is empty, it looks a lot smaller. When it is packed with people the floor somehow expands and grows into something else. The walls seem to be made of elastic to let more and more people join the party.

Sandra brings me lemonade over and it only takes a few steps till she's at the booth. Later on tonight it will be a monumental effort. She will have to push through a crowd of bodies pulsing, spinning and gyrating to the beat. I will stay on lemonade all night. I don't drink while I'm behind the decks. The music is my drug and it flows through me.

Saturday is a good crowd. Real mixture of people, old and young. No one has work the next day and everyone is up for a party. All of them come to worship at the church of bass and beats. I look over the set list I've been working on for the last week. Spent every evening tweaking it, moving songs around to find that perfect flow. I smile to myself. Think I've cracked it. You wouldn't get a set list like this anywhere else, so varied and so different. Going to be a good night. Haven't told Alan, but a promoter from a big London club might be coming down. Emailed me especially. Said he'd found reviews of The Phoenix online and heard good things. Might be coming to check it out. Not many people get a second chance in this industry, but I've put the time in and it has paid off. See, life is a spreadsheet for the Alan's of the world. He only sees figures, percentages and profit margins, whereas I see what I can do for the world as an artist. I'm destined for bigger and better things. Tolwood cannot contain my talent. I'm going to go stratospheric. No limits to how far I can go.

I think to myself that if the promoter likes my stuff, I'm just going to go with it. I'm done with loyalty to Alan. I've put in over ten years at this club. It's time for bigger and better things. Sure, there's Mum to think of. But

maybe I can get her some help while I'm down in London. Alternate weekends in London, back to Tolwood in the week to look after her.

Alan emerges from his office. His stupid ponytail follows him. Alan wears awful band t-shirts that he thinks make him look cool. It's supposed to be ironic but is just tragic. In reality, he looks like a washed up dinosaur, trying to fit in with the young folk.

He parades over, all grease and too much aftershave. His eyes continually wander to Sandra at the bar. She must be half his age, the dirty old git.

'So Bill, a word.'

'Sure.' I stop setting up my equipment and have a good look at him.

'In private.'

'Nah, I need to prepare. Get in the zone for tonight'.

He sighs deeply and smooths his greasy hair down, running his hands down his ponytail. There's a long silence as he struggles to find the words. Get on with it, I think. My set list is waiting. I need to prepare for the stage.

'We at The Phoenix. Well. We're going in a different direction. Going to bring some more of the young crowd in.'

'OK. More chart stuff I guess.'

'You've put barely any in.'

'It's rubbish.' Modern chart music is bland, overproduced empty noise. I put a couple of tracks in my set list on Alan's request but no more. It physically pains me to play such meaningless drivel. Sure, people would dance to it, but at a certain stage in the night, people will dance to anything. It's not an indicator of the quality. I think I'm educating people in music

they would not necessarily hear, underground and the classics. Elevating Tolwood to a higher plane.

‘Anyway Bill. We just don’t think you’re right for the club any more. So tonight will be your last night. We’ll pay you of course.’

There’s a hideously long silence. I croak out ‘Alan, I-’ but that’s all I can manage. My voice has failed me. Alan slides away, content with himself, the toad. Coward. Miserable git. ‘Go in a younger direction’. What bollocks. All the kids come here anyway.

See, the thing is when Alan says ‘We at The Phoenix’, it’s his club. He owns it with no one else. So trying to blame others is rubbish. He has just said it like that to remove responsibility from himself.

For a long time, I stare into space. Wonder how I’m going to look after Mum now. I feel sick. Then I come to and carry on setting up, furiously slamming cables into sockets and testing the CD decks. I normally test the PA with the Prodigy ‘Out of Space’ because it’s got all those highs and lows and really pushes the limits of what a sound system can do. Tonight though, The Specials ‘Nightclub’ is my choice. My hand-picked message to Alan. I turn up the volume as loud as it can go so the self-centred, perverted accountant can hear it in his tiny little office.

Ten years I’ve been resident here. I’ve brought the party to generations of people in Tolwood. They queue up outside to see me. I am the master of ceremonies. I control whether they are going to have a good night or not.

More chart stuff. What utter rubbish. Alan just doesn’t like me. I’ve noticed in the past months he has barely said a word to me. I don’t need his approval anyway. Alan is just concerned with the bottom line. He wouldn’t know good music if it was shouting in his face. Tragic really. I’m an artist. Possibly the only true artist in this nowhere town. If he doesn’t realise that, it’s his own fault. Ten years I’ve been working here. Ten years.

I consider getting Sandra to bring me over a shot of vodka to add to the lemonade. But I can’t bring myself to do it. Annoyed and angry as I am, I’m

still a professional. I believe in the music. I still need to give the punters a show.

The call goes round from above.

‘Doors!’

I slip my first CD in and start the playlist on its way. The music is still ear splittingly loud. Normally I’d keep it quiet for the first hour then pump it up. I don’t care about that any more. Music needs to be played loud so the beat takes over your heart and thoughts.

For ten minutes or so, it’s just me and the music. I play to an empty room. Then a couple of people start to drift in. I start with the unknown, up and coming producers. Real underground sound.

In a way, I’m glad. This club and this small town have been holding me back for some time. I don’t need them. They need me. Alan is going to be begging to have me back in a couple of weeks. I will look him straight in the eyes and say; ‘Nah, sorry mate, can’t be doing that.’ I can take this time to work on the new mixtape. I started it a year or so ago but keep getting delayed due to one thing or another. Now I’m going to have the time to sit down and really work on it. Got a little bit of money saved up and that’s enough to see me through the couple of months I’m slaving away at it. Once the mixtape drops, that’s it, the sky is the limit. It’ll be a slow burner at first then soon it will spread like a virus. People will clamour to download it. Crash the servers. Then who knows where I’ll go? London, Ibiza, LA. I could go anywhere. This is a good thing. I feel like this is the start of my breakthrough. I won’t be held back by this little club any more.

It’s getting fuller now. I realise with a jolt I am 45 minutes into my set list and I haven’t even noticed. It was perfectly crafted and I didn’t pay attention, just loaded up CDs one after the other, mixing the next song on auto pilot. A few people are on the dance floor but mostly everyone is milling near the bar or huddled on the leather seats. The lights are down low and from where I’m stood I can only see indistinct, blurry human shapes like people in fog.

Time to kick it up a notch and get everyone dancing. I scratch into a new house remix of a song in the chart. People start to move. See, I don't want to play chart music as released. Alan's wrong. You can't dance to it. However, put the same ingredients in the hands of a semi decent producer and it becomes something else entirely. When the beat drops, a few vague figures move to the dance floor and start shaking their stuff. Just a few is all I need. The rest will follow now in time. Before long the whole club will be shaking and moving to your beats. It's a powerful moment. You feel in control. People have come to worship and you are the reverend. All bending, swaying and shaking to the lord of the beat.

Although everyone looks the same from my booth, I see when he arrives. I glance over to the seats and see him sat there, the only plonker in a suit. Looking around at the rubbish décor. It's the club promoter. I steal glances and see a notepad on the table along with a glass of water. Serious stuff. I queue up the next track and somehow hit the perfect mix, where people don't even realise the next song has started until a minute in, when the beat mutates and morphs into something different. It's silky smooth. Glorious. I smile as I fade the first track completely out. Better than sex.

That's the only one that seems to go well. After that I'm sloppy. I miss the beat on the next mix and leave it a couple of seconds too long the next time. Silly little mistakes. I can't seem to concentrate, knowing he's there, watching me.

Everyone's on the dance floor now and has been for some time. The first dancers started an avalanche. Their bodies move to the beat as one person. Moving. Dancing. Writhing. The floor looks like a crush of people. This tiny underground club has grown into a warehouse. I rise above it all in my booth, unseen, controlling their every move. I am the master of making people move.

My set zips along and I slam down new track after track. I'm just getting into a state of flow, really enjoying it, when I glance to the man in the suit to gauge his reaction. Alan, the stupid pony-tailed grease ball is sat there with him. They're laughing together. Sharing some hilarious joke at my

expense I'm sure. Look at this prick, they're saying to themselves. What a pathetic nobody.

I slip up the next mix. It goes really badly wrong and sounds terrible. My hands are shaking. I'm flicking my CDs to the next track when a fight breaks out. Late in the day. It usually happens early on or last thing, not usually in the middle of the night. People are too busy dancing to cause any trouble. I've seen some brutal beatings. Some idiots just like to get wasted and kick several shades out of each other. Some even try and start on me when I won't play their stupid pop songs. I don't take requests. Luckily, I am safe in my booth.

One bloke is starting on the other. A guy in a white shirt is being beaten to an inch of his life. It's not even a fair fight. The attacker is like a man possessed. Everyone clears a space and starts cheering. Eventually, the bouncers stride in, pulling the two apart. The aggressor is dragged out into the street. The poor sod whose face is mangled and covered in blood is picked up and taken up the stairs. He'll be thrown out into the street as well. Sure, they might call an ambulance. Police for sure. That's about it. As long as the night can continue down here.

The gap where the lads were has closed up with bodies. I realise with horror that the music has stopped. I let the track spin out as I watched.

Fuck.

The only cardinal sin as a DJ is stopping the music. Time seems to hang. All the faces before me are frozen, staring in disbelief, willing the beats to continue. They brought the lights up a bit when the fight happened, so the bouncers could see who to take out. It means the figures are no longer indistinct. Old and young alike all gazing up at me in horror. Worst of all, there's the promoter and Alan in the corner. Both faces frozen in mocking laughter and silently hooting to each other.

I don't know what to do. I'm a CD that's skipping. I'm a corrupted MP3, a scratch in the vinyl.

Lighting fast, I pick out a CD and slam it into the decks. I lean the mic towards me. I never go on the mic, but it seems appropriate this time.

'Er... This one goes to those stupid idiots who got themselves chucked out.'

I press play. 'Another One Bites The Dust'.

As one, the crowd erupts with laughter. They all start dancing again. I am absolved. All my sins forgiven. I am reborn. It's the kick up the arse I needed. For the rest of the night, I am on fire. You can't stop me now. Every mix is right. Every song I drop gets a cheer.

I rip up the carefully constructed playlist and throw the pieces into the crowd. Bugger it. I'm not going to try and educate people about the best underground beats, not tonight. I'm going to play classic after classic. Give the people what they want, music they can holler to as one. Just the classics and the oldies. I am smiling now. When you're on fire, everything you do is just right. The club moves as one. We transcend the boundaries between us and move and dance and shout and laugh and cry all as the same person. I dig deep into my collection, pull up some Motown and some funk. Groups of lads start going mad to 'Superstition'. 'Dirty Diana' is a surprise hit with the older crowd. A hen do cheers along to 'It's Raining men'- the original, of course. Everyone is having a good time. I'm the centre of it all, master of ceremonies, leading everyone in the dance. All together as one, the music flowing through us, united to celebrate the beats.

We get to three in the morning and it's like no time has passed at all. The club is still rammed with people having a good time. Sandra brings the lights up but no one wants to leave yet and I don't want to stop playing. Not while I'm having such a good time. It's the best adrenaline rush you could ever have. I don't need booze. I don't need drugs. I just need a room full of bodies swaying in time to the beat, singing along and grasping at the air. I need people coming together as one..

I fade down 'Brown Eyed Girl' and get on the mic. 'Well folks, it's officially closing time,' I say. The crowd boos as one. Something stirs inside

me and I think sod it.

'Actually, you know what? Alan is a piece of shit and is getting rid of me. So I'm carrying on.' There is a huge cheer. I raise two fingers in the general direction of Alan and the promoter. What is he going to do? Fire me?

I slam on 'Kiss' by Prince, which gets a huge cheer from the crowd. We're carrying on. Screw noise limits, screw curfews, and screw the rules. We'll party until we drop. I have music for days. I see Alan stand up, but I can't see what he's doing. Panicking probably. Poor Alan, I'm not playing by his stupid rules. He can't fire me. I am the life blood of this club. I will keep the party going as long as possible.

'Kiss' slams into 'September'. Boom bitches! Now we're firing with all cylinders. I'm not thinking about what I'm going to do without this gig, how I'm going to get money or look after my mum. I'm just focusing on the here and now. It's glorious. I'm even dancing a bit as well. Shaking it down. Because why not? I am no longer hunched over the decks, but instead I'm calling out to the dancers.

I see the crowd parting. Huge figures in massive black coats are weaving their way to me. I scramble for another CD, flicking through my collection to find one specific thing. Because I'm going down in style. 'September' slows down and I mix in the opening horns of the next track. All the time the bouncers are getting closer and closer to me. It's only a small club but it's packed. Hard for them to move.

I fade into it. Turn it up as loud as it can go. Hold my arms out to the crowd, who cheer like people possessed. Edith Piaf echoes around this tacky space. 'Non, Je Ne Regrette Rien'. I'm laughing now. Cackling like a madman.

I only make it two lines into the song, before they get up to me, clamber up to the booth and grab hold of me. Ian has my arms and Shaun pulls the plug out of the jacks.

‘Shows over,’ he grunts into the mic.

Ian carries me out the club. My feet don’t touch the floor. They carry me past Alan who shakes his head.

‘Screw you!’ I shout. The club promoter is there. He must be only twenty one. Still got spots. Didn’t want to work with him anyway. Wouldn’t appreciate what I do. I am an artist and I cannot be sold. Don’t need him anyway. I’m destined for bigger and better things.

I hit the wet pavement hard. They didn’t have to throw me out like some common punter.

Ian and Shaun head back inside. People start to file out of the club, drunk and stupid. I wait. They haven’t given me my equipment back. I need all that, it’s mine. If I’m going to get to work on the mix tape I need the CDs and the CD-jays. Got to do live mixing, it’s more authentic that way.

People stream past into the night. Inane expressions on their faces. Some have sick down their clothes. Others can barely stand and have to be carried by their mates. These are the people I’ve spent ten years entertaining. They would enjoy anything the state they are in.

Still I wait. Maybe they haven’t been coming to see me after all. Maybe all of these idiots only come to The Phoenix to lose themselves for a night and forget their hardships. Forget about work, forget who they are, forget their friends, forget how to stand up. Lose themselves in a haze of booze and dancing to numb the pain. I am incidental.

Maybe they only come to The Phoenix because it's the only club in town.

Not one of the people who heads down to the taxi rank looks in my direction. No one says well done. I don’t think they even know who I am. They would get the same enjoyment out of a computer on shuffle, randomly spitting out songs.

The punters have all vanished and gone home. The party is over. Still I wait. The black door is shut. I am alone.

I'm stood for a moment shivering to myself. It's gone surprisingly quiet. Everyone has disappeared quickly.

The black door opens a crack. The promoter walks out with a brisk pace.

'Hey!' I call.

He stops and turns, looking pained.

'So what did you think?'

He doesn't say anything, just gives me a blank expression.

'Good for the London club? At least a trial maybe?'

I can see a wave of confusion sweep over him. He's really young. His suit barely fits him; he's got too much gel in his hair. When he speaks, it's in a half mumble.

'Nah mate. I ain't a promoter. Gonna be playing here next week.'

'Oh.' I feel like someone has taken my CDs and is putting them through a shredder one by one.

'No offence mate. Bit wedding DJ. Bit old, you know?'

I don't say anything. He stands awkwardly for a moment. Then walks away down the street. I stick two fingers up at his retreating back.

I wait in the cold and dark for what seems like a long time. I feel a weariness that sinks through my skin, through my fat and organs into my very bones. I'm so very tired. I've been doing this for too long.

I wait for almost an hour. No one comes out.

I feel sick in my stomach. No job. No decks or CDs now. I'll go round on the Sunday. Don't want to see Alan again but will have to. I need my equipment

Slowly, I drag myself to the taxi rank. I sit in the back of a car in silence.

At home I let myself in. Mum's asleep on the sofa. She looks smaller every time I see her, like she's shrinking.

Her eyes try to flicker open.

'Is that you Bill?'

'Yeah it's me. You didn't have to wait up.'

'I wanted to,' she says. Her voice is shaky and barely audible. 'Did it go well?'

'Yes. It was a good night.'

'I'm so proud...' Her voice trails off. She's fallen back to sleep. I get her duvet and cover her in it. Her breathing is slow and uneven.

I go to bed. I stare at the grey wall. All I can hear is the beat of my heart, thumping in my ears.

Waiting for the Bulldozer

The wind whistles through the holes in my tired bones. I do not mind. The wind is a part of the pattern, as this tree is, as I am.

The night is cool and clear. I can see for miles. The lights of Tolwood are distant orange stars. Out here in the fields it is peaceful.

I shift from one leg to the other. The left has gone numb, so it's time to move the weight over. In an hour, I will shift back. The pattern repeats.

I've been a fool. I see that now. Being up here has given me a sense of clarity. Everyone who told me not to come up here or warned me against it was wrong. Even June. They were trying to stop me from seeing the big picture. Because up here, everything makes sense. The connections between things are crystal clear. I was nervous about stopping the pills. It was necessary to reveal the pattern.

The teenagers who threw eggs at me were wrong as well. I paid them little attention. They can throw all they want, it does not affect me. Very few of them were direct hits. Their insults had no impact on me whatsoever.

They are all part of the pattern. They do not know that I am right. I have seen the truth.

A breeze tickles the back of my neck. June would stroke it sometimes. Or kiss my forehead gently. Sometimes her eyes would be filled with worry and I would not know why.

The chains are digging into my flesh. So are the keys in my left trouser pocket, digging right into my thigh. I am exhausted and hungry beyond belief. There is a bruise on my ribs from the eggs. I have felt it develop in the last day.

I've been up here three days now. I haven't eaten or drunk anything but I feel surprisingly great. The light-headedness and mood swings have passed for now. This is exactly where I need to be. In the grand scheme of things, I am just an infinitesimally small part of the pattern. A necessary part nonetheless.

The council is planning to knock down these beautiful trees and concrete over it all. Build houses. I couldn't let them destroy the living trunks, because we are all connected. I wrote letters to the council of course. Started a petition and struggled to get signatures. There wasn't much traction, but I started planning more drastic efforts to halt their schemes.

She wanted me to go to a doctor. I came home one day to find June having a cup of tea with a man who introduced himself as Doctor Stephens. I did not trust the man, but the tears in June's eyes made me take the pills he was pushing.

The air I am breathing is the clearest I have ever tasted. Cool and crisp. I breathe in the universe. This pain I am feeling is temporary.

Nature is a huge tapestry. No one realises this. June doesn't. We still have a connection, like every living thing. The bees. The flowers. The wind in my thinning grey hair, like June's fingers running across my scalp. All of it is a part of the same eternal dance.

It is cold though.

Being up here has really cleared all the poison out of my system. The wine, the sugar, the caffeine. The pills the so called Doctor forced me to take. All of that stuff distracts from seeing the pattern. Everything vibrates and beats to the same rhythm of nature. My eyes seem clear for the first time in forever. I am only annoyed that I found this realization so late in life. How can we cut down trees when we are made of the same things? We live on this earth. We are a part of the same pattern.

This tree called out to me. It was screaming. Waiting for someone to come save it. So after June left, I got chains, looped them round and padlocked myself to it.

The note June left said only this:

‘I have gone away for a couple of days. I’m sorry, it’s painful to watch.’

Nothing more. No forwarding address or number to contact her on. I didn’t even try calling her mobile. I knew she wouldn’t answer.

I thought building was due to start soon. Perhaps I was confused.

The pills slowed down my thoughts and stopped me from noticing the pattern earlier. A great fog descended upon me when I took them. Now, up this tree, the fog has cleared and the night is beautiful.

I’m thirsty though. My throat is drier than I ever thought possible.

It has been hard over the last few days. I miss our breakfasts. I miss holding June’s hand in the middle of the night. I miss her smell, of lavender and gentle scented soap.

The stars repeat the pattern above me in the night sky. So simple, but I’ve never seen it before. I look out over the hills and see the same comforting pattern of nature repeating here on earth. The distant roads leading to unfamiliar places. I think how little of this one planet I have seen. How quick and limited my life has been. There’s always another town over the horizon, another park, another wild expanse waiting to be found.

June would sometimes find my hand in the middle of the night and stroke my palm until I woke up. ‘Just wanted to check you were still here,’ she would say and smile. I would smile too.

I take a deep breath of the crisp air. This tree is a small part of the pattern. It’s not the whole thing. The council will build their houses whether I’m here or not. I see that now. I’ve been a fool. There’s a whole world out

there waiting to be experienced. I should try to experience as much of it as possible while I can.. I should go call June and start travelling, getting to see as much of this strange planet as I can.. Experience the pattern repeating across the Earth.

Half asleep, I fumble in my pocket for the keys. I am physically drained. All that matters now is just getting down from this tree.

I get a grasp on the keys and bring it to the padlock that holds the chains. The first key doesn't fit. With shaking fingers, I turn to the next. I try to force it towards the lock

The hooting of an owl startles me. The key falls from my hand and into the void of the night. I don't even have the energy to despair.

In Your Own Words

It is impossible to be completely professional. To cut yourself off from all emotions. People who do are psychopaths, like Oliver. Perhaps I should have followed the protocol more. I acted on instinct and in this instance I may have been mistaken.

May I have a glass of water?

Thank you.

It was another Saturday on patrol really. The usual. We don't get a lot of crime in Tolwood. Bit too out in the sticks for that. It's a small town and people love to get smashed on the weekend. Not a lot else to do really. So Saturday night is always our busiest time. People get drunk, they get stupid and then they fight. They piss in the street. The amount of young lads I've given on the spot fines for public urination is ridiculous. They are always embarrassed when I catch them. You get a fair few women pulling down their knickers in the middle of the street as well. They are always a bit more lippy. Don't respect the badge.

I was posted to the city centre with PCO Ian Rowntree. He's a solid copper, able to handle any situation. He's somehow achieved the impossible and has a happy solid home life to go back to after a long shift. Unlike me. My divorce was hard personally but I never allowed it to affect my work. Anyway, Ian and I have worked together a lot. We generally do the Saturday slog as a team, handling the drunks. That night we were at The King's Head. Some poor bastard had been pulled backwards off a chair, and then attacked. We had the guy who did it. He had been casually sat finishing his pint when we turned up.

The attacker seemed to have little care for what he had just done. We handcuffed him and took him out to the car. Read his rights. Everything was by the book. We knew he did it. There were multiple witnesses who saw him approach the other guy and just start attacking him for no real reason.

Didn't seem to have been provoked or anything. Some people just get scary when they drink. Especially young lads. Seem to think that anyone who looks at them funny is fair game.

I realise I'm stalling. It's difficult to think about the events of that night clearly.

Ian and I re-entered the pub to do a bit of clean-up, see if we could get any further information. The landlord didn't seem too bothered that a bloke had been beaten unconscious in his establishment. He clearly just wanted us out so he could carry on making money. All the time we were there he was losing valuable punters. We had to follow protocol and establish as many details as we could on the scene.

As we were speaking to witnesses, the call came through on the radio. I remember the voice clearly. 'Domestic incident at 26 Larch Close, Millden.'

Ian looked up at me with fear in his eyes. He knew what that meant as much as I did.

'I'll finish up here. You take the car,' he said. His voice had a wobble to it I had never heard before.

I didn't even think. I was operating on adrenaline only. I nodded and ran straight to the car. Ian responded as I left, telling them I was en route. I managed to hastily mutter an ETA into the radio, but mostly I just got in the car and drove. I had to.

Now, here is where the professionalism starts to break down. I know protocol states that you should go with your partner to the scene of a crime. I know it also states that you should immediately take individuals you have arrested to the nearest station. I know all this. I am aware. I have given over twenty years of service to this constabulary, thank you very much. When I got in the car, I wasn't thinking of any of that. I drove out of Tolwood fast, into the country. The land around the town is hilly and empty. I tore up the

hill as fast I could. I couldn't see any lights approaching so I put my foot down.

My thoughts ran something along the lines of 'ohgodohgodohgodohgod.' I must have prayed to every deity I knew.

Halfway up the hill the guy in the back piped up.

'What the shit?'

'You shut up.' I snapped back at him. A little unprofessional but he wasn't my main concern. To be honest, in the rush, I had forgotten he was in there.

'Station's the other way'

'I know. We have to go on a detour.'

'Fucking crazy.' He shook his head.

I blanked out his curses and threats for the rest of the journey. He was not my main objective. I had to get to 26 Larch Close as fast as I could.

I had the sirens on for the entire journey. The lights echoed around the absent fields. It is usually a twenty five minute journey to Millden. I made it in fifteen.

As soon as I pulled up outside the house, I slammed the car shut and went straight to the front door which I knew so well. Yes, I left the criminal in the backseat. Yes, I admit it was outside of protocol. Certainly very unprofessional. I wasn't thinking.

God it's hard to picture, even now.

The door was open, banging continuously in the wind. I did not wait for permission to enter. I did not knock. I went straight in.

I found her lying on the living room floor in the dark. She tried to look up at me as I entered. I knelt down beside her. I didn't want to move her, as it might be too much. I didn't do a sweep of the scene or check for danger. Instead, I stroked her hair.

'It's OK darling, It's OK, Mum's here. I'm here darling,' I whispered.

She started sobbing quietly, as if she did not even have the energy for that.

I sat for a while, in the darkness, stroking her hair and saying 'its OK' over and over.

It was a terrible thing to see. You want so much for your children for them have a good life that exceeds your own. Most of all you want them to be happy, safe and loved. When you see them like that, all protocol and thoughts of duty fly out of your mind, however deep they are embedded. It was heartbreaking. She was so weak. In so much pain. There was so little I could do. I felt helpless and sad and concerned and angry all at the same time.

Of course I knew who the perpetrator was. Vicky had started seeing Oliver at university, in her second year. She would start to mention him casually in phone calls, so I thought something was going on. When she told me she had met a boy I feigned surprise, then immediately asked when he was coming round for dinner. My mum did the same thing years ago when I was first seeing Vicky's father. I was excited for her and wanted to meet her new beau.

A date was set. I scrubbed my flat from top to bottom. Since the divorce I don't have much room, but it's enough for one person. It's my space. I can come home from patrol and feel safe. Try to relax and unwind.

I forget what I made. My cooking has never been that good. Vicky picked at the overcooked meat and soggy vegetables as usual. Oliver ate enthusiastically and was utterly charming. I think that's how I would describe him. Charming. I could see why Vicky liked him. He was well

spoken, polite and handsome. He seemed to have a limitless supply of self confidence. When he chatted to you, he really listened.

He went off to the bathroom. I told Vicky I approved and she smiled. She seemed so happy to be with him.

I assure you this is all relevant to the events of that night.

I didn't seem him for a while. Vicky would always go up to his house during holidays. In term time she was too busy for much except a phone call home every couple of weeks or so. She was studying Sociology and doing really well at it. She was modest, but would occasionally mention a paper she had got a first on. I missed speaking to her. At the same time, I knew she was studying hard.

Her dedication paid off. She got a first. I was over the moon, crying and everything. Vicky brushed it off, saying it was nothing. She had 'just worked really hard'.

I took the day of her graduation off work and drove up to the university. It was in a large city, as far from the isolated rural community of Tolwood as could be. I didn't blame her. Tolwood is no place for young people.

The ceremony was wonderful. Vicky looked so smart. So happy. In the reception after, she clung to Oliver's side, sipping a glass of orange juice. She didn't mingle with her course mates or say congratulations to anyone else. It was just her and Oliver together in the corner. I brought over a glass of wine for her. I noticed Oliver squeezed her hand tightly. She shook her head.

'I better not,' she said.

That was my first real hint that something was wrong. In this job, you learn to listen to your hunches, as nine times out of ten, they turn out to be right. It's easy to look back and think how I would have proceeded were I not emotionally involved. It was my daughter. Of course I was emotionally involved.

Vicky moved back home after uni. Tolwood is no place to be unemployed. It's too remote, too cut off from what's going on in the rest of the country. You and I both know there are not many jobs around there, especially for someone with a degree. She would send out hundreds of job applications but got no reply. It was difficult for her. To go from an environment where she was in complete control, to one where she had very little. I tried to respect her independence, but we soon fell back into a mother and teenager relationship. Living in my small flat didn't help much. We started fighting over silly things. Most of the time she would stay locked in her poky room, speaking to Oliver on Skype.

One day I got back from my shift, tired as usual. Vicky had cleaned the house and cooked dinner. I was impressed. She was humming to herself and seemed much happier. I hadn't seen this side of her for months. She sat me down and served the food. Then she said;

'Oliver's managed to get a job. In Tolwood. We're going to move in together,' she said. Simple as that. He had somehow managed to get a software company that was based in Tolwood to take him on in a junior role, and would move down immediately.

I was happy for her. Genuinely. I thought it would do her good to get her own space. We were living on top of each other. I tried not to think of him grasping her hand tight at graduation. I tried to convince myself it was nothing. You know as well as I do that a copper's instinct is usually pretty good.

The other reason I was hesitant was I didn't want her to stay round Tolwood. Vicky needed to get out there and see the world. Instead of being stuck here, like her mum. Don't get me wrong, I love the town and its inhabitants. I quite like being isolated. Vicky isn't like that.

To be fair to her, she went out the very next day and got herself a part time job working behind the bar at The Anchor. It was such a shame that she couldn't use her degree. For a stop gap it wasn't bad. I called in every now and then on my patrols, just to see the mortified look on her face. She

borrowed the money off me for a deposit and slowly started paying me back from her wages. Oliver travelled down to look for houses with her and they settled on one in Millden. 26 Larch Close.

They seemed to settle in quite quickly. They roosted together like birds. I went round for lunch a couple of times in the first months. Just me and Vicky as Oliver was always working. Vicky seemed happy. I mean, mostly happy. She was busy getting the house in order. She would keep checking her phone. Every couple of minutes or so. I didn't think much of it. Her generation are constantly on their phones.

Like I said, she seemed happy though. We didn't really talk about Oliver. We would instead talk about her job, her house. How she was settling in. Our lunches were brief. She would always say she was busy. Or she had things to do. I would be shuffled out the door. I felt uneasy. But I just put it down to seeing my baby girl fly the nest. I convinced myself that it was just what happens. Your children stop needing you after a while and start to live their own life.

God I was blind.

After a few months, my visits dropped off. I would try and make plans and she would always be busy. I would see her briefly when patrols took me to Millden, but I mostly text and called her when I could. The phone calls were every week. Then she would say she was too busy for them. So it dropped to two. Then every month. She stopped responding to my text messages. I would still send them of course. I got fewer and fewer responses.

I was worried. Of course I was. I'm still her mother. I knew that she had to live her own life. This was beyond that, it was radio silence. It seemed odd she couldn't type out a few words to her mum. She constantly said she was busy but was never specific.

Looking back, I should have listened to my instinct. Done things properly and not let it get to a crisis point. The evidence was all before me. I wasn't thinking professionally. I was thinking as a mother.

By the time I found her that night, it had been six weeks since she had contacted me.

It's hard watching as a mother. I've seen too many cases like this. I'm sure you have too. The women never leave them, not for long. They might swear off the men, say they will never see him again, but within two weeks they are back living with the bastards like nothing has happened. Swearing blind that this time they have changed, turned over a new leaf. Without evidence you know we can't do much. It's painful enough watching when it's strangers. When it's your own daughter you will turn over heaven and earth to save them. You hope they aren't like the others. You know deep down they might be.

I radioed for an ambulance. I had enough of my professional senses to do that.

While we waited, I held her hand. Stroked her hair. It was matted and thick with blood. Her face was swollen. In the orange street light that flooded in through the windows, I could see all the damage he had done to her. There was a smell of iron in the air. She kept looking up at me and sobbing under her breath, as if she was embarrassed to be seen like this. I just kept telling her it would be alright, over and over. It didn't feel like it would be. I had to keep saying it for her sake. I bit my lip and refused to let the tears flow, because then she would know how bad she looked.

The twenty minutes I was waiting for the ambulance were the longest of my life.

Excuse me.

When it finally turned up, the main paramedic was Gary. He's a decent guy. Often gets assigned to incidents I'm dealing with. Small town, you get to know everyone. He was there at the pub as well, carting off the guy who had been jumped on. He was his usual chatty self then. He entered the room quietly with his partner. They worked swiftly and efficiently, almost without sound. I registered they were there but didn't say anything to them or give them a briefing like I usually would. I just held her hand throughout it all.

They took her off in the ambulance. I watched the blue lights disappear down the road and into the darkness.

I got back into the car. Stared right ahead. I've seen many a man beat up a woman. None of them were my daughter. How had I been so stupid? I had seen the signs a million times. Social isolation. Dependency on the partner. Control over her every action. I thought back to her graduation many months ago. She had clung to Oliver for dear life. Turned down a glass of wine on her own graduation. Had it been going on since then? There was no obvious incident or bruises so I had never got involved. I felt it in my gut, but wrote it off many times as being paranoid.

A voice behind my ear made me jump.

'Look like she got a right seeing to'

'What did you say?' I said, barely able to breathe in anger. I had forgotten about the suspect I had left in the car.

'Guess she got what she deserved. Slut.'

It took all my restraint not to open the door, drag him to the kerb and start hitting him with the truncheon. Or to just start firing my tazer wildly. I took a huge, deep breath.

'You gonna come back here and sit on my knob? Always liked a woman in uniform'

That was better. I can deal with people insulting me, happens all the time.

'If you continue, I will smother you in pepper spray. Say you were resisting arrest. My colleagues will believe me. Your eyes will be stinging for a week. Do we understand one another?' My voice was quiet, but authoritative. You don't want the scum to think they have the upper hand. My anger was there as well, barely concealed. I would have done it in a heartbeat if he gave me even the slightest chance.

I know none of this is professional. I am just reporting how I felt at the time.

He just nodded. Shut his mouth right up. He knew I would do it.

I drove him back to the station in Tolwood. Booked him in. Sharon on the counter raised her eyes at the amount of time it had taken me to bring him in, but I didn't care at that point. Went back into the break room. Ian was there with a cup of tea, taking a break from the chaos of Saturday night. I must have looked worse than I thought, because as soon as he saw me he nodded. I passed the squad keys over to him.

'I'll cover for you,' he said.

'Thanks.'

I took my own car to the hospital. I've seen hundreds of people laid in a bed like that. Usually I have to detach myself, swallow my feelings. I would start the interview, being friendly but authoritative then try to get as much information as possible from the victim. How can you possibly remain professional when it is your own daughter lying there, her face half beaten to a pulp, her body covered in bruises? I didn't need any details or evidence. I knew who did it.

She looked up at me and smiled weakly. She propped herself up on her elbows, and winced. I sat down beside her. Took her hand. Squeezed it.

We sat in silence for a while. I smiled at her.

After a while, she snatched her hand away.

'Oh for God's sake Mum. I'm not that bad,' she said.

'I just thought-'

'I'm not dying or nothing.'

I knew it was pointless, yet I carried on anyway. My professional senses had not completely abandoned me.

'I can ask you questions and we can get him put away.'

I know what protocol says. I know I was too close to this case to be objective. There was no way I could be calm and rational. I should have got a colleague involved. Briefed them, then left the room so I didn't affect the testimony. I realise all this now. I wasn't thinking clearly.

She looked at me with a mixture of fear and horror. 'No,' she whispered.

I pleaded with her, begged her to change her mind, but she wouldn't budge. She barely said anything. Just laid back in her hospital bed and stared at the ceiling.

I was in the middle of asking her once again to consider pressing charges, when her eyes flicked over to the door. There was Oliver. Stood there as if nothing had happened. He had the audacity to look concerned.

She smiled.

'I came as quick as I-' he started.

I admit what I did was rash and unprovoked. I used police equipment to cause harm, with no provocation. I didn't think.

What I did was this: as soon as he started speaking, I got out my truncheon and whacked him around the face. It was pure instinct. He crumpled to the floor and I hit him again, the arm this time. Once more round the ribs for good luck. I've dealt with enough scum to know where to hit without causing too much damage.

'Come on then big man,' I said. 'Think you're tough do you?'

My daughter had somehow got off her bed and was holding my arm. The look of fear on her face was something that will stay with me for a long

time. I put my truncheon away and walked down the corridor, out of the hospital. I drove back to my flat, sat on the sofa and cried until there were no tears left.

This was the serious incident. I used my weapon without any provocation. Had it been one of my colleagues, I would have reported them for brutality. I accept full responsibility for my actions. You have to understand though, I was protecting my daughter.

She hasn't contacted me since. I know she moved back with him. Took him back even after he put her in the hospital. Even after he used her and threw her aside. My daughter won't testify against him. There's no evidence he has done something wrong. We can't make an arrest. Sure, we can suggest certain social services and women's outreach programs, but there's very little we can do if she wants to stay with him. We have to let her. I feel like I'm condemned to sit back and watch. It's just a matter of time before she ends up in hospital again. Or worse. I can't do anything as a police officer. I can do even less as a mother. What am I meant to do? Tell me, what am I meant to do? Just sit back and wait for the inevitable? How can I do that? What am I meant to do?

I have nothing left to say on the matter.

Statement concluded.

4:07 AM

I'm driving back into town. One last round trip before I call it a night. There are always a few stragglers who don't want the night to end. By now, The Phoenix has closed. All the pubs have been shut for a while. The kebab shops, the chip shops, the pizza places- all are closing. The few people who are left will be hanging around in the cold and wanting to go home.

Going back down the hill, my headlights catch someone staggering in the middle of the road. Clearly drunk. We must be two, maybe three miles from town. I'm guessing they didn't have the money for a taxi and decided to walk

I don't know what possesses me, but I stop in front of the weaving figure. Call out to them.

'Do you want a lift?'

They are concentrating on their feet, trying to push each one forward so they can keep their balance

'No charge. It's a cold night. I'll give you a lift.'

The figure looks up. It's the bald girl from earlier, who skipped out on the fare. She attempts to focus on my face.

'Get in,' I say.

She pauses for a moment, unsure of what to do. Then she staggers to the car and gets in.

'Little Wren,' she mumbles. I remember.

As we drive, she's all over the place. Keeps slumping from side to side. Eyes roaming around with no point of focus.

There's silence as we drive. Occasionally, she glances in my direction. Then she blurts out;

'I ain't gonna sleep wit' you to pay fare'

I shake my head.

She stares at me.

'You the... same bloke from earlier? Ain't you?'

'Yep.'

She doesn't know how to respond to that. She stares out of the window. She absent mindedly scratches her bald head, completely clean and absent of stubble. The countryside falls beside us. Each field is empty and dark. I watch the country roads drop away.

'Sorry.' She mumbles. It's so quiet I barely hear her. It takes me a minute to process what she has said. I smile.

She really reminds me of Kelly. The way she looks around. Her baggy hoodie is like Kelly's hangover outfit. When Kelly was drunk last night though, she wasn't so quiet. She was noisy, out of control and brash. I don't know where she gets the booze. None of the pubs will serve her, she's underage. I've picked her up a few times from her friend's houses and she reeks of it. Every time she thinks she's acting sober, that I have no idea what has happened. She sits up straight and pretends not to talk with a slur. This girl smells of a distillery like Kelly, although she is not trying to hide it.

Last night, Kelly was so drunk she threw up all over the car. We were coming up the hill from her friend's house and she just started spewing everywhere. I had to ask the valet to thoroughly clean everything, but the smell still lingers. I worry about her. She's too young to be drinking like that. Her future is so bright. She's going to University next year. I don't want to see her throw it all away.

I wonder if Kelly knows this girl. She could conceivably be in the same year at school.

'Jus' want'd a night out. Innit. Jus' one'

I glance at this girl. She stares out of the window with a melancholy that makes her seem more like sixty, not eighteen. She has taken no joy in going out and getting drunk. This night hasn't helped her with whatever she is going through.

'My daughter's about your age,' I say, softly.

She turns and looks at me. For a moment, I wonder if she is going to say anything, but she just stares.

'I worry about her. A lot.'

'She'll be fine.'

I nod. Shift the gear down. 'I know'

There's the smallest hint of a smile. Mostly, she watches the fields fall away as we drive on in silence. I think we have an understanding.

We pull up at her house. Someone turns a light on and rushes to the door as we pull up in the drive.

'Your mum?'

She nods.

'Thanks.'

She gets out of the car and weaves back to her house. Her mum grabs her and hugs her tight. I knew she was scared that she had lost her daughter forever, scared that there had been danger, scared that these fragile moments with her child are already slipping away.

The girl turns back to me and waves. I nod, then drive on.

Beast

As soon as she discovered her pregnancy, events conspired against me. We had been married for about seven months. The unfortunate spawn was an accident. I thought, perhaps naively, she was taking proper precautions. When she told me I saw my comfortable life fall out from underneath me. It was the worst possible situation.

Of course, I tried to convince her to get rid of it. I begged, pleaded, cajoled and ridiculed. Anything to get what I wanted. She was resolute and was determined to keep it. We were married and that was that. After marriage came babies, according to Anita and the church. I was initially attracted to her because I thought her faith might mean she was easier to push into the directions I wanted. Sadly for me, it only made her more stubborn.

Our wedding was a small affair. I told her I wanted to keep it private, just friends and family. In reality, I didn't have many friends to call on. Never really seen the point. I generally got my use of people within a couple of years and moved on. Anita could afford a larger affair. I wanted to keep that lovely inheritance in the bank. Anita was one of the truly rich who did not have to worry about anything at all. That was part of the attraction.

The baby is wailing away downstairs. Stupid brat. Anita is half asleep beside me.

She was content for the first few months. We lived in my London flat, everything set up just the way I liked it. Zone One of course, for a minimal commute to work. I was at Thompson and Cooke LLP, one of the finest firms in the country. In two years I was going to be a partner. This wasn't just speculation, it was fact. It was just a case of moving the pieces about. My life was going in exactly the direction I wanted it to. I had fine whiskey. Expensive suits. Good work. I was in a solid place.

Actually, there was one blight on this paradise. The urban foxes that would knock over our bins and spread rubbish all over the streets. There would be a continuous stench of rotting food outside my window. The council did very little except mumble about budget cuts. At night I would wait with an air rifle, but when I did they would never turn up. It ate away at me. That was the only mark on an otherwise content life.

When Anita told me she was pregnant, I despaired. I could see the whole edifice crumbling before me. Soon, we were talking about selling my flat and moving to the country. My flat! I had spent years getting it exactly how I wanted and now all the hard work was for nothing. Apparently the baby wouldn't do well in the city. What utter hogswill. What I wanted went out of the window and the absent bundle of cells took highest priority. It wasn't even born yet! Still it dictated my life. Soon it would be born, but it would still be barely sentient. All it would care about would be eating and getting its shitty nappies changed. This stupid child had the final veto on everything. I argued. I threatened. I raised my hand a couple of times. Anita was stubborn. The more I pushed her, the more she pushed back. She had her own tactics, like threatening divorce. I was planning it too, but a couple of years down the line so my case would stand up in court. We hadn't been married long enough for me to get a payout. So what could I do? I had to agree or else I'd lose out on all that inheritance. Back to square one.

I saw my life, my future, my career all crumble before my eyes. All due to that impudent urchin.

He's still bawling. It sounds like a chainsaw.

Somehow, she picked Tolwood. Who knows how? Perhaps she read about it in The Guardian, or some other middle class liberal echo chamber. We went down for a weekend to look around. I hated it. A tiny town in the middle of nowhere, surrounded by fields and filled with small minded people with no ambition or drive. There were people who were born there, lived there all their lives and would likely die there. A waste of effort, land and air. She was enthralled. She loved the narrow streets and the huge expanse of the sky. Before we really had time to talk it over she purchased a

house. Just like that. As I said, she was obscenely rich and these things never mattered much to her. If she wanted to up sticks and go live in the middle of nowhere, who was going to stop her?

I considered keeping my flat and commuting back on weekends. We argued bitterly about it. Tolwood was two and a half hours from London, practically the wastelands. It was inhuman. Then she broke down and started asking why I didn't want to be a part of the baby's life. It was important to her that as the father, I was around to provide moral guidance. Or something along those lines anyway. I've always considered morals to be signs of weakness, but I couldn't tell her that.

Eventually I had no choice. With her inheritance in mind, I resigned from my comfortable job. I moved with her to Tolwood. I took a position in a backwater firm. I sold my flat. All my plans and careful preparation over many years collapsed into dust. All because I was chasing that money. I was intoxicated by the promise of it. It called to me at night and kept me going. Even though I was living in the middle of nowhere, the thought of the lovely money meant I was able to keep my head down and get on with it.

Our house is outside the town itself, surrounded by fields with cows. The silence keeps me awake. There is no traffic, no sirens and no people roaming the streets. Every so often I hear a sound like a child's screeching, echoing around the fields. It is some small creature wandering the darkness. The internet tells me it is the cry of a fox. Even here I cannot escape them. Between that, the cows' wretched mooing and the baby's screaming, I am cursed with insomnia. Even now I stare at the ceiling, waiting for the wretched release of daytime.

When the baby was born, I felt nothing. I held the sack of skin and organs in my arms and I thought 'Is that it? Is that what I have sacrificed my life, my comfort and my status for?' It was pathetic. A wet bawling mess. Anita was overwhelmed with happiness. I think she cried for three days straight out of sheer joy. Around her I was all smiles. I said things like 'It's amazing' or 'I think he looked at you.' I would talk about the miracle of

birth, how my life had changed for the better. I meant none of it. I was a glacier inside, but then emotions have never really appealed to me.

See, that's the problem everyone else has. Too many feelings. They get in the way. I think they hold you back, in the long run.

Holding my child in my arms for the first time, I decided I was going to get my life back. No amount of money was worth this.

Unfortunately, I seemed to get sidetracked. The next few weeks were exhausting as I was continually woken by the baby. It screamed in the middle of the night, wanting feeding or changing. Even if Anita got up and saw to it, I was still constantly woken. I yearned for more civilized nocturnal hours and the sweet release of an uninterrupted deep slumber.

Anita named the baby Peter. I pretended to fight over the name, threw in a few suggestions myself. But I couldn't be bothered to fully commit to the naming process. So Peter it was. Apparently it was Anita's beloved great uncle, although I had certainly never heard him mentioned before. The baby was a wretched ball of organs and excrement, working on nothing more than instinct. All it knew to do was scream, eat and shit; it certainly wasn't worth cooing over and making imbecilic noises. It was a stupid, bawling proto human, barely even alive and certainly not conscious.

My work at the new firm suffered. I made a few silly mistakes. Luckily I was able to smooth them over before anyone noticed, but it still felt like control was slipping away from me. The days all merge into one and it's hard to focus on anything much. Insomnia doesn't just rob the night time, but the rest of the day as well. I haven't slept properly in six months.

Now Anita lies next to me. She had too much red wine tonight and nothing will wake her, sleeping will be uninterrupted and peaceful. Lucky her. Downstairs, I can hear baby Peter screaming. Its voice is coming through clearly on the monitor but I can hear it anyway, echoing down the hallway. It wants some attention. I have needs and desires too. The baby's desires come above everyone else's. How ridiculous. I'm so tired. My

thoughts feel like white noise, a detuned radio turned up in volume, until the distorted static sounds are deafening.

I get out of bed, slowly. Anita turns over and mumbles something in her sleep. Pulling on a dressing gown, I creep downstairs. I hear Peter still crying, with no-one coming to tend to it.

So I go into its room, where it makes a noise like an almighty car alarm. It struggles on its back like an upturned turtle.

'I am getting out of here,' I whisper to it. The ignorant babe can't even understand language yet. 'You don't control my life. So enjoy it while it lasts'

With that, I walk to the door, put my shoes on, grab my keys and open the door. I cross the drive to my car, get in and drive down empty lanes.

I'm not sure where I'm going or why. Tolwood is so quiet. There are only fields and cows, that is all. It's dark as well. I turn my lights down low, to really enjoy the stillness.

The country roads are narrow. Hedges loom up on either side. I don't really know where I'm going or what I'm going to do when I get there. Driving is a compulsion. I am no longer sure if I am awake or asleep. It's hard to tell any more. Awake is preferable because I'm behind the wheel of a ton of metal that is hurtling through the night. Roads and county lanes fall beside the wayside. Several silent villages. Their houses are ancient monuments poking through the surrounding landscape. Monoliths with darkened windows. Everything is still.

I notice that I am smiling. For the first time in a while, everything is simple. Just me and the road. Everyone else is asleep. I am free from their petty arrangements and sordid little lives. My wife is no longer arguing with me. The brat is no longer wailing for attention. It's quiet.

Now trees line the road, dark fingers blocking out the uncaring stars. In London I could go out at any time of the night and there would be people

around. Some signs of life. Here there is nothing but trees. It seems dead. I wonder how I am going to reclaim my life. There must be a way of escaping the quagmire I seem to have found myself in. I can't divorce Anita just yet, much as I'd like to be free of her moaning. When a child is involved, the judge always favours the wife, and then the riches I have been chasing will evaporate into dust. All my hard work will be for nothing.

Driving through the woods, there is an almighty thump. I think I've blown a tire. But the car rolls on for a bit perfectly fine. I stop by the side of the road. Nothing. There's no sound but the wind rustling the leaves. I sit for a moment in the car. Then I hear it. A slow, low growling. 'The heavy breathing of some animal.

I turn off the engine. Walk out into the night. It's sharply cold. My dressing gown doesn't offer much protection from the elements. Walking back along the road, I can't see it for a while. The night is too dark for that. The stars and moon are obscured by the trees. Then I see it. In the middle of the road, a rough bundle made of fur and meat has been thrown. As my eyes adjust to the darkness, I see something like a chest moving up and down. The road is sticky with something like oil. A snout is lying on the tarmac

It's a fox. I have hit it with my car. The beast's guts are spilled over the road. Somehow it is still clinging on to life. It looks around with unseeing eyes. Its breathing is rough and irregular. Every so often it whimpers or growls.

I crouch down beside it and stroke its matted fur. Nothing else exists for the moment. Just me in my dressing gown and the dying fox in the half obscured moonlight.

I stand up. Go back to the car. I open the boot and look in. The dim light of the boot is almost blinding. Searching, I can't see anything suitable. I pick up the tyre jack, a little too heavy but it will do. I close the boot and am overwhelmed by the sweet relief of darkness. I walk slowly back to the fox.

When I get there for a moment, I stop. There is no hesitation as to what I'm going to do, but I savour the moment. It's rare this happens and when it does, it is important to enjoy it. I allow myself a smile, the first genuine one for months. I pick up the tyre jack and swing it down on the foxes head, again and again, beating it to a pulp. Blood and brain spill out onto the tarmac. I carry on even when the chest stops rising and falling, even when there is little left of the beast's head, even when it's long dead. I think of the bastard fox who kept me up at night and the ones that used to raid the bins in my old flat.

I stop, out of breath. The night is quiet and empty once again. The peace has come flooding over me in waves. It feels holy.

I take the tyre jack and go back to the car. I get in and drive back to my wife and child. Everything will be alright.

I know how to get my old life back.

Alone With Infinity

Sleep isn't easy these days, but I try anyway. Every night I go through the same routine. Get myself in bed and snuggle down under the sheets. For thirty minutes to an hour I try to relax. Slow my breathing and drift off. It never works. I stretch my arms out and feel the other side is still empty.

People generally think the countryside is quiet, but at night it is actually full of life. Owls hunting mice. The wind rustling the trees. Sometimes I hear his voice calling across the empty fields.

Eventually, I give up and heave myself out of bed. I'm stiff these days, like clay slowly setting. Some days I think I'll freeze in place like a statue and be unable to move. I pull myself up into a sitting position and then swing each heavy leg out of the bed. Grabbing my cane, I put all my weight on it as I cross the room. I pull on my padded dressing gown, which is old and worn, but still warm.

This house echoes with ghosts of former lives. In the darkness, it could be any time in the last fifty years. There is a vagueness to the shapes to that suggests previous moments. Is that bulge a coat hanging on the door or is it Anton, back from work and having a brief pause to himself before coming to bed? Is the spare bedroom empty or is my daughter sleeping in there, five years old again? I leave the lights off because I don't want to spoil the possibilities.

It takes me a long time to descend the stairs. Each step creaks and groans, like my joints. I hold the banister with one hand, my cane in the other. Lower a foot down. Then the other. Repeat.

Halfway down I find a mint in the pocket of my dressing gown. It gives me the strength to carry on.

My daughter wants me to install a stair lift. 'What if you fall?' is her favourite refrain. I will not allow myself to be so demeaned. I am still

capable. Sure, it takes me time, but there is nothing wrong with taking it slow and steady.

By the door, I stop and pull on my wellies over my pyjamas, extra large now because of my swollen legs. Anton loved my legs. When we laid in bed together he would stroke them idly. I pause for a moment and I can almost feel his feather light touch.

He died almost twenty years ago. It still feels like yesterday.

Not bothering with a coat, I head straight out the door and into the night. My daughter would definitely not approve. I know she cares. She worries about me rattling around this empty house in the middle of nowhere. She wants me to go to a home and I can't think of anything worse. All those young faces making endless cups of tea and calling me an old dear. No thank you.

It is a clear night. I don't raise my eyes to the sky just yet. Instead, I focus on each step. One in front of another. Come on. I have an appointment to meet.

The walk is slower this time. It is getting longer and longer. It takes me twenty minutes to get the hundred yards or so down the lane. I drag my failing body forward one step at a time, aided by the cane.

The cane was a birthday gift from my daughter a couple of years ago. I resented it at the time, but it has come in handy. Her heart is in the right place. I know she is just looking out for me.

Finally, I reach the bench, wheezing from the exertion, my legs aching, and my back stiff. I sit down slowly and settle into the bench. Once I have got my breath back I allow myself to look up at the stars.

Here in the middle of the countryside you can see everything spread out in front of you. The darkness is lit by the burning of a trillion different stars. All spread over the sky. The stars are arranged before me. I can see it all- The Milky Way, constellations arranged within it, with stars beyond stars.

In the empty spaces there are yet more burning away. The number is uncountable, but this is just a minor fraction of the uncountable orbs that surround us. I sit and breathe in the universe. I may not be much longer for this world, but the fact I can see even a small part of it makes me breathe easier.

You don't get this in a city. Too many lights. Too many people who are too busy to look up into the night sky.

Life will go on. My daughter will be sad for a while of course. She will move on, like the constantly shifting stars, eternally burning in the night sky. I am simply a part of something bigger than myself.

I sit there, regarding the universe. Creation experiencing itself. Millions of silent sentinels observe me back. You wouldn't be able to do this in a home.

How long I sit watching the cosmos before me, I cannot say. I surrender to the grandeur of the galaxy. Eventually, I stretch my hand out on the bench. For a minute or two, it is alone, resting on the slightly damp wood. Then it is taken and held. The other hand is warm and comforting. It strokes my knotted fingers, soothing the pain in the joints. It is sweet relief to feel the warmth of another's skin on mine.

'Nice of you to join me Anton,' I whisper.

5:30 am

I should be home curled up in bed next to my Val. The rest of the world is asleep. Those who have gone out are back in their beds, or rolling around in someone else's. No one sees these hours. I should be driving home but instead, I sit on top of a hill overlooking Tolwood in the valley below. This view is mine and mine only. I am the only one awake.

I've been doing this job for a few months now and every week I've found the fatigue gets worse. No amount of sleep will shift the weariness. I will wake up early tomorrow, even though I've worked the night shift. I can never sleep in. In a few hours from now, I will get up and potter around the house. Kelly will be in her room listening to music at top volume. She'll lie in bed almost all day, pretending not to have a hangover. Val will watch endless amounts of TV. I'll bring her a cup of tea now and then. Kelly will emerge about four, only to slump on the sofa next to Val. There might be a roast, there might not be. In this way, our Sunday will pass like so many similar Sundays before it, quiet and calm compared to the chaos of Saturday night.

I don't know why I drove up here. I can barely keep my heavy eyelids propped open. I simply found myself driving past on the way home, pulled in and here I am.

Below me, the street lights of Tolwood light up the valley like amber stars. I see the streets I grew up in, where I met my Val. Where I married and worked and laughed and cried and slacked off and got drunk and sobered up and lived. I wanted to move out in my teenage years. Move to a different city then travel the world. I didn't think that thirty years later I would still be living in the same town. I never had the money or the guts. Still, the town has treated me well. I can trace out a history in those streets.

Above the buildings there is the faintest gradient, the slightest change of darkness into deep blue. The sun is starting to rise.

I get out of the car. The night is cool and almost completely silent. The valley below me is devoid of movement and noise. I can't see any headlights moving down the roads, or houses with their lights on. It's peaceful. I lean on my bonnet.

The dawn is just starting to push back against the night. On the other side of the valley, I can now see a slight glow, just along the horizon, of gentle orange light.

I forget the cold. I don't have a jacket on but I barely pay attention to the cold. I no longer notice my body shivering, or the goose pimples that coat my flesh. It is just me, the town and the sunrise.

As I watch, the blue changes to a purple splash that lights up the whole vista before me. Unseen columns of cloud are lit up like chemical fires. There's a violet now, a purple, leading into the deepest blue at the edges. Above the hill opposite, the tiniest sliver of unreal orange, brighter than anything imaginable.

The town before me is a vision from another universe. A whole new land of opportunity. I know Tolwood so well, but it seems to be so strange and new. The houses are different to what I remember; the narrow streets are arranged in unfamiliar positions. It feels like a mirage. I can almost reach out and touch the tiny houses. How many people are living in this small town? How many lives have I brushed up against in my decades in this small town and never realised?

The sky continues its transformation to golden. The new day pushes the night away, chasing it to the other end of the sky. It might be the tiredness taking hold, but it feels euphoric. The start of something truly new.

The sun crests over the hill, filling the world with golden light, so rich and so warm. I touch my cheek to find it wet with tears.

I don't know how long I watch the sun climb into the sky. At some point, I realise it is no longer dawn, but the next day has started. I drive home, still filled with the peace of that golden light.

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About the Author

[David Ralph Lewis](#) is a poet and short story writer based in Bristol, UK, whose work has appeared in *Neon* and *DogEar* magazines as well as the *Lies, Dreaming* podcast. He blogs regularly about politics and art and often scrawls over newspapers to create blackout poetry. When not writing, he enjoys dancing badly at gigs, attempting to grow vegetables and taking photos. He understands a very, very small amount of what is going on in the world.

On his website, David maintains a [blog](#) about writing, art and politics as well as any other random topic.

You can follow him on [Twitter](#), [Instagram](#), [Facebook](#) and & [Goodreads](#) if you want.

Other books

[Our Voices in the Chaos](#)- A unique combination of blackout poetry and normal poetry, *Our Voices in the Chaos* is my debut poetry chapbook, published in September 2019 by Selcouth Station

[Spare Parts](#)- A unique collaborative pamphlet with Amelia M. Eilki, fusing flash fiction and blackout poetry.

[Remain Vigilant](#)- Two linked one-act stage plays, both set in the same secret government organisation that deals with surveillance. Both plays show the paranoia that comes from watching the nation as well of the madness of any large office.

