

Creative Writing MA

Part II: Dissertation

The Jackal's Wedding

By

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Master's Degrees by Examination and Dissertation

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Synopsis

'The Jackal's Wedding' is the story of Miss Meyer, a psychologically damaged but physically striking woman in her late twenties masquerading as a white Namibian, and her road trip across America and Southern Africa with Joules, one of her three eighteen year old admirers. Following in pursuit for part of the journey is Joules' concerned father, the bulimic, recently widowed Harry, and Joules' eight year old step-sister, Mackie.

Set in the modern day, and opening in the fictional town of Avonford in the west of England, the story begins with Miss Meyer toying with Joules and his friends Jon and Drayton, tempting them with the opportunity of sharing with her a free, extended holiday abroad. In the days leading up to Miss Meyer and Joules' departure the fractured lives of the ordinary people of Avonford are revealed, and the mystery of the protagonist morphs into something more worrying as she assaults and robs a male, immigrant bar worker on a canal boat.

As the parallel road trips unfold we see the balance of power between Miss Meyer and Joules shift. Despite her greater age and seemingly superior education we soon discover that her carefully choreographed set pieces, the events and learning experiences she organises for Joules on their journey, have the opposite effect to that intended. As Joules begins to understand her present and her past, which includes detention for a physical assault against her mother as a teenager, he begins to feel pity and revulsion, but is never less than beguiled.

Harry and Mackie's pursuit, which owes as much to factors other than fears over Joules' welfare, comes to an end as they begin to see how they can find a

happy fit as father and orphaned step-daughter. Meanwhile, back in Avonford, logistical and moral support is extended across the internet by Jon and Drayton as they assist the pursuit, attempting to pre-empt Miss Meyer's next moves. During this period, Jon overcomes the loss of his ex-girlfriend D'Arcy to London, reconciles himself with his missed US computer game career and helps his mother address her canine Munchausen Syndrome by Proxy problem. Drayton learns that leverage over others, in particular Harry for a past infidelity, carries a price.

Finally, as Miss Meyer and Joules move onto Llandudno in the Western Cape of South Africa and then up to Rehoboth in Namibia, her disguise begins to slip entirely. She is clearly a con-artist and a fantasist and Joules begins to uncover her traumatic childhood and adolescence in Wales. After reaching Namibia, their relationship falls foul of a lack of funds, local anti-abortion laws and a pregnant, depressed Miss Meyer dramatically committing suicide in the sandy wastes of an abandoned German colonial mining outpost.

At the end of the novel Joules returns to Avonford traumatised, not so much by Miss Meyer's death, rather by what he has learned of her life.

Creative Writing Element: The Jackal's Wedding

Chapter One: The Jackal's Wedding

The three teenage boys tore at the water, running through the shallows at first and then swimming hard to get to the centre of the flooded quarry. They slowed as they approached the young woman floating on her back in the high afternoon sun, each careful not to be the one that splashed her. She fanned her arms in and out as the boys caught their breaths, her chest and knees rising and falling in the water.

Jon pushed down with his hands and kicked a little; for a moment he stood taller than the others. His sucked in his stomach as his shadow fell across the young woman's breasts and he wondered if the beads of moisture that collected on her curves would now take longer to evaporate.

Miss Meyer was naked apart from her Ray-Bans and Jon hoped that beneath the polycarbonate, warm glances would be thrown in his direction when he spoke.

'She drives like a dream, Miss Meyer!' said Drayton.

'We got everything on the list.' Jon bobbed as he emptied and filled his lungs.

Drayton flicked water at Jon's face. 'No thanks to you.' He looked towards Miss Meyer and gestured at his friend with his thumb. 'He thought Rizzlas were bacon crisps!' If her face had been capable of manifesting a crease it didn't show it.

Jon launched himself at Drayton.

The third boy, Joules, brought his outstretched hands together in a soft, silent clap just under the surface. He floated out of the way and grimaced as his classmates set about drowning one another. He sat low in the water, his fleshy chest hidden in the refraction.

At first, the two boys seemed to take it in turns holding the other under. Jon was the first to tire, allowing Drayton to snatch ever larger mouthfuls of air until the abundance allowed him to laugh.

‘Stop it Drayton!’ shouted Miss Meyer.

Jon and Drayton’s fight fizzled out. They were both coughing.

Drayton contorted his face. ‘He started it, he jumped on me.’ Drayton looked to Joules for support.

Miss Meyer pushed the Ray-Bans just above her hairline. ‘The chain of disrespect started with you, Drayton.’

She took her right hand out of the water and slid it palm down across her lower stomach. She stopped just below her belly button and made a loose fist except for her middle finger which she used to scratch at an old stretch mark. There were faint little scars all about the area slipping in and out of the water, in and out of the light. They looked like silverfish dancing.

Miss Meyer turned her head towards the boys and watched them watch her chase away the itch. ‘We’re not all perfect you know.’ She pulled the Ray-Bans over her eyes and angled her head back towards the sun. She tucked her long black hair behind her ears. ‘My little trophies. Hmm. They were purple and angry once.’ She inflated her cheek with her tongue and chuckled. ‘A bit you like you guys. I’m quite fond of them now, but I thought of getting them treated a few years ago. Ractional Laser Resurfacing.’

She rolled in the water, front-to-back, back-to-front, slowly at first and then like a dervish, the tattoo design along her spine flitting in and out of sight too quickly to be made out.

Miss Meyer's little tsunami stopped after a few metres. She came to rest on her back and spread out her arms and legs once again. Toggling her limbs slowly between two positions, she looked like a flipbook animation of Da Vinci's Vitruvian man.

Jon, Drayton and Joules caught up, half-swimming, half-treading water. She let her lower body drop down under the surface of the water and then joined the boys, completing the diamond. She moved her arms in a circular motion to keep afloat, sinking occasionally as she wiped at her face. Her Ray-Bans were somewhere below, just beginning their long journey to the bottom.

She tapped her Rs as she spoke, staccato consonant bursts that threatened to roll on and on but always died off, like rattling shutters in a passing tropical storm. "Direct heat can cause DNA damage and not just there on the scars themselves, but also in the surrounding tissue. At least, that's what the brochure said.'

'Unintended consequences, Miss Meyer. They're everywhere.' Joules inched his way closer to the centre of the diamond. His eyes were pinched in the glare, the freckles on his face more prominent than they'd been that morning. 'Like how the act of observing a subatomic particle alters the speed or position of the particle.'

Miss Meyer's raised her eyebrows.

Drayton didn't notice. 'Shut your tits, Joules. We've got the discovery channel for that kind of shit.'

'Or, like when subjects in psychology experiments guess at what the experimenters want and then give it to them,' suggested Jon.

'Maybe,' said Miss Meyer. 'Tell me, if this quarry were a song, what kind of song would it be?'

Joules and Jon started to speak at the same time.

Miss Meyer pushed her hair back, her fingers combing through the thick black strands. 'You first Jon.'

'I dunno, something trippy.'

'C minus. Joules?'

Joules looked about the quarry and wondered about the faults and striations visible in the exposed rocks; what was pushing what and why. They were encircled by wide bands of limestone with narrower layers in between - fossil-rich cherts perhaps or shell moulds. The sharp angles that had been cut into the earth were a harsh counterpoint to the gentle copse rich folds of countryside beyond. The lesion, the disconnect, the fluids pooling where they shouldn't, the violence of it all, it made him think of lobotomies. Before he spoke, he looked at his friends and the new supply teacher they'd got to know in the weeks leading up to their final A-level exams. They were as much a part of the quarry as the coils of ammonite propping up the ledges and lips that loomed over the chilly pool they now swam in.

'Something complex, a bit atonal at times.' He closed his eyes and swallowed. 'Structured then going a bit crazy, lots of stopping and starting, dissonance then melody. Genre, hmmm, Maths Rock I guess.'

'Nice. You matriculate, bru.'

Drayton raced off towards the far side of the quarry before Miss Meyer had the chance to pose the question to him. Her smile was lost in the spray.

Miss Meyer, Jon and Joules watched Drayton a while, laughing as he swapped all kinds of hand semaphores with an old man standing high up on the quarry ridge. As Drayton made his way back to the group the one patch of cloud in an otherwise clear sky began to empty a light rain on the valley. The air grew cooler and a sudden draught rolled down off the one open, gently sloping side of the quarry.

Miss Meyer watched the droplets skitter on the breeze. Her voice was a whisper. 'Where I come from, we call a sun shower a jackal's wedding. Jakkals trou met wolf se vrou...'

Miss Meyer was the first to leave the water. She walked towards the mounds of clothes they'd left on the shore. The three teenagers were a few yards behind her. Jules was wearing shorts, but Drayton and Jon were naked. Jon held his hands in front of his groin; Drayton's were by his side, his shoulders straight and his step fluid. Miss Meyer didn't turn to face the three friends, instead, she bent over her clothes, picked at the bundle and began to dress. She knew they were looking at her, that was a given. But, she also knew where they were looking, so she smiled and put her top on first.

The lower half of her spine showed a back view of Lewis Carroll's Alice in her pinafore standing on a step ladder, the kind found in an old, grand library. To Alice's side, stretching from the 'floor' all the way up to the base of Miss Meyer's neck was a very tall, slightly untidy stack of books.

'Is your tattoo meant to symbolise something, Miss Meyer?' asked Drayton.

Jon groaned. 'Don't you mean "what is it meant to symbolise"?'

'You think I'm frivolous, Drayton?' asked Miss Meyer.

From the top of the slope they heard the old man shouting - he'd tracked them across the top of the ridge. He stabbed at the air with his walking stick as he made his way down to meet them.

'Are you demented?' He struck the ground with the stick. 'People have died swimming in there. Can't you bloody read? There are signs everywhere.'

'Bit late with the warning!' said Drayton. 'We're out of the water now.'

‘Don’t be such a clever little bastard. You saw me waving from the other side of the quarry.’ He moved closer to the group. His stick rose and fell with the volume of his voice. ‘And put some clothes on. I don’t come for walks here to see dicks and quims.’

Miss Meyer was part way through putting her knickers on. ‘We didn’t ask for your advice and we wouldn’t expect your help in the unlikely event of needing it. I don’t tell you how to live, so do me the courtesy of fucking off out of my bubble.’ She looked at the three classmates. ‘Hurry up.’

Jon and Drayton laughed hard; Joules stayed silent, his face creased, his lips puckered. Drayton held one arm across his midriff the other pointed at the old man like an exaggerated cartoon taunt.

The old man moved across the scree as quickly as he could, half shuffling, half surfing. He rushed towards Drayton and swung his stick at the boy’s legs. Drayton dodged and flicked the old man on the nose. The old man swung again and slipped, twisting his ankle as he fell. ‘You little bastard.’ His head lolled for a moment, then he pushed down hard on his stick, gripping tight with both hands. He looked as if he might stand, then he slumped back down.

Miss Meyer pulled her trousers on. Her voice was clear and carried in the bowl of rock. ‘There’s an African saying that teaches us when an old man fights young men for meat, they will grab his testicles thinking they are pieces of falling meat.’

‘Fuck off,’ said the old man.

Miss Meyer slipped on her flip-flops. ‘Come on, you can all dress back at the car.’

As they walked up the slope, Joules buckled every few steps as his weight pushed his feet deep into the sharper stones. As they neared the car Miss Meyer asked Drayton for her keys. She clicked the fob and watched the boys open the doors. Then, she walked around her car checking for damage. Satisfied, she popped the boot and searched through the shopping. She pulled out a bottle of Tizer and went to sit on the bonnet.

‘We should go and help him,’ said Joules.

Drayton shook his head. ‘Put your bra on pal and shut up.’

Down by the waterside the old man was holding his mobile in the air, moving it a few inches every few seconds, trying to find a friendly stretch of spectrum.

Joules started to walk back towards the slope. ‘He could be there all day.’

‘For fuck’s sakes,’ said Drayton. ‘Just hold on.’

Drayton fumbled in the back of the navy blue, Volkswagen Golf and took a notepad and pen out of his rucksack. He tore out a sheet and wrote - *Try texting, Gerry!*

He showed the sheet to Joules, then wrapped it around a stone and threw it down the slope. It landed by the old man. ‘Technical consultancy. Should charge him for it really.’

Joules shook his head and climbed into the Golf. Within minutes they were all inside and belted up. Miss Meyer was in the driver’s seat, Drayton in the passenger’s seat to her left. She put her hand on his knee and thanked him for taking good care of her car.

‘So,’ she said as she crunched the gear stick into first, ‘which one of you am I going to choose?’

Chapter Two: Crooked Wood

Harry pushed the memory stick into the side of the television. He sat down on the sofa and tapped at the remote control until the picture slideshow appeared. Each image showed the same subject - a woman in her late thirties or early forties, pretty, bottle blonde and playing to the camera. Harry paused the slideshow. The woman was lying on the ground on her side in what looked like a park. There were trees in the background, the grass was cut, and daisies, dandelions and clover sprouted all around. She was wearing a short, sleeveless denim dress covering just enough flesh to remain on the right side of decent. Her eyes were squinting slightly in the sunlight and she was smiling. Her right hand was pointing at her boots. They were covered in mud.

Harry slipped off his trousers and pants before using his Smartphone to select a track on the media centre. It was Karen's favourite - Dirty Boots by Sonic Youth. He imagined Karen as she might have been in 1991 listening to that song - an uninhibited young woman gyrating to the repetitive chords, eyes closed, arms spread wide, tipping this way then that as she caught imaginary thermals. Harry smiled at the thought of her barking along to Thurston Moore's monotone in some dark, smoke-filled cellar.

Harry sat on the edge of the sofa, his testicles swaying against the cold leather. He rubbed and tugged at his penis while looking at the frozen screen. After a few minutes, he stopped, stood up, and walked to the bathroom. Then, he stuck his fingers down his throat and half-filled the sink with vomit. He turned a tap on and coaxed lumps of food down the plug hole grate with his finger. He opened the cupboard above the sink and swigged from a bottle of liquid antacid. With the

sudden collision of ions, his right eye stretched open in pain as the other closed. His face spasmed and then relaxed.

‘Harry, put your pants on!’

Harry turned to face the young girl. The colour drained from his face. ‘I was just about to take a shower.’ He grabbed a towel and wrapped it around his waist.

‘Mum wouldn’t be happy with you leaving your clothes about the place.’

‘No, Mackie, she wouldn’t.’

Harry walked back to the living room, Mackie followed close behind.

‘I thought you were going to Sadie’s for hot dogs, Mackie. What’s up?’

‘Every time I see Sadie’s Mum, she’s crying. Maybe her eyes can’t take the onions on top of whatever’s else’s making her sad so she cancelled.’

‘I’ll make you a sandwich to take back out.’

Harry stood in the bay window looking across to the park and the yapping dogs chasing kite shadow across the big field. He could just make out Mackie laughing with another girl on the highest parapet of the adventure castle. Harry leant forward and pressed his face against the glass which was cool despite the high sun. His arms flopped by his side; it felt like his entire body weight was concentrated on his cheek. Mrs Tomlin, one of his neighbours, walked past on the pavement. Harry didn’t blink, he tried not to draw attention to himself, and when she waved, he just thought about the pressure on his vertebrae and pushed harder against the glass.

Soon, Mackie drifted out of sight and Harry made his way to the kitchen. The worktop quickly filled with tins as he sifted through the cupboards, pushing soups and vegetables one way, meats and carbs the other. He opened a tin of corned beef and an all day breakfast streaked with thick white gloops of fat. He cut a slice of

corned beef and spooned some of the breakfast on top. He raised the corned beef slice to his mouth, holding it like an open sandwich, and bit it in half. As he chewed, he went to the fridge and took out a packet of processed cheese. He wrapped the remainder of the corned beef in two of the yellow slices and forced the whole lot into his mouth.

Harry finished what was left of the open tins and the packet of cheese. Then, he cooked some noodles in the microwave. He buttered six pieces of bread while he waited for the ping. He made noodle sandwiches and soaked them with brown sauce. He washed them down with orange juice.

His phone chirped. It was Quid.

Fancy a pint, Harry? Half hour, Plough?

Harry walked to the bathroom and knelt in front of the toilet bowl. He started shaking. He put his hands on the sides of the seat and tried to suppress the slow, juddering wave that took over his body. He gripped the white plastic until it hurt. He released one of his hands and pushed the fingers to the back of his throat. As the bile began to rise, he bit down hard on his knuckles and partially retracted his fingers. The urge to vomit subsided. He looked at the indentations on his hand, glad again that pain had stopped him surrendering to breathless tears.

Harry returned to the kitchen and opened a cupboard. He took out a bottle of spirits and glugged until the burning inside made his eyes stream.

Harry took his phone out of his pocket and typed a text to his dead wife.

It stops today, sweetheart.

He moved through the contacts list, selected Karen and hit send.

Then, Harry typed a reply to Quid.

Just try and stop me!

*

Bile stung the back of Harry's throat as he walked down Greenway Avenue. His mouth tasted like shit. He laughed at the realisation, remembering the name of a chemical from a physiology lecture twenty years earlier that seemed to tie everything together neatly. 'Bullshit!' he shouted. It came out as a gargle as the half-truths and the peppermints and the taurocholic acid swished about his tonsils. An old lady shambling along the opposite pavement sped up. 'Bullshit!' he shouted again.

Harry met Quid outside The Plough. He put his hand on his friend's back prompting him inside. As they navigated the double doors he asked, 'How did Drayton do?'

'CDU'

'Sounds like a counter terrorism or black ops unit.'

'Aye! He did a damn fine job of keeping what he'd learned a secret from the examiners that's for sure.'

'What did he get the C in?'

'Praise be, you're the first fucker not to ask what he got the U in!'

Harry put his hands on the edge of the bar. 'You know me, glass always half full...'

'Arse!' chuckled Quid.

The barmaid looked up from the small screen and shook her head. Then, she placed the phone in a gap between the crisps and the alcopops and shuffled across to the new arrivals.

Harry nudged Quid and looked the barmaid in the eye. ‘Why’s this place called The Plough when there aren’t any fields near here? Shouldn’t it be called the Canal Tavern or the Lock Inn or something?’

The barmaid tilted her head to the side. Her voice was soft and heavily accented. ‘Are you pissing on me?’

‘No, he’s not love,’ said Quid. ‘We know someone who’d pay for the opportunity though.’

Harry smiled at the barmaid. ‘Two pints of best, please.’

‘Fuck you. I not serving.’

The barmaid shuffled back to the far side of the bar and carried on where she’d left off with her phone.

The Plough was quiet. It was post-lunch and the remains of the burgers, lasagnes and goat’s cheese wraps had been cleared from the tables. The last two customers, a man and a woman in their early thirties, had been scrutinising their tourist brochures when Harry and Quid entered. Now, they were standing, and putting on the rain jackets they’d pulled from their small rucksack.

The shower had come without warning. At first, it felt like the old building was tingling or stretching, the ancient timbers and thatch waking to welcome an old friend. There was a musical quality to the way the raindrops pinged and tickled the loose-fitting glass of the windows. For a few minutes the inside of The Plough darkened as clouds gathered above the town. It was as if the lights had been dimmed in an auditorium. Even the brasses that covered the walls looked dull.

Harry turned towards the couple as they made their way between the tables to leave. ‘Were you just laughing at us?’

‘No, not at all,’ said the man.

Harry took a step forward. 'You think not getting served is fucking funny?'

'Look, I'll buy you and your mate a drink, problem solved, OK? We can all enjoy the rest of the day then.' The man looked towards the barmaid. 'Whatever these gentlemen are having, please.'

'I not serving those fuckers.'

Harry ignored the barmaid and jabbed the male tourist in the chest with his finger. 'Who the fuck are you to tell me what circumstances and conditions have to be in place in order for me to "enjoy the rest of the day"?''

The tourist took a step back and raised his hands. 'OK, I admit it, we were laughing, but not at what was going on over here. We weren't listening. We were laughing at a joke we heard earlier.'

'Which was?' asked Harry.

'Which was what?' asked the tourist.

'C'mon Harry,' said Quid, 'I just want a quiet pint.'

'Which was what! What the fuck's that? You don't get extra points for a triple pronoun sentence.'

'Pronoun, verb, adjective actually - with alliteration,' said the woman.

'Oh, so the top heavy totty can talk.'

The tourist put his arm around his girlfriend and steered her towards the door. 'Come on, Gail.'

Harry stepped in front of them, blocking their exit.

The tourist removed his arm from Gail's shoulder. 'Tell me, why do you call a rock an asteroid when it's outside the earth's atmosphere, but a hemorrhoid when it's dangling from your arse on a stalk?'

Harry screwed his face and turned his head towards Quid. 'What?'

As Harry turned, the tourist crouched slightly and threw his arm forwards and upwards towards Harry's chin. The movement looked a lot like an uppercut, but the tourist's wrist was rotated the opposite way to which you'd expect, with the heel of his palm presenting and the fist loose.

Harry side-stepped the move and slapped the tourist hard across the ear. The tourist staggered back.

'What the living piss was that supposed to be?' asked Harry. 'A fucking palm heel strike in a fucking pub on a summer afternoon! Jesus. What are you? Some kind of fucking incompetent assassin?'

Quid was doubled-up laughing. The words came out in twos and threes. 'You've been watching too many self-defence videos on Youtube Tourist-Boy, now, fuck off back to your tent.'

Harry started laughing hard. 'Jesus Christ, do as he says you little shit-streak Ninja before proceedings take us to Nastyville. I was just messing with you. Why do some people take things so seriously? What's wrong with you escalating shit like that? You're lucky I'm so fucking mild mannered.'

Gail took her boyfriend by the arm and marched him out of the pub.

The barmaid was standing with her arms folded. 'You lucky Jaakob not here. He start in five minutes.' She pointed towards the rear entrance to the pub. 'You go out that way cunts and leave them alone. Now!'

Harry and Quid sat on the canal side dangling their legs just above the waterline. The flagstones were damp and slick from the recent shower and the footpath was yet to return to its busy normality.

Quid inhaled deeply. 'I love the way the world smells after it rains.'

'It's an evolutionary thing,' began Harry, 'drought bad, rain good.' He waved his arms as he explained. 'When it's dry, plants secrete their oils into the soil, and the longer the dry spell, the more oils. When the rain comes these oils get activated and release some of those lovely smells that are so obviously giving you the horn.'

'When you start lecturing, there's usually some kind of...um, *you're all fucking thick* element to what you have to say.'

Harry guffawed and snorted. 'Seeing as you ask! This phenomenon's called petrichor, Greek for stone, *petra*, and blood of the gods, *ichor*. It doesn't smell nice at all, nothing does. It's all association, it's what it signifies that matters and how that response is hardwired into us. If it smelled of shit we'd still love it.'

'So in another universe, the equation of life might be something like: Shit equals end of drought equals good times?'

'Precisely.'

The breeze picked up for a moment and shook the leaves of a large ash overhanging the opposite bank. Dozens of large droplets fell on the black surface of the canal.

Harry extended his arms and brought his thumbs and index fingers together with their opposites, like a photographer framing a shot. 'All those folds and ripples and little pits look like a close up of a rhino's arse.'

'What was all that about in The Plough? Fighting! You could at least have waited until we'd had a pie and a pint.'

'I was just pissing around. Feeling a little wicked. I wouldn't have touched him, you know that.'

‘Got to compliment that guy on his distraction tactics though. Haemorrhoids!’
Quid turned to face his friend. Suddenly he looked more serious. ‘You pissed off about something? Joules did good didn’t he? He must have.’

‘Straight As. Quite a tedious kid actually. Not much of a parental challenge.’

‘Missing Karen?’

Harry planted a thumb on his forehead and pressed hard. ‘Are you asking for a punch? Of course I’m fucking missing Karen, that’s never going to change.’ He made a fist with his right hand and hit one of the flagstones in a hammering motion. ‘We were supposed to be going on a road trip this summer.’ He opened and closed his fingers to shake off the pain. ‘Having Mackie from his grandparents seemed like such a good idea at the time.’

‘You did a great thing there, Harry. Everyone’s in awe of you, mate.’

‘Yeah, I’m a right saint. Geldoff Mark II.’ Harry continued in falsetto. ‘Taking on an orphan, another man’s child, isn’t he just wonderful!’

Quid frowned and shook his head. He let his friend continue.

‘I barely know the kid and I understand it’s not her fault, but every time I see her or hear her clanking around in her room, she reminds me that her mother’s not here.’

‘C’mon, she’d been with you two years before the accident.’

‘Shared custody. Mackie was with us three-and-a-half days a week. Karen’d be clucking around her every other second and I’d be in work until six or doing some job around the house or out having a pint with you. It was never just me and her and now it’s always just me and her, twenty-four seven.’

‘You thought about going back to work yet?’

Harry nodded. ‘Aye, thought about it and rejected it.’

‘How is Mackie?’

‘Let’s talk about chemicals some more.’

Quid pushed down on the flagstones, one arm either side of his body, and raised himself off the ground. He held the position for as long as he could - a second. ‘Christ, I’m getting old. Talking about smells, who’s this bird our boys are sniffing around?’

‘Dunno.’ Harry waved his hand dismissively. ‘Did you know that really earthy smell you get after it rains is actually caused by bacteria? The rain sends their spores and a compound called geosmin into the air which is carried by the moisture to your nose.’

Quid chuckled. ‘I do now! I didn’t realise sun showers were so...transformative.’

‘They’re not, they just help along what’s already there building up. It’s all interesting shit. Back to why we like that smell - is it in our genes or cultural knowledge...’

Harry was cut-off mid-sentence. He felt something hard crash into his upper back. He twisted as he fell into the water. He saw Gail snarling on the footpath, her boyfriend dragging her back towards the spur that led to the main road. As Harry went under the whole world shifted an octave. Did Gail shout ‘cunt’ or ‘cultural synaesthesia’? He couldn’t tell. He swallowed mouthfuls of dirty canal water as he sunk to the bottom. When his feet met the canal bed he kicked hard and clawed at the water with his hands. That’s all he knew was that when he surfaced and emptied his stomach of rat’s piss and lunch, it was the first time in a long while he hadn’t had to make himself sick.

Chapter Three: Tintinnabulation

Miss Meyer dried the table and chairs with her cardigan, before tossing it behind the sprawling azalea that framed her corner of the beer garden. She sat down and put her bag on the nearest chair. The mirrored stars and moons that decorated the brown leather flashed the purples and pinks of the flower bed around the curves and gaps and slats of the aluminium furniture. The cobbled courtyard was slick with recent rain and the air was filling with birdsong and the scents released by the blaze of a newly clear summer sky.

She took a book from her bag and placed it on the table. She opened it at the bookmark and fell into the rhythm of reading.

The barman propped open the door to the lounge with a thick, key-shaped wedge. He stepped into the courtyard and made his way over to Miss Meyer.

The barman was in his late twenties, his accent East European. ‘Can I get you anything?’

Miss Meyer closed her book. She looked up at the barman and smiled. ‘A large Bailey’s and a random packet of crisps, please.’

The barman looked at the book on the table. ‘Arvo Pärt! Hey, he was born about twenty kilometres from where I’m from. Is the book any good?’

‘No. It’s only the sound of his music playing in my head that’s got me this far. Do you want it? I’m only going to throw it.’

The barman ran his hand over his stubble, sweeping from one ear to the other and back again. ‘Not behind that bush I hope!’

Her body tensed and relaxed in a quiet chuckle. ‘Are all men from Paide that observant?’

‘Near Paide, remember. But, yes, we’re all kinds of things, cool things. We’re smart - Hermann Hesse comes from there, or at least his father did. And, we’re very beautiful - even Carmen Kass looks ordinary when she comes back home.’

‘How long you been over here?’

The barman slid a chair out from the table.

‘Don’t get too comfortable, I want my Bailey’s.’

The barman leaned on the chair. ‘I’ve been here five years.’ He licked a small cold sore on the edge of his lower lip. ‘I’ll be going back to Estonia in a few months.’

Miss Meyer stretched to her side and pinched a handful of buds. ‘In China, they call this the “thinking of home bush”.’ She shook the petals over the tabletop. Somewhere beyond the courtyard walls, voices rose and fell against the quiet background hiss and whoosh of water.

‘I wonder if there’s a “this country’s too fucking expensive to live in bush?”’

Miss Meyer smiled. ‘Very good!’ She tilted her head.

‘What?’

‘Get your motor running.’ Her voice half sung the words.

‘Why do I get the feeling that everything is some kind of reference or in-joke to you?’

‘Because it is.’

‘Go on then.’

Miss Meyer exhaled with considerable exaggeration. ‘Hermann Hesse, you know, your mate from Paide, well he wrote the novel *Steppenwolf* and the American band of the same name wrote...’

‘*Born to be Wild*. OK, professor, I’ll get my motor running, I’ll go get your drink.’

Miss Meyer took an A4 pad and a pen out of her bag. She drew a circle that filled the page. She divided the circle into segments. The largest segment ate up two-thirds of the pie; inside, she wrote a capital S and a 1 - S1. The next largest segment ate up a little over half of the remaining space; inside, she wrote a capital N. The small segment between ten-thirty and midnight she further divided and crammed with the labels : S2, Z1, Z2, M and B. Then, she put her pen in the centre of the page and spun it. It came to rest in the S1 segment. She spun it again, and again, and again. S1. After a dozen attempts, each yielding S1, she tore out the page and threw it behind the azalea.

Miss Meyer rubbed her forehead. 'Sweet fuckery.'

With a sigh she drew another pie chart. This time, she reduced the size of the S1 segment to fifty percent. The remaining segments increased correspondingly in size. The pen spun just once. N. She put the pad back in her bag and nodded.

The barman returned to the courtyard with a glass of Bailey's and a packet of pork scratchings. He put them on the table and walked across to the large, double wooden gates that led onto the footpath and the canal. He lifted a couple of latches, strained against the weight, and with a series of jerks, the cobbles screeched a warning to the world outside.

The barman walked back to Miss Meyer's table and sat down on the chair he'd leaned on earlier.

Miss Meyer rummaged in her purse for money.

The barman raised his hand. 'No, my treat. Well, my boss's really, only he doesn't know it.'

Miss Meyer extended the open packet of pork scratchings to the barman. 'Is it always this quiet?'

He waved the packet away, turned his head to one side, closed his eyes and gritted his teeth. 'There's a vintage car show on the other side of town. It'll pick up here later.' He let out a loud pah! 'How can you eat those things?'

'You can't stand them, yet you thought them appropriate for me? Charming!'

'You asked for random, you got it!'

'I also asked for crisps, which these are not.' Miss Meyer crunched on another scratching. 'I quite like them actually. This country has its quirky little charms.'

'Hmm. So, you're not British.'

'Nup.'

The barman smiled. 'All you English speakers sound the same to me.'

'I'm from Namibia, just above South Africa on the map. Big dry place on the left with lots of sand.'

'Yeah, I know it, drove past it one day on my way to the gym.'

Miss Meyer kept a straight face. 'You don't look like you work out!'

The bar man put his hands on the table and shifted his weight forward. 'You're very pretty. You could be a model. Not a catwalk model, more...'

Miss Meyer fished a lipstick from her bag and held her arm above her shoulder as if to throw. 'Yes?'

'More a catalogue model for one of the high street stores. You know, one old men who haven't got broadband look at when they want to march the penguin.'

The lipstick hit the barman on the nose. 'Ouch!'

'Don't you mean hand to gland combat?' Miss Meyer popped another scratching into her mouth. 'I'll have you know, people say I look like Gisele Bündchen.' She undid her scrunchie and flicked her hair about her shoulders.

'She a wrestler?'

‘Shut up! She’s your pal Carmen Kass’s BFF.’

‘Is this Gazelle Bumchum one of your lot, German?’

‘She’s a Brazilian German.’ Miss Meyer licked salt from her lips. ‘But, I’m neither. Contrary to popular belief most white Namibians aren’t of German descent. I’m from an altogether different displaced tribe.’

‘Jaakob! Jaakob!’

‘I’d better go,’ said the barman. ‘I’ll be back in five. Got a short lunch break then.’

Miss Meyer watched Jaakob as he returned inside, taking note of how his clothes moved on his body, twisting and straightening on his shoulders, imagining the beginnings of eddies in the cloth as he curled his way between tables.

Miss Meyer stood as a barge slid past from right to left on its way to the nearby lock. There was a family on board, pointing ahead and smiling in anticipation of what was probably their first attempt at working the gates. She stepped onto the path and scanned to the right as far as the bend allowed. She could see five or six long boats moored. Most were packed bow to stern with small gaps in between. These appeared to be semi-permanent, some homes, some businesses. Towards the far end of the line the gaps widened with missing barges. There were two men walking near one of those gaps towards the pub. One was coughing and appeared to have recently climbed out of the canal.

Miss Meyer heard a noise from within the courtyard. She turned. Jaakob was sitting at her table drinking a coffee. She joined him and sat down.

‘Are people running businesses from some of those boats?’ she asked.

‘Hmmm,’ Jaakob swallowed. ‘I stay on the second one along. It’s a hairdressers. The owner’s gone abroad for a month and is letting me stay there at a very reduced rate.’

‘Are you working tonight?’

‘I finish at eight,’ replied Jaakob.

‘Do you fancy a few drinks?’

‘Here?’

‘Why not?’

Jaakob nodded his head. ‘OK.’

Miss Meyer’s phone beeped. ‘Excuse me,’ she said, ‘I do private tuition and I’ve got a couple of customers pestering me for a prolonged, intensive schedule of study and I’ve only got room for one.’

She tapped at the phone, selected two recipients and sent the words:

I’m sorry, but it’s not you.

She tapped at the phone, selected a single recipient and sent the message:

It’s you. Midnight pickup. Be ready.

‘Where was I? Yes, um, deal - we’ve got a date.’ She extended her hand. ‘My name’s Kimberly Meyer by the way.’

*

Jaakob leant across the table. ‘You know, my mate Arvo Pärt from Paide, he said the most amazing things.’

Miss Meyer looked amused. ‘What did he say?’

‘His method of writing music was called tintinnabulation and of it he said “One plus one, it is one - it is not two.”’ Jaakob wiped his sleeve across his mouth. ‘How about that?’

‘Are you sure that’s not the Spice Girls?’

‘Hey, c’mon now!’

Miss Meyer stood and took Jaakob’s hand. ‘It’s closing time, besides, I think we’ve both had enough to drink...’

‘You haven’t had half enough!’

‘So, when are you going to show me this long boat of yours?’

The long boat trembled as they stepped onboard. Jaakob was in front leading Miss Meyer past the numerous obstacles on the deck. They kicked flower pots and tripped over wicker ottomans as they made their way to the door that led to the living quarters.

Jaakob giggled as he tried the key in the lock. ‘Shhhhhh!’ he said.

‘Who can hear us?’

‘Just the fish.’ Jaakob snorted. ‘Just the fish!’

The towpath was quiet and the other barges were in darkness. The sky was clear, but the stars were dim and blurred. They were too close to town. Miss Meyer thought how magical it must be to lie on the prow of a boat in the middle of nowhere far from the urban heat and light islands, floating amongst the stream of suns and worlds.

They stepped inside the cabin and Jaakob flicked on the lights. The first room was the salon. There was a single styling chair, a sofa for waiting customers and a worktop and shelf full of product and equipment. The next room was a tiny kitchen that opened into the living and sleeping area. The bed was already folded down and there were clothes draped over the television. There were takeaway wrappers piled

on an easy chair, the styrofoam and bright red fonts at odds with the pastoral scenes decorating the walls.

‘Excuse me,’ said Jaakob as he made his way to the far side of the room. He stumbled through a door.

Miss Meyer could hear him pissing - short, loud, aggressive bursts. She pretended to conduct the splashes whilst her bag slowly slipped from her shoulder. She put the bag on the floor as Jaakob returned. He positioned himself directly in front of her and extended a hand to her cheek.

‘This way,’ she said, pulling Jaakob towards the bed.

He leaned into kiss.

‘Not with that fucking cold sore.’

Miss Meyer undid Jaakob’s shirt buttons as he struggled to maintain his balance. She helped him take the rest of his clothes off and then pushed him onto the bed. He landed face first.

‘Jesus, Jesus why doesn’t this barge stop spinning?’

Miss Meyer took off Jaakob’s shoes and removed the laces. She climbed onto the bed and sat astride the prone Estonian, her knees either side of the base of his spine. She used the laces to tie his hands together.

Jaakob moaned. ‘Kus suitsu, seal tuld.’

It took three blows to the back of the head with the empty beer bottle for Jaakob’s wimpering to stop. Miss Meyer paused after each blow, giving Jaakob ample opportunity to lose consciousness in his own time.

Miss Meyer checked his pulse. ‘Good,’ she said.

The next fifteen minutes were spent ransacking the barge. She took a mobile phone, a seven inch tablet computer, several credit cards, a small bag of weed and eight hundred pounds in cash.

‘Not bad,’ she said. ‘The least I can do is clean you up a bit.’

She took a long, thin implement from her bag and climbed onto the bed. She rubbed her hands across Jaakob’s back, stopping occasionally to pick away with a nail.

‘Gold mine!’

She pressed the hooped end of the implement hard against his skin. Blackheads erupted as she inched across the junction between neck and left shoulder.

‘A host of obsidian daffodils growing towards the sun! Comedones, my friend. Look at those gluttonous worms go!’

She took a strip of neatly cut cardboard from her bag. It was a little longer than a cigarette packet. There were four circles spaced across it. The first had a brown smear inside. It had been covered with a piece of Sellotape. Underneath was written the date. Miss Meyer scooped some of the debris from Jaakob’s back with a fingernail and coaxed it into the second circle.

Chapter Four: Nothing Straight

Drayton placed the wireless headphones and microphone on his head. While the console started up he walked to his bedroom window and looked down the street. The pavements were drying out leaving behind haphazard patterns of darker tarmac. A number of the shapes, reflecting perhaps, the symmetry of some structure or positioning of materials just under the surface, were almost Rorschach. One of the fading smears looked like a leg. Drayton imagined it solidifying and rising into the air. Then, spinning slowly it was joined by the rest of Miss Meyer's body parts.

As the martial music filled his headphones he turned from the window and took a seat on the floor near the console. He picked up a controller and leaned back against a bean bag. On the screen, a TV on a nearby dresser, he moved the cursor from the Avatar labelled *Drayts*, and instead selected *PunkFreud*.

He joined the battle near a bridge on the North/South Korean border. He stepped behind a tree for cover, taking a moment to orientate himself. The enemy was laying down sporadic suppressing fire.

'Yo, Punk!' said the American accented voice. A faint orange aura surrounded one of the soldiers in the company of ten or so soldiers. The name *Zooma* appeared in a panel on the right-hand side of the display. 'It's been a while.'

Drayton disguised his voice. 'Been busy slotting gooks for real.' He sounded like a poor impersonation of a gangster from Leipzig.

The orange aura shifted to another avatar. *Mexicant*. A stream of bullets floated over *PunkFreud's* head. 'Careful with the shit you talk.'

Drayton ducked as the screen filled with bark spray. Metal thudded into wood.

Zooma, the company leader, issued verbal instructions to the rest of the players. 'No pot shots at each other, OK! Now, fan out. *Crazy-J*, I want that Jeep. We'll cover. One - two - three. Go!'

Jon's avatar, *Crazy-J*, made a run for the Jeep as the rest of the company emptied their magazines. Halfway to the Jeep, *Crazy-J* went into a low crouch and then a roll. As he came up onto his feet, he locked the gun into continuous fire mode and filled the air with cordite. The magazine emptied and the avatar just stood there.

'What the fuck you doing *Crazy-J*? The Jeep!'

Bullets began to thud into the ground near *Crazy-J*. Then, a bullet glanced off his shoulder. The avatar's hand went to the wound.

An orange aura now surrounded most of the players. They were all shouting. 'Move!'

A bullet hit *Crazy-J* in the chest, then another hit his stomach. He fell to the floor. The body twitched as more bullets found their target.

Zooma sounded tired. '*Crazy-J*, what the fuck you doing?'

There was no answer.

Drayton took his headphones off. 'What the fuck?'

He played with the controls, preparing to exit the game gracefully and save his avatar.

'No way. No fucking way!'

Drayton rushed to the bedside cabinet. His avatar started taking hits. He could hear the other players shouting, a tinny cacophony leaking from his headset.

He picked up his phone. He checked for messages. None. He checked the signal. None.

He tripped his way to the window and held his phone out over the street. Ten seconds. Nothing. One minute. Nothing. He rebooted his phone. A message alert was flashing,

I'm sorry, but it's not you.

Drayton ran downstairs and out into the late afternoon.

*

Jon lay on the edge of his bed, face down, reaching inside one of the storage compartments below. He pulled out a cardboard box, flipped the lid onto the floor and fished out a fat envelope. He rolled onto his back, took out the bundle of sheets and held it up to daylight. The paper was thick, embossed, something to run the fingers over - an indulgence you wouldn't expect from an I.T. company. The letter outlined a job offer as a tester with the Electronic Games Foundation, Santa Monica, California. It was dated March, five months earlier. Along with the letter, came a whole load of paperwork to initiate the process of obtaining a visa and work permit.

Jon put the letter to the side. His eyes narrowed. His upper lip rose exposing white from incisor to canine. He could recite the letter by heart.

...Following on from the recent emails exchanged, we'd like to reiterate how impressed we've been with your exploits on The Titans of Deliverance. You consistently rank in the top five players globally. You are quite literally one in a million...

Jon rolled off the bed and onto the floor. He emptied the shoe box and picked through the contents, repacking some items, leaving others where they were. He put the lid on the box and returned it to the storage compartment.

There were a handful of different flyers on the carpet, each depicting the same young woman. She was a natural blond with a tendency to dye black, her hair cut in a bob, tall and with an ease of posture that comes to those with an active lifestyle. She was beautiful, but slightly glazed looking; well-proportioned, but photo shopped to titillation. Her name was D'Arcy Ragsdale, the venues advertising her gigs a hundred miles and more away in London. The backs of the flyers were all signed. The older ones carried short messages - 'Skype you soon babes', 'Miss you more than Ben and Jerry's', 'Keep that pillow warm for me'.

Mixed amongst the flyers were tickets for the cinema, the zoo and a theme park. There was also an ancient cassette walkman and a mixtape she'd made for Jon back in the days when she was still quirky. It was both joke and romantic gesture. The wrapper of the first sweet they'd shared was somewhere amongst the pile too. Lastly, there was a large box of matches with a lipstick print of D'arcy's lips on the one side.

Jon picked all the memorabilia off the floor and carried it out onto the landing and into the bathroom. He put the matches on the side of the bath and tipped the rest of the stuff into the toilet bowl. Then, he went downstairs and returned with a half-full bottle of lighter fluid which he poured on top of the fliers and the tickets and the walkman. He closed the door and pulled down the blinds. The room was gloomy if not dark.

He took a match from the matchbox and struck it. He used the flame to set the box itself alight. When it became too hot to hold he threw it into the toilet bowl and jumped back.

There was a loud sucking sound as much of the oxygen in the room was consumed in a dance of oranges and pale blues. Then, the fire fell back and swirled within the confines of the bowl, blackening the paper to ash, melting the edges of the portable music player. Jon stepped closer and watched the intensity fade to more slowly furling and unfurling curls of yellow. It reminded him of a torch on the wall of a tomb in game which winks out and leaves you blind before you've filled up with treasure. Jon flushed the chain and returned to his room. The flames went out and the walkman bobbed in the spray.

Jon fired up his console and put his headphones and microphone on. Then, he joined the game *The 38th Parallel*. He went through the usual drill - crouch down, find cover, check gun, top-up ammo, and wait for instructions from company leader. Two other players joined - *Mexicant* and *PunkFreud*. Guns started firing, avatars started moving all about the screen, players were shouting down their microphones across the continents. Jon, *Crazy-J* was under orders to take the jeep. He made it half-way.

Chirrup.

Jon reached for his phone.

I'm sorry, but it's not you.

Jon took his headphones off and walked out of the house. Then, he ran. His avatar started taking hits, slowly at first.

*

Joules sat on a bench on the far side of the park. Several hundred metres away stood his home. Somewhere in between, Mackie was playing with her friends. Joules was perched on the outer slat, ready to stand and make his exit should his step-sister wander over.

‘Why do they call you Joules?’

‘Jesus! Where did you come from?’

The girl pointed to a gap in the railings leading onto the main road.

‘Your name’s not Julian.’

‘Yes it is!’

The girl was around six years old. Joules didn’t know her name, but he’d seen her in the playground before. ‘No, it’s not!’

‘OK, it’s not. I’m called Joules because I’m a fat bastard.’

The girl laughed and put her hand over her mouth. ‘Huh?’

‘Calories, kilo-joules, you know?’

‘Hmm, no!’ The girl turned away from Joules and then looked back at him.

‘Mackie’s coming. Is she your sister?’

‘Fuck’s sake,’ said Joules as he rose to his feet and trotted along the path and out of the park. He carried on for another minute, until he felt his breath start to go near the junction with Park Avenue.

Drayton was the first to find him. ‘Where the fuck’s that cunt?’

‘He’s probably in the pub with your dad.’

‘I mean, Jon, you twat, not your dad.’

‘Your guess is as good as mine. On his way to the airport with Miss Meyer?’

Drayton kicked the park railings. 'Fuck! Fuck! Fuck!' He walked away from Joules - ten or twenty steps - then turned and walked back again. He tapped at his phone and held it to his ear. 'Bastard's still not answering.'

They heard footsteps approaching. Someone was running hard. Jon came around the corner and stopped. He and Drayton were facing each other, just feet apart. They sprung forward and collided with a thud. They fell to the floor throwing punches at each other. Then, they rolled onto the road.

One of the van's tyres pinched Jon's thigh as it came to a stop. The driver jumped out and shouted obscenities at the two boys. He grabbed them by their shirt collars and dragged them onto the pavement.

'You two mental or something?'

Jon stood for a moment and then lowered himself to the floor. His right hand gripped his right thigh. He looked at Drayton and shook his head. He lifted his right leg and stamped hard on the ground. 'Pffffff.' He sucked air in fast, gritting his teeth, and then he laid back and relaxed into the pavement.

The driver looked at Joules. 'Girl trouble?'

'Aye,' said Joules. He pointed to Jon. 'He got the girl...' Then he pointed at Drayton. 'And, he didn't.'

'What!?' Jon was shouting, his pitch wavering with the pain in his leg. 'I got a very, very fucking terse Dear John.'

Jon and Drayton ignored Joules as he said 'Me too!'

Drayton's voice was a whisper. 'Me too.' He walked to the railings, spread his arms wide and lowered his upper body over the spikes. 'What a cow.'

'Bullshit!' said Jon.

Drayton walked over and showed him his text message. Jon did the same with his phone.

Jon tried to get up onto one knee. 'How do I know she didn't send you two? A fake one to show us and a real one to say you'd been chosen?'

'How do I know she didn't send you two?'

None of the three boys spoke for a while, instead, they listened to the whine and chug of buses and lorries, the sounds of the streets, shouting, banging, sliding and beeping.

Drayton broke the silence. 'Who's up for a couple of bottles of Thunderbird up the woods?'

Jon nodded.

Drayton extended his arm and helped his injured friend to his feet.

Chapter Five: LCD

Miss Meyer followed the towpath towards the other side of town and the Avonford Hotel. The two mile walk took her over fifty minutes. After leaving the cluster of barges near The Plough she strolled under alternating patches of open sky and tree cover. To her left, the canal was still save for the occasionally splash of eel, gudgeon and stickleback. To her right, a syrup-stoned wall rose and fell like a sine wave, but here and there the formula failed at a pile of stones or a straight, well-maintained run. She stopped at the first bench she found and watched moonlight splash a bright ball of silver on the water.

Miss Meyer took Jaakob's phone from her bag and spent a few minutes trying out a handful of obvious unlock patterns before tossing it into the canal. Then, she took out the tablet computer. The tablet fired-up and opened without any security checks. There were hundreds of photos distributed across half-a-dozen albums - Edinburgh 2012, London, Petra, Pere, Avonford and Porn.

The first two albums contained shots of Jaakob and friends near monuments and neon of international note. The third album showed Jaakob with a young, tall, dark-haired woman not dissimilar to Miss Meyer herself. Miss Meyer chuckled and moved onto the final three albums. Pere was full of family photographs, Avonford contained nature and architectural shots of the local area and Porn was dedicated to high-performance sports cars. Miss Meyer swiped, pinched and tapped the screen. The photos collapsed into an abyss of zeros and were gone.

The tablet was full of music too. She deleted every song bar one - Norwegian Wood by the Beatles. She set the song to play as she continued removing all trace of Jaakob from the device. For a moment, she fancied the exquisite sitar playing had

brought the moths to the bench, then she threw her head back and laughed at the thought of the little, square LCD moon she could summon and dismiss with a squeeze of her finger, all the little flapping creatures she could disorientate.

Further along the footpath, near the old Tithe Barn, Miss Meyer stopped at a low section of wall to listen to teenagers fuck. She rested her elbows on top of the stonework. She peered down the slope, trying to pinpoint the exact source of the grunting and squealing amongst the shadows cast by the barn.

Miss Meyer lit some matches and flicked them in the direction of the grunting. They flashed through the black, brief like phosphorous meteors.

‘Have you found the oblivion switch yet?’ she shouted.

The grunting stopped. Miss Meyer set the matchbox alight, waited for it to catch, waited for the matches inside to start popping. Then, she tossed the mini-fireball into the air.

‘Go fuck yourself!’ The voice was female, mature.

The box of matches fizzled out in the grass.

There was a man’s voice too, quiet, asking the woman to leave it be.

‘Can I join in?’ shouted Miss Meyer.

‘I swear I’m going to slap that bitch all the way back to Australia.’

‘Gail, don’t - let’s just go back to the hotel.’

‘Namibia, not Australia,’ corrected Miss Meyer. ‘Anyway, what’s the problem? When the lights are off, most people tend get moist at the thought of doing the shit they rally against in polite company. Let me come down and stick a thumb up your arse, you know you want me to!’

‘Stop Gail! What the hell’s got into you?’

‘Not you, that’s for sure.’

Miss Meyer saw the outline of a woman emerge from the gloom and stride up the slope towards the footpath. Miss Meyer attracted her with a wave before shuffling across to a section of wall low enough for the woman to climb over.

Knickers aside, Gail was naked from the waist down. She straightened her top as she drew level with Miss Meyer. Her large breasts caused the fabric to gape as her shoulders stiffened; one button was fastened to the wrong hole. She puffed her chest out further and spat a feeble, almost entirely spittle free spit at Miss Meyer.

‘Come on then!’ said the Namibian.

Gail reached over the wall and prodded Miss Meyer in the arm.

Miss Meyer prodded Gail back, building a little on the force that lay behind the prod she’d received.

Gail prodded Miss Meyer in the other arm, losing her balance momentarily.

‘Ouch!’ said Miss Meyer.

Miss Meyer dipped down out of sight and then rose back up, arm extended, discharging pepper spray in Gail’s face.

Gail fell to her knees wailing.

Miss Meyer tutted. ‘You’re all blouse and no trousers, *hoer!*’

Miss Meyer picked up her things and continued along the footpath. Somewhere behind, somewhere in a dark, capsicum mist, Gail looked for her husband on all fours.

The night sky became cloudier as Miss Meyer made her way along the footpath. Near its end the scene became thick with street lamps and the flash of headlights winding their way past the edge of Avonford. The only celestial bodies to be seen were the mirrored stars and moons of Miss Meyer’s bag.

A few minutes later she was sitting in her car outside the ivy clad Avonford Hotel. She popped open the glove compartment and took out the keycard for her room. She got out of the car, closed the door and made her way to the foyer to settle her bill. A group of late arrivals kept her waiting for a while, then, finally, pleasantries were exchanged with the receptionist and a credit card was handed over with the room key.

‘Do you need any help with your luggage?’

‘No thank you, I loaded the car up earlier.’

The transaction complete, Miss Meyer returned to her car.

‘Safe journey, Mrs Roberts.’

Miss Meyer slammed on her brakes just as she pulled out of the hotel driveway and onto the main road. A man and woman were in her path arguing, facing off against each other either side of the white line. The woman prodded the man in the shoulder. They both brought their hands to their faces to shield their eyes from Miss Meyer’s headlights.

‘Shit.’

Miss Meyer reversed the car, turning the wheel sharply. She accidentally set the wipers off. She put the car into first; there was now a clear route past the obstruction. The couple dropped their hands and turned to look at the car. The woman started to cross the road, she raised her arm pointing. The woman started shouting. Even in the gloom, Miss Meyer could see that the woman’s eyes were on fire.

Chapter Six: That Which Men Are Made Of

Joules held the smoke in his lungs until the spasms subsided. He felt a heaviness in his stomach as he exhaled. His eyes stung and he could taste some vile, half-digested fragment of his last meal creep up his oesophagus.

‘So,’ said Joules, looking up towards his friend, ‘would she put out for a burger?’

Jon leant against the undercurve of the bridge grinning. ‘No mate, you’re the only person I know with an erogenous digestive tract!’

Joules belched and gobbled into the water. ‘Don’t you think D’Arcy looks a bit like Helena Bonham-Carter in that old Planet of the Apes film? Big brown eyes, make herself available for a piece of meat, anything to help alleviate the old iron deficiency.’

‘I have no idea what you’re talking about. Are you on drugs, Joules?’ asked Drayton shaking his head.

Joules passed the spliff to Jon. ‘I never touch the stuff, Drayts!’

Jon took a drag. ‘You should get off your face more often. You’re a funny guy when you let your hair down.’

‘So, I’m not funny normally?’

Jon and Drayton chimed back together. ‘No.’

‘Twats.’

‘Indeed,’ said Jon as he passed the spliff to Drayton. ‘Anyway, what’s with all this meat/sex talk tonight?’

‘D’Arcy was out of your league, Jon. You must have waved a ribeye under her nose or something to keep her as long as you did,’ said Joules.

‘Is that what you call your little man, ribeye?’ asked Jon.

Jon and Drayton’s chortling soon became choking, their eyes wet with laughter.

‘Look,’ said Joules, ‘most mammals are on heat like once a year, but women’ve got a regular, monthly standing order set-up.’

Jon barely stopped choking long enough to complete his sentence. ‘Is that why they’re always in the red?’

‘Fucking hell, I’ll finish this one day... Look, once upon a time, women were only on the blob once a year. They’d lose a lot of blood, go all anaemic and then put out for the guy who could supply them with the biggest piece of...’

‘Ribeye!’ shouted Jon.

Coughing, Drayton passed the spliff to Joules. ‘Here, I can’t take it no more man!’

Joules put the joint in his mouth, but didn’t bother sucking. ‘Jesus, I feel sick.’

Drayton’s breathing slowed and the world appeared to regain some degree of rotational stability. ‘Please carry on Joules, I’m having a whale of a time.’

‘So, those women, those mutants who bled more than once a year, they got more meat than the other women, so they got stronger and healthier and passed their genes on, and so on and so forth until it became a monthly occurrence.’

‘Hmmm,’ Jon said, ‘why stop at once a month? If evolution hadn’t come to a halt when we got all modern, would women be on say weekly cycles in a few thousand years from now?’

The three friends looked at one another.

‘Fucked if I know,’ said Joules.

They sat under a stone bridge in Highwold Wood. A tributary of the nearby Avon eased its way past. The leafy canopy of oak, beech and sycamore scattered the fading light. The woods on summer evenings were a place of shadows, reassuring shadows. The young men knew every root and branch, every sound and smell. Despite the tetrahydrocannabinol dancing through their bloodstreams, there was no paranoia, no fear; the sounds of footsteps on the bridge above of no more concern than the quiet push of current against pebble. They had each other's attention too. Their Smartphones were turned off and piled in a gap in the stonework. Jon had invoked a DS Double E – a digital Sabbath-esque-ette, a bit like a digital Sabbath, but just for twenty minutes or so and on any day of the week.

A grey squirrel fretted over an acorn on the opposite bank of the river. The friends watched it scratch and twitch for a few moments before it skittered away into the vegetation.

'Did you know that squirrels are the only mammals that can climb down a tree head first?' asked Joules.

Jon shook his head as if coming to. 'They're beautiful but they don't belong here.'

Drayton chewed the side of his lip. 'Like Miss Meyer?'

'Aye,' Jon began, 'but I think she's got the squirrel's moves too. A teacher hanging around with three school kids is reckless, a bit like running down a tree head first, only I think she's got claws, she's in control, she can slow her descent.'

Drayton drained the last of the Thunderbird.

'We all out?' asked Jon.

Drayton nodded. 'Affirmative on all counts legal and otherwise.' He ran his teeth over his bottom lip. 'So Jon, who's the biggest bitch then, D'arcy or Miss Meyer?'

Jon didn't answer. Instead, he picked a stone from the bank and threw it into the water. Soon all three were lobbing pebbles at objects in or near the water. Jon was the first to stop. He sat down and fiddled with a device he kept in his pocket.

'What's that?' asked Drayton.

Jon brought the device to his lips. 'My PV.'

Joules stopped throwing stones and turned to face Jon who was cross-legged on the ground. 'Looks like an artillery shell.'

'It's my personal vapouriser!' Jon raised the device to his lips and sucked. He then coaxed rings out of the smoke as he exhaled.

'Ha!' said Drayton, 'It's an e-cigarette. What a ponce.'

'Leave it out. They're cheaper than normal fags, don't smell and aren't harmful, but they give you the same fix. Besides, if I was a ponce I'd have one of the ones that look like a cigarette not this ugly mofo.'

'But you don't smoke man!' said Joules. 'This is a fucking gateway drug, soon you'll be on real cigarettes. What's the point? You disappoint me man, I had more respect.'

Drayton snatched the e-Cigarette from Jon and dangled it over the water. 'You'll thank me one day. I'm saving you from a life of addiction.'

Jon got to his feet and made a grab for the e-Cigarette. 'Give it here!'

The two boys fell into the river. They both went under but soon discovered that simply sitting-up ensured that little above their belly buttons was submerged. Jon punched Drayton on the shoulder. 'Freak.'

‘OK man, sorry!’

‘Hmm, it’s nice in here.’

‘Indeed.’

Joules tilted his head and raised his eyebrows, then, he joined his friends in the water. The three sat facing one another.

‘Bit of free-styling?’ suggested Drayton.

‘Singing or poetry?’ asked Jon.

‘Poetry, I reckon,’ said Joules.

Drayton pretended to swim, pushing his arms back and forth through the water. ‘Subject?’

‘How about,’ began Jon, ‘the duality of woman?’

‘You mean misogyny?’ Joules frowned. ‘I can do that.’

‘OK, two lines each, me first, then you Jon, then Joules.’ Drayton closed his eyes and took a deep breath.

‘Band aids and promises,

Claws and vanished balances.

It’s no surprise that despite soft smiles,

Herpes starts with her.

On gossamer wings she shone,

Clit like a burned tongue.’

Drayton was shaking his head. ‘For fuck’s sake Joules, that’s gross.’

‘Just following the brief. Duality. Two extremes. Gossamer and burned genitalia.’

‘Beautiful work, Joules!’ said Jon.

Drayton was still shaking his head. ‘No wonder you don’t get any action.’

‘It’s all about empathy and imagination, putting yourself in someone else’s mind.’

‘Who’s, a serial killer’s?’

‘It’s wordplay, letting your mind soar!’

‘Sink!’

Jon hi-fived his two friends. ‘It’s good to have you back boys.’

‘Amen!’ said Drayton.

‘Herpes starts with her, eh?’ Joules was grinning. ‘Let’s get on the couch and unpack that. Did D’Arcy you give you a dose?’

‘No, just wordplay!’

‘What time’s it Jon?’ asked Joules.

‘Nearly nine.’

‘Shit, I better get going. Got to babysit Mackie tonight.’

Joules shook hands with his friends, climbed up the bank and retrieved his Smartphone. He followed a faint trail that ran alongside the river for twenty feet and then double-backed up the slope that led to the main path. A noise caused him to pause for a moment. There was something moving in the undergrowth a little way beyond the fern wall to his left. He couldn’t make out what it was. It sounded too big for a rodent, too small for a dog. ‘Good night, uber-squirrel!’ he shouted before jogging up the remainder of the incline. He stopped a few minutes later, out of breath but smiling. He looked up at the sky and opened his arms to what was about to come next.

Jon and Drayton left a few minutes later each vowing an early night. They walked together along the footpath until it split.

‘Night mate!’

‘Night.’ Drayton’s face widened to a smile as the trees and the black folded in on him. ‘Helena Bone-ham Carter!’

*

The middle-aged woman crouched at the edge of the ferns near the start of the tree line. The dog was muzzled and on its back. The woman sat lightly on the dog’s stomach; her knees wedged either side against its flanks. She held one of the dog’s paws in her left hand. With her right hand, she raked a short piece of barbed wire back and forth through the fur and through the flesh. The paw tried to recoil. The muzzle didn’t fully mask the whimpering. The woman kept on telling the dog she was sorry. All she could hear was the tap-tap-tap of the muzzle as it spasmed against the bone-shaped name tag on the dog collar.

Chapter Seven: The Getaway

Miss Meyer accelerated hard towards Avonford. It was half-past midnight. Before hitting the town centre, she veered off through an affluent looking suburb and made her way to the playing fields on the northern side of the urban sprawl. Joules was standing under a tree by a locked playground gate. He was looking at his watch as she pulled up. She wound the window down.

‘Hop in. Put your rucksack on the back seat.’

Joules did as instructed.

‘Before you belt up,’ began Miss Meyer, ‘I need to make sure I made the right choice.’

Joules raised his eyebrows.

Miss Meyer pointed at the slide in the playground. It was quite large with seating underneath. ‘Imagine you and I were fifteen, sitting over there after dark. We’re laughing and then a cop car swings around the corner. What would you do?’

Joules turned in his seat and looked out the passenger window. He closed his eyes for a moment. ‘It’s raining, the lights are dazzling, the beams pick out the droplets as they complete their arc and blast us with white. I undo my coat and grab here.’ Joules took hold of his lapel to illustrate. ‘I pull my coat out like a shield and twist to the side. I draw you close under my other arm and keep your eyes safe from the police lights.’

*

Miss Meyer and Joules stopped at a motorway service station and bought a bag of donuts and two bottles of Dr Pepper. The atrium of the building was broad and high, a grid of buttressed glass catching all kinds of light - the blur of illuminated

advertising hoardings along the outside wall; a sepia moon obscured by shifting cloud cover; and the white halogen glare under which the nightshift sleepwalked mops about the tiled floor. They sat alone in the middle of the expanse of tables and chairs that serviced the closed food court.

Miss Meyer wore a sleeveless purple dress that stopped at the knee. The back of the dress was patterned with red, white and yellow daisies. The flowers crept partway around the front; along a shoulder, underneath the neck and down towards one breast. There was a sheen about the clingy fabric. The dress fitted perfectly. It was almost as if she'd been dipped in a soft pool of fibres.

Joules wore a navy t-shirt and sweatpants. He was dressed for a long journey. Miss Meyer tried to ignore the piss stain that'd appeared after his toilet visit, but she kept glancing at his crutch and the Rorschach invitation as he walked towards her. First, she saw an elongated horse's head, then, a vagina.

Miss Meyer took a swig from her bottle and tore a chunk off a stale donut. She chewed as she rummaged inside her bag. Joules sat with his hands on the table watching the sinews and tendons bubble as her arms rose and turned, fell and shifted. She put the box down on the table.

'Dominoes!'

Joules looked confused.

Miss Meyer sang, 'You and I in place, wasting time on dominoes.' She sounded like a child with its face pressed against a window watching the drizzle slant and spiral. 'A day so dark, so warm...'

She opened the box and slid onto the chair to her right so she was sitting at the adjacent table. She tipped out the dominoes and counted fourteen for herself, fourteen for Joules. She passed Joules the instruction sheet and then stretched to her left for more donut and Dr Pepper.

Joules pushed the instructions away. 'I am familiar with the domino, you know!'

'They used to call mourning-veils and travelling masks dominoes way back when in Venice.' She held the box in front of her face. 'Bet you didn't know that.'

'So, which one is it for you?'

'Ttssssss.' The hiss of water turning suddenly to steam. 'That's a very... searching question.'

Joules picked up a piece and held it between forefinger and thumb. 'They used to make these out of Bakelite.'

Miss Meyer looked over towards the cleaners. 'Wow.'

Joules snorted. 'My Dad could probably quote you the chemical formula.'

Miss Meyer perked up. 'That might feel nice if his lips were placed in the right spot. Hmm... Capitals and numbers really get the mouth wide and working!'

Joules flicked a domino at Miss Meyer. 'Pack it in, he's old enough to be your father.'

'Hmmm... H. Two. Oooooooo.'

'Bakelite's got an incredibly high resistance to heat, electricity and chemical action - none of them stands a chance.'

'So, you're Bakelite Man?'

'Maybe.'

Miss Meyer held up a domino. There were two white dots on each half of the piece. She brought the domino to her chest. 'I'm sure you wouldn't be able to resist my four nipples.'

Joules raised his eyebrows.

Miss Meyer flipped the table over. The hard slap of laminated fibreboard against the tiled floor echoed through the atrium. The cleaners leaned on their mops and watched Miss Meyer launch herself at Joules. He managed to catch her and twist her and hold her like a baby. He put his left arm across her back and used his right to cradle her backside and hips. She craned upwards to land a kiss. Joules backed away and took some of her weight on his knee. He freed his right hand and stretched for an open bottle of Dr Pepper. He began by pouring the drink over her face from a height, savouring the long, slow stream of effervescing cherry as he snaked the drink down towards and over her breasts. Miss Meyer's initial angry intake of breath became a rhythmic series of moans and then laughter. She looked like a big cat or a great ape, her head flung back, her mouth all teeth and no gum. Her eyes were like slits but they were brighter than anything the atrium and the strip lights and the miles of electricity engorged cables could manage.

A male security guard appeared from a doorway near the toilets. Joules looked at Miss Meyer, then at the guard. He thought he should fuck her but he didn't know how. He looked at the guard again as if for advice or permission to begin. The guard started running. He was talking into a mouthpiece. Joules could hear static and beeps and a muffled voice issuing orders.

Joules and Miss Meyer got to their feet, grabbed their belongings and raced out to the car park. They found their Allegro and took a moment to catch their breaths before Miss Meyer drove off. Joules looked at her wet dress. Her shape was

even more clearly defined than before. She was the most perfectly formed polygon he'd ever seen, each edge and point and vertex aligned to make him want to weep at the banality of everything that wasn't her.

Joules turned to look at Miss Meyer as she eased the car off the slip road and merged with the motorway traffic. 'I only counted two nipples.'

Chapter Eight: Enter Mackie

Harry danced to the radio station. It was a stationary dance. He held his hands out in front of his chest and moved his head from left to right. Then, two exaggerated nods to the one side of his hands, two exaggerated nods to the other side. The occasional twist and flick of the hips. And, repeat.

‘La Tristesse Durera! Scream to a sigh-eye-eye, to a sigh-eye-eye!’

Mackie came through the living room door into the kitchen and smiled at Harry. She was wearing her flannel Wonder Woman dressing gown and her Captain America slippers.

‘Oh, yeah, feel that baseline Mackie!’

Harry moonwalked across to his step-daughter. He took her by the hands. She came forward for a second, copying Harry’s jerky, turkey neck movements.

Harry let go of one hand and gave Mackie a thumbs up.

Mackie pulled away and went to stand by the fridge, arms crossed.

‘What’s up?’ Harry dug his thumbs into his eye sockets, his palms pressed together in supplication. He turned the radio down. ‘OK. We’ve got bacon and egg sandwiches for breakfast. Just got to do the eggs. Can you go and get Julian up, please?’ Harry looked towards the ceiling. ‘I thought the Manics on volume eleven would have done the trick.’

Harry heard Mackie stomp upstairs as he cracked three eggs into a frying pan. He turned the ring on and laid out the slices of bread and pieces of bacon.

‘Joules!’ Mackie’s voice, quiet at the best of times, was lost in the sound of stuttering fat.

Mackie re-entered the kitchen as Harry drained the eggs.

‘I can’t find him Harry. I looked under his bed, in the airing cupboard and in the bathroom.’

‘The airing cupboard?’

‘Before you put locks on our doors he used to go in there sometimes with a torch and a magazine.’

‘Right, I see.’ Harry suppressed a chuckle. ‘Let’s eat. I’ll try and find out where that bugger got to last night in a bit.’

Harry cut and plated the sandwiches. They sat down at the breakfast bar and ate.

‘What’s up? The usual?’

Mackie shook her head. ‘No, I read on my tablet that DC Entertainment aren’t going to make a Wonder Woman film.’

‘Well, maybe if you work hard in school you’ll be able to make the definitive Wonder Woman film one day.’

‘We both know that’s not going to happen, Harry.’

Harry took a huge bite out of his sandwich. ‘Why not?’

‘I don’t have the financial backing.’

Harry sprayed his plate with partially chewed bread, egg and bacon. Coughing, he said, ‘Fair point!’

Mackie ate the first half of her sandwich quickly. She toyed with the second half, making shapes in the bread with her fingers. ‘Can I have a banana?’

‘Sure.’

Harry finished off his sandwich and Mackie’s mangled remaining half and what he’d prepared for Joules. He swallowed, suppressing the loud burp he knew Mackie would frown at.

‘What you going to do today, play in the park?’

‘Dunno, looks a bit wet and I want to write some more of my story.’

Harry looked at Mackie’s straight brown hair and her expressionless face and wondered how a girl could look and be so different to her mother. Mackie had always been introspective, but without her mother as an anchor, she risked drifting into melancholy.

‘OK, girl. Off you go and get changed.’

Harry took his mobile out of his pocket and waited until Mackie’s footsteps could be heard upstairs. He dialled his son’s number. No answer. He dialled again. No answer. He texted Joules a *where are you* and left a Facebook message repeating the same question.

*

‘Are you OK, Harry?’

Harry wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and flushed the toilet. He ran his tongue along the upper and lower gum lines and spat out little pieces of food.

‘You what?’ he shouted.

‘ARE ... YOU ... OK ... HARRY?’

The sound of the cistern filling had subsided.

‘Do you need the toilet, Mackie?’

‘No, I don’t. Why don’t you ever answer my questions? Are you OK?’

‘I had a bit too much to drink last night. Just clearing all the gunk out.’

‘Drayton just phoned. He’s looking for Joules too. Have you heard from him yet?’

‘Hang on.’

Harry flushed the toilet again. He watched something orange bob in the froth before diving out of sight under and up the u-bend. Harry opened the bathroom door. He looked at his watch.

‘It’s been an hour since I tried phoning him. But,’ Harry puffed, ‘it’s only ten-thirty, he’s probably comatose on Jon’s floor, using a game controller for a pillow.’

‘I’m worried, Harry. A load of his things are missing.’

‘Show me.’

Mackie led the way into Joules’ bedroom. She opened her step-brother’s wardrobe. It was more than half-empty. ‘See.’ She grabbed Harry’s sleeve and tugged him down onto the floor. They both looked under his bed.

‘What am I looking at?’ asked Harry.

‘An invisible rucksack.’

*

‘Bloody hell, Jon’s number doesn’t work.’

‘He gets lots of stalkers,’ said Mackie. ‘I might be able to find his new number on Facebook, I know Joules’ password.’

‘How?’ Harry scratched his head. ‘OK, nevermind, just get your shoes and coat and we’ll drive to Jon’s.’

They pulled up outside Jon’s house less than ten minutes later. Jon was standing on the doorstep in his boxer shorts arguing with his mother who was on the path. His neck was tensing and thickening as he spoke, causing his lower lip to curl down at the sides. His hands were like arthritic claws. He looked like he was going to hurt someone.

Harry and Mackie got out of the car and opened the gate of the semi's hedged, small front garden.

Jon's mother turned to Harry. Her voice was flat and even, like a lathe left to run on its own. 'Look,' she said, pointing at the terrier sitting by her feet. 'Some beast got in the back last night and attacked Alfie. His leg's all messed up.'

'That's too bad, Jean. Some people shouldn't be allowed to keep animals,' said Harry.

Jon shook his head and tried to extend his fingers.

The lathe turned again. 'My sentiments exactly. And, if I catch hold of who...'

'You're going to miss your appointment at the vet's, mum,' interrupted Jon. 'You know how strict they are. You do want to get Alfie patched up again, don't you?'

Jean gave a nod and tugged at the lead. 'C'mon, Alfie.' The bone-shaped name tag swung at the dog's neck as it limped along the path.

Harry waited to hear the gate close before he spoke.

'Alright, Jon?'

Jon seemed to relax a little. 'Not really, but I'll get there. What can I do for you Harry?'

'We don't know where Julian is. He didn't come home last night and his rucksack and a load of clothes have gone missing.'

'Serious?'

'Very.'

'Do you want to come in?'

'Aye.'

'Do you want tea, Harry? Mackie?'

'Milk, no sugar.'

‘Just milk, no sugar, no tea even,’ said Mackie.

The front room was full of dolls and Sven Hassle novels. Harry and Mackie sat on the sofa in front of the window. Harry was looking at the unit to his left. Bookending the middle shelf were two Dutch dolls and in between, a run of book spines alluding to war and heroism.

Harry slurped his tea. ‘I didn’t know your dad was such a World War II fanatic.’

‘He wasn’t. The books are mum’s, dad was the one with the thing for dolls.’

‘Really?’

‘Nah, just messing with you.’

‘Girls can like war too,’ said Mackie. ‘Wonder Woman went back in time to help the allies. She saved us from Hitler.’

‘Paradise Island rocks, Mackie. I’d love to go there and train with Wonder Woman and her sisters.’

‘Hmm.’ Mackie took a sip from her glass. Harry and Jon exchanged the faintest of nods and almost succeeded in concealing their smiles.

‘So, Jon, what you know? Where’s Joules?’

Jon was sitting cross-legged on the sofa opposite the window. He still hadn’t dressed. ‘He left us about eight or nine or ten last night, sorry I can’t be more precise. Said he had to get back to babysit Mackie.’

‘Since when do I get babysat?’ Mackie stood up and started scrutinising the dolls.

‘Had you had a few?’ asked Harry.

‘A few, literally. Nothing too heavy.’

‘He must have come back when I was down the Trout’s Neck and Mackie was asleep. Um, what kind of a mood was he in?’

‘Great. Very talkative. On good form I’d say. He’s probably left a note somewhere. He’s probably just gone camping someplace.’

‘Julian isn’t what you’d call a free spirit,’ said Harry.

Jon uncrossed his legs. ‘Maybe not, but he’s really been poking his pecker out of his shell recently. I think he’s fed up of being seen as some kind of good grade machine.’

‘Could this be about a girl?’ Harry drained his cup. ‘What about this bird Quid has seen you boys hanging around with?’

‘Miss Meyer? Nah, can’t have anything to do with her. She’s just this crazy foreign bird that flits about the place upsetting everyone.’

‘Perhaps they’ve gone flitting somewhere together.’

‘Nah.’

‘What kind of foreign?’

‘She never said. She liked us guessing?’

‘What was your guess?’

‘We all thought South African, but she point blank denied it.’

‘What *do* you know about her?’

‘Nothing much, long dark hair, stunner and she worked at school a bit. Doesn’t matter anyway, I’m pretty convinced she’s got nothing to do with this. If you’re so worried why don’t you call the cops?’

‘He’s a grown-up, well, officially,’ said Mackie. ‘Besides you’ve got to be missing three days and then they’ll only pretend to look.’

‘Indeed.’ Harry stood up. ‘Let’s go Mackie. Thanks for the tea, Jon. Let me know if you hear from him. By the way, how did the exams go?’

‘ABB. Pretty pleased.’

‘Good for you.’

*

Mackie and Harry sat at the bar in the Trout’s Neck eating hot baguettes. Simon the landlord had just arrived to relieve the barmaid. She could barely squeeze past the giant Samoan and get to the door which led to the main passage. Simon was eating pickled eggs. He cradled a large jar under his left arm.

‘All right, Falafel?’

The Samoan shook his head. ‘And no, there aren’t four apostrophes in my surname either!’

‘What’s the news, buddy?’ asked Harry.

‘Bit of a mad one last night, brother. A tourist got pepper sprayed down by the Tithe Barn. Apparently, it was a Namibian woman who then tried to run the tourist down in her car about half an hour later.’

‘Namibian woman? What, like a bush lady with spears and shit?’

Simon snorted. ‘Now, that would be funny. Young piece apparently. White woman, long dark hair and a funny accent. The victim said she sounded Australian, the assailant insisted she was Namibian.’

‘There are white Namibians?’

‘Sure man. I played rugby there once. They sound just like Afrikaaners.’

‘Where d’you hear all this?’

‘The victim, Gail Matthews, was in here earlier holding court with the local press.’

‘Gail? Short woman, chesty and I’m not talking bronchitis, and a lanky no-mark boyfriend?’

‘Fits the description.’ said Simon.

‘Did the no-mark have much to say?’

‘Just that the Namibian’s car had its wipers on.’

‘Where they staying?’

‘Avonford Hotel. Probably be back in here later. She said The Plough was like the wild west. Why you so interested?’

‘I’ve suddenly got a bad feeling mate, a bad feeling.’

*

Harry threw another stone at Drayton’s bedroom window. Mackie bent down and picked up some more to hand to him.

The top portion of the window opened. A shaved head popped out. ‘Alright, Harry!’ The head leaned out a little further and scanned from left to right. ‘No Joules?’

‘Still no sign of him, Drayts. I’ve phoned, texted and inboxed him.’ Harry took a few steps back so he was standing in the middle of the front lawn. He rubbed his neck. ‘Tell me, do you think he could have gone off somewhere with this Miss Meyer bird?’

Drayton exhaled. He bit his upper and lower lips in turn. ‘The boys will kill me for saying this.’ He rested his head on the window crossbar for a moment. ‘Send Mackie to the car.’

Harry made eye contact with his step-daughter and gestured with his head.

Mackie threw the handful of stones she’d collected at a flower bed. Her footsteps were heavier than they needed to be as she made her way to the gate. Her voice was a whisper. ‘Sorry, Mr and Mrs Dahlia or whatever you’re called.’

Harry beeped the car and Mackie climbed inside.

'I'm coming down.' The window closed.

A minute later the front door opened. Drayton put one hand on the inside wall, the other was tucked somewhere behind the half-open door itself. 'Look Harry, you owe me, so this goes no further.'

Harry grabbed Drayton's wrist and yanked it away from the wall and down towards his knees. Drayton's back buckled. 'I warned you never to bring that up again. Now, where the fuck's my son?'

Harry let go of Drayton's hand.

'She ... Miss Meyer ... told us she was going to take one of us on a round the world trip. The plan was the three of us were going to hang out with her all week and she was going to pick the one she liked best to go off with her. She didn't pick anyone of us. We all got rejection texts.'

'You saw the one she sent to Joules?'

'Um ... no, but he said he had one from her ... I think. Look Harry, one, she's full of shit, she was just messing with us and two, if she was serious, no offence, but she's a looker and Joules had no chance.' Drayton banged the side of his head against the door. 'She was buttering Joules up quite a bit the other day. He probably thought he was in and now he's gone off somewhere in a huff.'

'She was a supply teacher in your school?'

'Yeah, just the last few weeks.'

'She taught you guys?'

'Kind of. She supervised some revision sessions near the end of term. We didn't see her for months and then she saw us up the woods one day a few weeks back and started getting friendly.'

'How friendly?'

‘Not that friendly if that’s what you’re getting at?’

‘Where’s she live?’

‘Wouldn’t tell us.’

‘How would I know her if I saw her, and I want more than hot and raven haired.’

‘Beyond hot. Shades. Huge Alice in Wonderland tattoo on her back. Drives a dark blue Golf.’

‘Reg?’

Drayton shrugged his shoulders. ‘Too busy looking at the chassis.’

‘Text me if you think of anything. I think he’s with her.’

*

Harry fired up the engine and gunned the car towards the west side of town and the Avonford Hotel.

Mackie gripped the sides of her seat. ‘How do you know the tourist woman, Gail?’

‘She’s just some mentalist I crossed paths with yesterday.’

‘Is that why you don’t seem too ... concerned.’

‘Explain.’

‘Well, if Gail’s a mentalist then maybe Miss Meyer did the right thing pepper spraying her and she’s not so bad after all and Joules is safe.’

‘Something like that.’ Harry slowed down and made a pfft sound as he shook his head. ‘And I am concerned. I just tend to trust that things will be OK, that people can look out for themselves.’

‘Even kids?’

‘Even kids.’

‘Even after everything that’s happened to my mum and my dad and Joules’ mum?’

‘Joules is going to be just fine. He’s taken a wrong turn and even if we don’t find him and show him the way back, he’ll make his way home without us in his own time.’

‘I’m scared Harry, I think she’s a liar, I think she’s grooming him.’

‘You can’t groom an adult, and she’s barely one herself. Besides, where did you get that word from?’

‘I heard it on the news.’ Mackie banged a fist on her thigh. ‘But, she is a liar, she lied about her car.’

‘The Golf? What about it, what lie?’

‘I don’t know what a Golf is Harry. But, whatever car she’s driving, it’s not hers.’

Harry indicated left and pulled off the main road. He brought the car to a stop in a quiet side street. He held out his hand, palm up. Mackie moved her hand towards Harry’s, but flipped it upside down to mirror his just before their fingers met. She formed a cup and moved it in a slow circle through the constellation of dust motes lit up in the midday sun. The side of her hand nudged Harry’s into life. Soon, both their cups were scooping and emptying fairy dust over each other’s arms and shoulders and heads and laps. Mackie smiled and laughed while the clouds complied; a rare kind of laugh, one that required no sound.

When the sun retreated, Harry coaxed Mackie out of the car. She stood on the pavement looking confused.

‘Here,’ he said as he lifted her onto the roof, ‘you’ve always wanted to sit on top of a car.’

Once she’d wriggled across to a safe position, Harry stepped onto the road, walked back half-a-dozen paces and ran up the bonnet and onto the roof to join her. He sat down and took her hand. ‘Now Mackie, what’s really troubling you?’

‘When dad picked me and mum up to go to the school concert he had his wipers on.’

Mackie swallowed. Harry could sense her body shuddering.

‘Carry on, Mackie.’

‘It was a hire car and dad didn’t know how to drive it. He kept putting the wipers on instead of the indicators. It wasn’t raining and they made a horrible scraping noise. Mum joked that she was glad you never waved us off when dad came or that night you’d have had another reason to call him a muppet.’ Mackie kept the tears from flowing and managed to steady her voice, but somewhere beneath the tensing and un-tensing, the emptying and filling of her lungs, she’d never cried so hard. ‘I think that’s why we crashed. He wasn’t used to the car and neither is Miss Meyer; she had her wipers on when she tried to run Gail over and it didn’t rain last night. It’s not her car and if Joules is with her I’m afraid he’ll end up like mum and dad and then there’ll only be two of us left.’

‘Sweet Jesus.’

Harry let go of Mackie’s hand and pulled her body towards him. They hugged until Harry sensed she wanted to stop.

‘It wasn’t your dad’s fault and it wouldn’t have mattered what car he was driving. The other driver had been drinking Mackie.’

‘He always said you could accelerate out of trouble if you had the right car.’

‘No offence Mackie, but he was probably just trying to justify spending money he didn’t have on a new car to your mum. Look, that was then, this is now, it’s a totally different situation. And, lightning doesn’t tend to strike twice.’

Mackie’s eyes filled with tears. ‘It did for me - mum and dad; and it did for you, mum and Julie.’

‘OK, we’re a team now and you’ve got to count everything together when you’re a team. If anything bad happened to Joules, that’d be like lightning striking five times in the same spot and it doesn’t take someone as clever as you to know that’s impossible.’

Harry gently touched Mackie’s nose. ‘Now, smarty pants, how do we find our missing pal?’

‘I got an idea.’

‘Does it involve the interweb?’

‘You know it’s not called that Harry!’ smiled Mackie. ‘If we log into Joules’ account from one of our laptops and go to do a post, but not actually do one, the location button will tell us where he’s been. It’s there so you that if you want to, you can say where you are when you post.’

‘Can you use my phone to do it now?’

‘No, he’ll get told when a new device accesses his account. To be secret we need to use a machine he’s already used. The thing is though Harry, if he goes abroad he might only be able to log in using wi-fi, so the location information might not be very accurate.’

‘Drayton mentioned abroad. Bigger.’

‘Does that mean we might not go look for him?’

‘I’ll tell you what, Mackie. When we find out where Julian is, no matter how far away that might be, we’ll go look for him, and even if we don’t manage to catch up with him before he comes back home, you and me get to have a little road trip. Deal.’

‘Deal!’

*

‘Cheers, Simon. Let me know as soon as you find out.’ Harry put the phone down and walked from the living room to the foot of the stairs. He raised his voice. ‘Any luck, Mackie?’

‘Nothing. I’m refreshing his page every few minutes though.’

Harry walked up the stairs to join his step-daughter in her bedroom. She was lying on her bed, two open laptops in front of her - one on Julian’s homepage, the other, showing a virtual farm she’d been cultivating for several months.

‘I’ve been in touch with the school and some local job agencies. They won’t divulge anything. I’ve given the cop shop Joules’ details and emailed a photo and they said they’d make some enquiries tomorrow if we don’t hear from him, but even if they find him they won’t tell us where he is unless he gives permission. For some reason he’s pissed off with me, Mackie, and I don’t think that permission will be forthcoming.’

‘Harry! Philadelphia! He’s in a coffee shop in Philadelphia!’

‘Fuck.’

Mackie raised her eyebrows.

‘Sorry.’ Harry bowed his head and banged his temple with the flat of his fist.

‘We better start packing.’

Harry's mobile rang. He pulled it out of his pocket and looked at the name. It was Simon. 'I'll be back in five to look for flights, I've got to answer this first. It's my bloody line manager.'

Harry made it to the front room before he answered. He was gripping the handset so tight his thumb only just made it to the answer button before the Samoan rang-off.

'Took your time, Harry.'

'What you find out?'

Simon's voice was warm and amused. 'The tourists were in here not long ago for lunch. Looks like maybe the Namibian didn't try to run them down. Mr No-mark and his missus seem to have very different recollections. He says the car simply drove around them.'

'And she ...'

'... poured lemonade on his lasagne.'

Harry relaxed his grip on the phone. 'You remember to ask if it was raining when the Namibian had her wipers on?'

'It wasn't raining mate.'

'Anything else?'

'There's some doubt as to her nationality. The details the woman on the front desk looked up on the computer suggested an English name.'

'Which was?'

'Dunno, these are just bits and pieces I heard. The cops had a bit of a laugh with the receptionist apparently. They asked her what the Namibian sounded like. She said something along the lines of "you English all sound the same to me" but then mentioned the Swedish chefs from the Muppet Show and how the Namibian

has a sing-song voice. One of the WPCs then had everyone in stitches trying to replicate the Namibian's accent. Went through nearly every accent this side of Jakarta. The receptionist thought East African or Welsh was the nearest match.'

'Cheers, Si. I might not be in for a while, going to look for my boy.'

'May you be thrown on the bosom of the wave!'

'Is that a good thing?'

'Fuck yeah, front part of the wave mate, swimming's never easier!'

Chapter Nine: The Urushi Tree

Joules sat in the chevy while Miss Meyer flitted in and out of the stores on the very small main street of a very small town in the Pennsylvanian Welsh Tract. He was under orders to read or sleep or otherwise avert his eyes as she ‘sought ingredients for her spell.’ He glanced up from his book each time a horn honked, a child squealed or an A-board flexed and relaxed a snippet of what sounded like some avant garde tune. After a few minutes, Joules pulled the sun visor down and focused on the opening line of the novel Miss Meyer had given him:

Petrograd smelled of carbolic acid.

Joules muttered to himself, ‘I bet it fucking did.’

He flipped the book over and looked at the cover again - *We the Living* by Ayn Rand. Miss Meyer’d told him it was quite interesting, but not to bother reading more than half-way through. She’d explained to him that you couldn’t really understand modern history, certainly not modern America, without knowing a bit about Rand, but that’s not why she’d given him it. She’d said he looked a little defeated and there was nothing better for making impressionable young men spunkier than a little bit of Rand.

The tome he’d chosen for her was on the back seat, a lush colourful, complete illuminated collection of the books of William Blake. She’d dropped what they’d called the Blake Bomb one night a few weeks earlier near the quarry. Even Drayton in his stoned state was whooping at her favourite line of poetry:

I must create a system or be enslaved by another man’s.

Joules had tried to read some more Blake, and in context, but got frustrated. He hoped Miss Meyer could help him learn a little more, but he wasn’t too hopeful.

She was a filter feeder like him. They both sucked up books and magazines and blogs, the occasional disembodied morsel digested, the rest forgotten or miss-applied. Joules wondered if there were any illustrations of whales inside the book ... or cockles.

Miss Meyer texted Joules when she was ready to return to the car. He put his hands over his eyes and waited until he heard the boot opening. After some rustling and banging, Miss Meyer closed up and joined Joules in the front of the car.

She tapped her hands on wheel. 'A most excellent little excursion.' She looked at Joules. 'You can put your hands down now!'

They both smiled, but Joules kept his hands in place for a moment. 'It feels quite nice,' he said, 'that little bit of pressure on the eyeball. Is there such a thing as an eye massage?'

'I'm sure there's some isolated tribe in Papua New Guinea that's raised it to an art form.'

'Probably!'

'How's your spunk?'

*

After leaving Philadelphia County on a wide interstate fat with traffic, they followed a few different highways, numbered in the seventies and eighties, eastward for about five hours. They passed townships named for Syrian cities and Northern Irish hamlets. The populations were so small Joules wondered why anyone had bothered to count them and display their single and double digits with such prominence. Sometimes they'd pass a strip settlement made up of a row of equally sized lots. In some of them, there sat grand-looking four or five bedroom, white,

clapboard houses; in others, stunted prefab dwellings hid behind old pickups, their bonnets permanently open and arthritic in the sun.

As they got closer to their destination, Miss Meyer pumped the accelerator and swayed the hire car back and forth across the worn asphalt. She couldn't stop grinning. 'I hope you're going to like my surprise!'

Joules shook his head and flashed his teeth. 'You're a crazy lady!'

'Viola!' she bellowed as they passed the sign for North Versailles Township. She took her hands off the wheel and placed the imaginary instrument under her chin. 'Can you hear the music playing yet?' She was bowing like a virtuoso, swerving like a drunk on ice. 'Viola! Geddit?'

'I get it.'

'The palace awaits us.'

Just up ahead was a low collection of buildings. An animal transporter was filling up with fuel. To the rear of the filling station, fields of rapeseed stretched off towards a low range of distant hills. In front and to the left of them, clumps of black cherry and quaking aspen obscured the view. They rounded a bend and then, there it was less than half a mile off. She flipped the cruise control on and steered with her knees, making gentle adjustments against the camber.

Joules looked across at the fenced-off complex, its hundreds of yards of boarded up store fronts, its lifeless neon tubes askew on the breeze, and then, he looked back at her. She'd tucked the imaginary viola between her left shoulder and chin again, her right arm sweeping back and forth through the air. She closed her eyes and rocked her head from side-to-side.

‘Christ’s sake, the wheel!’

Her grin widened and she steadied the car. She put her hand on Joules’ thigh. ‘Did you know, 0.3% of the population of this county are from the Pacific Islands? Who’d have thought?’ Her hand moved towards Joules’ crutch for the briefest moment. ‘Their men are quite big I’ve heard.’

She pulled off the road and mounted a grass verge heavily crossed with tyre tracks that led through a hole in the perimeter fence. Once in the car park she pushed the Chevrolet Impala hard towards the main entrance of the mall. They came to a dead stop twenty feet in front of a huge glass atrium. They caught their breath for a second, then, Miss Meyer gunned the accelerator and swerved back into the open spaces they’d just crossed. As she took the car through a series of wide, fast figures of eight she began to tell a story.

Her eyes were fixed on some point just in front of the car. ‘I bet this place isn’t much different to the Yamagata Prefecture.’

Joules reached for the flip-down handle above his door and made a fist around it with his right hand. ‘Fewer epicanthic folds...’ Joules gritted his teeth, ‘...and the locals aren’t afraid of at least searing their tuna, I’d wager.’

‘The monks started doing it in 794 AD,’ she said. ‘A thousand days of eating nuts and seeds and exercising until you can see the whites of your bones show from under your skin.’

The turns were getting sharper. Joules put his left hand tight across his stomach and gripped the little well that sat just below the door handle. Some sweet wrappers spilled out.

‘Then, a thousand days of eating just bark and roots...’

She pulled up the handbrake and swung the wheel hard in the opposite direction to the curve they’d just been following. The tyres screamed and Joules started to say something. A course, half-formed Germanic word got swallowed up in the blaze of sound. Joules couldn’t help notice Miss Meyer’s new fringe, from her haircut at the airport; it never seemed to move, not even then, still hanging quietly in the midst of all those centrifugal forces.

‘Then, when they’d purged their bodies of all that tasty fat, those oh so beautiful Buddhist friends of ours would start drinking the sap of the Urushi tree.’

Joules could hear her breathing in the gaps between engine snarl. She had skinny little arms and they’d been pummelling the great big steering wheel for a couple of minutes. Sometimes a bead of sweat would start to form on her forehead. The air con snuffed it out each time.

‘The sap’s traditionally been used for lacquering furniture,’ she continued.

Finally, Newton caught up with her hair. She flicked a stray ringlet from her face. This sent the car careening towards one of the wings of the mall as physics snatched control from her one hand. She hit the brakes and they stopped at a crazy angle to the building, a couple of feet from the pavement that edged its front.

‘Fuck me, what...’ began Joules.

‘Yeah, so they drink this poisonous-sap-lacquer-tea concoction for a few weeks and throw up a lot. The genius is that the body becomes so poisonous even

maggots won't go near you when you're dead. Final stage, the monk locks himself in a stone tomb sitting in the lotus position.'

Joules put his hand under Miss Meyer's chin and turned her face towards his. 'I know the history well, I've read all of Ueda Akinari's stories and I was weaned on Manga. I'm practically Japanese.'

'Despite your rude interruption,' she said, wagging her finger, 'and despite the profoundly dweebish manner of it, I do believe I'm feeling a little wet!'

Joules finished the story off. 'There'd be this little air tube connecting the monk to the outside world and there'd be a thin length of string tied to his finger on the one end, and above ground, on the other end, it'd be tied to a little bell. When he stopped ringing the bell, they'd seal the hole and wait another thousand days.'

Miss Meyer smiled. She started playing the imaginary musical instrument again, her arm bowing as she spoke. 'Then, they'd open the tomb and "Viola!" a Buddha, a beautiful self-made mummy Buddha.'

There were birds pecking away at the guttering of the building. Their shadows made a peculiar saw tooth pattern on the brickwork.

'I wonder,' said Joules, 'if birds ever shat down their breathing tubes, or if they had little protective cowls on top or something?'

'Shall I get Brando out of the boot?' Miss Meyer asked.

*

Joules couldn't stop looking at Miss Meyer. Since the airport, her looks and her demeanour had become softer, warmer and more approachable, yet she was

still seemingly unattainable. That baseline of classical beauty was still there, but instead of her not knowing whether she was a model on vacation or a high-powered executive sponsoring a summer fete, she now seemed more sure of who she was. Her thick black hair hung on each side of her head in a handful of long, fat, lazy curls that almost spiralled at the ends. Connecting each side was a wide and full fringe that swept down and along the edges of her face until it was lost in a sea of hair. She wore a cotton top with short sleeves, its navy and white hoops exaggerating her curves. Her khaki trousers, which stopped at the knee, were functional and fashionable.

There, amongst the tyre marks and the cracked asphalt her life sung. She twirled in the dry air. Her eyes were closed for the most part, her arms and hands moving like a lazy conductor's as she smiled to a tune only she could hear. She was like a little tornado only slower and softer and less predictable.

Joules picked up the cardboard Brando and waltzed him between imaginary cars. He was nearly lost in the moment. Every few steps his eyes would find her and he'd hesitate for a second hoping to catch her attention. She didn't look at him once. She was somewhere else entirely. He willed her to smile in his direction and throw her head back in a deep laugh. Joules closed his eyes and tried to forget who he was, but he was brought to a halt by a thud and a heavy vibration in the cardboard. Miss Meyer had been back to the car.

Joules opened his eyes and watched her laugh as she threw several bog-bombs in his general direction. The one that had hit was slowly sliding down Brando's chest leaving a wet trail behind it. His eyes followed the toilet paper ball fall to the floor. Soon the sun would dry it hard.

Joules looked up and saw Miss Meyer moving towards him. She was spinning and weaving, dropping to the floor and jumping back up again, long streamers in each hand, swirling a pair of rainbows. She had the last bog-bomb in her teeth and as she got close to Joules she bent down and moved her head in a circular motion about Brando's groin. Then, she stood up and leaned in close, the bog-bomb just out of reach of Joules' lips. She turned her head suddenly and flung the bog-bomb off to the right.

Miss Meyer wheeled back to the car again, popped the boot and took out a guitar Joules had never seen before.

'Come on,' she said, 'let's go get a Cola.' Then, she ran full tilt towards the dead shopping mall.

*

'Sweet Jesus,' said Joules. 'I never want to leave this place. It's so clean and so quiet, what's going on? Where are the carrier bags full of shit and the piles of syringes, the post-apocalyptic mutants chasing us down for the gold in our filings?'

'Apparently, the opposite end of the mall can be breached easily and it's a mess - leaky roof, slime moulds, dead tramps all that kinda shit!'

'How did you...'

'There are internet forums for everything, mush.'

They wandered through the mall past scores of shops, the fronts of which looked exactly as they must have done on their day of closure. They were surprised at how un-musty the air was and how much light came in through the small windows set-back in the side-walls above the shops. Then, they reached the hub of the

complex, a huge double level food court forming a wide, open circular space. A pair of escalators extended down from the top floor to the ground floor. Their ends had been blocked-up with planks of wood. Flanking each side of the escalators were glass lifts. Dotted about the space were beds of neatly organised artificial trees and shrubs. Above, the sun streamed down through a huge glass pyramid.

Joules and Miss Meyer sat down on a wooden bench at the very centre of the mall. To their side a small sign warned of a slippery floor.

Miss Meyer strummed a few chords and picked her way through a couple of scales.

‘I didn’t know you could actually play. I thought it was a prop.’

‘This song’s called Paris 1919.’ She coughed. ‘Not one of my own.’

Her surprisingly soft singing voice was so finely balanced with the sparse march of notes it was hard to focus on the lyrics. She was so moorish, in those stripes, with that guitar, in that body, with that voice from that mind - that he wanted to eat her. For the shortest time it seemed a love song, then it veered into abstraction, before Joules finally made a solid connection with the line *The Continent's just fallen in disgrace*, the actual title of the song and the township the mall was in. He could have listened to the chorus forever:

You're a ghost la-la-la-la la-la la-la la

You're a ghost

I'm the bishop and I've come

To claim you with my iron drum

la-la-la-la la-la la-la la

When she put the guitar down, Joules said, 'Wow!'

'Paris 1919,' she said, 'the world's gone to shit. All the big people are at Versailles, and for better or for worse, a new world order is about to be born. Don't look back, Joules, don't accept the old balance of power. You understand what I'm saying?'

'I do.'

*

They climbed over the wooden barricades at the bottoms and tops of the escalators and sat cross-legged on the upper level of the food court. A striped hammock swung nearby.

'What makes you happy?' asked Miss Meyer.

'I think that's a daft question. I think we're happy by default, it makes more sense to ask what makes us sad.'

'Take your trousers off and elaborate as to why so many people are so sad.'

'Yes, Miss!' Joules shuffled about on the tiled floor and took his trainers and his trousers off. 'Do you mean why are people sad in the general course of events? Like, nobody's died, nobody's knob's fallen off, you've got a steady income and a fair smattering of family and friends, yet you've got ankst with a mutha-fucking Danish K?'

'Yeah.'

'I don't think it's a god shaped-hole.'

'Ok,' said Miss Meyer, 'do you think Camus had anything interesting to say on the matter? You know, about humans needing to cling but having nothing to cling too?'

‘Caaa-mool!’ Joules grinned. ‘It’s so ... alluring to hear his name pronounced correctly by such a *belle dame*.’

‘Al-bear Caaa-moo-ooo!’ she replied, sounding like Inspector Clouseau.

‘Who?’ asked Joules suddenly playing stupid. His vowels were clipped. ‘Do you mean, AL-BURT CA-MUS!?’

Miss Meyer’s accent wobbled. ‘Aye, CA-MUS, mun!’

‘This is getting too surreal, Jamaican, or was that Geordie, existential name dropping?’

‘Just take your pants off.’

Joules stood and stepped out of his pants. ‘Ok, back to the question and let’s get specific. Even if my dad’s life hadn’t been littered with so much death, why would he still have been a miserable bastard?’

Miss Meyer leaned forward and lifted the fold of fat obscuring the base of Joules’ penis. ‘Precisely.’

Joules slapped her hand away. ‘I can’t help it the calories go straight to my mons pudendum.’

‘Don’t mind me, just prodding.’

Joules could feel blood building and redirecting. He sat down and crossed his legs. ‘I nailed this a while back. I’ve always said you can find the answers to most questions in Jon.’

‘New Testament John?’

‘No! Jon, Avonford Chapter,’ answered Joules. ‘Look, it’s all down to the pursuit of excellence, the lack of, or the thwarting of. Despite the fact that virtually no one on earth recognises that Jon’s mastery of video games is something profoundly

special, you don't get to be that good without utter commitment. This is no casual fancy, this is five hours a day ,every day for five years straight, total absorption.'

'So, what are saying? Jon is happy or Jon is sad?'

'He's broken. He gave gaming up for D'Arcy and she gave him up for a half-arsed attempt at fame and no one gives a shit that he hardly plays anymore. No one gives a shit that he doesn't do the one thing that makes him feel most alive. That sends out signals. He picks them up, and plays even less.'

'What about the monks, do you think they were happy?'

'I don't know, maybe, or ... maybe insane, but I know one thing for sure. When, um, let's call him Akahito, went to see his brother Kenji the Monk all entombed, and shouted down the breathing tube "Hey, Kenji! Uncle Hiro and Auntie Komiko are having their pearl wedding anniversary party tonight, you coming?" Kenji would have said in mad flurry of syllables something like "Fuck off, I'm lacquering my kidneys."'

Miss Meyer threw her head back and ran her fingers through her hair, bunching it in a ponytail at the back. She was snorting and rubbing her nose with her hand. Her eyes were bright and her grin wide. 'Phew! So, it's the distractions that stop us doing what we're meant to do that are the problem? All those dreams ruined by obligation, habit and expectation - watching Eastenders with your girlfriend when you'd rather be tearing your bicep down the gym, taking a shower to scrape the moss off your groin when you haven't finished writing your chapter.'

'Yes, moss on the groin! Who cares about shit like that when you've stepped out of time? There's plenty of time to scrub that off when you come down, step back into time, remember that you've got a body that might want to get laid.'

'I think it's about time you took your top off now.'

‘OK.’ His voice was muffled as the fabric dragged over his head from back to front. ‘Do you ever hurt people?’

‘Sometimes.’

Joules stopped undressing. The T-Shirt was bunched under his chin. ‘Have you got any friends?’

‘One.’ Her eye twitched. ‘RDJ. A guy, a bit older than me. Bi-polar. Lovely long hair and a beard.’

‘What is RDJ short for?’ asked Joules.

‘Renaissance Depiction of Jesus.’

Miss Meyer stood up and pulled Joules to his feet. She helped him pull his T-Shirt off his arms, then she undressed while he watched. She took him by the hand and led him to the hammock. It was brown and green and hung between two fake palm trees. They were in front of the Jungle Cafe.

‘How do you always know what to do?’

‘I don’t’ said Miss Meyer. ‘Sometimes when I get stuck I do this thing with dice or a spinning pen and circles that I draw on paper. I’ll show you how to do it next time you get stuck.’ She smacked Joules on the behind. ‘Up!’

Joules climbed into the hammock and looked down at Miss Meyer as he extended his arms to help her up. ‘Namibian?’

Miss Meyer smiled as she scrambled onto the netting. ‘Maybe!’

‘You going to tell me what you said in the quarry that day during the sunshower? What that saying about the jackal was all about?’

‘Maybe!’ She reached her arm across to Joules’ face and rubbed his cheek with her knuckles. ‘Be gentle.’

‘With you?’

‘No, in yourself.’

Joules folded his arms around Miss Meyer and eased her onto her back. As she twisted he ran his hand over her Alice in the library tattoo. It looked as if it had faded considerably. And, unevenly.

She smiled as he entered her. ‘I don’t think we’re going to last long in here before we fall out.’

‘I don’t think we will,’ agreed Joules.

As they began to move over and into each other, a few drops of blood formed on Miss Meyer’s inner thigh and dropped onto the cold floor of the dead shopping mall.

Critical Essay

The genesis of the novel *The Jackal's Wedding*, the first nine chapters of which are presented here, was a short story I wrote for an MA workshop entitled *The Shoulder of Orion* (Appendix A). The protagonist of that story was a teenage girl called Reggie struggling with the demands of looking after a mother with a mental illness. By the end of the story, Reggie contemplates seriously harming or killing her mother. The only real intimacy Reggie has experienced in her life is with her mother's boyfriend, John, who for several months before his death began the process of grooming Reggie, wooing her with music mix-tapes, discussions of movies and talk of the wider world. After writing the story I began to ask myself what happened next to Reggie? The answer was Miss Meyer - a woman in her late twenties, but much younger looking, recently released from incarceration for a violent act committed against her mother as a teen. Miss Meyer is herself recovering from some kind of mental distress and has a predilection for playing and experimenting with personas, seeking intimacy according to her limited understanding of the word.

I followed *The Shoulder of Orion* with another short workshop piece focussing on Reggie, set a decade or more later, entitled *The Urushi Tree* (Appendix B). This became the core of chapter nine. Although the second piece was generally well received, some readers felt the story lacked context and background, that the reader was being asked to do too much work. As much as being a failure of execution, there was a failure on my part to build a sufficiently complex character off-page. That is to say that, some of the gaps the reader had to fill in, were gaps I hadn't thought about. For example, why is this older woman travelling internationally with a young man she barely knows? It is only through knowing the characters and the plot intimately that

you are able to foreshadow and deliver a coherent narrative. Indeed, the playwright Alan Ayckbourn (2002, pp. 45-46) argues that you ‘can never know too much about your characters before you start.’

In addition, compared to the final version of chapter nine, the first draft portrayed Miss Meyer as being highly dominant and Joules (the unnamed first person narrator) as being in her thrall. I wanted to present a more nuanced picture as shown in the second example below:

I knew the history well, I'd read all of Ueda Akinari's stories and I'd been weaned on Manga. I was practically Japanese. I didn't feel comfortable finishing off what happened to the monks so I let her carry on. I think I knew what she could be like.

(*The Urushi Tree* first draft, Appendix B.)

Joules put his hand under Miss Meyer's chin and turned her face towards his. 'I know the history well, I've read all of Ueda Akinari's stories and I was weaned on Manga. I'm practically Japanese.' (Chapter Nine, p. 78)

Generally, I found redrafting to be critical to the success of the piece, and as part of this process I followed Haslam's (2006, p. 363) advice to purge the text of excessive adverbs and adjectives to allow room for more imaginative turns of phrase. Likewise, I tried to avoid cliché and instead look at things obliquely and freshly. I found that this created a kind of space in which oddity could flourish. This was important, as I agree with Greenwell (2009, p.211) that 'it is often an idiosyncratic element in the writing that engages you and makes the writing special... The oddity may occur in the situation, in the depiction of character, in the subject, or in the setting.' In addition, I also tried to vary the length of the sentences as I redrafted, utilising shorter sentences at times to 're-energise the prose' (Greenwell, 2009, p.203).

Initially, I intended to write the novel in the first person because of the sense of immediacy and intimacy it affords (Card, 1998, p.129). However, as soon as I began to imagine Miss Meyer interacting with others, I realised that the story would benefit from a cast of strongly realised characters who reflect and reveal one another. This also made it easier to introduce additional plots, both major and minor, and provide some relief from the intensity of one voice and one mind. Furthermore, the third person makes it easier to maintain the mystery and enigma of Miss Meyer in the dramatic present. Although the narrator is omniscient, relatively little is conveyed directly with regards the feelings and emotions of characters. However, the narrator is not limited to the simple reporting of facts.

Of the central characters, Miss Meyer is the main protagonist, and the most complex in terms of personal history and motive. She offers a number of challenges to the narrative. For example, how to reveal her past without heavy exposition or resorting to writing a novel of excessive length to accommodate the drip feeding of information. The solution I intend to employ, beginning with chapter ten, will be to include approximately seven chapters written by Miss Meyer in the first person, recollecting key periods or moments of her life as taken from the somewhat unreliable, slightly romanticised autobiography she has recently completed. These chapters will be spread across the length of the novel, beginning with Miss Meyer's early childhood and ending with her appearance at Avonford. *The Shoulder of Orion* (Appendix A) relocated to South Wales will serve as the template for the third of these 'flashbacks'. The intention is that these chapters will have a slight dream-like quality to them. They will each follow-on from pivotal chapters centred on Miss Meyer and Joules. They will reveal Miss Meyer in greater detail, but always many steps and years behind the main narrative, not catching up until the final chapter.

One of the most obvious traits the main characters exhibit in the chapters presented thus far is that of kind of pseudo-intellectualism. Indeed, writers, artists, musicians, philosophers, processes from the worlds of chemistry and biology are all used as reference points in conversation. Knowledge is a currency, a means of securing peer-group prestige or asserting a point. Despite this, I have attempted to follow Natalie Goldberg's advice and 'write about the ordinary' (1986, p. 100). As such, some of the most effective parts of the prose work because of their simplicity and their counterpoint to the more highbrow references and quotations. For example, Harry lifting Mackie onto the car roof for their heart-to-heart and Mackie's emotional fragility pivoting around a moving windscreen wiper. Likewise, Joules' analysis of Jon's unhappiness, which, despite some initial mention of French philosophers, boils down to him no longer playing video games, that 'No one gives a shit that he doesn't do the one thing that makes him feel most alive.'

The *Jackal's Wedding* is my first attempt at writing a novel. Previously, I have written short stories which by their very nature are more distilled and focused. Consequently, I was aware of the danger of bulking out the narrative with details or descriptions of things that ultimately do not add to the story. Indeed, Anton Chekhov famously stated that you should remove 'everything that has no relevance to the story. If you say in the first chapter that there is a rifle hanging on the wall, in the second or third chapter it absolutely must go off' (Rayfield, 1998, p. 203).

To this end, when plotting, I have tried to consider foreshadowing carefully. For example, descriptions early in the novel which come to be of significance later include Miss Meyer's stretch marks, the cardboard Brando, the Afrikaans proverb of the Jackal's Wedding and Joules' description of the quarry as a piece of a-tonal music. Others become apparent to some degree in the first nine chapters: Miss

Meyer's errant windscreen wiper and her mysterious use of circles and a spinning pen in The Plough's beer garden. Although a television series as opposed to written literature, I found the American television series *Breaking Bad* (Gilligan, 2008-2013) influential in my approach to foreshadowing - everything is there for a reason and often, for more than one reason, and the viewer is sent off in all manner of speculative directions before resolution is achieved. Indeed, *The Jackal's Wedding* is a mystery of sorts. How and why can Miss Meyer speak Afrikaans? Why does she collect blackheads? What does Harry owe Drayton?

My intention is that themes, ideas and events have a life beyond what seems to be their natural expiry. For example, the song *Paris 1919* (Cale, 1973) is used in the North Versailles shopping mall to underscore Miss Meyer's pitch to Joules of the need for personal revolution. As the story unfolds, we see that the song gives us a hint as to Miss Meyer's true identity and clarifies the frequent references to her slipping accent. The song is written and sung by a Welshman who made his name in New York as a member of the *Velvet Underground*, who it transpires was something of a hero to the teenage Miss Meyer, trapped as she felt she was in a small post-industrial Welsh town.

As I have worked at developing my craft the one piece of advice I have tried to follow most closely is that offered by Derek Neale, that characters should be revealed 'through dramatic action and the senses' (2006, p. 157). This links closely with the dictum that we must *show not tell*. To this end, I have sought to drip feed character detail rather than offload it as large expository chunks. This suits my natural bias towards allusion and my tendency to avoid unsatisfying abstractions such as "he was sad" (Neale, 2006, p. 128).

One of the choices facing the modern writer is how to manage technology within the narrative. I decided to embrace it and use it to further the plot. For example, text messages are used, with some suspense, to indicate that Miss Meyer has finally chosen which boy to take with her; a social networking site's location mechanism allows Mackie and Harry to track Joules; the three teenage boys are all avid gamers; and in chapter five, as an acknowledgement of the disruptive effect of technology on the narrative of their lives, they take a 'digital Sabbath' as they get stoned in Highwold Wood.

In the short stories I have written in the past, I have usually kept the number of characters to a minimum, and the plotline very simple. *The Jackal's Wedding* by contrast is more complex, more crowded and more involved. Whilst this can provide the reader with a variety of reasons to keep on reading, there is perhaps the danger of the essence of the story getting lost amongst the references to Estonian composers and medieval Japanese monks. To combat this, I have sought to universalise the piece around the themes of loss and the search for identity and meaning as a means of encouraging readers to 'form a relationship with [the]... text.' (Haslam, 2006, p. 285).

This novel has a modern feel and there are some literary aspects to it as well. There are examples of lyricism and layering, the characters are hopefully 'interesting, complex and developed' (Wikipedia entry for Literary Fiction), and in chapter nine, the narrative has a touch of magic realism about it. However, I do not want the novel to allow 'itself to dawdle, to linger on stray beauties even at the risk of losing its way' (Rafferty, 2011). Indeed, I intended the novel to have pacing more in keeping with that of paraliterary fiction, even if, as one reader remarked, it is useful to keep a dictionary close at hand when reading it! In terms of genre, or the kind of

readership this work is aimed at, I would say anyone who enjoys the work of Iain Banks, anyone who enjoys quirky, odd or spiky characters who engage in the world around them in interesting ways, with the combination of a reasonable pace and detailed, intellectual or lyrical digressions or musings.

Another influence on the development of *The Jackal's Wedding* relates to a number of twentieth century bildungsroman novels such as *The Catcher in the Rye* (Salinger, 1994), *To Kill a Mockingbird* (Lee, 2010) and the science fiction classic *Ender's Game* (Card, 1985). Joules fits quite closely the image of a youth on a voyage of discovery, growing psychologically and morally into adulthood, searching for the answers to life's questions. However, Joules is not the central protagonist of the novel, and there are several other characters on similar journeys, two of which are already adults. So, although not a bildungsroman itself, this novel will focus on the developmental journey, both physical and psychological of the four key characters.

Another influence on *The Jackal's Wedding* is Cormac McCarthy's (2009) novel *The Road*, or more specifically, his 2008 interview with Oprah Winfrey concerning the novel, where, he admits it was written as a love story to his son and that many of the conversations in the text were taken from actual interactions with his son. To this end, the sub-plot of Mackie and Harry will turn into an exploration of the growing love between a step-father and step-child as they face up to a shared bereavement. I anticipate that many of their conversations will mirror those that I have had or imagine that I will have with my children.

One reader of an early draft remarked that the novel felt like a series of short stories tenuously linked. My intention had been for the piece to feel somewhat rhapsodic in the musical sense: episodic yet integrated, but in order to make the

novel more cohesive, I had to tighten the links between the plot strands, by for example, sharing characters such as Gail between chapters. It is possible that the accusation of tenuous linking exposes the fact that I have hitherto only written short stories. As a consequence, as the story develops I will continue to consciously reflect and if necessary re-write to ensure that *The Jackal's Wedding* works as a whole.

It is beyond the scope of this commentary to describe in detail the remainder of the plot. However, briefly, Joules and Miss Meyer continue their odd courtship as they travel across a number of US states, the 'magic' of their relationship gradually fading towards the mundane - this will be reflected in content and style as less use is made of the hint of magic realism seen in chapter nine. They move onto Llandudno in the Western Cape of South Africa and then up to Rehoboth in Namibia where their relationship falls foul of a lack of funds, local anti-abortion laws and a pregnant, depressed Miss Meyer dramatically committing suicide. Harry and Mackie try their best to trail Joules across the America, but fail, instead having a road trip of their own which creates strong new bonds. The minor characters left in Avonford give remote support to Harry, assisting in attempting to plot Joules' whereabouts. Their problems get resolved: Jon overcomes the loss of D'Arcy and helps his mother address her canine Munchausen Syndrome by Proxy, while Drayton learns that leverage over others carries a price. Finally, Joules returns traumatised, not so much by Miss Meyer's death, rather by what he has learned of her traumatic life.

In conclusion, the title of the novel *The Jackal's Wedding* refers specifically to the Afrikaans saying 'Jakkals trou met wolf se vrou as dit reën en die son skyn flou' which literally translates as 'Jackal is marrying Wolf's wife when it rains and the sun shines faintly.' (Wikipedia entry for Sunshower). More generally, it refers to the phenomenon of sun showers (as seen in chapter one) which in folklore throughout

the world, conjures up connotations of contrasts such as sun and rain, unnatural marriages between different species of animals or the devil beating his wife. The sun shower is meant to symbolise and foreshadow what turns out to be the failed relationship between Joules and Miss Meyer.

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Appendix A: The Shoulder of Orion

This short story was the genesis of the novel *The Jackal's Wedding*. With minor modification in terms of time and place to suit the back-story of Miss Meyer, this extract will serve as the basis of one of the planned seven first person autobiographical chapters:

The Shoulder of Orion

Late October 1982.

We ran through the nearest door and shook the rain from our coats. The owner nodded in our direction and made some comment about ducks. My mother turned her back to him and watched the high-street empty of people and the cars slow to a near stop. There was a half-torn page of newspaper near her feet. I recognised the woman in the picture from the Sun; she was a page three girl. She was wearing a tight top and deeley-boppers and the policeman pretending to arrest her had the biggest smile on his face.

The owner turned a dial behind the counter and dropped a basket of chips into the fryer. Then, he turned a different dial, the clicks audible above the sound of rain whipping against the glass. There was a makeup advert on the wall, 'Revlon in Bloom', and the two models, one black and one white, looked like they were having difficulty keeping their red dresses from slipping from their shoulders. There were big pink floral prints across their busts and matching flowers tucked into their hair. My mother had taught me to dismiss empty headed frauds like these when I was a young girl, but there was something about colour that always seemed genuine to me.

The door opened and a man and his son skidded into the chip shop. The wind closed the door for them. The water streaming down the big window lost its shape for a moment as the vibrations sent droplets skittering in an abrupt arc. The owner made some comment about ducks to the man. They seemed to know each other casually. They exchanged some nods and secret twitches. I think they were referring to my mother. I couldn't be sure. She'd never taught me about that kind of thing.

'Large fish and chips and a small sausage and chips, please.'

The boy tugged at his father's sleeve. The man poked around in his pocket and handed over a ten pence piece. The boy walked across to the gambling machine near the far end of the counter and switched it on at the wall. He was about half my age, eight tops. He smiled at me and looked down. I think he thought I was pretty. My mother jumped as the machine chirped to life.

'Salt and vinegar with that?'

My mother turned and aimed her monotone bellow at the owner. 'I didn't order anything!'

She stepped towards me, took my arm and led us out into the storm.

My mother could feel every drop of rain and she clenched her fists against the whoosh and splash of tyres pushing pooling water. She was having a bad day, so I took her by the hand and marched us along the high street and on into the suburbs beyond.

I didn't know the streets of Thistledown that well and the road works didn't help. It was Friday, and since Monday, the pedestrian walkways around the machines and pipes and piles of rubble seemed to have shifted daily. The wind kept blowing our hoods off, so I'd stop every few lampposts and pull them back on. Though we were soaked through, there was some comfort in finding the bench and the limited shelter of the sycamore that stood over it. There was an old stone wall behind us, and behind that, one of the many grand houses that filled Sylvan Lane. On the opposite side of the narrow road, a new housing estate was emerging from a bite of agricultural land. We sat and waited for John.

'I think we should emigrate to Ireland.' My mother's hood had blown off again. Her hair was stuck fast to her cheeks, like lengths of dough slapped against a wall. 'They put bombs in cars over there.' She swallowed, 'I think we'll be safe though.'

'The bombs are in the north,' I said. I thought it'd be a good idea, for John at least, if my mother and I got as far away as possible. But, Ireland was like Britain with clogged up veins. It was hard enough breathing as it was. 'You wouldn't like it. The Irish bounce up and down in your face all day long singing and playing fiddles.'

Across the road, set back a couple of houses, a man leant out of gap where a window would soon be. He waved at someone near the main gate before moving his arm in long, slow sweeping movements towards the city centre.

'There he is! Look!' I said.

My mother spotted the arm just as it retreated back inside.

'He wants us to head back Mum. He's seen us; we should go home and get ourselves dried.'

‘He’s just being nice. He’s just being John. He wants us to stay, keep him company.’

‘If one of us is ill tomorrow, catches a chill from this rain, we won’t be able to come back.’

I didn’t wait to discuss it with her. I stood up, took her hand and led her back towards the shops.

My mother felt looser than usual. After a while, she said, ‘Régine, I’m going to invite John around for tea tomorrow. We’ll ask one of the other workmen to take a note to him. I wish he wasn’t so busy. It’d be nice to have lunch with him or just talk to him for a few minutes.’

John was great. He used to work a half-day on Fridays and during term-time he’d drive all the way over to Amberton from Thistledown and pick me up as I walked home from school. The lift would save me a good twenty minutes, so we’d stop a few streets behind where I lived, a little up on the hill, and talk. He’d ask me how I was, give me a new mix tape full of cool stuff, not the rubbish they played on the radio, and sometimes he’d give me money – not much, just enough for some sweets, or if I saved for a few weeks, some cheap makeup or jewellery I’d have to hide from my mother. Sometimes he just sat there smoking and I’d read one of the tabloids he bought. Best of all, he’d tell me about all the people he knew, all the places he’d been and the latest films I never got to see. He’d only been around our house twice and that was months and months ago.

As we walked along the high street towards the bus station, an advert for a film brought me to a stop. I let go of my mother’s hand. I couldn’t tell whether she’d

keep on walking or wait with me or lose her temper and swing her arms at strangers. In that moment, I don't think I cared. There was a man in the top left corner of the poster holding a gun. Opposite him was a very striking woman holding a cigarette. Her nails and her lips were cartoon crimson, her hair short and black, and her eyes bright and intelligent. She looked utterly ... comfortable. Below them were skyscrapers and flying cars.

The woman reminded me of my mother in some ways. She too was physically striking. She was tall and had the kind of figure and face that deterred the average man from trying it on. Her clothes, like mine, were quite drab, quite understated and the colours always muted. But, before things had started to get worse, some mornings as she randomly assembled the elements that made up the day's *look*, she'd hit some kind of sweet spot and look very smart. If one of those days coincided with her hosting the right kind of mood, and light fell favourably on her makeup-free face, she would, without trying, attract the attention of men in all kinds of mundane places. John aside, it was usually one of two kinds of men: the first was the confident type, money in the bank, not intimidated by her looks. They'd usually back off within a few minutes of getting to know her, unless they were up for the challenge of trying to fix her; the second types were usually cruel.

My mother hadn't wandered far. 'Can we go and see the film? It's starting in ten minutes. John said it was brilliant.'

'When have you been speaking to John?' There couldn't have been less warmth in her voice.

‘He told me about it months ago. He’d read the book and seen a preview of the film on TV.’ I’m sure I went red in the face. I wasn’t really worried though, she could never spot a lie. I worried that one day I’d stop going red, stop feeling my breathing begin to slip away. ‘If we go see it, you could talk to John about it; he’d like that – assuming he’s seen it, which I bet he has.’

I confirmed with the man at the box office that there wouldn’t be many people inside for the matinee. Then, I took the money from my mother and bought two tickets for Blade Runner. She’d do anything for John. The man’s eyes followed us as we squelched our way across the carpet to the doors that led to our screen. I wouldn’t have let us in. I imagined him leaning out of the little glass hatch to make sure we weren’t followed in by rats.

The cinema was practically empty, the odd isolated cough here and there the only indication of company. The lights had been dimmed, but not darkened completely. I took my mother’s hand as the trailers started to roll. During one of the adverts the song *‘I’ve never been to me’* played in the background. I wish I’d led Charlene’s life of fame, a life so full of experience and adventure that I’d been too distracted to look inwards. The tune was pleasant enough, the vocals confident, but if John’s mix-tapes were any indication, he wouldn’t have approved. That wasn’t a bad thing though; even his disapproval was full of warmth.

The last trailer was an Armed Forces recruitment piece and it ended with a jet racing across the screen. The lights were brought up to a full and a hatch opened in one of the side walls for pre-film ice creams.

My mother spoke quietly, ‘Do you remember the time John fixed our video and taped the news as a test?’ She turned her head towards me and squeezed my hand. ‘He loved the footage of that Harrier Jump Jet being chased by that Argentinean plane, then, whoosh, all of a sudden they’re in front and the Harrier’s behind them opening fire. He loves those planes, says they can turn on a peso!’

I wasn’t one for war, but John taught me there were all kinds of magic in machines. Although I didn’t get her started, I sometimes felt like my mother’s drug dealer. I gave her enough John to keep her from going under, enough for her to want to come back for more, but never enough for her to OD. ‘There’re flying cars in this film Mum. A bit like those Jump Jets.’

My mother smiled at me.

The lights dimmed to black and the film began. My mother didn’t last long before falling asleep. Blade Runner was set in a future I felt I might just live to see. It was surly but handsome Harrison Ford’s job to track down and kill rogue ‘replicants’ – fake, short-lived, synthetic humans that weren’t doing as they were told. The film ended with the most violent of the ‘replicants’ – Roy Batty - dying a natural death as he delivered a soliloquy listing the wonders he’d seen in his four years of life. I thought it was the most beautiful thing I’d ever heard and it made me resent Charlene and her stupid song even more. ‘I’ve seen things you people wouldn’t believe,’ Batty’d said. What a great thing a life is if only you open yourself up to it all. I felt my eyes fill up as the credits rolled and I wondered what kind of death my mother would have.

As we walked to the bus station I felt as if I was watching the past collapse around me. I felt like a visitor from the next century. I knew the world was going to be a different place for me from then on. When we arrived at our bus stop I noticed for the first time that it'd stopped raining. My mother seemed to realise it at exactly the same moment.

She grabbed my arm and said, 'we're going back to see John. We'll catch him as he clocks off.'

John didn't do hate, but if he did, and if he'd actually spoken with my mother more than a few times, I think he might have hated her. 'He's probably busy, trying to catch up on the outdoor work he wasn't able to do earlier.' I wondered where he was, what town had him now. I didn't even know if he'd ever worked on Sylvan Lane.

My argument seemed to relax her so we waited for our bus to arrive. The tarmac surface of the bus station was covered in a thin veneer of oil and petrol which had been activated into a pattern of dirty rainbows by the day's rain. A gang of girls walked past arm-in-arm, singing a song I didn't recognise; wearing colours and layers and accessories I wasn't allowed to. I could smell exhaust fumes and a hint of vinegar on the breeze. The light was fading and in a couple of hours the streets would be ruled by mercury and sodium.

Ten miles and half-an-hour later we arrived home. I struggled to remember the details of the film and everything looked the same as before, so I got angry with my mother for eating up all the space where new memories are supposed to go. I trapped her in the toilet until my hands went numb from holding the handle fast

against her yanks and pleas. Later, she got angry too, so I raised my arms to protect my face. Then, we prepared food together and played board games until bedtime.

A few weeks later I overheard some older girls in school saying that John had died. He'd slipped off scaffolding somewhere up north. I asked if it'd been raining at the time but it hadn't. I was glad of that. It felt as if he'd had a chance to hang around just that little bit longer before his memories got washed away.

I didn't tell my mother of course. School had started back and together, we found new ways for her to make it to nine o'clock.

Each night before drawing my curtains, I'd stand on my windowsill and watch Thistledown from afar, a blister of halogen and neon extending across the valley. Sometimes the view would help me remember things about John, sometimes snippets of the film came back to me. One night I remembered the scene where Roy Batty found his designer, his maker, his god and then killed him. It was so vivid I couldn't tell where the window pane ended and the film began.

Until I did something about my mother I knew I'd never get that scene out of my head.

Appendix B: The Urushi Tree (original version)

Note: before Miss Meyer's back-story had been fully established she was known as Reggie. In addition, the nameless first person narrator here is Joules.

The Urushi Tree.

Reggie brought music and a cardboard Brando to the dead shopping mall. She'd read up about these rusting monuments to the quiet, old routes before we caught our flights out to the States. After leaving Philadelphia on a wide interstate fat with traffic, we followed a few different highways, numbered in the seventies and eighties, eastward for about five hours. We passed townships named for Syrian cities and Northern Irish hamlets. The populations were so small I wondered why anyone had bothered to count them. Sometimes we'd pass a strip settlement made up of a row of equally sized lots. In some of them, there sat grand-looking four or five bedroom, white, clapboard houses; in others, stunted prefab dwellings hid behind old pickups, their bonnets permanently open and arthritic in the sun.

As we got closer to our destination she pumped the accelerator and swayed the hire car back and forth across the worn asphalt in quiet excitement. It was meant to be her big surprise for me.

'Viola!' she laughed as we passed the sign for North Versailles Township. 'Can you hear the music playing yet? The palace awaits us.'

I said I could, but the truth was I was tired. We'd just spent our first night together too unsure to touch. She slept the awkwardness off but I couldn't.

We passed a filling station and she asked if I needed anything. 'I'm OK,' I said, 'everything's perfect.'

‘Sure?’

She’d told me before we flew out not to worry about money, but I was determined to stretch out the hours between her acts of charity. She’d also told me not to worry about my parents, and that I’d learn more on this trip than I’d ever learn in college.

‘One hundred percent sure,’ I said.

To the rear of the filling station, fields of rapeseed stretched off towards a low range of distant hills. In front and to the left of us, clumps of black cherry and quaking aspen obscured the view. We rounded a bend and then, there it was less than half a mile off. She flipped the cruise control on and steered with her knees, making gentle adjustments against the camber.

I looked across at the fenced-off complex, its hundreds of yards of boarded up store fronts, its lifeless neon tubes askew on the breeze, and then, I looked back at her. She’d tucked an imaginary musical instrument between her left shoulder and chin, her right arm pushing a bow through the air. She closed her eyes and rocked her head from side-to-side.

‘Christ’s sake, the wheel!’

Her grin widened and she resumed a more proper approximation of driving.

She put her hand on my thigh. ‘Did you know, 0.3% of the population of this county are from the Pacific Islands? Who’d have thought?’ Her hand moved towards my crutch for the briefest moment. ‘Their men are quite big I’ve heard.’

She pulled off the road and mounted a grass verge heavily crossed with tyre tracks that led through a hole in the perimeter fence. Once in the car park she pushed the Chevrolet Impala hard towards the main entrance of the mall. We came to a dead stop twenty feet in front of a huge glass atrium. We caught our breath for a second, then, she gunned the accelerator and swerved back into the open spaces we'd just crossed. As she took the car through a series of wide, fast figures of eight she told me a story.

Her eyes were fixed on some point just in front of the car. 'I bet this place isn't much different to the Yamagata Prefecture.'

I reached for the flip-down handle above my door and made a fist around it with my right hand. 'A little less Japanese I'd wager.'

'The monks started doing it in 794 AD. A thousand days of eating nuts and seeds and exercising until you can see the whites of your bones show from under your skin.'

The turns were getting sharper so I put my left hand tight across my stomach and gripped the little well that sat just below the door handle. I flicked some sweet wrappers out. I must have looked like I was practicing a Karate block.

'Then, a thousand days of eating just bark and roots...'

She pulled up the handbrake and swung the wheel hard in the opposite direction to the curve she'd just been following. The tyres screamed and I started to say something. I remember getting as far as 'fuck', and then I noticed the pink bow she always tied around her waist. It never seemed to move, not even now, still bang-on dead centre in the midst of all these centrifugal forces.

‘Then, when they’d purged their bodies of all that tasty fat, those oh so beautiful Buddhist friends of ours would start drinking the sap of the Urushi tree.’

‘What for?’

I could hear her breathing in the gaps between engine snarl. She had these skinny little arms and they’d been pummelling that great big steering wheel for a couple of minutes. Sometimes you could see a bead of sweat starting to form on her forehead. The air con snuffed it out each time.

‘The sap’s traditionally been used for lacquering furniture.’

She flicked a stray ringlet from her face. This sent us careening towards one of the wings of the mall as physics snatched control from her one hand. She hit the brakes and we stopped at a crazy angle to the building, a couple of feet from the pavement that edged its front.

She cut me off mid-fuck again. ‘Yeah, so they drink this poisonous-sap-lacquer-tea concoction for a few weeks and throw up a lot. The genius is that the body becomes so poisonous even maggots won’t go near you when you’re dead. Final stage, the monk locks himself in a stone tomb sitting in the lotus position.’

I knew the history well, I’d read all of Ueda Akinari’s stories and I’d been weaned on Manga. I was practically Japanese. I didn’t feel comfortable finishing off what happened to the monks so I let her carry on. I think I knew what she could be like.

Her fingers were still tight around the steering wheel. ‘There’d be this little air tube connecting the monk to the outside world and there’d be a thin length of string

tied to his finger on the one end, and above ground, on the other end, it'd be tied to a little bell. When he stopped ringing the bell, they'd seal the hole and wait another thousand days.'

She turned to look at me for the first time since we'd driven into the complex. When she relaxed she looked her age. Her skin sagged and the wrong kind of light revealed a patchwork of different skin tones.

'Carry on.'

She smiled. She started playing that imaginary musical instrument again, her arm bowing as she spoke. 'Then, they'd open the tomb and "Viola!" a Buddha, a beautiful self-made mummy Buddha.'

I smiled back at her. I didn't tell her that it'd only worked a couple of times, that most attempts had failed. Stupid bastards. Instead, I said the only thing that made sense to me in that moment, 'Shall I get Brando out of the boot?'

'Hmm, yes please', she said.

I know some people would have slipped back into the car when she wasn't looking and driven off, but I couldn't stop looking at her. She was in her late-forties and when stripped down to basics was quite average looking in every way, like a sketch in an early chapter from an anatomy text book – before they start stripping away the muscles and tendons.

It was the way in which she decorated herself that turned heads. There, amongst the tyre marks and the cracked asphalt her life sung. She twirled in the dry

air, her tight black curls dancing on her head, the sequins on her thick, skin-coloured dress twinkling in the sunlight. Her eyes were closed for the most part, her arms and hands moving like a lazy conductor's as she smiled to a tune only she could hear. She was like a little tornado only slower and softer and less predictable. She was nothing like the woman I'd met at the convention.

I picked up the cardboard Brando and waltzed him between imaginary cars. I was nearly lost in the moment. Every few steps my eyes would find her and I'd hesitate for a second hoping to catch her attention. She didn't look at me once. She was somewhere else entirely. I willed her to smile in my direction and throw her head back in a deep laugh. I closed my eyes and tried to forget who I was, but I was brought to a stop by a thud and a heavy vibration in the cardboard.

I opened my eyes and watched Reggie laugh as she threw several bog-bombs in my general direction. The one that had hit was slowly sliding down Brando's chest leaving a wet trail behind it. My eyes followed the toilet paper ball fall to the floor. Soon the sun would dry it hard.

I looked up and saw Reggie moving towards me. She was spinning and weaving, dropping to the floor and jumping back up again, long streamers in each hand, swirling a pair of rainbows. She had the last bog-bomb in her teeth and she got close she bent down and moved her head in a circular motion about Brando's groin. Then, she stood up and leaned in close, the bog-bomb just out of reach of my lips. She turned her head suddenly and flung the bog-bomb off to the right.

'Come on,' she said, 'let's go get a Cola.' Then, she ran full tilt towards the dead shopping mall.