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UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHAMPTON

FACULTY OF HUMANITIES

Creative Writing

**Structures of Meaning:**  
***Form and the mundane***  
***in the contemporary***  
***novel***

Maté Jarai

*Thesis for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy*

*October 2017*



## **ABSTRACT**

FACULTY OF HUMANITIES: Creative Writing

Thesis for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

### **Structures of Meaning: Form and the Mundane in the Contemporary Novel**

By Maté Jarai

In the contemporary novel, the mundane is proving addictive. The lengthy digressions and obsessive details of Karl Ove Knausgaard have hooked readers, while Brett Easton Ellis hailed Tao Lin as ‘the most interesting prose stylist of his generation’, while labelling his novel *Taipei* ‘boring’. But what strategies does the contemporary writer use to arouse interest in monotony?

This thesis explores the question through a new novel *Illuminato*, whose protagonist Florián Hal struggles to find meaning, in what he feels is a pointless existence. The novel asks the reader to explore Florián’s world experientially, and focus on the repetitiveness of his daily life. Through the novel, I ask how the contemporary mundane can prompt intrigue, immersion, and engagement from readers.

The accompanying critical commentary considers strategies for writing the mundane, focusing on Tao Lin, Karl Ove Knausgaard and Scarlett Thomas. It assesses the techniques and devices these writers use in place of narrative climax or dramatic action, concentrating on their use of style, structure, and their interest in questions of fidelity, realism and form. It focuses on three distinct binaries of the contemporary mundane; Tao Lin’s interest in attention versus boredom, Knausgaard’s depiction of memory and the present, and Thomas’ contest between action and ideas. Each binary is examined with reference to the drafting and development of my own novel; in chapter one, from my protagonists’ distracted narration; in chapter two, the flashbacks used to represent his past; to the use of Plato’s cave allegory as a substitute for dramatic structure in chapter three.

The doctoral project offers a work in dialogue with the contemporary mundane, while reflecting on its limitations, opportunities, and challenges.



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# DECLARATION OF AUTHORSHIP

I, MATÉ JARAL ..... [please print name]

declare that this thesis and the work presented in it are my own and has been generated by me as the result of my own original research.

[title of thesis] Structures of meaning: Form and the  
mundane in the contemporary novel

I confirm that:

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Signed: Mate Jaral

Date: 15/10/17





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# Synopsis

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*Illuminato* is the story of Florián Hal, a twenty-five-year-old man struggling to find meaning in his life. Florián's parents died when he was ten years old, and he has always been missing a sense of self. The novel opens on a flight to Budapest. Florián travels through the city and ends up at the apartment of his grandmother, who he hasn't seen in fifteen years. She is surprised yet happy to see him. He doesn't share much about his recent past, only that he felt he needed to return to Budapest, the city of his birth, where he hasn't been since his parents' death. He begins to work for a man named István, trimming trees around the city. He tries to invest himself in this but after a few weeks realises he cannot.

From here the novel flashes back six months, to the fictional British coastal town of Whitingsea. Florián is living with his girlfriend Angie, however, aside from this, he is very much on the fringes of society, interacting with the world around him as little as possible. Though dramatic events do follow, large portions of the narrative focus on this, his boredom and inability to engage with anything.

Things spiral out of control when Florián accidentally kills a man in a hit and run incident. He is never caught or punished and he questions why this might be. Angie has had enough. After an argument, she decides to leave him and to go live on the fictional, Mediterranean Island of Dragoralla with her father. But Flo insists he still loves her, so he asks to go with her. She is willing to give him a final chance.

Back in Budapest, Florián reconnects with a girl from his past, while continuing to struggle with his sense of present self. After a romantic night, however, the girl disappears, and he cannot remember her name, so cannot find her.

The novel flashes back to Dragoralla. Angie hopes the change of scenery will show Florián another way of life and remind him of their love, though he becomes disillusioned very quickly. He can no longer live as he once lived, so he leaves Angie in the night and travels to Amsterdam in the

hope of finding his best friend Blaise, who left to travel the world some months earlier.

Back in the present, in Budapest, Florián is losing his mind trying to find this girl, but he concedes he will never see her again. He is leaning closer to an unnamed dark path, one learned from a mystery man called 'Fred', only hinted at to this point. The final straw is when he returns home one night to find his grandmother, Gréti, dead. He finally gives up on the 'normal human way of life' completely. He is ready to try an alternative path, no matter how dark or insane it may seem.

The novel flashes back to Amsterdam, and a few days before his arrival in Budapest. He doesn't find Blaise. Instead he finds a man who calls himself Fred, a man who shares many of his own ideals. But most crucially, Fred reveals that he knows about the car accident that first set Florián's delusion in motion. He knows that Florián has 'begun to see things.'

Fred shows Florián the key to unlocking the 'other side', claiming that 'all we know is a lie.' Through a secret, arcane recipe of hallucinogenic drugs, combined with 'acts' that are in total opposition with 'the moral, human way' of being, Fred claims this 'other side' can be reached. He forces Florián to murder a man. Florián is reluctant but he does the deed. Fred himself is killed in the aftermath and Florián is left all alone, but not before Fred passes on his quest, because although they are working towards a 'greater goal', something is still missing. Amoral acts alone don't seem to be enough for them to reach the 'other side'. There is something they haven't thought of yet.

Back in Budapest, Florián meditates on his grandmother's death. He acquires what he needs to complete Fred's recipe from some men living in the flat above. Under the influence of Fred's recipe, and with a final encounter with the girl he met just days ago, he learns what the final 'piece of the puzzle' must be. He must 'destroy love.'

In the novel's climax, he travels back to Whitingsea. He searches for Angie, hoping that killing her, his one true love, will finally set him free, but when he sees her, despite how far he'd been seemingly willing to go, he cannot do it. He is too much a part of this world.









# ***Illuminato***

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***Máté Járαι***



# **– Part One –**

## ***Cave***

“Imagine people living  
in a cavernous cell down  
under the ground; at the far end  
of the cave, a long way off, there’s an  
entrance open to the  
outside world.”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Plato, *The Republic, IX: The Supremacy of Good* (translated by Robin Waterfield), (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993) p.240



On a flight to Budapest Flo sits by the window with his eyes closed. He's slept through most of the journey, exhausted from the last few days. He lets his thoughts loose, allowing his subconscious to take charge, something he is able to do effortlessly. On this occasion he sees himself as a blind man in a dark cave, not for the first time. The transition from one place to another, airplane cabin to cave, is clean, and he thinks 'teleport', but erases the word from his mind, because the thought is 'active' not 'passive.' Inertly he steps through the dark, walls and ceiling too far away to guide him, cold rock beneath his bare feet. He begins spinning in circles with arms out at his sides, finally opening his eyes only because dizziness mutates into something feverous, a falling feeling takes over, falling backwards, and he can feel a sharp stab at the back of his head, momentarily, a coolness. When he opens his eyes a few moments later, he smiles at his reflection in the small, circular window. Only the green of his eyes is visible. The rest of his face has been erased by the external sunlight. Outside, there are only clouds below. The clouds could just as easily be sandy plains or snowy flats. It's all about perception, he thinks, his own, continuously evolving, so he flexes his fingers, feeling detached from the person staring back at him, the face in the glass shifting left and right for a while until his dizziness fades.

He turns his attention to the sketchpad on his lap. Using a black ink pen he draws a cave entrance in a sheer, stone wall. He shades the shadows, pressing the pen deep into the paper, scratching at it. The sound of the pen becomes clearly audible even over the hums, rattles and whooshing sounds of the airplane. The pen breaks through the page. It's a shit sketch pad. He says, "Fuck," unaware he's said it out loud until he senses the man in the seat to his right looking at him. He glances at the man, a bald man with glasses in his early thirties, who has a surprised and slightly offended expression. His features all seem to have expanded, wide eyes, flared nostrils. The man has been working on a Macbook but has stopped typing. It looks like an email, in English, to someone called 'Laci'. Flo raises a hand and says, "Sorry." The man doesn't say anything, returning his attention to the email.

Flo turns the page in his pad. This is a prelude to shifting his mind's active focus towards the immediate future. He begins sketching a horse, recalling vague childhood images of a rusty horseshoe hung over a nail,

embedded in a red brick wall, and a painting somewhere in his childhood home, a watercolour of stallions galloping, merging into one another, like reflections and impressions of the same animal. Realising he's re-entered the past he pauses, glancing at his reflection in the window again, still detached from those other eyes, and he grins, hoping his reflection won't grin back.

The landing is bumpy. At customs, the woman stares at his British passport with a Hungarian name for a long time, eventually shrugging and letting him through with a nod that's somewhere between 'welcome' and 'watch yourself'. In the taxi from the airport, the evening darkening, he rolls down the window and breathes in the air, sensing something unnameable but significant, historical, his own history, maybe. He takes his sketchpad out of his satchel and stares at his drawing of a horse. He thinks about how he never really asked his parents about their family history. Too young to care much about 'real things', he could never have known that soon they'd be dead. He closes his eyes and takes several deep breaths. His focus is that 'significant feeling' in the air. The sense of smell is the most evocative of memory. He read this somewhere once, or heard it, so he breathes through his nose. The air seems loaded with something like nostalgia, but more ambivalent, possibly an uncertainty relating to his present self and what it means to be here in the city of his birth. The road from the airport is long and dusty. There are billboards and outlet stores. Last time he was here was for his parents' funeral. He sat in the back of a taxi not dissimilar to this one, a small boy with tears in his eyes, rolling towards the cemetery. The memory arrives with weight, pinning him into his seat and causing his insides to ache, so he pushes it quickly away. Too much all at once, an unfathomable amount of distance, it seems, so he counts backwards, fifteen years since their death.

He drifts back from the past, recognising where he is. This surprises him. He thinks 'dreamlike' and sits up, feeling himself physically transforming into his boyhood self, no longer able to control the inevitable, the power of mind and memory too much. He glances suspiciously around, wondering if he is now part of a greater game, some grand illusion or trickery, before asking the driver to stop. At the airport he'd requested to be taken to the Chain Bridge because he'd wanted to see the stone lions that guard it, but he can see them later. This is important. He remembers Fred's words, 'Just roll with

it.' So he pays the driver and climbs out of the cab because he is on Mester Street where his grandmother, Gréti, had lived.

He walks along the pavement hoping he'll recognise her building, a place where he spent at least three summers as a boy. It's fully dark, the air steamy and sticky. Yellow trams squeak along tracks in the centre of the road beside the occasional passing car. The buildings either side of him are grey, communist-built apartment blocks, ranging more or less between eight and twelve storeys high. Further along Mester street the buildings are older and more decorative. He's getting closer, recognising a large school building, slowing down, stopping and turning to face the adjacent bakery which is instantly familiar. Gréti used to send him down to buy kiflis in the mornings on occasion, crescent shaped bread rolls. The bakery looks exactly the same as it had; cakes in the window beneath a faded brown sign, fresh coffee behind the counter in large sacks. He'd been terrified the first few times he was sent down alone, standing outside while trying to find the determination and courage to complete his task, a hesitance not dissimilar to what he faces now. He's fairly certain the next building along is Gréti's. The glass doors are cracked and the paint around the edges is peeling but he thinks he recognises the letter boxes and the red linoleum flooring, which had been lava to him, once upon a time, lava he'd avoided by sticking to the edges of the entrance hall. He moves cautiously towards the buzzers and list of residents. His grandmother's name, 'Egei Gréti', is there among the others.

As he pushes the button he feels nervous. When her voice finally comes crackling through the ancient intercom, "*Hallo? Ki az?*" he thinks he is shrinking again and hears a child's footsteps behind him. He turns around but is alone. It's undeniably her voice. He isn't aware he remembers it until he hears it. Maybe he was secretly hoping not to find her, since he'd not thought about what he'd say or do if he did. The loud rumble of a bus rolls past followed by a tram going the other way. He forces a smile, attempting to feel nostalgic in a good way, and imagines himself saying, 'It's me,' but the words seem preposterous.

She speaks through the intercom again, "*Hallo? Hallo?*"

An ache fills him. He thinks 'guilt' because they never visited her. When he grew older he could have come alone and still didn't. The urge to



travel backwards is overwhelming. He finds himself reaching for the buzzer again, thinking his past is a certainty while his future barely makes any sense at all. He lowers his hand, listens as the intercom clicks off, slowly becoming aware of coloured lights flashing in his vicinity. The building across the street is a strip club. He can't remember it being there and thinks about his grandmother staring at flashing neon-breasts each time she goes to the market. This would usually have made him angry but he feels nothing. He accepts it, doesn't fight it, thinks, 'Maybe I have no fight left,' before walking away with his hands in his pockets.

On the banks of the Danube, a point at which he arrives by total accident, after an amount of time that is unknown to him, he stares down at the dark water, all lit up by the golden lights draped in rows over the bridges. He can see the Parliament building in the distance to his right, its gaudy domes and intricate towers. The castle is opposite him on the other side of the river. He remembers fireworks from a distant night much colder than this one, roasted chestnuts, his mother's gloved hand holding his, and he stands there like a statue, looking for his own reflection on the water, but it's too dark. He is invisible amidst the electric city glow.

He smokes a cigarette while sitting on a bench a little further along the river, examining a copy he made of Fred's 'recipe'. He contemplates the many things that could become his next action. There are countless possibilities, like a leap into the river, maybe a cannonball, or an elegant dive. He could run, run until he can't run anymore, or simply do nothing, remaining there on that bench for eternity. But among all the possible courses of action, he knows that really there are only two. Following Fred is one of them but now, suddenly faced with having to do so, he is tentative. He thinks 'fear' but doesn't want to associate that word with himself. He forces a determined expression, lowering his brows, before letting his thoughts loose again, attempting to drift, hollow as he needs to be, the only way he might be able to go down that particular path.

He walks along the river bank. He passes several boats for hire. There are groups of people wearing dresses and suits moving on and off them. Lots of people are taking pictures of themselves and of the scenery. Instagram and Facebook for sure. Maybe Tweeting, even here, naturally, he thinks. He

crosses the street and moves into a pedestrianised part of the city, somewhere in Pest. He wanders into smaller alleyways. He passes bars and clubs. He stops outside a strip club called LUSTRE that's next to a sex-shop also called LUSTRE, cheaply lit with blue and red. This could be the kind of place where he might find the things on Fred's list, the ingredients he needs to complete that other quest, or at least someone who could point him in the right direction. He steels himself to enter but remains motionless. He can't find the motivation to go all the way, feeling done with those sorts of places, hating them even more than he always has. But it's not fear, he convinces himself. Disdain, revulsion, absolutely, but not fear.

He walks back to the river's edge where the smell of tarragon alerts him to a restaurant facing the water. A waiter is standing outside beneath a cluster of large umbrellas, with a crisp towel over his arm and a silver tray in the other hand. The ten-or-so tables outside are full of happy looking patrons. The chalk-board lists the day's specials, among them there is veal and tarragon soup. One particular family catches his eyes, parents and two kids with balloons tied to their chairs. The kids look excited to be up so late, maybe, he thinks, re-awakening the sense that he's regressed continuously since the moment he stepped off the plane and is now five years old, also excited to be up so late. He makes eye contact with the small boy at the table and smiles but the boy looks away. The father of the family is talking and joking around, gesturing animatedly, making strange faces. Throughout his act he glances repeatedly at Flo, warily, as if he were some kind of hobo about to ruin their meal. A pigeon lands on the canopy of the restaurant and the waiter quickly moves towards it with a broom, poking at it until it flies away. The waiter then looks at Flo and wags a finger, pointing to a laminated sign that says 'No Begging' beside the specials board.

Turning away from the Danube, Flo heads back up into the centre of Pest, far away from the water, those reflections and 'other sides', which he can almost hear humming ominously somewhere behind him, sounds and sensations he consciously ignores while walking back towards his grandmother's home.

The moment he pushes the buzzer again he feels intensely nervous. He glances up at the building, unable to remember which windows belong to his grandmother, which means he isn't sure if her lights are on or not. He buzzes a second time and the voice comes through the intercom moments later, "*Hallo? Hallo?*"

"*Szia Gréti, Florián vagyok,*" he says, hearing the hum of his heartbeat, a new phenomenon, finally drowning out those other humming sounds that have continued to tail him from the riverside.

There are a few seconds of silence before in rapid Hungarian Gréti asks, "Who? What did you say?"

"Flo," he says, "Your grandson."

"Florián?"

"Igen."

The buzzer rings out and he enters the building. He heads up in the ancient lift, feeling as though it might fall at any moment, hopes it will, pictures the event like a film in his head, soundless, black and white high-contrast, his own emotionless face looking upwards before disappearing into shadow. At least he wouldn't have to explain himself.

When he reaches the fourth floor and steps out of the lift his grandmother is waiting on the landing. She looks a third of the size he remembers, almost like a miniature version of herself that's been left out in the sun too long, sinking and arching gently towards the ground, only present as a reminder to him of what life is. He remains expressionless. She stares at him and studies his face. Her mouth is pulled wide like an old frog's and her entire form seems to decrease further in size the longer they stand there. He smiles because he feels awkward and then she starts smiling. Tears appear in her huge owl eyes. She shuffles forwards, pulling his head down to hers with both palms, hugging him with an arm around his neck while kissing his face.

"This is unbelievable. Totally unbelievable!" she says in Hungarian, speaking loudly and musically.

He hugs her tightly, first with one arm, then wraps both arms all the way around her. For a moment he feels truly happy, burying his face in her cardigan and sobbing, shaking, and then almost laughing at himself in

surprise with regards to the emotions overwhelming him, emotions he cannot control, a magnitude of feeling he thought he was incapable of.

“How can you be here? Did something happen? Am I dreaming? Is this really my Florián?” Gréti asks, grabbing hold of his wrist and leading him into the apartment before he has a chance to consider an answer.

The apartment is just as he remembers it. Like her voice, he doesn’t know he remembers it until he’s seeing it again, the shelves of books along every wall, stacked all the way up to the high ceilings, the classical music playing on the radio. He can smell cooking even though it’s after midnight. He looks around suspiciously and thinks about time travel.

She seats him in one of the old arm-chairs and dabs his face with a tea towel, explaining that she’s making pörkölt for the boys upstairs because she can’t sleep. She says she always cooks when she can’t sleep which is often. “It will be ready soon, and I’d rather you eat it anyway,” she says, passing him a glass of water.

“What happened to you?” She asks, solemn all of a sudden, her eyes narrowed and a little tearful again. She looks even older in the warmly lit room. Her wrinkles appear deeper and the shadows around them seem to cling to all the crevices of her face, as if magnetically pulled there.

“I’m fine,” he says, calmly smiling and closing his eyes to indicate that he is relaxed. “I’m just happy to be here.”

She nods slowly and seems to force a smile, then goes out into the kitchen to stir the food, before re-entering the room and starting to clear away the books and papers crowding the coffee table. She speaks without drawing breath as she’s always done, he remembers now. She talks about her work, a set of renaissance art books she needs to finish translating from Italian. He listens while looking at the photos around the room. There are several of his mother at varying ages, one of Grandpa Sanyi and some other black and white photos of people he doesn’t recognise. There are some of him and his two older brothers, including one from the Alps, skiing one year, in which he was around five, a photo he recognises because his parents had hung that same photo over their mantelpiece in England. There’s another photo from Christmas one year when the whole family had come together, here in Budapest. Both sets of grandparents had been present, his father’s

brother, even some second cousins. Flo remembers his mother telling him that was all Gréti had ever wanted, to have a big family so that she could host big familial occasions. That Christmas was the only time it ever happened. They ate venison and Grandpa Sanyi found a bullet in his meat. It both scared and excited Flo. His father, János, got a job in England a few months later. Flo doesn't remember the move at all, just being here in Budapest, and then suddenly being there. Grandpa Sanyi died shortly after they emigrated. The rest of the family were Hals, not Egeis. Gréti was all alone, is all alone. Tears fill Flo's eyes again. Other than he and his brothers, the only family she has is her son the taxi driver, but who knows where he is. Flo vaguely recalls a tall, funny guy who smelled of cologne and cigarettes, that was his uncle. There are a couple of photos of him too, one of him with Flo's mother when they must have been in their early twenties, and another of him alone, a portrait, but this photo is also very old. His name is Béla, Flo remembers.

A gold clock on ivory coloured pedestals sits in between two of the book shelves on a low cabinet, safely inside a glass case. Flo remembers the clock very well – its haunting chime every quarter hour – but the pendulum is motionless. The clock seems small now, only a metre tall. When he was a boy it loomed in Gréti's living room, sometimes waking him in the night with its low song. There was something magical about it which had always fascinated him.

He flicks through the set of Italian art books on the table beside an old typewriter and piles of translated pages. Gréti explains she's glad to still be working because it keeps her mind sharp while many of her friends have become braindead. When she's finished clearing up she goes into the kitchen and brings out a plate of cheese straws. She apologises for making them too dry. Flo eats one and laughs because it tastes great, remembering how she'd always done this, never happy with anything she made. He stops laughing because suddenly he realises it's kind of sad, but hopes she does this out of modesty and that occasionally, deep down, she does feel the satisfaction of success. Not a lot of that feeling in his own life either. Maybe 'The Wooden Gargoyle,' a short story he wrote and used as an exercise with some of the kids at school, was the last time he felt like he succeeded at something, because the kids loved his story, especially Samuel. He'd decided to put the

story on his blog but no one else had ever read it. Google Analytics informed him of this. His only other reader, of a paper copy he'd printed, was Angie. She claimed to really enjoy it, but, he seemed to recall, with little conviction in her voice. He sighs, wishing he hadn't thought of Samuel or Angie, that other life.

There are some loud crashes from the apartment above them. Chugging heavy metal starts blaring down. Gréti explains it's just the boys upstairs, that they're very nice but a bit loud. She says it isn't a problem. She never sleeps much anyway and simply turns her radio up to drown them out, something she does right then while explaining it is often her course of action. The theme from *The Gladiator* soundtrack plays. Flo eats some more of the cheese straws. Gréti is only in the other room talking breathlessly about her translation work, something about Da Vinci, but her voice seems to come from somewhere further away, drifting from beyond known dimensions through ways that can't be seen or explained. He's hearing her voice from the kitchen, but also inside his head, in memory, simultaneously. It's quadraphonic, something he's never experienced, except for maybe while in that 'other place' with Fred, but he doesn't want to think about Fred either, and assures himself this is different, relating to 'time' while with Fred the catalyst for abnormally layered and resonant audio had been 'space'. He thinks about how twenty years, the last time he was here in her apartment, is worlds away.

Finally Gréti sits down and sighs, with nothing left to clear up and tidy. "Well, that's enough about me. It's time for me to ask about you," she says, staring right at him, lips flat. "I didn't want to push you before, because I could see you needed to rest for a while and gather yourself."

"There's not much to say," Flo says.

She laughs. "I haven't seen you in fifteen years, and you arrive in the early hours of the morning looking terrible. I'm sorry but I have to say it. When's the last time you ate something?"

"I'm fine. I've just had a rough few nights," he says.

"Your skin is greyer and paler than mine. Are you in trouble? Is it drugs? Don't tell me it's drugs. We need to get you vitamins. I have a

wonderful doctor who you could see. She's kind, intelligent, she'll figure out what is wrong."

Flo laughs quietly at the slew of questions that finally come rushing out of her. He imagines the mental strength that must have been required for her not to pry up until that moment. Smiling deliberately, holding her stare, he says, "I'm fine, really. Just a few rough nights."

She gazes at him while perched in the armchair opposite, lowering her chin and moving her head up and down slowly, as if the movement might cause his mouth to continue speaking.

"I've been in Amsterdam, with a friend," he tells her reluctantly, feeling it's necessary. "Haven't been home in a while. Just enjoying some free nights, that's all."

She looks at him sternly, waiting for more. He rests his palms on his knees and shrugs, indicating that there isn't much else.

"Ok, I understand that," she says. "And as happy as I am that you're here, it's all very sudden and strange, if I may say. You could have called me or let me know in some way."

"It wasn't exactly planned. It's a long story."

"Alright, I understand. We can talk about it tomorrow. You're tired."

"I'm not tired," he says, in a monotone, shifting in his seat, staring at his hands. "Maybe tomorrow, maybe in a few days. If I could stay a few days?"

She smiles, grabs hold of one his hands and starts to massage it gently. "Of course you can. As long as you want."

"I just had to come here," he says. "A feeling I had, maybe more than that, I don't know."

She smiles placidly and nods. "I'm not sure why you needed to come here but I'm glad you did. I still can't believe it's you. I knew those eyes when I saw them, and that smile hasn't changed a bit. But you're so tall and thin, like a basketball player! And your nose got so big."

He grins and glances at her. "You look exactly the same."

"Of course I don't. My skin is terrible and I shuffle around like a hoover. But it's sweet of you to say," she says. "Your hair is much darker than it was. You were so blonde as a boy."

He nods as she continues to study him.

"It's very long, your hair, and I don't like the beard," she says. "It makes you look old."

"I am old," he says.

"Don't say such stupid things. I'm old. That clock is old. You are not."

He nods towards the ornate clock and asks if it's broken.

She smiles. "Yes, it's a shame. Imagine, it belonged to my great, great grandfather and sat in the dining hall at the Inn my family owned before the First World War. They were very wealthy back then," she says, gazing around her humble little apartment. "It's probably worth quite a lot now, more than one hundred years old."

"Don't ever sell it," he says.

"Do you remember it?"

"Of course I do," he says.

He eats pörkölt with nakedli, paprika stew with tiny dumplings, shovelling it down, amazed she could remember his favourite dish when he'd almost forgotten. Gréti makes it well but he remembers his father's was even better, spicier and thicker. He used to help János Hal peel the onions when he was two years old. He recalls seeing it on videotape. He sips a beer, realising he hasn't eaten in almost two days. Gréti watches him, evidently enjoying his hunger, telling him he's eating like a bear and laughing. She asks him about his life and he tells her some things; that he'd gone to university, hadn't seen his brothers in several years, how they'd pushed him aside and left him alone when they'd fallen out. His brothers haven't been to visit her either, he learns. Just the odd phone call every few years and promises of visits never realised. In spite of this Gréti is still shocked to hear that he hasn't seen them either. She won't let it go. "Such a great shame," she keeps saying. "The three of you should have stuck together. Especially after what happened."

He shrugs. "They were always close. I was so much younger."

"I told your mother not to go. Brazil is a dangerous place," she says, becoming tearful again.



“They both spent their entire lives flying from city to city, for business or whatever, and nothing happened. They leave to see the world and bam, down goes that little plane and they die. What does that tell you?”

She shakes her head. “Unfortunately this is how it goes. Sometimes monstrous things happen. There is no reasoning.”

He nods out of politeness.

She asks whether he has a girlfriend or wife and he tells her he doesn’t want to talk about it. He visualises Angie holding his acoustic guitar. It’s a memory from an afternoon when he’d taught her a few chords in their living room. She’s laughing, smells like vanilla and the rain because they’d been caught in it, though he can’t remember where they’d been, or why, just this moment with the guitar. He can hear her laughter as she struggles to place her fingers correctly on the fretboard. He will always be able to hear her laughter. When he finishes eating Gréti takes the rest of the pörkölt upstairs to her neighbours and he falls asleep around that time because he doesn’t hear her come back.

Around a week or so later Flo is standing by the window watching the street because he’s awaiting the arrival of a man called István. Gréti’s friend Bea, from across the hall, has arranged some work for him. István cleans Bea’s windows but also works various landscaping jobs around the city. Yesterday Gréti informed Flo that he needed to get out there and work if he was going to be staying with her for a prolonged period, which it now seems as though he might, though he is still just ‘rolling with it’, uncertain with regards to his long-term future. He is also surprised to learn that so many days have passed since his arrival. He’s spent his time almost entirely in Gréti’s apartment with her, venturing out only as far as the bakery, or a little further afield, to the market a couple of times. These little trips to the outside world were always quick, occurring maybe every other day, and not without fear, or at least unease. While outside, he tried not to look at people too much because he felt extremely self-aware but mostly alien, sensing that everyone knew instantly upon spotting him that he was from somewhere else, though he couldn’t pinpoint why this bothered him so much. At certain times he felt like he wanted to say, ‘No, I’m from here’ but he didn’t because

of how he imagined others would react, mostly with mocking laughter and finger pointing. Gréti told him his accent was unusual and funny sounding.

Gréti is sitting on the armchair behind him, saying that Tolstoy is the greatest writer of all time, for maybe the twentieth time. This is how they've spent most of the last week together, discussing books while listening to classical music, conversations that mainly consisted of her giving him hundreds of reading recommendations. She said she'd always read often but read even more when she was a little girl and was a total 'book moth.' He'd asked her what a 'book moth' was and she said it meant she was always buried in books. He'd laughed and said, "Oh, like a book worm?" which confused her. Book moths sounded flammable to him. He didn't understand the connections to books apart from 'they both burn.' He thinks about it now, still can't figure it out.

Gréti is drinking coffee, the aroma pulled towards him by the draft from the open windows either side of the apartment. He turns to her, away from the window, finds her staring into empty space. She tells him that *War and Peace* got her through some terrible times. He tells her he knows, she's told him. He leaves the window and sits opposite her, nodding, wanting to ask about these terrible times, resisting, having resisted before, feeling unsure as to whether or not he should. Instead, he listens thoughtfully as she recounts returning to Budapest towards the end of World War II, describing the moment she caught sight of the Danube with all the bridges blown up.

He says, "I can't even imagine."

She smiles and says, "No, some things you can't."

The buzzer to the apartment breaks the silence a few minutes later and Gréti answers. It's István, so Flo goes down into the street to meet him. He's just finished cleaning Bea's windows and stands leaning against a tree, wearing a blue workman's suit, unbuttoned to reveal waxed pecs. He's around forty years old, polished looking with blonde hair. He's smiling, an expression he wears often, Flo figures, because of the deep crease lines on his cheeks. They shake hands. István's grip is overly strong, like he has something to prove. He winks and lights a cigarette, putting his other hand in his pocket.

"Florián, like Albert Florián? Great player. He was my father's favourite," István says.

"He was my father's favourite too," Flo says.

István laughs, "He was everyone's favourite."

István explains the situation regarding the work, how his nephew quit on him to focus on his 'music career', which he claims is hilarious because there's no such thing in Hungary. He says Flo can work for him until his nephew comes crawling back. "I'll pay you cash and we won't talk about it too much, what?" He says.

"Sounds great," Flo says.

"Your accent is the strangest Hungarian I've ever heard."

Flo smiles, "I've lived in England for a very long time."

"How long?"

"Twenty years."

István nods approvingly, putting his half-smoked cigarette out by dusting it on a tree trunk. He tucks the remains into his breast pocket. "I'm impressed you can still speak at all. See you tomorrow at five." He drops to the ground and does a few press-ups, stands up again and pushes back his hair. "I just like to keep the blood flowing. Remind myself I am still human, surrounded by all this shit." He checks the time on his watch, a golden flashy thing, smiles and says, "I have to go."

"If you have to go, why are you doing press-ups?" Flo asks.

"There's always time for a little blood flow," István says. He looks down at his pecks and up at Flo, raising his eyebrows, grinning. "I have to keep it up, it takes work," he says. "I do five hundred press-ups a day, but never more than twenty at a time."

Flo nods and attempts to return the smile, evidently looking uncertain and not too convincing.

István smirks and says, "You think I'm cray, what? Don't worry."

He taps Flo's shoulder. His hand feels strong. His movements are deliberate and confident.

"The work is great. You'll see why I love it," István says, before turning to walk away, lighting the rest of his cigarette. He holds his arms out at his

sides, overdramatically, and looks up at the sun, shouting, "It's the fresh air and sunshine, my friend!"

Flo goes back upstairs and Gréti asks him how it went. He tells her it was fine and that István is funny.

"He's a very nice man," she says. "He has a lovely wife too. She's a nurse."

Flo tells her that Angie is a nurse, feeling surprised that he's mentioned her out loud, something he classifies as a 'natural' reaction, realising he's been both feeling and acting 'more natural' the last few days.

"Angie, a beautiful name, was she your girlfriend?" Gréti asks.

"Yes."

"What happened between you?"

"Maybe some other time," Flo says.

"She must have been very caring if she's a nurse," Gréti says.

"She was, she is," Flo says, remembering the time they saved an injured hedgehog. He tries unsuccessfully not to imagine what she did the morning he left, finding that one line he'd written on a piece of paper. He pictures her alone in their apartment now, clutching the rabbit on the balcony, watching the road hopefully for his return.

Realising he's been silent for a few minutes, he shifts in his seat, leaning forwards, wanting to say something but being unable to. Gréti stares at him awhile, chewing on something stuck between her teeth, a caraway seed, he guesses. Her glasses reflect the window's glare back at him and he can't see her eyes. He knows she probably has a million questions flying around in her head. She won't understand if he tells her. He's been through too many things that are unexplainable.

"Something's bothering you. You can tell me," she says.

Her voice catches him off-guard. "No, it's nothing. I was just thinking about ghosts."

She looks confused but doesn't ask, visibly immersed in thoughts of her own, announcing she's going to have a bath.

Flo picks up *Hunger* by Hamsun which he started reading a few days earlier. His own suffering seems pathetic in comparison, ungrounded, because it is so apparently 'abstract' while Hamsun's is so devastatingly 'real'.

He puts the book down, deciding he's done with it. He gazes out past the moving curtains at the morbid seeming afternoon light, the sounds of machine guns and explosions firing off not so subtly upstairs. The two young men who live up there want the world to know they enjoy a combination of video games, drugs, heavy music and sex with dirty-looking girls, and that they enjoy all these things at full volume. He's offered on numerous occasions to go up and ask them to be quiet but Gréti has always stopped him, saying things like, "They are just young boys enjoying life. It's not a problem." Twice they even came to the door and acted all friendly, asking Gréti if she needed anything fixing. She hadn't but gave them food regardless.

He stands by the open window and watches the street for a while, attempting to ignore the grenades and the Kalashnikovs, or whatever they are. School has just finished. The parents crowd at the gates searching for their children. It makes him think of penguins, a documentary he saw, penguins returning from a hunt at the South Pole, searching for the right baby bird to feed. The sounds of war above him stop abruptly, diverting his attention. He looks up at the ceiling as someone screams, "Let's get some food," so he turns off the radio and waits. There's a knock at the door moments later. He answers it. Both men from the apartment upstairs are standing there, in tank tops and skinny jeans, looking high and surprised to see his face.

One of them asks if 'Lady Egei' is home to which he replies 'no'. They arch their necks to see behind him, searching for proof that he's lying.

"I feel like you're being rude," he says. I told you she isn't here."

"Could we ask who you are?"

"I'm her grandson."

They glance at each other. "We didn't know Mrs Egei had a grandson," one of them says.

"There's actually three of us. I'm the friendly one," Flo says, grinning, nodding and slowly closing the door in their faces.

He sits in the armchair and turns the radio up. It's a classical piece he doesn't recognise. It's sad. There are strings, maybe only strings. He closes his eyes, in an attempt to alleviate the irritation he's feeling, picturing himself

sitting there forever as his hair and beard grow out, as his skin begins to sag, the rest of him wasting away until only a skeleton remains. He is found by strange beings from the future, silver humanoids wearing renaissance theatre masks. He doesn't know why they are silver or why they are wearing renaissance theatre masks. It's just what he pictures. The entire scene plays out in high-saturation, vivid tones, no sound other than the music. He explains humanity in general to the humanoids of the future. It's a good idea to do so. It seems logical. They'd probably want to know. 'We were here and we fucked up a lot of things, I guess, and now we are gone,' he could say, or something like that. He could show them music. Music is good. Music he would be happy to discuss.

On the morning of his first day working for István he struggles to wake up, feeling tired and cold as he looks out at the grey pre-dawn. He picks up an apple from the fruit bowl on the table and stands by the window, biting down on it. He considers throwing the apple out of the window and going back to sleep on the sofa bed, but then he spots István's van arriving in the street below. It's quiet. Other than the van there's no traffic for almost an entire minute, which is unusual. István steps out of his van with a heavy, bald man. They both lean against the van and light cigarettes, closing their eyes, waiting for the sun to come up. István notices Flo in the window after a few minutes and salutes him, shouting, "What are you waiting for, Florán?"

"I'm just working on my accent," Flo shouts from the window, through cupped hands.

István claps his hands together. "It will take a hundred years to get that sounding right again," he says. "Just get down here so we can climb some trees and watch beautiful girls saunter by, what?"

István's colleague, the large bald man, is introduced to Flo as, 'My best friend and business partner, Dani.' When shaking Flo's hand Dani glares untrusting with his pale blue eyes, biting down on the inside of his cheek. His grip, like István's, is unnecessarily firm

"Don't worry," István says, seeing the uncertainty in Flo's expression. "He doesn't hate you. He just doesn't trust new faces, unlike me. I love a new face. Keeps things fresh and interesting, what?"

They work their way along Mester street using ladders and harnesses to climb up the trees. With one-handed electric chain-saws they carve off the burgeoning branches. István and Flo do all the climbing and sawing. Dani stays on the pavement below, collecting the trimmings and running them through a small wood-chipper. It's hot and Flo sweats in his overalls. He's exhausted after only an hour and relieved when they finally stop for a smoke after the second tree. The streets have filled with the morning rush. Flo chuffs hard on his cigarette, eager to get up into those trees again, where he knows he'll feel safer. István whistles at every skirt he sees, winking at Flo almost every time between bouts of swiping aggressively at his phone.

"What would your wife say?" Flo says, grinning.

István laughs. "I fucking hate that bitch. I hope she sees me acting this way. Then maybe she'll finally fuck off!"

Dani sniggers for the first time, his creepy eyes hidden by big square sunglasses. He looks half-cyborg.

"She spends her life flaming and puffing away until I do what she wants. The fucking dragon used to be so sexy. It's like a backwards fairy tale, what?" István says. "Old faces and old tits, what?" He laughs and asks Flo if he's married. Flo pulls a disgusted expression and pretends to vomit, then laughs. István grins, says that most people in Hungary get divorced anyway, stopping to whistle at a group of girls young enough to be his daughters. "We are animals," he says. "A great nation of animals who deserve to be left alone."

Dani nods and says, "Fuck the EU, or anyone who tries to dominate us. The God I know will send them all to hell," which is the first time he's spoken all day. Flo smiles but immediately stops when noticing Dani's irate expression.

They're sitting in a sandwich shop with coffees a few hours later. Flo asks Dani why he believes in God. Dani ignores him, not moving, leaving his sunglasses on.

"He doesn't like to talk, as you can see. If it wasn't for me no one would know anything about him," István says, staring at the waitress who is pretty but only around sixteen years old.

István explains that when Dani was a young man he was on the run from the city, for reasons not disclosed. It was the early hours of the morning. Dani drove out to a small town and went into a church full of old widows, no one else. He sat at the back and listened to them sing. It was around seven in the morning and the sun was just rising.

“He came out feeling alive, fresh, golden inside, what?” István says, nudging Dani with his elbow.

Dani grunts.

“He doesn’t like to show his sensitive side, but he found God that day.”

“I’ll break your neck in two,” Dani says.

István laughs, “I’m done. And break’s over you lazy cocks.”

They continue to work along the same street for the next few hours. While up amongst the branches Flo can see why István loves his work so much. ‘Maybe I could get used to this,’ he thinks, ‘Maybe this is it.’ The work is physically hard but this is good. He doesn’t let himself get caught up in the pointlessness of it, the endlessness, because the trees of course, will always continue to grow, long after he, Dani and István are dead. A strong gust slides between the leaves, ruffling them, soothing his sweaty face. He closes his eyes and allows the sunlight to be absorbed by his eyelids. He feels like a guilty crackhead finally getting his hit, because admittedly it feels wonderful, despite all the things he knows are wrong with the sunlight, the connotations, the lies of it that he’s discovered. He smiles to himself, shaking his head in the sun’s direction because it has won him over again, at least in a small way, temporarily. He imagines doing this same job in icy, autumn rain, but staying that long seems impossible, ‘fictitious’ he thinks. But who knows? He says, “Not me,” answering his own question, snickering. He stares distrustfully at the leaves, recalling those ‘otherworldly’ silver fibres Fred introduced him to. He visualises that other place, attempts to see similar things in the world around him now, but finds nothing as such in the clear, searing daylight.

All day István mocks him with Hungarian phrases he doesn’t understand. “No ears and no tail, what? The waves crash together above his head!” Some of said phrases must be hilarious because occasionally even



Dani chuckles quietly. They eat Kifis for lunch and stop a few hours after. It's been enjoyable for a day but those earlier thoughts of positivity towards this work have died. Already Flo finds himself dreading having to do it again. He begins the walk home, stretching the aching muscles in his arms and rubbing his blistered fingers, thinking about how many things are fun for just a day.

István shouts, "Every cockerel is master of his own shit pile, what Florián?" He starts to laugh, adding, "The black soup is still to come!"

Flo hears them both laughing as he walks on slowly without turning around, towards Gréti's apartment, feeling that everyone he passes is walking the other way.

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Six months earlier Flo was living in Whitingsea, on the south coast of England. He was driving alone. On one side of the street the cars were lined up, all heading for the seafront, something relating to boats, or a cruise ship probably. He was the only person driving the other way, heading north. The night was wet. An electric shine caused everything through his windscreen to glow. He blasted his music, a mix he'd made, *From Autumn to Ashes* and *Thursday*. In those days this was often his choice when driving. The night seemed altered with an orange filter, the sky oxidised, tainted somehow. Golden creases leaked rain. He wondered what that might mean, thinking 'apocalypse'. He laughed and then stopped laughing because he was scared, then laughed again.

It was a Friday and the main streets were packed with drunks. A man stood in the road flexing his muscles like a statue as several girls wearing rabbit ears ran shrieking into the middle of the road, halting his progress towards his next destination. He didn't mind, feeling that it was all drifting by like a silent movie and that he was separated by more than metal and glass. His car and music provided safety and clarity. He felt in control, collected. He could carve through the night with a head full of smoke, certain that he was a separate entity entirely to those around.

At a red light he noticed his windscreen had steamed up. He rubbed words onto the glass, 'I own the night', smiling, remembering a time around a

year earlier when he'd written those same words in the condensation of his bedroom window. He felt surprised a year had passed since. He'd felt the words were a sardonic reminder from his former self, since they'd no longer been true. On this occasion he thought they might be.

Over those last few weeks he'd been living solely in the night, passing empty windows and doors, always feeling settled and at home in the darkness. He liked the way nobody could see his face even when they stared directly at his car. There was the glare, the wetness, the smoke and steam around him. This was his way to exist. Maybe he'd find a hooker to save, except as he watched the people crossing the road in front of him none of them looked in need of saving, or maybe all of them were. It was hard to tell. He noticed a former boss of his, Simon, among them, looking drunk and happy. Simon had fired him a few weeks earlier after one day of working at the corner shop, mainly because he'd spent most of that day reading *Steppenwolf* behind the counter which meant he wasn't alert when the teen girl stole the Super Noodles and bottle of Lucozade. Simon was probably glad he had a legitimate reason to fire him. In the weeks that followed he had to sell his Gibson SG to pay the rent. He felt that Simon owed him a guitar. He thought about shouting 'You owe me a guitar' but a moped had appeared out of nowhere and now waited behind him. It was honking its horn. The light had turned green. Flo drove off slowly, searching for Simon in his rear-view mirror, but was unable to locate him.

A few streets away he pulled up around the corner and dropped off an order of burgers at a house. The girl who answered the door was drunk and asked him if he had any cocaine. He said he didn't and she paid him for the burgers. The rain started to fall more heavily but he didn't run to his car. He let it soak him, feeling that running would hand the elements a victory, which he wasn't prepared to do. He slowly climbed in and closed his car door, sitting and waiting without moving off, not wanting to pick up his next delivery from 'Drew's Beef' just yet. *Autumn Leaves Revisited* was playing on his speakers so he turned it up and smoked a joint, tapping the steering wheel with his other hand, closing his eyes, *our leaves will fall, and so will you...*

His phone interrupted the moment in which he felt he was teetering on the edge of 'another realm', though admittedly his knowledge of 'realms' was vague at best. It was a text from Cliff, asking him to head over. Cliff's number was one of six he had on his tiny Samsung flip phone. His Samsung pre-dated most functions associated with phones, functions he'd actively been trying to avoid for the last year. This was a decision he took after a certain day, sometime in the physically recent but ostensibly distant past, when he'd still been part of that daily 'slog'. On the train one morning he'd observed how basically everyone around him was doing 'phone stuff'. This observation activated a need inside him, to join in and also do 'phone stuff', because he'd felt scared, depressed but mostly alone. Later that day he was in a field with no shoes on. He was trudging through the mud. He was physically alone but no longer felt alone. There were birds. He saw a frog too, and a spider web with a spider in it. He ended up tossing his iPhone into a stream.

Since Cliff and his wife Jody found out about Flo's new job, when by chance he'd delivered them a couple of burgers and some chicken wings a week or so earlier, they'd been using him as 'backup-ganja-delivery-service'. This was something Flo didn't mind at all. It was in keeping with his new persona, he felt, while allowing him to stay out even later, long into the dawn, avoiding having to return to Angie and her tactical sighs, silences and resentful glances at him via the mirror above their fire place, on those rare occasions when they'd still watch movies together, trying to pretend that everything between them was at least acceptable.

He drove to Ringerbush which was known as the seedy part of Whitingsea, a town he'd called home for the last six years. He stopped on a street lined with densely packed brick townhouses and parked cars. He knocked on one of the doors and Jody invited him. This was unusual because on the previous few occasions he'd been given a location, payment and weed on the doorstep, then sent on his way. He followed her into the living room. He stepped cautiously after her because her tattoos appeared to be moving. She was wearing a tank top and the stars on her shoulders span gently and the jaguar clawing at her bicep wrapped its blotchy tail around her elbow.

She offered him a seat on a dusty blue armchair. He sat down, noticing she'd dyed her hair red, feeling he should say something, but saying nothing. The TV was on but the sound was off. She tied her hair up into a raggedy bun and began watering her miniature jungle. There were small palm-type-plants and evergreens, bamboo and a lemon tree, some flowers, maybe forget-me-nots and orchids, other things he couldn't name. She told him they had to wait for Cliff. "He's out 'replenishing stock,'" she said, smiling in her way, with only the left side of her mouth. She sat opposite him in a matching armchair. Fluff stuck out of tears where the dog had gnawed at it. She crossed her legs and smoked while Flo listened to the hum of the boiler above their heads.

The news came on the TV. Jody turned the volume up. There were wars in sandy places. A man killed all five of his children and buried them and got drunk and drove around. A man with a machete killed another man. The economy was bad. It was bad in other countries too. Samuel Drew was still missing. They showed pictures of the boy's face. He looked happy and Flo wondered what expression he was actually pulling in that very moment, or whether he was still able to even express anything.

"Do you think they'll find him?" He asked.

Jody looked surprised to hear his voice and shrugged, saying, "It's been a while."

"Yeah, it has," he said.

"I hope they do," she said, sighing, staring down at the multiple rings on her fingers.

"Why?"

She raised a brow, "Because he's a child, and it's sad if he's dead?"

"Oh, yeah. Obviously."

He thought about mentioning the fact he used to teach Samuel but decided not to. He'd still been working at the school as a teaching assistant when the boy first disappeared. The police had even questioned him, not for any specific reason, but only because they questioned all the teachers and staff at the school. Coincidentally the day he was questioned was also his last day working there. The bosses hadn't been happy with his levels of effort and drive or similar qualities he'd simultaneously abandoned in the weeks prior.

Mrs Finn, the head, apologised for firing him on such a 'tragic day', attributing it to the fact that they'd arranged the meeting for that particular time and weren't prepared to adjust set schedules. They'd wanted him to finish the term but he told them he wouldn't be doing that. Puffy Nora cried as he left her standing in reception, chewing on the sleeve of her red school jumper. He'd told her he'd visit but knew he wouldn't and maybe somehow, she'd known too. Of the lies he'd told, that had been the hardest to bear.

On the TV a man was standing on the school field, saying, "If you have any information, please, come forward now." He recognised the gate he used to vault every morning, feeling a little sick in his stomach, nervous almost, remembering a day he'd chased Shaun Young all the way across the field after the kid had told Mr Angus to 'Fuck Off' during PE. He managed to stop Shaun from leaving the school grounds. He couldn't remember what he'd said. Just something vague like, "You'll be in even more trouble," which had been enough to suppress Shaun's seething but momentary rage, caused by Mr Angus picking 'unfair teams' for basketball.

Jody kept sighing. She said, "Breaks my bleeding heart," around four or five times. The reporter on the TV looked sad. She pointed at the school building. She kept using the words 'tragedy' and 'desperation.' The camera panned left to reveal Samuel's parents. They were both crying. Jody turned the TV off. She stood up and sat down again. Her eyes stared at distance as she told Flo she had a little sister who went missing, almost ten years ago, at age thirteen. Her sister was never found. Jody tapped her rings together rhythmically. She said her father still went on Google every couple of weeks to search for her sister's name, Amber.

"She might still be out there," Flo said, feeling, not unusually, that there hadn't been enough conviction in his voice.

Jody closed her eyes and her lids trembled. She coughed but held herself. "No. She's dead," she said. "When it happened, I knew straight away she was dead."

Jody paused as a siren went by outside. Blue light rolled into the room for a few moments. Flo was about to speak, maybe there's a third place – life, death and something else – a place reachable through the armchair's gaping mouth, maybe, or through a special tree somewhere, like that tree in *The*

*Fountain*, the tree of life, probably in Brazil somewhere. Maybe his parents saw it as their plane span through the air before the final crash. Maybe that transcendent tree was the final thing they experienced in this world, glowing gold amidst all the green, humming to them, calling them. But his eyes drifted shut and he said nothing. He'd melted into the armchair.

He heard Jody mutter, "Fuck this," followed by the sound of a clicking lighter. The smoke smelled fragrant and exotic. She passed him the blunt, "Be careful. All sorts of shit in here."

He took it and smoked it. His eyes bled about.

"Three pickin' up tonight, by the way" she said. "That alright?"

He shrugged and said it was.

She tossed him a bag, "That's yours."

The boiler grew louder. He stared at it and sucked the blunt, smoke fogging around him.

"Go easy on it. The fucker will gut your eyes," she said.

"Gut my eyes?"

She laughed, "Mate, you'll see."

He nodded and rubbed his hands together. She leant back and covered her face with her palms. "Sometimes I wish I was blind," she said. "Imagine this was your world. You could decorate it however you want. Leopard print walls, sparklers hanging off the ceiling. No dead kids."

"I don't believe in leopard print as a decorative item," he said.

"What do you mean?"

"Sometimes I think snow leopards must be from somewhere else," he said.

She looked confused.

He said, "Snow Leopards."

"What are you talking about?"

He shook his head and said he felt confused and didn't know what he was saying. He closed his eyes and sat back, waiting for things to happen. After what felt like a minute he said, "All I can see is black."

He opened his eyes. Jody was staring at him. She lifted her head off the armchair and smirked. "Then I pity you," she said.

She put on some ambient music he didn't recognise and they sat listening to it without talking. The plants in the hanging baskets appeared to be growing at an alarming rate which made his heart accelerate and feel like it was also growing.

"My eyes have been gutted," he said.

"Mate, you are lookin' white as," she said.

He forced his eyes wide open, struggling internally with a rushing sensation and separate sense of being forced downwards. The feeling converged into something strange and terrifying. He tried to count, hoping it would sway his focus, but he couldn't get past two. He wondered if he looked as terrified as he felt. He wondered whether Samuel felt terrified. A period of time passed and Samuel spoke to him in his head. I'm waiting, Samuel kept saying. We're waiting. Samuel's face was also ice white.

Flo opened his eyes. Red digits on the clock-radio pulsed, informing him it was 2AM. Jody was no longer opposite him. The toilet flushed upstairs and headlights lit the room yellow before darkening again. Cliff came into the living room with their dog, a boxer called Matthew. Matthew was soaking wet and jumped up on Flo, licking his hands. He pushed Matthew off and rubbed at the saliva on his jeans, smearing it but in no way removing it. He tried his best to appear relaxed and at ease.

Cliff laughed for what seemed like an unreasonable amount of time. "Sorry, mate," he said. "He normally bites as well though. He's probably stoned from the box of hash brownies he scoffed earlier, so count yourself lucky."

Matthew circled the armchair, biting at the material, growling and then whimpering and cowering. Flo wondered how the armchair must have looked to Matthew, if dogs were affected as humans were, whether Matthew was also seeing a gruesome, toothy monster.

"Matthew, come on!" Cliff said.

Matthew obeyed and followed his master to the back garden. Cliff returned alone and took off his back-pack. He was wearing a yellow tank top and a little Celtic pattern began sliding up his forearm onto his shoulder and then neck, like it was a crawling insect. Flo tried to focus on Cliff's bald head instead but it seemed too shiny and the glare was making him squint, so he

rested his gaze on Cliff's huge stomach, watching him scratch at it nonchalantly, feeling the sound of scratching might be emanating from somewhere inside his own head.

Cliff passed him three sandwich bags. "Three separate clients, but all in the same place. Jody give you yours?"

Flo tapped his pocket, nodding.

Cliff stared past him, "Where is she?"

"Not sure. Upstairs maybe?"

Cliff nodded, handing him a scrunched up twenty, "Here you are mate. For petrol and things."

"Things?"

"I don't know. Buy a lion bar, and a book about space, planets."

Flo smiled and thanked him.

"They're all waiting down at the docks at the new flats there, you know the ones?"

Flo nodded and said, "I know the ones."

"They'll all be in the bus shelter in front. Bring me the money when you next drop by."

Flo nodded and stared at the door behind Cliff, who playfully punched him in the chest with his huge fist, laughing, telling him not to look so 'shit-scared'. Flo shook his head and smiled, not too convincingly, he felt, saying he wasn't.

The cold air made him feel better. He took the 'Drew's Beef' sign off the roof of his car and spread his legs as he unlocked the door, to compensate for the heavy swaying. He drove slowly because he thought he could hear the clouds whispering. The dew crackled as it froze.

Rows of sail boats lined the jetties as he neared the docks. The apartment blocks were across the road and the bus shelter was in front of them. The five faces under and around the bus shelter all looked at each other nervously as he rolled his window down. They came over in turn and paid him for the weed. Two girls were last and they ran off giggling. They were drunk, covered in UV face paint, with glow sticks on their wrists and ankles. Flo thought of a time in the recent but seemingly distant past, when he'd dressed like that with Angie and others. He felt sick.



He drove back towards the centre of Whitingsea. A mass of seagulls circled and squawked above the sail boats as he rounded the corner. He stopped to watch even though the traffic lights were green. When they disappeared over the high-rise apartment blocks he headed to the main seafront where he pulled up by the beach. He grabbed a pen from the glove-box. He wrote about Samuel, almost four months on from the boy's disappearance. He'd been writing sporadically since being fired from the school, but mainly sketching. Pictures, he felt, were a clearer form of self-expression. Words required too many rules to mean something. He had so many pages now and would often spend the early hours of the morning like this, his seat pushed back, feet up on the steering wheel and a pad in his lap. He had the feeling he was creating something that might help him navigate the world around him, which had slowly started to feel fabricated and 'less real' than it was before a sequence of events, beginning with him getting badly beaten up beneath the old, burnt pier, and ending with Samuel's disappearance. He often thought of his life a series of movies and one film had concluded there. He imagined the front cover, the words, 'Tragic Drama' above a title, 'Falling Apart'. He wondered what his next film would be about, and the genre. Three hours of him sitting in his living room floor getting stoned, drawing and reading while playing with the rabbit, followed by footage of him driving and delivering burgers, looking vacant and uninterested. Maybe it would be a film with no audio except for music, representing the music in his head, with some of the scenes in black and white, high contrast, a visual representation of the shadowy way in which he now viewed the world. Maybe Samuel could feature as a ghost-like-presence. They could use CGI to make Samuel appear like he was floating. Flo pictured himself staring into his bathroom mirror as Samuel's face materialised behind him, smiling, nodding.

Pulling up his sleeve, he turned his arm over and wrote the words, 'I will find you,' before repeating them out loud in his Batman voice a few times, laughing when he caught a glimpse of himself in the rear view, feeling more like he was sharing a joke with his reflection or alternate self rather than acting self-mockingly. He didn't know where Samuel was but something 'otherworldly' and 'unimaginable' is what he tried to envision. All he'd said to

Samuel was that if he wanted to play in the trees he should. He remembered saying, "There will always be stupid rules you'll feel you should follow. But all of that leads here, to where I am." He'd felt like Robin Williams in *Dead Poet's Society* and imagined Samuel saluting him, saying 'My Captain, My Captain.' He pictured all of the kids doing it, standing in a line, Puffy Nora, Trent, Ruby. He often missed them, but felt glad he wasn't there anymore. He hadn't enjoyed having to teach them things he didn't really believe himself.

He turned the engine on and drove a little further along the seafront. As he rounded the bay he parked up again on Shore Lane, turning his attention to the burnt pier that had crept into view. The charred wood sparkled black and ominous in the emerging sunlight. He remembered the pain of getting hit, first in the back of the head, then repeatedly in the face. The cold of the morning several hours later. Staring up the pier's rickety frame. Ambulance sirens. Angie's concerned and embarrassed face beside his hospital bed. He shook his head of those images and for a few minutes he watched the waves instead, observing how the world was transforming and becoming beautiful with the sun's rays, somewhere so obviously inoperable suddenly seeming divine.

Outside his building, he remained seated in his car for a while, watching his balcony, noticing how the curtains were open which meant Angie was probably awake. The dead chilli plant on their balcony had been knocked over by the wind. It was rocking from side to side, softly rolling on its curve, a movement he mimicked for a few moments from his car seat because it looked relaxing. After a few minutes he finally felt ready to climb out of the fog of 'his world' and enter the 'real world' again. At the door to his flat he waited with an ear pressed against the wood because he could hear the radio and Angie humming along to it. After a period of time which felt too long to be standing there, he finally opened the door just enough to slip inside and into their spare room, where he sat at his desk and started to roll a joint.

This room was his cave, where he scribbled and sketched on all those long nights when Angie was working shifts and he had time off. He'd been

hiding here a lot since changing jobs. After he was fired from the school and left his phone in the tiny, semi-frozen stream, he'd pretended to have a plan when he returned home late at night with mud all over his feet. He'd even said, "It's cool. I've got a plan." Angie angrily told him he was 'crazy.' He'd just laughed and got in the shower for almost an hour. After his shower Angie had been calmer, concerned maybe, chewing her nails even more so than usual. She kept saying 'I want to help you. I want to look after you,' which made him feel childlike and even less like talking. She said she'd help him figure out what he was supposed to do, which had almost made him laugh again, but that was an urge he'd resisted since he hadn't wanted to argue with her till sunrise. Instead they watched *Legends of the Fall*. He remembered dreaming about being mauled to death by a bear like Brad Pitt. The dream had woken him up suddenly in the night. There was a strange sound, clinking metal. He looked up and saw that it was the curtain rails, though the windows were closed and no breeze existed. That was the night he started writing again, in his cave, by candlelight, though words were soon replaced predominantly by pictures. He'd felt pretentious as he lit the candles but the electric light had felt wrong, and he'd realised it was irrelevant because he was alone and therefore no pretence existed other than his own, which he was determined to manipulate. The pages had piled up since, all in black, scratchy ink, lying in the centre of the desk. He never looked at them once he was done and couldn't really remember what they contained. He didn't plan on showing anyone either. It was the act of creating them that he loved so much. The pen he'd been using was one his grandmother Gréti had sent him for his tenth birthday. He'd saved it for fourteen years and finally unleashed the ink that night, while Angie slept on the other side of the thin plaster walls of the flat they'd shared for the last two and a half years.

It was almost three years now. He was grinding the weed when Angie came in a few seconds later, like she'd sensed his arrival. She looked slightly angry, asking why he was rolling a joint before he'd even said hello. He didn't look up straight away and fumbled the grinder. He dropped it on the carpet and spilled weed everywhere, before swivelling in his chair to face her, saying, "Sorry, I was just coming."

She raised her brows and chewed her lip, looking slightly disgusted.  
“You’re going to smoke? Before you’ve even said ‘Hi’?”

He stared at her blankly. She was in her night gown and fluffy slippers, all of it pale blue. Her blonde hair was tied up into a loose ponytail, flicking left and right as she spoke. She held her hands up by her head, then grimaced, keeping most of her actual thoughts and opinions to herself.

She said, “You’re always so spaced out,” in a quiet, disappointed voice.

He leaned down to pick up bits of weed and she noticed the writing on his arm, pulling his sleeve all the way up. He submitted and let her, deciding he didn’t really care what she thought about it.

“What’s this?” She asked.

He told her, “Nothing.”

She blew out air and grunted in frustration. “It’s always ‘No’ or ‘Nothing.’ I’m sick of it,” she said. “I mean, I made us breakfast, thought you’d be hungry, but whatever. Fuck it.”

She walked out slowly, lingering. He wondered why she didn’t leave if she was sick of it, or ask him to leave. He sighed and followed her to the living room where she was standing by the balcony doors looking out, chewing on her fingernails again. The rabbit was on the sofa washing herself, staring at him. Breakfast was all laid out; croissants, eggs, blueberries and cheese. There was raspberry juice and coffee. He found it depressing, how she still tried, when by her own definition he’d clearly been acting like an asshole. He wanted to apologise but the words got caught up in his throat and only a cough came out. She turned and glared at him. He coughed again and swallowed the mucus, telling her it looked incredible. He clenching his teeth and gripped his churning stomach. The churns were violent and made him grimace.

“Are you Ok?” She asked.

He smiled ingenuinely, saying, “Yeah, sorry. Hunger cramps.”

“It’s fine we don’t have to eat yet if you don’t want to. Fuck it to be honest, like I said.”

He felt guilty so he sat at the table and said he’d love some juice. She reluctantly sat opposite him, held his stare and poured him a glass. He took it

and sucked in tiny sips, letting the sour taste fire over his tongue in little flurries.

“I hate when you make that noise,” she said.

“I like drinking like this.”

He put his glass down and stared out at the rich sky. Bits of green and pink had washed in. Too much colour now. He shut his eyes.

“It’s beautiful out there,” Angie said.

“I need to sleep.”

“I know, but I thought maybe after you’ve slept a few hours, we could go to the park, walk around, feed some ducks. Maybe it’s not too late to salvage this day. We can at least try.”

He looked at her blankly and rubbed his nose, trying to think of a reason not to go to the park, since ‘no’ was clearly not sufficient anymore. The rabbit dashed across the carpet all of a sudden. A bee had flown in through the balcony doors and scared it. The bee buzzed around loudly. He said he was surprised to see a bee already, thinking it was too early in the season for them. She looked confused and said that it was April and there were loads of bees.

He glanced outside at the cold and clutched his shoulders, saying, “It’s too cold to go anywhere.”

She poured him some more juice and he sucked at it again. She didn’t say anything this time. The radio was still on in the kitchen and the DJ was talking loudly, “Steve n’ the lads are in Newcastle for the weekend. Three-night stag! It’s gona be carnage!”

Angie noticed him clenching his fists and turned the radio off.

“Annoying,” she said.

He nodded.

“I was looking after an eighteen-year-old yesterday,” she said. “He’d been out drinking and got hit by a van on the way home. The impact was right on his liver. He’s got a huge laceration. Drinking days are over.”

He said it was ironic and she agreed. He picked up a croissant and chewed it, shaking his head, saying, “Poor fucker’s doomed.”

She sighed and stared out the window, telling him it was hurtful when he said things like that. He apologised and said he didn't mean to be hurtful, just honest.

"I remember when you used to always say the right things," she said. "I'd come home upset if maybe a patient died or something, and I'd talk to you about it. Afterwards I always felt better."

"I never knew what to say," he said.

She was rolling a blueberry back and forth on her plate with her index finger, avoiding his gaze, maybe, or just deep in thought. "Simple things like, 'You couldn't have known,' or 'Nothing's going to happen to either of us.' It was all I needed, to hear you say those things," she said.

He remained expressionless and tried his best to seem unaffected but he remembered. He thought about some of her stories; a man with an unknown disease who literally rotted away after eating a meal at a restaurant, a woman who tried to hang herself because she'd accidentally smothered her baby in her sleep, drug addicts, plenty of suicide attempts, bridge jumpers mainly, the disabled boy with cancer all over his face, as if he wasn't dealing with enough already. The stories had always depressed him and he struggled to understand how she could take it, to the point where he tried his best not to listen to her too much anymore. He remembered how she always used to come home and cry just one tear, all she needed to release the day's sadness and pain. He'd hold her and it would drop on his collar, or sometimes he'd catch it with a finger and grin at her, ensuring her everything was OK. She'd been trained not to take things personally, to deal with the shit that came through the ward each day. But it was in her nature to care. Maybe the heart was un-trainable, though admittedly Angie cried a lot more when she'd first started working. He wondered if eventually that single tear would dry up too, imagining her eyes like spheres of ice, always frozen. Maybe it had already happened. He wanted to search her eyes but her head was still bowed and she was facing the outside. It felt strange realising that he no longer knew about something he'd been so involved with for what seemed like a very long time, a feeling that manifested itself as a heavy presence in his stomach and chest, something with roots that was

beginning to grow out of him, digging down into the chair and locking him there, causing his head to spin.

“Let’s go to the park,” he said. “I just need a nap first.”

Angie woke him with kisses. She hadn’t done this in a very long time and it deeply confused him. It made him think about time travel, as he rolled over to look at her, surprised to find that she was under the covers with him and was naked. He couldn’t remember the last time they’d had sex either, but it had been a long enough that he felt nostalgic when he touched her warm skin. He rested his head on her chest and ran his fingers along her stomach. She giggled as his hand got lower. He smiled at her sleepily, forcing his bristly face into hers, kissing her, mainly because his dick seemed up for it even if his brain was uncertain. They rolled around for a while together. The rest of the world disappeared. He looked into her eyes at one point while she was on top of him but he didn’t like how it felt, so he focused on her body, soft in all the right places, curved along all the right lines. He thought ‘primitive’ and ‘biological’. They lay in sweat afterwards with the covers kicked onto the carpet. He winced as she stroked his chest, wanting to push her hand away, even more so when she said, “I’ve missed you.”

She stared at him, her eye lids fluttering. They did that. He remembered it from the first night he’d spoken to her, clearly, just that one thing, and he thought that maybe she’d been wearing her butterfly top too. For a while he’d called her that, his butterfly. There were many nicknames since, a couple of new ones every year, but that was the first one.

“Time for a joint,” he said.

She shook her head, smiling, “No, it’s time for a walk.”

She hopped up, still naked, and opened the curtains. It was bright and glowy out there.

“How long have I been asleep?” he asked.

“A couple of hours,” she said.

He watched her standing by the window, her blonde hair covering most of her back.

“Everyone can see you. I hope you know,” he said, sprawled on his back.

She gasped and hopped to the side, wrapping herself in the curtain, laughing. He asked if they could go to the forest instead but she said it was too far. She needed to sleep later ahead of her night shift.

"I prefer the forest. There are less people and the people who are there seem like better people," he said.

"The park has ducks. I'm going to investigate our bread situation," she said, pulling on her jeans and bra, before leaving the room.

He closed his eyes and remembered the last time they'd walked through the forest, maybe not quite six months ago. It was shortly after his beating beneath the pier because he remembered still having a limp and the remnants of a black eye. He'd told her he loved her, and really meant it too. It was raining as they trudged along side by side, hooded beneath the trees, rain drops on the leaves and foliage sounding like alien chatter. He'd wanted to climb some trees and make a bow and arrow but never got around to it, finding himself overly absorbed in the woodland around him, mossy rocks seeming unnaturally green and vivid in the muddy brown hue that seeped through everything else. "It's like there's nobody in the world but us," he'd said. "We're separated from everything. I hope it never ends." Angie had asked him what he meant and he'd told her he wasn't sure, just that the forest seemed alive and magical, so different and unearthly, more real, filled with actual living, breathing things, not like 'real life'. She'd continued to grip his hand but looked sadly away, fluttering her eyes. He'd seen it in the fringes of his vision and knew instantly things had changed between them, as if parts of them both, the parts that still fitted together harmoniously on some deeper level, remained in the forest that day, drifting up amongst the tree tops, somewhere between the visibly existing lines and those other lines imperceptible to the human eye.

Angie re-entered the bedroom, announcing, "We have no bread."

It took Flo a second to realise what was happening. He stared sleepily around. She told him he looked cute which further confused him, and placed a green tea she'd made for him on the window-sill above their bed.

"We could take the croissants, but I'm not sure the ducks will like them," Angie said.

"I think they'll eat anything."



“Maybe, but it’s a bit of a waste. I’ll take them to work instead.”

He lay there sniffing at the steam of his tea, sitting up so that his head was resting on the window sill, side on, his eyes facing the outside. There were cars and houses and a few trees. It was no longer bright out there but rainy like the day in the forest. The weather and ambience had changed so quickly. He thought about the symbolic nature of this change and also his psychic abilities, which he was convinced were increasing, as if maybe, somehow, recent events were instilling a more sagacious level of understanding in him. Angie was showering but she’d left the door open so he could hear the rushing water coming from the bathroom as he watched the rain outside. It seemed to him like the sound of the shower was being caused by the rain, which made both the rain and the shower seem fake, like they were dubbed versions of something else.

They both dressed and Angie drove. He didn’t want her to see or smell the state of his car. He held her hand on the gear stick out of necessity and guilt and she smiled at him, squeezing his thigh for a moment, a gesture that made him feel greatly dishonest.

They drove through Ringerbush into Bramble Village where the park was. It was crowded despite the melancholy skies and moisture in the air, maybe because the morning had been so promising and people generally weren’t comfortable with adjusting their plans once said plans were in place. Above the tree line, through clouds varying in both density and speed of motion, bands of orange and yellow ribbons burned away one by one as they walked along the pebbled path. Angie clutched his hand, keeping away from the swampy fields he veered towards again and again.

“You’ll get your shoes all muddy,” she said.

“I like walking in the mud.”

“Fine,” she said.

She released his hand and he stepped off the path and squelched alongside her, smiling. They passed children running and screaming, dogs chasing sticks and balls. Flo moved back on the path after a while because the novelty of the mud had worn off and was becoming tiresome. A small boy in a puffy coat ran out in front of them forcing them to stop suddenly. The boy carried on across the path before slipping onto his ass in the grass. His

mother struggled after him shouting, "Jayden! Come here!" She was obese and troll-like, picking the boy up with vehemence, swinging her index finger at his face, screaming, "What did I tell ya?!" before spinning him around and smacking his sodden ass several times as the boy screamed and cried.

"He's wailing like he's seen Death slice up the Easter Bunny," Flo said.

"He was just making a run for it," Angie said.

"But there's no escape," Flo said, smiling at her, laughing a little, imagining himself beating the troll to death with the Easter Bunny as his accomplice, who he pictured as a man in a purple rabbit suit with evil eyes.

He said, "We should watch Donnie Darko."

Angie shrugged and said, "Sure. I love Jake Gyllenhaal."

They carried on walking as the boy continued to cry somewhere behind them. Angie said she saw Samuel on the news again, that they found his bike buried in some woods. "It's awful," she said. "I feel sick even thinking about it."

Flo agreed that it was awful and said he felt sick too. Samuel had told him that all he really wanted to do was play in his tree house and ride his bike. Samuel had been his favourite for those reasons, a constant reminder of his own childhood self. Flo had also once had a tree house in the woods behind his parents' home. His older brothers had built it but abandoned it soon after to pursue beer and girls instead. He'd been left alone to guard the fort. He'd spent so many days pretending he was a combination of Robin Hood and Ninja Turtle, calling himself Turtle Hood. Bravely he'd watch the older kids that came to the forest to smoke and sniff things in plastic bags, ready to fire his arrows if they ever came too near to his domain. Maybe that was the last time he'd felt real purpose. Samuel had reminded him of that purpose and he'd just wanted to help the kid, give him the wisdom he needed to make a break for it while he still had the chance.

Angie said she wanted to sit for a while so they perched on a fallen tree trunk with several fields stretching out in front of them, scattered with colourful little moving objects. There was a condom wrapper behind the tree trunk but Angie didn't notice. Flo put his arm around her ensuring she kept looking the other way, watching a group of teens playing football. A raven flapped down from a tree and landed to their right, tilting its head and

croaking at them. Angie looked wary of it and said it was ugly. Flo stared at the bird and it croaked again, hopping closer. He waved his arm and it flapped back a few metres, turning away to peck at the condom wrapper which Angie now saw but ignored, not wanting to taint their first 'nice day' in months.

One of the footballers shouted, "Fucking hell, you almost broke his legs!" and they started pushing each other.

Angie tutted in disgust and said, "God, so aggressive."

Flo was rolling two cigarettes and laughed. "We're animals, baby, simple as that."

She looked him up and down and shook her head, grinning, saying, "Who do you think you are?"

The raven croaked from behind them and she jumped, swivelling around to look at it. It was right beside them on the other side of the log. Flo swung his arm again and the raven hopped back but only a metre. It sat there staring at them and opened its beak but remained quiet. Flo told Angie to ignore it. He told her it was scared.

"It's fucking massive," she said. "Biggest crow I've ever seen."

"I think it's a raven," he said.

Angie did a Google image search for crow, then raven. She showed both birds to Flo and said they looked the same.

"Except ravens are way bigger," he said. "But it's still scared of you."

She didn't seem convinced but tried to look at other things, pointing at a woman a few hundred metres away who was wearing an ankle long red dress, tossing a tennis ball to herself.

Angie said, "Weird."

They watched the woman repeatedly throwing the ball up high and running in small circles till it came down. She'd catch it every time and fling it up again.

"At least she's having fun," Flo said, faking a casual, relaxed tone, smiling.

He put both cigarettes in his mouth and lit them, passing one to Angie, who was still watching the woman, smiling, burrowing her chin into her pink scarf.

"She seems a bit mental though," Angie said.

"Leave her alone, she's enjoying life."

"Would you still be with me if I was like that?" she asked, smirking.

"Yes I would," he said, nodding, expressionless. "Why wouldn't I?"

The raven cried out again, twice in quick succession. He ignored it but Angie turned side on so she could keep an eye on the bird.

"No you wouldn't," she said, swivelling away from him, blowing out a mouthful of smoke. "You'd be too embarrassed to come anywhere near me."

He shook his head, starting to feel frustrated, but tried to sound extra cool and relaxed as he said, "If that's what you'd want, I'd be happy to hold your hand while you did it."

"Well I wouldn't want to be seen doing that."

"Of course not. Everyone would think you're nuts because they weren't all doing it with you."

"Yes I know," she said. "We've had this conversation so many times." She was looking away now uninterestedly, her nose all scrunched up.

Flo forced some nervous laughter and breathed out a long stream of smoke. "We become what the world wants us to be," he said.

"Is this from one of your books, by some old French man? Existentialism, or the other one, Nihilism? You're always so fucking nihilistic."

He shook his head smiling, dropping his cigarette butt and stamping it into the mud. "Ethnic villagers in the Philippines are wearing Nike tracksuits and listening to Jay Z," he said.

Angie finished her cigarette and shrugged. "Yeah, that's just globalisation. It is what it is," she said. "Just do your thing, live your life. Don't worry about everyone else."

"Believe me, I don't give a shit about anyone else," he said, feeling a little hate towards her for the first time, strongly considering standing up and walking away into the forests all alone, leaving her there with the raven and the condom wrapper, but the raven croaked again, several times in quick succession as if it was cackling at him.

"Sounds like you do," Angie said, grinning, raising her brows.

He clenched his hands against his knees. They were cold. He shook his head, staring out ahead of him.

"Are you ok?" she asked.

The raven croaked again and he span to face it. He picked up a large grey stone and flung it over arm. It struck the bird hard. A thud rang out. The raven lay limp on its back, wings open. Its feathers trembled in the breeze.

"Flo! What the fuck!?" Angie screamed, jumping up. "You've killed it!" She jumped back, "Shit, it's moving! Is it alive? Do something!"

He stood up and told her to calm down. Eyes in the distance were on them and he was aware. He hopped over the log and crouched by the raven. "It's fucked. I need to end it," he said, picking up the bird. It seemed huge in his hands. Its beak opened but there was no sound. The feathers were warm. He could feel it pulsating in his hands. Starring into its deep pit of an eye he saw nothing, only a tiny version of his own reflection staring out of the dark. He gripped the neck in one hand, the body in the other and snapped the bird in half. The cracking sound resonated through the air. It resonated through him. It felt like maybe there was more than one crack, simultaneously, as if the crack of the raven's bones had set off a chain reaction of many things cracking and breaking in several places all at once, places he could feel but not see.

"Oh my god, I'm going to be sick," Angie said, turning away and holding her stomach.

"I had to," he said absently, eyes unfocused.

"Why did you throw the rock in the first place? For fuck's sake!"

He blinked several times and stared at the bird resting in his open palms. A little bit of blood had leaked onto his hand.

"What are you doing? Why are you still holding it?" Angie shrieked, her eyes tearful with frustration.

He dropped the raven suddenly, jerking his hand back. He brushed his palms on his jacket. Angie glared at him and walked away down the path with her arms crossed, her head buried even deeper into her scarf. Flo noticed the woman in the red dress beside the path to his left. She was staring at him with a blank expression, holding the tennis ball down at her side. He waved at her and nodded, then jogged after Angie, glancing at the sky which seemed darker and therefore ominous, a shade purple, maybe also

omniscient, somehow, because he could still feel the bones snapping in his hands, like the clang of endless church bells somewhere deep inside him.

A few days later Flo lay in bed with Angie asleep beside him. She was breathing heavily into her pillow. He was staring at the back of his hand, certain he could still see the dark smear of blood running along from his thumb, even in the dim light of around 6AM, a tattooed reminder of what he'd done, the only reminder, aside from Angie's increasingly expanding distance from him. He listened to the curtain rails clinking, worried about being alone. Angie was going away for the weekend to visit her dying grandfather. He thought that maybe he should go see the old man too, Angie's only relative who wasn't a lunatic and therefore her favourite. He slipped out of his bed and smoked a joint on the balcony and decided he didn't really want to go with her. He thought it would probably seem strange if he suddenly pretended he did.

A few hours later he was watching *Taxi Driver* in the spare room, wrapped in an orange and turquoise blanket his parents had sent him from Brazil just days before their plane crash. Travis Bickle was talking to a security guard, looking mischievous and edgy. He'd muted the film and replaced the audio with inauspicious Clint Mansell soundtracks which completely changed the tone of the movie and made him think of Travis Bickle as an ethereal being.

His best friend Blaise called him and said, "I have news. I'm coming to see you tonight."

He paused the movie but not the music and sat up. "Is that the news? That you're coming?"

"No. I'm coming because I have news," Blaise said.

"Can't you tell me now?" Flo asked. "I might be busy later."

"No," Blaise said, "I can't tell you now. And you're not busy later. Well you are now. With me." And the line cut out.

Angie left in the afternoon. He kissed her on the cheek by the door and she smelled like citrus and coconut. He always loved her most in those moments, when she'd be gone a while.

Maybe she caught something sad or pensive in his expression, because she asked him, "Will you be OK?"

He said, "Of course, what could happen?"

She looked down at the floorboards and slid her foot sideways, hesitantly. "Just be careful, and go easy on the weed," she said. "It's better to keep your head clear." She kissed him softly on the forehead and gave him a meaningful stare that said 'I still love you' but also 'don't let me down again.'

He spent the remainder of the afternoon drinking beer and smoking joints on the roof, thinking 'fuck clarity'. The clouds were continuous, the light only breaking through in fractures. He smoked with his eyes closed and sipped a beer as the sun went out. The clock tower burst alight and took its place in the deep sky, like a second moon beside the other. A famous fuzzy feeling overcame him and he floated freely for a while, thought to thought, notion to memory, laughter to disinterest in all things real or otherwise. He huddled into his woollen jacket and watched the waves over the drooping rooftops of Whitingsea, like a giant staircase to the water's edge, which he remembered thinking before but couldn't pinpoint exactly when. The burnt pier faded with the daylight, almost disappearing, and he felt more at ease when he could no longer see it.

Blaise arrived just after 9PM, completely drunk, shouting from the street until Flo buzzed him in. He'd grown his hair out into an afro and had a thick beard which was also new. He gave Flo a bear hug at the door before bundling past and cracking a beer mid shuffle. He fell onto the sofa. He spilled beer all over his face and laughed loudly, lifting another beer from his bag and tossing it in Flo's direction. The can hit the wall and rolled across the carpet. Flo looked at the can then at Blaise, who was trying to clean beer foam off his Air Jordans, grinning at him.

"You've seen better days," Flo said.

Blaise shook his head vigorously, proclaiming he'd never seen a better day. "Where's Angie? I want her to hear my news too."

"You look like Django at the start of *Django Unchained*, before he's unchained," Flo said.

"I feel like Django around ten minutes into of *Django Unchained*," Blaise said.

“What’s your news? Angie’s not here.”

Blaise smiled proudly. “Tonight is my final night,” he said, “Then I’m sailing the fuck away.”

Flo picked the beer can off the floor and opened it, letting the foam overflow without caring about the carpet which he knew Angie had cleaned just the day before. “Elaborate,” he said.

“I’m leaving on a boat tomorrow morning,” Blaise said.

“Leaving where?”

“Well, just back to France first, but not to see my family. I’ll pretty much pass through, because you know, the amount of times I’ve seen France... Then wherever.”

“For how long?”

“Long.”

“What about becoming a doctor?”

Blaise shook his head, “Fuck that. I’m not interested in it anymore.”

“Why not?”

“I got tired of the idea. I’d find something to hate about it eventually anyway.”

Flo sipped his beer and remained expressionless, deliberately and consciously. Blaise excitedly suggested that they should all go, Angie too, but Flo didn’t respond.

“Well maybe soon,” Blaise said, “We can meet a year from now in some strange village on a distant island, or in the jungles high on ayahuasca, dancing with head-dresses and face paint on.”

Flo forced a smile because it was stupid thing to say, and not just because it would never ever happen. He lit a joint and they smoked in silence for a few minutes. The curtains were open and he watched the moon, the few stars, thought of the sea below them, recalling the last time he hit the road with Blaise, when they were eighteen and full of it, six weeks from city to city across Europe, finishing in Krakow and flying back with no money. They’d planned to go as far as Budapest but never made it because they stayed in Amsterdam longer at the start of their trip. He regretted that, wondered if his grandmother Gréti might still be alive.



"I even deleted my Facebook, Instagram and Gmail accounts," Blaise said. "I'm going off the grid."

"What about Twitter?"

"I kept Twitter. I decided the world deserves my nuggets of wisdom."

Flo laughed and got a bottle of rum out of the freezer. They made their way through it. Blaise threw up in the bathroom at one point, but returned ready to carry on only minutes later. He asked Flo if he was writing a book and Flo said he wasn't. Blaise said he thought he was. Flo shrugged and shook his head.

"What about your blog? What happened to it? I always enjoyed reading it," Blaise said. "It's good. I like your poems. Even though I don't get them. I like the words you use."

"Thanks," Flo said. "Nobody else did so I stopped, almost a year ago now."

Blaise widened his eyes, "A year? When did I last see you?"

"Pretty much about a year ago now."

"That's insane," he said. "Maybe you should try getting back into it. Get more Twitter followers and tweet your stories," Blaise said.

"I hate Twitter. None of my followers cared about my blog."

"How many followers did you have?" Blaise asked.

"I don't know. A few hundred," Flo said.

"I have nineteen thousand," Blaise said, raising his eyebrows and smiling.

"How? You're not famous."

"I add people and they add me back. It's how it works."

"What do you tweet about?"

Blaise shrugged, "Nothing really. Earlier I tweeted that I saw one magpie and spent two hours searching for another to avoid bad luck."

"That's stupid."

"I know. Twenty people re-tweeted it and fifty favourited it."

"What does that even mean?"

"I don't know." Blaise checked his phone, "I have six new followers. Awesome."

"That shouldn't be something you feel is 'awesome'," Flo said.

Blaise shrugged, "You have to play 'the game' and 'the game' has changed."

"Fuck the game."

Blaise asked Flo about school. Flo said he quit half a year ago and Blaise said they really needed to do a better job of keeping in touch.

"Why did you quit?" he asked.

"I don't know. I got bored."

"I always get bored," Blaise said. "For a while I thought being a doctor was the one, but I got bored of that idea as quickly as everything else. I don't even like blood. It makes me gag."

"I remember when we wanted to buy a pirate ship," Flo said.

"I still want to buy a pirate ship."

"I feel like the childhood version of myself would be disappointed in me."

Blaise shrugged, "Most people's childhood selves would be disappointed."

"Maybe."

"Well, ten-year-old you wanted to be a knight, or a cowboy, right? And then you were obsessed with Will Smith and wanted to be an actor."

"I get it," Flo said, smiling.

"And then a rock star, right? Is that all the dreams of little Florián Hal? Am I forgetting anything? I feel like I must be."

Flo smiled. "You forgot chef. For a while I wanted to be a chef."

Blaise slapped the coffee table, "You should become a chef." They both started to laugh again. "You could specialise in fish," Blaise added, drumming on the table with his fingers. Flo's family name meant fish in Hungarian.

Flo had enough of fish jokes by the time he was four, but forced a laugh.

"You'll figure it out," Blaise said, "Eventually. And in the meantime at least you have an incredible girlfriend. My dick hasn't had a name in years. What's yours again?"

"It doesn't have one," Flo said, trying to remember if it did, thinking it must have, but that he had genuinely forgotten.

"Bullshit. Every girl names her boyfriend's dick. I posted that line on Facebook and more than a hundred people liked it."

"That's ridiculous."

Blaise laughed. "Dicks aside, you're lucky to have her. She's your Jessica Alba."

Flo made a confused expression.

"I love Jessica Alba, and until I find her, no one else will be enough," Blaise explained. "You have your Jessica Alba," he added, leaning forwards off the sofa and laying his hand out on the table, nodding, presumably feeling his point was made.

"I feel like what you're saying is kind of sad," Flo said.

"I know," Blaise said. "Angie is maybe the one you were *supposed* to find, that's all I mean. I think I'm really drunk and struggling to express myself."

Flo nodded. The words 'supposed to' stood out and kept echoing in his head until they weren't words anymore, just noises one hears but tries to ignore like cats battling at night or pipes in the walls.

At 1AM they headed down to the seafront and Blaise wanted Flo to show him the spot where he'd been beaten up. He kept insisting, pulling Flo by the arm and pointing at the charred remnants of the pier, saying, "Why are you being weird? Come on."

Flo suggested they have a beer first because it would be more fun if they were drunker and go later. Blaise reluctantly agreed.

"Did you ever find out how it burned down?" he asked. "I remember once I asked you and you said you'd find out."

"Burned down means it burned to the ground, there are still some supports left so it hasn't actually burned down."

"So then what do you say?"

"I don't know. Burned up?"

"That doesn't sound right."

"Yeah, it doesn't. Burnt. Just burnt."

"Ok. How did it catch fire and kind of burn down, but not completely?"

"I never found out," Flo said. "I like not knowing. The fear of the unknown or something, the mystery, makes it better."

"I like to know," Blaise said. "I'll look it up when I'm alone so I don't ruin the 'mystery' for you." He emphasised the word 'mystery' and raised his brows, grinning mockingly.

"Good friend," Flo said.

The path along the beach was quiet. They saw two people having sex on the rocks and watched. For a while it seemed funny, then seedy. They moved on.

"I almost forgot this was real," Blaise said.

"I know," Flo said. "It doesn't really seem real. It seems exaggerated."

"Exactly," Blaise said. "Like *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*. Or the CIA."

They didn't feel like going into any of the clubs and ended up walking back up to Shore Lane. They bought some beer in an off-licence before heading back to the beach. They sat side by side on the rocks with their legs stretched out and smoked cigarettes and drank beer. Blaise asked him about the night he was beaten up again, this time with more concern, as if wanting to assist in some way. "Angie called me up, you know, she was so worried," he said. "I told her to relax, that you do this sometimes, go a bit weird."

"No I don't," Flo said.

"Remember when we were nineteen, living in that house, the salvia, the shrooms, the mirror? That was pretty weird."

"Yeah, I remember," Flo said, recalling a dark time in his life with fearful acceptance, a time he tried not to think too much about. He'd lost what remained of his family after a phone conversation with his older brother Tamás hadn't ended well. They'd argued about their parents. Tamás said Flo was being selfish, hating how the memory of their parents was being tainted. Flo remembered saying, "They fucking abandoned us," but he remembered it in third person, as if watching himself saying it, maybe because it was a moment he'd replayed frequently in the following weeks, his own raging face screaming, followed by intense chain smoking, an inability to speak to anyone for a few days. Tamás challenged him to get on without their money and they hadn't spoken since. He and Blaise spent the next year

holed up together, avoiding the impending end of 'freedom', temporarily convincing themselves the rest of the world didn't exist, both entities, themselves and the world, rolling on without the other. The reality they created was more random and interesting while also feeling safer. He remembered often listening to the *Requiem for a Dream* soundtrack on repeat and passing out to visions of himself in an ancient war, surrounded by armour and swords in a field of rain and mud.

"Aragorn is an incredible man," Flo said.

"I know," Blaise said. "God, don't I know." He was staring at the pier. It skulked out from the shingles on their right. "It's fine, man," he said. "You and I are like that, we just need escape sometimes. So that's what I told Angie."

"Thanks," Flo said.

"What made you do it?" Blaise asked. "Wasn't it like December? It must have been so cold."

"I don't know," he said. "It just seemed like a good idea at the time."

That part was true, although he did have a slightly greater understanding than he was letting on. He considered going into more detail. He and Blaise had both slept with an ex-girlfriend on the same night in different countries, without any knowledge of the others' actions until afterwards. They were sixteen and from the moment they confessed that to each other, they'd confessed everything since. This seemed different though, somehow. On the night in question he'd been out with Angie and some of her nurse friends and somewhere over the course of that night realised he hated all of Angie's nurse friends and was also starting to dislike her. They were in a club called 'Shuga', sitting on some white leather sofas on a platform above the dance floor. Kim was getting married soon and they were looking at wedding dresses on their phones. Hannah had just bought a flat and was showing everyone pictures of that. Someone said, "When you have a kitchen with an island in the centre, that's when you know you've made it." He'd laughed (on reflection somewhat manically) and was on his feet, weaving through the dance floor seconds later. Angie had called after him, "Flo, Flo, Flo." But he didn't stop walking. Smoke machines powered up and hid his escape route up the stairs and then he was outside, tearing over the

beach towards the waves, removing his clothes as he ran. He remembered his short time in the sea that night more clearly than anything else that had happened since. He'd let himself roll with the waves for a few moments, lying face down like he was dead, thinking maybe this could be the end, with his own face under the water, the city noise plugged out, the traffic and voices gone. A dull hum had harmonised with a quiet ring. The pebbles knocked against one another on the seabed. Calmly he'd let the wild toss him about, opening his eyes so they filled with dark shades of green. The salt sting hadn't been enough to force them shut. Only the need to breathe had caused him to lift his head to the surface and return to that other world. He'd smoked a joint beneath the pier afterwards. There were shadows with no origin leaping at him under its brittle frame. Eventually they'd caused him to fall back onto his hands. A rustle sounded in the dark, and he recalled a faint clink but couldn't tell what had caused the sound. A force struck him from behind moments later, a fist most probably. The two men had searched his pockets and called him a 'cunt' for not having anything of value on him, before punching and kicking him until he passed out.

Blaise stood up and stretched, touching his toes, then reaching up towards the sky. "Let's do it, right now," he said.

He started taking off his shoes and Flo joined him, then their jeans, shirts. Blaise started running and Flo followed. They made it to the shallows. The icy feeling charged up their limbs and held them still.

"I don't know if I can," Blaise said. "I'm starting to feel too sober for this. It's the fresh air or something."

Flo nodded and said he was also feeling too sober and also like they were mimicking a moment that could not be repeated. "It's no longer an authentic moment," he said.

"How profound of you," Blaise said.

They were interrupted by two drunk girls laughing not too far away. The girls approached them precariously, struggling across the stones in their heels. They both dropped their chips at the exact same time and started laughing even harder. When they finally caught their breath they asked Flo and Blaise what they were doing.

“We were going to express our freedom by night swimming in the frozen water but decided not to,” Blaise said. “We’re now going to go smoke a joint at his flat instead.”

Blaise raised his brows and smiled at Flo, implying jackpot, and invited the girls, who now introduced themselves as Beth and Annabelle, to join them. Beth and Annabelle had fake eye-lashes and big hair and cackled a lot. Flo decided he hated them straight away but went along with it, knowing it meant he and Blaise didn’t have to go to the pier. He’d kept his nerve but this was the closest he’d been to it in months. It looked more terrifying than ever to him.

They bought some whiskey and some tequila and drank in Flo and Angie’s living room. The girls sat on one sofa either side of Blaise, falling all over him, both in tight, sparkly black dresses. They didn’t pay much attention to Flo who remained intentionally shy and distant, deciding he liked them even less than on first impressions now that he’d had to endure their company for several hours.

At some point during those hours Blaise began to massage Beth’s beefy shoulders and she started making sex noises. Annabelle had passed out next to them and the entire situation felt awkward and depressing. Flo found a bottle of red wine in the kitchen and collapsed to his knees, thanking the stars, ironically but also genuinely, because he thought they were out of alcohol and was certain that he needed more to survive the night.

He drank and smoked on the roof again, thinking about Blaise in there, wondering why he’d felt no attraction towards either of the girls despite being equally drunk. He concluded that they were exactly the type of girl a lonely man seeks before he rides on towards setting suns. Never anything more than a parting gift, something small, like a pair of socks on Christmas that might be nice on a cold day, maybe once, but you never really remember you ever had them afterwards.

He got high and waited for the rise. The sky edged towards blue and soon the strip of gold appeared. It lit up the waves softly with splashes of mirrored paint. He squinted and imagined diamond rope tossed up from the depths, lassoing around his best friend and lifting him out of the window, up

and away, like some kind of angel, while he sat there ready to fly in pursuit, only his wings were little pink bones without any skin flaps or feathers.

He tossed his butt off the building top and Blaise appeared in the street below with a bag on his back and a cigarette in hand. He lit it whilst gazing down the road for a few seconds, before turning to look up at Flo like he'd sensed him, smiling faintly, scratching his beard, then taking a bow and walking out of sight down the hill. Flo threw the empty wine bottle up high so that sunbeams struck it before it fell into the shadows below. It cracked into shards on the road. He barely heard it. The clock tower smiled slightly. It was ten past nine.

When he re-entered his apartment later that morning Beth and Annabelle were still there, groaning on the sofa. He told them he had a really busy day ahead and asked if they wouldn't mind leaving. Annabelle smiled and said absolutely, thanking him. Beth grunted a few times, avoiding eye contact. The rabbit ran across the room and she screamed 'rat'. Flo laughed, grinning at Annabelle, saying, "It's a rabbit, look at the ears." Beth told him to fuck off and said the rabbit was grim. Flo picked up the rabbit and held her close to his chest, asking them both to go immediately, feeling angrier than he was expecting to, surprising himself even as he slammed the door behind them.

Angie sent him a text saying she was going to stay an extra day and see her sister, who'd recently separated from her husband after finding out he'd been visiting sex-chat websites on a daily basis and spending large chunks of their 'house-fund' gambling on sports and mostly losing. Flo felt relieved that he wouldn't have to clean up yet. He dropped onto his bed where he lay with his head underneath one pillow and on top of another one. He watched a documentary about Antarctica on his laptop. He could only see half of the screen and had to imagine the other half. Later he read a few pages of *Less than Zero* without taking any of it in, staring at the words, past them, as if there was some kind of coded message in there, ready to reveal itself if he focused on the letters enough, the shapes they made, rather than the words themselves. As he drifted off he heard clinking again. Metal on



metal. Then the raven's croak. The two sounds were rhythmically in unison, maybe linked somehow, but in ways he couldn't quite figure out yet.

He didn't dream and when he woke up it was dark. He sat on his sofa staring at the bookshelf, feeling like there was something fuzzy and translucent draped over everything including himself. He didn't move for at least an hour, listening to the Sikh couple arguing in the flat below him. They kept shouting 'Fuck' and soon he joined in shouting, 'Fuck, fuck, fuck.'

The argument ended with a shriek and a slammed door. One of them left. Probably the man. It was usually the man who left when they argued. The building went quiet. He turned his attention back to the book shelf, attempting to decide what he should read next, without feeling much like reading anything. He felt restless, wanting to run, even if just for the act of running, simple exertion, not unlike killing a raven, the same in fact, he felt, exactly the same. Laughter came up through the floor, girlish giggling and deep voices. The clatter of the letter box made him jump. He listened for footsteps but there were none.

The lights in the stairwell were on but a shadow blocked the incoming stream of yellow, something outside his front door. He waited but the shadow didn't move. Another eruption of laughter sounded somewhere, followed by heavy footsteps above. He slid slowly over the floorboards and peered through the peep hole but there was no one there.

The shadow blocking the light was the doormat, not a person. Relief washed through him, a sensation that felt cleansing for a moment, interrupted when he flicked the switch beside him and the hallway lit up. He laughed to himself, almost slipping on the postcard beneath his feet which he hadn't noticed in the dark. It was one of Van Gogh's self-portraits. He picked it up and stared at that paint smeared, ginger face and hollow brown eyes before turning it over:

*Hope you haven't cut off your ear yet.  
I got a tattoo of a panda on my shin. You should get one.  
I'm never coming back. You'll have to come find me...*

*Blaise*

He went to the balcony and leaned out over the rails. There was no late-night postman in the dark. A girl on a bike rode by. Her headlight skipped along the pavement. The light of the clock tower was broken, its face in shadow, but he could still make out the hands – it was 9PM. He flipped the postcard over and stared at Vincent again, looking for hidden messages in the paintwork, focusing on the brush strokes and thinking about how they were printed by a computer and were no longer brush strokes at all. There was nothing secret or mystic in there, he conceded. But still, none of it made sense. Blaise could have sent him a postcard already, maybe, if he was lonely and bored. But no postal service is that fast. He stared at the sky to see if maybe it was purple, at least a shade purple, wondering whether maybe days had passed since the morning Blaise left and he'd slept right through.

The rabbit caught him off guard by nibbling at his toe, causing him to scream, "Fucking hell, Rabbit!", whilst almost kicking her against the wall in shock. He picked her up and looked into her yellow eyes, brighter than the raven's but just as empty and undefined. Hollow like Vincent's. Like a painting and then print of something that once upon a time may or may not have been real.

An hour passed. The clock tower sang for the last time that night. He opened a can of beer and turned on the TV. A female reporter was looking concerned, devastated but mostly determined, while saying, "The search continues, but there are still no fresh leads on missing school boy, Samuel Drew. It has been confirmed that the recovered bike, initially thought to be Samuel's, was incorrectly identified by officers due to its similar appearance..."

He turned off the TV and faced the rabbit. "They won't find him anywhere around here," he said. He counted the four corners of the room but didn't make a wish as his father had taught him to, when wishing still had meaning. He sipped on the beer. It tasted like metal. The lights were off and silence had sunk into the building. He was truly alone in his crevice on earth.

He lifted the rabbit and stroked the patch of waxy hair between her eyes. He lay on the sofa with her exploring his chest, before nestling down and falling asleep again, puffing along with his breaths. A gust carved through the room. His hands shook with the cold as he stretched his fingers, listening

to them click, rubbing the space vacated by the brown smear of raven's blood. Death's branding. A killer of more than just insects, though he didn't feel any different. He placed the rabbit in her box and she snuggled down to sleep. He returned to the sofa and closed his eyes for a few moments, re-considering the notion of a wish, finding nothing sincere to wish for, only self-mocking wishes, like a meteorite or sense of self-worth, or a genie, to provide him with more wishes he wouldn't be able to make. Thankfully his phone buzzed. It was a message from Cliff with a late-night request, one he was happy to oblige.

Outside it was warmer and quieter than he thought it would be. He drove with the stereo fully blaring. Psychedelic guitars panned from left to right, encircling him with ascendancy, guiding him along the glassy streets, Jimmy Hendrix this time, a decision he took after a moment of self-reflection in which he acknowledged that he was feeling less secular than he had been but also calmer. An earlier sheet of rain slipped under the tires as he turned past the park and into Ringerbush. Cliff came to the door in his boxers holding a carton of milk. ET flying past the moon was tattooed in the centre of his chest.

"Cheers mate. Jodie's out and I need to stay with the dog. He got into a bit of a scrap and needs to lay low for a while." He handed Flo some weed wrapped in cling film. "Same place, one guy. I think his name's Frank."

Flo nodded, bumped Cliff's massive fist.

"And I've got this for you too," Cliff said, holding up a blunt, "From Jody. If you feel like gutting your eyes again."

Flo took it and said, "Thanks."

"Just don't smoke it while you're driving. You see this?" Cliff pointed to his elbow. The tissue was all scarred. Flo made a surprised and intrigued facial expression that he was very aware of, but couldn't tell if he was being genuine or mimicking what would be the correct reaction for such a situation.

In a slow, quiet voice he asked Cliff if he crashed his car because he was high. Cliff shook his head and said, "No, Matthew bit me when he was a pup. But he was blazed out of his little mind." He laughed uncontrollably for around ten seconds and slapped Flo's shoulder. He stopped laughing abruptly

and drank a glug full of milk. "I'm messing mate," he said. "I took a shit on my own doormat once. Told Jody it was the dog. I'm full of shit in all senses. Have a good night."

Flo smiled and nodded. He got back into his car and took the road down to the east docks, passing the ferry port and hundreds of rows of rusty shipping containers. He looked up at billboards that he couldn't quite make out. Seagulls span around in the sky but there was one black bird among the splinters of white. He took a left turn, taking his eyes off the sky for a moment and when he glanced up again the black bird was gone.

He arrived at the pickup point and pulled over. There was a man waiting in the bus shelter alone and it had started to rain. Flo turned his music off and called the man over, rolling his window down. The man sat up suddenly and glanced around in a panicked way, so Flo turned off his engine. The man completely froze then seemed to be sniggering. Flo squinted, in order to discern whether or not his last observation was correct. He was about to call out to the man again, assuming it was Frank since there was no one else around, but the man stood up and ran, disappearing somewhere ahead, between boats and buildings. There were faint sirens in the distance which may or may not have been the reason. Flo felt confused and edgy but didn't follow the man. He drove away from the docks, avoiding Shore Lane, heading nowhere in particular as rain soaked the city.

He pulled over in front of a row of empty houses in Ringerbush and slumped down in his seat. He lit up Jody's gift and closed his eyes. The rain began to sound like drums, tribal pattering, precise and possessive, not a random fury, emanating from somewhere else, it seemed, coinciding with the music on his stereo, creating a richer texture of sound. It made him think of that third place and other places again.

A group of men surprised him by knocking on the window. Their faces were drenched, hair slick and greasy. He stared at them blankly. Then one of them punched the window hard. The glass didn't break and they started to laugh. Flo heard another thud somewhere behind him. He turned the engine on and reversed, hitting the car behind. They were laughing and howling like wolves as they surrounded his car, four of them at least. He swung the wheel and accelerated forwards, firing out onto the road. He left them in the

distance, stooped in rain and shadow. He visualised himself pulling the wheel around and speeding back towards them, hearing their screams as they ran. He laughed, feeling his narrow escape was enough, and in victory he opened the windows. The smoky heat inside combined with the night's wetness to steam around him.

He took a corner far too quickly as Jimmy and his distorted guitar sang quietly. He turned the music up. Ringerbush was dark, deserted. Bled of colour. He glided on through the night, his wheels flicking up water droplets that sprinkled the darkness. Looking through the windscreen was like trying to see through a waterfall.

He turned on to Park Avenue and sped down the long wide road. He began picking up speed on the straight. Trees lined both pavements and the country park was on his right. The streetlights were pale. He barely saw the man at all, far away, stumbling over the road alone. Guitars strummed deep thoughts of escape on his stereo. He felt the thud as he hit the body. Multiple thuds came with it, inside him and around him but elsewhere, working together to create a burning force that threw him back down into his car seat.

The body flew up over the bonnet and disappeared before appearing again in the rear-view mirror, a soaking heap in the road. He barely swerved. His heart dipped and then soared up, never landing, like it had been caught up there on a hook, causing him to almost throw up. Clarity was replaced by chaos, like cymbals in his head. He was there again on the gritty streets, his music silenced, but his foot didn't ease off the pedal. He floored it, speeding away as puddles scattered and tires tore at the wet road.

He didn't slow or stop till he was home. Angie was still at work and it was dark as he came stumbling through the door, panting and shaking. He took off his wet coat and jeans, flinging them on the floor. He paced up and down clicking his fingers, scratching at his beard, wondering whether he'd been seen. It was 4AM. Maybe everything would be ok.

Tears were streaming down his cheeks. He cowered against the wall in a squat. He stood up and opened the door to leave and then closed it again, before finally locking it and tossing his keys down once and for all, into the rabbit's box. He smoked joint after joint wrapped in his Brazilian rug,

sitting on a chair by the closed balcony doors, as the rain fell harder. The night would not end. Already he couldn't recall what had happened exactly. He couldn't see through the haze that hung in front of his eyes and over his thoughts. He couldn't hear his memories over the guitars and heavy drums and he smoked until the living room was filled with a fog. Gradually rage and pain fizzled and went out. He felt the feelings go, like candles that were always dying.

He wrote all night until seagulls toyed with one another in the dawn. The sun moved into view and the clouds dispersed. He searched the sky for the black bird but it was nowhere to be seen. The sun fuelled an uneasy feeling within him, but at the same time he also felt the world was beginning to make sense. The concrete and the tarmac sparkled in the light but it all seemed false somehow, like an illusion. He stared at the sun from the balcony and smoked on through the morning, becoming aware of a strange glimmer, hidden behind the sun's familiar glow. He noticed it on the sea over the rooftops, a hidden shine that grew the more he let his eyes waver, the more he let the familiar world fall away. It was a kind of pearly sheen beneath the sun's reflecting splashes, maybe coming from under the waves and the stone, but not buried deep enough anymore, unable to hide from him between the lines. So like a tree he stood there on the balcony, pricking skin with his sharp nails, feeling no pain at all, increasingly feeling like someone else, concealed deep within a body that was no longer his.

An old man shuffled past the guest houses across the street with a bunch of tulips under his arm. Sirens sounded in the distance again. Another horn called up to him from the water. He could see the ship from his balcony, monstrous and white, taller than most of the buildings. He thought about the man he'd run down and felt strange, not as he'd expected to feel. He felt absent from emotions he should have been experiencing, imagining himself chained to a chair in a dark room, staring at the wall feeling guilty, then standing on the chair he'd been bound to, holding the chains above his head, smiling slightly. The final shot of his movie; because things that worried him before didn't matter. The past and present were gone from his mind as he wondered where to go from there.

He glared at the sun because he was finally certain, beyond all doubt, that it was trying to hide something from him. He closed his eyes and he heard it, the clink, clink, and he smiled when he stared up at the curtain rails because they were completely still.

He was on the roof when Angie came home, sitting with his legs crossed under his Brazilian rug. He stared out to sea with a half-smoked cigarette loosely between his fingers, shivering and trying his best not to blink.

She climbed half way up the ladder and placed a hand on his knee, "Flo, are you alright? What happened?"

He put the cigarette to his lips but it had long gone out and fell from his fingers.

"Flo, you're scaring me. What's going on?"

Slowly he tilted his head towards her and smiled weakly. "I'm fine," he said, "Don't worry."

She stared at him, biting at the pad of her thumb, holding onto the ladder with just one hand.

"Go inside," he said, "I just need a minute."

She shook her head, puffing out air, shuddering from the cold. She was wearing blue, the same colour as the sky. The sun marked her cheeks white but her eyes sparkled greener than usual as she started to say something, but stopped herself and glanced at him tearfully, before climbing back down onto the balcony and going inside. He continued to gaze out at the sea and picked his half cigarette up off the stone, put it to his lips and tried to smoke it again. He breathed in only air. It was very dead, but he didn't care. He liked the way it felt between his fingers and lips.

When he came in off the ladder Angie was standing in the living room, cradling the rabbit against her shoulder.

"Well?" she said, glaring, patience running out.

"I couldn't sleep."

She dropped the rabbit suddenly and it darted out of sight. She held her hands down at her sides and tensed them. "You're so frustrating

sometimes,” she said. “Don’t bullshit me. It’s obvious something’s happened.”

He said he wasn’t bullshitting her and smiled calmly. She stormed out of the room with an exasperated grunt and he returned to the balcony. His hands were shaking but they felt strong. He clenched his fists until the skin turned red. No sirens came for him and no dark spirits circled him, taunting him with guilt, dragging him to the seven circles of hell. The ocean and sky were separate, no longer merging to hold him there. He nodded, re-analysing and approving his earlier thoughts, that something sharper existed beyond what was in front of him, high-def, maybe 4D, or something similar that was yet to be named or classified.

The roads cut between the rooftops, silver passages between the gaudy staircases leading to the sea, and he wondered about the significance of this observation, whether these silver passages were genuine or some kind of trick as well. Colourful little figures were rushing around on them, maybe eating ice-cream, on their way to the beach or the arcade. Traffic in the distance drowned out the seagulls. The clock-tower sat in the middle of it all, out of place, archaic and beautiful. He squinted his eyes so the rest of it disappeared, becoming blurred and insignificant, low-res and dated. He could only see the white tower and the sea beyond, feeling this was the most beautiful the city had ever been.

Nobody had come for him because maybe nobody had seen him and he wondered what that meant. It seemed absurd that such a small technicality meant he would go unpunished. It made no sense like space which was supposedly infinite, but infinity wasn’t a rational concept. Everything stopped making sense and being rational and he felt that there were only ‘things’ around him, abstractions like ‘truth’ and ‘death’, every word he visualised appearing framed with inverted commas. He thought about how in the past humanity knew for certain that the world was flat, and towards those magical edges they sailed, where a glorious waterfall dropped infinitely towards a sparkly beyond.

He stood up and stared down into street at his little car. It looked sinister down there, nestled in amongst all the other cars and he imagined it sniggering, thinking about how to everyone else it was no different than the



other cars, with no mark or sign to reveal its recent actions. But then he realised he wasn't even sure if that was true, as he stared momentarily at the back of his hand where the raven's blood had been. He'd never checked whether his car was clean.

He grabbed a toothbrush from the bathroom where Angie was showering. She said something he didn't hear because he was already running out through the door and down the stairs, imagining his car surrounded by men and women in bright yellow vests. When he reached it, he was relieved to find it sitting in the street alone, with no obvious dents or scratches. He leaned down and inspected the front bumper carefully, finding a patch of something brown and sticky, smeared over a lengthy crack running all the way along from the left headlight to the license plate. It was dry blood. He spat on the toothbrush and scrubbed at the long stain until it was mostly gone, the bristles of his toothbrush turning a muddy red and starting to fall off.

Angie was standing in her towel looking confused as he opened the door to their flat. The radio was on.

"Where did you go? I heard the door slam. Is that your toothbrush?"

He gripped the plastic in his hand but it was too late to hide it.

"Yeah," he said.

"Is that blood?"

She stood there wrapped in green, her long wet hair dripping onto the floorboards.

"Hello? Are you going to answer any of my questions?"

"I think I hit a dog," he said quietly.

"What are you talking about?"

"It may have been a cat, or a fox. I had to clean my car."

"What?" She stepped up to him and rested her hand against his forehead, testing his heat. "You feel cold and clammy," she said. "You're looking pale too."

He shrugged. "I feel like it was a cat. The sound it made..."

"Why didn't you just say you hit an animal?" She hugged him and kissed his cheek, then quickly recoiled as if trying to reign in the affection that

had naturally escaped her. "But why are you using your toothbrush to clean the car? That's ridiculous."

Straining his ears, he tried to listen for seagulls over the sound of the radio. He kept his arms at his sides while she squeezed him again, briefly but lovingly, he felt. Her hair smelled like coconut and soaked through his t-shirt.

She released him and said it didn't matter. "It happens unfortunately. Try not to think about it," she added. "Remember the time I hit that squirrel? I couldn't stop crying. I know how you feel but I'm sure there's nothing you could have done..."

Her lips kept moving and he heard more words but he wasn't listening. Instead he was picturing blood smeared all over his steering wheel, along with an indistinct image of a face, probably his own, screaming, 'Coward' inwardly to himself, 'I drove away like a coward.'

"Flo?"

Angie stroked his left cheek with the back of her index finger. He cleared his throat but didn't know what to say.

"I'll make you a drink," she said. She started walking towards the kitchen in her towel. "The owner, what about the owner?"

"I didn't stop. I drove away. It was late."

"We should try to contact them. They'll be worried sick," she said.

"I think it was a stray cat," he said.

She stuck her head out from the kitchen, "How can you know that?"

"I saw it. It looked stray."

She lowered her brows, suspicious, maybe. "But you said it may have been a dog, or a fox, and now you're suddenly so certain?"

"I don't know, I'm tired. I need to sleep I have work tonight."

"Please sort this mess out a bit first," she said. "I'll help you, even though I shouldn't. Can't stand looking at it."

He hadn't cleaned up since Blaise's visit and the living room was a disaster but he stood there unable to move. It smelled of beer and stale smoke. Sticky patches had darkened on the carpet and there were cans and bottles everywhere.

"Looks like it got bit wild," Angie said, while picking up beer bottles and throwing them into a plastic bag, harder than she needed too. "How long was Blaise here?" she asked.

"Only a night," he said.

She asked how their night was and he told her Blaise had decided to 'leave his life behind'.

"I can't believe it," she said. "I wish I'd known, so I could have said bye at least." She was staring out the window and seemed upset. "How do you feel about it?" she asked. "Are you Ok?"

"He'll be back eventually," Flo said.

"How long is he going for?"

Flo shrugged and Angie nodded but she was deep in thought and staring at an empty space in the centre of room. His mouth was pasty and the rest of him felt clammy and claustrophobic. He noticed her flowery weekend bag sat in the corner and realised he'd forgotten all about her dying grandfather. He apologised for not asking immediately. Tears started to roll down her face as she told him he'd probably die in the next few days. He remembered that it was her grandfather that had taught her to ride her bike because her father was far away and her mother was a monster.

She began collecting bottle caps and cigarette butts off the floor and he joined her in silence. She looked annoyed but didn't say anything. In the past he'd always cleaned up, lit candles and put out drinks for her arrival. Now he greeted her with this.

He felt awful so went and got the Hoover. He started sucking up the bottle lids and baccy off the floor. The lids rattled up the metal tube. The ash-tray was spilling over onto the coffee table and he vacuumed that up as well. A little cloud of ash puffed out and it made the room stink even more. Angie glared at him so he turned off the power.

"You'll break it," she said.

"I do it all the time. It's fine."

She raised her eyebrows at him and shook her head. "You're an idiot."

"I'm sorry," he said. "I meant to clean up before."

She picked up a cigarette butt. "You hate smoking these."

"Blaise," he told her.

"What's this?" Angie stood holding something black. It looked like an insect.

"What?" He stepped closer. It was a fake eye-lash.

Angie stared at him and a little menace flooded her eyes.

"Oh, Blaise brought a girl back, must be hers," he said.

She stared for a second, searching for a hint of a lie. She'd once told him his mouth shrunk when he lied so he'd learned to keep his lips wide. She grabbed some kitchen roll from the side and began to wipe the coffee table.

"Who was she?"

"Just some girl he picked up. I don't even know her name."

She paused again, biting her tongue, not wanting to tarnish her return any more than it already was. He caught her vexed expression in the mirror above the electric fire place as she let herself fall onto the sofa. The rabbit hopped up beside her and she grabbed it, placing it on her lap, starting to scratch at the fur between its ears. He stood beside her and stared at the book shelf. Bret Easton Ellis, Camus, Sartre and Bukowski sat above *The Lord of the Rings* on DVD. He shook his head, attempting to focus on finding something helpful to say but he had nothing.

"Jen's not doing too great," Angie said without looking up. "She asked how you were and I didn't know what to say."

He stepped over to the balcony doors and looked outside, but without looking at what was there. He focused on the glass and whether or not he could see through or past his reflection, mainly because he was bored. He also wondered if he could still see that exuberant shimmer somewhere out there. But the sun was too strong now. He knew the conversation would last even longer if Angie became any more irate and he was already sick of it, so he chose to focus on an exit plan. Still facing away from her, he attempted looking sorry and weak. He wished he could see himself and wondered whether he was being a good actor, imagining a high angled camera shot focused on Angie talking, him in the background, black and white, maybe even slightly transparent as an artistic representation of how he felt, which he liked the idea of, an idea that almost caused him to smile. He was able to block out the smile, however, so as not to ruin his performance.

"I know it's been tough these last few years. Your brothers were all you had," Angie was saying, among other things that he'd not heard. "You've had to deal with a lot on your own. It was simple until now. I get that."

"What's your point?" he said, suddenly turning around, staring at her in what he felt was a vacant expression, before feeling a slight smile appear on his lips, acknowledging that his performance was waning, as actual feelings were beginning to manifest themselves.

Angie looked up at him, slightly scared for an instant and then just plain disgusted. "Forget it," she said.

"I'm just so tired. I'll clean up when I wake up," he said.

"I don't give a fuck about the mess," she said.

He went into their bedroom and closed the curtains, crawling into bed, away from that bastard sun. He shut his eyes tightly but couldn't sleep for a long time. He heard Angie rattling around but she didn't bother him and eventually he heard the front door slam shut. Drifting in and out of consciousness, he waited for the night to drop.

He woke up some time in the evening and Angie wasn't home. The mess was as it had been and he continued to ignore it while he searched for news of a hit and run victim on the internet using Angie's MacBook. There was nothing. The body hadn't been found, or if it had it wasn't newsworthy. He considered that maybe it was just a drifter, someone nobody cared about. Then there was the possibility it hadn't happened at all. Aside from his new found feeling of chainless-ness and mistrust, the blood and crack on the car were the only proof of what had transpired. But strangeness is all around, he thought. Blood doesn't have to be blood when nothing makes sense anymore.

Around a week later he was lying on his back on the living room carpet in the middle of the day. His knees were bent and his arms were stretched out above his head. He watched the rabbit sniff around in her own fluffy and pointless way, something he'd been doing this a lot over the last few days. It was raining heavily from a flat, colourless sky, the patter of drops against the glass the only sound. Angie was at work and the coffee table was pushed back against the sofa to allow him extra floor space. The floor was

filled with stacks of books. He'd been marking pages he liked or felt were significant (admittedly without really knowing what he meant by 'significant') with torn off pieces of paper. Sitting up, he lit a half smoked joint and stared at his raggedy copy of *Steppenwolf*, wondering what his parents had been trying to convey when they gifted him that. He remembered the day that he and his brothers had all been given a box of things, specially selected for each of them, the will aside. He remembered saying it was like they knew they were going to die, getting all this stuff ready. His brother Dávid had told him, "It's called being prepared." The thought of being ready for death frightened him then, and made him shudder as he recalled the feeling of fear. He was the often-acknowledged accident resulting from a second honey moon, distant from his two much older brothers, not only in age. He couldn't remember the moment he'd first heard the news of his parents' death, at least not in physical terms, things like where he'd been or what he did in the immediate aftermath. He just remembered a bottomless sinking feeling, like he was falling inside himself into somewhere dark, waiting to hit whatever was down there, still falling. He also remembered crying uncontrollably at some point, feeling like maybe he'd been in their bed, and was now recalling a certain scent, one that he could only describe as what his parents bed had smelled like, and there he'd been, taking it in one last time.

He rarely thought about his parents' death, especially since the argument with his brothers, almost six years ago. As a child he'd obsessed over the incident. He saved up his pocket money for years, hoping to go to Brazil and track down the spot where their little plane had hit the water. They were only supposed to be in Brazil for a month. It was his father's sixtieth birthday present. According to reports the plane had an engine malfunction somewhere in the jungle. The pilot tried to crash land on the river and Flo visualised the plane skidding along the surface, before cartwheeling up into the sky again as the nose caught the surface, landing upside down with the tail hooked onto an overhanging tree, the rest of the plane dangling into the water. The cartwheeling and skidding he'd invented in his mind, but the plane's final resting place was exactly as it had happened. He'd seen the pictures of the wreck. The forensic evidence had shown that everyone but the pilot survived the initial crash itself, but that the plane had

been suspended in such a way that the heads and torsos of Flo's mother and father, as well as the co-pilot and guide, were submerged. They were likely unconscious from the crash so drowned, hanging upside down by their seatbelts. He pictured them now, swaying in the currents in slow-motion. He imagined what his parents would look like if they'd been left there all this time, visualising their eyes suddenly opening. He pictured himself lying in bed, suddenly sitting up, sweaty and panting, something which often happened to him throughout his childhood after their death. He never really slept well until he started smoking weed when he was sixteen or maybe only fifteen.

He stared at the joint in his hand and sighed, taking a long drag and closing his eyes, allowing himself to fall back onto the carpet again. The rabbit hopped up beside his head and sniffed at his ear.

"What do you think, Rabbit?" he said, smiling.

He laughed softly to himself while watching her hop around on his books, sitting on Plato.

"Is that the one, Rabbit?" he said, "Is this your way of telling me?"

The rabbit stared at him. She sat up on her hind legs and flopped to the side mimicking his earlier movements, but only coincidentally, because he was fairly certain rabbits weren't that smart. He thought about how simple her life was, how it all made sense to her, too stupid to think beyond her walls. He envied her and playfully hurled a little shit pellet which hit her in the face, but she did nothing, continuing to groom herself. That's your freedom, he thought, to shit where you want and keep yourself clean. He leaned forward, scratched her forehead with his index finger. She started nibbling at her shit. He sniggered. "You're sick, Rabbit. But you don't know that you are," he said. "But if I told you, and you could understand me, then you'd drop that little turd instantly, wouldn't you?"

The rabbit hopped all around the room, up onto the sofa, across to the coffee table, dropping fur, convulsing with excitement when she found a snack. Flo stood up and opened the kitchen door and the rabbit noticed it straight away, approaching this whole new world cautiously at first, hopping forwards, leaning and sniffing at the air, before moving onto the plastic tiles,

beginning to run around hyper actively like she'd been charged with lightning.

He watched her enjoying this strange new world for a few minutes and then picked her up, taking her back into the living room and closing the kitchen door once more. The rabbit flailed her fluffy head as he put her down in the centre of the living room beside the books. She darted straight back to the kitchen door and sniffed at it, scratching at the wood.

"Not so happy now, are you, Rabbit?"

The rabbit continued to scratch at the kitchen door, chipping the white paint away.

"You and me both."

He sat on the carpet with his back resting against the sofa, realising he'd spoken to the rabbit directly at length for the first time. He drew a picture of the rabbit in cartoon form and looked at it, then drew another picture with a different pen in a different style. He placed the drawings next to each other. The rabbit looked at the pictures and he wondered what she was thinking, whether she recognised the images of herself. He listened to Elliot Smith for several hours and thought about what it must be like to stab yourself. It must be difficult to miss all the ribs and other organs in order to strike the heart. He wondered whether Elliott Smith had thought about Samurais before or during the time he stabbed himself, feeling happier now that he was listening to music

On a different day, that may have as well have been the same day, he was reading *Nausea* and began to feel restless. He decided he needed to leave the flat which he hadn't been outside of since his accident. He tried to ignore his restlessness by watching *American Beauty* and then writing his own alternate ending, in which Kevin Spacey kills his wife and runs away to the Himalayas to live purely on sunlight. He thought that maybe Kevin Spacey could have a pet snow leopard and he drew a picture of Kevin Spacey with a snow leopard which he showed the rabbit. Afterwards he felt even more restless so he put on his leather jacket. He ensured his hood was low down over his face and headed out. He convinced himself this latest action was not



by chance but by design, a way of approaching his restlessness with deliberation and an aim, revolving around discovery and exploration.

He walked down the hill from his block of flats towards the square. Even the indirect sunlight, striking him from the walls and pavement, seemed exceptionally bright, causing him to squint the entire time. He sat on a bench just off the square, along the bordering pavement beside the adjacent library. From this bench he could see the clock tower up close, spearing the sky from the square's centre. He refrained from entering the square itself because the white stones reflected the light too harshly, straight upwards into a layer of air hovering just above the stones, creating an iridescent area he decided not to enter, a pocket of white hot light surrounding the square's entirety. Instead he smoked and watched from the safety of the square's fringes. He focused on an old man who was staggering towards him. The old man was trapped in the pocket of light but seemingly moved along unscathed. He seemed to be almost hovering. He was probably a hobo and also insane, peering around suspiciously at things that weren't visible, before sitting on a patch of grass beside the library, not far from Flo. The madman leaned against the windows by the library's entrance and turned his head half towards the glass. He smiled vacantly and said, "He fought in the war, my granddad. Got one medal, they remember him for that!" After laughing overly loudly, causing two passing teen girls to turn and stare, he added, "The other granddad, he lost his leg. He was a captain, no medal, and they don't remember him!"

The madman looked like a pencil sketch, covered in lines, causing Flo to doubt his existence for an instant. But others were looking too, so he had to be real. The madman was talking about how his grandfather may have been a Nazi but wasn't a terrorist. He reacted to no one and nothing, carrying on as if both he and everyone else were somehow in separate places, only appearing to be in the same physical actuality. Flo smiled but mainly felt envious of the old nut, who was bouncing on the verge of what he himself was drowning in.

He put out his cigarette and approached the madman. The madman's head was still against the glass. He continued to stare inexpressively, his grey

eyes vacant but focused somehow, on something that must have been far away, in more than one sense.

“Sitting in cells! With Bob Dylan,” he said, suddenly slapping his knee.

“For three days! Haha! Not a single cup of tea, not one at all,” he said.

“Where’s my bit of social security?”

“I like Bob Dylan too,” Flo said, nodding. “But I prefer Hendrix’s version of *All along the Watchtower*.”

The madman didn’t look up. He stopped speaking and returned to his trance, lifting his hand to the window and gently moving smudges around with three fingers, maybe trying to contort the glass somehow, or find a way through. After a few minutes he pushed himself to his feet and staggered off in silence. Flo lit another cigarette and watched him walk away. He felt glad the madman had appeared for just a split second, before leaving him again, to wherever he roamed.

Shielding his eyes, Flo cut directly across the square thinking, ‘this is crazy’, making it across in what felt like lightning speed, then thinking ‘I made it’, glancing back at the quad of light and puffing out his cheeks, shaking his head, relieved but also proud. He continued walking into the town centre via the back roads, simultaneously thinking about the old man he’d just witnessed and recalling the time Blaise had mentioned on the beach only a few nights earlier; a period of around a year in which they’d holed up together following certain events. Flo passed an old couple with Cornettoes and a group of men in shorts and sunglasses even though summer seemed far away. He approached the seafront and passed the house in which he and Blaise had lived for a year. It looked the same and he wondered who lived there now, moving on past it, recalling more days, finally focussing on a particular day amidst that hazy time, when it must have been summer because it was really hot. Blaise had mentioned this day on their last meeting. Flo remembered taking shrooms and smoking some salvia. He’d ended up standing in front of an old mirror in his student room, feeling like he was seeing another side in the glass, only he couldn’t move into it. The mirror was huge, framed in golden foliage that twisted and weaved around the centre. He was alone but as he stared into the eyes in the glass he felt like they were familiar but also completely unknown. The shade wasn’t quite

right or the sparkle was a different kind. He remembered reaching out to his reflection but the reflection didn't reached back. He stood his ground bravely, breathing in and out calmly, holding his own stare. And then Angie had taken his hand and it all stopped. He remembered how they stood there, hand in hand, gazing at their reflection. He'd switched his focus from his own eyes to her eyes in the glass, deep and dark, not the same somehow, different like his. It had been a similar sensation to the feeling of catching eyes with someone who you know but can't remember who they are or how you know them. It had scared him and things seemed physically darker around him, objects ostensibly swallowing light and colour, so he'd turned away from the mirror towards the real Angie. She'd kissed him on the forehead and he remembered feeling like a knight. She said something like, "We'll look after each other." They'd both cried quietly while kissing. He tried to remember whether she'd also taken shrooms and thought probably not. He remembered thinking they'd both endured a lot to be there before the glass, gripping the sweaty hands of the other, which had been the predominant reasoning in his decision to return to reality, sharing all of it with her from that point on.

While entering the shopping mall through the multi-storey car park at the back, he wondered how many other mistakes he might have made that he wasn't aware of yet. He could barely move inside the mall. Huge, red 'Sale' signs filled the shop windows. He'd put his headphones on in the stairwell and was listening to *The Doors*. He felt very aware that there was glass all around him as bodies rushed from one window to the next. A group of teenage boys came out of H&M all wearing stripes like the mannequin behind them in the window. Giant posters were filled with pictures of desirable men and women jumping around on beaches, looking happy, elated and bronzed, because 'sunshine was the key to happiness.' His headphones pumped 'This is The End' into his ears and he laughed vacantly, feeling it absolutely was, riding up an escalator. He remembered a time when he'd ridden it before, many other times, with various people, some he still knew like Blaise or Angie, others he no longer knew. He felt ashamed recalling how he was once part of what currently encircled him.

At the top of the escalator he felt himself drifting slowly on. The bodies around him kept his pace constant, all moving one way or the other with no room to manoeuvre, a phenomenon he chose not to fight. He allowed the fleshy current to tug him along, certain they could see the fear in his eyes. He stared at the ground to escape them, corneas glazed over with the other side, ears open, listening for that clink, seeking that glimmer on the tiles, but those eloquent manifestations were non-existent there, an absence he attributed to there being 'too much humanity' around him. Holding his distance was crucial. The faces around him reddened in the hot glass, glass he now viewed as a boiling tube in which all were forced to react, ready to explode and find a way out, had there been one. If only he possessed that kind of power, but all his hands could do were hide in his pockets and tap his thighs.

The many faces he passed became the same, plastic and unreal, all blending together. Bodies began to interchange, colours colliding, outfits reshuffling on the skin, like avatar creation or something similar, which he felt was an accurate reflection of what 'real life' had become. He stared nervously and suspiciously at a hand that reached out from the crowd. The hand clawed at the air in front of his eyes, grabbing his shoulder forcefully. He stared at the face belonging to the hand. It was featureless like all the others. He looked away and tried to move on but then he heard a sound that broke through his music. It was his name, "Flo, Flo!"

He rubbed his eyes. Angie stared at him with angry suspicion. He removed his headphones and nodded weakly with a blank expression.

"What the fuck is up with you? You walked straight past and stared right through me," she said.

He shrugged, having already walked on in his mind, the crowd behind him forcing him along.

"You're literally a fucking zombie," she said shaking her head, no longer suspicious, only furious, visibly, but trying her best not to make a scene. "This is so embarrassing. I'll see you at home."

She was with her friend Kim who was getting married or maybe was already married now. Kim stared at him with a forced and pitiful smile but Angie grabbed her arm and dragged her away. He imagined Angie was

probably crying but he felt nothing this time. This was also the most they'd spoken in days. He put his headphones back on, drowning out the chatter and voices, moving into the crowd towards the green EXIT signs. The faces around him blurred away again and the current took him. 'This is the End' had finished and he listened to 'High Times' by Elliot Smith, thinking about self-stabbing again, this time more suicidally, the physical act, the implications, imagining Angie rushing into their bathroom to the sounds of his screams.

After calling in sick for several shifts over the last week or so, he finally went to work that evening. It was the first time he'd driven since the accident. Holding the steering wheel felt strange. He'd imagined holding the wheel so often over the last week that it was hard to comprehend that this was now concrete and real. His boss Drew had seemed happy to see him and said they'd been struggling in his absence because Ben drove like an old woman and he was now the only other delivery driver. Sam had quit a few days earlier. Flo had nodded and said he was glad to be back.

After delivering several burgers he didn't want to go home so he shadowed a taxi for around twenty minutes, thinking about the driver, empty like him, alone, his car soon to be filled with drunks, and he wondered whether the driver would feel some connection with his or her passengers, causing him, like his vehicle, to no longer be empty. He searched for other drivers like himself, curving aimlessly through the streets, maybe driving angry or afraid, lonely or just wanting to get away, seeking rare solitude in a crowded life. But it seemed most, if not all, had somewhere to be, eventually parking up and leaving their vehicles behind.

The night was clear and dark. While gripping the steering wheel he could still feel the resonant jolt in his hands as he'd hit the body, a richly-textured thud that he relived each time a pedestrian passed near his car. He watched the sky, feeling like the dead raven's broken bones were following him around as well. He thought about the sound as they cracked in his hands, a noise that he felt had been omnipresent yet completely evasive. He parked up beside the sea again, the blackened pier on the fringe of his field of vision, and imagined himself wielding those broken bones like knives, or claws

between each of his curled fingers, stabbing at empty air, until invisible curtains revealed themselves, drifting gently over everything, forming a cover that tore apart as he sliced at it, other things becoming visible through these new slits in front of him, but evading him at angles he couldn't quite catch, always blowing out of reach.

He sketched pictures of his trip to the 'throng', which had only reinforced some things he was already sure of while shedding no light on the many things he was completely unsure of. He remained in his car long after he'd ran out of things to draw. He knew Angie would be home, probably wanting to discuss the previous afternoon, mostly the 'embarrassment he'd caused her.' Since their argument on the morning she'd returned from visiting her grandfather he'd been avoiding her by leaving before she got home from work and coming back after she'd left. He felt it was easier this way, at least for now. While inside his own head he was able to live without interruption or guilt, which although he tried to ignore, he still suffered with, conceding that he still loved her. He'd made a mental list of all the things he knew were real and all that were false. Love was neither. It had become that shady middle ground.

At 10AM, after a brief nap in his car, he finally headed for home. When he opened the front door he was surprised to find Angie standing there, wearing pyjama bottoms and a hoody. The hall was windowless and it was moderately dark, only a rectangle of grey light falling through from the living room. She stepped towards him and put her arms around the middle of his back. Her grip was weak at first. It gradually tightened. She held him close. He stood still, arms remaining at his sides. He wondered what had warranted this sudden display of care.

When she released him she looked at him sternly and began to chew on her thumb nail, nervous about something, scared even.

"I need to talk to you," she finally said. "I took extended leave. I'm going to away for a while."

He stared at her, unable to react. He felt confusion above all else, comedic but also tragic. She sighed and stepped back, apparently

unimpressed by his lack of a reaction. He was unable to generate one. His brain was stuck processing this new information.

Her eyes were all puffy from sleep and some of her hair was stuck to her forehead. Golden, wispy little curls hung loosely by her ears. "I'm going to stay with my dad," she added, looking anxious.

"Your Dad," he said quietly.

She nodded, "I can't go on like this, Flo, but there was a time, not so long ago, when things were amazing. I don't know what's happened to you. I don't know if anything I do will change things, but right now, I just need to get away." Her face creased up and she put her hand to her lips, breathing out slowly. A tear formed in the corner of her right eye. It ran down her face and dropped off her jaw onto her neck. She smeared it away with her thumb. "Please say something," she said.

He stared into her eyes and the space just below his heart started to ache. He felt choked up and his hands trembled a little, to his own surprise. Now tears were flowing down her face in curved lines. She couldn't even look at him. Again, he thought about the night he'd first spoken to her, meeting those fluttering eyes. He'd been drunk and found her sitting on a kerb alone at 4AM. He'd told her she was an angel in a denim skirt and after they'd said goodbye, hours later, he'd known that unless he could exist in her presence, he would never be happy again.

He held out his hand weakly in her direction but still couldn't think of anything to say.

She glanced at his reaching hand, then up at him. "The oil is about to burn," she said.

He followed her to the kitchen. She sniffed as she took the pan off the heat. The smell of hot oil was intense. She cracked and whisked a couple of eggs, then began chopping onions and tomatoes. He listened to the crunch of the knife. The onion juices made his eyes sting. He stepped forwards, wrapping his arms around her from behind, leaning in and kissing her ear gently, automatically, without a thought as to why or whether he should. She became all there was, there in his arms, warm and quivering, and the feeling of sickness subsided. He felt calm. Her neck smelt like warm hay, a little sour from a sweaty sleep and it was all he wanted, to hold her there and breathe

her in. He closed his eyes and collapsed onto her back, nestling there, accepting with uncertainty, that maybe this was still where he needed to be.

She slowly turned around to face him. The kitchen light kept flickering. He tightened his arms around her as she wept into his shoulder. The knife was still in her hand and he felt the cold metal on his back through his shirt as he stroked her head and kissed her face repeatedly, whispering, "I'm sorry, Angie. Let me come with you."





# **– Part Two –**

## *Fire*

“Imagine that one of them has been  
set free and is suddenly made to  
stand up, to turn his head  
and walk, and to look  
towards the firelight.”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Plato, *The Republic, IX: The Supremacy of Good* (translated by Robin Waterfield), (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993) pages 241-242



Around a week after starting to work for István, Flo decides to go out and walk along the Danube in the dark. He normally stays home after work, exhausted from forcing laughter all day. The constant jibes are growing increasingly tiresome, but he can't listen to Gréti this evening because he has a head ache and he needs some time alone, even if it is in the middle of a crowd. Gréti has been repeatedly mentioning a girl she wants him to meet, Dori, who he 'played with as a boy'. He can't remember her. Thankfully they keep missing each other, because he doesn't feel like knowing anyone else right now. Dori is Bea from across the hall's granddaughter, described to him by Gréti as a 'sweet girl' who got involved with some 'terrible people' in her teens and had a drug problem, but is now 'doing much better'.

He stares at the river, remembering his first night in Budapest, a night that feels very recent. He attempts to count how long it's been since, but most days are indiscernible from each other. Fred drifts on the water's surface, before sliding into his own reflection and sinking, taking his reflection into the depths along with his body. Flo tries to laugh away the haunting feeling that has overtaken him but when Fred's reflection doesn't resurface he quickly walks away, becoming aware, in an epiphany like manner, that the city stopped being a memory at some point in the last few days. It has become the present and the future.

He goes back to Gréti's apartment and sits in the armchair in the living room. She's asleep. He reads Fred's list of ingredients. He reads Fred's message. He closes his eyes and imagines himself waking in the night to the sound of curtain rails. He pictures himself sitting up. Wet footprints on the floorboards lead across the narrow living room. Fred is sitting in the armchair, the moon lighting up his drenched face and slick hair. His suit is soaking into the armchair. He grins. Flo opens his eyes and it's the morning. He can hear birds through the open window.

While working near the Parliament building, later than usual that afternoon, Flo, István and Dani are taking a break and drinking a beer on a small patch of grass. They're facing the Chain Bridge. István is lying on his side, leaning on one elbow, tossing daisies into the air. He asks Flo how long he's planning on staying in Budapest and whether he's 'looking for

something.' Flo says he doesn't know but that not everyone is looking for something.

Dani stares at him silently for what feels like an extremely long time. He takes off his shades and says, "You're barely even Hungarian. Why would you want to be here?"

István laughs loudly and holds an arm in front of Dani, as if holding him back, widening his eyes and rocking his head from side to side in mock terror. He slaps Dani on the shoulder and laughs harder, by which point Flo is also laughing a little but not genuinely.

"I don't really know," Flo says.

István nudges Flo with his elbow and says, "I think what Dani means is that maybe not everyone is looking for something, but you, Hal Florián, are."

"Maybe I just wanted to visit my grandmother," Flo says.

István lights a cigarette. "And maybe a little soul searching, what?" he says, winking.

A large group of well-dressed women walk by with shopping bags, probably tourists, and István shakes his head. He begins to talk about how 'love' in terms of other people is bullshit. The only true love in the world relates to the little things, like the feeling of grass on his bare skin, something he demonstrates by spreading his toes out and caressing the ground with them, while breathing in deeply. He recalls fishing at Lake Balaton where he'd first met Dani, and theatrically recites the story, how Dani beat up some kids who took his fishing rod. Flo pretends not to get the moral of the story, which is something to do with trust. He laughs and says it's a good story. The questions stop, though István remains subdued and irritable. He continues to glance at Flo with thoughtful mistrust for at least the next half an hour. His brown eyes seem matte and dead. The wide smile that first welcomed Flo, the day they met, seems less genuine now, a mask he wears to hide the fact that deep down he might be a real piece of shit.

István says he doesn't feel like working anymore so they pack up. They walk along the tram lines as the city discolours with the arrival of night, re-emerging electric yellow and deep blue. István buys some lavender from a beggar for a hundred forints and gifts the sprig to an old woman around the corner.

"It's the little things," he says, winking at Flo.

When they split for the evening with the usual handshake, István keeps hold of Flo's hand and smiles. His dead brown eyes look even more intensely matte, despite the array of yellow and orange light around them.

"I'm a very curious individual," he says. "I know an interesting character when I meet one. And I have a sixth sense for stories. You'll have to tell me eventually, Fish."

"He's the first fish I ever heard of," Dani adds.

"His passport's probably fake, what?" István says, "A conman trying to steal a bit of my love and freedom! You're staring like a calf faced with a new gate, what?"

They both laugh at Flo's confusion. István quickly apologises while still laughing and invites Flo to see his nephew's band. "They're shit. But the girls at this place are always beautiful and the beer is cheap. It's open very late," he says, jiggling his brows.

Flo shrugs uncertainly because he feels more like locking himself away than venturing out, but he agrees to go. It's easier to say yes for now. He can turn off his phone and not turn up.

When he steps into the apartment Gréti approaches him with a smile and a bottle of cold beer. She kisses his cheek and squeezes his arm. He watches her shuffle back towards the kitchen and smiles as he washes his hands in the kitchen sink, scrubbing at the blood that he knows isn't there, but at times still seems visible, in certain light.

They eat schnitzel and he asks Gréti about the origins of the name 'Hal' and whether it's a rare name. She tells him that his father's father arrived in Budapest after the Second World War and changed his name because their original name was of German descent. She says they chose 'Hal' meaning 'Fish' because they liked to fish. Flo thinks about whether he likes to fish and can only remember one time he went fishing with his brothers around the time his parents died, vaguely recalling finding it boring. He asks Gréti what their family name was before 'Hal' and she doesn't know and isn't sure if she ever knew.

Vacantly, he says, "I have no name."

"Of course you do," she says.

"Yeah I know," he says while glancing out at the half moon.

"Obviously I know that I do."

A breeze drifts in through the window and lifts the curtains. It moves the leaves of the plants on the sill. Flo closes his eyes and smiles, hearing clinking, then a crack of metal breaking at last. For a moment he believes he's created those sounds. When the moment passes he feels uncertain and cold all at once.

"I was involved in an accident in England, a while ago now," he says, allowing his eyes to glaze over, so that he feels like he is nowhere and everywhere all at once and can speak freely.

"What kind of accident? Are you Ok?"

"It was about a month ago. I hit a man with my car."

"Oh my God. What happened to the man, is he alive?" Gréti asks.

He shrugs, "I don't know. I drove away." He closes his eyes, both feeling and hearing rain falling even though he knows the night is clear and he is indoors. He feels pathetic and suddenly a lot like jumping out of the window. Walls of books are closing in on him and he opens his eyes, pushing the walls back with angry glances.

"You feel guilty," she says.

He looks up at her, deciding to lie, "Yes."

"Don't torment yourself," she says.

He nods without looking at her because he feels afraid to.

"Unrest is in this family's blood," she says.

She tells him that Grandpa Sanyi's family where from Hortobágy and that his great grandfather was one of the famous horseman of the plains. His great uncle Bálint led a revolt against land owners and had been hung for it.

She goes into her room and comes back with a box of sepia photos. She shows him a picture of his great grandfather who looks exactly like him, except with a moustache and baggy pantaloons.

"Almost like the same person," Gréti says, smiling and then sighing, adjusting her glasses thoughtfully. "Thank you for telling me, about the accident. I know it must have been hard. If you want to talk about it some more..."

“No, it’s Ok. I just felt like you deserved to know, after everything you’ve done,” he says. He stands up and leans down, kissing her cheek. She puts an arm around him and they stay like that for a few moments.

“I’m going out,” he says.

She gives him some extra money, but he puts it back into one of her handbags by the door when she isn’t looking. He hesitates in the doorway for what feels like a very long time, and then goes back into the living room. Fred’s original note is folded away inside his passport but he’s been using the copy he made as a bookmark. He takes it out of *The Plague* and stares at it. He shrugs and places it in his jeans pocket.

On the tram ride to ‘Volt’ he notices a few women checking him out. He wonders if maybe in Hungary he seems more attractive because of his genes, which are definitely Hungarian even if the rest of him isn’t. He glances at his reflection in the window. He looks healthier than he did when he arrived, tanned and stronger. His hands are calloused and covered in blisters and peeling skin. He lays them out on his knees, realising he wants everyone to see them. This catches him off guard. He doesn’t understand his own subconscious reasoning but leaves his hands spread over his knees, as he smiles at a pretty blonde wearing a leather skirt and boots. She doesn’t smile back. He wonders what he could say to her, can’t think of anything. She plays on her phone. She wouldn’t smile at him but smiles at her phone a lot, leaving vocal messages on Whatsapp, he guesses. She takes several pouting selfies and he hates her by the time he gets off the tram at the Lágymányos Bridge around twenty minutes later.

He walks further down the river bank till he can hear some bass guitar and eventually a bass drum. Soon the rest of the music, low chugging guitar and melodic vocals, emerges out of the distance. He weaves through the taxis and congregations of mildly drunk people towards the entrance of Volt. Once through the gates he goes straight to a bar and orders himself a beer.

Volt is outdoors and has a festival atmosphere, with three or four circular beer stands at the back of the crowd, who are mainly jumping in front of a wide stage. The band are a Hungarian punk-rock band. Flo nods his head gently, feeling self-aware despite enjoying the music and the general vibe. He begins to hope that István and Dani won’t turn up because he



doesn't feel like dealing with their bullshit. He imagines himself shouting, "I don't want to listen to your bullshit!" at them and he feels good inside, hoping he'll say it in real life, immediately doubting himself, knowing he won't.

He stands at the back and drinks several beers and smokes several cigarettes. The band continue to impress him by playing *Sublime* and *NOFX* covers. He feels drunk and taps his finger on the bar more vehemently than he has been. He feels like smoking something more than a cigarette and eyes a skinny, crack-head-looking-guy as someone who could maybe help him. He fiddles with Fred's recipe in his pocket. The crack-head-looking-guy has gold hoops in both of his ears and keeps pulling on them. Flo thinks 'pirate' and chuckles as the man moves off into the crowd. Flo follows him, striding softly over the grass.

He doesn't get far. A girl blocks his path and he tries to sidle around her but she won't let him. Their eyes catch and at first he can't even see the rest of her face, just the eyes burning out of a solitary form. He knows them. They're a shade of gold and he feels like he's being consumed by them, not for the first time. He can't remember her but he knows he's seen her before. In another place, maybe another life. One of his other selves loves her, he thinks suspiciously, goose bumps spreading over his skin. For a moment she stares back at him as if also caught off guard. Stunned eyes narrow and she breaks into a shy smile. Her skin is white and her hair keeps changing colour with the flashing stage lights, before settling on green, not because her hair is green but because the stage lights remain frozen on green. She smiles less shyly and he's certain that he definitely knows her, or did at some point, here or elsewhere, but in this life, this self, not some 'other'. He feels overwhelmed and weak within her gaze which makes him nervous. She starts to say something. He turns and quickly walks away.

He hides beside a different beer stand, one on the far left of the grass, away from where he's been. The music continues to play, now through a stereo because the band have finished. He focuses on watching all the faces in front of him, so he's able to spot the girl coming before she has a chance to see him. After a few minutes he begins to feel calmer and more rational, deciding it was just a weird moment and that maybe he just looks like

someone to her as well, or that it was a misunderstanding. He starts searching for the skinny, crack-head guy or someone else with a similar aura, grasping the list in his pocket again, reeling off the ingredients he can remember in his head. But warm fingers grasp his forearm and spin him around. The girl with the golden eyes is standing beside him and she starts laughing.

“Why did you run away?” She asks.

He shrugs and stares closely at her face, feeling scared but mostly curious. “I know you,” he says, regretting it instantly, hoping that maybe she hasn’t heard.

She nods and raises her brows questioningly, “Do you?”

“I don’t know. No,” he says. “Sorry.”

He turns away from her again. She grabs his shoulder and pulls him around.

“Don’t look so terrified. You’re right,” she says, smiling. “You do know me.”

“How?” he asks, his voice sounding shaky.

She smiles. “I’m not going to say. You’ll have to try and remember.”

She waits for his answer and he feels his lips moving but is aware that no sound is coming out. She leans in closer to hear what he’s saying. He kisses her on the corner of the mouth, causing her to pull away with a stunned expression. He says he’s sorry and that he doesn’t know why he did that. She says it’s fine and smiles so he kisses her again, this time with force, laying his arms across her back. She tastes sweet and beery. She giggles and begins sliding her hands along his upper-arms. He pulls away and grins at her. He looks into her eyes, thinking about how gold isn’t even magnetic but that it certainly seems to be having an effect on him.

“Does that mean you remember who I am?” She asks.

“No. Something made me want to do that,” he says, immediately wishing he’d said something different.

But she laughs and says, “Let me buy you a beer.”

He shrugs and smiles. “Sure.”

“Maybe you’ll realise how you know me,” she says, looking down at her feet and then up at him again.

He has butterflies in his stomach and thinks about Angie, nodding at the girl, imagining Angie's head in front of him, exploding like a balloon. He says, "OK."

He leans on the bar and orders two beers. She tries to pay but he doesn't let her. She thanks him and knocks her beer against his, saying, "*Egéségedre.*"

She's wearing yellow shorts and a vest top, Vans on her feet and pearls around her left wrist. She asks him if he's enjoying Budapest. He laughs and asks why she thinks he's from elsewhere.

"Your accent," she says, smiling suspiciously. "Nice try."

"Oh," he says, grinning. "I wasn't trying to catch you out."

"So?"

"I like Budapest, but I prefer the seaside or mountains, or forests."

"Well I'm, a city girl," she says, pulling a disappointed expression. "I love this city. All cities."

"Maybe I met you a few years back," he says. "Yeah, that must be it. Do you know my friend Blaise too? Was it in Prague? No wait, Krakow?"

She imitates a child's frown, lowering her chin and closing her mouth while shaking her head. "That wasn't me. Those were other girls," she says. "I bet there were many other girls, weren't there, Flo?"

He feels awkward, thinks of Fred and shudders. He laughs in order to bury those feelings. "You know my name, how?"

"I obviously can't tell you that," she says. "But I'm disappointed you don't remember mine."

"Let's drink some shots," he says. "That might help my memory."

"I don't think it will," she says.

"It might," he says.

They drink some pálinka shots and Flo coughs from the heat while the girl is unaffected by it. She orders two more and they drink those too. He feels wasted. They hold hands and someone pours a beer on him. He can't remember why but he remembers laughing, lots of laughing. Neighing like horses, clutching each other in hysterics. She sits on his lap and he says her eyes are beautiful. She tells him his eyes are beautiful. Her arms are around his neck. He asks a skinny bald man for weed at one point. The outcome is a

mystery to him, but he remembers lots of smoking. There are other faces, her friends. They don't like him much and update Facebook all too often. He rants about social media and how much he hates it, telling her friends they should be enjoying the moment. One of them says he's strange and pretentious. He calls her a shallow bitch and another man laughs. They knock their plastic cups together and put their arms around one another.

The sun rises and there are only a few people left at Volt, at around 5.00AM. She shows him the time on her phone because he doesn't believe her. He buries his head in her neck and closes his eyes, feeling safe. They're on the grass and birds are singing, no more Hungarian punk rock. Her cool fingers touch his cheek. Soft fingers in his hair. She grips his thigh and he grips hers. Her friends come for her. "So, do you remember who I am yet?" He doesn't. There's a last kiss on his forehead, cold. When he wakes up in the morning it's the first thing he remembers, because it clings to him like frost, a blue mark where her lips have been. He can see it even if no one else can.

He's at Gréti's on the sofa bed in the living room. He can't remember how or when he arrived back here. He rolls onto his stomach and aches inside, unable to focus on anything else, only those flashing images of the girl and this overwhelming need he has to see her. He doesn't even want to touch her or kiss her or anything like that, he thinks, maybe just have a conversation, or even pass by her on the street, wordlessly, so they can smile at each other. That would be enough. These feelings in him surge tenfold, suddenly, when he realises with a force that makes him feel like he's falling, that it's over. The need in him will never be absolved because he still can't remember who she is and will therefore never see her again.

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The island of Dragoralla was so windy when they arrived that Flo didn't notice the heat at all, only the sun, which blinded him as they stepped off the plane, looking whiter than usual. It seemed drained of its generally yellow shade, maybe drained by the wind, he felt, wondering if his own face also looked whiter than normal. Angie held his hand and squeezed it. He laughed awkwardly and looked at her face which seemed excited and also

white like the sun. He touched his own cheek and grinned, then held out his hands in front of himself, staring at them as if he'd just entered a new body and was seeing his various parts for the first time. This is how he would view this trip, he decided. A new self, a new me. After Angie had reluctantly allowed him to accompany her, in what she called 'a last attempt to save what they had', he'd promised to be positive and embrace their relationship and new surroundings. Maybe in a new body, this was something he'd be able to do.

Angie's father Victor greeted them outside the terminal, smiling through gold-rimmed aviators.

"You didn't tell me he was a fucking hippy," he said, lowering his aviators onto his nose and raising his brows.

Flo had never met Victor. Angie didn't speak about him much since he'd not been around for her. He left for better weather with his millions when Angie was eight. He'd been trying to reconcile with her for years and she'd finally visited him the previous summer for the first time.

He looked almost proud of himself as he asked, "How's your mother? Kicked it yet? Still starting the day with a pint of vodka?"

"Please don't," Angie said.

He bared his buck teeth and grabbed her by the shoulders, hugging her for a long time. Victor was in his sixties but looked no more than fifty, with thick greyish-brown hair and a goatee that hung down in miniature dreadlocks. Angie had told Flo that Victor drank a few handfuls of seawater every day so maybe that was his secret. A former lover of his had been a Buddhist and this was the one habit he picked up from her, since week-long silences and meditation hadn't been his thing.

On the drive from the airport goats lined the road, standing on orange rocks, staring at them cross-eyed as they drove past. The car door kept swinging open because the lock was broken. Victor was a retired stock broker. He retired at forty-five. He could have had any car in the world but he chose to hold on to his rusting Peugeot because he said cars didn't interest him. The car smelled of cat food because of the crate of cat food Victor kept in the back. He told them that every morning he wakes up early to feed all the strays in the neighbourhood, and that the local restaurant and café

owners are his friends but hate him doing it because it encourages the strays' prowling. "Now I just wake up earlier," he said. "I tend to their feline needs while the town sleeps."

"Like a vigilante of cats," Flo said.

"A what?" Victor asked.

"Like Batman," Flo said. "Catman."

Angie turned around in her seat to glare at him, not quite angry, but close.

"So what kind of name is Flo anyway?" Victor asked. "I had a great-aunt called Flo. I remember she had a pet tortoise, also called Flo. They'd both just sit and stare, completely still, Flo and Flo."

"It's Hungarian. Short for Florián," Angie said.

"Hungarian? God, I've been telling everyone I have a Belgian visitor arriving." He smirked in the rear-view. "No matter. Belgium, Hungary, not a huge difference, am I right? But Flo? No, I can't do it. Can I call him Dave?"

"You're being rude," Angie said.

Flo forced a laugh from the back seat, "It's fine, call me whatever you want."

Victor chuckled while pulling on his dreadlocked goatee. "And what is it that you do?" he asked.

"Deliver Burgers," Flo said.

Victor started laughing and then coughing. He said it was the humidity. Angie bit her nails as they passed more goats. She told Victor that Flo was very creative, but hadn't found his niche yet. Victor said he had a friend who was very creative, became a writer and was now homeless, or maybe even dead. He wasn't sure. Flo laughed because he thought it was a joke but Victor said it wasn't a joke. Angie slapped his hand on the gear stick and Flo laughed while looking out the window hoping to see more goats or other animals, but the red rocks were barren and lifeless as they carried on along the dusty, pot-holed road.

Victor gave a history and geography lesson of the island for the remainder of the journey because Angie asked him to, for Flo's benefit. Flo felt like he was on a guided tour, which reminded him of *Jurassic Park*; the strongest reference point he had to having a guided tour while in a vehicle.

But it wasn't raining and there was no T-rex. He began shifting his eyes from side to side, mimicking suspicion and unease, as if maybe something was coming. Angie turned around and looked at him confused which made him laugh. He pretended to roar like a dinosaur, silently, opening his mouth wide and shaking his neck from side to side, then laughing again. Angie put her finger to her lips, asking him to be quiet. He felt this was ironic because he was.

Victor explained that the island was small and relatively untouched by tourism. It was the most rustic of all the islands in the Mediterranean. Hotels were not allowed to be taller than five storeys because they'd spoil the landscape. The island was once in the control of the British navy. Flo knew a lot of this already because Angie had filled him in on the flight over and he'd listened to her attentively for a change. He was ready for extreme exploration, he felt, although he wasn't sure he'd find it there. The beaches were covered in coarse sand that looked pink at dawn and sunset. Many of the inhabitants had come for a fresh start, a different type of life.

"Landscapers and cleaners, chefs and waiters, looking for a little more sun in their lives," she'd said. "Then there are the wealthy artists and bankers who come to live it up."

It was a libertarian place, supposedly, an aspect Angie, and also now Victor, were eager to emphasize. Most of the beaches were nudist. The hippies came in bunches, evidently, since they were everywhere as they drove through the port of the island's capital.

"I don't buy it," Flo said.

"What?" Angie asked, turning around.

"Nothing," he said, while thinking these hippies didn't actually stand for anything, other than trying to look bad-ass and fun-loving, because of habits like sleeping in old vans and juggling on street corners. They sold jewellery and bongos, spent their money on weed and falafel, probably. He laughed at the documentary he'd created in his head – *The New Hippy: Vegan Circus People*. The word 'free' began to sound like a noise, maybe a goat's yelp; free, free, free. He laughed quietly to himself imagining a goat being eaten by a T-rex and a bunch of hippies running away screaming, one of them, the bravest, throwing his juggling balls at the T-rex, making no

impact, then also being eaten, the T-rex spitting the hippy out because the hippy tasted like shit, since it was malnourished and covered in dirt.

"If it was cold the hippies would be fucked," Flo said. "But in paradise sleeping in a tree is romantic not desperate."

"What?" Angie said.

"This place is paradise," he said, nodding, faking a calm and content expression, all too aware he was trying to trick himself as much as anyone else, but had failed, since in reality he was only feeling slightly affected and predominantly detached.

Angie squeezed his knee lovingly and smiled. Victor nodded thoughtfully and said, "It certainly is."

Victor lived in an old naval town on Dragoralla's north coast. The streets were narrow and cobbled, neatly sectioned in tight lines. Victor's house was in the centre near the town square. They sat in the courtyard beneath a giant palm tree and drank gin while listening to *Cream*. The house had previously been owned by drummer Steve Gadd, who played drums for people like Eric Clapton and Joe Cocker, among others. Victor spoke continuously about all the various gigs he'd been to. He saw *Zeppelin* at a secret concert once in the seventies but never went to Woodstock which he told them he regretted and always would.

Victor had arranged a dinner in one of the restaurants down on the bay and he'd invited his closest Island friends, as well as some others who were visitors to the island. "It was hard to decide who to invite. There'll be some jealous faces around Calle Azul this evening, those who didn't get the exclusive call," he said smiling, while leading Angie and Flo down a narrow cliff path to the bay beneath the town. He told them about the firework display that would later mark the start of the town's Fiesta, a week-long celebration of horses and getting drunk.

The table was at the water's edge, already surrounded with faces that grinned and murmured excitedly as they spotted Victor. A man shouted, "There's the old git!" and they all laughed. Some of them knew Angie from the previous summer and she'd clearly made an impression. A few older men stood up and kissed her hand, embracing her, telling her how beautiful she looked and how wonderful it was to see her again.



Small fishing boats lined up along the black water. Flo stood awkwardly watching them with his hands in his pockets. Restaurants and bars curved along the bay. He had to smile when he noticed the cluster of hippies beside a row of tables covered in bongs and jewellery. He wished he had a video camera so he could start his documentary. "Here they are in their 'natural' habitat," he imagined himself saying.

Yellow lanterns reflected off the surface of the water and the sky was starry and bright. The smoky smell of grilled fish and sea salt drifted invisibly.

Angie caught his eye and watched him. She'd been sucked into conversation by a really tall old man in his seventies, a long white haired Gandalf-without-the-beard type, with those same pale blue, ocean eyes. Angie looked desperate to come over and include Flo in the conversation but was too polite to interrupt the man, nodding, smiling, adept at social conventions. Eventually she took the man by the hand and lead him over to Flo.

"Flo, this is Sam, my Dad's best friend. He's the artist I told you about." She turned to Sam. "Flo's actually been getting really into art lately. He likes drawing."

Sam was a tower in spite of the hunched back. He wrapped his giant arms around Flo, kissing him on both cheeks. He smelled like lemons and menthol cigarettes "My dear boy, it's wonderful to meet you."

Flo nodded, "Same here."

Sam leaned back, with his hands on Flo's shoulders, and tapped his cheek gently. "He's a handsome one, Angie," he said. "Got the look hasn't he. Rugged but clean somehow. I love a contradiction." He released Flo and held Angie close. "So how's her mad father been treating you? Has he made you drink the sea yet?"

Flo smiled and shook his head, "Not yet."

Sam laughed theatrically and kissed Angie's cheek for maybe the tenth time in five minutes.

His wife came over and introduced herself as Paula. She was an artist too. She shook his hand and politely asked him about his work.

"I had a blog but no one read it," he said.

"You should get more involved with social media," she suggested.

He nodded, feeling a little sick. "I know" he said. "It's all the rage."

They took their seats at the table. There were ten of them. Flo was seated between Paula and a mop-haired, fat man who introduced himself as Lars. His shirt was unbuttoned and there was a huge surgical scar across his sweaty chest. He was drunk and gruff voiced. He leaned back in his chair, swirling red wine in his glass, running his index finger around the rim.

"I hear you're a fellow Belgian?" Lars said.

"No, I've never been to Belgium," Flo said.

"Oh. Victor said you were," he grunted. "Well, don't bother. I left as soon as I could."

"How did you end up out here?"

Lars swept his hair back. The sweat greased it into place. "Sunshine and women. I work for the UN. Write reports a few times a week. I can live anywhere in the world as long as the reports keep coming."

Flo nodded and said, "Sounds interesting." He wondered how many years of grinding and ass-kissing his way through various government jobs Lars had to endure before they finally gave him a license to roam.

Lars put his hand on Flo's shoulder and pulled him close, "I tell you, shit is coming. The world is getting ready to vomit on itself and wake up sideways. You'll see. We Belgians need to stick together."

Flo forced a laugh. Lars didn't laugh because it wasn't a joke. He continued to stare at Flo wide eyed, looking intentionally fearful, while downing the rest of his wine.

There were two more Belgians across the table who'd also come to the island to see Sam's art. Angie was at the other end of the table between Sam and Victor. There was a German called Ulrich who Angie had also told Flo about. He invested in art. He was sitting with his Brazilian wife who was young enough to be his daughter or even granddaughter. Gold bracelets lined her wrists and she was leaning on her elbows looking really bored. Flo felt sorry for her and wanted to speak to her but knew he wouldn't.

He realised he knew quite a lot about the people around the table and the situation he'd walked into, which surprised him, since it meant that somewhere in the last few weeks he'd started listening to her again. He wondered if things were looking up, while pouring himself some more wine

and downing his glass. Lars laughed in approval and filled his glass again. A spread of tapas was laid out, including things like patatas bravas, mussels, prawns, salads and cheeses. There was some liver which almost made Flo vomit so he sent it down the table far away from him. He picked at things but mostly he watched the others. Lars didn't stop talking, mainly about the rise of Belgium's football team, which he felt was the best thing about his country, along with Hoegarden and the publicity created by the movie *In Bruges*. Flo said he loved *In Bruges* and Lars nodded and said everyone does. He drank several bottles of red wine and ate three plates of chicken wings all on his own. His lips were deep purple by the end of the meal and he licked his sticky fingers two at a time.

"What is a man like that doing with a woman like her?" He said, motioning towards Ulrich's Brazilian wife.

Flo shrugged and sipped some water.

Lars pointed at Angie next, "She's probably an actress, or a model. And look at those lecherous old fucks hemming her in like that. She can't escape! It's all about the money, I'm telling you. The things I'd do..."

"Actually, that's my girlfriend, Angie," Flo said, automatically, surprising himself even. "She's a nurse, not an actress or model," he added, confused by his own defensiveness.

Lars slapped the table, "Ha! Sorry for the crudeness, but take it as a compliment."

"I am, thanks," he said, taking tiny sips from his water glass in quick succession, glancing up at the stars, then turning away from them.

Lars poured more wine, scratching at his scar through chest hair with his other hand. "You should get her into porn," he said. "You'd be a rich man in no time. Classy girls like her never do porn. It's always filthy looking girls. A classy girl like her would do very well."

He felt a little ache in his back and sat up, nodding, maybe a little too vehemently. He was glad no one at the table knew him well enough to know he was acting, furious inside for reasons that continued to confuse him. He pictured Lars holding a video camera, naked, and Angie taking her clothes off in front of him, smiling. He had to shake his head to get rid of the images.

"I thought you worked for the UN?" He eventually said, clearing his throat.

"I do. I'm just saying. Wine?"

Flo declined the offer. Lars tried pouring some anyway but the bottle was empty. He couldn't figure out why nothing was glugging out of the end and shrugged, tossing the bottle on the floor. It smashed but nobody looked up. Everyone was beyond drunk, shouting and laughing, stuffing their faces. Angie was still being smothered by Victor and Sam. Sam had his arm around her. He kissed her hair between bouts of laughter and intense story-telling. The Brazilian girl continued to yawn and jiggle her bracelets.

Lars clicked his fingers, "Waiter! More wine!" He turned to Flo, "I repeat. We need to stick together, we Belgians. That's why I'm going to warn you now. Watch your back. Look around. There's a sludge in the air that consumes all. This island may appear beautiful, and it is, I'm not denying that, but that's precisely why it's so deadly. Like a siren you know, from Greek mythology."

"Yeah, I know," Flo said.

"Beauty on the outside, but they will fuck you to death! It's the same here! You wait."

Lars motioned out towards the bay as his wine arrived. The waiter filled his glass.

"You going to share that, you old crook?" Sam called from the other side of the table.

"Fuck you Sam!" Lars stood up, "This wine is wasted on you English! This is just for us Belgians!" He lifted his glass in one hand and patted Flo on the shoulder with the other. "For me and my new friend! We're going to produce a porn movie together!"

"You better watch him, Angie," Victor said, grinning and wrapping his arm around her. "You don't want that maniac corrupting your chap, whispering dirty tricks in his ear. You're a snake, Lars! A fat little snake!"

The whole table started laughing and Lars stood up, taking his bottle of wine, stumbling away in his pink shorts and sandals. Flo watched him march purposefully along the bay, bending over to catch his breath after less than fifty metres, before disappearing into the crowd.

Meanwhile the fireworks had begun. Green and blue explosions rained down onto the oily water. Flo chose to watch only the reflections. He enjoyed the imperfection of the swelling, fiery spheres. The water was layered in smoke, like mist on the surface. Angie clapped in awe. She even shrieked a few times. She glanced at Flo and he smiled at her warmly, feeling nostalgic and glad she still had it in her, to let loose like that. Pure ecstasy. Free and easy on the island away from her life that was full of diseases, suicides and crying people. He was happy to see the fire was still inside her, wondered where it had been. She loved fireworks and always would. He tried to think about something in his own life that had that same effect on him but couldn't come up with anything.

Later the air had cooled but it was still warm. He was absently watching the crowds of people wandering through the bay when he spotted a man in white linen and a straw panama, with a guitar slung over his shoulder. He had a dog with him on a leash. For a second Flo wondered if the man was really there because he appeared to be gliding, surrounded by a sheeny glow that seemed to be emanating from somewhere inside him, a lot like the stars in the sky, or Moses on a mountain, full of God's power, lit up Hollywood-style, or maybe by magic.

The man approached the table with a grin on his face and removed his hat. He knelt beside Victor and began to pluck the strings of his guitar. Victor ruffled the guitarist's hair, laughing, motioning towards Angie who blushed a little as the man in white worked his fingers up and down the fret-board, serenading them.

The dog ran off dragging its leash but the guitarist didn't seem to notice or care. The dog charged up and down the bay leaping at people. Some of them played with it and others stepped back warily or hurried away from it. The guitarist played Spanish classical with skill that amazed Flo, and he wondered why the man was here busking for change when he clearly had the talent to be so much more. Maybe it was the music that made him glow.

Flo glanced around looking for laughing immortals and smiled to himself when he found none. He watched the guitarist intently, his playing effortlessly elaborate, clean and deep, but the world would never know, he thought, wondering if the guitarist had Twitter or a Soundcloud, or maybe a

Myspace. He was pretty old and they were in continental Europe and maybe people still used Myspace in continental Europe. He wanted to tell the guitarist that if he had any of those accounts he should get rid of them because they're a waste of time while requiring a lot of effort.

The guitarist concentrated serenely, inside the song but not ruled by it. They were equals, balanced perfectly. Flo nodded in approval, thinking of the many battles he'd had with his guitar, never good enough to be in it like this. He wanted to be, and instantly regretted selling his SG, deciding he would buy another one, or something different, a classical guitar like this one. He liked the way the guitar sat in between the guitarist's legs, neck pointed at the stars, almost like he was aiming at them, absorbing their glow through the music, or something like that.

When the man finished playing everyone clapped and he stood up to take a bow. He had dark and dreamy looking eyes, a lot like Richard Gere in *The First Knight*, or another equally corny 'nineties' film. He noticed Flo clapping along with the crowd and winked at him. Victor stood up and hugged the guitarist, pulling up a chair for him. The restaurant settled again and Flo strained his ears to hear the conversation at the other end of the table.

"Jorge, you remember Angie?" Victor was asking.

"How could I forget such a beautiful thing," the guitarist said.

It all came back to Flo when he heard the guitarist's name. Angie had told him all about Jorge when she had returned the previous summer. He was a Spaniard, born on the island. "You'd love Jorge," she'd said, "He's like an older version of you, in a way."

"In what way?" he'd asked.

Angie had shrugged and said, "I'm not sure. It's hard to say exactly. Just a feeling I had."

Jorge spoke with a thick accent. He stared at Angie with a sheepish look of adoration in his eyes that made Flo stand up abruptly and walk around to their side of the table. He grabbed a chair and sat down awkwardly in between Jorge and Victor, a little behind them. Jorge turned his head and then shuffled his chair backwards, "Sorry my friend, Hello," he said.

Angie seemed excited that Flo had joined them. "Jorge, this is Flo, my boyfriend," she said.

Something about the way she said it irritated him. He clenched his fists.

"Thought I'd come see how you were doing over here. I was bored after my fellow Belgian left me," Flo said.

"Flo's also a musician," Victor said proudly.

"He's a writer, or a painter. Isn't he, Angie?" Sam said.

"All things that are more or less the same, no?" Jorge suggested, grinning.

The three old folks laughed as Angie smiled. Flo gritted his teeth, feeling like vomiting.

"You have a beautiful woman here, Flo. I congratulate you," Jorge said.

Sam reached across and grabbed Flo's wrist, pulling him close so that Flo could smell the minty smoke on his breath. "I would have killed you for her thirty years ago," he said menacingly, looking intense and red faced for a few seconds. But then his face rippled with laughter. Menace was gone as if it was never there.

Sam smoked his menthol cigarette and sipped his gin. "This young man doesn't know what to think," he said, raising his brows at Angie. "My good friend Victor here will tell you, Flo, never trust me when I'm smiling."

"Mental Sam – those will be the words on his gravestone!" Victor said, hitting the table with his fist.

"I won't have a gravestone," Sam said, suddenly very sullen. "One day I'll just disappear, poof, and I'll be watching from on high as you all cry over your great loss, one of humanity's most magnificent treasures."

But then the smile came creeping through and soon all of them were laughing again. Flo looked at Angie and shook his head smiling, not by choice but because of social convention. Angie returned his look but her smile was real. She blew him a kiss. It surprised him and he wondered if she'd finally lost the ability to differentiate his truth from his lies, his bullshit from his actuality.

He noticed what she was wearing for the first time; a coral dress stitched with white flowers. It was one of his favourites. She'd worn it a lot in their first summer together. He hadn't paid much attention to her all evening but now she became his sole focus. She was tanned after only one afternoon in sunshine, looking gaudy and unreal like a china doll, but a Hispanic one, because her face was no longer white like it had been when they got off the plane. The whole bay was glowing around her too and for a moment she was at its centre, like the earth in the universe of the past. The rest of it was background noise. Maybe, somewhere along the line, he'd died and this was the epilogue. He heard the crack of the raven's bones and looked down at his hands. They were full of black feathers and he slid back in his chair. The feathers disappeared. Maybe he was dead and the deaths he'd caused since were some kind of metaphor for his own, a figment of his brain that was now in a glass jar somewhere, being looked at by alien creatures he couldn't visualise because he was too drunk to be creative.

The table seemed empty all of a sudden. Sam and Paula were shaking people's hands, taking a few quick selfies, waving, making their early exit on account of Sam's heart condition. Victor looked concerned for his good friend who seemed shaky on his feet, a giant about to go down hard.

"Everyone seems to develop a heart condition here," Victor said.

"They drink too much," Angie said.

Flo stared at his glass of gin and it was full of juniper berries. He thought he'd taken them out and glanced around looking for who could have put them back in. The water's edge seemed laterally closer, but horizontally further, as if the concrete jetty had been slowly rising out of the water and simultaneously shrinking in terms of surface area. A black bird flew overhead and croaked repeatedly but no one else seemed to notice or care. Flo leaned back in his chair and crossed his arms. He kicked off his flip-flops and tied his hair back with one of his wristbands.

Angie smiled at him and said, "You look nice, like Samurai."

Jorge stayed with them a long time, tossing back free gin and tonics courtesy of Victor. Soon it was just the four of them. Victor drank like a machine, totally immune to the rivers of beer and gin, something that Flo realised applied to himself also.



The bay was quiet, still, lit up but nearing empty. The hippies had gone off to smoke their sweet Mary J. Victor was paying the bill when Flo caught sight of a fat, shirtless man stumbling along in the distance, glancing around manically. When he got closer Flo realised it was Lars. He would have struggled on past them, panting and heaving, if Jorge hadn't jumped up to intercept him.

Lars stood breathless with his hands on his knees. "I was with her, Carmen," he said frantically. "I told her to go buy some wine from the store. She never came back!"

Victor spat the ice onto the table, "She probably got sick of your ridiculous wailing. Pipe down."

"Have you seen Carmen? Queen of all that is beauty! My god, a rapist would be blind to miss her!" Lars said, arching his neck towards the sky.

"Lars, not in front of the young lady. You embarrass yourself," Jorge said, motioning towards Angie who chewed her nails pensively.

Flo moved for the first time in a while and untied his hair, letting it fall over his face. "What's he talking about?" he asked.

Victor waved his hand dismissively, "Apparently there's a rapist on the loose. There have been two attacks in the last month. People are scared because this sort of thing never happens here. Bollocks to that I say."

Lars began to cry. "My Angel, my Carmen! Taking it hard against her will!"

"Shut up Lars. You sound like you're the one being fucked," Victor snapped.

Jorge patted Lars on the shoulder. He'd crumpled onto the table face down, still crying. Jorge pointed into the distance. A chubby lady in a long purple dress was strolling along.

"For Christ's sake Lars, look, she's right there," Victor said, also pointing.

Lars sat up wiping his tears. Carmen looked concerned for him.

"What has happened?" she asked.

"You got raped, apparently," Victor said.

"What? He asked me to go buy him some wine. When I got back he was gone," she said.

Lars was buried in her bosoms, still crying.

"I think you need to take him home," Jorge said.

Carmen dragged Lars to his feet and they walked away together. It was quiet again.

Flo stared up at the town above them, lighting a cigarette, thinking about the outcast hiding up there. "What's the deal with this rapist?" He asked, expecting to see a shadow slip down the high stone wall behind them.

"It's a hideous situation. The first attack was over a month ago. The second was last week. Both young girls," Jorge said.

"Well he needn't worry about Carmen then," Victor grunted.

"Don't be an ass, Victor," Angie asked.

"Victor?" He said, raising his brows.

"It's not something to joke about. It's disgusting."

"Calm down Angie, no one died," Victor said.

Jorge strummed his guitar lightly with his thumb. "And that makes it alright?"

"That's not what I meant," Victor said. "Christ, what's wrong with everyone? I was ready to go, but now need another drink, anyone else?"

Victor glanced around for the waitress, and catching her eye, pointed at his drink and grinned, signalling for another.

Angie sighed. "So, what are they doing to try and catch him?"

"Who knows," Jorge said. "Police here are a lot like the lifestyle, very relaxed. But I hope they catch the beast soon."

"It's so horrible, especially in a place like this," Angie said. "Nowhere is safe. I hope when they do catch him, they really make him suffer."

Flo stared at her gaudy form while toking his cigarette, shaking his head. She didn't normally look so radiant, so enchanted, but it wasn't because of what she was saying. Maybe it was simply because she was wearing lotion, or something new on her face. Maybe it was the moonlight. It seemed stronger here, more visceral somehow.

"Don't you think?" Angie said, looking directly at him, hostile all of a sudden.

"What? I didn't say anything," he said.

"I know, and I find that worrying. Don't you have an opinion about this?"

Flo nodded and sighed with a pained expression. "Of course I do. It's awful, and obviously I hope they catch the fucker soon."

He thought about potential reasons why an individual might decide to rape young girls, like childhood abuse, mental illness, or maybe just all the rich foreigners coming and ruining a place that must have been a lot better fifty or a hundred years ago. Or maybe someone came to the island, an outsider like him, and didn't find what they expected.

"Who's to say it's even the same attacker?" Jorge said.

Victor's gin arrived and he sipped it happily. He wasn't even listening to the conversation anymore.

Angie gave him a dirty look and turned more directly towards Jorge, away from Victor, making an effort to swivel her chair as loudly as possible. "You think there might be multiple attackers?"

"It's possible, yes. As far as I'm aware, there is no proof the attacks are linked," Jorge said.

"So why do the police think they are?" Flo asked.

"Because there is no such thing as violence here. There can only be one psychopath on the loose in this tiny grain of paradise." Jorge placed his guitar down and lit a cigarette. "It hurts me, it really does. Sometimes I think maybe I should do something, take things into my own hands. Clean up the filth, you know?"

Angie smiled at him warmly, "If only more people had a good heart like you."

Jorge shrugged. "I just try to do and feel what is right, what is good and true."

"How noble. What would be your alias?" Flo asked.

"What do you mean?"

"You basically just described Batman," Flo said.

"Batman? What is a Batman?"

"Course you know Batman, everyone knows Batman. The superhero. He cleans up Gotham city, because its full of filth, exactly as you said, taking the law into his own hands."

"Oh, I'm sorry, I don't pay any attention to the drivel of popular culture, so banal," Jorge said, taking a long drag on his cigarette.

Flo started to laugh.

"Don't be rude," Angie said.

"Are you fucking kidding me? You believe this shit? Of course he knows who Batman is. Like he's some kind of superior being because he's never heard of Batman."

"Flo!" Angie said, glaring at him harshly, not so beautiful or enchanting all of a sudden.

"It's fine Angie, he's only joking, aren't you, my friend?"

"Yeah. I'm just being hilarious."

Jorge winked at Flo and let out a laugh. Flo turned to the water but couldn't see past the yellow lantern light streaming over the surface. Victor paid the bill and they said goodbye to Jorge. Jorge leaned in and kissed Angie on the cheek. He took her hand and whispered something in her ear. When he pulled away he smiled deeply again, saying, "Words cannot describe your beauty," while holding his hand up beside her face.

Flo turned away in disgust and walked to the water's edge. He was about to sit down between two moorings but spotted a cockroach running along one of the ropes. The cockroach leapt onto dry land and he stamped at it but missed. He tried again and missed again. The cockroach made a sharp turn and leapt straight into the water and he half smiled at what he presumed was victory, but then the cockroach started to swim out into the black of the inlet, disappearing in the lantern light. They're evolving, he thought, remembering how Blaise had once told him that in Mexico cockroaches could fly.

He turned away from the boats to see Jorge waving. "See you later, my friend," he said, winking.

It made no sense, why he kept winking. They weren't 'in on' anything together and Jorge didn't seem gay based on how he was acting with Angie, unless it was the most explicit over-compensation ever attempted. Jorge whistled and his dog came charging out of the dark. It had a book in its jaws and pages were flying all over the place. Jorge pulled the book out of the

dog's mouth and threw it onto the floor, then waved a final time, heading off along the water front.

Angie and Victor stumbled off in the other direction, up towards the main town. Flo picked up the torn-up book. It was a self-help book called *Flow*. Smile about it or lose my fucking mind, he thought.

The apartment they were staying in was one of seven Victor owned on the island. It doubled as an art gallery full of Sam's work. The first few rooms were empty apart from the artwork, white walled with black and white floor-tiles. Tiny spotlights were angled at the paintings, some of which were two metres tall, three dimensional and abstract. 'Mixed-media' was listed as the 'materials used' on the little plaques beneath each painting. Flo passed one that was fiery red and orange with webbing like material in the foreground and triangles in the background, another that was blue and pink and purple, made up of circles and rings like planets in space. He liked a lot of them and decided to choose his favourite. Angie was stumbling around undressing in the bedroom, he guessed, because he couldn't see her, only hear her talking about how great everyone was, how excited she was, but then he stopped listening.

He stared at a small painting that was the smallest in the room, green the only colour on the black and grey background. He thought about what the green might represent and jumped at the sudden feel of Angie's touch, two hands on his waist. He hadn't heard her come up behind him.

She stroked his chest and stomach and whispered, "I want you," into his ear.

"Are you serious?"

"Come on, Flo, don't. It's our first night here. You promised you'd try. We're in a beautiful place. I don't care about anything else. I don't want to think about anything else, any of this shit. Help me forget all this shit."

Her tongue tickled and he winced. She smelled of alcohol. The hair on his arms stood up and he stepped away.

"You're so drunk," he said.

"I am, so take advantage."

"I have the worst headache," he said.

He got straight into bed without saying anything else but couldn't sleep for a while. Angie kept huffing beside him and eventually he turned to face her and put his arms around her shoulders. She was hot and he began to sweat. The air-con rattled loudly and he stared at it, straining his eyes because he thought he could see cockroaches falling through the slats onto the floor. He listened for a crackle or a crunch, but the air-con was too loud so he closed his eyes and tried not to think about greasy insects crawling all over the white sheets. At some point in the night, in a dreary half-awake state he thought he could hear Angie crying softly beside him, but he soon drifted off again.

At dawn Flo left Angie in bed and stepped out into the cobbled street. He smoked a cigarette and thought about the previous night, mainly Angie's offer of sex followed by crying, and felt like it was all a dream. He began to believe it must have been, or at least that some of it was. It was easier to think of it as a dream, regardless of the truth. Eggs were being fried somewhere nearby and he could smell weed drifting out from the apartment across the street. The family next door were in their open-fronted garage, eating, sitting on plastic chairs. It was around 7AM but already the heat was intense as Flo stood there in his tank top and shorts, squinting at the pale blue sky, thankful for the buildings keeping him in the shade.

Victor came around the corner wearing green harem pants, with a fork in one hand and three cans of cat-food in the other. Flo could smell the tuna as he approached.

"You're up early," he said, "Just doing the rounds. Going to buy the paper afterwards. Then I have to make my business calls, just a few. After that we can go to the beach."

Flo nodded and said, "I thought you were retired."

Victor shrugged, "I am. But I like to take a punt or two when the mood strikes me. Sam says I have an addiction." He laughed, holding his stomach. "I don't actually want to stop," he said, "keeps me young, the fury of it."

Flo smiled.

"Have to fund my expensive hobby," he motioned towards the gallery behind Flo. The door was open and some of the paintings were visible from the street.

"Come by for breakfast in half an hour," he said, before marching off to save the strays. Flo imagined him wearing a cape and cowl and laughed to himself. He caught eyes with the old man from next door, sitting in his garage, also laughing, and they laughed together about totally separate things, which made Flo laugh even harder.

Angie woke up shortly afterwards. Flo was doodling in his notebook in one of the gallery rooms. They went over to Victor's main house a few doors down. Victor was waiting in the courtyard beneath the palm tree. *Little Wing* by Jimmy Hendrix was drifting out of the glass doors that led down to the basement, *moonbeams and fairy tales, that's all she ever thinks about...*

The maid busied around, sweeping dead flower buds, watering the living ones. She smiled and went about her work as Victor explained to Flo that her family were back in Ecuador and that she sent them money every month. Meanwhile they waited around on a banana plantation. She'd just found out that her husband had another lover. The youngest of her five children was ten and hadn't seen his mother since he was four.

Victor's phone rang multiple times. He sat there at the garden table in the hot shade, scribbling on receipts and anything else he could find. Flo spotted cannabis plants on a balcony a few buildings away and remembered that Angie had told him that on the island it was legal to have up to two plants for personal use. He asked her if she knew who lived there and she said she didn't, but that the previous owner hung himself. "It had just happened when I was here last summer," she said.

"Why did he kill himself?" Flo asked.

"Nobody knows. His wife moved across the street and works at one of the hotels. She locks the doors and shutters every night when she gets home. Only comes out to work. Victor used to be close to her. And her husband."

"It's sad," Flo said.

"Yeah," Angie said. "I see it all the time at the hospital. People wishing they could just die without their loved ones. They often do."

Flo shook his head, "I mean it's sad she can't go on and live her life. Seems a waste."

Angie looked away and Flo noticed her eyes were wet. She tried to hide them by closing them but her lip was almost quivering. He closed his eyes too.

Victor hung up the phone, "And it's done! A quick twenty grand. Where shall we dine tonight? Hahaha."

They drove to the beach a few hours later and saw more goats. At the beach Flo couldn't relax at all, mainly because wasps circled him constantly, coming in swarms from their nesting point in the cliffs. He didn't understand why this was Victor's favourite beach. The sand was darker than other beaches they'd passed and the water was choppy. The wind and the tide were at odds so the waves slid into one another, causing little folds of sea to fire upwards. A Martello tower perched just above the beach on one of the cliffs. There were five in total on the island, lookout points from the past, now eyeless.

Victor wandered around the beach naked and brown. He seemed to know everyone. He spoke to some of them in Spanish and some in English. He spent an entire hour swimming, floating on his back. From the shore he looked like an old sea turtle bobbing around on the surface. When he finally waded out he kneeled in the sand and drank the water out of his cupped palm.

In the evening they went over to Sam's. Sam was hosting his weekly open house. Like Victor's apartment, Sam's house was a gallery first, home second. It was a three-floored house on the other side of the main square from where Victor lived. Giant marble stairs led upwards on entry. The stairs were lined with paintings marked with dates and prices. Orange stickers were placed beside the ones that were already sold, Victor told Flo. "Not that you could afford any of these," he added, chuckling with a mischievous expression.

At the top of the stairs the room opened up into a minimalistic sitting room with a zebra patterned sofa. Sam immediately left the people he was



speaking to when he spotted Angie. He kissed her cheeks and head before hugging Flo and then Victor.

He led them around the rooms. He talked about each painting, his and Paula's, what they meant and how they were produced. Angie nodded and asked questions. Flo didn't listen to a word. He took in each painting on his own, trying to hum music in his head so he could block out all the crap coming out of everyone's mouths around him, preferring to look at the art without the story. He almost said that to Angie but decided not to.

The three Belgians arrived later on, including Lars, who stood proudly with Carmen, looking a changed man with a white shirt on, buttoned all the way up, his hair slicked back behind his ears. He smiled blushing at Flo as they entered. Victor waved at Lars dismissively.

Flo watched Lars awkwardly talking to people, probably about serious things, like the UN and reports on whatever, holding Carmen's hand tightly. Flo smiled at Lars, 'The-Zany-One', now trying his best to be normal for the sake of the woman by his side. But it was impossible to forget the fully-formed image he'd already created of Lars.

Everyone was drinking Pamada, a mix of Island gin and lemons. Paula, who'd been busy making deals since they arrived, filled up their glasses from a jug and led them into the courtyard. Sam was taking a break, smoking with Ulrich around a table.

"He's just offered me double the marked price for the sculpture," Sam said, grinning at Victor who'd followed them outside.

Victor shook his head. "Fine, if our ten years of friendship mean nothing to you, by all means, go right ahead."

"It's a business decision, Victor. Friendship has nothing to do with it," Ulrich said, crossing his arms.

Victor grunted and marched back inside, followed by a concerned looking Angie. There were several parakeets in cages and they twittered away while Ulrich reluctantly dragged himself to his feet, shuffling inside as well, calling after Paula with an empty glass. His suit was pale and pressed, looking as if it may have cost more than Flo had made in the last five years.

Flo sat opposite Sam, who offered him a menthol cigarette. He declined and rolled his own. He told Sam he liked his art a lot. "I don't know much about art, but there's something about yours," he said.

"What do you mean exactly?" Sam sat forward, smiling and intrigued.

Flo shrugged. "I don't know, really. I can escape with them, sometimes, if I'm drunk enough. It's like they're depicting something else, from farther away, like black holes and space and stuff, maybe what's beyond that, if there is anything..." He paused because he wasn't sure he was making any sense. "Like if you went through a black hole to some other dimension, it might look like your paintings, is what I mean," he added, feeling idiotic and confused and wishing he'd just said he liked the colours.

But Sam nodded, smiling that big horsey smile. "It's interesting that you say that," he said. "Actually, all of my work is based on real life. That big red and orange one in Victor's gallery is a waterfall. The last few I've done are based on the cliffs to the west. I actually collect a lot of the materials from the beaches. It's how I choose to present them that's important."

Flo felt disappointed but smiled and pretended to be interested. Sam explained that he grew up in a small mining town in the north of England. His father and older brothers were all miners. He was always medically weak and had all kinds of health issues growing up. He caught pneumonia when he was about fourteen and spent months in hospital. "I couldn't move and as I drifted in and out of consciousness, I watched the light change," he said. "It slipped through the shutters, moved across the room, transforming everything around me. The room changed completely with the light. How we perceive the world around us is totally controlled by light." He stopped talking and held his hands up in front of the moon and chuckled. "A forest can be terrifying by night, and the most beautiful place on earth on a summer's day. I became obsessed with it. All my paintings are just that, altering the world with light and colour."

Flo nodded. "Without light this Island would be a dark, windy rock. No one would come here," he said.

Sam toked his cigarette and scratched his chin. "I suppose you're right about that."

Flo smiled, "You're a smart man, Sam. I'm glad I met you."

Sam started laughing but then Victor charged out onto the terrace, followed by Angie. He pointed accusingly at Sam. "Do you know what, old man? Fuck you and your sculpture," he said. "That Kraut just told me you promised it to him months ago, and that you were only humouring me."

"Now hang on Victor..." Sam started saying.

Victor cut Sam off, "I'm not hanging on anymore you wispy-haired shit. Has anyone ever told you that you look like a camel? A mangy old camel! I planned my whole gallery around that sculpture. It's an entire studio dedicated to you and your fucking art! And this is what I get? I'll burn it down!"

"Dad, please, you sound like a lunatic."

Victor glared at Angie, "Do I? Do I?" He puffed out air and shook his head, storming off down the stairs.

"I'm so sorry," Angie said, following him.

Flo shrugged and stood up, "I guess we're leaving. Thanks for the art lesson."

Sam smiled, "Victor's very emotional. He'll be fine."

"I'm sure he will," Flo said.

By the time Flo made it downstairs to the front door Victor was in the distance, half way across the dusty square to his house. Angie looked at Flo and shrugged. She said they should walk down to Calle Azul. Flo felt submissive and agreed.

On the way down the path they stopped by the water. There was no one around and she took his hand and hopped onto a low, white wall. She perched there and pulled him in between her legs, kissing him open mouthed. Her lips felt strange to him, not like lips he was kissing, but like something he didn't really want in or on his mouth. She unzipped his shorts and kissing felt good suddenly. Her hair swung around in the wind, rippling like ribbons. He grabbed her head in both hands and ran his thumbs behind her ears. His breathing grew loud and she pulled away, putting an index finger to her lips. The moon was full and her face silhouetted against it, apart from her bright eyes. Her skin looked gaudy like before, but it softened as he stared at her, clouds shielding the moon for an instant. He kissed her hard

again, feeling like he was kissing someone for the first time. It wasn't Angie, somehow, he felt.

Their front teeth bumped lightly and she giggled. He pushed her skirt up her thighs which were warm and moist with sea spray. They kept their lips together to avoid crying out, murmuring into each other's throats. He clutched her shoulders, her waist. He listened to the wind howl. The stars glittered in his eyes. The freedom in that moment was contagious. Together in the open air, all else shrank away. She bit his lip and flicked her head back, gasping. And suddenly it was all over. The feeling lifted off and blew away as fast as it had risen. He wanted to be alone in the dark somewhere. She smiled at him and he smiled back, mechanically. He kissed her because he felt he should. But there was no longer any urge. He didn't even want her to touch him.

"What's wrong?" she asked.

"Nothing. I just don't want anyone to see us," he said.

As they walked between the bars and boats she grabbed hold of his hand. Her palm was moist and sticky. He knelt by a dead crab to get away from her but she crouched beside him and put her hand on the back of his neck. They took the stone stairway back up to the town on the far side of the bay. A three-legged greyhound cowered at the stairway's mid-point, whimpering. Flo ignored it but Angie stopped and stroked its head. When they were alone, looking down on the bay from the town above, she stopped again. He sighed because he knew what it meant.

"How are you finding it here?" she asked.

"It's nice. I like it," he said.

"And what about you? We haven't really had a chance to talk yet, since we got here."

He stared out at the sea, shrugging, "What do you mean?"

"You know exactly what I mean," she said, beginning to look frustrated.

"I'm fine," he said. "I like it here. Sam is cool."

She shook her head. "Flo, we came here for a reason. But you haven't said a word about anything. And I can't read you anymore."

"You shouldn't be trying to read me," he said, trying to sound nonchalant, wondering if repressed rage was one of the feelings she was no longer able to sense in him.

"What other choice do I have? It's not as if you talk," she said, almost shouting it, breathing out slowly to try and calm herself down. "Maybe this was a bad idea. Maybe I should never have let you come."

He began to walk on, "I'm sorry. I just mean that I don't want you to worry about me and how I'm feeling. It's all fine. I'm just bored of talking about it. It's so boring. Let's just go back to the apartment."

He carried on walking and she followed a few paces behind. She kept sighing extra loud to ensure that he'd hear it.

"Stop that," he finally said, spinning to face her.

"What? I'm not doing anything," she said, smiling cunningly almost, the look he hated most of all, as if she'd figured out something wonderful, a great new way to taunt him. "This is bullshit," she finally said. "You promised me you'd try, but you won't even talk to me. You're a fucking asshole, Flo."

He laughed and stepped right up to her, inches from her face. "Here it is," he said. "I think that Victor is the saddest little rich man I've ever met, spoilt beyond all measure, beyond pathetic, especially for someone his age. I think Lars is a fucking animal who wants to fuck everyone and anyone. I think Sam's a dirty old creep who desperately wants to fuck you. And Jorge... Fuck, don't get me started on that dreamy cunt. Aged sixty, thinks he's Jesus and Casanova's all at once, with his fucking guitar and soulful eyes." He spat on the ground when he was done talking and walked on quickly before Angie had a chance to say anything.

She ran to catch up, her sandals slapping along the cobblestones. She pulled at his shoulder, dragging him back to face her.

"What?" He said, in a tone more aggressive than he intended.

She searched his expression and looked sadly down at her feet. "I was hoping you didn't mean any of that. But I can see it in your eyes. You meant every word."

"Yeah, every word. I have a head ache. I need to sleep."

"You look for the bad in everyone, in everything," she said.

"I don't look for it," he said. "I'm just not blind to it like everyone else."

"What is this 'everyone else' bull shit? You talk like there's you, and then everyone else. What makes you so fucking special?"

He sniggered, broke into laughter. She stepped forward and slapped him once on the cheek, again, even harder.

"Fuck you, Flo," she said, so quietly it actually scared him a little.

She marched off ahead with her arms crossed and he watched her with a wry smile because it was funny how well she knew him, how she was right on the money. She could read him better than she thought.

When they got back to the apartment she went into the bedroom and shut the door. He sat on the tiled floor and stretched out. There was a cockroach on the wall. It scrambled down and dropped onto the tiles. The room was hot and the air was stagnant. He sat up and rubbed sweat off his face as the little cockroach headed straight for the bedroom door. He jumped up quickly and took off his flip-flop, flinging it at the greasy little thing. Its feelers were poking around in the air but it didn't sense the flip-flop coming. The smack rang out and the cockroach was dead. He waited for Angie to come out and ask him what the hell was going on but she never did and after a while he fell asleep on the floor tiles.

As soon as there was light coming through the shutters Flo went out. It was 5AM and he hadn't slept much, repeatedly jolting awake throughout the night, thinking he could feel cockroaches on him. The town felt deserted as he walked between the houses, crossing the square. Even the cats were somewhere else. He headed down towards Calle Azul, walking along it quickly, moving up a hill towards the villas on the western side of town. He found a path that led upwards between some rocks, and then along a cliff edge. A jetty hugged the bay below him as he started moving up, passing an old man sat with his legs dangling over the edge, fishing. He had a bucket beside him for his catch but the bucket was empty.

Flo hiked on over the rocks and soon his feet were red with the dirt and he was covered in sweat. He'd walked for fifteen minutes and had seen no one. The sun was glowing hot and the air was as still as it had been since

their arrival, so he knew the marijuana smoke he could smell was coming from somewhere nearby. He watched the sea glowing below him, turning from deep blue to turquoise as the sun gained height. The sparkle on the water bothered him because he knew it was a dirty trick, or decided that was something he would claim to know, since he didn't know much about anything anymore.

He had to start somewhere, so he began by searching the sea's surface for the splinters of light, a phenomenon he'd first noticed on the water on the morning after the accident. Now he watched as one sparkle flittered into the next. He tried to follow the flashes, blazing a trail across the water, but there was no clear path across it. It was a confused mess of little lights that led nowhere and meant nothing, so dazzled, he turned away, rubbing his hands together and closing his eyes.

When he rounded the corner he spotted a white figure lying in the grass at the very edge of the cliff, smoking, glowing. He approached carefully. There was a guitar beside the figure. Something like rage woke up inside him. He consciously forced himself to continue appearing calm and at ease.

Jorge was lying on his back, leaning on one elbow with a pair of Wayfarers on, puffing out rings of smoke. His teeth were shiny white like his clothes. He tipped his panama towards Flo and motioned for him to sit.

"Nothing like a joint in the early sunshine, right, my friend?"

Flo sat with his legs crossed, catching the stink of Jorge's spicy sweat in his throat. The cliff jutted out further where they were sitting, creating a little ledge. There was a small patch of rugged grass there. Flo took the joint from Jorge and smoked, lying back on his hands.

"What brings you up here? And where is that beautiful lady of yours?"

"I couldn't sleep" Flo said.

Jorge nodded, "Ah, that is because you're not in familiar territory. When one is free like I am, one can sleep anywhere, in any condition, regardless of state of mind – that is true freedom."

Flo chuckled, "Actually it's because I slept on floor tiles and my back was hurting."

Jorge smiled and removed his sunglasses. "The floor?"

"There was a cockroach in the bed," Flo said, then laughed.

“Why do you laugh?”

Flo shrugged, “You said ‘true freedom.’ That’s funny.”

“You are young, you don’t understand.”

“I’d like to, lay it on me,” Flo said, raising his brows, smiling.

“I have lived and roamed for many years. I go where my music takes me, and countless women have fallen at my feet.”

“I thought you were born here. And you’re here right now,” Flo said.

“Look around you, it is beautiful. So I always return. Dragoralla is my home. It is my island, and I rule it like a king. Bob Dylan said a man is a success if he gets up in the morning and goes to bed at night, and in between he does what he wants to do. Can you say that about yourself, Florián? Because I certainly feel that I can.”

Flo passed the joint back, held his breath long. He had a half smile on his face, watching the waves crumple and crease. “When I first saw you I admired you, the way you played the guitar,” he said.

“Thank you,” Jorge said.

“But you’re like everyone else. Except that no one would miss you if you disappeared,” Flo added.

Jorge laughed “Oh the ladies would, believe me!”

Flo laughed and said, “You’re deluded.”

Jorge glared at him for a moment before laughing again, kind of maniacally, like Brad Pitt in *Fight Club*. “You are a rash one, boy, I’ll give you that. Lucky for you I’m too stoned to knock some respect into you.”

“Does it get exhausting? Talking shit all the time, romancing every girl you see. It seems like it would be exhausting.”

“I see what this is about. You are jealous of how I spoke to your dear Angie,” Jorge said, winking.

“No, I just think it must be exhausting. Trying to impress everyone. Coming up with lines all the time.”

“I just use the same five lines over and over again. Girls are all the same. Beautiful, but stupid. It’s easy. You could have all the women you wanted. Why be tied to just one?”

“Why be tied to any?”

“Because feminine beauty is our world’s greatest blessing.”



Flo laughed and said, "If you say so."

Jorge stretched out onto his back and breathed out. "So many women. It is not easy as it once was. Age has been a difficult adjustment, but I keep conquering in any way I can. A king's rule goes on. I feel I can tell you, man to man, it is a need deep within. You must know."

The wrinkles creased up around Jorge's lips but then he sighed and relaxed himself. Flo looked over the cliff's edge at the water rocking below. It looked like thousands of sparklers had been lit and tossed over crumpled glass. The fall wouldn't necessarily be enough to kill someone, unless they were to fall face first maybe, or hit a rock just beneath the surface. He tore at the grass. The blades were thick and coarse. He threw a tuft of grass at Jorge's face but the wind blew the grass off the cliff towards the sea. He'd always believed that certain people deserved to die. The man he'd run down in his car may have deserved to die, which may be the reason he wasn't locked up, still 'free.' He wondered if he had it in him, to kill again, this time with deliberation.

After a while Jorge began snoring. Flo stood up and nudged him with his foot. He stopped snoring, coughed, but settled back into sleep. Flo knelt down and inspected Jorge's hands. The tips of his fingers were callused but the rest of his skin looked soft. A small pocket knife had fallen out of his linen trousers onto the grass. The blade was open, the steel clean. *It would be so easy*, he thought. He wanted to do it, he really wanted to, and like a moment before a leap, his stomach heaved but ultimately held him back, heavy, as if lined with cement.

"Bon dia," the voice surprised him. It was the old man he'd seen fishing. He'd crept up the path the same way Flo had. The man had a proud smile on his face. He bobbed from side to side as he stepped towards them, one arm behind his back, the other carrying the bucket.

Flo smiled back at him and said, "Hola."

The man's bucket was full of red and pink star fish. They drooped stiffly over each other, submerged in water. Flo nodded goodbye to the old man and began his descent towards the town. As he walked away he could hear Jorge conversing animatedly with the man before whistling for his dog,

but Flo never turned around, not even when Jorge's dog charged past him with a dead chicken dangling from its jaws.

Angie hadn't been in the gallery when he returned later that afternoon and he'd felt relieved, assuming she was probably with Victor somewhere. He was waking up now, coiled in the sheets, feeling delicate and confused, with his head still underneath the pillow as it had been when he'd first crawled there, consciously attempting to hide from the world and daylight, several hours earlier. He removed his head from beneath the pillow and the room seemed yellow and cold, sometime in the late evening, maybe. Loud music pumped nearby, and then he thought he could hear hooves and possibly also horses screaming, a trilogy of sound that reminded him it must have been the night of the Jaleo, which was the climactic night of the fiesta.

The street outside was crowded with people making their way towards the square. He followed the crowd and the crowd became denser. Soon it was hard to move. Kids were carrying balloons. There were plastic cups on the floor and puddles of foamy beer. Bass was thumping ahead, some kind of techno. He rolled his eyes and said 'Fuck' to himself.

Around the corner, horses lined the centre of the road, leading all the way to the square. Their saddles were colourful and decorated. They had ribbons and coloured thread tied into their tails and manes. The riders were dressed up in tasselled white socks and traditional black hats that reminded him of pirate hats, also wearing stitched jackets to match the ribbons on their horse. Angie had shown him pictures of the Jaleo riders last year and he felt they looked less impressive in real life, but also felt this had nothing to do with the riders themselves and purely related to his own situation which had changed a great deal since he'd seen the photographs.

The evening was grey but the colour and sounds of the town made it seem bright and alive somehow. He walked along the row of horses. One of the cafés had been extended out onto the street with tables and the owner was on top of the bar in a zebra-print thong, shunting his junk back and forth. He was middle-aged and had a huge stomach and an inflatable banana on his head. He was firing a beer-pump into the crowd, soaking the drunk and happy people who were dancing to the aggressive techno. The horses nearby

puffed out air furiously. Flo imagined the grey horse nearest to him losing it and going on a trampling rampage, kicking the hell out of someone, the man on top of the bar maybe.

He looked around and saw Angie dancing in the street, surrounded by people he didn't recognise, shaking her long hair around with her eyes closed, wearing a strapless white top and some flowery harem pants he'd never seen before. Victor was standing behind her talking to a couple of young Spanish looking girls. Two strong, shirtless men enclosed Angie and danced with her. One of them put his hand on her hip so Flo strode over, pushing through beer and sweat-soaked bodies. He pulled his fist back to swing but a hand grabbed his arm from behind. It was Jorge. He passed Flo a beer and winked, "Have a drink instead, my friend."

Angie turned her head, saw Flo, and began instantaneously smiling at him with lazy looking, unfocused eyes. She grabbed him and wrapped her arms around him, kissing him clumsily, missing half his mouth, breathing mostly beer and some garlic into his face. He downed the beer he'd been given and tried to ignore the elbows that kept knocking him and closing him in, pointing to the beer Angie was holding, cupping his hands around his mouth, shouting, "I have some catching up to do!"

She smiled glassily and he knew all fights were forgotten, at least temporarily. The music changed to some Reggaeton and she grabbed his hand and started to dance. He forced a smile and closed his eyes for a moment, imagining himself dancing with her but felt sick thinking about it so stood still. She laughed for some reason and a tall man took off his cowboy hat and put it on her head. She smiled and then shrieked excitedly because a horse had wandered into the crowd and was right beside them. She rubbed its nose, smiling and giggling. He added horses to the list of things Angie still loved in a way that reminded him of why he loved her. The rider looked down at Angie and motioned for a photo to be taken. She passed Flo her phone and he took a few pictures, ignoring the rider's hand gently massaging her bare shoulder.

Jorge came over with more beers. Flo downed one and took another as Angie came dancing back towards him. The music from the bar cut out suddenly and a brass band began to play somewhere out of sight, causing the

crowd to shift and then begin moving towards the square, collectively as one giant entity. Angie held onto Flo's hand. They were swept along the streets into a section of the square that had been packed with a layer of sand. The sand pit was encircled with temporary seating, forming a small arena. The brass band finally came into view on a small stage at the arena's edge. The arena was directly beneath the town hall, a red building which had a clock tower, the moon appearing directly above it, and Flo couldn't help but stare, smiling, also a little drunk now, he realised.

They were surrounded by hippies and tough guys. There were at least six people wearing Pau Gasol jerseys. Angie jumped up and hugged Flo and the cowboy hat fell off her head but she didn't seem to notice or care. She stood on tiptoes and shrieked again as the first horse came riding into the arena. The rider reared the horse up onto its hind legs and it stepped along, rocking its muscular head. People surrounded the horse, holding it up, and the brave ones slapped the horse's heart for good luck. That was the aim of the game, Flo remembered, another fact Angie had shared when returning from her trip the previous year. They'd been doing it for hundreds of years. He said, "Fuck this is stupid," to no one in particular but also to everyone. People surrounded the horse and held it up for the second time. A teenager with an afro slapped its heart and then poured a cup of beer over his own head while screaming at the sky in celebration. The horse walked on only its hind legs for almost ten seconds and everyone cheered. The horse then circled the pit, attempting to rise up again, visibly neighing, although you couldn't hear the sound because of the brass band and the joyously rowdy crowd.

The horses came in two's after that, circling one another, taking it in turns to rear up, held there by the swarming crowd. The brass band played the same eight bars of melody again and again for over an hour. The crowd leapt around like chimpanzees, reminding Flo of a documentary he'd seen, which made him wonder if these islanders, like the chimpanzees, would eventually turn to cannibalism.

Angie turned to him smiling and shouted, "You should do it!" directly in his ear, pointing at a skinny shirtless man slapping a beige horse on the heart.

Flo raised his eyebrows but didn't say anything. A short woman bumped into his side and he clenched his fists.

Angie put a hand on his shoulder, gripped it. "Come on, why not?" she said. "It's supposed to mean good luck," she shrugged, "Maybe we could use some of that."

"You can't be serious," he said.

She looked down at her feet, then peered up at him like she was about to cry.

"I need some air," he said.

He weaved his way through the masses to edges of the sand pit. The rest of the square had been filled with fair-ground rides and beer stalls. There were dodgems and spinners, target ranges and pink teddy-bears to be won. He sat down on a bench beside a burger stand, facing the horses, still riding through the crowd. He could see the brass band but could only hear techno which made everything seem strange and unrealistic, so he turned his attention back towards the crowd, spotting Angie pushing her way through. She stood at the edge of the arena glancing around, searching for him. Even from a distance he could see how beautiful she was, but he was assessing her objectively, non-emotionally, he decided. Her skin looked a deep brown and her hair looked almost golden, streaked with white, as it whipped around in the wind. The sun had turned her even more beautiful, but he refused to fall for that distraction anymore. He went to the nearest bar and ordered himself two beers and downed the first one, sipped the second, wondering where he should go from there.

He wandered out of the square and down a dark alley that smelt salty and fishy. He pissed on a wall. Out of sight he could faintly hear a new band had started playing bland covers of songs that were bad in the first place, songs he recognised vaguely but didn't know the names of.

He went back to the square and saw Ulrich with his young Brazilian wife. Ulrich was speaking to some men he didn't recognise but then he spotted Sam and Paula in the group. Sam was red faced and laughing, taking selfies again. Paula was smiling politely, gazing around. He felt like he needed to speak to Sam but realised he didn't know what he'd say and that Angie and Victor probably weren't far off so he avoided them.

He walked around the edges of the square for the next hour, feeling alert and ready for action, suspicious of everyone, at first in a game-like way, but then it stopped feeling like a game. If he caught eyes with anyone he looked quickly away. He was most careful not to be seen by Angie who he kept an eye out for but never saw. This made him wonder if maybe she was spying on him, watching him, which would have been ironic and funny, but also terrifying, and he felt like he was in a spotlight all of a sudden, back in his movie, watched but unaware.

A small boy bumped into his legs, catching him off guard so he grabbed the kid's shoulder to stop him from falling. The boy looked just like Samuel and for a second he thought that it was, which made him stagger and feel a pain deep in his back, the pain he'd now decided was clearly a symptom synonymous with anything strange and uncanny occurring. The boy began speaking in Spanish and started to cry. Three other kids took the crying boy by the arms and led him away, glancing back at Flo as if he was a potential danger. He forced a laugh for himself and not others, which was funny, so he laughed for real. Three girls looked at him like he was crazy because he was laughing on his own. All around him the party swelled and people were elated and dancing and drunk, but all of them were with at least one other person, and also sort of 'all together'. He began to feel like spaces were opening up and widening in between him and all these others, pockets forming, stretching, isolating him in their midst. It was time for him to leave the festivities behind.

On his way off the square he noticed Jorge's glowing form almost through a crowd of bodies, like a star through a cloud of dark matter, he thought. Jorge wasn't alone. A young girl was draped on his shoulder. She was so drunk she could barely walk. Jorge was laughing and whispering into her ear. He began to lead her through the crowd, glancing over his shoulder, checking no one had seen him, before quickening his steps. Flo followed them into a quiet street and around the corner. He ducked behind a sports car and watched as Jorge leaned the girl up against the wall. She could barely support her own head and he grabbed her neck aggressively, pushing his face into hers, ignoring her hands flailing at him feebly.

The alley was lit only by starlight. The band could be heard in the distance and a strong smell of horse shit filled the air. Flo held himself back and remained crouched in the car's shadow, feeling ready to charge. Jorge began to sing softly, taking off his hat and holding it to his chest. The girl shook her head and smiled awkwardly. She pushed herself away from the wall and tried to escape but Jorge grabbed her arm and pulled her back. He swung her into the bricks and pressed his mouth against hers again. Her scream was stifled. He pulled his mouth away and replaced it with his hand, laughing, putting his other index fingers to his lips and shaking his head gently.

Flo stepped out of the car's shadow and walked towards them. Jorge heard the footsteps and released the girl's mouth.

He looked up, "My young friend, what are you doing here?"

The girl screamed and started to stumble away. Jorge didn't follow. He put his hands on his hips and slumped down, shaking his head. "Ah, now look. You let her get away."

Flo threw his arm back and slammed his fist into Jorge's jaw. Jorge hit the ground hard. He stayed on his hands and knees for a moment, feeling his lip for blood.

"You fucking piece of shit," he said, "I'm going to fucking kill you."

He tried to get up but he was too drunk, fell straight onto his hands again. Flo stepped forward and swung his foot into Jorge's stomach. Jorge rolled onto his back and coughed, looking up at the night sky. Flo looked up too. The stars gleamed, so many of them. He smiled and swung his foot again, and again.

"You're a sick fuck," Jorge groaned after several kicks.

"*I'm* a sick fuck?" Flo said, laughing.

He knelt over Jorge and stared into his eyes. He was still glowing and Flo felt chaotic and lost but mostly more depressed than ever, his lack of understanding seeming unreasonable to him. Jorge swung at him but missed completely. Flo rammed his fist into Jorge's head, shutting those dreamy eyes at last. He told himself he was protecting the innocent girls, or that it was because of jealousy. Or something else, everything else. He wasn't sure. His feelings were complex and at the same time he had no feelings towards his

actions at all. Punching meat, beating flesh, that was all. It felt liberating, like getting a dark secret off his chest. So he kept swinging.

He hit Jorge three more times before he stood up and stared at the blood on his fists. He had a sudden urge to find Angie and show her what he'd done but he fought it. All of that was over. A group of girls led by two security guards appeared from around the corner, screaming, pointing. He took a final look at Jorge, his face a mess of bloody slashes, all orange, but skin still ablaze, like a blessed saint, Jesus crucified. Jorge moaned quietly and whimpered as Flo saluted him, before running off into the night.

In the apartment he lay on the floor drifting out of consciousness, then back again. The bass throbbed all night. He couldn't escape it. After a while he noticed the room starting to brighten up. The bass had stopped. Grey streaks cut through the shutters and Angie hadn't returned. It was the morning and he was still alone.

For an hour he didn't move. He heard seagulls and muffled voices from time to time but nothing else. It was peaceful. When he sat up he noticed his hands were sticky. They stuck to the cold tiles as he pushed himself off them. The blood was all over his knuckles. He smelt it – earth, iron and a sweetness – while thinking about all the people who'd escaped to the island but couldn't escape themselves.

He patrolled the four rooms of the gallery and stood by each painting, trying to decide which one he would burn. The paintings all blurred into one after a while, becoming an unbreakable wash of beautiful things. He didn't really want to destroy any of them, but more overwhelmingly felt like he absolutely should. In the end he stood before one of the big ones. It towered over him, an expanse of red. He clicked his lighter on and lifted it to the corner. The painting didn't burst into flames as he'd hoped so he used a deodorant can to create a flamethrower and watched the paint blacken. He shook his head laughing when he finished because burning the painting revealed nothing and didn't bring him any satisfaction. It only made him realise how indistinct he and his actions were.

He washed the blood off his hands and watched the red water slither down the drain. He took his passport, his notebook, a few pens and the money he had. Before leaving he wrote a note for Angie:



*Don't look for me. Don't wait for me. I'm gone.*

He walked to the ferry in the sun and watched the red and white ship chug in slowly. The sun was shimmering hard and he faced it but closed his eyes. He bought his ticket and boarded the ship, heading straight for the deck. He passed lots of people but didn't see any of them. He climbed the stairs to the front. Facing the sun again, he closed his eyes, letting it burn away at his lids. Everything was red as the horn sounded and the ship finally took him away.

On the mainland he caught a taxi to the train station. He rode a train to the airport and bought a ticket to Amsterdam. He hoped that Blaise or at least traces of Blaise would still be there, since he strongly felt it was time someone knew what was going on in his head, confession and the soul, all that stuff.

# **– Part Three –**

## ***Glare***

“And imagine him being dragged  
forcibly away from there  
up the rough, steep slope, without  
being released until he’s been pulled  
out into the sunlight. Wouldn’t this treatment  
cause him pain  
and distress?”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Plato, *The Republic*, IX: *The Supremacy of Good* (translated by Robin Waterfield), (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993) p.242



At work the following day Flo is very quiet. István continuously apologises for not making it to Volt, saying something about his ‘dragon-bitch wife.’ Flo tells him it’s fine and that the band were good. István says his nephew is the bassist but that doesn’t mean anything to Flo who can’t remember any of the band members and doesn’t think he’d care even if he did. He’s only had a few hours sleep and is still mildly drunk, buzzing inside for the majority of the day, up until around 4PM when he begins to feel ‘zombified’ and extremely sick. In every spare moment he pictures the girl’s golden eyes looking at him. He plays out scenarios in his head, where they meet again and speak for hours, sometimes walking along the Danube, sometimes getting on a plane, but he never knows where to. He imagines them in the woods hand in hand, and the girl morphs into Angie, at which point he realises that many of the scenarios he’s imagining are actually memories he has, in which he’s replaced Angie with this girl. The memories seem more exciting this way, maybe because they have become fictitious as opposed to historical. But this girl is real and also feels like fiction which he decides is the main reason he can’t let her go. The feeling this creates within him is strange in a wonderful kind of way, one he remembers vaguely from times when he was between the ages of fifteen and eighteen, and often fell hard for girls in moments that had seemed important within themselves. In this new context, looking back years later, these moments were just normal moments amplified and glamorised by his imagination and tendency to over-think, and to dream of things that he knows don’t exist in reality, only in film sometimes, the kind of films he no longer enjoys but did back then, like *Good Will Hunting* or *Candy*.

At 6PM his eyelids are tingling with pins and pricks and he needs to lie down. He asks István if he can go home early. István says no. Flo shrugs and leaves anyway. On the walk home he thinks about how even if he still believed in social media he wouldn’t be able to use it to find the girl because everything related to social media begins with knowing someone’s name, which is the kind of irony that usually he would find funny, but doesn’t in this instance. The feelings in his biological body are irrational and unexplainable, dominating his mind for the first time since some other time, so far away that he can’t even remember it exactly. He thinks about chemistry again, the

properties of gold, considering that maybe it is actually magnetic, but not in terms of magnets and metal but in terms of hearts and flesh, souls even, whether they exist or not.

He can't sleep in spite of his exhaustion. He walks up and down the streets, thinking that maybe he will see her again. As he steps along searching the faces he begins to feel hopeful and certain that he will. It all felt so powerful. It was destiny. He laughs at destiny but shrugs because now he feels that maybe it is a 'thing.' He goes to Heroes Square and then across the Chain Bridge, ignoring the water beneath, heading up to the castle district. There is a man dressed in medieval attire with an eagle. Flo pays the man and holds the eagle for a few minutes. He wants to remove its leather hood so it can fly away but he doesn't. He waits for night to fall and takes a tram back to the Pest side of the Lágymanyos Bridge, but Volt is closed. He asks a man collecting beer cups if he's seen a golden-eyed girl. The man shrugs and says, "I don't think I've ever seen a golden-eyed person."

He goes home and calls István to ask for the week off, claiming he has a chest infection. István seems hesitant and suspicious but accepts it, telling Flo he has weak lungs. Flo says yes, he does.

He writes things down about love and whether it's real and physical or psychological. He comes to the conclusion that he won't be sure until he sees the golden-eyed girl again, which he plans to do the following Sunday when he returns to Volt. He feels that if she's there exactly a week after they first met, it will prove that love is real and he'll ask her to go to Brazil with him and then maybe to Japan. He's never been that far to the east and wants to see blossoming trees and temples, which he remembers seeing in photographs. He imagines himself taking a cherry blossom from a tree and putting it behind the girl's ear. He realises this is also a memory of Angie, except they hadn't been in Japan and the cherry blossom had been a daisy.

He reads a lot, finishing *The Plague* and not really understanding the end, mainly because he's been reading the words without taking them in. He wants to read *War and Peace* but gives up after fifty pages because there are too many characters and he can't follow or care about any of them. After several days of not leaving the apartment Gréti tells him she's concerned because he doesn't seem ill. He assures her that he is, and she tries to make

him go see her doctor. He refuses, telling her it's a mild chest infection and he gets them all the time.

In a desperate moment one evening in the middle of the week he asks to borrow Bea from across the hall's laptop. He searches Twitter and then Instagram for variations of 'GoldenEyeGirl', finding many similar names but none with a location set as Hungary that he can recognise as her. After hours of online searching he feels like a traitor and also sick of himself. He starts to read *Crime and Punishment* almost continuously from that point, for the second time, finding a greater level of enjoyment and understanding than when he'd previously read it, feeling he can identify with it more now. He almost laughs when realising this, early one morning with intense sunlight streaming in through the open window onto his face, making him sweat, because he'd forgotten about the blood on his hands, which makes him feel powerful, victorious and unearthly in his half-conscious, dreary state. This has become his permanent way of being, he realises, after six days with barely any sleep and too much time in his own head. He thinks about the words, 'Love was reduced to an abstraction' and wonders whether the golden-eyed girl is also an abstraction, a creature he's created in a haze of alcohol and music, an apparition of that younger, free, subconscious part of himself that has become increasingly dominant since his arrival in Budapest, but seems to be waning again.

On Sunday he wakes up smiling, very aware that it is Sunday. He's almost there at his moment of reckoning, but he knows today will be the longest day yet. He draws pictures of cartoon birds and a plant with eyes growing out of a planet with eyes in his notebook. He doesn't eat all day and starts sipping on a beer before noon. He's mildly drunk by the early afternoon which he didn't intend to be. Gréti asks him if he's alright because he's been very quiet and a little erratic all day. She asks to see his drawings but he won't let her because he thinks she might think they're strange. She cooks him some chicken legs in breadcrumbs and he eats only to sober up. While cleaning the dishes Gréti drops a pan and makes a huge racket. She apologises, informing him she lost her balance because of some new pills she's been taking, which are great but make her sporadically dizzy. He tells her it's fine, he doesn't care, and then goes out.

When he arrives at Volt it's still light and the gates are only just opening up. The band haven't started yet and he smokes and drinks, trying to pace himself, but is unable to do mainly to nerves but partially because of boredom. The band starts at around 9PM and he wishes they hadn't. The songs are overly melodic and irritating, mainly because the Hungarian singer is trying to sing in English and it sounds awful. He's anxious and sweaty. The air feels soupy and thick. He scratches his back and drinks more beers, having totally given up on staying sober. He paces through the crowd searching for the girl but she isn't anywhere around. He sees some faces he recognises, probably from last week, but no one speaks to him or acknowledges him. He's standing at the back when firm fingers grip his shoulder from behind. Golden pools flash in his head as he turns to face the person who's grabbed him, but evaporate into the stars when he comes face to face with dead, brown eyes, creased cheeks and a waxy looking chest.

István smiles at him. "I thought it was you. Feeling better, what?"

"I want to buy some drugs," Flo says.

"Great plan," István says. "So do I. But let's drink a Hubi first. This band are straight out of the frog's ass."

Flo follows him to one of the bars. István claps his hands and rubs his palms together. He winks at Flo, gesturing to the bar maid in tight denim shorts. Flo forces a smile as István orders some Hubertus shots. The bar maid pours them from a bottle shaped like a stag's head.

"How much to get you with the next round?" István says.

She smiles awkwardly and gives them their shots, quickly moving to the other side of the bar to serve a big group of teens. István turns to Flo and holds his hands out at his sides, pulling a bemused expression, shaking his head at the fleeing barmaid.

"Everyone's so fucking scared these days," he says.

Flo doesn't say anything. He resumes his search of the crowd.

"Who can you see? Someone you like? A little love, what?"

Flo raises his brows and shakes his head. "Just watching people."

"Love is fiction. Like being alone," István says.

"Being alone is fiction?"

"So is everything else." He slaps Flo on the shoulder and passes him the Hubertus.

Flo drinks it. It burns his throat but doesn't taste of much. "What about your love for beer and the feel of grass, is that fiction too?" he asks.

István clicks his tongue and cocks his head to the side, knowingly. "Everything is. All we do is decide which fiction to believe."

"What about family love?"

István runs his pinkie around the edge of his shot glass, smiling, describing how human babies are wiped of instinct and filled with morals and truths. "All we learn becomes right and real but what if we weren't taught those things?" He pauses, raises his brows. "As I said. It's just fiction like all the rest."

"You're crazy."

"Male lions often eat their sons, so that they don't grow up and fight them for control of the pride. Survival, what? But we humans forgot that a long fucking time ago," he says. "I guess it must have been some time before we descended from the trees. That's when fiction began. All this shit." István sips his shot slowly and slurps loudly. "But at least we have a choice. We choose which fiction we live and that is our freedom."

"But you wake up early every day and climb a tree in a harness and cut branches," Flo says. "It seems like you aren't really that free."

"You're right," István says. He points towards the sky and adds, "But in this fiction, it's the most freedom you're going to get."

"Maybe."

"What?"

"Nothing. Let's get some more shots. And we still need to buy drugs," Flo says, nodding, glancing around.

"What kind?"

Flo stares at István and shrugs. He starts to grin, pulling Fred's recipe from his pocket. István takes it and laughs loudly when he sees what it is. People start looking at them. Flo takes the list back.

"That's some crazy shit. Does your sweet grandmother know you're into this shit?" István slams his hand on the bar and roars with laughter.



More people are looking. Flo turns and walks towards the exit. István calls after him but his voice is swallowed up, replaced by an ominous hum. It's all Flo can hear. The need to find the girl is more or less gone. He labels her a potent distraction, like the sun, discerning that maybe the gold in her eyes was a warning and a clue. Flickering images of her face turn fuzzy, a musical giggle deepens and becomes a part of the surrounding hum. There was that look she gave him, down at the ground and then up at his face, along with those words, "You're right, you do know me." But he can't remember anything else. A fucking golden-eyed ghost, he thinks, a beautiful fucking ghost to lead me astray.

He walks towards the tram station and doesn't look for anyone to help him with the items on his list. That all seems stupid too. Everything is stupid. He takes a tram back to Mester street. He goes up the stairs to Gréti's apartment, not wanting to be enclosed in the lift, thinking that love for his family is real as anything at this point, maybe the only thing left that is.

When he reaches the door to Gréti's apartment he's surprised to find that it's slightly ajar. He pushes it open slowly, standing there, listening to the slow creak echoing through the stairwell. Classical music plays faintly in the other room, something soft and sad that he doesn't recognise. Other than that there's silence in the apartment. As he steps cautiously inside and moves through to the living room, he notices the empty space on the little cabinet, where the clock should be. He searches for it with his eyes but the clock is nowhere.

The door to Gréti's bedroom is open and the music is coming from in there. He steps around the corner and sees her, all tucked up in a purple duvet with a hair-net on, her eyes closed, the curtains open only a fraction, allowing a beam of yellow light to slide in and cut through the room. He smiles at the peace of her moment, but as he stares at her, even in the faint light, he notices she's especially pale. He watches her closely, straining his eyes in the dark, fairly certain that she isn't breathing.

He imagines himself rushing over and attempting to resuscitate her by pumping on her chest until her ribs crack. In reality he remains completely still. When he finally moves it's only because his knees give in, causing him to drop onto his shins. He's shaking. He puts his forehead against the doorframe

for a moment, before tensing his muscles and pushing himself up, using the floor and then the doorframe for support. He moves over to her and leans down by her bedside, checking her pulse. She's cold and her heart is still. He calls an ambulance and while he waits he gazes at her shrivelled face, feeling certain she's smiling a little. The hair net reminds him of a time he'd forgotten until that moment, standing there. He was about six and was staying with her because his parents had gone away. He'd woken because he'd had a nightmare in which his parents died in a car crash. Gréti had been snoring when he ran into her room in the night and she was startled to see him there. He told her about his dream and she made him a nettle tea with real nettle leaves and then she read to him until he fell asleep. He vaguely remembered her saying something like, "It's Ok. Everyone has nightmares," which made him feel brave, because he wasn't a coward but was just like everyone else.

The paramedics arrive. She's been dead for several hours and they don't attempt to revive her. They can't fit the stretcher in the lift and have to carry it down the stairs. Flo follows the painful descent, watching his grandmother roll and jerk as the stretcher knocks and bounces against the walls. He thanks the paramedics and watches as the ambulance pulls away down Mester street, disappearing into the night. Some officials speak to him about funeral arrangements but he tells them he'll need time, that he'll call them in a few days, knowing that he won't.

The presence of death becomes a sickness of loss in his throat as he remembers his parents' funeral in the form of a black and white montage with no sound. A man with a wig who wouldn't stop crying even though no one seemed to know who he was, another man with white eyebrows who limped around with a cane, a black dress dragged through dewy grass, lots of old faces, teary, younger faces, people leaning in and kissing his cheeks, close-ups of various flowers and suit collars, the sun through leaves of varying shades, fountain spray. He remembers being in a taxi, staring out the windows all puffy eyed, feeling tiny and insignificant to all those eyes they passed, looking at him through his window. Ten years old, life as it was erased completely in one cataclysmic instant. He wonders if maybe that was the end of his life too, suddenly feeling like he'd never recovered and that all

his actions and deeds since had been completely futile and without any form of meaning at all. He'd been a ghost for years, but maybe now he could stop being a ghost and reanimate into something living again, using his past as paint almost, or clay, to put real meat, bones and skin back onto his self that had become hollow and aimless.

His parents' funeral service took place on the outskirts of Budapest, possibly towards the airport, he isn't sure. His family had been living in England for almost four years but the funeral was to be held back in their home city. A former colleague read a speech documenting all János Hal's professional successes. An old friend read similar things about Julia Hal. It hadn't meant anything to Flo. He didn't care what they did at work or what they were like when they were young. He just missed them as his parents and felt completely alone, even more so when hearing all these other things about them that he'd never known, things that made them feel almost alien to him, like different people that weren't really his parents and had lived these other lives instead.

He remembers the matching urns carried out by two men in black robes who looked sinister like executioners, especially in the hot sunlight. He allows the image of them walking to play in black and white, high-contrast in his head, while their faces, which he can't recall anyway, slowly fade away, becoming white and waxy and void of any features that would cause them to appear human. The priest kept chanting the words, 'We ask you, please listen to us,' which seemed desperate and added to the sinister mood of the occasion. The urns were placed on a podium in the centre of a grass lawn, surrounded by a fountain's water jets. The ashes were fired out through openings in the sides of the urns, while simultaneously the fountain sprayed up into the air, catching the ashes with its streams, dusting the trees and flower beds. This was his parents' choice, to be released back into nature. At the time it made no sense to Flo, the way they were dispersed like that, no more significant than sand or earth. He understands it now and thinks it's beautiful, feeling like he'd choose something similar for his own funeral if he ever had one, something he hopes is unlikely, based on recent revelations about the world that continue to feel dreamlike, but not necessarily false. Tears form in his eyes. He can feel them and does nothing to stop them,

letting them fall silently. He remembers how at his parents' funeral he didn't want anyone to see him cry. He shuffled away as the organ rang out and the fountain continued to scatter his mother and father. Behind some rose bushes, where no one could see him, he cried for several minutes. Tamás and Dávid were busy accepting condolences from lines of people offering all the help in the world to the three orphaned Hals, help that upon reflection was mainly just words and didn't ever materialise. It was his grandmother, Gréti, who found him hidden near white birch trees behind rows of thorny rose bushes. His mother's mother wrapped her frail arms around him and kissed his head while he sobbed into her coat. He remembers lavender, a smell which ever since has always reminded him of death.

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Flo stood on the underground platform beneath Schiphol, unable to focus his eyes, thinking the air felt different and not just because it was really cold, tired from a flight spent scribbling in his notebook, unable to sleep, feeling that he'd been trapped in a vortex that was internal but also seemed external, as if the plane had been caught in a tornado but then miraculously landed anyway. He took the train to Amsterdam's central station after withdrawing his final 200 euros. He entered the streets, immediately wishing he'd brought a jacket or at least shoes with him because he was still in his shorts and flip-flops, conceding there just hadn't been time to think this far ahead.

He'd been to Amsterdam twice before, with Blaise on both occasions, and on their second visit they'd never found the coffee shop in which they'd spent most of their first. Most of their second visit, therefore, took place in a different coffee shop that was underground, with walls made of plastered coral and fish tanks. A TV had played underwater images of jellyfish and whale sharks. Blaise hated the jellyfish and declared the thought of touching them made him grit his teeth, like the sound of nails on a black board. This was the only detailed memory of a specific moment that Flo seemed to have of his previous trips which he found amusing and ridiculous but also frustrating, because it was in no way helpful to him. It meant there was

nowhere to aim towards so he would drift purposelessly, which as a notion he discovered to be relaxing. Though he knew that in all existing senses finding Blaise would be near impossible, due to mathematics of chance and other things he chose to pretend had ceased to exist, he was thinking that because of recent occurrences, there was actually a very high likelihood that he would eventually locate his friend. He could then tell Blaise everything, something that seemed absolutely necessary, and a concept that made him feel apprehensive but not in a negative way, since he felt he was headed in the right 'direction' in terms of other things he felt he may now be sensing. He entered the canalled part of the city, noticing the stillness of the tree reflections on the water. He found himself thinking about Angie which irritated him. So he pushed her out of his mind, focusing on all the other things, like his new surroundings, internally narrating his actions in the third person as a way of trying to manipulate his emotions and regain control, thinking things like, 'The man felt adventurous and was ready for anything.'

He passed through the red-light district which was deserted early on a Sunday morning. The curtains in the little windows were mostly shut, the mysteries they held locked away till later on. There were more windows around the corner, and the girl standing behind the glass of one of them caused Flo to almost stop suddenly. It seemed unnatural which he remembered he'd definitely thought before. He felt he could even hear his own voice saying, "It's just so unnatural," to Blaise probably. It seemed like an obvious thing to think or say, but maybe wasn't actually so obvious. Her skin was orange and she was dressed in a pink and green bikini, and as he walked on casually she pressed her hands up against the glass, pouting when she caught his stare. They were alone on the street and her cold blue eyes were alone in looking at him. He felt vulnerable and exposed, so he smiled at her and nodded nervously. A chill down his back made him quickly walk away. After cutting down an alley with more red lanterns and closed curtains, he emerged along an adjacent canal. He crossed a bridge lined with parked bikes and had to hug the edges to avoid the many moving bikes rolling past at speeds he felt were too high. The sun had started to shine and he was warmer but still cold as he finally slipped into a coffee shop called *The Green Scene* where he could hide for a while and gain a new perspective.

He bought two hash cakes, an espresso and two grams of Fantasia, taking a seat in the back room where he was alone. Damian Marley played quietly. The room was dimly lit with blue bulbs streaming through the chiselled slats in white lanterns. The walls were covered in blue paintings that reminded him of the sea. He found himself longing for it while eating the hash cakes quickly and smoking until the room span whenever he closed his eyes. A Japanese man and his son sat down at the adjacent table. They packed their pipe and smoked it while talking fast with big smiles on their faces, handling their present situation like seasoned pros, lighting up a joint while the pipe still burned and rolling another straight after. They laughed and nodded along to *Rebelution*, which had taken over from Damian Marley. They talked animatedly. Flo wished he could understand them, feeling a need to know what conversation could possibly have given them so much pleasure. The father had silvered hair and his son had a shaved head and goatee, dressed in baggy jeans and black T-shirt. He referred to them as father and son because he felt they could only have been father and son, due to age, fashion and the way they conducted themselves. He hoped that they weren't, in a sense, that they were just two people from seemingly different worlds who'd found a common ground. He smiled as he thought about them, and then about how there was no sense of the outside in *The Green Scene*, deciding that while there was any chance that the outside world would cease to exist, he'd keep on smoking.

He imagined being there with his own father, a man who'd loved expensive cars and spent his Sundays out on the driveway with a cloth and can of polish. Flo remembered an afternoon he'd been out in the woods behind their house. There'd been some shady activity in there. Some older kids built a fire and sat around it smoking while he watched from between the trees. It had rained the night before and the ground was muddy. He was face down to avoid being seen and when the teens started throwing burning branches around. He panicked and ran. The driveway was wet when he came charging around the corner. He slipped on the pebbles and fell into the Jag, covering the driver's door in mud. He was only eight and began to cry when he saw the blood on his knee. His father came outside. He remembered feeling so scared because of the mess he'd made, but János Hal didn't even

give the car a second look. He picked up his son and took him inside to clean the wound.

“I’m sorry,” Flo had said, sobbing into his shoulder.

János just stroked his head and said, “It’s just a car, Florián.”

The hash cakes inside him digested and a shroud fell over him, as he wondered what had been more important to his father than a car. The house, family, adventure, maybe. He wondered if his parents left because they grew tired of the sameness of each day, beckoned by the world like Blaise. ‘It was just a car.’ There was more in those words than he’d ever known. Maybe János Hal had been different, ‘more like me’, he thought. He’d never had a chance to get to know his father in an adult sense so he held onto that thought and painted a picture around it.

He felt ready to explore again. The hash cakes were really taking effect and he felt like he could see himself taking each step before moving his feet forwards, almost as if he was copying himself, but another version of himself that existed elsewhere, a ‘real’ version that he was mimicking. He was hungry and bought a bagel from an underground bakery which felt medieval because of its rickety, wooden interior and the owner wearing a checked shirt and apron like a blacksmith. He walked back towards the red-light district in the afternoon. More of the curtains had opened and the prostitutes swayed their hips in lacy underwear, beckoning, whilst tourists marched and took pictures of the burlesque show entrances. A Hispanic man offered him cocaine, saying “Psst Coca,” as he slunk into an alleyway. Another Hispanic man also offered him cocaine in the same way, but held up a little bag of white stuff and smiled. Flo politely declined on both occasions.

The crowd was growing and he felt like it was swarming him. He felt out of sync, a step behind the world rolling out in front of his feet. He was sweating and his flip-flops were repeatedly stepped on. He needed to escape the crowds so he cut down the next alley and men’s faces stared out of little windows, slightly feminine on account of lipstick and pink eye-shadow, but a man will always look like a man, he thought, as soft black eyes stared back at his, adding to his increasing sense of unease.

He jogged for a few minutes and hit a square. He dodged some trams and bikes. He didn't know where he was going at first but then he spotted the tourist signposts. The Van Gogh museum was straight ahead.

He passed hundreds of tall spindly, brightly coloured buildings, all so quaint and individual when compared to other places he'd seen, but all the same after a while, he began to think, each canal an artist's impression of the last. The museum was far away and when he got there he was tired. It was late so there was no line for tickets. Inside everything was clean and white. The paintings on the wall looked out of place. He didn't like many of them, feeling the colours were mostly washed out, destroyed by time maybe.

He searched the crowd for Blaise, although Blaise had never had an interest in art and only the postcard Flo had received on the night of the accident tied him to the museum. In the gift shop he found the same postcard, along with many others, and he wondered why Blaise had chosen that particular self-portrait. He thought about how on the night he'd received it he'd been watching Samuel on the news and by the night's end he was a killer, continuing to search the postcards, the famous skull, sunflowers, feeling absolutely certain there had to be a link, a hidden meaning he couldn't see, but when he realised he'd been comparing postcards for half an hour he knew it was time to move on.

He smoked a joint on a quiet street next to the museum and stared at a brick house covered in purple wisteria. He thought if he had to live somewhere he'd choose to live there. When he stood up and gazed at the house a final time he thought he could see someone in the top window, four storeys up. Girlish laughter caused him to look away and when he looked up at the window again there was no one there. The silhouette of a man had disappeared.

He was tired and needed to lie down so he entered a park. Lying on the grass, he drifted in the heat but couldn't fall asleep. While lying with his eyes closed he lost feeling in his limbs, but then became aware of a hand grasping his forearm. Warm fingers squeezed hard. He didn't open his eyes, but he could feel four individual bands of heat burning his skin, then realised it was probably his other hand. He concentrated on his own body and found that his other arm was tucked behind his head. He clamped his eyes shut,



unable to look, the mystery hand continuing to squeeze. His fingers went numb and suddenly the grip on his arm was gone. He sat up, dazed by the sudden light in his eyes. There was nobody near him, though he was surrounded by picnicking tourists and students in the close distance. A skinny man with long hair was doing kick ups with a deflated football. The air seemed a little cooler and he clutched his upper arms as a heron landed in the stream. Some girls with back-packs were taking pictures of it. He stared at his arm expecting to see burns on his skin but there was nothing there.

After smoking another joint he lay down again, determined to sleep, on his stomach this time. His limbs went numb again and felt loose and free. He felt space underneath himself in the darkness, beneath the grass and hard earth. He felt as if he could have pushed down into the black, passing through the physical lines he knew were there. But his body had disappeared, weightless, only his mind remained floating in the dark. And somewhere in that deep, empty black, he sensed shining forms, but as he tunnelled down there they evaded him.

He woke up in the early evening. Some time had passed but he had no sense of how much and didn't try to work it out. Back in the city he went from hostel to hostel, stopping for a joint at each coffee shop he passed. Nobody knew of anyone named Blaise. In one of the coffee shops he sat upstairs beneath a giant mural of a cat. A Russian man on the table beside him was struggling with consciousness.

"Mister," he muttered, "Tobacco?"

Flo nodded and passed the man his pouch. The man struggled rolling a joint for a while and eventually Flo left him to it, leaving his tobacco because he could always buy more.

Along the next canal he spotted a coffee shop where he could sit outside and smoke in the quiet evening air, watching the city, the people. It was like a French café and he thought about Sartre. Smoking while watching the world reminded him of being on his own roof and he felt himself missing home again, missing the sea out beyond the rooftops, causing him to chain-smoke until he'd forgotten about it.

It was dark when he walked back into the centre of the city. A tram slid past and the wasted Russian who'd taken his tobacco was leaning against

the window, passed out. Music was playing loudly, seemingly everywhere, converging to make a noise of various musical genres. In the moment it felt as though this may be a snapshot of what music could become a few hundred or even thousand years in the future, when any form of originality will require extreme and chaotic methods. The city was in the midst of transformation by light and for around five paces Flo felt an urge to drink and grow wild as well, a notion that although not enticing in any way, seemed the correct thing to do.

He followed a man who looked like Dostoevsky into a quiet looking bar and ordered a beer. The bar had a local vibe with beers on tap he'd never heard of and the regulars sitting at a bigger square table near the bar, drinking coffee and doing crosswords or reading newspapers, including the man who looked like Dostoevsky. Flo sat at a small round table, one of only two remaining tables and sipped his beer. A man with unnaturally black eyes and a casual, European looking grey suit entered with a tall brunette in a dress. The man stared at Flo as he moved towards the bar, appearing to glow faintly. Flo blinked deliberately and refocused his vision in order to ensure that he wasn't looking at Jorge. He was relieved to find that this man was maybe ten years younger, with gelled black hair spiking upwards, the gel reflecting the light above the entrance which had made his hair temporarily appear white. He looked a lot like Antonin Artaud and a little like Joaquin Phoenix, smiling and then winking at Flo, who began to examine the other faces in the bar because it seemed possible that maybe everyone in there looked like someone else. He was distracted from this new game when he caught eyes with the man who looked like Artaud again, who was now leaning on the bar but facing away from it, in his direction. Somehow his gaze had been pulled towards the man's eyes, which now seemed even darker than they had when he'd entered. The moment their eyes locked again also seemed to coincide with a rush of heat sliding up his back, and the burns he'd felt on his wrists in the park flaring up again, while also causing him to think of that day in front of the mirror, which he felt was an odd trail of thought, but maybe not completely random somehow.

He sipped his beer and casually looked around, attempting to hide the unease he was feeling. The man who looked like Artaud bought drinks for

himself and the girl he was with and then for everyone at Dostoevsky's table, jovially handing the glasses out himself, slapping backs and asking what seemed to be personal questions, though it all happened in Dutch. The man seemed to know everyone at the table and also the man at the bar who was presumably the owner. He called over to Flo, speaking English for the first time, in what seemed to be a French accent, asking him what he wanted to drink. Flo said he was fine but the man ordered him a whisky anyway. Flo drank it and then another one, as the man who looked like Artaud kept buying everyone drinks until some of Dostoevsky's table, including Dostoevsky, left at various times.

Hours later, a period that Flo had spent drinking alone but feeling in no way absent from the events encircling him, the man who looked like Artaud finally came over and sat at his table. The man asked him why he was wearing flip flops and he told the man that he was somewhere warm and didn't like it so left without packing. The man laughed and said he liked the 'display of spontaneity', because it was a 'rare thing.' He pointed at the girl he was with who was sitting glassily on a bar stool, struggling with consciousness, and said that she was an actress but forgot how to live.

"I'm not sure I know what you mean," Flo said.

The man laughed and slapped the table, spilling both of their drinks. He called the girl over and introduced himself as Fred and her as Rita. Flo asked if she'd been in anything he might know. She said her name wasn't Rita and left but without showing any sign of anger, just complete vacantness.

Fred said, "Thank God, or the stars, or whatever it is you're supposed to thank," and ordered two more whiskies for them.

"There're are more important things I need to be focussing on anyway," he said.

"I think my problem is that I lack focus," Flo said.

Fred smiled slyly and looked Flo up and down saying, "Yes, that much is clear."

He asked Flo what he was and Flo said he wasn't sure. Fred said he looked like someone who's seen things and Flo said he hadn't seen that much.

"I don't mean things as in physical places or objects, I mean *really* seen things," Fred said, emphasising the word 'really' in a way that sounded slightly sinister but may have just been sarcasm.

Flo shrugged and Fred began to explain his own life and also his recent ideas about life in general, in a way that reminded Flo of *The Fall*, first discussing his life as a theatre director in Paris, which he abandoned because they wouldn't allow him to 'push the boundaries enough', labelling him as 'sick and perverted', a notion which presently made him laugh and down the rest of his whisky.

"How are you now going to push the boundaries?" Flo asked.

"I've found ways," Fred said, "But an artist doesn't talk about his art."

Flo lowered his brows. Fred explained that he lived alone with his father until he was fourteen and how his father would regularly beat him, but then one night he finally fought back and almost killed his father, leaving home and never going back.

"That's so dramatic," Flo said. "I didn't expect you to share something so dramatic and personal with me."

Fred shrugged and his expression changed from one that was mostly confident to one that seemed forlorn. "My point is that in spite of all that, look at me now," he said.

Flo asked where Fred's mother had been and Fred said he didn't know, but that now she was dead. They both sipped their drinks and sat quietly for a moment, after which Flo felt like he was absently watching himself speak the words, "My parents are also dead," looking down at the table and grabbing the wooden edge with both hands, thinking it felt thicker and heavier than it needed to be. "I rarely say it out loud" he said, finally feeling able to look up again.

Fred was nodding and leaned across the table, grabbing hold of Flo's shoulder and squeezing it a little, a gesture that caught him off guard but felt calming and reassuring.

Flo said he needed a piss but went outside instead and lit a cigarette. He wanted to go back inside and talk to Fred some more, but also felt that he needed to move on. He walked around the corner and spotted the icy eyed hooker he'd seen in the morning. He stopped walking and wondered if she'd

been there all day. Their eyes met like before and she pressed her skin against the window, pouting and waving at him seductively. He stopped to stare at her and she beckoned him again, so mechanically that it terrified him. This is who she'd become, transformed by the many eyes in the street. She'd never escape, he thought, approaching her this time. She was still looking at him and he fought the urge to look away. He was about to turn around, feeling she'd won the game of chicken, when she smiled and mouthed the words, "*Gyere be.*" They were unmistakable. He watched her repeat the same movements with her lips, asking him to 'come in' in his mother tongue. It was haunting and he felt as if something cold had stepped into him, keeping him from moving away.

She smiled again and he noticed she was wearing red lipstick, which was new, and along with the dimly lit street, made her look pale and scrawny. Her knees were still red from her session with the last customer, he assumed, visualising the hordes of men who'd ploughed her while she'd remained on all fours looking bored, fantasising about other, better things, he hoped. Her entire ordeal sickened him, but feeling suddenly mechanical and lacking any direct control of his actions, he guiltily stepped forwards as she opened up the door. He reached into his pocket and handed her some money to which she uninterestedly said, "Another fifty," in English.

He passed the rest of the money over and asked her if she was Hungarian, "*Magyar vagy?*" She counted the notes, barely looking up, vacant. A white cat prowled along the water's edge, to their left, sticking out of the dark in a jarring way. Three men walked by laughing and the cat darted off. Flo searched for the cat in the dark. It had disappeared behind some bikes. He waited for it to re-emerge but it didn't.

The hooker asked him if he was coming in which made him jolt. She said, "*Megy az idő,*" informing him he was on the clock and that time was passing by, tapping an imaginary watch on her wrist. Flo said he was sorry, uncertain about what he was apologising for, stuffing his hands into his pockets and bowing his head. Inside she closed the curtain behind him as he surveyed the room. He struggled to decide what was sadder, the pathetic little camper bed they were supposed to have sex on, or the fact that as he stared at it, she was already climbing onto it and spreading her legs. He felt

ashamed for both of them and stood there expressionlessly, watching her, thinking that maybe he was here because he'd just wanted to talk to her, but now he didn't even want to talk to her. She turned around and bent over and he saw the spots on her ass, blending in under the red-tinted lighting, but not quite enough to be invisible. He wondered why she got them and felt grim and also that the present situation was beneath him.

He apologised to her and left quickly. The image of her lips mouthing the words, '*Gyere be,*' played in his mind in black and white and slow motion, like an echo of a more distant past that was continuously calling out to him again, it seemed, suddenly important somehow. He thought of his grandmother Gréti. It had been almost fifteen years since he'd heard any spoken Hungarian at all, a realisation that made him consciously slow down because he felt like he was walking downwards, maybe along a stairwell, even though he was certain, with the enduringly present part of his brain, that he was in fact standing completely still.

While staring at his feet he breathed deeply, in and then out, managing to finally lift his head and peer around because he felt a presence nearby. He thought it would be the white cat but it was Fred, standing right beside him, leaning against a wall with one foot up against the stone, smoking a cigarette, his eyes even glossier in the moonlight beside the canal, dark and shimmery like both the water and the sky.

"Couldn't do the deed?" He said, smiling.

Flo paused for a few moments, still feeling dazed, unable to discern whether he should be truthful or pretend that yes, he had been too scared, or shy. Eventually he nodded and attempted to smile, feeling he'd failed, and chose not to say anything.

Fred sighed and looked empathetic for an instant but then grinned and said, "I know it's hard. You're braver than most, I can tell you that. We do it alone, you and I."

Flo laughed weakly because Fred's words sounded theatrical and Fred was a theatre director. He'd wanted to express genuine amusement but could only manage the weak laugh, because he was somehow feeling more alone than he'd ever felt at any other point in his life, eclipsing the prior such moments of loneliness, he thought, while cycling through those other lonely

moments, many of which were recent, but like most other things of late, felt far away regardless. Angie's face was far away and blurry too.

Fred walked up to him and put a hand on one of his shoulders. "We loners need to find each other once in a while. Like a couple of wolves on an icy plain."

Flo nodded and said, "I'm sorry. I had a strange moment."

"It's alright. A lot of things are occurring right now," Fred said calmly. "You feel it. Perception changing, am I right?"

"Nostalgia seems like it's a physical thing right now," he said. "I can actually feel it physically affecting me."

"Worlds collide," Fred said.

"I don't know what that means," Flo said.

Fred dropped his cigarette butt and rubbed his hands together.

"Look," he said, "I haven't been entirely honest with you."

"You're not really a theatre director?"

"Yes, I am," he said. "Everything I've said is true. But there are other things."

"Like what?" Flo said.

Fred lit another cigarette, raising his brows and smiling excitedly.

"Where do I begin?"

"It seems like your stalling," Flo said.

Fred laughed and said, "I am. You will see why momentarily, because this isn't easy." He paused, sighed, and gripped Flo's shoulder with one hand, squeezing hard but not in a threatening way, in a caring way. "Just listen," he said. "And don't be afraid."

Flo looked away from Fred, realising he was now feeling afraid, deciding he should keep his fear a secret and act as confident as possible.

"I did not stumble upon you by chance," Fred said.

Flo looked suspiciously around and then smiled because he felt unable to do anything else. He was considering excuses for a quick exit as Fred grabbed both sides of his face and looked into his eyes, whispering the words, "I know what happened to you. I know about the accident."

A moment of intense silence seemed to rush out of the sky and buildings around them, warping somehow inside of Flo, burrowing in there,

forcing out all else just as it had on night in question. Light and objects faded out along with sound, as he saw the body hit the tarmac with so much force the rest of the world came with it, shaking and squeezing his car like a tin can. He glanced up at Fred who was nodding again, grinning. He finally released Flo's head and took a small step backwards. Flo's feet still wouldn't move and he stared down at them, noticing gum stuck to the ground beside his flip-flop. A flyer for a furniture sale blew across the ground and a pigeon ate a chip off a bench. Mayonnaise stuck to the bird's tail feathers and Flo glanced fearfully at Fred again, who casually relit his cigarette, smiling, glowing more overtly now, just like Jorge, with more intensity the longer he stared.

Flo clenched his fists in an attempt to appear aggressive and dangerous and said, "Stay the fuck away from me," sounding frail and wary instead. A hen party danced past wearing bunny ears and tails and he thought about how everywhere was the same while walking briskly away. After ten minutes of walking he finally dared to look behind, breathing a sigh of relief because he hadn't been followed. He smoked a joint overlooking the water, assuring himself he was right to run away because Fred was clearly insane and potentially hazardous, a feeling that had been present in his surrounding air and now seemed absent. He looked around doubtfully, laughing suddenly, assuring himself that Fred's reference to 'the accident' had been nothing more than a lucky guess by a maniac who probably spent his life walking around trying to scare people with loose truths, a lot like a fortune teller or psychic, hoping to get lucky, and in this case had gotten lucky. It was the glowing that bothered him. He scratched at his arms, grinding his teeth in uncertainty, before faking a laugh solely for himself because he was all alone, or at least believed he was, a new uncertainty that made him stuff his hands into his pockets and slink away. He entered a hostel he remembered passing earlier. It was still early for Amsterdam and the ten-bed dorm was empty. He lay down in his bunk and span around for a while, cartwheeling into his pillow as Fred's black eyes continued to haunt him through dreamland until the morning.



When Flo opened his eyes he smelled coffee. He turned his head and Fred was sitting on the next bed holding two McDonald's cups, grinning. Flo sat up quickly and shunted backwards, away from the bed's edge, glancing around the room, looking for signs of a dream world, finding none. But at least they weren't alone. There were sleeping people in some of the beds. A girl had just returned from the shower and was combing her hair on the far side of the dorm.

"You probably need this," Fred said, holding out one of the coffees. He was dressed exactly as he had been, either again or possibly still, though he looked not at all creased or dishevelled, but neat and pressed like he had been the previous night.

"No thanks," Flo said monotonously, trying to appear calm, relieved by the lack of a glow surrounding Fred, the only immediately discernible difference in his appearance, hoping that maybe it was the hash cakes, that maybe they were more than hash cakes because his brain felt overly stuffy and sore.

"It's surprisingly good," Fred said, sipping his cup.

"Did you follow me?" Flo asked.

"Let's just say somehow I knew where to find you," he said.

"You're sounding kind of insane."

"Yes, I know. But maybe you should trust me," Fred said, looking serious all of a sudden, wiping the smile from his face and lowering his chin so that his eyes tilted towards Flo and seemed deeper and maybe even sinister.

Flo shrugged. "You're acting like Joaquin Phoenix when he pretended to lose his mind and become a rapper so he could make a documentary, and you also look kind of like him."

"Everyone looks like someone else," Fred said, smiling. "And they simply didn't understand Joaquin Phoenix. So they labelled him a maniac."

"So you're saying I don't understand you and that's the only reason I'm calling you insane?"

Fred sniggered and said, "I'm just a man in a suit who's brought you coffee."

Flo relaxed a little. He was beginning to feel that Fred wasn't a threat. He was just one of those weirdos that come around from time to time, something he'd experienced on multiple occasions, learning from those occasions that it was usually best to let them run their course, like a bad sitcom, because there may be some moments of hilarity worth witnessing even if the rest of the experience is a fucking disaster. So he took the coffee.

"Insane is just a word. Everyone is fucking insane," Fred said, winking.

"I know," Flo said, sniffing the cup.

Fred laughed and closed his eyes for a moment, before looking into the distance thoughtfully. "No you don't. But you will," he said.

Flo raised an eyebrow, "What?"

Fred smiled as if he'd won the argument.

Flo didn't even attempt to make sense of it. "Did you put some LSD or something in here?" He asked, holding up the coffee. "Or half a bottle of cough syrup? Am I going to wake up with the Russian mafia harvesting my organs?"

Fred laughed and took Flo's coffee cup back. He drank a big gulp, smacked his lips, and let out a reverberating, "Mmmmmmmmmmm," which made the girl combing her hair look over and giggle. Flo forced a laugh and took the coffee, sipped it, finding no funky taste in there, nothing bitter or abnormally sweet. It was just black coffee, rich and warming. He drank it quickly, deciding that he'd resume his search for Blaise later. For now he just needed a joint and some fresh air. His head was pounding.

He went outside and found a quiet, sunny spot around the corner from the hostel, along a canal. He sat cross legged on the brick path and rolled. Fred stood beside him watching the water, sipping his coffee, quiet for a change. Flo began to smoke a joint and Fred lit a cigarette.

"So, you like the ganja," Fred said.

Flo nodded and offered him some.

He declined with pursed lips and a gentle shake of the head and smoking hand. "There's only one way to get truly fucked up in my mind," he said. "It's my special blend. Now that will really let you see things, if you're brave enough to try."

Flo stared at him blankly, shrugged and continued to smoke his joint.

"I promise you, it is like nothing you've ever smoked, and leads to something beyond your wildest dreams," Fred added casually.

Flo looked up at him again, squinting in the sun. Fred was a silhouette, the expression on his face invisible.

"And how would you know what my wildest dreams are?" Flo asked. "Is this something to do with why you aren't doing theatre anymore? Did you want to drug your audience or something? Heighten the mood, the art, the colour, or whatever it is you do?"

Fred flicked his cigarette into the canal and grinned. "You are a smart man, Florián, but no. This has nothing to do with art or perception, only experiencing truth."

There was something cold in Fred's dark eyes as he turned his head, in the way his lips curled, no longer a silhouette. His voice sounded distant and Flo tried to conceal his shudder by clasping his hands together and rubbing them, because Fred appeared to be steadily glowing again. Flo squinted, trying his best to force the echoing sound of Fred's voice speaking the words 'I know about the accident' out of his mind, hoping the glow he was witnessing was just the glare from the sun blurring his vision. He forced a smile in return, sitting back down and dangling his legs over the water. He re-lit his joint, thinking that maybe he would try to lose Fred as soon as possible, the terrible sitcom having run its course.

"When you've finished smoking that joint you should come with me. I'll show you the truth," Fred whispered.

Flo carried on staring at the water, watching the slim bars of light stretch out ahead of him, growing smaller with distance. "The 'truth', is that what you call your 'special blend'?" He asked, still watching the ripples on the canal, the reflection of a red and blue boat that looked lurid coming off the water.

Fred hesitated for what felt like an age. A couple walked by with linked arms, marching in a mocking way. Their laughter filled the silence and Fred spoke at last. "Sure, yes. That is what I call my special blend," he said.

Flo stood up and stretched his arms above his head, then touched his toes, stretching his back. "Let's go," he said, turning to Fred. "Lead the way, sir."

Fred nodded slowly, grinning. "I knew you couldn't pass up my magic. My apartment is not far."

Flo thought, 'Love a bit of magic', as they walked on side by side in the sunshine, Flo half a step behind, with his eyes on Fred the entire time. Neither of them spoke. Flo began sizing him up, assessing his strength and build. If it all lead to violence, which though unlikely remained a possibility, he wanted to be sure he'd have the upper hand. Fred wasn't as tall as Flo but looked solid and moved sharply. He walked with a straight posture and an ease to his steps, efficient and swagger free. But I can take him, was Flo's conclusion, as they moved out into a sunny square. They passed a caricaturist drawing a little girl who was posing confidently. Flo stopped to watch and gauge the artist's skill, not because he cared, but to build up the illusion of calm and of 'rolling with it.' Fred called his name loudly to regain his attention, beckoning him to follow. Flo raised both thumbs in Fred's direction but watched the caricaturist for a few more moments as a means of gaining some control over the present situation, or lessening the dominance Fred had gained with his implied and unexplainable knowledge of things. Though they hadn't directly referred to Fred's omniscience since the previous night, it appeared to be the element controlling every instance, occurrence and interaction that had taken place between them since. Director of more than just theatre, maybe. Insane, definitely, but so were many other things. Flo thought about the list he'd made, the shady middle ground in the centre, how he needed to rewrite the list and that now the central 'shady' column would be thousands of pages long, but that insane would maybe go in the 'false' column. It no longer seemed to have any value as a word or form of expressing anything.

The streets were packed and they had to work hard to maintain their pace. They approached the Van Gogh museum and for a few minutes Flo thought they were headed there. He wondered if everything was about to come together, but they passed the museum. He felt disappointed and a little frustrated with himself for thinking so optimistically, as they entered a quiet, cobbled street around the corner. It took him a second to realise that he'd been there before.

"Here we are," Fred said, motioning towards a tall brick building, the purple Wisteria tumbling down from the windows. Flo slowed and almost staggered for a moment as he remembered the silhouette in the top window the previous day. He glanced at Fred who smiled at him knowingly, nodding.

"Shall we go inside, Florián? The top apartment is mine," he said.

The stairs were carpeted but the wood beneath them creaked as he followed Fred upwards. He gripped the banister and felt extreme heat in his neck. His mouth was completely dry and he found himself desperate for water, because he wasn't ready to die yet. I need water to live, he kept thinking.

At the top of the stairs Fred unlocked the door and they stepped into the apartment. It was a single room, almost completely bare. There was a small bathroom by the front door. A bed-roll was neatly folded away in the corner and there was a small wooden desk against the opposite wall. Outside the sun was bright, illuminating the chalky room through the open window in an alcove. Flo looked down at the street at the spot where he'd smoked the previous day.

He turned towards Fred and elevated his shoulders to seem bigger. "You saw me out there, didn't you?" he said.

Fred went over to the desk, leaned over it and laughed softly. "I've been watching you since you stepped off the train," he said.

"You've been following me?"

"I prefer to think of it as wandering in your shadow."

Flo glanced around and began to toy with the hair behind his ears, feeling he was way out of his depth, unable to answer himself as to why he was even there.

Fred smiled and held out his hand. "Relax Florián. I am your ally here, in all senses," he said. "You and I are of the same breed, don't forget. We have the same, rootless soul."

Fred pulled a suitcase from under the desk and tossed Flo some clothes; a blue shirt and some trousers like his, shiny, grey linen. "Change into this. You look a little ridiculous, no? And you're starting to stink."

He handed Flo a pair of boots and went over to the desk. He opened the only drawer and took out a small wooden box with a lock, a glass mortar

and pestle and a set of small glass scales. Flo watched transfixed as Fred pulled a tiny silver key from his pocket and unlocked the box. It was divided into small square sections. At one end a larger compartment held a clear glass pipe. The small compartments each contained different coloured plants, buds and powders. Flo only recognised some of them, like salvia, shrooms and DMT, possibly. Fred began weighing each item in turn, placing very precise amounts into the glass mortar. He was meticulous, perfectly following a recipe in his mind. When he'd added each substance, he began grinding them all together, in a careful circular motion, using only his thumb and finger to grip the glass. He worked like an artist with a paint brush. It was a craft. It required care and patience, attention to detail. When the mixture had turned into a fine powder he tipped it into the glass pipe and took a seat in the alcove by the open window.

Flo was still standing with arms folded, the clothes and boots in a neat pile in his grasp. He tried to relax as he approached Fred, placing his new outfit down and leaning back against the wall in the alcove. He eyed the mixture in the pipe, trying to guess what else was in there and what he was about to smoke, maybe ayahuasca, peyote, things he knew of but had never experienced. He felt very aware of the many deaths that occurred just like this. But this was where everything led, and he thought, 'Who am I to fight it?' turning to Fred and saying, with mock confidence, "I guess it's time to get fucked up."

Fred held up the pipe proudly, "I like to think of these as little saplings from beyond, left here for the wise."

Flo smiled and then laughed accidentally, hearing his own nervous laughter out loud before he'd even had a chance to consider whether laughing would be Ok. He stopped himself and glanced around.

Fred was smiling back at him. "It's fine, you can laugh," he said softly, breathing in the smell of his mixture. "Soon you will see how serious I am. And that 'getting fucked up' is incorrect terminology. We are about to see things much more clearly."

Flo said he needed some water first and closed his eyes as he drank from the bathroom tap. The cool water washed away pasty, sticky things and he convinced himself that now he had water he couldn't die. When he

returned to the living room he stepped confidently over to the window and dropped heavily down next to Fred.

“Show me the ‘truth’,” he said, slapping his knees with both hands.

Fred handed the pipe over and pulled a box of matches from his pocket. “It contains the right amount of everything, to take you up, but also to bring you down,” he said, while remaining expressionless. “It will help you to see things differently, so that dimensions normally masked and hidden are finally clear. But it is not a solution, only an aid.”

“An aid to what?”

Fred smiled, “Release.”

Flo laughed quietly and said, “Yeah, that sounds good.” He held his hands above his head, his wrists pressed together as if they were handcuffed, waving them gently, pulling a desperate facial expression. “These chains are getting too tight,” he whispered in a theatrically disturbing voice.

Fred laughed and sparked up a match, shielding it from the breeze with his hand. He passed the pipe to Flo and held the flame up to it. The green mixture fizzed and popped as it burnt. Flo toked long and deep until his throat burned.

Fred smiled and said, “Soon you will see what I mean.”

In what felt like only seconds later, but could easily have been longer, Flo’s heart was thrashing violently, and in a way that was unlike similar sensations he’d previously experienced, feeling more actual and external as opposed mental and dreamlike. He visualised that his heart now had a face and fists of its own and was hitting his ribcage and lungs while screaming, making a pained expression, tears of blood dripping down onto his other organs below. The other organs, his stomach mainly, also seemed to begin thrashing as if infected by whatever was coursing through his veins, each organ becoming hyper sensitive and hyper aware, feeling like separate individual entities inside of him, each with their own internal consciousness and system of control. His own eyes were locked wide and open, the sun disappearing and the room darkening, before everything surrounding him, including the walls and furniture, the ceiling and floor, seemed to stretch out like elastic at first, pulled further and further away as if on a puppeteer’s strings, like a backdrop that was no longer needed. When things could

stretch no further, their newly, rubbery-seeming texture maximised, they pinged away and out of sight, leaving them in a complete and empty darkness, only the two of them present, Fred sitting clear and vivid beside him, sealed in a white glow emanating from his veins, or somewhere else beneath his skin, as if his blood itself was silver and bright, like mercury on fire. Flo's organs went silent and everything seemed to be engulfed in a deep and hollow black, as if they were in empty space, before Einstein figured things out and space was vacant, no particles or waves to move or react, vibrate or collide. And in that black Fred stood up and twirled, grinning, his hair growing wilder and sharper, the individual strands looking like silver etchings, slowly but deliberately creeping upwards, curling left and right. Fred's smile stretched wider and kept on growing horizontally outwards, until it seemed like his lips and cheeks were about to split open at the sides, causing Flo to reach out towards Fred's cheek and mumble something that he himself couldn't hear or make any sense of.

"Hold on, Florián," Fred said. "Don't let yourself rise too far. Like all first times it can be harrowing. This is powerful shit."

Fred's voice echoed inside Flo's head, louder and clearer than anything he'd ever heard, as if the words were coated in a resonance he'd never experienced, church bells being the thing closest to resembling what he was hearing, if church bells had been able to speak. Only Fred's words were lost on him. A rushing sound that began faintly, somewhere inside Flo's own head, grew louder, stars seeming to appear, their rush, maybe, except the ground was now turning to liquid and distracting him from Fred, from the rushing of starlight, the ground becoming a river of ink. Still images of the canals overflowing and seeping into the room flashed in front of his eyes in sequence, then out of sequence, the images themselves spinning and contorting like paper photographs, folding and bending on their own, causing his line of sight to also bend, invisible curves appearing in the dark. He began to fall from the alcove seat and fell for a long time. He tried to scream as he hit the ground but could only hear clinking now, in the distance somewhere. He braced himself and held his breath but before he became immersed in the liquid flow down there, a force dragged him up with the greatest of ease. It was Fred pulling him to his feet and just like that, they were in the room



again. The water was gone. Fred sat him back down and handed him a joint, sounding more or less normal now, only slightly otherworldly. "This will counter the others, calm you down," he said.

Flo smoked the joint and started to feel sick and heavy eyed, but the enigmatic visions were gone. He noticed it was now dark outside and wondered how many hours had passed.

"What did you see?" Fred asked.

He leaned back and closed his eyes. "I don't know," he said. "Water. You. Everything was dark."

"Is that all?"

Flo opened his eyes. Fred was staring at him intently, waiting, with a curious and excited expression.

"I don't know," he said, "Were you expecting something specific?"

Fred looked down at the floor, thoughtful for a moment. "Then you are not ready," he said.

"Ready for what?"

Fred laughed slowly and leaned back. "You still haven't asked me how I know about the accident."

Flo sat up straighter, feeling colder, seeing that sinister shade in Fred's expression again.

"I've said many things, Florián, but only one thing that truly upset you. And you haven't mentioned it at all."

"I don't know," Flo said. "All you've said is 'accident'. I feel like that could mean anything."

Fred smiled and nodded. "Alright," he said. "I know around one month ago you killed a man by running him down with your car."

Flo felt himself shrinking into the alcove. He managed to stand up and stagger away from Fred but lost his balance and fell onto his hands and knees. He stayed there for a moment and saw himself cowering by the radiator back home, teary eyed in the dawn. He imagined that Fred had been there on that night, sitting in the clock tower watching him, sniggering.

"Who are you?" He asked, rising up onto his feet slowly, taking a few steps back. He readied his fists to fight. He'd use his height, stand tall and attack from above, swinging fast and hard.

“Tell me something Florián, how did you feel afterwards? How did it feel to know you’d killed someone?”

Flo shook his head. Maybe he’d try an uppercut. “How can you know that?”

“Is it really important ‘how’ I know?” Fred asked, raising his hands. “I am a man. We have never met before. Yet here I am telling you things about yourself that I could not possibly have learned by any known means. Should you not just accept this as something extraordinary and listen to what I have to say?”

Flo shook his head dismissively. “You could have been there. You could have seen it happen and followed me ever since.”

Fred chuckled and stood up. “Do you really believe that’s possible?”

“I could have told you about it, just now even. I blacked out. I barely remember a damn thing.”

“Trust me when I tell you that you were in no condition to converse.”

Flo felt the fierce expression slowly leaving his face, after which his cheeks quickly turned cold and tingly. He felt the kind of butterflies he imagined he’d have if he was about to climb out of a trench into no man’s land and charge towards a wall of bullets and grenades. “What the fuck?” He whispered, his hands and knees shaking as he backed away some more.

“You can approach this in two ways, Florián. You can run away from it, like most of humanity would, because it is something incomprehensible. Or you can fucking *roll with it*.”

Flo stood still staring into those black, knowing eyes, becoming aware of the moon shining through the window, lighting everything silver. It transformed into the clock tower’s face and he felt that rage again, rage that began as he sped away in the rain, but faded so quickly with the night’s end, the arrival of the sun. He thought about how blood didn’t have to be blood when nothing made sense anymore.

“At first I felt sick to the core and I wanted to tear my skin off,” he said, pausing for a moment. “But by morning I just felt numb.”

He realised this was the first time he’d acknowledged said events out loud to another person. The words just dropped out. A Methodist Christian once came to his door and told him confession strengthened the soul, though

he didn't feel stronger, only bare and unprotected, cold. But that feeling that made him think of a barren icy mountain, solitary and jutting out in an ugly way, melted as Fred nodded approvingly, smiling in a way that reminded him of his father.

"And what about since then?" He asked. "How do you feel about it now?"

"Confused," Flo said. "And depressed. I don't know what to think."

"What is confusing about it?"

He sighed and said, "I killed someone. But it's like it doesn't matter."

Fred closed his eyes for a second. "That is because it doesn't," he said, smiling slightly.

"How can it not matter? It's someone's life."

"It doesn't matter because nothing *here* matters."

Flo shook his head. "What does that even mean?"

"Come with me. We have to go and see someone. I promise that by the end of tonight things will be at least a little clearer."

Fred mixed some more of his blend and packed it away with his pipe and matches, beckoning towards the door with a revolving hand.

"Shall we?" he said, grinning.

Flo felt unable to move and stood frozen, awkwardly, fighting separate feelings of intense fear and a natural urge to laugh the situation off and leave. Fred pulled a couple of whisky bottles from inside the bedroll and tossed one to Flo. "For the inhibitions, yes?" He said.

Flo shrugged and began to drink without really knowing why he was drinking. The bottle looked expensive but the whisky burned a lot.

"You will see what I mean," Fred said, "It will make things much easier later on."

A breeze lifted the half-closed curtains, cooling them both. The city stretched out beyond the window, the canals creating a watery web they were about to enter, spindly and mysterious, or something along those lines. It could be his mission, a new kind of game. Like playing 'make believe' when he was boy. He thought about Turtle Hood and drank his whisky fast. He put on the clothes he'd been given and felt alien in them, which at first made him feel uncomfortable. After a few more mouthfuls of whisky, he realised he

could treat his new clothes as a disguise. He imagined himself creeping through the streets of Amsterdam, grinning like Fred and nodding at people, buying them whisky and laughing.

Fred sat beside him and patted his shoulder. "Just remember what I said, free and easy, open and accepting."

He couldn't remember Fred saying those things before but he nodded and said he would, drinking a huge mouthful. Fred laughed and slapped his back, which made him spit out the whisky and Fred laughed even harder.

Outside he followed Fred closely, passing people in huge groups, some people on their own, most of them stumbling drunks and a lot of them seeming aggressive and shouting things. His own head was spinning and he took one step at a time, making slow progress as Fred drifted in front of him. He'd turn to Flo every once in a while, and grin while rubbing his palms together. Flo attempted to respond with similar gestures of feeling excited and ready, like raising his eyebrows or smiling, but after a while he was finding it difficult to focus on anything that physically existed on 'earth', distracted by a sharp, silver glimmer, increasingly vivid on the water and in the sky, between the leaves on the trees, while all else seemed hazy, the people and buildings appearing dark and shadowy. The slender glowing fibres moved gently, as if the trees, the water and the sky were made of cheap cloth, shifting in unseen wind, and underneath that cloth, light was trying to tear through, not dissimilarly to what he'd experienced on the morning after the accident.

"What can you see, Florián?" Fred asked.

Flo shrugged, trying to ignore the flashing in the background, what he'd come to think of as an 'otherworldly exuberance' that he now realised was most potent on Fred's face, making his eyes look even more disconnected, as if they were their own entity, like shiny little beetles about to crawl out of the sockets and take flight. He smiled weakly and said, "Nothing. Let's keep going."

"We're almost there. Try and get a grip my friend," Fred said, tapping his shoulder reassuringly.

They entered a small building on a narrow road, a road that grew narrower as it wound between the walls either side. Fred pushed through a heavy wooden door and Flo followed him down a tunnel of stone steps.

At the bottom they passed through another door and stood beneath a stone archway. Fred winked and squeezed Flo's shoulder, declaring he was going to introduce him to a friend. Dripping and creaking filled the gloom ahead as they passed under the archway into a damp, stone cellar. Only one small light bulb hung by a wire from the ceiling, flickering dimly. Against the far wall there was a bar made of stone and the girl standing behind it had pale, colourless eyes and dreadlocks down to her waist. Her dark skin was lit with sweat, something Flo noticed while also noticing it was extremely hot down there, like a steam room, before moving to unbutton the top buttons of his shirt. Fred waltzed up to the girl and asked her if 'he' was there. She stared at both of them, then nodded. They waited as she disappeared through a door behind the bar. She moved slowly as if in a trance. They heard some angry Dutch muttered on the other side of the door and she returned with a small wrinkled man moments later. She was tall for a woman and the man's head only reached her chest. He was dressed in dark colours, brown jeans and a stained black t-shirt with cut-off sleeves.

"Henri, alone again?" Fred asked, holding out his arm and smiling.

"Not alone," Henri nodded towards the dreadlocked girl.

"And who is this?"

"My newest employee," Henri said, grabbing his crotch with both hands and snorting.

"Trés bon, and what is her role?"

Henri smiled, his crumpled paper face scrunching up even more. "Kaya is my assistant. She does whatever I ask, don't you?" He raised his eyebrows at her and slapped her ass hard. She yelped like a puppy but her expression didn't change. She continued to gaze at Flo, then Fred. There were track marks on her arms. Her fingers were bandaged. Flo imagined himself breaking Henri's neck and busting her out, trying to convince her to follow him to... he wasn't sure, but he envisioned himself pulling her arm, her standing still, unable to react or comprehend what had just happened, because she was zonked out her mind.

"She was a gift, part of a deal. Something to sweeten things on my end," Henri said. "I wish she spoke a little though. Speaking with myself is getting tiresome. And she could pretend to enjoy things at least!" He smiled, widening his intensely yellow eyes, before smacking himself in the side of his bald head with his fist.

"Where's your entourage?" Fred asked.

"Working, out of my way. Who cares? I needed some quiet tonight."

"You sound angry, little one."

Henri pulled a pistol from his belt and pointed it at Fred, "I'll shoot you in the fucking head if you belittle me again."

The appearance of a weapon took things to another level. Flo staggered back a few paces, since suddenly death had become a distinct possibility again, water being no match for flaming hot, speeding metal, he realised, deciding he was definitely fucked. He stared at the weapon and tried to guess what it was. A handgun, not a Desert Eagle, smaller, maybe a 9mm something. Automatic or semi-automatic? He wasn't even fully sure what those things meant.

Fred seemed relaxed and natural. He even chuckled in the face of the barrel. "I'm sorry, my friend. Please. Let's calm things down," he said.

Henri tucked the gun away and appeared to relax. "If my men aren't here, then they are on the streets making me lots of money so I am happy. Very happy," he said, licking his overly long and chipped looking fingernails, flexing both of his undefined, pink biceps. "But since you have chosen to interrupt my night of peace let's snort something. I want to fuck tonight but I'm not horny yet. I need to snort something!"

"Cocaine has quite the opposite effect on most," Fred said, elbowing Flo playfully.

"Cocaine is for the aggression. Viagra will take care of my cock!" Henri said, laughing hard. He slapped Kaya's ass again, even harder than before. She yelped quietly once more but still said nothing, remaining expressionless.

"Sure, let's live a little," Fred said.

'Fear of death has faded again', Flo thought, watching Henri, who he'd misjudged and now felt was just one of those small men with too much 'masculine pride'. Waving a gun around was one of many tactics he used, a

way of presenting the heft of his 'second cock', one that shoots and kills, although probably fires even less often than the one in his pants.

Henri caught Flo staring and raised the gun again, at him this time. "What about your friend here? It is rude not to introduce one's self," he said, in an aggressive voice, spitting on the ground. "Is he a mute? Has his tongue been chewed out by wolves?"

"This is Florián. I've known him for a very long time. He's just a little shy around new faces."

Fred smiled at Flo, who was trying his best to appear at ease now, hands in his pockets, a kind of grin, but feeling stiff and statue-esque, like a puppet in his stupid suit, wooden and unable to convince even himself that he was what he appeared to be, let alone anyone else who may have tried to analyse and classify him.

"He looks a little worried, like he shit in his pants or something," Henri said.

Fred and Henri both roared with laughter for several minutes during which time Flo stood there absently, watching them both and feeling increasingly like he was no longer in the 'real world', and that maybe he himself should also do something that seemed 'non-real-world', conceding he was too nervous to think creatively. Fred put an arm around his shoulders and led him after Henri, through the door behind Kaya, whose eyes met with Flo's as he passed her. The deadness in them scared him. She had sores all over her face and her mouth fell open revealing silver teeth. He felt relieved when they were through the door and out of her presence.

In the adjacent, smaller room, lit entirely by candles in metal cages on the walls, they stood around a worn, circular table. Henri sat down on one of several rickety chairs and pulled a knife from his belt, pouring a large pile of cocaine out onto the table and beginning the process of cutting the mound into smaller piles. Flo stood beside Fred and they watched him scoop some up with his long fingernails. He snorted and slapped the table, turning to them and holding out a hand, saying, "Please, be my guests."

Fred motioned for Flo to sit opposite Henri, who was scratching at his arm, drawing blood with his nails, inadvertently dusting the open wounds with coke, which combined with his blood to make a pink, milky paste, which

though disgusting, made Flo smile for some reason, in an absurd sort of way, he thought, quickly eliminating his smile when noticing that Henri eyed him now with creased brows. He quickly sat down at the table as Fred moved over to the other side of the room, gazing around the cellar, before stopping still just behind Henri. A narrow strip of shadow cut Fred's face exactly in half, so that his nose seemed to disappear, his dark hematite-like eyes unexplainably radiant as several of the candles seemed to go out at once. Henri grunted and said, "Fuck", peering through the new darkness. Fred smiled at Flo, flashing his white teeth, before smashing his elbow into the back of Henri's head.

Henri dropped straight off his chair onto the floor without a sound. Flo stood up quickly, knocking his chair over, backing up against the far wall. The room lit up yellow again as Fred walked along the walls, re-lighting several of the candles. A small stream of blood dribbled from a wound on the back of Henri's naked skull and Fred stood still beside him, looking at Flo as if waiting.

"What the fuck are you doing? Have you lost your mind?" Flo yelled.

Fred grinned and said, "Quite the opposite."

Flo stared at the body. "Is he dead?"

Fred smiled at him, "No, not dead. That is your job."

Flo laughed, sounding more nervous than he expected to. The whole situation was starting to resemble a bad movie, filled with madness, chaos and seedy nutcases. "What are you talking about?" he finally asked, forcing some edgy laughter for his own sanity more than anything else. "I'm not going to kill him. I don't even know who the fuck he is."

"Does it matter?"

"Of course it does. He hasn't done anything to me."

"And if he had?"

Flo hesitated because the questions were ridiculous, but that violent streak he'd seen in Fred, that danger, it was out of the bag now. He said, "I don't know," in almost a whisper, adding, "We should go."

"We will do no such thing. The job is half done," Fred said, shaking his head.



Henri's gun was on the floor and Flo couldn't decide whether to lunge for it, thinking it was probably unloaded anyway, but maybe it would make a nice club. "I shouldn't be here," he said.

Fred smiled. "Remind me Florián, how did you feel when you ran over that man?"

The question surprised him and he hesitated, thinking it seemed out of context. He began feeling for the door handle behind him but couldn't grasp it, saying, "That's irrelevant."

"No it isn't. This is exactly the same. You will see."

"You want me to kill him?"

Fred nodded slowly, "Of course. Why do you think I brought you here?"

"To introduce me to a friend," Flo said.

"Did you ever really believe that?"

"I think so," he said, "I don't know."

"You need to trust me. I am just like you, I know things, I have shown you that," Fred said, stepping closer.

"But what happened before, that was an accident. This would be murder."

Fred nodded, "Yes, you are right. And that's exactly why this is more important."

"Every time you speak you sound more and more fucked in the head. Think about what you're asking me to do."

Fred came closer and placed his palms on Flo's cheeks. "Why have you followed me even though I can see you are frightened?" He whispered. "It is because you are curious. You do not understand what's happening, and you need to know." He held his hands up either side of his face and splayed his fingers, wriggled them all in the air. "So I'm crazy, that is what you are thinking. I've completely lost it." He started to chuckle and widened his eyes for a moment, but then he narrowed them again and nodded gently. "Most people would have turned away and ran from me the second I reappeared this morning, returning to the calm and comfortable normality of their lives. But not you, Florián. Tell me why that is."

Fred took Henri's seat at the table and picked up the knife. As he polished the handle with his sleeve, Flo thought only about the door behind him, while running his fingers over the crack in the wood.

"Florián, answer my question. Why not just walk away?"

He thought about all aspects of his previous life. He felt relieved and sighed. "I've got nothing to walk away to," he said.

Fred smiled. "I could see it in you the second you got off the train. The slight glow of a man that has *seen* things."

Flo shook his head. "I still don't know what you're talking about."

"You do," Fred said. "Let me remind you."

He pulled the pipe from his jacket pocket and passed it to Flo, who was staring at the body, the small pathetic man, destroyer of lives. Fred skipped around the table and took some keys from Henri's body. He locked the only door and tossed Flo some matches.

"Whenever you're ready," he said.

Flo sat down at the table and lit the pipe. The thin stream of smoke wafted delicately upwards. The stone slabs beneath his feet began to swim and once again his heart charged and his surroundings passed into the distance and darkened, dragged away by those puppeteer's strings. Fred stood before him, growing in stature and presence. He held out the knife.

"Take it, finish him off. You must trust me."

Fred's lips hadn't moved. His voice came from all around them but also from somewhere inside of Flo, and he took the knife. Fred dragged Henri's body out into the middle of the room. His head had stopped bleeding but he was starting to groan.

"Do it Florián. He is not worth the shit on my boots."

Banging circled them, a fist on hard wood, but the sound was somewhere far away, he felt, emitted from elsewhere, somehow, unclear and without origin, because there was no door, no room, no table, just three figures stooped in darkness. The only light came from Fred's glow now, candlelight removed from wherever the three of them now existed.

"You hear that? Someone is coming. End this mother fucker now!" Said Fred and several other voices, varying in pitch and volume, but all equally resounding.

Flo lowered himself down onto his knees, straddling Henri. But he couldn't bring the blade down.

"Trust me Florián, I know you are lost. I'm showing you a way."

Flo gazed at the papery face. Henri's body was fading. It became a charcoal silhouette with blurred lines. His mouth was just a hole.

"Fucking do it!"

Flo thought about Jorge. He pictured Henri forcing himself inside the dreadlocked girl, then Angie. He heard girlish sounds of pain. He heard the little man's laughter. He lifted the knife and slammed it down into Henri's chest. The little man gasped and fell silent. Flo felt something wet in his hands but saw only darkness in front of him, spilling black atop a shadow. Everything felt cold. There were no emotions attached. All he'd done was knifed at darkness. He released the knife's bone handle and looked up at Fred, who knelt in front of him, alight and powerful, as if he himself was exuding starlight. He began a slow clap, his smile spiralling out of control, sending waves of silver into the black.

"How do you feel Florián?" Fred's voice boomed along with others, entering not through his ears but arriving by those other means he didn't understand. He stared at his hands and the blood was inky, a sketch of something that may or may not have really existed, his own skin glowing beneath it, causing him to stand quickly and back up against the wall, still staring at his shining fingers.

Fred held his shoulder, "Do you see?" He leaned in close, so that their noses were nearly touching.

"I don't know. I feel..." Flo couldn't find the words.

"You see the world around us as it really is, shade and obscurity, nothing more. The light you see, the silver strands hanging beneath the darkness, they originate from a place that does not exist in science or history books."

Flo stared at the body in front of him, barely a body, just a greyed mound. His act seemed to have no consequence, not in terms of his own emotions, nor how he was aware he should have been feeling. His arms felt loose. Whistling burrowed inside his head, melodious and sharp, a rush beneath it, tingling, like crystal wind-chimes.

"This doesn't make any sense," he said.

"Of course it does. We are given a way of being and we follow blindly. Most of us never think twice. When you killed that man with your car your journey began. You proved that taking a life is no different to drinking a glass of water or taking a shit. Everything we do here is meaningless because all of this is a lie."

Flo glanced at Fred and then closed his eyes tightly, in an attempt to convince himself that what he was being told was delusional, despite feeling ice cold from the inside out, since in actuality, Fred's words made perfect sense. He couldn't escape the feeling that he'd known all along and envisioned giant puzzle pieces falling from the sky and landing perfectly in place, to which he began shaking his head, hoping to offset the balance and dislodge said pieces, so that he could return to a time only a day earlier, when the grand puzzle had only existed as a metaphysical figment of his own mind, unconfirmed and unspoken.

Fred continued to speak as if he'd read his thoughts. "You are fighting to make sense of it. I understand that." He approached Flo and grabbed hold of his shoulders, almost lifting him off the ground. "What I'm telling you goes against everything you've ever learned. But there was a time when the world was flat, when an entity named God created all of this. Knowledge changes perspective. Over time knowledge grows. That is what I am offering you, knowledge, to alter your perception. With your actions here tonight, you are a step closer. Believe me. But this is still only the beginning. It is easy to kill someone as worthless as this infected little shit."

Flo suddenly became aware that Henri's blood, turning red again, was all over the floor, seeping towards him. He glanced at Henri's twisted, pale face and vomited, falling onto his knees, completely weakened. As he hit the stone floor it gave way. He felt like he was falling into the nothing beneath, that empty space he'd felt in the park the previous day, the black down there consuming him as his consciousness, somewhere in the midst of the fall, finally gave in.

Angie's face swam in front of his eyes, the sun shimmering behind her bronzed skin as she smiled, warming him but also making him feel sick.

“Who are you?” She said.

He turned to the side and vomited, before closing his eyes and curling up, hugging himself. The warmth he’d felt faded and when he opened his eyes the sun was gone. He could smell something like sugary rust but before he could figure out what the smell was, small gasps sounded in the dark and he realised he wasn’t alone. He rolled onto his back and felt a kick in his side.

“Who are you?”

It was a deep female voice and he peered up at a silhouette of a woman. After a few seconds of surveying her, he realised that it was the dreadlocked girl, Kaya. She was holding a knife and standing back, ready to fight. There was a circle of light coming through a small round window at the top of the wall, just above the desk. He remembered they were underground. Kaya stepped into the light and he recognised her face for certain, the pale eyes and dark skin, but the sores and scars that had covered her on the previous night were gone.

She had a fierce expression but her jaw was shaking as she again asked him who he was, also adding, “Why did you kill him?” Her English was good but she spoke with a Hispanic sounding accent. He told her he couldn’t remember much but also that he didn’t think he’d killed anyone.

“Then why is he dead?” She asked.

He peered to the left, catching sight of Henri’s body only a few metres to his right. Blood had spilled all around and there was stale vomit on the floor. He threw up again, into his own mouth this time. He managed to swallow most of it but began to choke. Kaya leaned down and pushed him onto his side, punching him between the shoulder blades until he coughed freely. She stood up off him and stepped back, holding the knife out straight.

“Where is your friend?” She asked.

Fred was nowhere. The door they’d entered through was tightly shut. Flo staggered onto his feet, leaning on his knees with both hands for support, saying, “I don’t know.” He stared at the backs of his hands. The blood on them had browned and dried, but it was all over his fingers and wrists and underneath his nails, and he remembered clearly what he’d done, feeling it was far away and dream-like, only where dreams often felt hazy this memory was clear, even more so than his other memories of the previous day, in fact,

or any others, except for maybe the accident, or the impression of the raven in his hands. He felt afraid to approach his true feelings on the subject, as if they were heavily guarded by other versions of himself that looked identical to him but were somehow different. He pictured them all standing in a circle with spears and shields in an empty plain where the sky was silver and the ground was black. He'd fight them and not be afraid, which would lead to the end of internal lies and an acceptance of who he was, he decided. Except he didn't know how to do that.

Kaya held out a piece of paper.

"What does it say?" She asked.

"Can't you read it?" He asked.

She shook her head.

He sat up and looked at the note, Fred's scrawled writing, he presumed:

*You know where to find me.*

He told her what it said and she asked him if it was from his friend. He told her it was. "I'm going to go to him, if you'll let me," he said. "You can come too."

"Why would I come?" She asked.

"I don't know," he said. "It seemed like I should offer."

He felt sorry for her but mostly wanted to go as quickly as possible, because he kept both hearing and feeling the sound of Henri's chest bone cracking open, the reverberation of sound and feeling in his fingers steadily occurring more and more often like a quickening pulse, until they became a constant grind that filled his thoughts completely.

"Fred's not really my friend," he said, closing his eyes in an attempt to return to the present. "And he's crazy. But he can't be as bad as...." He trailed off and pointed at Henri without looking at him. But he didn't want to be afraid so he forced himself to glance at the pale, translucent body, his skull and bones seeming almost totally visible under the skin. His eyes and mouth were still open and there was so much blood everywhere, more than he'd

imagined, assuming that movies and Angie had always exaggerated this kind of thing. The knife was still sticking out of the bony little chest.

"It was you, wasn't it," Kaya said. She'd crept up on him and stood right behind him. He could feel her warm breath. "Why?" She asked.

Flo turned to her and said, "I don't know what happened."

She looked down at Henri's body. A tear appeared in her eye, just one, and it dropped onto the stone floor.

"Are you sad?" He asked. "I thought he was a bad man."

She nodded. "I'm not sad, I'm relieved."

He looked Kaya up and down, thinking she was athletic and muscular, pretty even, but that her story must have been tragic, a notion that deeply depressed him despite the fact it was only an assumption, but one that seemed fair. Every time he looked at her eyes he felt pain in his heart and he hated her for making him feel that way. He wanted to hear her story, maybe it wasn't so bad, but he conceded there just wasn't any time.

Fists started hammering on the door, the same door through which they'd entered the previous night, the only way out, as far as he was aware. He didn't move as Kaya held a flinger to her lips.

"Henri! You Ok? We've been waiting upstairs for almost one hour. We have your money." The rusty handle rattled. "You haven't died in there have you?" It was a shrill man's voice who spoke English with an accent that sounded Hispanic like Kaya's. He continued to hammer on the door.

Kaya motioned for Flo to follow her to the far side of the room. Behind some beer kegs there was a small hatch in the wall. She opened it and signalled for him to move through it. A ladder led straight up and he began to climb, entering a bedroom at the summit. Hot sunshine beamed through the window. A clock on the wall revealed it was almost midday. The room was full of animal skins, including a tiger draped on the bed and a zebra on the floor. An elephant skull hung from the wall above a photo of Henri on a bedside table, holding a shotgun while leaning over a dead tiger, not the one that was on the bed. The tiger in the photo was white, probably a Bengal tiger, since they were most likely to be white, Flo remembered reading. It had bled out into the long grass. Flo shook his head and stared at his hands, focussing on Henri's blood, flexing his fingers, thinking that maybe there

were some who deserved to die, that maybe justice had been served in a small way at least.

“Quickly,” Kaya said. She’d walked up behind him and pushed him towards the window.

He picked up a shirt and tore it in half, wrapping each piece around each of his hands to conceal the blood. Kaya motioned towards the window and he peered out at the sunny street, a bike’s bell ringing past, the smell of sweet donuts nearby. They were on the ground floor and he opened up the window, hopping out easily.

As he turned to help Kaya out, the sight of two men creeping up behind her completely froze him up. He recognised their faces, he thought, the words, “pst, coca” entering his mind immediately. Before he had a chance to cry out and warn her they grabbed her from behind and clamped her mouth with a hand, dragging her back from the window.

He looked into her eyes. They were charged with life and anger for just a moment, before turning suddenly sad and desperate, wet. He was running before he had a chance to even consider doing anything else.

He followed the canal. He could barely breathe as he entered Dam square, only recognising his location because of the wax museum. He hid amidst a group of people, an old couple in matching T-shirts, a family with some kids, a guided tour, he realised, while trying to catch his breath. He peered through the people around him to see if he’d been followed as the tour guide spoke in German, pointing at things. He pretended to listen, watching the road he’d entered from for a few minutes, but the men who’d grabbed Kaya never came. He pictured what they might be doing to her, thinking they’d blame her for Henri’s death most likely, then kill her. He hoped they’d kill her. That was the best scenario he could envision and he tried not to imagine the things they might do to her if they kept her alive, feeling overwhelmingly guilty because he’d had a chance to do something. Maybe he could still do something. Again he’d been powerless, and as he stayed with the tour group he was choosing to remain powerless, like he’d been in so many crucial moments.

He moved away from the guided tour just as the buxom little lady leading them, complete with a beige suit and microphone, had started



squinting at him distastefully. As he walked away he turned, smiling and nodding, before stuffing his hands into his pockets and heading into the wax museum's shadow. It was a twenty-minute walk to Fred's apartment and he didn't rush. He continued to hug the walls and remained in shadow, since the sunlight was causing hot flushes, partly because of his general feeling towards sunlight, partly because of his hangover, but mostly because it reminded him of a life he was beginning to think of as 'his old life', of which the final chapter was the Island and Angie.

He smoked a joint at a coffee shop which was underground and darkly lit. An obese American sat beside him and within seconds shared the fact he was an opera singer, before filling Flo in on his escapades in the red-light district.

"I fucked around a little," he said, smiling casually, as if he was talking about making a sandwich. Flo imagined the situation, choosing to visualise the prostitute he'd almost been with, mouthing, "Gyere be," before opening the door to the fat virgin, her supple little body lying there beneath the masses of white flesh. It made him feel sick so he stood up without saying anything, as the obese American was taking selfies and talking about how he's been addicted to Twitter since he arrived in Amsterdam, because there are just so many things to tweet about.

"I've uploaded like sixty photos on Instagram since I got here, and it's been like two days," he said, as Flo smiled, moving on out of there, continuing through the streets without looking at any more faces until he reached a house where the purple wisteria beckoned, along with that black silhouette of a man in the window high above the street.

The door at street level was unlocked. He climbed the stairs inside and knocked on the door. There was no answer so he knocked a second time, waiting for only a moment before reaching for the handle, finding it also unlocked. When he entered Fred's apartment the first thing he noticed were the walls, newly covered in pages of writing and drawings. They spread from the ceiling to the floor, rippling in the breeze from the open window by the alcove, where Fred was seated. He had his back to Flo, facing the outside, while scribbling on a notepad in his lap. Flo stayed quiet and scanned the pages on the walls, attempting to read some of the writing, but it was all in

French. There were images of shadowy figures, painted trees, totem poles and strange men, robed with branches sprouting from their heads like antlers and faces like Ancient Greek theatre masks, wide grins and moon shaped eyes. It was definitely madness but also beautiful in a way, he thought, how all the pages sat in neat rows, the arrangement like a work of art in itself.

"You've been busy," Flo said.

Fred looked up immediately, startled, but he beamed when he realised it was Flo who had spoken. Placing his notebook down, he walked quickly across the room, looking dishevelled for the first time, running his fingers through his messy hair, his shirt both untucked and unbuttoned, revealing a hairy chest and scarred neck, little nicks all the way around and along his collar bones.

"Florián my friend, I was worried!" He said, leaning forward and hugging him excitedly.

Flo stood still, keeping his arms down at his sides. "What's all this?" He asked, nodding towards the walls.

Fred grinned and said he'd tell him all about it momentarily, but wanted to hear what happened to Flo first, to which Flo monotonously responded with, "I feel like I could have died. Why did you leave me there?"

Fred shrugged, turning away from Flo and moving back over to the window. He sat down in the alcove and folded his arms behind his head. "I thought it would do you some good," he said. "I can show you things and I can tell you things, but in the end it is up to you to make up your own mind."

"About what?"

Fred chuckled. "Well, you remember last night, don't you?"

He nodded, "Yeah I remember."

"And how do you feel?"

"Like shit," Flo said, giving his temples a massage with one hand.

Fred shook his head, "I don't mean physically. I'm talking about the rest of you. How do *you* feel?"

Flo hesitated, picturing Henri's open mouth, cocaine still stuck to parts of his face.

"Do you feel guilt for what you did?" Fred asked.

When Flo thought about the many feelings and urges he was subject to, even in the ambivalence they formed, guilt was absent. "There was a photo of him with a dead tiger," he said.

"So he deserved it."

Flo shrugged then nodded.

Fred stood up from the alcove and approached him slowly, smiling, as if he was planning something. He laughed and clapped his hands together. "I must say Florián, you are looking very well after last night. Very well."

Flo stared blankly.

"And what do you remember of the aftermath?"

Flo's teeth began to chatter despite the heat, consciously aware that part of him was still fighting as it once had, because simply put, he'd stabbed a man to death. He threw up right where he stood, spraying his shoes in the brown acrid stuff.

"Pull yourself together," Fred said, rubbing his back. "Take a seat. You're exhausted."

Flo slumped down in the alcove and closed his eyes. "I'm thinking this has all gone way too far," he said, holding back tears, "Way too far."

Fred leapt down beside him and held him by the shoulders, shaking him, pulling him upright, "No, Florián. Where you are concerned, things are finally going exactly as they should. Just look at your hands."

Flo stared down at them, thinking maybe he could pretend the blood was something else.

Fred was smiling, with eyes wide. "Do not look so devastated, Florián," he said. "You did a great thing. You are on your way."

"What the fuck are you talking about?" Flo asked, attempting to sound angry and frustrated, barely hearing his own voice. "The mind games..." He trailed off. "I can't take it. Tell me straight, what's going on?"

"You know exactly."

"Do I look like someone who has a fucking clue?" He stood up and paced across the room, turning back towards Fred in a rage. "When I woke up I wasn't alone," he said. "The dreadlocked girl was there, Kaya. She was scared and as we tried to leave some of Henri's men grabbed her. There was nothing I could do. If you'd been there we could have saved her."

Fred was still sitting in the alcove and he smiled slightly, shaking his head at Flo, "Is that really why you're so angry, Florián?"

Flo stood still and didn't say a thing, hating Fred, in that moment also hating everything that had ever happened to him.

"You should be overjoyed, Florián. You have done a great thing. Do you not remember everything I told you?"

Flo nodded, "Of course I do."

"Well then?"

"It's just so unbelievable."

"Why is it that in the depths of your mind you know that I am right, yet you cannot say the words?"

He was feeling like a mouse in cathedral hall, tiny and insignificant, dwarfed and mocked by grand and unexplainable, spiritual things around him.

Fred smiled reassuringly and moved over to the desk where he began preparing his blend. "You have all the pieces. You just need to put them together," he said, motioning towards the words around him.

"What is all this?"

"It took me a very long time to assemble," he said, sticking out his chest proudly.

Flo tried once more to read some of the pages but his French was awful. Then he noticed his own name amongst the scribbles. He stared at it vacantly, the letters, lifting his hand weakly, pointing at it. "Why is my name there?" He asked.

Fred was grinding magic and paused for a moment, smiling wryly, sighing, complete relief, like he'd just reached the top a mountain peak. "Because you are the last piece," he eventually said, closing his eyes.

Flo laughed quietly, hoping to mask his growing confusion, a sound Fred either didn't hear or pretended not to hear.

He leaned back in the alcove with the loaded pipe in his hands, almost inaudibly saying, "I've shown you the world as it really is..."

"A black shadow where only you and I exist?" Flo said, interrupting him.

Fred softened his gaze further, slowing his voice down to an irritating level of calm that Flo felt was in complete opposition to what the present situation and subject matter called for. "Just listen to me," he said. "There is much more to existence than the world around you." He paused and beckoned Flo sit beside him but Flo remained still. "What if we are taught certain things to keep us from finding the truth? What if we were to break apart our 'lessons'? What would we find?"

Flo searched the words on the walls again, pretending to be disillusioned and un-interested, fully aware that he was feeling the exact opposite. He closed his eyes and saw Samuel's face, then all those versions of himself in their protective circle beneath a silver sky. He approached them and they parted, allowing him to see what secret they held hidden at their centre. It was Fred, smiling, clapping and glowing. He wondered if this revelation was significant, whether it meant he should do whatever Fred says, or whether he was purely justifying things for himself through imagery, in an attempt to make it all easier. Maybe they shared a soul, somehow, he and Fred, if that was even possible. Maybe that's what 'soul mates' *actually* meant.

Flo turned to Fred slowly, feeling like someone who'd just woken up, still a split second behind events. "If everything you say is true, then why are you still here? Why don't you leave, ascend, whatever you call it?" he asked.

Fred chuckled. "Florián, I've done things I wouldn't dare tell you about. I've broken every code of right and good countless times over," he said, smiling smugly. "But I am not an evil man. I am not heartless. In fact, I am quite the opposite. The reason I am able to do these atrocious things is because, as I have explained, they do no matter, no more than anything else we might do 'here'." He paused, held his hand out towards the window. "We are all in chains in this place, facing shadows on a wall. Most of us never come to hear that *clink* in the night."

Flo smiled nervously, feeling fearful, but he was accepting of this fear. Fred grinned at him and held up the pipe. The pipe looked huge in his hands. It appeared to grow, an otherworldly presence in itself. Flo hesitated, because the shadow world he saw when he smoked the blend was vivid and powerful, but still too surreal, he felt, while at the same time Fred was now

revealing knowledge of his recent past he'd never told anyone, that sharp, ethereal sound that had woken him in the night, the clink without cause or origin.

His perspective switched. He felt it, almost heard the click even, when looking up into Fred's eyes again. What had seemed psychotic became real. This transformation, he conceded, had finally forced itself on him. Despite the forceful nature of this transition he was feeling calm and open, his hands ceasing their shaking, because he'd always known, in a way, while starting to cry silently, thinking he'd never really been lost at all.

"But you haven't answered my last question," he finally said. "If everything you're saying is the truth, then why are you still here?"

Fred sighed and began to nod slowly, rhythmically. "I've spent years wondering the same thing. And then I saw you," he said. "All became clear. I needed to find another like me, share what I've come to know. That's what I mean when I say you are the last piece of my grand puzzle."

"But you've done all that, you've shown me," Flo said. "And here you still are."

Fred thought for a moment. "Maybe it is because you don't really believe me yet, but now you will," he said, grinning, licking his teeth, seeming speculative rather than all-knowing for the first time. He held out his pipe and magic again and whispered, "Let's pay the other side another visit."

They smoked. That place appeared before his eyes just like before, the splinters of light materialising in the air all around them, the cheap cloth cover over the world seeming even more frayed, stretching thinner. There was light glaring out of Fred's words on the walls as well, then the walls themselves moved away, and only the glowing words and illustrations remained as if they'd been drawn in the empty air by a wand that could paint silver.

Just as before, Fred's form glowed brighter than everything, and as Flo inspected himself he noticed a faint lustre on his own skin. It was just the two of them, one bright, one dull, and those glowing words, marking their faces with pearlescent patterns.

"It should be more vivid now. Your actions have set you alight, look." Fred faced the empty space where the window had been and they peered

'outside'. No canals or building or streets were visible. It was just a deep empty blackish blue, but there were shapes and shadows slipping through that darkness, barely visible, distorted patches drifting though the afternoon that had suddenly transformed into what appeared to be the darkest of nights.

"Can you see them?" Fred asked. "They are the people of this earth, happy to trudge along in this murky darkness. We glow because we have begun to see."

Flo watched the little silhouettes, some alone, some in groups, shuffling along silently, while Fred's voice echoed in his head. Tiny specks of light began to appear on the ground outside and also in the room, growing it seemed, like blades of grass sprouting out of the wood and stone, all perfect copies of one another, geometrically identical little flicks of light. He grabbed hold of Fred's arm, feeling terrified but mainly excited by this evolution of darkness.

He was about to speak.

But then he heard a low groan, pained and throaty.

He turned to see a shadow standing there in front of them.

A third figure had crept into the room whilst they'd watched the street.

There was a sudden movement from the shadow. It jabbed at Fred and then a spray of light began to spew from his side. It took Flo a few moments to recognise that the shadow had stabbed him.

Fred clutched at the wound, trying to stop the flow of liquid light. A knife stuck out where he'd been stabbed and he tugged at the handle, pulling it free.

Flo barely had time to react at all before Fred was on his feet, shining in the dark like some kind of angel. He swung at the inky figure with the butt of the blade, slamming the figure to the ground while grimacing in pain, liquid light dripping down his shirt and trouser leg. He knelt over the quietly murmuring shadow and slit its throat. Inky fluid fizzed and leaked out of the deep slice wound.

Flo hadn't moved, but the slashing of the throat was too much and finally he leapt up from his seat in the alcove, screaming, "What the hell is this? Are you Ok?"

Fred scowled, panting slightly, as the glowing liquid continued to pour out of his wound. "Time to go, Florián," he said. "One does not kill and fuck their way through a city without making a few enemies."

"Where are we going?"

"Just follow me."

The effects of the blend were wearing off and the room surrounded them again, returning from the distance, slowly dragged out of black, details reanimating. Fred gazed around at the walls a final time, scanning each page. He smiled and looked satisfied, before motioning for Flo to head for the door. Flo stood in the doorway waiting as Fred grabbed stacks of money from the desk drawer and pulled out a match. He sparked it on the desk's rough wooden surface and lit one of the pages alight. For a moment Flo watched the paper and ink burn, fire slowly spreading across the walls. The shadow that stabbed Fred moments earlier now appeared to be a man, skinny with no eyebrows, expressionless and dead. Smoke began to fill the room and Flo, feeling suddenly vacant and illusory, stood completely motionless, unable to discern whether the smoke came 'from here' or 'from there', only escaping his state of vagueness when a hand grabbed him by the shoulder from behind, dragging him out into the stairwell.

On the streets they could hear sirens already. The building was in flames, the wisteria blazing away, edging the fire with a purple lining. They ran for around ten minutes and on a quiet canal they finally stopped, breathless and sweaty in the hot, afternoon sun. Fred collapsed to the ground holding his stab wound with one hand. He put a cigarette in his mouth and held out a lighter for Flo to spark it with.

"Mother fucker. Did you fucking see him?"

"Not until he was right there, I'm sorry."

Fred released the wound for a moment and blood poured out, still laced with an ethereal shine, but Fred's glow was fading. His eyes looked matt, lifeless, his hair seemed limp. Flo leaned down and lit the cigarette for him.



"Fuck this," Fred said between tokes, "After everything."

"You need help."

Fred spat into the water, "It's too late for that." He began to cough, stretched out on his back beside the canal. "I've shown you the way. I should be free. I've done everything." He crawled to the very edge of the water and looked down at his reflection. "There must be something else. Damn it. You will have to be the one to figure it out."

"Figure out what?"

He looked up at Flo and smiled, pulling a piece of paper from his pocket, along with a stack of cash. "To aid you in your search."

He tossed the money and a note down on the cobblestones. "I never did return that walking stick to Ireland," he whispered. Those were his final words. His breathing grew rapid and he spluttered for a few seconds before falling still.

Flo glanced around. They were alone. Without thinking about it too much he gently pushed Fred's body into the water. The splash rang out in the quiet and he watched as the body floated slowly away, face down. A woman screamed. She'd appeared from around the corner across the water. Flo picked up the note and the money and ran without looking back.

He bought a bed in a hostel somewhere in the centre of town, but only to use the bathroom and wash away the remnants of Henri's blood from his hands. He took some jeans and a black jacket from the wash room and left some money in their place. He had money now, and his passport still, so he walked to the Central Station through the red-light district. When he passed his favourite hooker's window he looked up expectantly but the red curtains were closed. He felt disappointed but wasn't sure why, thinking maybe it would have brought this, his third trip to Amsterdam, full circle, although he wasn't sure why she seemed important. He smoked a final joint at a coffee shop beside the station, imagining those words again, '*Gyere be.*' He could hear her voice speaking them, again and again, and they continued to echo in his head for the entirety of the train ride to the airport.

He stared up at the list of departures and it didn't take him long to decide on a destination. Once he'd gone through security he sat on a bench

beside a toy shop because he had some time to kill. He opened up Fred's note:

*This world will morph and transform to try and fool you, to keep you  
here. Do not lose sight of what you have learned. Never be led astray. And  
soon you will blaze  
beyond the flames.  
Good luck Florián, not that luck has anything  
to do with it.*

Beneath the message Fred had scrawled his recipe, all the precise measurements of everything. He smiled and put the note away, catching eyes with the woman behind the counter in the toyshop. She smiled at him, before turning to a customer, a business man buying a remote-control helicopter. He thought about how happy the man's son would be, imagining the joys of receiving such a gift along with a compassionate hug, remembering a time he'd received a rubber polar bear from his father after a business trip. It was only a rubber animal, but it had made him so happy. His father had known it was meaningless, but as a boy he'd fallen for it, just as he'd misunderstood the importance of a car.

He asked himself if he was prepared to believe in something so ridiculous they'd lock him up if they knew, but just as quickly he realised it didn't matter what he believed. Regardless, he was prepared to give it a try. He could go anywhere. The world was his until he figured out which was the greater madness, Fred's or the alternative. The absurdity of his thoughts made him smile, because it was all he could do, to laugh at himself, the only way he could realistically believe in something so 'insane', since deep down he wanted to believe in it, needed to. His ghost walk had to end, but he wouldn't be stabbing himself like Elliot Smith. He'd learned he was afraid of death and wanted to live. He whispered, "Just not *here*," to himself, at which point his gate number appeared on the screen. He swung up onto his feet, moving steadily through the uncharacteristically quiet terminal to board his flight to Budapest.



## – *Part Four* – *Salience*

“And at last, I imagine, he’d  
be able to discern and feast his eyes  
on the sun – not the displaced  
image of the sun in water or  
elsewhere, but the sun on  
its own, in its  
proper place.”<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Plato, *The Republic, IX: The Supremacy of Good* (translated by Robin Waterfield), (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993) p.242



Flo sits in the kitchen and eats a kifli, chewing slowly as he stares at Fred's original message and list of ingredients. He holds the note up to the light. Water marks are visible around the edges. The ink has run in places and the page is crumpled from the time it spent folded in his sock. He feels hot inside and cries silently for a while. He puts the list in his back pocket. When he re-enters the living room to get his cigarettes, the gaping emptiness on the cabinet's top reminds him the clock is missing, a huge anomaly that he can't believe he forgot about. He glances around for other signs of strangeness but everything else seems normal. There are no signs of forced entry or any other objects missing but the door, he remembers, was ajar when he arrived.

At the kitchen table he stewes over the notion, to steal from someone so old and frail, and to steal only the thing that matters most, without even knowing. He glances around the kitchen too, hoping to find more clues, finding no additional signs of a break in, but notices a note on the fridge for the first time:

*Florián, there's pörkölt in the fridge. Warm yourself a plate. Dori called while you were out. She left her number for you this time – 003630 2960450. I'm feeling very weak so I'm going to bed. It's this heat, just unbearable.*

When he spotted the message he hoped his grandmother's last words to him would be profound, but unfortunately they mean very little aside from revealing that in her mind at least, it was the heat that killed her. At least he can enjoy her cooking one last time. Her final gift to the world is a meal for another, which he feels is perfect in terms of being in line with her legacy and who she was. He begins to cry again, more intensely this time, making quiet noises of pain which surprises him. And then the loud music begins pumping down from above him, heavy dub rattling the ceiling, transforming his tears of grief into blind rage.

"Shut the fuck up!" He screams. "Shut the fuck up!"

He runs up the stairs two at a time. The music grows louder as he approaches and the scent of weed seeps out into the hall from under the

door. He hammers on the wood with the base of his fist. Minutes pass and he keeps on swinging his fist hard against the door, while taking in the ganja smoke, enjoying the aroma, realising he's missed it. Finally the music quietens and he hears laughter and voices. He knocks again, calmly.

The door opens and a face peers out at him, red eyed and swaying by the door frame.

The man brushes his dyed, red hair back and nods, "Mrs Egei's Grandson, I remember you. What's the news?"

The stench of weed rolls out into the hall now, and Flo can feel Fred's recipe in his pocket, seeming to grow heavier as he stands there. The man at the door is wearing a basketball Jersey and yellow skinny jeans. He has an eyebrow piercing and moustache.

"My grandmother died tonight," Flo says, "Can I come in?"

It takes a moment for the news to register. The man's face drops slowly into a look of shock and he immediately begins apologising, saying 'Oh God' several times, before stepping aside and allowing Flo to enter.

The apartment is a full of dirty plates and dirty clothes. Most of the plates Flo recognises as being Gréti's, still lined in congealing paprika and onions. It smells like weed mixed with paprika. It's not a good combination. There are a lot of joint and cigarette butts, mostly in containers but a few on the floor and furniture. They have a giant TV hooked up to unnecessarily large speakers and tangles of wires cut across the room, connecting games consoles and laptops, creating a messy, black web. Cocaine lies spilled over the coffee table in assorted piles and pictures of naked girls decorate the walls.

The man who answered the door turns the music off and reaches out to shake Flo's hand, swaying on his feet a bit, "I'm Matyi, this is Péter."

Flo hadn't noticed the other person on the sofa, draped in a wool blanket that he also thinks belonged to Gréti. It's chequered with red, brown and yellow squares. Flo made forts under the coffee table with it when he was a boy. The man on the sofa pulls the blanket off his head and nods in Flo's direction. His blonde Mohawk flops down and he flicks his head to move it from his eyes.

"Hi," Flo says, "Hal Florián."

The man with the blonde Mohawk sniggers and says, "Kásás Péter."

Flo ignores the mocking tone in Péter's voice and searches the room, noticing a sheet draped over something, the exact shape and size of the missing clock. He glances again at Gréti's blanket, all the plates, wondering what else may have belonged to her. He stares at his hands and smiles to mask the rage that he feels might come blasting out of him at any moment. He pretends to look casually around, heading towards the draped object that he deeply hopes will turn out to be the clock, so he can finally stop pretending and unleash whatever it is that's going to come out of him, one of the other 'selves' maybe, the riotous one, or the murderous one.

While Matyi and Péter begin clearing some space for him to sit, he pulls the sheet off the object. It's just a stack of HVG news magazines, still in their plastic wrappings. No clock.

"My Dad got me a subscription for Christmas but I don't have time to read about the fucking world," Péter says. "I have my own shit to deal with."

"Mrs Egei died this evening," Matyi says.

"Fucking hell," Péter says, "My sympathies. What happened?"

"She was old," Flo says. "She died in her sleep. Up one minute, gone the next." He hasn't thought about that until now. "It's kind of beautiful," he adds.

They nod in agreement and offer him a seat. He declines, asking them if they can get him some drugs because he's depressed and wants to escape reality for a while. They high-five each other and he pretends to smile.

"We have all kinds of drugs," Matyi says. "What do you need?"

"Some of it's a little exotic," Flo says, taking the list from his pocket and passing it to Matyi.

He examines the list with wide eyes and then hands it to Péter, who's curled up in the blanket again.

"We have coke, MDMA, weed, some shrooms and stuff, but most of things on here, no," Matyi says, "Not here right now."

"Can you get hold of any of it?"

"Maybe," Péter says.

"We know some guys. Will take a while though." Matyi is smiling, proud that he 'knows some guys.'



Flo holds both his thumbs up, "Great, I'll come back tomorrow. In the meantime, I'll just take some weed."

Matyi smiles, "Helps to ease the passing."

"Helps to ease everything," Péter adds, handing Flo a little baggy.

"Take this, no charge. With our best wishes. The rest of it will be expensive though."

Flo nods and looks into Péter's eyes, noticing how black they are, how they droop downwards at the outer corners. He's probably half Korean or Mongolian and Flo wonders why he didn't notice until now.

Back in Gréti's apartment he rolls a nice long Gandalf, taking it slow, enjoying the process. He leans back in the armchair and puffs away, staring at the space left by the missing clock, wondering where the hell it could be. He feels really high a few minutes later and thinks about his grandmother, wishing her well in his mind, while playing her radio all night long, until a silver dawn emerges from the yellow dark. Rolling, smoking, drifting, rolling, sleeping, smoking. High as ever, joyous, washed in a deep, calming peace of indifference towards the world around him, he finally heads out.

He walks to the Danube and stares at the statue of St Gellért, the man who was thrown down a mountain in a barrel for reasons he can't remember. He walks along the riverside all the way to Margit Island, watching the trees come alive with increasingly influential sunlight, thinking about how the crowns look like mounds of green embers. When he reaches Margit Bridge he crosses it and walks back along the opposite bank, focusing only on moving efficiently and without obstruction, often dropping off the kerb and sidling through tight spaces between trees and fences to avoid people that might affect his speed. He makes it to the Chain Bridge and walks along it slowly, aware of all the faces that may be watching him from within their cars in the slow-moving traffic. He smokes a joint on his bench, where he sat alone his first night in Budapest. He thinks about how different he felt then as opposed to now, and another 'self' joins the little circle inside of him, a development he feels apathetic and accepting towards. Beyond the river, the castle and St Gellért, the Liberation monument rises up above the city, commemorating liberation and freedom from communism. He wonders what liberation from everything else would look like and whether they'd build a

statue commemorating the individual who achieved that, picturing that individual as being himself. There wouldn't be an actual statue, only a vast platform and an empty space where a figure should be. He visualises people staring at it on top of a mountain covered in snow, looking confused, then one person's expression turning into realisation, nodding, before being beamed up into the stars through mist swirls and ice fall, to the other side where he waits, through a darkness imperceptible to the naked eye.

An hour later he gets on a tram without checking its number or destination and sits by the window, staring into the glass, through the glass, at himself. He presses his fingers against the smudges, moving them around slowly, feeling for a way through, only it remains non-existent. He notices an old man in a wine-coloured beret staring at him through thick glasses. The man snorts and turns away. Some kids standing by the doors are also staring at him oddly. They nervously switch their focus when he glances at them. He returns his gaze towards the window, allowing his vision to turn blurry, continuing to rub at the smudges as he rolls blindly through the city, satisfied, drifting somewhere between the shimmering streets and those other places he's seen glimmering out there.

Some time that evening he becomes aware that he is on Mester street. He feels his reasons and methods of reaching there are ambiguous but upon seeing his late grandmother's building, he feels suddenly hopeful and willing because it's near dark. His day of waiting passed slowly and continued to feel dream-like, but also like a voyage where he was moving at speed along gradients that were different to those around him, as if rocking on waves slightly above the plane on which everyone else seemed to be slowly shuffling and glancing at him distastefully.

He goes up the stairs because he doesn't want to wait for the lift. As he rounds the corner to his landing he freezes because there's a girl standing at Gréti's door, knocking. He doesn't recognise her from behind and hesitates, wondering whether he should slink away. Before he can act she turns to face him. Her golden eyes are full of tears. He grabs hold of the banister to steady himself.

"Hi," she says. "I'm so sorry about Gréti."

He isn't sure what to say so he nods, watching her with admiration for a few instances, but then suspicion the longer they both stand there. Faint voices mutter further up the stairwell. He looks down at his feet and then up at her again.

"I've known her my whole life," she says. "Nothing but sweetness and kindness every moment of every day. If there was ever an angel on this earth..."

He nods and says, "Yeah," while tapping the banister, wanting to scratch his back but ignoring the itch.

"Sorry," she says. "I guess this is strange for you. I'm Dori, Bea's daughter."

"I realised," he says, continuing up the final few steps and moving past her, catching her scent and feeling tight chested for a moment before unlocking the door. He feels confused and wishes he hadn't come back to Gréti's apartment. He can't remember why he has. Loud chugging music begins to play above them as if the powers of the universe, the stars, whatever, had heard and sensed his sudden lack of clarity and focus.

"I'm sorry we kept missing each other. It's shit that we have to meet again like this," Dori says.

"Yeah," Flo says without turning around, staring into Gréti's empty apartment, his gaze drawn towards the clock's empty space but without concentration, drifting in the air somewhere between the doorway and the opposite wall.

"Do you remember me now?" She asks.

He says he does without turning around because he feels scared to look at her. She says Gréti talked about him all the time and used to promise he'd come visit so they could play together more, but he never did. He shrugs and says his parents died. She says she knows and is sorry.

He's certain closing the door won't be enough to escape his current situation so he stands aside and reluctantly motions for her to enter. He avoids her eyes as she passes but catches her scent again and shudders, vaguely remembering kissing her neck as she sat in his lap laughing. He repeats the words 'she's too late' in his head.

They go into the living room and she stands by the kitchen door. She coughs nervously and their eyes catch for a second. He quickly turns his head and goes over to the window, standing among the plants there.

"I know how you feel," she says, "Gréti was like my extra grandmother. I came here a lot growing up, and even now, more recently. I think I've eaten Gréti's cooking more than my own mother's."

"Her pörkölt was good," Flo says quietly, finally daring to look at her, feeling he has to, not for her but for himself, to overcome his current state and win.

She's still tearful and her hair is dark brown, not green, which he feels makes sense. There's a slight L-shaped scar above her eye he didn't notice previously or couldn't remember. It runs along just above her left eyebrow, cutting down across it at a sharp angle. Her left eyebrow is partially painted on. She notices him looking at it and strokes the mark gently with her finger. "Radiator," she says. "You were there actually. We were playing horses, which meant galloping round and round the apartment. It didn't end well."

His expression doesn't change and her smile fades. She's standing awkwardly with one knee bent and her arms down at her sides. She spots the grinder on the table and averts her gaze, pretending she hasn't seen it. She looks him up and down and says it's surprising to her how tall he's gotten. She holds her palm out below her chin to demonstrate how tall he had been compared to herself when they were little. He says he'd been small for his age until he was sixteen and suddenly started to grow.

"You followed me around like a little puppy. I called you that, my puppy," she says, blushing and looking at her feet. "Do you remember anything from when we were little?"

"Not really," he says. "Just your face for some reason," he lies. Seeing her in Gréti's apartment brings back a few vague memories. He remembers eating little gherkins and pretending they were antennae, then using them as swords. It's the way she blushes and chews her lip that causes these memories to reanimate before his eyes, and he shakes his head, feeling smaller and smaller the longer he stands there, shrinking while she grows into something monstrous and unavoidable.

"We used to play out in the hall all the time," she says. "We'd go on 'adventures'. Once we sneaked out into the street. You didn't want to go but I made you."

He remembers it as she speaks, recalling predominantly feeling fearful of punishment, but mostly fearful of the unknown. She says some older kids walked by and said some things she couldn't remember, but that it scared him and he ran back inside to hide under the stairs. He remembers that too, and how she'd stood up to them and told them to leave him alone. He also remembers later telling Gréti that he loved Dori because Dori protected him. Gréti had said he was too young to be in love and he'd listened, believing her, deciding it must have been something else that made him want to hold her hand, like Robin Hood and Maid Marian when they were foxes in the Disney movie, ducking beneath a twilight waterfall, surrounded by fireflies.

"I got you into a lot of trouble," Dori says, "For making you go down into the street."

He sits in the arm chair and begins to roll a joint, thinking she might leave, but she doesn't. She sits down in the armchair opposite him, where Gréti had always sat over the past few weeks, noticing his notebook and asking if he writes.

He says, "Not really. Mainly I draw," lighting the joint and smoking it, closing his eyes. He offers it to her but she declines.

"You spoke a lot about weed the other night. You called it a super plant," she says. "We spent a long time trying to get some."

"Did we?"

"We got something from a guy, but it didn't look or smell like weed," she says.

He nods and says, "Oh, I couldn't remember."

"Pretty crazy night. It was amazing though, kind of special." She glances up at him, her lips pursing up. "I'm sorry I've not been by all week. I've been in Milan with work."

He's staring out the window, pretending to be barely listening.

"I know I'm rambling. I guess I thought I might surprise you when I was back, but then I thought you might think I didn't care. So I called..." Her voice chokes up a little as she says, "Obviously I had no idea..."

He feels a strong need to comfort her, maybe even kiss her, but ignoring that 'self' is key to his survival, so he doesn't move. He sits shaking his head, smoking.

"I'm sorry," she says, "I'm trying not to cry."

"I just need some time alone," he says.

"I'll come by tomorrow. Maybe we could go for a walk, if you want to talk about things."

"I'm leaving tonight," he says, "Sorry."

"Oh, you mean back to England?"

He shrugs, staring at her eyes, then into them, challenging himself. She's crying and he becomes convinced that her tears are golden as well, a realisation that makes him both uneasy and uncertain. He sees surprise and pain in her eyes, all coming together. She begins to fiddle with one of her curls, twisting the hair around her finger. He smiles because she's blissfully unaware of what she's doing to him, but is really coming for him now, and he breathes out deeply, closing his eyes and leaning his head back, slouching down in the chair.

"Please, I need to be alone," he says. "I have so much I need to do still, before I go."

He hears her shift in her seat and then stand up. He keeps his eyes closed and can't hear any more noises so he assumes she's gone. Opening them again, he finds her still standing there, tilting her head and searching his expression. He isn't going to let her see, not this time. She nods sadly and heads for the door but turns around before she goes out. Her face is redder than it has been, more tears, different tears, the exact look he never wanted to see, the reason he slipped away wordlessly in the night when leaving Angie.

She sighs and says he should call her if he changes his mind. She says talking is good. He doesn't say anything and she lingers for a few seconds and goes. When she's gone he slouches even lower in the arm chair. He chews his knuckle for a moment, before picking up a pillow and covering his face, screaming into it several times, aggressively and at length, no words, just noise.

Some time later, when he's convinced himself that he's calm again, he heads upstairs. He knocks on Matyi and Péter's door and Péter lets him in, smiling.

"Good timing," Péter says.

"I heard the music," Flo says. "Success?"

Péter smiles and says, yes, they were mostly successful. Their friend Zsolt recently made friends with a gang of Brazilians in the 4<sup>th</sup> district who have access to many of the things on Fred's list. Péter also acknowledges that it's an 'insane' list. Flo wonders about being insane again and shrugs, feeling it's finally time to find out, once and for all, whether Fred was also 'insane' or the total opposite. Words like 'wise' and 'illuminated' scroll through his head as he follows Péter into their living room. Matyi is on the sofa packing the bong. Flo nods at Matyi, an action that is returned, and stands with his hands in his pockets listening to the bong bubbling, declining a hit when it's offered to him. Péter passes him a square package, a folded-up bin bag sealed with strips of heavy tape.

"A lot of magic in here," Péter says, raising his eyebrows. "We were wondering what you're planning on doing with all that. I don't know if you'll see the world as it is ever again," he says, sniggering.

"Is that such a bad thing?" Flo asks, while remaining otherwise still and expressionless.

"God, my lord and father, no," Matyi says, almost choking on a mouthful of smoke.

Flo asks how much he owes and is told 300,00 forints. He pulls a wad of money out of his pocket and counts out the right amount. Half the money he was given by Fred is now gone, but he has his earnings from István so he has plenty of money still, even after handing over what feels a vast amount due to numerical value, but really isn't that much considering what he asked for.

"You planning on taking these all at once? Or just thinking ahead?" Matyi asks.

"I'll see what happens." Flo heads for the exit. He holds up the parcel and adds, "Thank you kindly, fellas."

“Any food left in your fridge by any chance? You know, from before,” Péter says.

Flo pauses in the doorway and thinks about the meat knife in the kitchen downstairs. He imagines himself luring them down with a freshly brewed stew, wafting the steam towards the door with a handkerchief, smiling maniacally, then stabbing them both in the face as they come inside, at which point he feels startled and snaps back to the present. He laughs quietly and says, “There was but I ate it.”

He sits at Gréti’s kitchen table and rips the package open. Almost everything he’s expecting to see is there in his hands, individually wrapped in cling film, the salvia in a baggie, DMT in a baggie, more weed wrapped in foil. He follows the recipe as closely as he can, substituting missing items with more of others, which he feels is better than leaving things out, because he’s worried about the potency. He grinds all the ingredients. He whispers, “A forest of nature’s shades,” when he’s finished and is tilting his metal grinder from side to side, watching the particles mix and blend, changing colour as varying light patterns strike the powders. He doesn’t have a pipe so he tips the mixture into a joint and rolls it up. He inhales deeply and slowly, holding it in before releasing the ribbons of smoke. They swirl and circle him, looping around the books on the shelves, the radio, the space where the clock used to be.

After an unknown amount of time his surroundings slowly pass into an inky darkness, one he recognises. He feels excited but doesn’t move, remaining seated and staring at the meat knife on the kitchen table. He stays motionless and quiet as the knife is pulled away into the black along with everything else, but he knows where it is, just a few inches away from his hands. He can only hear vibrations, as if underwater. There are faint murmuring sounds coming from all directions, voices maybe, but not human voices, he thinks, as those sounds cease too, sucked out of the air gradually at first, then sharply. He’s left with empty space and silence, existence void.

A knocking sound ends that peace after what seems to be several hours, though it’s possible that only minutes have passed. The sound is faint but he knows it’s of his world, coming from Gréti’s apartment. He rises and heads towards the sound, thinking it has to be the door, even though he



can't see it. He imagines himself opening it, seeing Fred standing there, grinning at him, because he feels lost in that darkness all alone. The splinters of light seem out of reach and there's no other light source in the absence of Fred's glowing form.

He continues to move towards the knocking but he can never reach the walls or boundaries of that space. He's trapped there so he stops trying to move forwards and faces the emptiness where the door should be, waiting. He closes his eyes and sees giant, golden pools, circular, the surface on fire, so he pulls his eyes open to escape them. He remains in the darkness. There's a lack of air and he feels claustrophobic. The knocking stops and a shadowy figure slips into the room. It stands before him waiting, making a whispering sound, but he can't hear any words. For reasons he can't quite comprehend, he knows it's Dori, something about how the air around her feels, which is different even there. The black begins to melt off her as if it was paint, suddenly hit with heat and water, and beneath the black her skin is glowing like silver fire. This transformation confuses him for a moment, but then he understands.

Around and above her, the splinters of light swell like waves heavy with foam, as if attempting to burst open through the black. They begin to squirm, creating a mass of moving, shifting splashes of light in the air, as if an ocean's surface is up there ready to collapse onto them. He claws at the air in an attempt to aid the heaving light fibres, but it doesn't seem to help. Little blades of grass have sprouted from the ground around her feet. More of them grow out of the black, hundreds, thousands, spreading over the distance as far as he can see, white and silver like the splashes in the air. They grow taller, becoming thick vines almost as tall as him, merging with the waves of light above. They sprout leaves the colour of shells, moving left and right as if feeling for a way through the dark to where he stands. He tries to grab hold of the stalks but each time he moves his hand they elude him, passing through or around his splayed fingers. He stops trying and stands still. Fred's voice whispers in his head but the language is unknown, like nothing he's ever heard. Dense starlight flares out of the dark above, suddenly and with force, replacing the hovering ocean. More and more dots appear and he falls to his knees. The stars drop down out of the black, like a rain of arrows,

turning everything gold. Dori stands aflame at the centre of it all, swaying gently.

He waits because he feels there's more, and nods approvingly when little curls of emerald begin to appear in the distance beyond everything else, in a way that looks like vaporisation in reverse. These new creations are more defined than everything else, or maybe it's everything else that suddenly seems blurry in comparison. They mass together and spread out again, far away, tiny like little fingernails. Their green glow swarms the dark as they flutter closer, transforming into emerald butterflies, some of them circling his face, before they all gather somewhere above Dori and fly away at speed, until they are completely out of sight.

He shifts his gaze towards Dori who is still unrecognisable, but cautiously reaching out towards him. She's fading along with everything else now. The jungle of the 'other side' retreats into the ground and he feels like he might cry, before becoming suddenly re-awakened to the presence of the knife somewhere behind him, as if it is alive and stabbing at him, sniggering where it lies.

Dori has devolved into a dulled outline again. The black paint has been re-applied. Everything remains fogged in dark swells but Flo can see his old surroundings vaguely now, the walls and wooden flooring, the armchairs and bookshelves. He ignores the knife and heads for the door, pushing Dori aside and striding down the stairs.

As he walks along he is certain that somehow, he's become both stronger and faster, his steps more confident, the strides themselves lighter and wider, like he's half-floating as he has been all day, moving along that gradient slightly above the street. Only now he isn't rocking on invisible waves. He's sliding straight through. He ignores all the shadows he passes, gladly accepting that now he's on a different level to them entirely, reaching the edge of the river and walking along its banks, turning at the roaring, glaring, stone lions and heading down the Chain Bridge.

Exactly half-way between the two giant concrete arches he climbs the metal railing and stands still, staring down at the water. The reflected lights of the parliament building and royal palace glitter in the oily black. The Chain Bridge casts rows of little lights as well and among them is a stooped figure,

with the palest of silver glows, his reflection looking serene and ghostly, causing him to smile. He closes his eyes and crosses his arms over his chest. The wind rises up off the river and takes him. He falls straight, without ever opening his eyes, into darkness. The inky swells hit his feet and consume the rest of his body.

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*A sentence must be served.'*

*'Yes, it must.'*

*'But we're heading the right way.'*

*'How can you tell?'*

*'A feeling.'*

*'Describe it.'*

*'Some things are indescribable.'*

*'Some things. Not this.'*

*'A step away can be a step in the right direction.'*

*'Then why is it so difficult?'*

*'Living in darkness only empowers the light.'*

*'But what is 'the light'?''*

*'It's hidden. But I know it's there.'*

*'We've seen it.'*

*'And you wish to escape?'*

*'Yes, like snow leopards.'*

*'Too beautiful, too wondrous.'*

*'So they're not really nearing extinction?'*

*'No.'*

*'They just went home?'*

*'Yes.'*

*'What does this have to do with us?'*

*'Everything.'*

*'There must be something else.'*

*'Yes, there must be. And you've found it.'*

*'We knew all along.'*

*'It always goes like this'*

*'Yes, always.'*

*'Sink and close your eyes.'*

*'I am.'*

*'Good. We're almost at the end.'*

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He sits on a bench on Margit Island. There's a sign directly in front of him telling him where he is. It's dark and it's cold. He gets up and leaves, heading to the bridge and then over the bridge. He rides the tram and doesn't look at anyone. He gets off on Mester Street and goes into a building and heads up the stairs to an apartment on the fourth floor. The door is unlocked and a girl on the landing starts talking to him but he ignores her. When he goes inside the apartment there's a tall man placing a clock onto a cabinet. The tall man starts to apologise while crying and tells him he's the son of the old woman who lived there and that he took the clock to be repaired and wanted to surprise her. He isn't interested in the tall man and the clock so he turns away. Instead he picks up a bag which is full of money and has a passport in it.

The tall man asks where he's going and the girl on the landing shouts something when he's already half way down the stairs and then he's outside. There's a taxi across the street, stopped at a red light. A man in a suit is sitting in the back. He pays the man in a suit a lot of money and the man in a suit is happy to give up his taxi even though it's the middle of the night. He asks the taxi driver to take him to the airport.

He gets on a plane and while flying he drifts in and out of consciousness listening to 'I know a Place' by Bob Marley on repeat. After the plane he gets on a train and then gets off the train in a coastal city which is the end of the line. First he walks to the beach and stares at an old burnt pier, still listening to 'I know a Place' on repeat. He watches the waves for an unknown amount of time. They look brown and cold. There are seagulls and people walking and

others sitting. Some are quiet and alone, others are loud, mostly the ones with friends or acquaintances who are also loud. The sun is out and he keeps his head low and wears a cap down over his eyes and sunglasses.

Away from the seaside he heads to a brick house on a street full of brick houses where he knocks on the door. A bald man answers and seems happy to see him. He tells the bald man he needs a lot of different ingredients and needs them quickly, passing the bald man a list of things. The bald man looks confused. He asks the bald man if it's going to be a problem. The bald man says maybe so he tells the bald man he'll come back tomorrow. As he walks away the bald man shouts, 'Matthew died,' and starts to cry but he doesn't turn around.

He goes to a flat a few streets away and it's mostly empty apart from one room. In the living room there's a sofa and a table but not much else. In the bedroom there's a bed with no sheets on it. Maybe no one has lived here for a while. He goes to a shop and buys lots of beer and goes back to the abandoned flat and gets drunk while watching a clock tower through balcony doors. A building is being built and there are three cranes in front of the clock tower. When they finish constructing this new building the clock tower will no longer be visible from the balcony doors.

Later he's drunk and sits on the roof shouting things. He goes inside and stumbles around the apartment and falls over in one of the rooms, not the bedroom or living room, the third room that still has things in it and he's been avoiding. There are mainly books and also a desk. Some of the books are torn apart and there are some pages with handwriting and drawings on them that have been burnt in places. He finds a rabbit in there. It runs out from under the desk and makes him fall. It jumps on him and he holds it, swaying because he's so drunk. The rabbit is warm and he picks it up and gives it water and some crushed up crackers. He gets even drunker and smokes lots of cigarettes and shaves his head while staring heavily into his own eyes in the mirror. At some point he passes out.

He wakes up to the rabbit licking his face but drifts off again. Later when he wakes for the second time he can't find the rabbit anywhere. He feels sick and vomits in the kitchen sink. He buys and then drinks some milk and eats an almond croissant. He goes back to the brick house where the

bald man shouted, 'Matthew Died,' and knocks on the door. A girl with blue hair answers. She also acts like she knows him. He nods and smiles and goes in. The bald man isn't there because he's getting stuff. The girl with blue hair asks him to stay and looks concerned but he doesn't want to stay. He says he'll come back at night.

He gets on a bus and goes to a hospital. He asks a nurse who's smoking outside if she knows someone who is also a nurse called Angie. She says she doesn't. He asks another nurse in the car park and she says she does. He says he's Angie's cousin and needs to know where she'll be later. The nurse tells him that Angie hasn't been to work in a while. The nurse says there's a leaving party for someone at one of the clubs by the sea later, and that Angie might be there, but the nurse isn't sure. He thanks the nurse and leaves.

He walks past a bus stop and a man with a small afro runs towards him and says things but he tries not to listen. The man with the small afro looks confused as to why he's being ignored. The man with the small afro apologises and says 'it just happened,' then looks frustrated for a moment and accuses him of 'breaking her heart'. The man with the small afro says he was just comforting her and it happened. He doesn't say anything in response to the man with the small afro and starts to run, first casually then fast. The man with the small afro shouts after him but doesn't follow. The shouting quietens and then stops.

He waits in the flat where he got drunk the night before, hiding behind the curtains. At one point he sees the man with the small afro through the window with a blonde girl. They walk towards the building he's hiding in but then the blonde girl suddenly turns and walks the other way. The man with the small afro runs after her and they disappear around the corner.

At 8PM he goes back to the house where the bald man shouted, 'Matthew died' and the blue haired girl looked concerned. The bald man is back and keeps asking him why he's acting so strange and asking if something's happened. He tells the bald man he's in a rush and smiles. The girl with the blue hair comes downstairs and demonstrates concern again. She rests her hand his shoulder as if trying to console him. He asks her not to

touch him and asks if he can please have what he asked for. The bald man gives him a plastic bag and says he was able to get most of what he requested. The girl with the blue hair doesn't want him to have the plastic bag. She blocks the doorway but the bald man says it's fine and asks her to stop. He gives the bald man money and leaves. The bald man shouts, 'Be careful.' The blue haired girl says some things but he doesn't hear what they are.

He goes to the flat where he got drunk the night before and opens the plastic bag. He mixes all of the ingredients in a grinder. The blend sparkles green and yellow and brown and he smiles. He smokes from a wooden pipe, but only a tiny amount of his blend. Everything turns dark around him which is good, but there are other things he needs to do first so he waits, ignoring the ordinarily imperceptible light and whispering he is now subject to, until everything is 'normal' again. He rolls some of his blend into cigarettes for later and gets drunk until midnight and then goes out.

At the beach a man with a broken nose tries to fight him because he doesn't like his face so they fight. He punches the man with a broken nose several times including once in the nose. He also gets punched while other people shout things. Nobody wins because the police come and he runs away laughing, grinning at the moon and stars which appear for the first time that night.

After hiding in the dark by lying flat on his stomach on the pebbles he goes to a club and walks through the crowd. It's hot and it smells bad. People shout in his face, some with excitement while smiling and others looking angry at him for being there. He goes to another a club and it's the same only more crowded. Someone spills beer on him and he wants to fight but there are too many people around him and he isn't sure who spilled the beer. He goes to a third club and it's like the others only the music is different but equally bad. While traversing the sticky dancefloor and searching faces he makes his own music in his head, walking through and then out of the crowd. A girl in a white dress asks him for a cigarette at the entrance and he gives her one. The girl in the white dress thanks him and says she recognises him but doesn't know how. He says he recognise her too, but also recognises everyone because people are the same, especially the shadows of them. The

girl in the white dress looks confused and he smiles and walks away, heading along a path that follows the edge of the beach. He smokes alone, lying on the pebbles, for a long time.

The sky is no longer black and he walks towards the burnt pier. Only one star remains, and the moon. He stops suddenly and stands still for what feels like a while. There's a blonde girl sitting on the pebbles alone, staring out at the water. It's the same blonde girl he glimpsed from the flat window alongside the man with the small afro. He approaches the blonde girl and she hears him coming. She rises to her feet quickly, staggering back startled. She talks to him, crying streaks of tears, and points at his head. He asks her not to talk and she gets angry and starts swinging at him saying things like, "How fucking dare you?" He tries to stop her by wrapping his arms around her and pressing her body against his. She struggles and eventually weakens. She starts to sob uncontrollably. Her tears dampen the skin on his neck.

He looks over her shoulder, out at the sea beyond. The waves are flickering, turning dark, those shimmery waves of white gold light on the surface, in the depths, growing stronger. He imagines himself knocking the blonde girl to the ground with his fist. He imagines himself smoking his blend, the unconscious girl lying beside him. He'd put her over his shoulder and walk towards the water. The sky would turn white and the water would be cold. There'd be no more final star. No more moon. He'd start to swim, paddling with one hand and both feet so he could keep the girl's mouth and nose above the water. He'd swim until the beach was far away and he was too tired to continue. He'd float there, and imagines how everything would transform. The water would disappear and he'd be floating in black, the blonde girl glowing in his arms, turning emerald green. She'd feel hot, her entirety pulsing.

He envisions the ripples of light swimming into the darkness from each pulse of her heart, pockets of light glimmering as the ripples pass through them. The pockets of light would disappear again. Unseen voices would speak a language he wouldn't recognise. He'd stare down at his feet and they'd be surrounded in black, appearing to hover in something that would look like oil and ink and smoke all at once. There wouldn't be a point where the sea stops



and the air begins. He imagines it to look like space, all around him, shifting, moving, stretching wider, opening up. Figures would appear down below his feet, glowing all over, in the far depths. They'd beckon him to join them as the shore was dragged far away, first stretching, then disappearing into the swirling black.

In his final moments here, the figures below him would drift deeper into the depths. They'd wave gently. He'd glance at the blonde girl in his arms one last time, before wrapping his arms tightly around her, allowing the concealed forces to pull them both under. Together, he and the blonde girl would sink deeper. They'd turn in the black and float upside down. He'd kick at the water, pushing them both towards the figures that would continue to hum in the depths.

But then he imagines her opening her eyes. She mouths his name, "Flo."

They hang there, light above and below. They hang in currents as air runs out. The blonde girl's eyes close. He swallows water, lungs alight, heart wrung with an ache, but the ache isn't solely in his imagination like the rest of it.

Angie starts to struggle in his arms again, her crying growing louder. He whispers, "Everything's going to be alright," and releases her. She screams, "Stay the fuck away from me. You're dead to me." Her eyes are full of tears, her forehead and brows creased. He doesn't say anything as she turns and walks away.

He sits on the pebbles and smokes his pre-prepared cigarettes. One last trip to the in-between. He watches the other side come and then go, just as he'd pictured it. He can hear the ominous humming, he thinks, but it's quiet, too quiet. He doesn't move, just sits there embracing it. After a while the waves and the air above separate again. The in-between begins to fade. The air is thick there with a darkness that he's seen but won't ever pass through. Knowing it's there might be enough. Elusive like him. Hiding like him. What remains of that swirling obscurity shakes and then cracks, as if it was always physical, existing, now struck hard by an unimaginable force. The

broken pieces sink completely out of sight in the sea in front of him. He's left sitting there in the morning rays, knees tucked under his forearms.

He lets the world before his eyes fall into a haze, imagining several versions of himself, both in the clouds and in the depths, between those other lines and other places, all living similar lives simultaneously. He wonders if the only way to ascend is to become fully aware of our seemingly alternate certainties, something unattainable, all too focused on who we think we are externally rather than looking inwardly, forever heedless of these glimpses at our sentient others, ignoring their calls, clues and whispers while pretending we're 'crazy' and hearing voices. Maybe the word 'crazy' is just another means of control. So he closes his eyes, he listens.

He smiles because he no longer hears clinking.

Just rushing. Rushing and the hum of starlight somewhere.



# *Structures of Meaning*

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## *Chapter One – The Long and Short of It*

Sam woke around 3.30 p.m. and saw no emails from Sheila. He made a smoothie. He lay on his bed and stared at a computer screen.<sup>5</sup>

These are the opening three sentences from Tao Lin's 2009 novella, *Shoplifting from American Apparel*.

It began raining a little from a hazy, cloudless-seeming sky as Paul, 26, and Michelle, 21, walked towards Chelsea to attend a magazine-release party in an art gallery. Paul had resigned to not speaking and was beginning to feel more like he was “moving through the universe” than “walking on a sidewalk.” He stared ahead with a mask-like expression, weakly trying to remember where he was one year ago, last November, more for something to do than because he wanted to know, though he was not incurious.<sup>6</sup>

These are the opening three sentences from Tao Lin's 2013 novel, *Taipei*. Though both novels employ a paratactic style of prose, the difference is obvious. *Taipei*'s often long, drawn out, rolling, shifting sentences, create a distinct style of prose throughout the novel, representative of the rolling, shifting, flittering trails of thought of protagonist, Paul. The sentences stretch and drift on and on, from action to thought, from thought to action, illustrative of how Paul drifts through his life, from his limited interaction with others, to his lonelier moments and musings about what life really is. The prose is continuous and fluid, made of long meandering clauses that often dilute each other, so that nothing, or no single moment, sticks out, and

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<sup>5</sup> Tao Lin, *Shoplifting in American Apparel* (New York: Melville House, 2009) p.5

<sup>6</sup> Tao Lin, *Taipei* (New York: Vintage Books, 2013) p.3

no occurrence is flatter or sharper than another. In his article on Tao Lin, titled 'Nobody's Protest Novel' Frank Guan argues:

Characters, abstractions, themes, strands of narrative: all are treated as interchangeable components in this system as it continually shifts into new, self-similar configurations. The swarming density that this process evokes (reflected by the book's many images of clouds, haze, nebulosity) can be so much that even the most perceptive reader is left disoriented after first reading.<sup>7</sup>

Each action and thought is simply another part of the mundane, drug-induced, tech-centric 'sleep-walk' through Paul's life as he struggles to 'feel' anything. The prose is monotonous. Paul is decidedly distracted, and the unvaried droll of these often far-too-long sentences, reflects how he sees himself within the world he inhabits, a disoriented 'someone' who is merely 'moving through the universe', while also evoking this haze and confusion within the reader.

*Shoplifting from American Apparel* takes a different approach to sentence structure. In this book, there are no long sentences. There are barely any conjunctions, only the occasional 'and'. Each action is singular. Each thought is separate. Protagonist Sam moves from one thing to the next. He does something. He thinks something. He says something. Though this overtly paratactic approach towards sentence structure, on the surface, differs to that of *Taipei*, the effect is not so far removed. Similarly to the prose in *Taipei*, the style reflects the character's distractedness. Sam is a lot like Paul. He struggles to connect with others. He shoplifts in order to feel something. His actions and thoughts are not only disconnected from each other, but from the world he inhabits, much like Paul in *Taipei*. Lin is experimenting with his style, demonstrating that there are several ways to write the mundane, to create the desired effect of 'meaninglessness'.

And how is the reader's engagement affected? A contemporary reader spends more time on the computer, scrolling through articles, listicles,

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<sup>7</sup> Frank Guan, 'Nobody's Protest Novel', *NPlus1 Mag*, Issue 20, Fall 2014  
<<https://nplusonemag.com/issue-20/reviews/nobodys-protest-novel/>.

clickbait, social media and blogs, rather than on reading longer pieces of fiction such as the novel. According to Ofcom statistics (published August 2015), 85% of UK adults now have home internet access. Of this 'digital population', 72% have a social media profile, with the majority of users accessing either Facebook or Twitter.<sup>8</sup> In Shannon Belew's *Art of Social Selling: Finding and Engaging Customers on Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn and Other Social Networks* she states that "there are more than 200 million registered active users on Twitter, and the numbers continue to grow."<sup>9</sup> Twitter is highlighted further by Belew for its "ability to disseminate information quickly to the masses."<sup>10</sup> This extensive usage and readily available information has no doubt had an all-encompassing effect on society as a whole, as well as on the individual in it, inclusive of reading habits; how we retain and respond to information. In his article 'Reading in the Digital Age', Sven Birkerts takes an in depth look at how new digital platforms are affecting not the way we read, but also the way we think. He claims that 'the novel is a vital antidote to the mentality that the Internet promotes',<sup>11</sup> focussing on how the reading of a novel requires imagination and contextualisation, how it deepens thought and engages the mind.

My real worry has less to do with the overthrow of human intelligence by Google-powered artificial intelligence and more with the rapid erosion of certain ways of thinking – their demotion, as it were. I mean reflection, a contextual understanding of information, imaginative projection, a contextual understanding of information, imaginative projection. I mean, in my shorthand, intransitive thinking. Contemplation. Thinking for its own sake, non-instrumental, as

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<sup>8</sup> [http://stakeholders.ofcom.org.uk/binaries/research/cmr/cmr15/UK\\_5.pdf](http://stakeholders.ofcom.org.uk/binaries/research/cmr/cmr15/UK_5.pdf)

<sup>9</sup> Shannon Belew, *Art of Social Selling: Finding and Engaging Customers on Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn and Other Social Networks* (New York: Amacom Books, 2014) p.164

<sup>10</sup> Shannon Belew, *Art of Social Selling: Finding and Engaging Customers on Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn and Other Social Networks* (New York: Amacom Books, 2014) p.163

<sup>11</sup> Sven Birkerts, 'Reading in the Digital Age: Notes on why the Novel and Internet are opposites, and why the latter undermines the former and makes it more necessary', *The American Scholar*, Vol. 79, No. 2, Spring 2010, pp.32-44 <  
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/41222179>>

opposed to transitive thinking, the kind that would depend on a machine-drive harvesting of facts toward some specified end.<sup>12</sup>

Birkerts goes as far as saying that these new ways of reading information are ‘reconditioning our neural functioning.’<sup>13</sup> In terms of reading, and the novel, he describes the effort it takes for the reader to enter the novel’s world. He argues it is the ability to focus enough, or to engage with text for a prolonged period, that is disappearing in the contemporary reader. Birkerts states that engagement with a novel requires ‘that at least the language be able to reach the reader, that the word sounds and rhythms come alive in the auditory imagination.’ He goes on to say that it could be the ‘original connection’ with the novel that cannot be made. And finally, most crucially in terms of the present argument, he states that ‘Imagination must be quickened and then it must be sustained – it must survive interruption and deflection.’<sup>14</sup>

*Shoplifting from American Apparel*, with its extremely short sentences, appeals to the masses with little attention, as our reading habits continue to change due largely to the internet. In his article, ‘Is Google Making Us Stupid?’, Nicholas Carr describes changes he has noticed in his own ability to read longer pieces of text, suggesting something has been “remapping the neural circuitry”<sup>15</sup> of his brain:

My mind isn’t going—so far as I can tell—but it’s changing. I’m not thinking the way I used to think. I can feel it most strongly when I’m reading. Immersing myself in a book or a lengthy article used to be

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<sup>12</sup> Sven Birkerts, ‘Reading in the Digital Age: Notes on why the Novel and Internet are opposites, and why the latter undermines the former and makes it more necessary’, *The American Scholar*, Vol. 79, No. 2, Spring 2010, pp.32-44 <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/41222179>>

<sup>13</sup> Sven Birkerts, ‘Reading in the Digital Age: Notes on why the Novel and Internet are opposites, and why the latter undermines the former and makes it more necessary’, *The American Scholar*, Vol. 79, No. 2, Spring 2010, pp.32-44 <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/41222179>>

<sup>14</sup> Sven Birkerts, ‘Reading in the Digital Age: Notes on why the Novel and Internet are opposites, and why the latter undermines the former and makes it more necessary’, *The American Scholar*, Vol. 79, No. 2, Spring 2010, pp.32-44 <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/41222179>>

<sup>15</sup> Nicholas Carr, ‘Is Google Making Us Stupid?: What the Internet is Doing to Our Brains’, *The Atlantic*, July/August 2008 <<https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2008/07/is-google-making-us-stupid/306868/>>

easy. My mind would get caught up in the narrative or the turns of the argument, and I'd spend hours strolling through long stretches of prose. That's rarely the case anymore. Now my concentration often starts to drift after two or three pages. I get fidgety, lose the thread, begin looking for something else to do. I feel as if I'm always dragging my wayward brain back to the text. The deep reading that used to come naturally has become a struggle.<sup>16</sup>

He blames the internet for this change, stating that now his mind "expects to take in information the way the Net distributes it: in a swiftly moving stream of particles."<sup>17</sup> He takes his argument to the extreme, suggesting that as we continue to rely on the internet for our reading needs, for our primary source of information, intelligence is 'flattening' out into artificial-intelligence.<sup>18</sup> He cites the effect the internet has had on other forms of writing and media as well:

The Net's influence doesn't end at the edges of a computer screen, either. As people's minds become attuned to the crazy quilt of Internet media, traditional media have to adapt to the audience's new expectations. Television programs add text crawls and pop-up ads, and magazines and newspapers shorten their articles, introduce capsule summaries, and crowd their pages with easy-to-browse info-snippets.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Nicholas Carr, 'Is Google Making Us Stupid?: What the Internet is Doing to Our Brains', *The Atlantic*, July/August 2008

<<https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2008/07/is-google-making-us-stupid/306868/>>

<sup>17</sup> Nicholas Carr, 'Is Google Making Us Stupid?: What the Internet is Doing to Our Brains', *The Atlantic*, July/August 2008

<<https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2008/07/is-google-making-us-stupid/306868/>>

<sup>18</sup> Nicholas Carr, 'Is Google Making Us Stupid?: What the Internet is Doing to Our Brains', *The Atlantic*, July/August 2008

<<https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2008/07/is-google-making-us-stupid/306868/>>

<sup>19</sup> Nicholas Carr, 'Is Google Making Us Stupid?: What the Internet is Doing to Our Brains', *The Atlantic*, July/August 2008

<<https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2008/07/is-google-making-us-stupid/306868/>>



He goes to further describe how 'old media' such as *The New York Times* have shortened their approach as well, condensing articles.<sup>20</sup> In his article 'Less Text, Please: Contemporary Reading Behaviours and Short Formats', technical writer Tom Johnson adds to this argument, writing, "The less I write, the happier my project teams are. If I could deliver everything in a handful of haikus, I would be the most popular writer in town."<sup>21</sup>

So why should these changes not apply to the novel as well? If readership is the primary goal, which it would seem is the case for Tao Lin, who puts great thought into his public persona and people's perception of him as writer, it's the smart thing to do. We read Twitter and text messages. More and more articles are bullet-pointed lists, so that we don't have to trawl through pages of text in order to find the part that interests us. We can move from one idea to the next with ease. We can skip the ideas or topics that don't interest us. Readers can take a sentence, a thought or an idea, digest it, and move onto the next. It's easy and it's simple, requiring little effort or 'deep thinking'. In *Shoplifting from American Apparel*, Lin has written a novel to appeal to this new reading culture. Its prose is easy to digest, and you could read ten novellas its size in the time it would take to read and make sense of something like *Crime and Punishment*. Birkerts suggests that the novel has not changed, it is our way of thinking that has. In his writing, Lin is showing us that yes, the way we read has changed, and that maybe it is time that the novel changed as well, to adhere to this new way of thinking.

Readership in terms of numbers is not the focus here, but it's important to understand why this sparse style of writing may have developed, and the effect it could have in a writer's ability to create a piece that is more readable and thus more interesting for contemporary audiences. In *Taipei* Lin achieves a similar effect in a different way. He uses the long, drawn-out sentences to describe mundane daily happenings. He is mimicking

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<sup>20</sup> Nicholas Carr, 'Is Google Making Us Stupid?: What the Internet is Doing to Our Brains', *The Atlantic*, July/August 2008  
<<https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2008/07/is-google-making-us-stupid/306868/>>

<sup>21</sup> Tom Johnson, 'Less Text, Please: Contemporary Reading Behaviours and Short Formats', *I'd Rather Be Writing*, January 2010 <<http://idratherbewriting.com/2011/01/21/contemporary-reading-behaviors-favor-short-formats/>>

the way we scroll through text online, endless information with no real intrigue to it, much like his fiction. But we read on, we scroll on down the page, even though we don't really want to, just waiting for that next piece of 'clickbait'.

Birkerts describes similar process:

All of us now occupy an information space blazing with signals. We have had to evolve coping strategies. Not merely the ability to heed simultaneous cues from different directions, cues of different kinds, but also – this is important – to engage those cues more obliquely. When there is too much information, we graze it lightly, applying focus only where it is most needed. We stare at a computer screen with its layered windows and orient ourselves with a necessarily fractured attention. It is not at all surprising that when we step away and try to apply ourselves to the unfragmented text of a book we have trouble.<sup>22</sup>

In *Taipei* we are given these long scenes of exposition precisely for this reason. As a reader, we can scroll through, we can pick and choose words or clauses to follow, and at the end of the page, we are left with a few interesting ideas, a few instances of Paul's 'concrete reality', and if we miss certain things, it is not detrimental to our understanding of the plot, because little has actually happened.

These two approaches to sentence structure read very differently. Both styles will surely be despised by many readers. They are polarising, and this is evident from the critical reception. In the *LA Times* review of *Taipei*, Lydia Millet wrote that Lin is "A genuinely original stylist" who "writes in a deadpan, automated voice that characterizes with powerful flatness his antihero's ongoing crisis of narcissism/social anxiety disorder."<sup>23</sup> In that same paragraph she also writes that, "Reading this text is not unlike staring fixedly

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<sup>22</sup> Sven Birkerts, 'Reading in the Digital Age: Notes on why the Novel and Internet are opposites, and why the latter undermines the former and makes it more necessary', *The American Scholar*, Vol. 79, No. 2, Spring 2010, pp.32-44 <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/41222179>>

<sup>23</sup> Lydia Millet, 'Can Tao Lin see the future?', *LA Times*, June 20, 2013 <<http://articles.latimes.com/2013/jun/20/entertainment/la-ca-jc-tao-lin-tapei-20130623>>

at a blank wall.”<sup>24</sup> Even Bret Easton Ellis, to whom Lin has often been likened to, famously tweeted that Lin was ‘one of the most interesting prose stylists of his generation’, but not before adding that *Taipei* was a ‘boring novel.’ However, in terms of this thesis, the focus is on how structure can create meaning, down to the finest of details, the smallest of things.

In spite of its difficult prose style, *Taipei* remains an intriguing novel. There is something in its scrolling prose that makes it addictive, in the way many have described the work of Knausgaard. In reference to his *My Struggle* series, Zadie Smith even wrote, “I need the next volume like crack.”<sup>25</sup> Tao Lin’s Prose has had a similar effect on me. I’ve actively searched for novels written in a similar way, eager to sink my teeth into more of the same. Tao Lin has written something that perfectly captivates both myself and how I like to read. Quite simply, I find his lengthy sentences beautiful. There is an ominous, thoughtful quality to them that appeals to me as a reader. I can pick a random page from the novel, without any context of what comes before or after, and enjoy it greatly, purely for the language and the thoughts of the character in that particular moment, and how it reflects on the world. There is a sinister quality, a haunting realism in its ‘presentism’, in its ‘nowness’.

But then again, maybe I’ve been ‘duped’. On Lin’s sentence structure, in his review of *Taipei* for *The American Reader*, Jonathon Kyle Sturgeon writes:

The novel’s sentences sliver sensation and spread it evenly over a given moment, until feeling itself disappears into bodily movement (a turning head) or a fleeting sense of duration (“silently a few seconds”). Its similes are neither heavy enough to weigh down a succession of instances nor light enough to float toward neutral beauty, which is the only form of beauty that vague and scientific language can handle. It takes less than a chapter to realize that *Taipei*’s scattered pools of figurative language are nothing but

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<sup>24</sup> Lydia Millet, ‘Can Tao Lin see the future?’, *LA Times*, June 20, 2013

<<http://articles.latimes.com/2013/jun/20/entertainment/la-ca-jc-tao-lin-tapei-20130623>>

<sup>25</sup> Ben Lerner, ‘Each Cornflake’, *London Review of Books*, Volume 36, 22 May 2014

<<https://www.lrb.co.uk/v36/n10/ben-lerner/each-cornflake>>

mirages meant to distract the reader from its desert of automated prose.<sup>26</sup>

As highlighted by Sturgeon, Lin's sentences are bloated without building towards anything. The sentences are disguised as hypotactic, but remain flat, or 'automated.' They don't take us, the reader, anywhere. The clauses undo each other at times, taking one step forward and two steps back. That is to say, rarely do the sentences move the reader forward in a clear and concise manner, with regards to what Paul is thinking or doing. Sturgeon writes that "At the sentence level, too, the novel obeys an ethics of presentism, one that inflates its now-ness in order to crowd out the past and the future. It is not so much that a new clause rises up and overthrows the memory of the clause before it; it is more that each moment is loosely attached to the next in a rapid sequence, like bubbles in foam."<sup>27</sup> But perhaps this is precisely the point.

Paul felt himself trying to interpret the situation, as if there was a problem to be solved, but there didn't seem to be anything, or maybe there was, but he was three or four skill sets away from comprehension, like an amoeba trying to create a personal webpage using CSS.<sup>28</sup>

Paul goes from trying to interpret his present situation to imagining himself as an amoeba. His mind can't even be bothered to attempt to process what is happening, and he becomes distracted, feeling he is incapable of working out what is transpiring, an event that turns out to be the ending of his relationship with Michelle. In this example, and many other distracted sentences that seemingly go nowhere, it is evident that Lin is capturing his protagonist perfectly. Paul, in his mind, is unable to go anywhere. He muses and at times can't even afford the effort to complete a trail of thought.

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<sup>26</sup> Jonathon Kyle Sturgeon, 'Review: On Tao Lin's "Taipei"', *The American Reader* <<http://theamericanreader.com/review-on-tao-lins-taipei/>>

<sup>27</sup> Jonathon Kyle Sturgeon, 'Review: On Tao Lin's "Taipei"', *The American Reader* <<http://theamericanreader.com/review-on-tao-lins-taipei/>>

<sup>28</sup> Tao Lin, *Taipei* (New York: Vintage Books, 2013) p.10

Nothing is elevated from the prose because in Paul's reality, nothing is elevated. Nothing has any more value than anything else. The prose seems 'automated' because Paul is, in many senses, 'automated', at times almost appearing like a robot or alien, attempting to make sense of humanity's ways. The novel is about the Internet, it's about social media and technology in general, the effect these things are having on humanity. Our online personas are more important than our 'real-life' personas. Paul lives his life through his Macbook, his one constant companion in the novel. We are becoming almost like machines, in a sense.

Meanwhile the short staccato sentences of *Shopliftng from American Apparel*, or Lin's even earlier novel, *Eeeee Eee Eeee*, make reading so simple. I would go as far as saying they are almost amusingly simple, appealing to the reader's sense of humour.

Light turns green. Andrew doesn't want to go. He goes. He should drive into something. A mountain. The mountain would explode.

There's nothing to drive into.<sup>29</sup>

The trail of action is easy to follow. Written as a narrated monologue, or free indirect discourse, it moves the reader closer to the character's consciousness. The sentences themselves, or thoughts, are witty in their simplicity. They are mimicking the way in which, within periods of boredom or indecision, we flitter just like this. 'I should eat. No I shouldn't. I'll get fat. Maybe I should go for a run. I hate running. Fuck it. Where's the toast. I'll watch a movie.' In a sense, it is the honesty of both styles that makes them work, the manner in which they truthfully reflect how so many, at least from my generation, might feel. In *Taipei* Lin uses psychonarration. The narrator is ever present, guiding us as we delve into Paul's thoughts. However, this does not seem to diminish the effectiveness of the representation of thought. This style, which would normally create a distance between reader and character, works for two key reasons. Firstly, Lin is a writer who blurs the lines between fiction and reality anyway. His characters are him, and he is his characters.

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<sup>29</sup> Tao Lin, *Eeeee Eee Eeee* (New York: Melville House, 2007) p.50

There are numerous parallels between the two; his characters are usually writers, Paul is from Taiwan, as is Lin, and Sam grew up in Florida, as did Lin. His characters take drugs, as does Lin. They are usually vegan, as is Lin. Therefore, as one reads Lin's psychonarration, the expected distance between narrator and the character's thoughts, that often accompanies this style of writing, becomes very small. It feels as though, in many ways, Lin is narrating his own thoughts.

Secondly, it would seem that now, in today's 'online society', one that is so dominated by 'self-produced' images of the self, we have become accustomed to 'curating' our online personas, updating our various social media outlets, and thus, in a sense, creating a narrative of our own lives in which we are the characters. In his book, *Consciousness and the Novel*, David Lodge writes "We not only have experiences, we are conscious of ourselves having them, and of being affected by them."<sup>30</sup> In today's contemporary society we can add to this notion. Now, as well as being conscious of ourselves having experiences, many of us seek to show the world this very fact, and to demonstrate it continuously. Deborah Chambers shares this view in her book *Social Media and Personal Relationships*, stating that social networking site engagement is "a form of impression management that involves an explicit construction of the social self."<sup>31</sup> She goes on to say that "creating and networking online content has become a fundamental resource for managing one's identity."<sup>32</sup> Citing Alison Hearn's study on Twitter, Chambers states that "social media is used to carefully construct a 'meta-narrative' and 'meta-image' of self."<sup>33</sup> Tao Lin's approach to thought process within his fiction mirrors this idea in many ways. He is narrating himself, or a version of himself that he wants the world to see. His readers can engage with his prose, and feel close to his characters despite the pre-supposed distance his particular style could create. Arguably, a stream of consciousness style narration, as employed by Joyce's *Ulysses*, for example, is more realistic,

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<sup>30</sup> David Lodge, *Consciousness and the Novel: Connected Essays* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 2002) p.14

<sup>31</sup> Deborah Chambers, *Social Media and Personal Relationships* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013) p.62

<sup>32</sup> Deborah Chambers, *Social Media and Personal Relationships* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013) p.64

<sup>33</sup> Deborah Chambers, *Social Media and Personal Relationships* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013) p.62

or even organic, without punctuation, blurring together ideas and thoughts and actions, taking the reader deeper into the character's mind, creating a closer relationship between the reader and the thoughts of the character. However, in contemporary fiction, as demonstrated by Lin, it would seem this use of psychonarration could be closer to reality, or at least to what has become reality, and is just as effective. And finally, in a novel in which one of the key themes is technology and the internet revolution, and how these have affected the existential self, it is all too fitting that the style of prose be reminiscent of precisely this.

Returning to sentence structure in general, Sturgeon likens Lin's style to mathematics. He writes that Lin's "early prose reads like a student's math assignment, a zero-sum game where ideas and things are added and subtracted in the way a child plays with a calculator."<sup>34</sup> This is with reference to *Eeeee Eee Eeee*. He goes on to write that Lin's mathematical style has remained in *Taipei*, but perhaps has 'matured'; the "arithmetic has become a geometry."<sup>35</sup>

Meaning is an arbitrary construction that does not inhere in material things; it is still, therefore, a matter of taking apart and putting together, a narrative mathematics.<sup>36</sup>

He goes on to write that "a surplus of imprecise language is used (precisely) to nullify meaning"<sup>37</sup> and that the sentence clauses build up an almost unreadably intense presentism, or "an accumulation of instances" that total out to "zero."<sup>38</sup> However, Sturgeon does praise *Taipei* as 'beautifully cut' and 'geometrically pristine', a point that I cannot argue with, concluding that at the very least Lin has achieved contemporaneity and authenticity. Yes,

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<sup>34</sup> Jonathon Kyle Sturgeon, 'Review: On Tao Lin's "Taipei"', *The American Reader*  
<<http://theamericanreader.com/review-on-tao-lins-taipei/>>

<sup>35</sup> Jonathon Kyle Sturgeon, 'Review: On Tao Lin's "Taipei"', *The American Reader*  
<<http://theamericanreader.com/review-on-tao-lins-taipei/>>

<sup>36</sup> Jonathon Kyle Sturgeon, 'Review: On Tao Lin's "Taipei"', *The American Reader*  
<<http://theamericanreader.com/review-on-tao-lins-taipei/>>

<sup>37</sup> Jonathon Kyle Sturgeon, 'Review: On Tao Lin's "Taipei"', *The American Reader*  
<<http://theamericanreader.com/review-on-tao-lins-taipei/>>

<sup>38</sup> Jonathon Kyle Sturgeon, 'Review: On Tao Lin's "Taipei"', *The American Reader*  
<<http://theamericanreader.com/review-on-tao-lins-taipei/>>

perhaps *Taipei* lacks ‘feeling.’ But it would seem Lin has used a defined method of construction to achieve exactly this. Meaning might be arbitrary, or at least appear arbitrary, however this arbitrary feeling has been achieved through an approach that is deliberate. In an interview with Rachel R. White for *Vulture*, Lin explained that he has “tight guidelines — formulas — that create his distinctive writing style.”<sup>39</sup> His guide is made up of a series of grammatical rules for sentence structure, including things like, “Yes comma if verb does have adverb (“stared ahead with a masklike expression, weakly trying ...”).”<sup>40</sup> The formulaic approach to sentence structure, as alluded to by Sturgeon, is evident in *Taipei*. Ultimately, it would seem that mathematics, automation and extreme presentism have replaced meaning. It is this absence of meaning that is arguably the core of what makes *Taipei* work as novel. The carefully conveyed procession of crowded, present moments give the novel this definitive feeling of ‘going nowhere’.

The vocabulary used by Lin in these respective novels follows a similar pattern in terms of length. In *Taipei* Lin uses adverbs like ‘circumstantially’<sup>41</sup> and ‘indiscernibly’<sup>42</sup> and ‘uninhibitedly’<sup>43</sup> in his long, meandering sentences. The effect of these words is similar to the effect of the sentences themselves. I have already mentioned that other than the word ‘and’ there are very few conjunctions in *Shoplifting from American Apparel*. The rest of the language is comparably simple. Short sentences with short, simple words. They are easy to understand and digest; subject, verb, object.

He ate a seaweed salad. He drank a smoothie. He walked back to the apartment. He drank an energy drink.<sup>44</sup>

The paragraph usage in these respective novels follows the same pattern, as do the length of scenes. *Shoplifting from American Apparel* jumps from one scene to the next at lightning pace. We are in one place, and then the next,

<sup>39</sup> Rachel R White, ‘Staying Up All Night With an Adderall’d Tao Lin’, *Vulture*, June, 2013 <<http://www.vulture.com/2013/06/tao-lin-profile-taipei-drugs-adderall.html>>

<sup>40</sup> Rachel R White, ‘Staying Up All Night With an Adderall’d Tao Lin’, *Vulture*, June, 2013 <<http://www.vulture.com/2013/06/tao-lin-profile-taipei-drugs-adderall.html>>

<sup>41</sup> Tao Lin, *Taipei* (New York: Vintage Books, 2013) p.99

<sup>42</sup> Tao Lin, *Taipei* (New York: Vintage Books, 2013) p.99

<sup>43</sup> Tao Lin, *Taipei* (New York: Vintage Books, 2013) p.117

<sup>44</sup> Tao Lin, *Shoplifting in American Apparel* (New York: Melville House, 2009) pp.34-35



for the most part. The book's longest scene takes place when Sam is being held in jail, after being arrested for shoplifting.

A policeman said the drunk man had beaten up a homeless person in Tompkins State park, not gotten beat up in Starbucks. The drunk man was snoring in the other cell. The bald Caucasian and skinny Hispanic talked about hurting the drunk man. They discussed the placement of security cameras at Central Booking.

"He's drunk, people are different when they are drunk," said the African American policeman in a shy voice. "He might sober up and be the nicest person you ever meet."

The "fat Irish boy" policeman woke the drunk man to get his fingerprints. It took about ten minutes to get the drunk man's fingerprints. The drunk man and the policeman hugged. The tall Asian was released. The bald Caucasian went in a side room with a policeman. "They told me what I'm getting," he said back in the cell. "I'm going away for a long time."<sup>45</sup>

The scene lasts seven pages. Its length allows it stand out from the rest of the book, because the style is flat as always, the sentences still short. However, the overall length of the scene allows readers to understand that this is a central moment in the vague plot, aside from the fact that it's the title scene of the book itself.

Conversely, the scenes in *Taipei* are very lengthy and convoluted for the most part, (though admittedly *Taipei* does jump around rapidly at times), primarily due to large passages of exposition as to what is going on inside Paul's head. In *Taipei*, it is the scenes where Paul is alone that we, as readers, often spend the longest in one particular locale. Once again, this is the mimicking of the boredom, the mundanity, how long each of us spends alone at our computers scrolling and reading through the online world that has become so dominant and all-encompassing.

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<sup>45</sup> Tao Lin, *Shoplifting in American Apparel* (New York: Melville House, 2009) p.25

He stared at the backs of his eyelids with motionless eyeballs, slightly feigning not knowing what he was looking at – which also felt like a kind of hiding – and gradually discerned that he was in Brooklyn, on an aberrantly colder day in late March, in the two-person apartment, in a four-storey house, where he had moved, a few weeks after returning from Taiwan, because Kyle and Gabby had wanted more space, to “save their relationship.”

It was Spring, not winter or autumn, Paul thought with some lingering confusion. He listened to the layered murmur of wind against leaves, familiarly and gently disorienting lives, then opened his MacBook – sideways, like a hardcover book – and looked at the internet, lying on his side, with his right ear pressed into his pillow, as if, unable to return to sleep, at least in position to hear what, in his absence, might be happening there.<sup>46</sup>

Paul is alone and Paul is bored. Little else happens in this extensive passage, yet it elicits boredom expertly. It mimics a disaffected mind. There are many similar scenes throughout the novel, and when Paul does venture out, on his book-tour, or to Vegas to get married, or to Taipei, the scenes are just as empty of any real ‘action.’ Paul and his various friends and acquaintances take drugs and walk around, watch movies and film each other, drink smoothies and Paul sometimes ‘works on stuff’. It is repetitive, but deliberately so, reflecting the meaninglessness of the world, as viewed by its characters. It is nihilistic in many ways, existential to an extent, but somewhat empty none the less. The novel, as a result of these lengthy boredom-eliciting passages, feels too long. *Taipei* is an average sized novel at 79,360 words. Most literary agencies, who are the first step towards publication, will cite in their requirements, that the novel should be between 80,000 and 100,000 words. *Writer's Digest* suggests 80,000 to 90,000 words for first time authors.<sup>47</sup> *Taipei* adheres to this general average. Yet considering this apparent lack of plot or any real drama, I would argue that

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<sup>46</sup> Tao Lin, *Taipei* (New York: Vintage Books, 2013) pp. 18-19

<sup>47</sup> Chuck Sambuchino, ‘Word Count for Novels and Children’s Books: The Definitive Post’, *Writer’s Digest*, October 2012 <<http://www.writersdigest.com/editor-blogs/guide-to-literary-agents/word-count-for-novels-and-childrens-books-the-definitive-post>>

248 pages is excessive. In contrast, as I have already alluded to, *Shoplifting from American Apparel* is a 32,740 word novella. The book, written in such terse sentences, is fittingly terse in itself. Something quick and easy to digest and then ponder. This further illustrates that perhaps the plot itself isn't so important in these novels. Their purpose is not to entertain through dramatic action. The style of the prose itself and the form it takes, if achieving its desired effect, can be enough to entice readers into engagement and even enjoyment.

In writing *Illuminato*, my own prose went through several extensive changes in relation to sentence structure. My initial drafts were filled with short staccato sentences, as I was heavily influenced by the style employed in Camus' *The Stranger*, and furthermore when I began to read Tao Lin's earlier novels. Here is an early version of the scene where Flo kills the raven:

*Angie glared at him. She walked away from him with her arms crossed. Her head was buried deep into her scarf. Flo noticed the woman in the red dress beside the path to his left. She was staring at him with a blank expression. Tennis ball at her side. Her hair was limp and straight. There were patches of mud all over her dress. He gave her a wave and jogged after Angie. The sky seemed ominous. Also omniscient, he thought. He could still feel the snap of bones in his hands. The feeling reverberated through him. The sound echoed like church bells.*

*(Illuminato, Early draft)*

After reading Don DeLillo, Saramago's *The Double* and *Taipei*, I decided to shift radically, and opt for long drawn-out sentences, to reflect my protagonist Florián's constantly meandering inner voice. I liked the way the rolling sentences blended 'thought to thought, notion to notion'. The above scene became this:

*Angie glared at him and walked away down the path with her arms crossed, her head buried even deeper into her scarf, as Flo shifted his focus to the woman in the red dress beside the path to his left. She*

*was staring at him with a blank expression, holding the tennis ball down at her side, so he waved at her and nodded, then jogged after Angie, glancing at the sky which seemed darker and therefore ominous, a shade purple, maybe also omniscient, somehow, because he could still feel the bones snapping in his hands, like the clang of endless church bells somewhere deep inside.*

*(Illuminato, Early draft)*

The former extract has a staccato rhythm. Each action is separate and easy to follow. Each clearly leads to the next. In the latter example, the clauses continue to build and emerge from each other, creating a sentence that is much more difficult to follow. While this works well in certain situations, in moments where I want to emphasise Florián's lack of direction, it merely confuses scenes where the action is more direct, such as the example above. The short sentences work almost like a film script, providing short instances the reader can easily visualise before moving onto the next, not dissimilar to series of 'shots' in a film. Angie glares. Angie walks away. We see the woman in the red dress. The reader is drawn to details in her physical appearance. Flo waves at her. Flo jogs away.

Though both styles attributed something distinct and particular to my novel, in the end it seemed a combination of the two would be most effective in accurately conveying my novel's ideas, reflecting the protagonist's character, and perhaps most importantly, engaging the reader. I opted for long flowing sentences in passages where Florián is thinking, imagining and reflecting. This seemed logical, a true replication of how a bored and 'disaffected' trail of thought might work; an honest representation of a jaded mind pondering numerous things, as it struggles to latch on to some form of meaning in any single, considered idea. For the action however, I used short, rhythmic sentences. In these moments, the sentences bounce from one to the next, an approach I used for clarity, but also as a way of expressing the impulsivity of Florián's physical movements and general 'direction'.

*He walks along the river bank. He passes several boats for hire. There are groups of people wearing dresses and suits moving on and off them. Lots of people are taking pictures of themselves and of the scenery. Instagram and Facebook for sure. Maybe Tweeting, even here, naturally, he thinks. He crosses the street and moves into a pedestrianised part of the city, somewhere in Pest. He wanders into smaller alleyways. He passes bars and clubs. He stops outside a strip club called LUSTRE that's next to a sex-shop also called LUSTRE, cheaply lit with blue and red. This could be the kind of place where he might find the things on Fred's list, the ingredients he needs to complete that other quest, or at least someone who could point him in the right direction. He steels himself to enter but remains motionless.*

*He can't find the motivation to go all the way, feeling done with those sorts of places, hating them even more than he always has. But it's not fear, he convinces himself. Disdain, revulsion, absolutely, but not fear.*

*(Illuminato, p.9)*

Throughout the novel, Florán doesn't know where he is going, or what his greater purpose is. He just 'rolls with it' in terms of his physical actions, while quietly meditating on everything in the background. In the above example, taken from the opening of the novel in Budapest, the sentences are short throughout, aside from one. The lone long sentence describes Florián pondering his main quest, one that has been given to him by Fred. He is deliberating, and here I am able to slow the prose, in order to reflect this deliberation and lack of a concise thought process. I am able to pull this sentence out from amidst the others, indicating its significance to the overall narrative. This has been crucial to my writing process as well. Utilising both paratactic approaches to sentence structure has allowed for a more interesting prose as a whole. It has enabled me to elevate key moments by prolonging them, or to alter the pace quickly in moments of dramatic action. The night of the hit and run is one such example, where total

boredom and loneliness turns into one of the more dramatic scenes in the novel.

*He turned on to Park Avenue and sped down the long wide road. He began picking up speed on the straight. Trees lined both pavements and the country park was on his right. The streetlights were pale. He barely saw the man at all, far away, stumbling over the road alone. Guitars strummed deep thoughts of escape on his stereo. He felt the thud as he hit the body.*

*(Illuminato, p.54)*

The sentences are short. The vocabulary is simple. The pace of this particular scene is evident, especially when compared with what comes after. This scene is followed by several pages of Florián's rooftop musings, where he meditates on the consequences of his actions, or apparent lack of consequence, and notices what becomes 'the other side' to him, for the first time. In this scene, with its expanded sentences, the pace is slowed down significantly.

*He stared at the sun from the balcony and smoked on through the morning, becoming aware of a strange glimmer, hidden behind the sun's familiar glow. He noticed it on the sea over the rooftops, a hidden shine that grew the more he let his eyes waver, the more he let the familiar world fall away. It was a kind of pearly sheen beneath the sun's reflecting splashes, maybe coming from under the waves and the stone, but not buried deep enough anymore, unable to hide from him between the lines. So like a tree he stood there on the balcony, pricking skin with his sharp nails, feeling no pain at all, increasingly feeling like someone else, concealed deep within a body that was no longer his.*

*(Illuminato, p.55)*

For passages like this I chose to use the lengthy 'many-claused' sentences, as employed by Lin in *Taipei*. As well as conveying Florián's general mind set in

moments of pondering, this allowed me to highlight instances of great thematic importance and to transform the pace, thus, hopefully implementing both intrigue and meaning to the mundane.

Toying with the sentence structure, the scene and paragraph lengths, has allowed me to write the ordinary organically and accurately, but also in a way that I hope is both interesting and absorbing. The resulting changes of pace, and to essence of meaning, are elements that I like to think will keep readers hooked, addicted even, as Tao Lin was able to addict me.

## ***Chapter Two – Back and Forth***

If any of literature's other elements are stronger than form, such as style, plot, theme, if any of these take control over form, the result is poor. That is why writers with strong style often write poor books. That is also why writers with strong themes so often write poor books. Strong themes and styles have to be broken down before literature can come into being.<sup>48</sup>

The above extract, taken from Knausgaard's, *A Death in the Family*, the first of his 'My Struggle' series, makes the writer's intentions quite clear. Form is his focus, and this is all too evident in his take on contemporary fiction, a long and arduous journey through his own life, a journey described in meticulous detail, detail so fine and so seemingly un-important, that at times the reader wonders why they are included. In a series of books containing little dramatic action, as with Lin's novels, Knausgaard must use form in order to entice and grip readers. The above extract is taken from the mid-point of *A Death in the Family*. By the time the reader reaches this stage in the novel, Knausgaard has carefully guided them through several events of his distant past and more recent past, with little dramatic action. In fact, throughout the 'My Struggle' series, Knausgaard takes us continuously back and forth, from boredom to creativity, from creativity back into boredom, and through time itself. At the central point in the series' first novel, we are given this poignant, honest-seeming quote about writing. It appears very self-conscious, as if Knausgaard is justifying his lack of a distinct style and thrilling plot, by informing us, the reader, that form is not only his focus, but should be the focus of all literature. It would seem that he is 'breaking-down' other elements in order to allow his form to dominate and rise above the other elements. By including this quote on writing, he is demonstrating that the lack of dramatic action is an artistic choice. He hasn't simply omitted a strong style or gripping narrative so that form could dominate. He has intentionally,

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<sup>48</sup> Karl Ove Knausgaard, *A Death in the Family* (London: Vintage, 2014) p.218



by design, opted for this 'authentic-seeming' style of fidelity over drama, as the constant flashbacks create the illusion of legitimacy. Furthermore, in the way he discusses the separate elements of literature, it's almost as if they are even in competition with each other, plot and style and themes being the antagonist to his preferred form. You must 'destroy' one, or two, to allow another to prevail. Again, this seems to justify his omission of these important elements in literature. He is telling the reader, overtly and honestly, what he is doing. But this is the genius of his form. It appears self-conscious, it appears honest, but this 'illusion' of total fidelity between himself in the reader is his form, and it is one reason why his novels have been so successful.

*A Death in the Family* opens in the present, written from the point of view of a 37-year-old Karl Ove, using the first-person present tense. The opening pages examine the theme of death in a largely philosophical manner, until a few passages describing particular instance of death lead us into the past, to an 8-year-old Karl Ove.

I am sitting alone, watching, it is sometime in Spring, I suppose, for my father is working in the garden. I stare at the surface of the sea without listening to what the reporter says, and suddenly the outline of a face emerges. I don't know how long it stays there, a few seconds perhaps, but long enough for it to have a huge impact on me.<sup>49</sup>

37-year-old Karl Ove's musings evoke this particular image of a drowned fisherman, as seen on the news by a much younger Karl Ove. It is this image, in a narrative sense, that creates the direct window into the past, where the narrative remains for almost 250 pages.

Once this transition into the past has occurred, Knausgaard continues to play with chronology. Time is manipulated constantly. The flashbacks themselves are partly chronological, however, large parts of the narrative seem to be organised and categorised thematically instead, as the reader navigates the main plot points of Karl Ove's life. One memory will lead to

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<sup>49</sup> Karl Ove Knausgaard, *A Death in the Family* (London: Vintage, 2014) p.9

another, and to further digressions from the 'main thread' of the plot. These digressions are often several pages long, but it is this constant back and forth motion that gives Knausgaard's writing a unique feel. We go back and forth with him in waves, some larger than others, but there is a constant ebb and flow. The images, the one highlighted above for example, are used not for style, but as devices to aid the form, that is to aid this back and forth motion, to create a seemingly streamlined connection between the past and the present, allowing for the past to be described in as much excruciating detail as the present without losing the sense of authenticity. Arguably, he has written something deeply honest, and in his form he is trying to mimic a real mind, and be as authentic as possible, or at least create the illusion of total authenticity, as if he is compelled to share absolutely everything with his readers, down to the most brutal truths about his own family. As Wood describes it, "Knausgaard is intense and utterly honest, unafraid to voice universal anxieties, unafraid to appear naïve or awkward."<sup>50</sup> Thus, we as readers fully believe that he is capable of recalling all these minute details from his childhood, and that perhaps we have the power to do the same. These long digressions into the past create suspension in the most literal sense, keeping us away from the present until that particular wave of the past rolls forwards towards the now, before the undercurrent takes us back out into the sea of the past again.

The novel for the most part remains clear and easy to follow in spite of the ceaseless back and forth movement. This is down to the effective transitions Knausgaard has used, the images highlighted earlier, allowing the reader to seamlessly shift from one point in time to the other. Another example of this takes place on New Year's Eve, as a sixteen-year-old Karl Ove is attempting to reach a party, with beer that he bought in secret and stashed away in a bush. From this one narrative event, an entire odyssey of a young Karl Ove's experiences with alcohol follow. First Knausgaard takes the reader back further through time, to the night when a young Karl Ove gets drunk for the first time. From there the narrative moves chronologically through a few alcohol related experiences. These experiences with alcohol lead into Karl

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<sup>50</sup> James Wood, 'Total Recall: Karl Ove Knausgaard's "My Struggle"', *The New Yorker*, August 2012, <<http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2012/08/13/total-recall>>

Ove's first experiences with a girl, and then many more similar, teen-love related instances. Following this set of memories is the meagre history of Karl Ove's band and his rock music obsession, from first band practices to a first disastrous gig at a shopping centre. This digression, or sequence of thematic digressions, are so long (p74-p109) that by the time Knausgaard returns to the main narrative thread, if it can even be called that, the reader has all but forgotten what this is (New Year's Eve). This scene is in fact also a flashback in itself, and music is the device used to facilitate a time-shift in this instance. The strumming of a guitar is the particular image, a David Bowie songbook, and we are back to New Year's Eve, with a sixteen-year-old Karl Ove planning his grand scheme in order to make it to a party with his stashed beer.

I sang 'Ground Control to Major Tom', strummed the two minor chords I liked so much and thought about the two bags of beer lying in the forest.<sup>51</sup>

As Part Two of the novel begins, Knausgaard finally returns to the present. A 37-year-old Karl Ove discusses his writing, before the reader once again makes that transition into the past. In this instance, it is the dead face of Christ appearing in the knots of the wooden floor that is used as the catalyst for 'time-travel'.

I noticed that the knots and grain, perhaps two metres from the chair where I was sitting, formed an image of Christ wearing a crown of thorns.<sup>52</sup>

This image is followed by Karl Ove filling the kettle with water, and this image of water, combined with the image of a dead Christ in the wood, reminds Karl Ove of the dead face on the water from his childhood again. Once more, the reader makes the transition to Karl Ove's past.

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<sup>51</sup> Karl Ove Knausgaard, *A Death in the Family* (London: Vintage, 2014) p.109

<sup>52</sup> Karl Ove Knausgaard, *A Death in the Family* (London: Vintage, 2014) p.210

I suddenly remembered something that had happened one evening a long time ago, deep in my childhood, when I had seen a similar image on the water.<sup>53</sup>

This is another great example of images within the power of memory, as it is often an image or a smell, or even a sound, which remind us of something from our past. These singular, sensory evocations can lead into entire trails of thought, all built upon a simple sensual association. In fact, following this passage, Knausgaard discusses how he can remember all the rooms from his childhood home, the spaces in which things occurred, the ‘atmosphere’, “Just not what happened there.”<sup>54</sup>

In some instances, the shifts in memory are less subtle, more defined and thematic, as opposed to being triggered by a singular image or combination of images. Knausgaard explores the ‘unrealness’ of death through philosophical musings.

This aspect of death, that which belongs to the body and is concrete, physical and material, this death is hidden with such great care that it borders on a frenzy, and it works, just listen to how people who have been involuntary witnesses to fatal accidents or murders tend to express themselves. They always say the same, it was absolutely unreal, even though what they mean is the opposite. It was so real. But we no longer live in that reality.<sup>55</sup>

Firstly, this quote underlines Knausgaard’s deep-rooted interest in reality, a central theme that shadows the entire series of books. This particular discussion, however, has an even more important role. It leads to another memory; the first time Karl Ove saw a ‘dead body’, that of his father, seven years prior to the ‘present’, when Karl Ove was thirty years old. From this memory, the story shifts backwards again, to three days prior to his seeing the body, to the time when Karl Ove received news of his father’s

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<sup>53</sup> Karl Ove Knausgaard, *A Death in the Family* (London: Vintage, 2014) p.210

<sup>54</sup> Karl Ove Knausgaard, *A Death in the Family* (London: Vintage, 2014) p.211

<sup>55</sup> Karl Ove Knausgaard, *A Death in the Family* (London: Vintage, 2014) p.250

death. This backwards chronology seems perhaps illogical, however, if analysed, follows the process of human memory with great accuracy. Karl Ove's brother Yngve is the catalyst for the shift. They say goodbye to each other in one memory, and Karl Ove watches his brother disappear in his car, which evokes memories of receiving the phone call from Yngve days earlier, another instant where his often-distant brother entered and left his life in a moment of great personal pain and suffering. In terms of fiction, perhaps chronology would make more sense, however, if one is attempting to honestly and organically mimic memory, this way of jumping backwards and backwards again is more accurate. One instant may remind us of something in the recent past. Recent memories, aside from certain memories of great importance (that may be crucial or powerful for a multitude of reasons), tend to be more vivid, and closer at hand when we search our minds for them. Once we analyse one memory, this may lead to memories further from the present, as a recent memory reminds us of a more distant one.

There are several notable things to take from this approach to form. The mind doesn't move chronologically. In reality, certain memories may evoke others for uncountable reasons, but we rarely have control over this. It is not dissimilar to thought process as briefly examined in Chapter One of this thesis. Secondly, and most crucially, perhaps by moving the reader through time, and by categorising events in this way, Knausgaard is keeping his readers' attention. There is little dramatic action, as already alluded to. Simple chronology and no dramatic action would lead to a very boring book indeed. However, at least in this way, as a reader, one never knows where the narrative will take them next. This unpredictability in the arrangement of Knausgaard's novels is key to its success. The form disguises, or 'breaks down' the mundane. The absence of dramatic action is counteracted by other means. The key thing to take from all of this, is that Knausgaard is 'writing honestly', even in terms of how he represents his own mind, is he not? In actuality, it would seem the exact opposite is true, as Knausgaard goes to extreme lengths to create the illusion of total and absolute fidelity between himself and his reader, through careful planning and structuring, he is able to fabricate or imitate a piece of writing that seems to be deeply confessional, memoir-esque, and this is his genius. This element is arguably

most crucial to his novels' success. As he himself writes in *A Death in the Family*, "Writing is drawing the essence of what we know out of the shadows."<sup>56</sup> Phrases like this lead the reader to believe that the words on the page are Knausgaard's deepest, truest essences.

As mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, the title, back and forth, relates not only to time, but to the representation of boredom, how for Knausgaard it leads to creativity, but likewise, the reverse is true, and creativity leads to boredom. A great example of this appears in the centre of the novel, at the beginning of 'Part Two'. He is working on his novel in his office in Stockholm. He is staring at a computer screen, and after "grafting for half an hour"<sup>57</sup> he turns around to look at a poster, which like so many things he describes in extreme detail. We can almost visualise him sitting there, trying to write, to be creative, but before long he is studying a poster, then looking out of the window, describing all the things he can see there, before making a cup of coffee and wandering around seemingly aimlessly, again describing all the things he passes in detail, little of which seem to have any significance. He is trying to be creative but he becomes bored. This example of his boredom in writing one novel eventually becomes a part of another novel, and thus the back and forth movement ensues.

In examining this within his writing, it is important first to look at the mundane in more detail, because if ever there was a series of books swelling with the mundane, Knausgaard's 'My Struggle' series is it:

I sprayed Jif, wrung the cloth and scrubbed every centimetre thoroughly. Once a section was clean and had regained something of its old dark-golden colour I dunked another cloth of Klorin and kept scrubbing. The smell of Klorin and the sight of the blue bottle took me back to the 1970s, to be more precise, to the cupboard under the kitchen sink where detergents were kept. Jif didn't exist then. Ajax washing powder did though, in a cardboard container: red, white and blue. There was green soap. There was Klorin; the design of the blue plastic bottle with the fluted childproof top had not changed since

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<sup>56</sup> Karl Ove Knausgaard, *A Death in the Family* (London: Vintage, 2014) pp.212-213

<sup>57</sup> Karl Ove Knausgaard, *A Death in the Family* (London: Vintage, 2014) p.210

then. There was also a brand called Omo. And there was a packet of washing powder with a picture of a child holding an identical packet, and on that, of course, there was a picture of the same boy holding the same packet, and so on and so on.<sup>58</sup>

*A Death in the Family* is full of passages like this one, where extremely dull, seemingly totally meaningless day-to-day activities are described in tremendous detail. The above example, is part of a two-page-passage dedicated to Karl Ove's meditations on washing powder and cleaning chemicals. It seems as if nothing has been left out. The verisimilitude is strong, yet the 'so on so on' implies there is something missing, and of course there is. The back and forth movement means he never has to finish; we are in a constant state of ellipses but the obsessive detail hides this fact. This particular image, of the boy on the box of washing powder holding the same box of washing powder, on which the boy is also holding the box of washing powder, is a recurring image that mirrors this overall idea, of a constant state of ellipses. Clearly there are boundaries to what Knausgaard will put into his writing, to what is omitted from his novels, purely based on the fact that it's physically impossible for him to include absolutely everything. What these boundaries are, only he knows. It is impossible to guess, or at least it seems that way, because Knausgaard has done his utmost to ensure there appear to be none.

Like many other passages, this scene detailing the cleaning materials and washing powder also showcases the importance of senses in memory, as the smell of Klorin takes Karl Ove back to the 1970s. This extract comes from Part Two of the novel, in which the focus shifts towards Yngve and Karl Ove's cleaning of their grandmother's house in the aftermath of their father's death. These extracts describing monotonous activities in such detail, demonstrate Karl Ove's concentration on the mundane in a time of emotional turmoil. He is devastated by his father's death. Focusing on these activities, the small particulars of them, is one of the ways in which he copes with his grief. But there are many ways to create this effect. Why has

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<sup>58</sup> Karl Ove Knausgaard, *A Death in the Family* (London: Vintage, 2014) pp.400-401

Knausgaard chosen to focus on such mundanity? Firstly, he is creating the sense that this is an honest, ultra-realistic representation of a man dealing with grief. As Wood states, in his review for 'The New Yorker':

By the time it is over, we have cleaned that house with these brothers; the experience is extraordinarily vivid and visceral and moving. Of course, it is also the narrator's tide of mourning that we are being drowned in: we experience this housework as the necessary transference that it is. The labor of our reading merges with the labor of Knausgaard's writing, which is the very labor of grief. A complicated grief, too: horror, recoil, regret, shame, indifference, relief.<sup>59</sup>

It comes down to fidelity. Fidelity replaces drama. Reading *A Death in a Family* is 'experiential'. The reader lives through Karl Ove's grief with him, sharing in the tedium of the physical and mental organisation he goes through. It comes down to his overall aims with his 'My Struggle' series, in which he claimed to be creating 'literary suicide', the death of himself as an author. By his own admission, these books are not conventional novels. In Ben Lerner's review of the series, he writes of Knausgaard, that "He appears to just write down everything he can recall (and he appears to recall everything)."<sup>60</sup> Interestingly however, though these details appear completely real to the reader, it is possible that many of them are not. Sheila Heti, in her review of Knausgaard, describes how she asked him about a particular scene, in which he comes downstairs, his mother is washing potatoes in the kitchen, his dad is on the driveway, and a teenage Karl goes back upstairs to listen to a record. Heti asked Knausgaard if this particular 'memory' was real, to which he replied "No no, I made it up."<sup>61</sup> Heti was disappointed. As she states, the "spell of the book had to do with how amazing it was that a writer – that anyone – could have such a photographic,

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<sup>59</sup> James Wood, 'Total Recall: Karl Ove Knausgaard's "My Struggle"', *The New Yorker*, August 2012 <<http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2012/08/13/total-recall>>

<sup>60</sup> Ben Lerner, 'Each Cornflake', *London Review of Books*, May 2014 <<https://www.lrb.co.uk/v36/n10/ben-lerner/each-cornflake>>

<sup>61</sup> Sheila Heti, 'So Frank', *London Review of Books*, January 2014 <<https://www.lrb.co.uk/v36/n01/sheila-heti/so-frank>>



such a novelistic recall of his own life.”<sup>62</sup> If this particular extract is made up, then the reader must question the truth in every such memory, every such detail. Yet, readers continue to be mesmerised by Knausgaard. Lerner highlights the many flaws of his writing, but ultimately praises its quality, stating that “It’s easy to marshal examples of what makes *My Struggle* mediocre. The problem is: it’s amazing.”<sup>63</sup> His final assessment of why the series is so unique and so well received is ‘telling’:

Perhaps it’s less that we identify with the particular experiences Knausgaard recounts than that his writing makes us feel we might be able to recall our own past, near or distant, with all the texture and urgency of an inhabited present. This is why the extreme inclusiveness of Knausgaard’s attention – and the flatness of the language in which it’s conveyed – is so important: it feels universal, less interested in the exceptional life than in the way any life can feel exceptional to its subject (even if it sometimes feels exceptionally boring). Much of *My Struggle* isn’t a story so much as an immersive environment.<sup>64</sup>

In the end, it would seem it doesn’t matter whether or not the individual details are invented or part of actual memories. It comes down to the novel’s form, which takes the shape of a memoir, a man’s final ‘goodbye to literature.’ Knausgaard did well to drum up the hype, with terms such as the aforementioned ‘literary suicide.’ The last line of the sixth and final book in the series is “And I’m so happy that I’m no longer an author.” Though he has admitted in an interview with Evan Hughes for ‘The New Republic’ that he is in fact “working on a new”<sup>65</sup> novel, after claiming that his *My Struggle* series would be his final work, after which he “can never again write something

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<sup>62</sup> Sheila Heti, ‘So Frank’, *London Review of Books*, January 2014

<<https://www.lrb.co.uk/v36/n01/sheila-heti/so-frank>>

<sup>63</sup> Ben Lerner, ‘Each Cornflake’, *London Review of Books*, May 2014

<<https://www.lrb.co.uk/v36/n10/ben-lerner/each-cornflake>>

<sup>64</sup> Ben Lerner, ‘Each Cornflake’, *London Review of Books*, May 2014

<<https://www.lrb.co.uk/v36/n10/ben-lerner/each-cornflake>>

<sup>65</sup> Evan Hughes, ‘Karl Ove Knausgaard Became a Literary Sensation by Exposing his Every Secret’, *The New Republic*, April 2014 <<https://newrepublic.com/article/117245/karl-ove-knausgaard-interview-literary-star-struggles-regret>>

from the heart”<sup>66</sup> without repeating himself, meaning there would be nothing left within him. It is all the illusion he creates, his series ultimately being a fictional account of an author and the death of his craft. It is a fiction disguised as a memoir, a reality, and this the success of his form. This is why he was able to write the mundane in such a way that has millions of readers hooked like ‘crackheads’, a comparison that is often made in writing about Knausgaard’s series:

...people liken *My Struggle* to a drug because reading it can feel like consuming vast quantities of essentially undifferentiated material: all crack is the same, you just want more and more of it.<sup>67</sup>

Somehow despite seeming mundane and undifferentiated, Knausgaard’s work is compelling, addictive even, and it comes down to the fundamental features of its form, as eluded by Knausgaard himself, and described by Lerner, which is a “Breaking of the vessel of art, the renunciation of fiction, literary suicide – these are fictions, and they’re the devices on which the power of *My Struggle* depends.”<sup>68</sup> Crack is a bland seeming, undifferentiated substance, a powder that could be flour or sugar to the untrained eye, but the secret chemistry of it makes it extremely addictive when consumed. In a sense, it has a hidden power, one that cannot be seen on the surface without an inner knowledge of what it actually does. Knausgaard’s writing is not so different. It holds a hidden power of its own.

And how does this relate to the back and forth between boredom and creativity? Essentially, the ‘My Struggle’ series is a series about a writer, his boredom with reality and how this leads to his writing. Throughout the novel there are several instances when Knausgaard describes his process, his writing, his struggles, how boredom leads to moments when he must utilise his creativity, and vice versa, scenes where in his office he is trying to write, but cannot, because he is bored. He moves back and forth in this way, and

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<sup>66</sup> Ben Lerner, ‘Each Cornflake’, *London Review of Books*, May 2014  
<<https://www.lrb.co.uk/v36/n10/ben-lerner/each-cornflake>>

<sup>67</sup> Ben Lerner, ‘Each Cornflake’, *London Review of Books*, May 2014  
<<https://www.lrb.co.uk/v36/n10/ben-lerner/each-cornflake>>

<sup>68</sup> Ben Lerner, ‘Each Cornflake’, *London Review of Books*, May 2014  
<<https://www.lrb.co.uk/v36/n10/ben-lerner/each-cornflake>>

the 'My Struggle' series is the outcome of this back and forth motion. In his article on 'The Joy of Boredom', Adam Phillips describes the evolution of boredom, how it stemmed from the invention of 'leisure' as a concept, and how the idea of boredom has changed in contemporary society. One such change he describes is how there is an "evolving focus on "inner experience," on the growing sense that people have complex worlds -- of feelings, wishes, thoughts, desires, prejudices -- that are located somewhere inside them. As we become more psychically discriminating, or more seduced by psychobabble, we become more sensitive to our emptiness, and more obsessed by what we lack."<sup>69</sup> I would say this quote epitomises what Knausgaard has achieved in his novel, and why it has been a huge success. He has catered to this style of thinking. He's written the perfect novel for such a state of mind, a novel about emptiness, the loss of meaning in all things as we travel through life towards death, an honest, deeply relatable account of a normal man's normal struggles, while also gifting readers with the temporary ability to imagine their own past in perfect detail, as detailed by Lerner, because "it feels universal, less interested in the exceptional life than in the way any life can feel exceptional to its subject."<sup>70</sup> His apparent honesty feels real, and in reading it, his readers can reflect on their own contemporary human struggles that can only exist in a world where boredom is so prevalent.

He wants us to inhabit the ordinariness of life, which is sometimes visionary (the Constable sketch), sometimes banal (the cup of tea, the Old Spice), and sometimes momentous (the death of a parent), but all of it perforce ordinary because it happens in the course of a life, and happens, in different forms, to everyone.<sup>71</sup>

In boredom, we become obsessed with our own inner emptiness, with our own lacking and shortcomings, as we search for existential meaning

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<sup>69</sup> Adam Phillips, 'The Joy of Boredom', *The New York Times*, December 1994  
<<http://www.nytimes.com/1994/12/18/books/the-joy-of-boredom.html>>

<sup>70</sup> Ben Lerner, 'Each Cornflake', *London Review of Books*, May 2014  
<<https://www.lrb.co.uk/v36/n10/ben-lerner/each-cornflake>>

<sup>71</sup> James Wood, 'Total Recall: Karl Ove Knausgaard's "My Struggle"', *The New Yorker*, August 2012, <<http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2012/08/13/total-recall>>

and purpose. Adam Phillips describes how boredom has arisen from the “notion of leisure”<sup>72</sup>, that it arose from a decline in religion, and was first considered a sin, demonstrating a “lack of faith.”<sup>73</sup> Today, we are so concerned with our “right to happiness”<sup>74</sup> and in the absence of this happiness we are bored. The cures for this boredom are “drugs, glamour and shopping.”<sup>75</sup> Contemporary society, at least in the Western world, has created boredom in the absence of greater concerns. In a world where it exists in so many of us, it is no wonder that a novel about it, in which so many of us can see ourselves, and live through another man’s aches and pains, is so captivating despite the absence of plot, narrative, dramatic action, a distinct style, and many of the other elements we would expect to find in a novel. In Knausgaard’s ‘My Struggle’ series, as he writes in the extract quoted at the opening of this chapter, form must take centre stage.

*Illuminato* went through numerous changes in terms of the novel’s overall form and chronology, and this examination of Knausgaard has allowed me to finally solve certain issues I myself was having. *Illuminato* was initially largely chronological, opening with Florián working at a school, and aside from a few flashbacks to his childhood. The narrative was more or less straightforwardly chronology. The form itself was initially a first person account of a man’s search for ‘the other side’, that I viewed as kind of a ‘journal’, an account of Florián’s ‘true enlightening’. Florián himself, as a character, viewed this journal as a great artefact that he meant to leave behind for the world once he made his ‘ascent’ to the ‘other side’. It was going to be his final gift to the world, so that those who are ‘worthy’, may follow. Due largely to the fact I was struggling to remain outside of his thoughts, I decided to switch to the third person. I also abandoned the ideas of the novel being anything other than a straightforward novel in its form. The form the narrative took became ordinary, rather than an attempt to create something experimental and different, as Knausgaard has done. I

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<sup>72</sup> Adam Phillips, ‘The Joy of Boredom’, *The New York Times*, December 1994  
<http://www.nytimes.com/1994/12/18/books/the-joy-of-boredom.html>

<sup>73</sup> Adam Phillips, ‘The Joy of Boredom’, *The New York Times*, December 1994  
<http://www.nytimes.com/1994/12/18/books/the-joy-of-boredom.html>

<sup>74</sup> Adam Phillips, ‘The Joy of Boredom’, *The New York Times*, December 1994  
<http://www.nytimes.com/1994/12/18/books/the-joy-of-boredom.html>

<sup>75</sup> Adam Phillips, ‘The Joy of Boredom’, *The New York Times*, December 1994  
<http://www.nytimes.com/1994/12/18/books/the-joy-of-boredom.html>

wanted to write a conventional novel with strong themes and ideas that would link those of existentialism with contemporary life. Unlike Knausgaard, I focussed on ideas and style rather than form. I focussed on creating a story that although mundane for large portions, still contained some powerful and gripping narrative moments. I didn't feel the need to complicate the form, concluding that I wanted my novel to be a novel of ideas, that the ideas themselves would be enough to carry the story. But that isn't to say the form isn't important.

Knausgaard in his approach to his form influenced me a great deal, in particular my use of time and memory, as well as the overall ordering of narrative order of events. I toyed with these features at length, in an attempt to create the most captivating and interesting version of the story that I could. In initial drafts, the lack of dramatic action was noticeable. Barely anything happened in the first half of the book, much like Knausgaard's fiction, though I didn't have that element of fidelity and what I will refer to as 'fake ultra-realism' that he utilised so effectively. The first half of *Illuminato* was little more than a sequence of scenes evoking Florián's boredom and frustration but did little else.

*The balcony doors were frozen shut. He pulled at them until they swung open, knocking him back, spilling coffee over his socks and on the carpet. The curtains blew at him, lifting off the ground and falling again. He picked up a green apple from a wooden bowl on the table and started to eat it. Green apples were too sour but he finished it anyway because there was nothing else within arm's reach. He twiddled the stem between his fingers, dropped it on the carpet and rolled himself a cigarette. The breeze intensified so he turned away from the doors to light it, then sat there sucking on the ugly thing. He watched the waves over the drooping rooftops. The rooftops of Whitingsea were like a giant staircase to the water's edge, which he remembered thinking before, but couldn't pinpoint exactly when.*

*(Illuminato, Early Draft)*

This passage is the original opening of the novel. The entire first chapter, of around four-thousand words, continued like this, narrating Florián's morning and journey to work on foot, on the train, and on foot again. I went into great detail in order to show the small details Florian was focusing on because of his boredom, the little things that bothered him due to his overall frustration with the world, in the absence of anything else meaningful in his life. Though I personally enjoyed the writing, and felt it served its purpose in terms of the idea I was trying to convey, ultimately a novel's purpose is to entertain, and in this sense, my early drafts did not work. This was therefore an issue that I put at the forefront of the redrafting process.

Secondly, there was no real inciting incident until far too late in the plot. Therefore, I decided to move things around. As described earlier in this chapter, Knausgaard's use of time, his constant movement back and forth, is an element that I think is key to maintaining the interest of his readers. Therefore, I rewrote the first part of *Illuminato* so that it began with the hit and run incident. From this point in the narrative I included flashbacks to Florián's time working at the school and other important events I wanted to keep from the previous version of the novel, since I felt it was important to show the reader that Florián was once a normal man with a normal job, simply trying to live his life. This overall structure worked much better as a whole, but it was still lacking something. Therefore, in my final draft of the novel, I decided to radically alter the overall sequence in which the narrative plays out. The final version of *Illuminato* opens in Budapest, which initially had been the penultimate part of the novel. I chose to do this for several reasons. Starting in Budapest allowed me to go back and forth through time, but also in Florián's mind, as he goes back and forth between wanting to follow Fred's absurd quest and wanting to live a normal life.

*He smokes a cigarette while sitting on a bench a little further along the river, examining a copy he made of Fred's 'recipe'. He contemplates the many things that could become his next action. There are countless possibilities, like a leap into the river, maybe a cannonball, or an elegant dive. He could run, run until he can't run anymore, or simply do nothing, remaining there on that bench for*

*eternity. But among all the possible courses of action, he knows that really there are only two. Following Fred is one of them but now, suddenly faced with having to do so, he is tentative. He thinks 'fear' but doesn't want to associate that word with himself. He forces a determined expression, lowering his brows, before letting his thoughts loose again, attempting to drift, hollow as he needs to be, the only way he might be able to go down that particular path.*

*(Illuminato, p.9)*

This mirrors the way in which Knausgaard goes back and forth between wanting to apply meaning to things, as he did in his childhood, and the growing understanding that in the end nothing has meaning, things are just things, including death itself. As Wood describes, in the end, "all things leak away their meaning."<sup>76</sup> When *A Death in the Family* concludes, "Death and life finally unite, married in their ordinariness."<sup>77</sup>

Furthermore, opening in Budapest allowed me to introduce a version of Florián who is far more engaged in reality, attempting to live a 'normal human' life once more. The previous version of *Illuminato* began with a Florián who is extremely disconnected, barely interacting with the world around him, smoking a lot of dope, and being quite unkind, or at least extremely neglectful, towards his girlfriend Angie. Opening the novel with a more grounded version of Florián would allow for readers to better connect with him and sympathise with him, perhaps even feel sorry for him, a man who is so clearly lost and seeking for answers in his distant past. It also created intrigue. Who is this man? What is this list of ingredients he keeps looking at? Who is Fred? These are just some of the questions I would hope my readers will now be asking, and questions which will drive them to read the novel. Most crucially, however, I wanted to spread the more exciting or important events of the novel, to create a balanced story that builds to a crescendo, while also disguising the mundanity of large sections of the narrative, by shifting back and forth in the same way Knausgaard does.

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<sup>76</sup> James Wood, 'Total Recall: Karl Ove Knausgaard's "My Struggle"', *The New Yorker*, August 2012, <<http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2012/08/13/total-recall>>

<sup>77</sup> James Wood, 'Total Recall: Karl Ove Knausgaard's "My Struggle"', *The New Yorker*, August 2012, <<http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2012/08/13/total-recall>>

Budapest acts as a central point in the novel, a narrative thread told in the third person present tense. Each of the first three parts of the novel begin in Budapest before flashing back to a particular locale with a particular theme. This is again something I enjoyed in Knausgaard's approach to form, the thematic connection between events. Therefore, I decided to focus my themes in a similar way. Part One is about being lost, it's about searching, which is the focus of the Whitingsea flashback of the novel. Part Two centres around love. In Budapest Florián encounters a girl from his past and the flashback takes place on the island of Dragoralla, where Florián and Angie are making a final attempt at saving their relationship. Part Three's focus is death; the death of Florián's grandmother Gréti and the flashback to Amsterdam, where Florián commits murder for the first time. Part Four is a little different, as it is the novel's ending, and the fastest paced section of the novel. From the beginning of Part Four the narrative is completely chronological, aside from a small dialogue which is supposed to represent the two sides of Florián, the two selves he goes back and forth between: the Florian at the beginning, the one who wants to live a normal life of love, surrounded by family who care for him and friends who understand him, and the Florián at the end, who believes fully in an alternate reality, and will do anything to arrive there. Part Four is about both beginnings and endings. It brings everything full circle, featuring the emotionless, hollow, nameless form, that is Florián's end.

The climax, in which Florián imagines what it would be like to kill Angie, seeing the other side around his and her floating forms, visually evokes in him the memory of his parents' death, their own submerged forms floating in the Amazon river, an image that has haunted him his entire life, a moment which marked the beginning of his existential downfall, and the beginning of the narrative thread that the story of *Illuminato* centres around. Ultimately it is this image, and hearing his name, 'Flo', uttered by his greatest love, a name given to him by his departed parents', that stops him in his tracks, that reminds him that he is still someone. He is not no one. Finally, in this moment, he let's go of the 'insane alternative'. Remembering his beginnings, at the very end, allows for his tiresome, ceaseless 'back and forth' motion to cease at last.





## Chapter Three – What’s the ‘Big Idea’?

I was reading about how to survive the end of the universe when I got a text message from my friend Libby.<sup>78</sup>

This is the opening sentence from Scarlett Thomas’ *Our Tragic Universe*. It features both the totally mundane and the absolute sensational: A text message and the end of the universe. The novel continues in this way, because above all, *Our Tragic Universe* is a novel of ideas. Similarly to the novels explored earlier in this thesis, *Our Tragic Universe* features little dramatic action and a very simple plot. However, it remains a gripping novel, due largely to the hundreds of intriguing ideas that saturate its pages. From a narrative perspective, it’s a novel about a writer and her simple life in Devon, her friends, her relationships and struggles with creativity. But the novel is about so much more than this.

It is about existence, meaning, magic, our universe and what it means to be here. These ideas are explored through long conversations, dialogue, the general musings of protagonist Meg, and through Meg’s writing, which is often explained in great detail: her other projects, novels, review of books etc. While Tao Lin manipulated style and Knausgaard focused on form, Thomas uses the ‘idea’ to transform the mundane into something vivid and intriguing. In his *New York Times* review of the novel, fittingly titled ‘The Metafictional Club’, Dave Itzkoff asks the question, “Is a sequence of fictional events, populated by characters and imbued with subtexts and recurring themes, a novel?”<sup>79</sup> This is an apt summary of *Our Tragic Universe*, but the question of ‘what is a novel?’, as can also be seen from the work of Knausgaard or Tao Lin for example, is difficult to answer. It is difficult to define. *Our Tragic Universe* is not a traditional novel. As I have stated, it doesn’t have a strong or clearly structured narrative with a beginning middle

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<sup>78</sup> Scarlett Thomas, *Our Tragic Universe*, (Edinburgh: Cannongate Books, 2010) p.3

<sup>79</sup> Dave Itzkoff, The Metafictional Club, *The New York Times*, September 2010  
<<http://www.nytimes.com/2010/09/19/books/review/Itzkoff-t.html>>

and end, or one particular large obstacle for the protagonist to overcome, an antagonist or any real 'suspense', but neither does real life. The 'plot' is a simple story readers will recognise, a contemporarily everyday life with ordinary problems and equally ordinary solutions to those problems. As explored earlier, the notion of the novel is changing, as the way we read is changing, and it would seem Thomas has found another way of making the dreary, monotony of the everyday ultimately thrilling.

The way in which Thomas weaves 'ideas' and 'plot' together is multi-faceted. Firstly, as with the novel's opening sentence, she does it on a sentence level. She also does it within paragraphs, where one mundane action becomes spiritual or beautiful through the protagonist's thoughts:

I drove as slowly as I would in the day. It was a beautiful night, with thousands of stars scattered across the clear black sky. All the stars I could see were long dead, of course, unless we were living in the Second World, in which case they were what? Alive again? Fictional? The backdrop to long-dead people's heroic journeys?<sup>80</sup>

In this extract, the simple act of driving at night to see her boyfriend Christopher is linked to one of the many otherworldly ideas in the novel. This particular thought comes from one of the books Meg is reading and reviewing. It creates a magical, mysterious, ethereal feeling within an otherwise very ordinary narrative moment.

Thomas also links long passages of digression into these ideas with little episodes of reality. She does an excellent job of bringing the reader back into reality, and the digressions, as with Knausgaard's flashbacks, help to create a very literal suspension of a narrative that would otherwise be quite mind-numbing, because the reader must often trawl through several pages of digressions into various abstract, pseudo-scientific concepts (for example) before returning to Meg's simple little life in Devon. And so 'the simple little life in Devon' becomes, amazingly, interesting.

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<sup>80</sup> Scarlett Thomas, *Our Tragic Universe*, (Edinburgh: Cannongate Books, 2010) p.191

Taking a particular section of the novel as an example, a dinner party with several friends turns into a six-page conversation about paradoxes. Each paradox, explored by the characters through conversation, provides the reader with an interesting thought:

Aquinas wondered what would happen if God wanted to achieve universal reconstruction. In other words, bringing everyone who had ever lived back to life at the same time. What would happen to cannibals, and the people they ate? You couldn't bring them all back at the same time, because the cannibals are made of the people they've eaten. You could have one but not the other.<sup>81</sup>

This is one of the more 'colourful' paradoxical ideas discussed, as well as the paradox of the horse with two bales of hay, or 'Cretans all being liars', if said by a Cretan. The conversation eventually leads into a discussion of the Omega Point, arguably the central theme of the entire novel (though it is difficult to choose one central theme), or its chief 'Big Idea', which is a concept of 'eternity' from a series of books by a fictional writer Kelsey Graham. Meg accidentally reviews one of these books and eventually writes a feature on New Age books in which she explores these ideas, so the 'idea' of the Omega Point is one that returns again and again.

The conversation on paradoxes is followed by a very ordinary narrative moment, in which Meg walks home with Rowan, an older man she has been contemplating leaving her boyfriend for. In this passage, Rowan tells Meg that his partner has left him and Meg debates kissing him, for what would be the second time.

In the following scene, Meg returns home and reads a book on Dog psychology, which leads into several pages of her musings on what it means to be human:

Perhaps it would also explain what happened to our instincts when we became domesticated, and how silly we look when we mime the

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<sup>81</sup> Scarlett Thomas, *Our Tragic Universe*, (Edinburgh: Cannongate Books, 2010) p.287

movements of our ancestors and try to make our lives more interesting by imagining we are doing things that we aren't really doing at all.<sup>82</sup>

The constant shift to and from ideas and the mundane creates suspense, interest, and above all, means that even though perhaps as an entire piece of fiction there is little to admire in *Our Tragic Universe*, within every page, or couple of pages, there is something to ponder and question, or at least something interesting to learn. And as explored earlier with reference to Tao Lin, arguably, this is how the contemporary reader likes to read; small bite-sized pieces of interest, because the entirety of a 400-page novel, all together and at once, is far too much to take in anyway.

The 'idea' was central to the writing process of *Illuminato* and is central to the final novel as well. It is crucial as to the themes of the novel, but more importantly, the structure, giving a relatively simple story a much deeper meaning, however, from my reading of Thomas and her 'loose' and 'sporadic' approach to the 'idea', what became apparent was that while the idea is a useful tool in terms of crafting the novel and adding intrigue to it, it should not dictate the narrative itself. The initial inspiration for *Illuminato* came from Plato's Allegory of the Cave. When first conceiving the seeds of the idea that would become *Illuminato*, I wanted to write a novel about a man who starts to view ordinary human existence as 'the cave' in a literal sense, thus coming to believe that there must be a physical 'way out'. In *Illuminato*, the 'other side' turns from a place of ideas, into somewhere material and concrete, which Florián comes to believe is reachable if one is to destroy the bounding rules of our world, those of 'morality.' The notion is that if one is to destroy the rules of this world, they prove its meaninglessness and are able to 'transcend' to the world outside the cave.

In early drafts of *Illuminato* the structure of Plato's allegory dictated the overall narrative wholly. In its completed form, the allegory remains central to the plot, though until the Amsterdam section of the novel it is very much in the background. Despite this, the idea of the 'other side' is ever

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<sup>82</sup> Scarlett Thomas, *Our Tragic Universe*, (Edinburgh: Cannongate Books, 2010) p.300

present, and so is the framework of the prisoner's journey, from shackles to the sunlight outside. However, the allegory became the 'scaffolding' upon which the story was built rather than the final building blocks.

Each Part of the novel opens with a quote from the Allegory of the Cave, and each Part represents one stage of the journey towards enlightenment. Part One focuses on life in the cave, which, for Florián, is concrete reality and the world we all live in. In Heidegger's *The Essence of Truth*, the analysis of Plato's cave similarly breaks the allegory down into stages which very closely mirror those I set out for the writing of this novel. Heidegger describes this first stage of the allegory, with reference to the prisoners, or us (the people of this world) stating that, "In the condition described they are entirely ensnared in what lies before them."<sup>83</sup> The prisoners fully believe in the world they can see, unaware that anything else may exist. They accept this. Heidegger goes on to say that, "Caught up in our misapprehension, we see only what is played off on the wall. The latter is, as it were, the whole world."<sup>84</sup> Heidegger writes that the first stage of Plato's cave allegory "depicts precisely the everyday situation of man, who, in so far as he does not possess any standard other than everydayness, cannot see its strangeness."<sup>85</sup> However this is where Florián starts to change. He does begin to see the strangeness of the everyday situation of man.

In Part Two of the novel, Florián is finally able to 'break his shackles' and face the fire for the first time. Within the novel, the sound of his chains loosening and eventually breaking is represented by a 'clinking sound' that Flo begins to hear in the night. In Heidegger's analysis, this second stage of Plato's allegory is referred to as 'The Removal of Shackles', whereby "The unhidden separates out: there the *shadows*, here the *things*."<sup>86</sup> However, ultimately, at this stage, the 'emancipation fails':

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<sup>83</sup> Martin Heidegger, *The Essence of Truth: On Plato's Cave Allegory and Theaetetus* [1988] (translated by Ted Sadler), (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013) p.24

<sup>84</sup> Martin Heidegger, *The Essence of Truth: On Plato's Cave Allegory and Theaetetus* [1988] (translated by Ted Sadler), (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013) p.26

<sup>85</sup> Martin Heidegger, *The Essence of Truth: On Plato's Cave Allegory and Theaetetus* [1988] (translated by Ted Sadler), (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013) pp.24-25

<sup>86</sup> Martin Heidegger, *The Essence of Truth: On Plato's Cave Allegory and Theaetetus* [1988] (translated by Ted Sadler), (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013) p.29

The second stage ends with this thwarted emancipation. The emancipation fails because the one to be freed does not understand it. Liberation is only genuine when he who is liberated thereby becomes free of himself, i.e. comes to stand in the ground of his essence.<sup>87</sup>

For the prisoner, or in this case Florián, the result of this ‘failed emancipation’ is that he becomes “insecure and helpless, is no longer able to cope; he even regards those who are shackled as possessing an advantage in terms of this negative freedom.”<sup>88</sup> This is why Florián attacks Jorge so brutally and the end of Part Two, though he himself doesn’t even know why he’s doing it:

*He knelt over Jorge and stared into his eyes. He was still glowing and Flo felt chaotic and lost but mostly more depressed than ever, his lack of understanding seeming unreasonable to him. He rammed his fist into Jorge’s head, shutting those dreamy eyes. He told himself he was protecting the innocent girls, or that it was because of jealousy. Or something else, everything else. He wasn’t sure. His feelings were complex and at the same time he had no feelings towards his actions at all.*

*(Illuminato pp.110-111)*

In Part Three Florián struggles towards the cave entrance. He finds Fred. Fred becomes the next piece of the mystery. He takes Florián by the hand and shows him things he could never have believed. This is Florián’s ‘genuine liberation’, a process Heidegger describes in the following passage:

Genuine liberation is not just release from shackles within the cave, but is an exit from the cave into the light of day, i.e. to the sun, completely away from the artificial light of the cave.<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>87</sup> Martin Heidegger, *The Essence of Truth: On Plato’s Cave Allegory and Theaetetus* [1988] (translated by Ted Sadler), (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013) pp.31-32

<sup>88</sup> Martin Heidegger, *The Essence of Truth: On Plato’s Cave Allegory and Theaetetus* [1988] (translated by Ted Sadler), (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013) p.48

<sup>89</sup> Martin Heidegger, *The Essence of Truth: On Plato’s Cave Allegory and Theaetetus* [1988] (translated by Ted Sadler), (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013) p.35

Heidegger notes that this second attempt at liberation is different because the fire is now ignored, and the liberation now relates completely to the “primordial light”<sup>90</sup>, or what is beyond the fire; the sun outside the cave. Within *Illuminato*, this takes place with Fred’s assistance in Amsterdam.

Finally, in Part Four, Florián all but reaches the cave entrance, though ultimately, he is unable to leave ‘the cave’ behind. He has too many ties there. He is too embedded in that world and doesn’t have what it takes to move fully into ‘the light’. In Heidegger’s analogy, the fourth stage of the allegory is returning to the cave and the other prisoners, bringing a message of what was learned outside the cave in the ‘true light of the sun.’ Initially, as explained earlier, my intention was to represent the novel itself as Florián’s own notebook of sorts, a ‘gift’ that he plans to leave behind for the ‘other prisoners’. Stage four of the allegory would therefore have been represented by the novel itself. However, I abandoned this idea, and in the final version of the narrative Florián does not return to the cave either. This stage of the allegory is ignored completely. He never quite gets that far, unable to complete the task required to ‘leave the cave’ and enter the ‘other side’. Therefore, in my own use of Plato’s cave allegory, I have split what Heidegger refers to as ‘The Third Stage’ into two separate stages. Within the context of my novel stage three of Plato’s analogy relates to the struggle to reach the cave’s opening, while stage four is the moment when the cave entrance is reached and the ‘actual sun’ outside is finally seen. Heidegger combines this moment of revelation together with the ‘violent struggle’. I chose to split these moments into separate stages. The moment of reaching ‘the other side’ or the ‘cave entrance’, in my mind, is an altogether isolated stage in comparison to the prior struggle. It’s a spiritual moment where all the dark deeds culminate in an instant of beauty for Florián, and for this reason I wanted to explore it’s meaning as a narrative stage in itself.

From my reading of Thomas, it became clear that as a writer, it is important not to follow an existing idea too rigidly. The most important aspect is to tell a story, one that is yours, and the story should never take a

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<sup>90</sup> Martin Heidegger, *The Essence of Truth: On Plato’s Cave Allegory and Theaetetus* [1988] (translated by Ted Sadler), (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013) p.36



backseat to the structure an 'idea' may provide. At the beginning of this chapter, I referred to 'scaffolding', and I return to that metaphor now. In early drafts of *Illuminato*, Plato's Allegory of the Cave was more than scaffolding, it was the basis, the foundations of the narrative, however, as I continued to work on the story it became a foundation I could remove once the story was finished, something to guide the 'building process', but to eventually be pulled away, allowing the narrative of *Illuminato* to stand on its own, with only the 'ghost of an idea' present in the story, that is to say, it remains crucial to the understanding of the ideas conveyed in the novel, however it is no longer essential for the reading of it. The most explicit example of this, as described earlier, is with regards to the final stages of the allegory. I chose to split one stage of the allegory into two because it better suited my story, and of course I eliminated the final element of the allegory altogether, whereas in the beginning I spent countless hours trying to work the final stage, the return to the cave, into the novel. This is how I came up with the idea of having the novel being a 'journal', a 'relic' or 'message' that Florián is to leave behind, as opposed to returning to 'the cave' himself. Within the realms of the novel's reality this would have meant Florián needed to 'ascend' to the 'otherside' and this was again restricting. How would I achieve this in a way that fits with the novel's world? And how would this fit with the ideas I wanted *Illuminato* to convey, those that disregard Plato's allegory and are more centred on contemporary existentialism? Once I made the decision to not focus too much on Plato's allegory as a rigid, narrative defining structure, everything fell into place in terms of *Illuminato*'s story. I was able to finish the novel in the way that I felt made the most sense to me and the story I wanted to tell.

Scarlett Thomas expertly fills *Our Tragic Universe* with the 'ghosts' of hundreds of ideas, though she does this in a way that reflects protagonist Meg's avowedly amateur approach to writing. Though Thomas references 'ideas' much more overtly than I have done in *Illuminato*, occasionally digressing into large passages in which Meg explains her own concepts for novels, her own writing processes and the books she is reading, they remain less crucial to the overall plot, in comparison to the role Plato's allegory plays in my work. In the end, Thomas seems to lose her way a bit, because she is

using too many ideas, and for the reader, though all these ideas are interesting, often becoming ‘puzzles’, it becomes difficult to distinguish which are most important to the plot. Is it Kelsey Newman and his theory about the end of the Universe? Is it the Beast of Dartmoor? The death of her former best-friend Rosa, now a famous actress? Is it that she may possess ‘magical powers’? Is it the general concept of ‘storyless stories’, which is another recurring theme, ironically, since *Our Tragic Universe* itself also seems to be a fairly storyless story? As highlighted by Itzkoff, “Sometimes these puzzles simply fizzle out, and other times they converge, but rarely in ways that allow readers to see the clues being assembled — if there are any clues to be found at all.”<sup>91</sup>

That said, Thomas does not allow the ideas and the ghosts of ideas to control the structure of her novel. The ideas in *Our Tragic Universe* give meaning to the everyday events of the main narrative thread but never take control. They are there to show that in moments of uncertainty we question everything, and that perhaps there is more to the world than meets the eye, and though we like to think we know everything, it is just as easily possible that we know absolutely nothing.

The novel even ends in this way, with a whole lot of ‘nothing’. In her review of the novel for *The Guardian*, Alice Fisher writes that, “*Our Tragic Universe* is an accomplished novel, but how much you enjoy it depends on whether you like a journey or prefer the satisfaction of reaching a destination.”<sup>92</sup> The ‘journey’ is meandering and interesting, an effect achieved by the multitude of ‘big ideas’, but as eluded to earlier, there are too many, and rather than providing any form of structure, they hinder it, because in the end nothing comes together. What good is an idea if it leads nowhere? It’s a lot like having the great idea of going somewhere interesting one sunny day, doing something exciting with your time, contemplating the idea but eventually choosing to stay at home. The idea, while ‘fun’, is ultimately pointless. In fiction it is no different. While it is important not to become a ‘slave’ to ‘the idea’, as a writer, it is just as important to use the

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<sup>91</sup> Dave Itzkoff, ‘The Metafictional Club’, *The New York Times*, September 2010  
<<http://www.nytimes.com/2010/09/19/books/review/itzkoff-t.html>>

<sup>92</sup> Alice Fisher, ‘Review: *Our Tragic Universe* by Scarlett Thomas’, *The Guardian*, May 2010  
<<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2010/may/09/our-tragic-universe-book-review>>

idea to take you somewhere. In *The Sense of the Ending*, Kermode writes that, “to make sense of our lives from where we are, as it were, stranded in the middle, we need fictions of beginnings and fictions of ends, fictions which unite the beginning and the end and endow the interval between them with meaning.”<sup>93</sup> Therefore, while I took a great deal from Thomas’ slant on ‘the idea’, *Illuminato* focused on one ‘big idea’, an ‘idea’ that carries the novel from start to finish, ‘endowing’ the narrative with a clearer sense of meaning.

Thus, the ‘idea’ not only created the narrative of *Illuminato*, but is crucially important within it. Florián must deal with a ‘crazy new idea’ himself, in a very real way. Returning to Heidegger and Plato and the role they play in *Illuminato*, in the final Part of the novel, Florián becomes a nameless man with no connection to his ‘human’ past. This is a conscious disconnect and the solution he comes up with, in order to reveal the ‘one true Florián.’ It is a disconnect he feels is necessary to do what needs to be done. Yet it is also a disconnect he believes in fully. Heidegger states that “becoming free means binding oneself to what is genuinely illuminating, to what makes-free and lets-through, ‘the light’. But the light symbolizes the idea. The idea contains and gives being.”<sup>94</sup> For Florián this is the idea that amorality will allow him to reach this ‘other side’. Heidegger goes on to say that “knowledge of what man is does not fall into anybody’s lap, but man must first place himself in question.”<sup>95</sup> Florián places himself in question. His solution is a culmination of the many things he feels are wrong with his world. Furthermore, he feels that he must form an answer and it must come from somewhere outside of the world he knows. As he states when Fred first presents this absurd idea of ‘escape’ to him, he cannot go on drifting aimlessly. He needs some form of meaning to fight towards otherwise he may as well kill himself. So he listens to ‘new ideas’, things so far removed from what he knows as truth, and starts to believe, because in his mind our absurd and unfair world simply cannot be everything. And if something so absurd and pointless can exist, who’s to say something equally ‘crazy’ may

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<sup>93</sup> Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000) p.190

<sup>94</sup> Martin Heidegger, *The Essence of Truth: On Plato’s Cave Allegory and Theaetetus* [1988] (translated by Ted Sadler), (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013) p.50

<sup>95</sup> Martin Heidegger, *The Essence of Truth: On Plato’s Cave Allegory and Theaetetus* [1988] (translated by Ted Sadler), (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013) p.61

not also be the truth? For Kierkegaard it was Christianity that filled the existential void. But existing religion is not the answer for Florián. It is part of the world he knows. It is part of the shadow cave. The spiritual side he seeks is a great secret.

With regards to the end of Plato's allegory, Heidegger writes that "we are only what we have the power to entrust ourselves to be."<sup>96</sup> In the end Florián cannot complete his quest and murder Angie because he does not 'trust himself' to be this 'higher being' or 'Illuminato.' He cannot discount his prior existence fully despite his best efforts and so he remains in between existences, drifting towards his past again, but perhaps also towards a freer future.

What man is cannot simply be read off from the living beings running around on this planet. Rather, we can only ask about this when man himself somehow comes to be what he can be, whether it be this or that.<sup>97</sup>

Florián's future is left ambiguous when the novel finishes, but what happens next is not important in terms of his story. Ultimately, there is no escape from the mundane absurdity that surrounds us but Florián will no longer concern himself with it. He will look inwardly and no longer struggle. He's not strong enough to connect with all his 'others' and reach 'true enlightenment', but he knows they exist and he knows the 'other side' is there, between the lines. For him, maybe this is enough, to know that the world is still a great mystery, to know that life is still a great mystery, and not the one-dimensional 'illusion' he despised so greatly.

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<sup>96</sup> Martin Heidegger, *The Essence of Truth: On Plato's Cave Allegory and Theaetetus* [1988] (translated by Ted Sadler), (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013) p.62

<sup>97</sup> Martin Heidegger, *The Essence of Truth: On Plato's Cave Allegory and Theaetetus* [1988] (translated by Ted Sadler), (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013) p.61



# Conclusions

Adam Phillips argues that boredom should not be viewed as a 'handicap' but an opportunity.<sup>98</sup> If we have the capacity to be bored, it means we have the capacity to desire something, though we may not know what that desire is. This unknown desire should be utilised. Writing about boredom, writing the mundane in a contemporary society where it exists so prevalently, is no different. It should not be viewed as a 'handicap' in creating fiction, but as a chance to invent new forms of writing, new forms of creation and new forms of art, since boredom has "the power to exert pressure on individuals to stretch their inventive capacity."<sup>99</sup> The writers I have examined are just a few that have found innovative ways to write the contemporary novel, in ways that replicate our 'bored society.' In the past, novels were written as an escape from boredom. The novel rose as a pastime once the idea of leisure existed<sup>100</sup>. Nowadays, it seems that the novel, rather than attempting to 'solve' boredom, is 'engaging with' boredom. Matt Freeney has noted, for instance, that David Foster Wallace's work imagines boredom as "complete immersion in tedious experience. For the characters in *The Pale King*, boredom is something that comes at you, relentlessly, redundantly. It is inescapable. There is no layer of inspiration or freedom beyond or beneath it"<sup>101</sup>. Not only is he engaging with boredom as a writer, but the characters in his novel must also fight this boredom. Like Lin and Knausgaard, Wallace is fighting, or engaging with boredom, on multiple levels.

There are countless other writers doing the same thing, using the methods explored in this thesis as well as others to write the mundane. Sam Pink is another writer, for example, whose novels are brief like Lin's *Shoplifting from American Apparel*, and about very little in conventional narrative terms. It would be difficult to even provide a plot summary of one

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<sup>98</sup> Adam Phillips, 'On Being Bored', *On Kissing, Tickling and Being Bored: Psychoanalytic essays on the unexamined life* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1994)

<sup>99</sup> Benedict Carey, 'You're Bored, But your Brain is Tuned In', *The New York Times*, August 2008 <<https://www.mhpbooks.com/zachary-german-tells-tao-lin-a-thing-or-two/>>

<sup>100</sup> Ian Watt, *The Rise of the Novel: Studies in Defoe, Richardson and Fielding* (Bruges: Pimlico, 2000)

<sup>101</sup> Matt Feeney, 'Infinite Attention: David Foster Wallace and Being Bored out of Your Mind', *Slate*, April 2011

<[http://www.slate.com/articles/arts/culturebox/2011/04/infinite\\_attention.html](http://www.slate.com/articles/arts/culturebox/2011/04/infinite_attention.html)>

of Pink's novels without it seeming like a list of things any bored, random person might have done over a series of days. But Pink combines approaches used by Lin, in the sparsity of his prose and shortness of his novels, with those of the 'idea' as utilised by Thomas, filling the mundane, 'actual' events of his fiction with interesting and bizarre images and thoughts, meaning that humour becomes a crucial element in his use of the 'ideas', which takes centre stage in his fiction:

I'm laughing.

I can't stop.

I'm stupid-awesome.

Yes.

The laughing feels so good.

It occurs to me that there might be gum in the middle of the earth.

That makes me laugh more.

Is there gum there.

It doesn't matter.

This is good.

And one day, there will be no evidence of me ever having lived.<sup>102</sup>

Pink sets his novels out like poems, allowing for easier reading, but further disorientating the genre. Each sentence is nicely spaced out on a line of its own, easy to navigate for our 're-wired' and 'bored' minds. He throws in ridiculous ideas like the above example, the notion that the centre of the earth may be gum, and all in service of the absurd, which is most often the central theme in his writing. In Erlend Loe's *Naïve, Super*, space and time are the ideas that continually surface to add an extra dimension to the protagonist's aimless wanderings.

Yes, our contemporary world is absurd in many ways, boredom as a notion is, arguably, absurd in itself. But this only provides writers with new ways in which to represent their stories, new ways to structure their fictions, and new ways to give meaning to the mundane, the boring, and the

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<sup>102</sup> Sam Pink, *Person* (Portland: Eraserhead Press, 2010) p.86

seemingly meaningless. *Illuminato* is about a bored, meaningless existence and the chaos and madness that is born from it. In writing the novel, utilising the techniques examined in this thesis, I have engaged with Florián's boredom. I have attempted to write his story in ways that cater to contemporary readers, hopefully gaining their attention through my use of style, the shifting structure, and above all, a strong central 'idea', one that has existed for thousands of years and remains as relevant as ever.

Describing a passage from *The Pale King*, Matt Feeney writes about how "a mysterious lecturer in a class on tax accounting declares that, where heroism and bravery once consisted in acts of discovery that generated new facts and meanings, today there are no new facts. Today, heroism consists in attending to existing facts, so as to order them better, and bravery consists in bearing up against this task's unbelievable tedium."<sup>103</sup> Is this how many of us live our lives? Maybe so. The brave and courageous in contemporary society (at least in the Western World) no longer 'fight for survival' against new discoveries and new meanings, but 'fight for survival' against boredom. Foster Wallace's lecturer eludes to the way Foster Wallace and Knausgaard write. *My Struggle*, is written much in this way, or at least seems to be, as Knausgaard 'attends to existing facts' of his own life and attempts to order them in a way that makes for an intriguing style of prose. Foster Wallace's short story, *All That*, published in *The New Yorker*, works similarly, recounting a story from the author's childhood about a 'magical' toy cement mixer he was given. Through his own adult reflection, he muses that his parents must have told him of the mixer's magical capabilities 'in the bored half-cruel way that adults sometimes do with small children'<sup>104</sup>, for their own amusement. This little joke became something his young mind fully believed. The story itself, among other things, focuses on the problems of memory, how the truth becomes altered and how difficult it is to categorise memories of one's own life; towards the end of the story, specifically, how his father remembers things versus how he did, with reference to an old war film they once

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<sup>103</sup> Matt Feeney, 'Infinite Attention: David Foster Wallace and Being Bored out of Your Mind', *Slate*, April 2011

<[http://www.slate.com/articles/arts/culturebox/2011/04/infinite\\_attention.html](http://www.slate.com/articles/arts/culturebox/2011/04/infinite_attention.html)>

<sup>104</sup> David Foster Wallace, 'All That', *The New Yorker*, December 2014

<<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2009/12/14/all-that-2>>



watched together. Through this, Foster Wallace once again expresses the difficulty in ‘archiving and categorising’ thought, and the narrative goes back and forth between describing these childhood events and Foster Wallace analysing the meaning or significance of the feelings involved. The story itself, is the story of ‘archiving and categorizing.’ If we are to take Foster Wallace’s lecturer from *The Pale King* as the voice of the author, in writing this short story, attempting to categorise his own childhood memories in great detail, Foster Wallace, like Knausgaard, or Tao Lin, is being a ‘brave and courageous’ writer.

Writing a novel was once about creating worlds and characters, new situations, new stories, new ideas and meanings, or “Romantic conceptions of freedom, aesthetic experience, artistic creation”<sup>105</sup>, in other words, elements that may shed some light on our world and allow us to escape our own mundane boredom. As Feeney argues:

Romanticism saw people finding moments of freedom through withdrawal and retreat. In this process, we slow ourselves down to experience beauty, and, through this beauty, we might experience a deeper part of ourselves. Or vice versa.<sup>106</sup>

For writers explored in this thesis, the author’s task has changed. The ‘brave’ author no longer seeks new ways to help the reader escape boredom and find ‘meaning’ or ‘beauty’, but instead seeks out new ways in which to ‘arrange’ the ‘tedium’, or new ways to ‘present’ the tedium and boredom which already exists in our contemporary society. This is what I have worked towards in the writing of *Illuminato*. I took an age-old idea, Plato’s cave, and I ‘re-arranged’ it using the techniques explored in this thesis. In our ‘bored society’ we can no longer fight it, so we must face that boredom. The author’s candour would be compromised if they didn’t depict lives stretched out by tedium, as is ‘real life’, which is why this trend of hyperrealism has

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<sup>105</sup> Matt Feeney, ‘Infinite Attention: David Foster Wallace and Being Bored out of Your Mind’, *Slate*, April 2011

<[http://www.slate.com/articles/arts/culturebox/2011/04/infinite\\_attention.html](http://www.slate.com/articles/arts/culturebox/2011/04/infinite_attention.html)>

<sup>106</sup> Matt Feeney, ‘Infinite Attention: David Foster Wallace and Being Bored out of Your Mind’, *Slate*, April 2011

<[http://www.slate.com/articles/arts/culturebox/2011/04/infinite\\_attention.html](http://www.slate.com/articles/arts/culturebox/2011/04/infinite_attention.html)>

become so prevalent. As writers, we need not try to escape it, or to aid our readers in escaping it. We must now try understand it, help our readers understand it, and engage with it. “Boredom is, in effect, the unavoidable price we pay for living in a disenchanted and hyper-rationalised world,”<sup>107</sup> writes M.E. Gardiner, however, Benedict Carey writes in his *New York Times* article, that “falling into a numbed trance allows the brain to recast the outside world in ways that can be productive and creative at least as often as they are disruptive.”<sup>108</sup> It seems that authors have been ‘recasting’ the novel as well, and in writing the bored, the mundane, will continue to do so.

This thesis has argued that the contemporary novel holds our attention by means of dispersal, ennui, and distraction: we may yet need a new critical and creative language to describe how and why it proves so compulsive. Future research must seek out new ways to analyse these texts and strive to create new language around this subject area. Some of my difficulties in writing *Illuminato*, in terms of finding the right voice and structure for my narrative, were due to a distinct lack of available critical models for writing the mundane. Though plenty of research exists around changing reading habits, from scientific and sociological perspectives, there is very little in terms of fiction and creative writing. As it stands, most, if not all creative writing guides, advise techniques that are anti-dispersal, favouring concision and precision. For example, in Newman and Mittelmark’s *How Not to Write a Novel*, they highlight the inability of some authors to “grasp the difference between description and inventory”<sup>109</sup> and suggest that differentiation between events based on importance is crucial, however these are rules that are totally flouted by authors such as Knausgaard and Lin. Arguably, rules such as these are somewhat redundant when writing the mundane contemporary novel, and as this type of writing continues to grow in popularity, which I believe it will, we must seek to expand the way we analyse and interpret said phenomena. In a recent article ‘Reasons for Corbyn’ for *The London Review of Books*, William Davis examines ‘The Twitter

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<sup>107</sup> M.E. Gardiner, ‘Postscript: Not your Father’s Boredom’, *Boredom Studies Reader: Frameworks and Perspectives* (London: Routledge, 2016) p.242

<sup>108</sup> Benedict Carey, ‘You’re Bored, But your Brain is Tuned In’, *The New York Times*, August 2008 <<https://www.nytimes.com/2008/08/05/health/research/05mind.html>>

<sup>109</sup> Sandra Newman and Howard Mittelmark, *How Not to Write a Novel* (London: Penguin, 2009) p.115

Effect', focusing on the vast quantities of archived information available to everyone via the internet, not only of subjects, such as music or history, but of individuals, as many of us who indulge in social media for example, create a 'paper trail' of our own personal history. He refers to this as the 'big data mentality', and reaffirms the stance that writers such as Knausgaard, or using the example of filmmaker Richard Linklater, in his film *Boyhood*, elevate the 'capturing of every biographical detail over time'<sup>110</sup> to an 'art form.' He claims that 'The archive isn't merely available to us; it actively pursues us,' raising some important questions that are very relevant to the subject explored here:

This cultural epoch introduces a distinct set of problems. Which event from the past will pop up next? How can a clear narrative be extracted from the deluge of messages and numbers? What does my data trail say about me? Can past judgments of oneself or others be revised or revoked? It can seem as if there are only two options: to immerse oneself entirely, or to not give a damn.<sup>111</sup>

Knausgaard and Linklater, or Foster Wallace and Tao Lin, have chosen the prior, as have I in the writing of this thesis. The purpose of fiction is to capture something of reality, to create something we can reflect upon reality through, so if reality is becoming this vast database of 'maximalism', fiction must follow suit. That said, if this is to be the case, as writers we must continue to theorize and to develop ways in which to achieve this within the novel. Therefore, we must continue to analyse the work created in this field thus far, in order to fully understand how writers are achieving such immersive pieces of fiction within the realms of the mundane. Further research, new language and methods of extracting the means and meaning behind the mundane in the contemporary novel, will allow writers and readers new ways to attend to the distractions and diffusions of an increasingly 'bored' society.

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<sup>110</sup> William Davis, 'Reasons for Corbyn', *London Review of Books*, Vol. 39.No. 14. July, 2007 <<https://www.lrb.co.uk/v39/n14/william-davies/reasons-for-corbyn>>

<sup>111</sup> William Davis, 'Reasons for Corbyn', *London Review of Books*, Vol. 39.No. 14. July, 2007 <<https://www.lrb.co.uk/v39/n14/william-davies/reasons-for-corbyn>>





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