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UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHAMPTON

FACULTY OF HUMANITIES

Creative Writing

Volume 1 of 1

**Unspeakable Things: A Critical and Creative Exploration of the Limitations of
Language and How We Can Navigate Them to Better Communicate Meaning**

by

Thomas James Brown

Thesis for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

January 2019

UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHAMPTON

ABSTRACT

FACULTY OF HUMANITIES

Creative Writing

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UNSPEAKABLE THINGS: A CRITICAL AND CREATIVE EXPLORATION OF THE LIMITATIONS OF LANGUAGE AND HOW WE CAN NAVIGATE THEM TO BETTER COMMUNICATE MEANING

Thomas James Brown

Disturbing, haunting, mesmerising, surreal — the sentiment behind the words used by readers in response to *Unspeakable Things* calls up the collection's sublime subject matter. Suggestive of the unutterable and the unknown respectively, the title of the collection speaks to this focus, which the fourteen narratives within evoke in order to transform complex contemporary issues such as social inequality, mental health, modern sexuality, and an endemic disregard for human life into affecting and accessible themes. Their use of the sublime achieves this by elevating the reader beyond thought and language at choice moments in each text, encouraging an emotional, spiritual, or philosophical response that serves to raise the reader's awareness of — and engagement with — key themes.

Herein lies the new knowledge the accompanying critical commentary contributes to the creative writing field, putting forward the means by which the discourse of the sublime can not only be appropriated to examine key issues in critical contexts but used as a literary device by the modern creative writer to articulate contemporary themes and issues otherwise challenged with being too complex, far-reaching, or inaccessible to communicate authentically in narrative form. The creative collection is itself a contribution of new knowledge to the field for the way in which it demonstrates this.

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Academic Thesis: Declaration Of Authorship

I, THOMAS BROWN

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.

Unspeakable Things: A Critical and Creative Exploration of the Limitations of Language and How We Can Navigate Them to Better Communicate Meaning

I confirm that:

1. This work was done wholly or mainly while in candidature for a research degree at this University;
2. Where any part of this thesis has previously been submitted for a degree or any other qualification at this University or any other institution, this has been clearly stated;
3. Where I have consulted the published work of others, this is always clearly attributed;
4. Where I have quoted from the work of others, the source is always given. With the exception of such quotations, this thesis is entirely my own work;
5. I have acknowledged all main sources of help;
6. Where the thesis is based on work done by myself jointly with others, I have made clear exactly what was done by others and what I have contributed myself;
7. Parts of this work have been published as:
 - 1.1 Prologue, earlier version originally published as 'Harvest House' on Pen of the Damned, *Damned Words 2* (Pen of the Damned, 2013)
<<https://penofthedamned.com/2013/06/01/damned-words-2/>> [accessed 29 September 2017]
 - 1.4 'Imago Dreams', originally published as 'Insomnia' on Pen of the Damned, *Damned Words 6* (Pen of the Damned, 2014)
< <https://penofthedamned.com/2014/03/11/damned-words-6/>> [accessed 26 November 2018]
 - 1.6 'Winnie', earlier version originally published as 'Lady Crocodile' in *Mirror, Mirror*, ed. by Dorothy Davies (North Carolina: Thirteen Press, 2014)
 - 1.7 'The Flowers', earlier version originally published as 'Pink Orchid' on Pen of the Damned, *Damned Echoes 3* (Pen of the Damned, 2016)

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<<https://penofthedamned.com/2016/09/13/damned-echoes-3/>> [accessed 29 September 2017]

1.8 'Eve', published on Pen of the Damned, *Damned Words 9* (Pen of the Damned, 2014) <<https://penofthedamned.com/2014/09/23/damned-words-9/>> [accessed 29 September 2017]

1.10 'Escape', originally published as 'Half-Measure' on Pen of the Damned, *Damned Words 4* (Pen of the Damned, 2013)

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1.11 'Sarah', originally published as 'It Lives In Us' in *Twisted Realities: Of Myth and Monstrosity*, ed. by Gloria Bobrowicz (New York: Siren's Call Publications, 2012) and *At The Stroke of Thirteen* (North Carolina: Thirteen Press, 2014). Earlier version previously submitted for MA Creative Writing module assignment, 2012. Course convenor Aamer Hussein.

1.12 'The Docks', earlier version originally published as 'RMS Valor' on Pen of the Damned, *Damned Echoes 2* (Pen of the Damned, 2016)

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1.14 Epilogue, earlier version originally published as 'Route UB1' in *Changes*, ed. By Dorothy Davies (North Carolina: Thirteen Press, 2014)

Signed: Thomas Brown

Date: 05/01/19

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Chapter 1 *Unspeakable Things*

1.1 Prologue

Each day, when morning breaks, the gates unlock. Blue-eyed boys and blond-haired girls hop, skip, jump, crack silly jokes, kick chequered balls into an empty sky. A bell rings and they rush inside; Nick, Lily, Winnie, little Max drink juice, help themselves to biscuits, laughing, throwing punches, wiping crumbs from around their messy mouths.

After lunch the children play inside, read stories (Tams and Sarah sing), fall fast asleep, and then, in that calm, soporific state, begin to change. Skin shivers, splits revealing shells, long insect legs, click-clacking tongues; by night a horrid, hungry hive trapped inside this, their steel penal-nest.

1.2 'Tammy's Flight'

Hydraulics hiss and, through the settling fog, Tammy makes out the UBI's indicators, blinking indifferently. Her stomach fluttering, she starts to run.

Men and women obscure her way, towering forms laden with bags, cases and rucksacks, lost in cell phones, oblivious to her, to everything except the grown-up nonsense blowing from their mouths. She pulls free from the crowd in time to see another flash of indicator lights in the fog. Then the bus is swallowed by the whiteness.

Frustration flares inside her, to be swallowed by a void of overwhelming helplessness. Wiping her nose on the back of her arm, she wishes again that Lily was here, or Nick. They'd know what to do. She used to dream about what it would be like on the other side of those fences. Now she's here, she feels very small and even more lost. The rain picks up, driving her beneath the bus shelter.

In the wake of the six-ten, the shelter is abandoned. Tammy hops onto one of the benches, her legs dangling, before sliding back to the pavement. A timetable stares down at her, the times she needs spray-painted over with green stars and swearwords. The next bus might be ten minutes or ten hours for all she knows. Her shoulder finds the metal post, cold but supportive, and for a moment she's tempted to wait, to spend the whole night here, if she has to.

The thought no sooner enters her mind than she buttons up her denim jacket, double-knots her shoelaces, draws a deep breath, and steps back out into the street.

Rain clings to her like a second, transparent skin, and in a second she's soaked through. The current of adults drags her along, while around her the street blurs. People become base silhouettes, tall shadows glimpsed in her periphery. Others sag, stooped against the weather, darkening like her jacket, and it's all too easy to imagine the rain might wash the whole city away, waterlogging the pavement and the people forced to use it. The fog lingers around the road, a blank canvas into which the silhouettes vanish or reappear suddenly, chased into sight again by headlights and the rattle of car engines.

The entrance to the Underground yawns ahead. She remembers it from the books they used to read together at Story Time, and the stories her mother would tell her before that. Her mother's face is a blank canvas but she remembers those stories, of Paddington Bear and his adventures beneath the city. She could sing when she spots the bear's name, printed in bold letters on a sign above the entrance.

The current pulls her closer until she can barely move, and she can't help the wave of panic that crashes over her. The crowd presses nearer as it narrows, elbows and briefcases knocking her shoulders and the small of her back. Paddington Bear also became lost in the crowd; she wouldn't make the same mistake. Mimicking the others on their approach to the turnstiles, she fumbles in her pockets: several buttons, the bell from her bike, and a handful of her morning tablets. One of the gates has been left open; she slips through it and finds herself riding an escalator down.

Long bulbs line the ceilings, guarded behind strips of wire-mesh. She can look at them for only a moment before her eyes hurt, every cracked tile, every broken bottle, every billboard plastered with adverts illuminated in the unforgiving brightness. She approaches the station just as a train roars through. The carriages shudder past her faster than anything she's seen before. Faster and faster they race, too fast for her to properly see but felt all the same, their rhythmic rocking echoing within her like a carousel or a great heartbeat, and with each successive *whoosh* her chest tightens, her shoulders hunch, her hands clench harder and tighter by her side. The silence in its wake swallows her up.

The times on the electronic board tell her another train is due any minute. She hears it before she sees it, its arrival announced by something halfway between a mechanical sigh and a scream. She doesn't know where Southampton Central is but when the carriages slide to a stop, she wanders on-board.

The aisle funnels her down the length of the carriage. She moves from glossy armrest to glossy armrest until she finds herself at the very end. Away from anyone else, she huddles into a seat. The train begins rocking beneath her as it pulls away. She doesn't know how long it will take to get to Southampton, but a twist of her stomach reminds her it must've been hours since she last ate.

She sleeps. When she wakes, night crowds at the windows. In the blackness, her reflection watches her intently, studying the dark bags under her eyes, the tightness of her face, her thin hair, still wet with rain. Winnie was always smiling. Jake, too. How they'd all beamed, their eyes bright, grins wide, as they fled the grounds!

She's not smiling now. She thinks again of the facility, of break time in the mornings and the games they'd all played together. Automatically, her fingers return to the small tablets in her pocket, her thoughts to the grown-ups who'd administered them. Only the nurses had truly frightened her, and even then, she knew she was safe as long as she was with the others. She's still staring at her reflection when it starts to blur.

She'd never cry in front of Nick or Max, but then, they aren't here. Nobody is here. She is all alone. Lights flash behind the speeding carriage windows, and for a moment she thinks she sees something else through the glass; a long face, white, speckled with eyes like bulbous orbs and a mouth that seem to stretch wider than any mouth should. When she blinks, it's gone. The glass clouds with hot breath and a low hissing sound, which can only be the train's brakes. Then the train is slowing again, slowing, sliding to a stop. Standing, she hurries towards the door.

She doesn't know how long she's been sitting here but the sign on the screen above the doors says this is Southampton. Wiping the last of her tears on the backs of her sleeves, she fumbles for the button that opens the carriage doors and disembarks.

The platform is much busier than the last one. She moves quickly towards the stairwell, possessed by the sudden notion that the nurses have let them out on purpose. Perhaps this is a treat for good behaviour, or another one of their tests, and any moment the nurses and wardens will pull up beside her and bundle her into the backseat with Sarah and Winnie and the others. Yes, they probably just lost her in the fog, that's all. She repeats her name to herself, just in case anyone is listening out. The word echoes around her:

'Tammy. Tammy. Tammy. Tammy. Tammy...'

She's halfway across the platform when the station answers her. Turning, she cranes her head. The sound becomes louder, clearer, echoing from the tunnel mouth to her left: the scratching of something hard against the tracks.

The tunnel itself doesn't frighten her. There's comfort in the dark, respite enough from the rest of the day to draw real breath and find relief. It seems impossible here, where the light is unfaltering, but it would be an easy thing to wander to the edge of the platform and climb down. Then she hears the patter of steps again, and the sound of something heavy dragging its bulk across the ground. When a silhouette appears, eight eyes glittering in the gloom, she turns and flees.

The steps are slippery, or perhaps it's her hurry that makes her trip and fall. With the delayed momentum of a dream she stumbles away, up the stairs and outside. She races past the turnstiles, all set to open, and into the night.

She doesn't stop running. She couldn't, even if she wanted to; she can't see her pursuer but she hears a clicking like Nick's knuckles, feels a warmth on the back of her neck, and knows it can't be far behind her. A sweet, coppery taste fills her mouth. Puddles shatter underfoot. It's stopped raining, at least.

She races faster through the streets, sometimes stumbling, other times reaching newfound speeds, but the alleyways are never-ending. She wonders if she could run like this forever and still not escape, if there will always be another road, another towering building, another set of street-lights, that sound like popping gristle filling her head. Around her, the city glistens as though iced.

Headlights turn into the road ahead, and through a different kind of fog she remembers something: lateness, another run, a bus she'd wanted to catch to escape the streets and the crowds. She knows it can't be the same bus but she gives chase anyway. Strength fills her arms and legs, the wind sliding over her skin, the sound of her shoes marrying with the clicking sound. Exhilaration presses at her ribs, her belly, running like electricity through her fingertips and toes.

The bus is slow and in moments she's caught up with it. As she pulls parallel to the vehicle, she catches sight of her reflection again in the row of windows: her own pale face, small but bright and smiling. Her eyes gleam like a

cluster of pennies. She counts her riches: one, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight.

A dream flits behind them: the playground, crawling with the shapes of her friends: Lily, Sarah, Winnie, Nick, Max and the others. Then it's gone again. Scuttling ahead, she chases it through night.

1.3 'Catherine'

Chapter One

Catherine is reading a book on the sofa when she realises the cat has spoken. Putting down the well-thumbed collection of Donne, one of Freya's gifts to her on her fortieth, she follows the voice to Merlot, sitting on her haunches by the fireplace.

'Sorry?'

The cat stares curiously back at her. 'You will be. I asked why you're reading, if it's making you cry.'

Blinking quickly, Catherine looks away. Night presses at the windowpanes, held back not by glass but the glow of the lamps dotted around the room. She stretches across the sofa, which smells softly of lavender. The whole room smells of the flowers, a generous vase of them dressing the coffee table. She's just finished her second bottle of Classic Claret. Merlot doesn't drink. At least, not red wine.

'Sorry,' says Catherine, 'I didn't see you there.'

'You're deflecting,' says Merlot.

'I'm not sad. What on earth have I to be sad about?'

'And yet you're crying.'

The cat's voice is silky and laced with self-assurance. It slides velveteen into Catherine's ears. She studies her darling baby a moment longer, silhouetted against the fireplace, then rises to the drinks cabinet. A glass of bourbon finds her hand.

'I'm not sad,' she repeats, sinking back into the sofa and taking a small sip. 'Besides which, you're a cat. What do you know of sadness?'

'I know that it's normal to be upset sometimes. The world is a big, bad place.'

'Not for a cat.'

‘Especially for a cat.’ Merlot’s eyes shine like emeralds in the lamplight. ‘And lonely. Sometimes it gets so lonely.’

Catherine laughs as she hears this. ‘You, lonely? You’ve been round the village more times than I can imagine. You had a litter!’

‘And you gave it away,’ says Merlot. ‘You fawned over my babies and then you gave them up. Still, I suppose a litter is more than you will ever know.’

The room grows blurry, Merlot swimming in and out of visibility. The fireplace warps with Catherine’s tears, flames leaping to engulf the cat’s silhouette.

‘That was cruel,’ she says. ‘On both counts.’

‘I’d say we were about even, then.’

Retreating to the window, Catherine stares outside, watching as her younger self runs, smiling, laughing, across the cobbled street. She’s stopped crying, her tears replaced by tightness in her chest and back, as though her own skin is constricting around her. It’s a feeling she remembers well from when she worked with the children at the facility and from the dank places in the forest surrounding the village, but never here before, in her own sitting room, her home!

She finishes her bourbon. Chasing it down with a glass of milk, she retreats to bed, leaving the cat and the fire and the aroma of lavender behind her.

*

That night, Catherine dreams she’s running across the heathland that surrounds the village when she trips and falls into a hole. As she falls, her eyes catch one last glimpse of her surroundings. She sees swathes of tall grass, budding flowers, and white clouds against blue skies. She knows it’s autumn, yet here, now, the sky seems heavy with spring. Then she’s swallowed by the hole and knows only earth, with its metallic smell and the scratch of roots against her cheeks.

It could be a rabbit hole, she thinks as she topples forward, or perhaps a badger’s sett. The heath is full of such pitfalls, and it’s the season for newborn young. Really, she should’ve been more careful. She feels a hundred things in a moment, one second that seems to stretch on for the longest time: surprise, shame, fear, shock, embarrassment and a thrill, which rides her churning stomach.

She falls quickly through the dark. The sky shrinks above her, growing smaller and smaller until it’s a pinpoint of light, barely visible at all. The hole is

much deeper than she could've imagined. Her heart races, her lips grow dry, but still she keeps falling. A shrill sound accompanies her, high-pitched and lilting. She realises she's screaming, that she's been screaming since she first started falling and possibly even before then. It's no wonder her throat is sore, that her lungs burn from want of breath.

As she falls, she thinks of Alice and her tumble into Wonderland. When she was a child, her mother would often read the book to her. There's nothing wonderful about this fall, only darkness and the wet breath of loam against her skin, until she hits the ground and starts awake in bed. What she'd give to be Alice, she thinks, as she lies there struggling for breath, or at least to be as brave. What she'd give for a potion, to be as tall as the sky, or as small as an ant, or any size that was not her own, and not herself.

Chapter Two

Freya visits the next day. Wrapped up in hand-knitted sweaters and chunky scarves, the two women sit together by the window in Catherine's front room. Merlot isn't far away; from where they're sitting, Catherine can see him stalking sparrows through crunchy leaves.

'He was a tall man. And broad. I distinctly remember him being broad.'
Catherine peers devilishly over her glass of Pinot. 'Big, strong arms, you know?'

'Who?' says Freya.

'Your father.'

'Catherine Lacey! You're awful, have I ever told you that?'

'Would you have me any other way?' She settles back into the sofa and sips her drink while studying her oldest friend. Freya seems content, her slight figure nestled into the cushions. Her smile seems genuine. Wine glistens across her lips.

Like Catherine, Freya has lived her whole life in Lynnwood. They met at school. Freya has always been the more confidant, the more outspoken of the two. One evening, when they were barely into sixth form, they stole wine together from Catherine's father's cellar, but it was Freya's hand on the bottle. They often talked about what it would be like to get married, have children, make lives for

themselves here when they grew up, but it was only Freya who ended up accomplishing these things.

Catherine used to envy Freya's relationship with her father. While David Heart would steal Freya for walks through the forest, Richard Lacey remained rooted to his desk. The chief executive of a facility in London – where she herself would go on to work one day – he was constantly on the phone or surrounded by a sea of papers. What Catherine would have given to be able to drag him from his chair, to splash him with puddles and feel the shadows of the trees on their faces, the pair of them unmasked in the forest's dappled light!

She doesn't have many memories of her father, but this one remains: her knuckles rapping timidly against the old oak door, then grasping the brass knob – almost too big for her hand – when her knocking went unanswered. She remembers moving quietly into the room, standing beneath the cluttered heights of the study, shelves of books rising like ribcages around her and papers spread across the floor. She remembers the shadows, inching closer before darting back again, slaves to the oil-lamp on the desk.

'Dad,' she'd whispered. Then, louder: 'Dad, look.'

Across the other side of the room, before the broad bay windows where he stood, her father flinched. He did not turn, but waved her away with one hand.

'Not now, Catherine, please.'

She stepped through the study towards him. The room smelled of the spirits her father kept in a cabinet in the corner and was silent, save the ticking of a grandfather clock beside the door. She didn't know why he insisted on using an oil-lamp, except that it was a family heirloom, passed down by his father, he said, and his father before him. Such traditions made no sense to her. They were silly.

'Look what I've found,' she said, tiptoeing between papers towards him. 'The caterpillars from the jar above my bed, the paper ones I made at school, look what's happened to them!'

The wind strained against the windowpanes. Outside was indistinguishable through the dark, as though there was no outside at all; just another study, identical to this one, reflected backwards in the glass. It wasn't especially late, but this deep into winter the nights were long and came early. The wind sounded like dogs howling into the sky.

As she drew closer, she could make out her father's face in the window. She thought he looked tired, pale, a shadow of his real self. She moved beside him, one hand slipping into his, and as she did so another face loomed through his at the window, a long, white visage, wide-eyed and open-mouthed.

Her hand clenched around his, the glass jar slipping from the other. It made a single pop as it shattered against the floorboards, bursting into a hundred shards.

Then the face was gone. Whether it was her father's or that of something else at the window, she wasn't sure. He knelt with her to retrieve the pieces of glass, and the ragged paper butterflies the jar had contained.

*

Birdsong sounds from the garden. It's weightless, without worry. Catherine watches as Merlot stalks an unsuspecting sparrow. She wonders whether she should tell Freya about her conversation with the cat. She decides against it.

Merlot gives a predatory performance. A huntress of the village wilderness, she shadows the sparrow through the leaf litter until the moment comes when she springs. As Catherine watches the cat's claws descend, she thinks about the sparrow, which in an instant has known life, then whatever comes afterward. She wonders if it knew, in its last moments, that death approached, an instinct, the promise of decay, of maggots crawling in its soupy corpse, its glassy eyes staring.

She thinks about these things again when Freya gets up to leave and they discover the dead bird on the doorstep. As Catherine buries it in the garden, she decides that it's just a sparrow, or was, and most probably had no knowledge of life or death. She feels emptier for the realisation. From the corner of the garden, where she teases her paws with her tongue, Merlot sits watching her.

Chapter Three

The village is as old and beautiful as Mrs Gossamer, who lives across the Green. Growing up, Catherine loved the village's cobbled streets, its fairy tale cottages and Thursday markets. She remembers running through the streets, grinning at passers-by, the sun warming her skin. Even in winter, the village isn't unpleasant. The air feels colder, tastes wilder on the tongue. Snowdrops carpet the gardens

and the adjoining fields, and snow falls thick across the surrounding forest. She used to walk here with her mother, though not as often as she'd have liked.

They tell many stories in the village. There was the time Ms. Andrews turned up drunk for Sunday Service and had to be taken home by the Rankins. Much light religious mockery had followed: their shepherd, guided safely home by her flock! They speak of the Hemmingways, of the unfortunate year they moved into the village, and the next, when they left. Only when one of McCready's pigs found its way into the unpleasant family's sitting room did they finally take the hint, leaving suddenly one Christmas in the middle of the night.

'Goodness knows,' the villagers had said afterwards, 'how McCready's livestock got there!'

They tell tales of the forest, too. They talk of voices on the wind, of the dark spaces between the trees and figures glimpsed through the undergrowth. These stories tugged at young Catherine's breath, pressing on her heart and her chest until she could do nothing but write about them. Her earliest poems, often a source of comfort when she was revising for her exams, were formed from that wilderness breath on her neck, a much-needed relief from her clinical studies.

Everyone in Lynnwood knows the forest's history. Local schools teach little else. She learned more about it in the library and online, too. Her laptop shows her many things the guidebooks omit. There are no secrets any more, no corners unexplored, except those hidden by the people in their graves, and perhaps under the skins of the people who still live in the village above them.

*

It's another week before Catherine speaks with Merlot again. She wakes one morning to the cat's face hovering over hers, eyes dazzling like a dragonfly's or those of an old lady by the light of her bedroom window. Paws swat gently but insistently at her face. They smell of soil and the cold.

'Wake up,' says Merlot. 'Wake up. I'm hungry.'

Catherine stirs, groans, trying to push her assailant from her face. The cat skitters away, then springs back.

'Get off me,' says Catherine, 'your breath smells awful.'

'And I'm getting drunk off yours. On an empty stomach too. Feed me.'

‘Feed yourself. The study window’s left ajar for a reason, you know. Find a mouse.’

‘Find a...’ The cat tilts her head, her eyes swimming monstrously above Catherine. ‘Find a mouse indeed. Perhaps it’s a godsend you can’t have children.’

‘Don’t start this again.’ Catherine’s voice is hard and tired. ‘Just don’t.’

‘No?’ The cat’s head swivels. Her pupils shift, becoming slits of black against gold. ‘I wager you wouldn’t be so inhospitable if I was Freya, crouched over you in bed.’

‘And what has that got to do with anything?’

‘You might not dream so often of the dead, if you enjoyed living once in a while.’

Struggling up on her arms, Catherine grabs Merlot and tosses her to the floor. The cat lands heavily yet nimbly on the wooden floorboards.

‘Rude,’ says Merlot, before collapsing to her haunches to lick herself.

Catherine rubs the sleep from her eyes. She stares at the four walls: the rocking chair in one corner, the crumbling white ceiling, the ivy that climbs outside the window. She wonders if things will change one day, and if so, when that day will come. Change, she realises, would be welcome, in this village where almost everything remains the same.

‘Coming?’ says Merlot, from the doorway. Even at this distance, she can see the cat’s pupils have melted into black discs.

Slipping from bed, Catherine follows her cat to the landing. ‘Yes, yes, I’m coming. I’m hungry too, as it happens.’

‘I know,’ says Merlot softly. Her tail erect, she weaves between Catherine’s legs as they walk. ‘There’s not a person in the village who isn’t hungry, now or ever. And they are not hungry for mice.’

*

Each September, when the light stays late, the ladies of Lynnwood feast with their husbands in the Foxleys’ garden. A chill nibbles at their ears and the tops of their noses, but lit braziers, hot food, and spiced alcohol keep the impending cold at bay.

Catherine has long considered the Foxleys' garden beautiful, and this evening is no exception. Bunting flutters overhead, stretched across pavilions or pulled tight between the branches of trees. Torchlight flickers, growing stronger with the fading daylight, and the heady scent of uncorked wine wafts through the air, never mind the other smells: roasting meat and sweet cider and often the smoke, from fireworks.

On this occasion, Freya has a previous engagement and Catherine is forced to attend alone. She doesn't mind this too much; there will be company at the party and the walk there isn't long. Turning from the row of houses at the end of her street, she crosses a small bridge, coming to the long gravel path behind Lynnwood Manor.

For one strange, indistinct moment, she feels hesitant. To her right, the grey gravel path runs into the distance, thinner and thinner until it's swallowed from sight by the trees. To her left, she can see where the path meets the road, marked by tarmac and the red glare of the traffic lights. Ahead of her sits an allotment.

The Foxleys' place is on the left, across the road, on the other side of the Village Green. Still, she can't help but turn right. The path leads nowhere, running behind the school and out of the village. It's a pleasant enough walk on a sunny day, or when wrapped-up warm in winter, but it's only a walk, and that's all.

She's two steps down the path before she realises she's moved at all. Her chest tight, heart racing behind her ribs, she turns back, towards the road and the Green.

The party is already alive. Bodies fill the garden, neighbours eating and drinking and laughing enthusiastically into the evening. Despite her reservations, which she can't help but hold, she finds herself delighting at the decorations and the breath of the wines.

'Don't you know,' cries a man over the hubbub of voices, 'they caught Margaret Gossamer at last.'

'At last?' shouts a lady, whom Catherine recognises as the Manor's headmistress.

'Yes,' he goes on, 'haven't you heard? It was she who'd been stealing from the village hall. We caught her on the cameras last Tuesday. Our elusive thief, Mrs

Gossamer! Knives, forks and assorted other silverware, never mind those wallets and Arthur's misplaced mobile.'

Turning, Catherine moves towards the drinks table. The guests prowl around her. A young lady brushes past a man Catherine recognises from her street, the woman's fingers following the seams of his jacket. He feels her touch and responds in kind. Drink in hand, Catherine watches as the two explore each other, their confidence growing with the fading light. Behind them, three older men she doesn't quite recognise talk in hushed tones, faces lit by the glow of a lamp. Their eyes flash around furtively, studying, dissecting, waiting, and she wonders if she looks the same.

The wines are rich, the bottles many, and it isn't long before she dissolves into the hubbub of the crowd. She drinks more, growing more social, less sophisticated. She meets friends and talks and even laughs with some of them.

Darkness settles slowly overhead, stripping the garden of familiarity, and Catherine shivers bodily. The other guests are drinking more heavily now. Wine splashes past lips and runs down pale throats. A number of couples slip away into the gathering gloom as yet more emerge from the house, circling social groups, engaging with others, chirping with laughter into one another's faces. Some of them paw at each other, fingers slipping across soft satin or the sleek, cold brass of the braziers. These are mounted straight into the lawn, impaled like spears into the soft turf, and Catherine can't help but marvel at them flickering fiercely. Such beauty as she sees in the burning, oil-soaked rags is a rare thing now. A champagne flute finds her hand and she savours a mouthful, relishing the sharp bubbles in her mouth and nose.

'Tell me,' roars a voice, overheard through the rest, 'whatever did they do to her, that poor Mrs Gossamer?'

'Nothing yet,' shouts a man, and at this he begins to chuckle. Tears well in his eyes, leaving shining trails down his cheeks. His face seems to shimmer in the lamplight. 'She doesn't know, so not a word. But she'll get her just desserts!'

'Her just desserts indeed!' The garden buzzes with laughter. 'Blancmange, anyone?'

The world shifts around Catherine, and there are no guests any more, no trees, no pavilions, only light and darkness and a hundred different sounds and smells sliding through her mind. Shapes that are people become other things,

rolling and leaping through her vision, blurred shadows slipping from the light into the forest and the hedge maze at their rear, and for the briefest moment she uncorks the memory of another time, when the children under her care were made to wear their wildness like a second, chitinous skin. Then she drinks more herself, and remembers little else.

Chapter Four

'You don't look well,' says Merlot, in the kitchen the next morning. 'I'd say, in fact, quite ghastly.'

'Don't start,' replies Catherine, from where she huddles inside her dressing gown over the worktop.

'I don't suppose you remember very much?'

She lifts her head from her hands long enough to shake it, sending the room spinning around her. The flowers in the hanging baskets become bright streaks of colour in her eyes. The rest of the room is a mixture of light and dark.

'You don't drink,' says Catherine, 'therefore you should have no opinion on drinking.'

'I don't drink because I don't need to drink,' says Merlot. She swaggers across the floorboards and springs onto the windowsill. The morning sun frames her proud silhouette. 'I'm wild enough without wine. You saw me catch that bird last week.'

'I don't drink to be wild,' says Catherine curtly.

The cat considers this in silence. While Merlot contemplates, Catherine's eyes crawl across the room. She studies the hanging baskets, the cooker, Merlot's bowl, overflowing with cat food. Through her headiness, she frowns. 'Haven't you been eating?'

'To numb the pain, then. You drink to drown your sorrows, as they say?'

'Shut up,' she mutters.

'Catherine the cliché?'

'Shut up!'

Before she knows what's happening, she's grabbed an empty bottle from the worktop. She doesn't feel its weight in her hand, but she notices its absence as it spins away from her, a flash of green through the air. It flies towards Merlot, who turns to face the oncoming bottle. Her feline eyes show a flicker of surprise, perhaps, then the bottle crashes through her into the window behind.

Catherine is on her feet before the bottle hits but she isn't fast enough. Glass showers into the sink. Cracks spread across the window. Catherine's stomach leaps.

'That,' says Merlot, from the other side of the room, 'could have been messy.'

'How...' she gasps, her eyes darting across the kitchen. Then she remembers that she shouldn't be talking to the cat in the first place, and the absurdity of the situation checks her. Her breath comes heavy from her lungs. 'You don't drink,' she repeats quietly. 'So keep your opinions to yourself.'

'And you don't live,' says the cat. 'Not in the honest sense. So do not be so quick to lecture me about living.'

Silence settles back over the kitchen. Catherine stands by the cracked window for several minutes, wondering whether or not she's mad, and for just how long she's hated herself, and when the last time was that she actually saw Merlot alive.

*

That evening, as on most now, Catherine finds herself staring out across the village. A glass occupies her hands. She doesn't speak or smile or show any real emotion in her reflection, studying the street silently from the confines of her sitting room. She's a ghost, or something worse than a ghost: a husk.

Staring into her eyes, she could crumble before the window. Her throat swells with a lump that even the wine can't wash away. Her eyes blur, tears streaming down her face, and she realises with a sob that it's not the village that blurs, not the street, not the picket fence outside her cottage, but her reflection. She doesn't know what she's looking for when she stares into her face each evening, whether she's clinging to a Catherine she recognises or is watching for some change or seeking her father's face in the glass. She doesn't know if there's any point to it at all, if there's any point to any of it. Her body shakes as she cries,

until she can't cry any more and her reflection fades from the window. Ascending through the cottage, she climbs into bed and curls up into a ball.

She dreams she's back at the Foxleys' party. This time, Freya moves across the lawn towards her. Her dress flutters, her bare feet stepping lightly on the grass and, though Catherine has watched her friend dance many times before — perhaps because she's watched her friend dance so many times before — this moment resonates with her. Freya seems detached from the world as she sways and spins, her eyes closed, lips smiling at the corners.

Her neck is long and pale like a splash of spilled cream. What it would be, Catherine dreams, to press her lips to that throat, to feel Freya's skin against her mouth and inside it, to tap into those veins and drink.

The other guests stand statuesque around her. They eat rare food and speak and laugh headily, but Catherine has only eyes for her friend as Freya celebrates the autumn and the butterflies that dance around her.

*

She wakes early next morning, before the sun has risen. The cottage feels cold. Still dressed in last night's clothes, she leaves the house without really knowing where she's going. Outside, it's dark and colder still. As she wanders down the garden, there's still no sign of Merlot. She moves quietly through the village.

Her feet carry her around the outskirts first, then into the centre. She passes the church and McCready's farm before finding herself at the Green. Then she's back among houses, old cottages with new extensions and cars wet with dew. This is the village, she thinks. This is what they've made to suit themselves, to separate them from the forest with its hollows and its bogs.

She crosses the small bridge, as she's done so many times before, coming to the long gravel path behind the school. She can't remember ever being here so early before, so fresh in the morning that it's still night. To her right is the gravel path, a line of stone stretching into the darkness. To her left is the road, and ahead of her the villagers' allotments. She stands at the junction for what feels like a long time, lost beneath the low, jagged tangle of the hedgerow. Her eyes follow the pale stone path through the dark, and it's then that she sees it, or thinks she sees it: a white figure, small but growing larger as it draws nearer.

To begin with, she can't make it out, except that it appears to move oddly, like a limping man or a crab. Then it's close enough that she can see it more clearly, and she realises that it's a man, half-naked, his flesh pale with the cold.

She doesn't recognise his face, even when he scurries past her so close that she can smell him. His eyes are wide, his breathing sharp. She's frozen to the spot, the early morning silent except for his ragged gasps.

She turns as he passes, for the first time noticing that they're not alone; other shapes crawl through the pre-dawn gloom, emerging from trees and over garden walls. Some of these she does recognise: neighbours and friends in equal states of undress, and at the end of the path another figure, different from the rest, the thin form of an old woman fleeing through the dark. She knows it's Mrs Gossamer from the grey hair trailing behind her.

A sound fills her ears, dull at first as though heard underwater, then louder and with more clarity. She's never heard an old lady scream before, or if she has, she doesn't remember it.

Mrs Gossamer stumbles towards the road but Catherine knows, even before the first of the villagers reaches her, that it's futile. She sees this now, standing in the dark, cold and for the first time alive.

They catch the old lady at the pavement, where they fall on her with their hands and teeth. For several minutes Catherine watches from the path. Then she too is among them, feasting beneath the glow of the traffic lights.

1.4 'Imago Dreams'

They say dreaming is dead, but I still dream: clear skies, cool breeze, a little sunlight on my face. I would like to walk somewhere with you, hand-in-hand, and not be alone. I choke to think of what could be: flesh and blood and bones that sing my name, my song, our song, rising into the wind. We should be so lucky.

They say dreaming is dead, but I still dream of a way out, an escape, a different life to that behind this iron gate, this tarnished prison, this nightmare in which we have trapped ourselves, furry with sharp blood-red rust.

1.5 'Tammy (2)'

Chapter One

Steam blooms across the hull of the dishwasher. Shadows swim in the tarnished metal and, in their wake, the suggestion of an emaciated silhouette, long-limbed but bent low, scuttling after them.

Tammy half turns, expecting to see Gift or perhaps a customer in need of assistance. A few of their regulars occupy their usual seating, but that's all. Empty tables, worn leather sofas and the beige expanse of the wall meet her view.

'Hello?'

The confirmation that no one's standing behind her is as reassuring as it is unsettling. Heart racing, she studies the dull, metallic surface of the dishwasher: nothing but her bleak reflection stares back, indistinct in the steel. She can still remember the day, three years ago, when she first learned it was possible to paint a face onto the space where her own should be: eyeliner, so that she might see, lipstick with which to speak, blusher with which to bring her face to life. It had made her smile that she should use concealer not to conceal but to create, fashioning the impression of a person each morning in her dressing table mirror. She has worn it ever since.

The dishwasher occupies a cramped corner, screened from the rest of the coffee shop by a partition that doesn't quite reach to the ceiling. Plates scale the divide, rising like rickety pillars alongside cups, towers of bowls and assorted other pieces of clean crockery. Caught at a glance, the rising plates gleam like bare bones; ribs encasing the coffee shop's innards, picked clean and shining with steam.

Behind her, two tiny Asian women sit motionless with their drinks by the windows. In one corner, a lonely figure in a black raincoat dozes away. Otherwise all is still. If the shop front looks old, with its crumbling brick and washed-out overhang, the inside is its match: dated, archaic; 'a corpse from the nineties', her mother had said, when Tammy took the time to describe it to her last week. She hadn't wholly understood the expression at the time. She still doesn't, except that she knows they aren't in the nineties any more and it might take more than a

couple of once-plush leather sofas to make a place inviting. Only the stainless-steel refrigerators behind the counter suggest anything contemporary.

In the corner, the old man in the crinkly raincoat shifts in his seat. Turning back to the machine, Tammy hovers beside it until a tiny red light flashes. Retrieving some gloves from the side, she pulls them one-by-one onto her hands. The clammy fabric is moist against her skin. As she heaves the heavy door open, revealing the slick crockery within, she realises this is going to take some getting used to; not just the commercial-grade dishwasher, but Grounds in general. The machine roars, its steamy breath engulfing her.

Afternoon stretches slowly into evening. She doesn't remember much of the rest of her shift. The hours blur into one long stretch; clear the plates, load the dishwasher, unload the dishwasher, stack the plates. Rinse, cycle and repeat, until she's free to leave for another day.

Her arms burn, her neck throbs, and she's sure her makeup must be running from a mixture of sweat and steam. The damp touch of fog feels invigorating after so long immersed in dishwashing chemicals and coffee. Streetlights, market stalls and glittering angels with plastic faces fade by. The night air is still, broken only by the distant blare of car horns and the background moan of traffic, seeming distorted; drawn out by the dark. The city becomes a blur, viewed through tired, greyscale eyes and forgotten moments later.

All around her, the city appears to be winding down for the night. There are a few signs of life, she notices, as she emerges from the side-street; unfortunate souls in her own position, closing up, switching off and leaving the day's trading behind them, but not many. The sight of a kebab van reminds her that the boys will be expecting dinner when she gets back.

She tries to visualise the contents of the cupboards at home; an indiscernible collection of cans, packet-vegetables and ready-made sauces. She should be able to rustle up something relatively quickly. It won't be ideal, but at least they'll have eaten.

As if her brothers were with her now, a child's cry rings down the side street. She turns back to the alleyway, and after a moment's pause makes out a small cat trotting towards her. Walking slowly back, she meets it halfway.

'Hello, you.'

The animal rubs up eagerly against her legs. Brushing her calves with its cheeks, it springs over her feet before pottering clumsily between her shoes. Tammy's eyes blur from the cold, but she notices the length of its fur and the greasy residue it leaves against her hands. Reluctantly, she wipes herself down against her leathers.

'You look familiar.'

Perhaps it's the little white socks that remind her of Cooper. Perhaps it's the way this cat slinks between her knees in quick figures of eight. Perhaps it's the missing fur and milky eyes that revive memories of her long dead house-pet, buried now beneath her mother's roses in their back garden.

Halfway between her calves, the cat freezes. Motionless, its pale eyes flash. Then it skitters off into the alleyway, leaving Tammy alone again. She wonders where it's going in such a hurry, and whether she'll see it again. Cooper had gone much the same way, near the end. They say animals have a sixth-sense for that kind of thing, as if they know when their time's almost up.

Reaching the high street, she turns right. The night sky clears, the stars visible as tiny flecks of cold. Shop windows slip past her, inscrutable. Taking a left, she follows a side street towards the car park, and in minutes her bike comes into view, sleek and solitary in the streetlight. A couple of other vehicles are parked up, but not many, leaving her plenty of room to manoeuvre free. Straddling the seat, she glances once more around her, but she's alone except for the cold cars and the cold wind and the cold night stretching endlessly above.

With a guttural growl, she brings the bike deftly to life, before lurching away.

The city melts past her. Streetlights become blazing trails of star-fire by her sides. When she reaches a certain speed, everything blurs until she might be floating down an endless river, guided only by the cat's eyes in the road and the allure of home. It would be easy to drift like this forever, without care or worry, with nothing to hold her back or distract her. Beneath her helmet, she allows herself a smile.

The first thing she hears when the bike quietens outside her house is the boys' screams. Hurrying up the front path to the redbrick terrace, she lets herself inside. The faded cream hallway stretches out before her, barely visible beneath an overburdened coat-hook, rucksacks and collection of odd school shoes, strewn

across the floor. Her brothers are rolling among the shoes and bags, cheeks flushed crimson, tears streaming from their eyes.

She offloads her own backpack to the pile, pausing for long enough to separate the boys before continuing into the kitchen. Chris and Luke give chase, stumbling to their feet after her.

‘What have I told you about keeping your voices down?’

‘I didn’t want to play’, says Luke. ‘He took my car keys and he won’t give them back.’

‘Chris, where’ve you put Luke’s keys?’

‘I haven’t got your stupid keys. Anyway, he shouldn’t drive, Tammy, he’s been drinking.’

His hands shooting up, Luke backs slowly away. ‘Only two, Officer, I’m not over the limits.’ To prove his innocence, he points to two empty cola cans on the kitchen lino. Two years younger than his eight-year-old brother, Luke is usually the quieter of the two, but a fizzy drink calls off all bets. Retrieving the cans from the floor, Tammy sees only sugar, brown and syrupy, flooding Luke’s veins, and a sleepless night ahead.

‘What’s for dinner, Tams?’

‘I want spaghetti.’

‘Spaghetti hoops. Even Mum likes those.’

Tammy sniffs with cold and rubs her hands together. Her fingers are numb and feeling returns to them slowly. ‘Mum’s not feeling well, remember? She needs rest, so don’t you go disturbing her with your games. I hope you were better behaved for Auntie Char, when she picked you up from school.’

The cramped kitchen still smells strongly of bleach from when she cleaned it at the start of the week. The plastic work surface shines under the overhead light, reminding her all too much of the tables at work. She examines some cupboards for their contents, a dozen lurid labels leaping out at her. The cans of spaghetti hoops are there, their labels composed of bright orange jungle characters and long lists of additives.

Retrieving two cans of baked beans, she places a saucepan on the hob and starts dinner. The reflected room distorts in its metal curves, and for a moment the boys are unrecognisable, two spindly shadows prancing behind her. Then they rush around her legs, Chris clinging to the bottom of her leather jacket, and they are her brothers again.

‘How was work, Tams?’

‘Did you make lots of coffee?’

Chris splutters and pulls a disgusted face. ‘Yuck, coffee!’

‘I made lots of coffee,’ she lies, rummaging around for a tin-opener in the drawer. ‘I made so much coffee that there was enough for everyone in Southampton.’

‘Everyone in Southampton!’

‘You’re well nice, Tams.’

‘But I didn’t get any.’ Chris tugs insistently at her jacket.

‘I thought you didn’t like coffee?’

‘Yeah, well I might.’

Shaking her head, she guides the boys out of the room. Returning to the hob, she watches the beans as they begin to warm, separating from the sauce, spreading out until they cover the base of the saucepan in a thin layer.

The boys will eat. She’ll help them with their homework. Then they’ll have an hour of television time, before she chases them across the landing, herds them into their room, forces them into pyjamas and leaves them to sleep. It’s their nightly routine and she knows it as well as the city’s narrow roads.

Twice, maybe three times if she’s especially unlucky, Chris, Luke or the restless pair of them might trudge downstairs. Sometimes they have nightmares. Other times they have too much energy. Occasionally, when excuses fail them, they simply ‘can’t sleep, Tams’. She’ll stare down at their tousled hair, their pyjamas — always a size too small, no matter which she buys — and they will crawl onto the sofa with her and curl up together.

Chris and Luke inhale their food without complaint. They shovel beans and slices of toast animatedly into their mouths, the pair of them fidgeting in their

seats, as Tammy watches diligently. She ensures they clear their plates before sending them upstairs to start their homework. When their bedroom door closes, she walks quietly to the sitting room with a third plate.

The door complains as it opens and closes. The rose-pattern curtains are firmly drawn and none of the lights are on. She finds her way by the glow of the television and the chatter of world news. The smell of habitation and old food fills her nostrils.

‘Is that you, Tams?’

‘Yes.’

Her mother is nestled into an armchair, beneath a swathe of blankets and quilts. As Tammy nears, her mother shifts, withdrawing into the pile of bedcovers. A sigh hangs in the air. ‘I knew it was you, but I was worried, when you weren’t here earlier...’

‘I’ve been at work. Remember?’

‘Work? Yes... Grounds...’

‘How are you feeling today?’

There’s more shuffling as her mother readjusts herself, followed by a wracking cough. ‘I’m well, Tams, I’m always well, don’t you worry about me. What’ve you got there?’

‘Beans on toast. But you haven’t eaten your lunch.’

‘Doesn’t smell like baked beans. Smells like... coffee. Have you brought me a coffee?’

Tammy lowers the plate of food to the side-table. Heat shimmers in the blue light of the television. Illuminated by the flickering light, it looks as if the air above the plated food is wavering, wavering in and out of reality. The whole room seems inconstant, an extension of the dancing screen, as if at any minute the channel might change or they might lose reception and the sitting room will cease to be. On the television, a news reporter is condemning the state of third-world trading standards. Flashes of gunfire light up the walls.

Still staring at the television, Tammy asks: ‘Have the boys been disturbing you?’

‘Not at all. They could never disturb me.’

Tammy sucks in a breath. ‘I’ve put dinner on the side for you, just like yesterday.’

‘Thanks, love.’

‘And the day before.’

‘Yes, thanks, love. You’re a good girl. A sensible girl. Whatever did I do without you? My Tammy who came back to me.’ A thin hand reaches out from the covers. It fumbles for the plate, and in the cerulean light might be stripped of its skin, a glove of blue veins and the pale bone beneath. ‘Sleep tight, Tams. Keep an eye on the boys for me.’

‘I will do. Love you, Mum.’

She moves silently back through the house until she finds herself in her bedroom. The room is dark, save for the light from the first-floor landing, spilling through the open doorway. It’s easier when the bedroom is dark, as though that makes it all right; as though it’s acceptable that she can’t properly see herself when she can barely see anything else. This is her private place, where she once hosted tea parties and entertained her dolls. In many ways, it’s still this room. Her ragdolls still line their shelf on the wall, felt shoes dangling above her plastic rocking horse, long since put out to pasture in the corner.

Canned laughter carries through the house, and the sound of audience applause, as her mother’s own evening ritual comes to its close. Rising from the dressing table, she walks quietly to the bathroom. It takes her three minutes to brush her teeth and let down her hair. Only when she’s finished does she look herself in the eyes.

She is Tammy Becks, eighteen, two months shy of nineteen. She enjoys playing games with her little brothers, even if they do always beat her, and dancing to the radio while doing the dishes. And, although she doesn’t especially like coffee, she will do whatever necessary to support her family, even if it means spending the next few months in a dead-end coffee shop, just until her mother gets better, just until she’s feeling like herself again.

She considers all this in a moment, before her feet carry her back into the bedroom. Climbing into bed, she pulls the covers up to her neck. There’s something fresh and frigid about the bedcovers; the fabric stiff but smooth, like a

sheet of slippery scales. Shivers slide down her skin as she surrenders to sleep, bringing to mind again the shape glimpsed in the dishwasher, dancing like a string puppet in the blackness behind her eyes.

Chapter Two

An air of expectancy hovers over Grounds in the mornings, lingering like the exhaust fumes after her bike. Perhaps it's the stillness that's discomfiting; the mocha haze that seems to spill from the walls, clinging to the shop even when the lights come on.

Tammy blusters in from the high street, her face as cold as one of their iced smoothies, and collapses onto the sofa nearest the door. Her leathers rub, squeaking against those covering the backrest. She takes a few moments to thaw.

The ticking clock and the electric hum of the fridges fill the coffee shop. Forcing herself upright, she glances around. Grounds stares listlessly back, but there's another sound that she hasn't heard before, a hissing reminiscent of steam escaping pressured confines.

Disturbed, she approaches the fridges. Her leathers whine with each step. The sound is louder here, more insistent, and another thought, neurotic and bloated from circumstance, fills her head: fire.

She immediately disregards the idea. The room would've filled with smoke. Besides, the fridges are well maintained. The Health and Safety documents that Mr Allen keeps secure in his folders certify as much. Still, a cold sweat sticks to her shoulder blades and the small of her back.

She scans the products, searching for a leak, damage, anything to account for the unusual sound. The stark refrigerator light reflects off the metallic sides of the unit, a block of modern steel in a den of antiquity. There are some sandwiches on display, left over from the night before, but the shelves are mostly bare. She's still investigating when a voice startles her.

'What are you doing, girl?'

The lights flicker reluctantly into life. Her chest tight, throat dry, Tammy spins around to find Gift standing in the doorway. The woman is swaddled in a vast purple coat, while a headscarf contains her hair. Gift Mumbai was the first to

greet Tammy when she started a week ago, if the old woman's customary nod and unashamed stare could be shrugged off as such.

'I'm checking the fridge. I thought I heard something.'

'In the fridge?' Locking the door behind her, Gift approaches Tammy. As she draws near, Tammy detects a scent; a fragrant waft of cinnamon or ginger, home comforts and momentary familiarity. 'The fridges are always making noise. The groan of the pipes, water sluicing. Whoever next?'

'What do you mean?'

'First Jake, and now you. The young these days, jumping at shadows. It is the drugs. All the drugs, messing with their heads.'

As if to reinforce the old woman's words, the fridge hums suddenly into life. Like a wasps' nest, stirred into activity, it clicks whirs, then buzzes as something courses through it.

Gift works her hard this morning. It's Tammy's first time helping to open the coffee shop, and she hadn't realised quite how much effort went into preparing the shop floor for service each day. She isn't convinced that the majority of their customers would notice if every table was wiped down or not. Still, she plays her part, taking down chairs from the tables, unloading the morning delivery and placing fresh cakes beneath shining plastic domes.

Gift hasn't been idle, polishing the coffee machine with what could almost have been affection and filling the grinder with coffee. At nine o' clock the coffee shop awakens properly with the patter of beans as they're devoured by the whirring blades below, and Grounds is ready for another day of trade.

Their first customers arrive over the next hour, seeking shelter from the high street, if not the cold. Gift assumes her position at the coffee machine while Tammy processes the orders at the till-point. When there are no customers to serve, she busies herself clearing tables and running dirty crockery through the dishwasher. She no longer needs to think about these things while she does them.

Starting at the front of the coffee shop and working her way back, she sets to work spraying and wiping. The thrum of the dishwasher ebbs into her ears, beginning quietly but building up in her head: the sluggish, unending pulse of Grounds itself. She hears other things, too; the now-familiar clink of cup to

saucer, and a rustling sound, which she traces to the regular in the corner. He shifts inside his anorak and, for a moment, she thinks he might be about to leave. His hacking cough fills the coffee shop, like he's spitting up his life or a twig of holly. Then he settles back, limp, into his sofa.

The repetitive motion of spraying and wiping begins to tell on Tammy's arms and after several minutes they are starting to ache. She wonders how her mother used to do it. Miranda Becks spent many years as a cleaner at a local secondary school, scrubbing the art room walls, sweeping the floor, scouring lewd cartoons and scabs of congealed paint from table tops. It's a life that has taken its toll on her mother, inside and out, a life deserving of recognition in a world with none to give.

'I think you've got it.'

The voice startles her. Turning, she finds herself face-to-face with a boy. He's maybe an inch taller than her, with a mop of mousey brown hair. Beneath his fringe, she makes out the sharp blue of his eyes, offset against a freckled face.

'Got what?'

'Coffee. Cheese. Traumatic memories. Whatever it is you're trying to clean off that table.' He grins at her earnestly, and she suspects he might be older than she first thought, if only by a year or two. 'I'm Jake.'

'Tammy.'

He keeps level with her for a moment longer; staring curiously into her eyes, then begins wiping the next table along. Behind its partition, the dishwasher gurgles to a sudsy finish. Idly, she wonders who's operating it.

'There's no one to serve, so I thought I'd give you a hand. It can get tiring after a while, all the tables.'

'Thank you.'

They move onto the next two tables. From the other side of the room, the Mackintosh Man shifts again.

'So you've been here, what, a week? How are you finding it?'

'It's fine. I mean, I'm not really used to it.'

'Used to what?'

‘The quiet. Little brothers,’ she explains, catching his eyes.

‘You like the peace and quiet, then?’

The question catches her off-guard. Her happiness has never really factored into anything before now.

‘I think it’s boring,’ he says. ‘It’s too slow. The day drags on when there’s nothing to do. You might like it now, but give it a few more weeks. You’ll be begging to get out of here.’

‘How long have you been here, then?’

It’s Jake’s turn to pause. The spray falls by his side and she wonders if he’s going to reply at all. Something in his eyes strikes a chord with her. ‘I can’t remember. Too long, anyway. At least three Christmases now.’

‘She seems to have survived all right.’ Tammy nods towards Gift. They watch as the old woman wipes down the coffee machine, caressing it almost affectionately with her damp dishcloth.

‘Stir-crazy, our Gift. She has it in for anyone under thirty. Even Norman — Mr Allen — gets put down, sometimes. She must think we all lurk under bridges, smoking and drinking and spray-painting walls. I’ve never touched a can of spray-paint in my life, and I hardly ever drink on the Itchen Bridge. Norman tried to tell her off once. She walked straight out, mid-service, and didn’t come back for five days. Mind you, the place went to the dogs without her.’

She continues to watch as the ancient woman deftly snips the top from a bag of coffee beans. The scissors make a gravelly crunch as they slice through the protective foil. ‘I wouldn’t have thought a place could depend on one person so much. I mean, it’s just a coffee shop.’

‘I think it’s more than that. I think people are shaped by their surroundings, you know? Fed and watered on the lifeblood of a place, like an unborn child. She’s a part of Grounds now, and it her. It’s the same with the regulars. And believe me, this place is full of them.’ His eyes catch hers and linger there, staring but not seeing. ‘There’s the Ling sisters over there. They never stop eating, but only ever seem to get thinner. Then there’s Sam and Lord Grey.’

‘What about him?’ she asks, indicating the old man in the corner.

‘Long-time regular, is Reg. Here every day. He used to come with a lady-friend, April. None of us knew who she was to him, but they would sit on the old leather sofa at the back and for the rest of the day drink coffee and eat shortbreads and chatter away. Mostly it was Reg who talked. Sometimes he’d laugh at something he’d said while she slept with her head on his shoulder. They seemed happy, in their own way. Then one day she stopped turning up. Nobody knows what happened to her. I tried to ask him, once. He just smiled and thanked me for his coffee and wandered back to his sofa.’ He wipes half-heartedly at a stained splash of espresso while he talks. It half comes off from the table beneath his efforts. ‘I feel sorry for him. He’s nice enough really. We get a few like that.’

‘Like what?’

‘Like they live for the place —’

‘Jake.’ Gift’s voice cuts across the shop floor, as sharp as a lemon, or one of the knives she uses to slice them. ‘Back to work. You do not get paid to stand around smoking and talking and jacking up. Silly girls.’

‘We’re not on drugs,’ explains Tammy.

‘And I’m a boy,’ adds Jake. When Gift doesn’t seem to hear them, he springs to his feet from where he was leaning on the table. Snatching his cloth and spray, he looses a quick-fire succession of squirts in Tammy’s direction, before sauntering away, his trainers squeaking against the floor. It’s only when she turns back to her table and catches her reflection in the sheer surface that she realises she’s smiling.

Chapter Three

Tammy’s days begin to blend together. She starts each morning by checking in on her mother, removing uneaten food, changing her sheets and switching the channel on the television before turning her attention to her brothers. She feeds and dresses them both, forcing them into something resembling their uniforms before walking them the short distance to school. Sometimes, as they approach the gates, she imagines that she feels other eyes on her; parents or waiting teachers, perhaps, studying her critically, unspoken questions forming on their lips. Mostly she walks with her head down. The end of one shift slides seamlessly into the start of the next until all she remembers is the ticking of the clock

behind the till-point, the electric hum of the fridges and the almost tribal percussion of the dishwasher as it roars through endless cycles. The days draw shorter, and sometimes she doesn't see natural light, except for what little of the sun penetrates the fog in the alleyway outside.

That Saturday, she takes the boys into town. The bus stop is nearby, at the other end of the street. She knows the route well; before she could ride her bike she used to take the bus into the city centre and back all the time. It's not too far and the journey doesn't take long.

She asks for one adult and two children's return tickets. The tickets are more expensive than she remembers them being. Telling herself that she should not be surprised, they find seats near the front. She still feels like she's not yet properly woken up. Beyond the bus windows, Totton slides past.

The route is the same one that she takes on her bike but the city looks very different in the day. Perhaps it's just that, the increased visibility casting light on the shattered soul of each street. Perhaps she notices more from the bus. It's slower than her bike and they stop often for fellow passengers to leave or climb aboard. Perhaps she's not seeing anything she hasn't seen before. She wonders if she's changed more than she's aware of lately. Through the battered bins, waiting to be collected, the run-down gardens, the children cocooned in coats as they play in the road and the white sky, the maze of streets sing to her.

Tammy and her brothers disembark in the city centre. The high street is heaving, and they move slowly from one shop to the next. The fog here has mostly cleared, but a different kind of whiteness replaces it as the breaths of a thousand shoppers coalesce in the air.

The boys' birthdays fall within weeks of each other, so she shops for them together. Chris and Luke want two of everything. She purchases t-shirts and sweaters, new trainers with light-up soles and mobile phones that aren't phones at all but toys that flash and beep when the keypad is pressed. It would've been better to shop without them, to maintain some modicum of surprise for when they come to unwrap their presents, but her shift patterns mean this just won't be possible. At least this way, they both get what they want.

They visit the local market but don't stay long. The sausage sandwiches lure them close with promises of hot food, grease and ketchup. Before Tammy quite knows where the day has gone, almost two hours have passed. Someone

walks past with a lidless cup of coffee, its aroma filling her nose. When they have everything they need, she takes the boys' hands and leads them back to the bus stop. The sounds of the street roll into one white-noise roar, a deafening wind numbing her cheeks, reducing her eyes to tears.

The bus ride home passes her by. She must have produced their return tickets from her purse, although she can't remember fishing them out. She comes back to herself slowly, nudged gently into sentience by the insistent rocking of the bus. With the boys tucked sleeping beneath each arm, she stares from the back seats down the length of the bus and imagines she's at the cinema. It's a long time since she's been to the movies; she can barely remember what it's like to sit in the tall seats and lose herself in a film. She does remember that she went with her mother, and that they ate sweet popcorn from a seemingly bottomless carton. The backs of the other passengers' heads nod their affirmation. Outside, the city streams past, fairy lights illuminating the gloom.

The bus takes a speed-bump too fast, its passengers nodding again in unison. In her grasp, the boys stir from their exhausted sleep. Outside, as the bus approaches Totton, day succumbs to deepening darkness, spoiled only by the glare of traffic and the decorations littering front lawns.

Chapter Four

Nested in bed that evening, one brother tucked beneath each arm, Tammy and the boys settle down together with one of their favourite documentaries.

Last week they were in the Arctic. The week before that they visited the Amazon basin. This episode takes them to southwestern Ethiopia. Hordes of children splash through the shallows of the Omo River, interposed with footage of one village's farms further into the foothills. Men and women toil under the sun, harvesting fields of cabbages, then broad-leaved tobacco plants, and other crops that Tammy knows to be coffee plants from the pictures in Mr Allen's workbook. The narrator tells her as much, moments later.

They learn about scarification, a tribal wedding, and community of a sort that Tammy's only ever imagined. The villagers work together while their children play by the river. In the evenings they all dance and pray, their smiles wide beneath the blanket of stars. Only when the village comes into contact with a neighbouring people does conflict erupt. She listens to gunfire rattling through

the mountains, watches as thin men daubed with white paint take unskilled shots at each other from the backs of armoured jeeps, skeletons in all but name making real dead of their enemies with Western weapons. Children run for the shelter of their homes while their fathers and brothers take up arms. A woman with Gift's face drops the basket she was carrying and rushes towards a hut.

In many ways, Gift reminds Tammy of her mother. She imagines the coffee machine, standing dull and metallic and unaltered by the turn of time, while Gift ages with the turning decades, withering from a fresh, bright-eyed twenty-something into the weary, work-tired woman of today. Perhaps the machine has done more than watch, she wonders, picturing Gift as she stoops to wipe it clean. Perhaps it's because of the machine that she's aged so, the collection of cogs and wires and worn plumbing stealing her youth and siphoning it away in little porcelain cups under the guise of caffeine.

On the surface, her mother has nothing in common with this woman, who is sharp and tasteless and lacking in visible joy or warmth. But, underneath, Tammy recognises common characteristics; stubbornness, diligence and, she suspects, determination when it matters. Her mother might have lost her way a little bit recently, but she's all of these things. She is.

Then the children are back, laughing as they tumble through the Omo, falling into one another in their eagerness to play, swarming like red ants over red earth in their attempt to reach waters turned red with mud or something else. Her eyes grow heavy but she continues to watch until she can't quite distinguish between the children in her arms and those on the screen. There's something to be said for the simplicity of their lives, made possible by these crops, and the cattle to which they sing when they pass away. Instinctively, her grasp tightens.

Eventually the boys stumble to their own beds. The house feels unfamiliar as Tammy ushers them gently into their room. Taking their little hands, she leads them through the darkness before returning to her bedroom. Already, she knows she'll regret having let them stay up later than normal tomorrow. At least they won't be her responsibility for the day; Auntie Char has agreed to look after them at her house while Tammy goes to work. She doesn't know what she'd do or where she'd be without Char to look after the boys for the best part of each day. Like Tammy, the boys never really knew their father. She has no one else.

Dropping off the bowls in the kitchen, she fills the sink with hot soapy water and washes their dinner plates. The water blackens with food stains and,

she suspects, the coffee grounds from beneath her nails. While the clean crockery dries on the draining board, she places a new liner in the pedal bin and goes upstairs to bed.

Struggling into her pyjamas, she feels for the first time how much her arms ache after the long day in town. Her reflection stares back at her from the mirror above the wash-basin, but she looks at it only long enough to brush her teeth, remove her makeup and comb her hair in the way that her mother once taught her. Beneath her concealer she sees nothing.

It's late, especially given she has work in the morning. She prepares herself a hot chocolate in the kitchen before crawling into bed. Her sheets are cool and goose bumps prickle her arms but she isn't uncomfortable; she's in bed, the place of dreams and sleep and snug familiarity. Besides, the bed will grow warm quickly. It does so every night. At least, it has done every night beforehand.

Mug in hand, she slips a crumpled booklet from her bedside drawer. Unfolding it as best she can, she smooths it against the bedcover. She was handed it on her first day at work but has barely looked at it since. The spine is thick and Mr Allen has made it very clear that she needs to finish it in its entirety.

She loves reading, but it's not a skill that has come easily to her, and she makes slow progress down the page. The professional nature of the language reminds her of her school reports, or the letters she opens in the mornings for her mother. At some point she goes for a sip of hot chocolate and finds her mug empty. She can't remember finishing the drink but the dark dregs stare murkily back at her. Surrendering to tiredness, she returns her distractions to the bedside table, switches off her lamp and settles down.

It's dark, save for the glow of the streetlight outside her window. From across the room, her mobile phone flickers briefly into life. For one moment its blue light illuminates her shelf of smiling dolls — she sees Molly, Blossom, and Paddington Bear, clutching tight a jar of her marmalade — then it cuts out again. The room falls still.

She's half-asleep now. Her eyes are closing and she's drifting off. Her legs slip either side of her bedcovers, relishing the feel of them, the coolness between her thighs, and in this half-sleep state she wishes for a bedtime story. She can't remember the last time her mother read to her. There was a time when this was a nightly practice. Now there's only silence, and sometimes the laughter of the

television below. She wishes her mother would read to her again, like she used to when she was very little, like before.

The curtains flutter, the rocking horse creaks, and another sound drifts across the room, like the mewing of a cat. Leaning forward, she peers over her crumpled covers, searching for its source. Her eyes scan her bedroom: the wardrobe, the nightstand, the shelf where her childhood dolls sit, glassy eyed, their lips stitched into beatific smiles. She knows those smiles. They are ‘supposed-to’ smiles. She wears them often enough.

And then she sees it. The silhouette, about her own height, is standing next to her mirror, beside the dressing table. The light of the streetlamp outside her window turns it into a silvery shape. She isn’t sure how long it’s been standing there, hidden in plain sight by the dark. She doesn’t suppose it matters.

Sensing that it’s been seen, the figure turns its head to face her. The streetlight catches its face, and she sees that it’s covered with flies, shivering like a second skin, a mask made up of clear wings, black bodies and bright insect eyes. Automatically she recoils.

Her mouth opens, to shout, to cry, except no sound escapes her lips, and the figure’s jaws do likewise. With terrible slowness its mouth widens, mirroring her own until she can’t imagine it stretching any wider, certain that at any moment it must snap shut again with elastic force —

The curtains flutter, the rocking horse creaks and the widening jaws shudder to a stop. For a moment the figure seems to consider her from the darkness of its face. Then it spins slowly on its heels.

Something is happening to the rocking horse. It sways forwards and backwards, forwards and backwards, steadily at first but with increasing pace, just like it would when she was a small girl and would ride it. The dolls are twitching too, their legs swinging, button eyes blinking. Then, with deliberate slowness, the horse’s broad, white neck curves round. He whinnies and snorts a steamy breath, his pearly black eyes fixing on her nightmare.

He’s her defender. Even though she hasn’t ridden him for almost fifteen years, he remembers her hands on his neck. He remembers her weight on his back, her legs pressed tight to his sides, and she knows he will fight for her.

The figure stalks with horrid purpose towards him. The horse whinnies and rears up as it draws near, shining hooves pedalling beside the dressing table. The figure cowers on the floor before him and it looks as though the stallion might triumph. His mane shakes. His flanks ripple. His eyes are two glistening marbles in the dark.

The flies erupt into a swarm. The buzzing intensifies as they fill the air then settle across her steed. Blackness spreads across his coat as they swarm over his broad neck. He throws back his head, his eyes rolling, his giddy neighs bubbling as the iridescence reaches his open mouth.

One by one her dolls drop from the shelf. The room fills with soft sounds as they hit the carpet, then the patter of their boots as they rush across the floor. Reaching up, they tug at the figure still standing at the foot of her bed, grasping its legs, pulling it back from her with Lilliputian might. She sees Molly and Blossom, their stitched lips pursed tight, and feels hope.

With a voiceless heave, they pull the figure down into the sea of smiling faces and pin it. Climbing triumphantly onto its chest, Paddington Bear leans forward and upends his pot of marmalade over its face.

Rolling onto its front, the figure snatches the dolls in its hands and tears them apart. The flies are everywhere now, in the air and on the dolls and inside the stuffing of their ripped bodies. Buttons and insects plink across the room.

The stallion stumbles where he stands. Tammy feels him fall and trembles. Screams judder from his throat as he sinks to his knees, the dressing table shattering beneath his bulk. Sinking to his flank amid her toys and the remains of her dolls, he dies.

Its face glittering in the streetlight, the figure turns back to her bed. Tammy's eyes brim with tears, although she's otherwise motionless, frozen by a mixture of fear and something else, something strange, a feeling of familiarity. Downstairs, all is silent. Her mother must have gone to sleep. It feels like forever since she put her brothers to bed, and Cooper is long gone now, to be with the angels in the sky, though she knows he really occupies a shallow hole in the back garden.

The figure rises up once more over her bed. Slender fingers drag across the covers. It leans in close, and even through her duvet, its medicinal breath catches in her throat. It seems like everything safe, everything nice, is swallowed

up by the blanket of black flies, which are not really black at all but blue, green and silver as they crawl from the figure's face into her own.

A scream fills her mouth. It fills her bedroom too, piercing even the blackest shadows as the mouth gapes over her. Then the figure is gone and she's sitting up, alone in the darkness.

Slowly she calms down. After a while, her breathing steadies. Her eyes regain a languid glaze. If anyone heard her screams, they haven't awoken. When she's sure that the dressing table isn't broken and the rocking horse unmoved, she sinks back into her bed; that place of dreams and sleep and snug familiarity, except not so snug any more.

Unable to place what's changed, in a room that hasn't, she drifts uncertainly back to sleep and dreams of an empty playground.

1.6 'Winnie'

Sitting before the mirror at her dressing table, Winnie doesn't recognise the girl staring back at her. There's familiarity in the face, as there's familiarity to be found in anything if a person is subjected to it often enough, but that's all. Still, she keeps looking. She must look, every night, before Seth turns in for bed, desperately studying the features that emerge from beneath her makeup. The ritual of recognition is on going.

'Your Winnie,' she thinks, pressing harder with the face wipe. 'Your dragon, your beautiful dragonfly...'

She sits in darkness, save for the light from the first-floor landing, spilling through the open doorway. It's easier when the bedroom is dark, as though that makes it all right, as though it's acceptable that she can't properly see herself when she can barely see anything else. Canned laughter carries up the stairs, and the sound of audience applause, as Seth's own evening ritual comes to its close. Soon he will move through the house, as if chasing the vestigial laughs, until they lead him into the bedroom where she's waiting.

The evening had begun like any other. Dinner was ready for when Seth returned home from work. She'd cooked lamb, rubbed with rosemary and thyme. She ate silently while he told her about his day. She nodded when encouraged, smiled when he smiled, laughed at his jokes.

He told her the lamb was nice, that 'my dragonfly's done herself proud with this one.' They drank wine, his white, hers red. He said the white went with the vegetables. Her palate favoured the red. She agreed with him regardless. Seth loves it when she agrees with him. He says it shows their unity, that they are two made into one. 'In sickness and in health. Till death do we part. My Winnie, my beautiful dragonfly.'

She turns her attention to her lips next. Pulling a clean tissue free from the box to her right, she dabs it to her mouth, as though kissing it gently goodnight. Her lips haven't kissed anything gently for a long time now. Seth doesn't like his love gentle, and on the occasions he does press his mouth against hers, it can't be called a kiss. Once, before all this, he might have kissed her in the proper sense.

There had been tenderness then, enough to tempt her from her parents' home into his arms.

She presses harder, then begins rubbing, until all of the lipstick is gone. Underneath, her lips are thin and slightly raw. The tissue comes away red and streaky in her hand.

Staring at herself in the dressing table mirror, she remembers every slight, every wound, every word intended to belittle her. This isn't love, she thinks. She dares to think it again, giving voice to the doubts that have for a long time been hatching in her head. This isn't love. It was never love. She's no better off than when she left home: lost and lonely and unloved by a world that doesn't know the meaning of the word.

She remembers the feel of his hand against her face, the sound it makes; a ringing slap that sinks beneath the skin and seems to burn. His dragonfly, scorched!

So much pain, she thinks, so much upset for so little: a small piece of jewellery and their names on a certificate. God, she was sure, played no part in this, an ancient force dead to the modern world. But there were yet more ancient forces, not dead but sleeping, and they stirred now, suffused with heat and hunger. Tears cling to her long, black lashes before breaking free and running down her face. Most of her make-up is gone now but she doesn't stop wiping.

Quiet falls suddenly over the house. As she regards herself in the mirror, she hears Seth at the bottom of the stairs. As most nights, he comes perhaps to penetrate her, to pin her like a specimen to the bed until he's spent and she's stilled beneath him.

He reaches the top of the stairs, and she senses him on the landing. Then she sees him in the mirror, a silhouette in the doorway. His body blocks the light.

'You look cold,' he says.

'I'm fine.' She continues staring into the mirror.

'Come off it, I can see you shivering from here.' Seth moves into the bedroom, his silhouette reappearing by the window. It's open, the bedroom exposed to the black sky, millions of city lights below. 'What have I said about leaving this open at night?'

He's still talking but she doesn't hear. Time seems to stop as she considers him: not Seth but a silhouette, featureless and without meaning. He's nothing. It's nothing. She feels herself shaking as she considers what she's given to him. Every smack scalds her skin; embarrassment sears her cheeks, abuse burning between her thighs until she can barely contain the heat inside her. Her mouth stretches into a silent scream, jaws wide like those of her namesake. Lipstick and lashes, for lamb!

'— make an effort. You know I love you, Winnie? Your knight in shining —'

She rushes at him through the darkness. They stumble into the en-suite, half in and out of the bedroom. His head hits the smooth white of the washbasin and he lies still beneath her. Heat spills from her mouth in hurried words.

'Lamb,' she breathes hotly, 'lipstick and lashes, for lamb!'

His eyes flutter, head lolling on the linoleum, and she wonders if he can see her, if he recognises that she's changed now. Her breath seeps from her throat; a beautiful, susurrus hiss, which seems to say I am a woman and you have wronged me. Then, jaw loose, her mouth closes around his face. Her teeth sink into his skin and he breaks beneath her, this modern knight, this meat, this man.

1.7 'The Flowers'

She goes by many names: Wildflower. Indian Stick. Even Lily, once. Her favourite: Pink Orchid, rare, stunning, suggestive of the way she unfurls for the right price, under the right touch.

She works everywhere. Tonight they meet at her place in Bassett Green. This one found her on the website, 'just had to call', had to meet Pink Orchid in the flesh. They are all the same.

He arrives on the dot. Sometimes she sees them, waiting outside, smoking in their cars, drumming fingers anxiously across the dash. She knows the feeling. Come in, get it over with, *please*.

They do not fuck for long. He comes quickly, and she's ravenous. He's still thrusting when she starts to change; she watches him through myriad eyes as ecstasy turns into terror. He screams but she has him pinned. Soft, weak, this sorry man, this human meat. Pink Orchid always starts headfirst.

1.8 'Eve'

Your bodies slid over one another, lubricated by your sweat and the massage oil from our bedside drawer. I watched for as long as I could, hypnotised by your flailing limbs.

'I'm sorry,' you said afterwards. You said other things too; empty words as hollow as the hole in my heart. *'LonelyfrustratedIdon'tlovehimyouareneverhere.'*

When your speech was finished, I took the bedside lamp to your head. You died in a flash of light. I buried you in the dark, beneath the wall between our garden and the adjacent fields. Nettles grow there now. In the summer, butterflies dance over your grave.

1.9 'Adam and Roach'

'Those had been wonderful times, and they had never returned, at least not with the same glory...' – Franz Kafka, *The Metamorphosis*

Chapter One

Drinks spill across the bar to the sudden shrieks of the girls in front of Adam. They wear the brunt of the deluge but he couldn't have moved anyway, penned in by the queue, never mind the floor, sticking like Velcro to his trainers. Bass throbs through their soles and up, pulsing throughout him. The track will change dozens of times tonight but that beat will remain the same. His arms trapped at chest-height, he lowers his mouth to the plastic straw and sucks greedily. Vodka-coke floods his tongue, sticky and sweet. He can ask for no more from a Monday night.

To Adam's front and right, Roach paws for a barman's attention. His white Armani T-shirt glows brightly under the UV lighting, every stain revealed like the damp patches in their conservatory. Sweat glistens on his forearms and the back of his neck.

'I know one of the guys working tonight.' Roach throws his voice over his shoulder. 'Drinks aren't going to be a problem.'

Three third-years in matching black tees work busily behind the counter. Two of them are pulling pints and taking cash. Roach nods in the direction of a thin barman with a narrow face and long arms mopping up the spill at the counter.

'Manzils, from nets. We've played together since Freshers'. You'd know that, if you ever came to watch.'

With his thirty-six inch waist, his rash of stubble and flushed cheeks, Nick Roach certainly doesn't look like a devoted sportsman. In the three years they've house-shared together, Adam still struggles to believe he plays cricket for one of the university teams, or that he used to do so for the county. Even as Adam watches him, Roach appears to slip, arms flailing, hands gripping the counter before he goes down.

‘Smooth,’ shouts Adam, reaching out to steady Roach from behind. Turning away, he scans the crowd for the others, but it’s impossible to see more than a few feet in any direction. To his left, a poor guy with a face like a caterpillar’s catches his eye; looking away, Adam returns his mouth to his straw.

‘Jesus wept. It’s bad in here tonight.’ Ali’s nose crinkles, her eyes creased. Barely shoulder-height on Adam or Roach, she squeezes in between the two of them. Her arms slide snugly around their waists, an array of bracelets digging into Adam’s hip.

‘You think?’ Adam inhales deeply. ‘This close to your neck, all I can smell is Christian Dior.’ He doesn’t know the first thing about perfume, but he does remember reading the name on the back of a bottle once, when waiting for Ali to finish shaving her legs. She hugs him tightly, her bracelets catching the back of his T-shirt.

‘Oh, shush, you.’ Reaching into her bag anyway, she produces what looks like the very same bottle and gives the air around her a swift spritz. ‘Really, what is that?’

‘Must be all the rats.’ He hides his smile.

‘The what?’

‘The rats. They crawl behind the wall and under the floorboards, get stuck and die.’

She stares him out, her own eyes narrow with suspicion. ‘That’s gross. And such a lie.’

‘It’s true. Roach told me.’

‘Oh Jesus. It must be true, then.’

Equipped with vodka-cokes, they grab Roach and move deeper into the club. As they leave the bar area the crowds thin slightly or seem to congregate in groups outside the toilets, at the benches and under the balcony outside. Some heads turn as they pass. Mostly they’re ignored. They find a sheltered spot beside the stairs where there’s room for them to sit, space for their drinks, enough fresh air for them to light up.

The evening slips away from Adam in flashes and smears. He remembers laughing with Roach, the genuine kind of laughter that hurts your ribs. It’s not long

before Roach heads back to the bar. Adam and Ali watch the wreathes of smoke drifting from her cigarettes while overhead the sky steadily deepens, in parts indigo, in other parts as black as the liner around Ali's eyes. He's never lived with Ali but he might as well have done for the number of nights he's sat on the edge of her bed, drinking discount wine, watching moths buffeting her lava lamp while she climbs in and out of a sequence of outfits. When she slips away for the bathroom, Adam is left alone with their drinks. Her nicotine fills his nose and mouth. He hasn't smoked since Year 11 but his tongue recognises the taste, his hand the pinch between finger and thumb. It was the same year he first found a girlfriend. Samantha Jones told him one night, when they were kissing on his sofa, that she'd fancied him since the start of the year, when they were put into the same Art class. They spent the best part of the evening kissing and sharing cigarettes in his back garden before his parents returned home. She tasted of nicotine too, and honey. The night was clear. He remembers the deep blue of the sky and the smoke as it curled before the moon.

When he comes back to himself, he realises he's still alone. It might have been ten minutes or twenty since Ali left him for the bathroom, he can't remember. In his hand his glass is empty; he can't remember finishing this either.

'You're empty.'

It's Caterpillar from the bar. He mooches over from the bottom of the stairs, giving Adam a chance to properly check him out. He's a little shorter than Adam and doughier with a round face and womanly hips. His hair is shaved down almost to his scalp, his smile fixed. He wears a plain white tee, black jeans that have seen better days, and military-style boots the same shade of brown as the slime coating the ground. Adam wonders if the boots were always this colour or whether these are his Escape shoes, reserved exclusively for nights at the Palace of Dreams.

'I'm just waiting for a friend.'

'Is he getting served? Here, have.' The caterpillar presses one of two pint glasses into Adam's hand. It's full of coke and, from the taste, vodka. 'I don't feel right.'

'Very Hungry?'

'Yeah, actually. And how cheap is this vodka? I can't face another.'

Sipping anyway, the man glances around. His eyes are glazed, his face waxy, like tomorrow's hangover is already struggling to come out. Adam follows his gaze to the graffiti on the walls, then the queue at the bar, then a barely concealed couple, rubbing up against each other in the corner. Someone waves at Adam from across a bench. He doesn't recognise them, decides not to see.

'Do you come here lots?' Caterpillar slurs.

Adam splutters into his coke. 'Now and then.'

'I'm sure I've seen you before, actually. Do you know Ali?' He has barely spoken when two bouncers march past, converging on the dance floor. Adam cranes his neck, tracking their Hi-Vis jackets. When he looks back, Caterpillar has moved on.

Adam wanders in search of Ali or Roach. The crowd quickly swallows him. People are propped up against the walls, deep in conversation, others spilling inside from the smoking area. He squeezes past. The music is loud, much louder here than it was outside. He finds Ali on the edge of the dance floor.

He realises he can't smell the club anymore, let alone the rats. Ali is still heavily perfumed. For one moment they hover on the outskirts while they wait for Roach to catch up. Her hand is warm and slippery against his. Then they dance.

He quickly loses track of time in the press of bodies. The ceiling seems to dip, like tarpaulin with too much water on it. The walls loom closer, other students pushing into him, their weight against his own. He draws deep breaths, apart from everyone else and for a moment joined with them. It's still a new feeling. Before university, he'd never imagined anything like this. He spent long days in the garden behind his parents' farmhouse, lunchtimes in the playground on his own, afternoons walking home through the fields from school when he was old enough to make the trip himself. The memories are brief and unwelcome here, breaking quickly apart under the waves of noise and vodka rushing through him.

He becomes aware of Roach's hand around the back of his neck. Roach's face swims in front of his, his mouth forming words that Adam can neither hear nor read. Drawing him closer, Roach plants a kiss on his forehead. Then he steps away into the crowd. Those students nearest part before him, the slowest are shouldered aside. They fall back into place immediately, so Adam only glimpses his housemate, lit up by lasers as he rounds on someone and starts punching.

'Roach!'

Like a shifting tide the crowd begins to turn. Men and women and first-years fresh out of sixth-form scrabble over one another, first one, then two, then more and more as the people around them seek to escape the vicinity. He imagines the music getting louder, faster. Someone's fingers grip his arm, chipped pink Shellac digging into his flesh.

The changing movement throws him off-balance. The ceiling spins and when the crowds briefly part he catches sight of Roach again, bent double, trapped in a headlock. He calls out for him, tries to move towards him, but the movement of the crowd drags him back. Bouncers add to the mix, converging on his housemate, and here and there, caught in flashes of light, deadpan faces, pickled and impossibly pale, staring blankly across the room. Idly, he wonders if Caterpillar is okay. Adam is near the entrance when his drink slips, splashing his top before shattering against the floor. Glass crunches underfoot. Coke seeps through the fabric of his T-shirt.

Chapter Two

Adam wakes in that halfway place between real life and the night before. Most mornings begin the same: the pinkish blur of the world behind his eyelids, aching muscles in his legs and back, and the mute pain, a physical presence in his head.

Rolling over, he stares groggily around. Sunlight, grey and weak, shimmers through the curtains. He's in his room, in his bed. The walls spin and he wonders if he's still drunk. It isn't unheard of, the morning after.

The dryness in his mouth tells him he's not. His tongue is tough, his lips grainy. From his bedside table he retrieves a glass of water, half-full, and a packet of painkillers. Popping two of the tablets onto his tongue, he takes a mouthful of water and swallows. At least he's picked up something at university, even if it's only how to relieve a headache.

Gradually he sits upright. His sparsely covered desk and salmon-pink armchair seem to swim around him. A collection of empty Smirnoff bottles glints in the light. His battered alarm clock breaks the quiet, rattling feebly in its plastic cladding. Rolling out of bed, he fumbles for some clothes.

His T-shirt is ruined. Spillages come with the territory, one of the many hazards of Escape, but he's still never grown used to them. It isn't so much the spilling he dislikes as the being jostled. There's probably a reason, if he searches back far enough, if he dredges his childhood memories for a traumatic experience, perhaps an offhand comment, stuck with his subconscious ever since. Nothing springs to mind. Pretty much everything before the last three years is a blur.

The struggle to campus is just that. This early into the day, students are mostly converging towards the university's main site. Redbrick houses line the road, windows shining where they catch the morning sun. Outside a Polish grocer's, punnets of strawberries, browning apples and Eastern European sweets spill into the street. He sees the homeless, some with dogs, others alone, and people who might be homeless or could just as easily be other third-years on their way to morning seminars. This close to the coast, everything smells of the sea.

The day's lectures have never seemed less appealing. One by one they slip by, and the morning with them, passing in a fug of automatic writing and the dull glare of PowerPoint presentations. As recently as a year ago he might not have turned up at all. He wishes he'd made the effort to attend more, but there was no resisting the allure of Escape's themed nights, weekly fancy dress parties, and film marathons with Roach and Liam. Now his third year is here and his degree depends on these hourly catch-up sessions. His student loan is almost gone. His time as a student isn't far behind it. Only what's left of the semester and his dissertation stand between him and graduation.

His work ethic wasn't always this bad. By sixteen, he'd given up smoking. He'd given up Samantha Jones too. That year he worked hard to pass his GCSEs. His grades were nothing remarkable, but they saw him through to sixth-form. Unsure of himself and what he wanted, he chose to study a selection of subjects. English, Music, and Biology were recommended by his teachers. Somehow, Fine Art found its way into his curriculum.

It was in English that he met David Shaw. He'd always been wary of his classmates, and they him – a hatchling brood sensing the alien nature of one in their midst – but David was new to the area. They bonded awkwardly over debates on Keats and the semantics of love.

'It's been romanticised,' David had said, toying with a biro between his fingers. 'Everyone has this hyped-up notion of love as delicate and romantic and ideal.'

‘Love is romantic.’

‘No,’ David repeated, lowering his voice, afraid the group at the table next to theirs might overhear him. ‘Love is wild. It’s messy and untamed, like an animal ravaging its prey.’

‘That’s interesting.’

‘Is it?’

‘Yes,’ Adam said. ‘I mean, I think so.’

David said that, like an animal, love could be caged or neutered or left to die in a small room. The media beautified it, trussing it up with soft ribbon and serving it with a box of liqueur chocolates to the starving masses because that was what they wanted, what they needed.

He could feel David’s eyes on him. David’s chair squeaked as he shifted in his seat, the shadow of his head inching across the table.

‘It’s a force,’ he finished, ‘an attraction. Anything more than that is fancy wrapping.’

It was around this time that Adam first read *The Metamorphosis*. He studied it as part of his English A-level. The course recommended lots of reading, but it was Kafka’s story about a young man waking up to find he’d been transformed into a giant beetle that struck a chord. At least, he remembers it striking a chord at the time. Getting back into it has been a struggle.

It’s lunchtime by the time his morning lectures finish. Resisting the urge for a hotdog at the Stag’s, he turns off at University Road and follows the street back to Portswood. It’s busier than when he passed through this morning, heaving with locals and other students. He’s almost past the newsagent’s on the corner when a girl with a clipboard approaches him from through the crowd.

‘The Drink of the Devil. Hell’s Water. The Blood of Christ. All names we at Straight Edge give to what the majority of the student body calls ‘booze’. Tell me, do you think the binge drinking culture has a foothold here at the university?’

Pinching self-consciously at the sleep in his eyes, he takes a step back and slides his hands into his pockets. ‘I... think everyone likes to go out once in a while and have a good time.’

‘So you’d agree there’s a problem with binge drinking here?’

Their university, allegedly rated amongst the heaviest student drinkers in the UK – or so Adam had heard on a night out once. He’s sure every university lays similar claims. She must have heard this too. Her nose crinkles distastefully as she gives him the once over; her sharp eyes spearing him like a pair of pins. Her bold print slogan-hoody stares boldly back at him.

Living on the Straight Edge.

‘I don’t think there’s a drinking problem.’ He forces a smile. ‘The university’s doing fine. More than fine, it’s smashing league tables, so there can’t be a problem really.’

‘That’s interesting.’ The girl pauses, takes a deep breath, and Adam fancies Portswood does likewise, the street around him slowing, falling quiet. ‘You don’t think unprovoked violence is a problem? You don’t think that liver failure and other long-term diseases are an issue? You don’t think falling university standards nationwide, as a direct result of alcohol abuse, is something to be addressed?’

It’s too early for this. Early into the day. Early into the semester. Early into his hangover. It occurs to him that they’re arguing, although he’s not quite sure how, or why. He wishes he was at home, in bed, anywhere else really but here.

‘It’s subjective. I think you have your beliefs and other people have theirs, even if those only involve having a good time and making the most of their time here.’

Her eyes are hard, make-up free, slightly red around the edges. ‘Subjective? Sure, it’s subjective. Ask the opinion of anyone out there who’s been bottled, the healthcare staff on wards on a Saturday night, the men who have to clean up your vomit from the streets outside Escape every Sunday morning.’ She steps closer, her clipboard by her side now so that it’s just her face and his. Other students are starting to stare. ‘Only this morning, a third-year Computer Electronics student has been reported missing. No one’s seen him for a week. Do you think *he’s* having a good time?’

‘Quite possibly.’

Adam backs away from the sermon and skitters behind a group of Chinese students before she has a chance to retaliate. His teeth chattering, he rounds the newsagent’s and heads down Alma Road. Whatever the journalist had been

interviewing for, it sounded like one hell of a publication. Give him a night out at Escape any day.

Chapter Three

Approaching the house, Adam finds the rusting gate already open. The large, ground-floor bay window is attached to Cerys' bedroom, and he wonders if she's in, watching him from the other side. She's supposed to be at the hospital on ward rounds, not that this means much. She's as guilty as any of them of skipping her lectures.

The ambush on Portswood is still fresh in his mind. *Your vomit*. She knew. How had she known? His stomach knotting, he glances behind him but sees nothing except for the long road, the tall spire of the church on the corner and three crisp packets, caught in the hedge. On the opposite pavement, a young woman in a university hoody is pushing a pram down the street. He watches her, slumped over the handlebar, the buggy's wheels rattling, until she catches him looking. Turning, he lets himself into the house.

Almost immediately he's hit by the stale smell in the hallway: onions, fried chicken and warm beer. Grasping the doorframe, he takes a lungful of fresh air before braving the house. To say the hallway needs cleaning is an understatement. Liam's car needs cleaning; the house needs cleansing by fire, fumigating, exorcising; preferably all three, in whichever order is the quickest. It hadn't been his first choice when they were house-hunting last year. It hadn't smelled like this either. But it was the largest they'd found within their budget and he was outvoted.

Hanging his satchel from the banister, he slips off his shoes and kicks them in the direction of the broken rack. 'Cerys, you in?'

Another voice calls to him from the sitting room. 'Through here, babe.'

He follows it to its source. Empty bottles, used glasses and food-encrusted plates greet him. The room boasts two sofas and as many armchairs; a matching set, embroidered with roses that might once have been red but have long since faded into a fleshy pink. A cream carpet spills out from the hallway, most of it obscured beneath a knee-high table. On the rare occasions the table is tidy, it's possible to read the stickers that other tenants have plastered onto it; a legacy spelled out in catchphrases, food labels and safe-sex warnings that have clearly

come from a Freshers' pack. He spots Charmander and Mickey Mouse, Pikachu and Stitch. Daffy Duck's orange bill pokes out from beneath a plate of day-old toast.

Flick is standing on an armchair, one foot on each armrest. She's dressed in a crop top and grey tracksuit-bottoms. Her trademark tangle of dirty-blonde hair hangs like a mane around her shoulders.

'I thought you were Cerys.'

'Story of my life.'

Reaching the arm of the sofa, Adam collapses forward onto the cushions. 'I'm never drinking again.'

'Apart from tonight?'

His stomach turns at the thought of going out again. 'Tuesday nights. Escape. Under-rated. You definitely need to come next week.'

'Couldn't do last night, could I? Stupid placement this morning in Winchester. '

He reviews her outfit. 'Did you make it in?'

'No.' With nauseating grace she springs off the armchair and pinches a long stretch of Blu-tack from the table. 'But the intention was there.'

'You're giving me motion-sickness.'

'I've always thought I should've gone into dance.' Scaling the armchair, she resumes tacking photographs to the wall.

'Bit late in the year for interior design, isn't it? Trying to mask the damage?'

'I printed these off last semester, just never got round to putting them up. Better late than never.'

One of the photos slips from her fingers. It flutters disobediently towards the carpet, away from Adam's outstretched hand. With some effort he stretches to retrieve it. Taken last year, on Adam's twentieth, it shows Roach, Liam and him, perched on a black leather sofa in their old basement flat. Each of them is brandishing their drink of choice: Adam and Roach a tall lager, Liam his trademark alcopop. Before university, Adam had no proper friends to speak of. There were the Samanthas, the Davids, but they had never been close. He can still remember his

first day in Southampton, walking the three flights of stairs to their flat, meeting his housemates for the first time. Roach's bravado had been almost overwhelming, a cloud of masculinity and Lynx threatening to suffocate him. Then Liam had appeared, and the two of them seemed to counter each other. They have all lived in each other's pockets ever since, through exams, nights out, the inevitable mornings after, Liam's driving tests and Roach's retakes. And in a matter of months they will graduate and all this will be behind them. The thought passes through him like a fresh wave of sickness.

Handing the photo back to Flick, he slumps back into the cushions. 'Why do we do this to ourselves?'

Dismounting the armchair, she ventures into the kitchen. 'Because it's fun?' She returns moments later clutching Shaniqua to her chest. Their rental agreements had always prohibited the ownership of pets, but this year, for the first time, that changed. She bought the rat last summer and has hardly left its side since.

'She misses you. Want a cuddle?'

'Your pet needs help.'

They settle down in front of the television while Adam examines his arms. In several places the scars are still visible from where he once tried to hold the rat. Antiseptic cream and two vodka-cokes had swiftly followed. Vodka-cokes have become his answer to most things recently. Antiseptic cream isn't usually far behind.

'Got caught by some girl from one of the support groups on the way back from campus. Kept going on about alcohol abuse. I was thinking, can you imagine if she'd bumped into him, instead of me.' He nods towards Roach's room.

Flick smiles. 'She wasn't impressed with you then?'

His phone vibrates in his pocket. He's had it on silent mode for lectures and had forgotten to switch it back. There are nine missed calls, all from Ali. He catches this one before it becomes the tenth. 'What happened last night?'

'Adam, have you heard? Someone's gone missing. From Uni.'

'Oh yeah, I did hear something about that this morning.'

'You did? I've just found out. It's Tan, Adam.'

'Who?'

'Tan Ming. Maybe you never met. I've known him since school.'

'No way. Are you okay?' He catches Flick watching him from across the room. 'Do you want to meet?'

'Christ above, Adam. Yes please.'

They arrange to meet later at the Ship. When Ali hangs up, Adam buries his face back into a cushion. A draught chases through the sitting room, scattering Flick's photos and unsettling the rat in her arms. His phone alarm chooses that moment to ring, the wake-up he'd needed this morning. Adam, Roach and Liam stare back at him from the print off, drinks in hand, each of them trapped in timeless celebration.

Chapter Four

Hartley Library is a network of corridors, workstations, and desktops across five levels. Some are practically deserted, the aisles looking as if they haven't seen a human presence in many months. Others are the opposite, students queuing up for seats or waiting for their turn to search the narrow aisles for a book. Grace is here somewhere, studying like the diligent student Adam wishes he could be. The place is easily large enough that he might loiter for an hour and still never see her. Liam is somewhere nearby too, revising for a paper next week. Roach should be with him.

Adam wanders up to the next level, past the misshapen forms of students slumped over their workstations. How Grace spends so much time here without suffering from cabin fever is beyond him. Frustration gnaws at his insides. His tutor had made it sound so easy, as if he could just walk in and out again with the books he needed. A quick search on WebCat reveals the texts he's looking for dotted all over the library. He decides to start his research online.

He slowly sources several webpages about *The Metamorphosis*. Grasping his pen, he opens his notepad to a fresh page and begins copying. At this stage he's not looking for anything too specific; the more he jots down now, the more he can refer back to later. He amasses almost three pages of scribbles before he leaves to meet Ali.

It's a ten-minute walk from Hartley to the Ship. The prospect of a pint isn't an enticing one right now and he takes the walk at a leisurely pace, so that when he arrives Ali is already waiting for him by the taps. The pub is small and unusually quiet. He spots only three other students sitting at the back.

'As if I beat you here,' she says as he approaches.

She's already finished a large glass of white. He orders her another, then a lager for himself, noticing again the students across the room. He'd put them in their first year, except Freshers rarely venture this far into Portswood. Second-years, then, on the cusp of entering their third and newly emboldened by this fact. He remembers feeling similarly, this time last year. They don't know what they're letting themselves in for.

'I'm going to miss this place when we leave,' says Ali, as they make their way to their usual table. 'I reckon we've spent more time here than up on campus.'

A small pile of paperbacks rests on a shelf behind them, beneath one of several wooden plaques dotted around the room. Adam's eyes settle on one overhead, attached to a wooden beam.

Men are like fires – they go out if not watched!

Quoted for truth, not that the women he knows are any better. He watches Ali sip at her wine as she unbuttons her jacket.

'Are the others coming down?' she asks.

He takes a brisk mouthful of his pint. 'Roach will, when he finishes nets. How're you feeling?'

'Oh Jesus, I don't know what to think. Tan's... unassuming, you know? If anything's happened to him, I'll never forgive myself.'

'Maybe he's staying with someone. He might've got lucky and be totally oblivious to all this.'

'For a week?' Her eyebrow leaps. 'He isn't like that, and I'd know if he was seeing someone. Plus he hasn't replied to any of my texts.'

'You said you know him from school?'

She plays with her wine glass, running her fingers around the circular base. 'Sixth-form was a hard time and Tan was there for me. He only lives a few doors down from you, actually. I'm surprised you've never met before.'

'If this dissertation carries on at the same rate, I'm never going to meet anyone, ever again.'

'Oh chick!'

'It's not that bad. I have some ideas and I know what I want to discuss. There's just so much pressure to get everything right.'

'Well, speaking as someone whose degree is made up of methodologies, there's a lot to be said for a little self-expression. Do what comes naturally, chick, and worry about the details later.'

He has the impression of something large buffeting the doors. It looms closer, bumps the pane of glass. The silhouette smudges, then the door opens outwards and Roach is marching up to the bar. He clocks them while he waits to be served.

'Since when was that door a pull?' A pint of Fosters in hand, Roach approaches the table. He stoops beside Ali to hug her. 'How are you holding up, babe? This one filled me in earlier.'

Adam finds himself dwelling on his dissertation while Ali brings Roach up to speed. He's spent the best part of the week at his desk, but after two years of scraping by, there's been a noticeable adjustment period. He agreed his title with his tutor and has been struggling pretty much since then. Gradually he becomes aware of Roach's voice again.

'You don't know that anything bad has happened. What's his name, Tan? He might show up right as rain tomorrow.' Roach pulls up a chair between them and plants his elbows on the table. 'And if you ever need a natter, we're here.'

'Thanks, chick. Maybe you're right, maybe I'm overreacting. How was practice?'

'Aced it. Top form, smashed a train of sixes. Think they want me in the Firsts.'

Ali shakes her head. 'I don't know how you do it. You were hardly sober last night. You remember punching Toby, yes?'

The night comes back to Adam in flashes: Roach pulling him in for a kiss, the crowd parting around him, glimpses of Toby, held in Roach's grip, waxy faces staring back at him through the crowd, then the *pop* of his glass shattering across the floor.

'Sorry not sorry. As for this, years of practice.' Lifting his pint, he knocks back his head and pours the drink into his mouth, throat bulging as it swells and undulates with each swallow. One, two, three seconds pass before the empty glass hits the table. 'Watch and learn, Adam.'

'I could do that,' he hears himself saying. 'I just don't want to.'

The conversation lulls while he and Ali attempt to down their own drinks. He's several seconds longer than Roach. As he chokes down the last of it, his watery eyes settle on another slogan, visible over the rim of the glass.

Life changes: beer and wine remain.

He thinks of the photo, newly tacked to their sitting room wall and how he'd cope if it was Roach who had gone missing, or Ali, Liam, or any one of the friends he's made since moving here. Each one of them has become like an extra limb. He imagines a spider, flailing as its legs are plucked one by one from its body, and realises he's tapping the table with his fingers. He moves his hands to his lap.

Chapter Five

Adam's bedroom door shakes on its hinges. The deadbolt rattles. Every knock passes through his body. Slowly he becomes aware of himself; his heavy arms, his aching head, his foot, cold where it has poked out from the covers. His whole body aches. He rolls over and peers through small eyes at his surroundings. He's in his room. He's in his bed. A hundred questions crawl through his mind, one of them surfacing above the others: What the hell happened last night?

He sits up slowly and rubs his head. Everything is shades of grey and white. At least he's made it out of his clothes this time. A pair of boxers cling snug against his sore thighs.

The door shivers on its hinges again. Dragging himself from bed, he moves to answer it. The scrape of metal on metal fills his ears as he slides back the lock and Roach stumbles in. Adam wanders past him into the bathroom. It's small,

barely big enough for the shower, toilet and cracked hand-basin. Squinting, he examines himself in the mirror above the sink.

He doesn't look well. His face is pale, his eyes pink against the dark bags beneath. He wishes he could remember more; anything that might shed light on what had happened last night. He recalls Roach and Ali in the Ship, then the taxi to Escape. Everything else is a blur.

Returning to his room, he crawls into bed beside Roach just as the front door slams. The floor shakes as someone hurtles upstairs. There are only two people as heavy-footed as that, and Roach is tucked up in a heap beside him. It's moments before Liam bounds into the room.

'How's everybody feeling?'

'Like mould.'

'All right, Chubs, didn't see you over there.' Liam takes a running jump, landing heavily on top of his housemate.

Roach's Green Day pyjamas – a contradiction of ideologies if Adam has ever seen one – ride halfway up his back. Billie Joe grins lopsidedly. 'Fuck off.'

Liam grins. 'You're cheery.'

'Don't start. I've got nets this evening and I need to be on top form if I want to impress.'

Climbing from the bedcovers, Liam settles down in the armchair. It hadn't taken Adam long to realise why Liam liked the ancient heap so much, when they moved in last summer. Besides the bed, it's the centrepiece of the room. Liam clutches at the armrests, king of their crumbling castle.

'So, apart from the damage, any more news? Fill me in, I want to know everything.'

Roach snorts. 'Maybe if you came out with us once in a while.'

'Hey, I had to go home. Family dinner.'

'It's always a family something with you...'

'No it isn't!'

‘Stop shouting. Please.’ Adam buries himself further into the covers.
‘There’s no need for the shouting.’

‘We’re having an amicable discussion.’ Liam pulls off one of his trainers and hurls it in Roach’s direction. ‘No fights this time?’

‘No fights. I was on best behaviour. This one left early.’

Adam remembers drinking and dancing, then feeling dizzy. His chest tightens as the dance floor comes back to him, revealed in flashes, faces watching him, panic filling him, threatening to spill out. ‘I felt sick.’

‘Really? That’s unlike you, Adam.’ Winking, he springs to his feet and heads for the door. ‘Anyway, in case you haven’t noticed, it’s glorious out. Hitting the Common with the girls. Coming?’

Liam tears open the curtains. Adam and Roach scuttle for the shadows, but it’s a wasted effort. Sunlight floods the bedroom, blinding Adam as he wrestles for the covers, and in less than an hour they’re making their way to the Common. They arrive to find the rest of Southampton has had the same idea. Ali, Flick, Cerys and Grace are among them, waiting near the lake.

‘Watch it, Adam—you’re going to burn.’ Ali chucks a bottle of sun at him as he approaches. It hits his chest and bounces off, settling a couple of feet away in the grass. He leaves it; he already applied a light covering before coming out.

Finding an empty spot slightly apart from the rest of the crowds, they unpack their supplies and set up Cerys’ speakers. Little blades tickle Adam’s neck and behind his ears as he sprawls out across the grass. His eyes are closed, but he can hear Liam and Roach as they kick a ball around somewhere nearby. He can’t think of anything worse than playing football in this weather, but they sound like they’re having a good enough time of it.

‘Oh Jesus, this is what it’s all about.’ Ali’s lighter clicks quietly, followed by the familiar waft of smoke. Adam doesn’t mind the smell. He’s used to it after three years of living with Roach. Forcing his eyes open, he turns in her general direction. She’s sitting cross-legged, some Chemistry notes open in front of her. At least the thought was there. He hadn’t even remembered to bring a pair of shades.

‘Don’t panic,’ starts Flick, ‘but I think I can hear the ice-cream van.’ She could have won the lottery for the excitement in her voice. ‘I could *just* go for a Mr Whippy.’

‘Not for me,’ says Cerys, ‘I’m on a diet.’ She’s lying beside Adam, soaking up as much of the sun as humanly possible. It will be her first natural tan of the year. When Cerys stops applying the fake stuff and drops to the ground, that’s when they know summer is really here.

He doesn’t know long they lie there, lounging peacefully in the sun. The breeze returns, playing over his chest. He brushes away stray grass that has settled on his stomach and takes a long, steady breath.

‘Has anyone seen my sun cream?’ asks Grace. Adam hadn’t realised she was awake, but that’s nothing out of the ordinary. Her room is directly opposite his, yet he can’t remember the last time they crossed paths around the house before today, never mind went out anywhere together. Like Ali, she appears to have brought some reading material with her, a course book open in the grass in front of her. Unlike Ali, she seems engrossed.

‘Yes, I have it. No, I had it.’ Ali flicks the ash from her cigarette before rummaging around in her bag. ‘Just a second, I know it’s here somewhere.’

Propping himself up on an elbow, Adam glances around. ‘Do we have any drinks?’

‘Good lad!’ Roach jogs over to the group, ball under arm. Liam races after him. Catching up, he drops to the grass beside Grace while Roach rummages around in a couple of bags. One by one, he produces four drinks.

‘Beer for me, beer for Adam, beer for Ali,’ he announces, handing the bottles around, ‘and tart fuel for this one.’

Liam grimaces as he takes his bottle.

Appearing over Roach’s shoulder, Flick grasps him in an easy headlock. ‘Don’t we get any?’

‘Hold on, hold on, I’m not finished.’

He swings the carrier bag closer, its contents clinking like wind chimes. Bottle caps plink, drinks hiss and, for one contented moment, everyone is quiet. The faint shrieks and yells of other people on the Common filter into Adam’s ears, mingling with the cry of a seagull somewhere nearby. It reminds him how close to the sea they are. Southampton: so far from home, except it isn’t.

They spend the rest of the afternoon together on the Common before picking up more alcohol in Portswood and returning to the house. Roach has cricket practice to squeeze in, leaving the rest of them with just over four hours before they plan to head out.

‘Still on for next week?’ Ali asks before leaving him on his doorstep.

‘Next week?’

‘A trip to town. For your Grad Ball suit?’

Roach dashes past them, his cricket bag in tow. ‘It’s not what you wear but how you wear it, mate.’

‘Says the man in the burgundy vest top. So next week, yes?’

Adam’s workload flashes before his eyes, but it doesn’t last. ‘For sure.’

The girls vanish straight into their bedrooms to begin getting ready. The house is cool, as though a door or window has been left open. Liam isn’t coming out with them, but he helps Adam to stock the fridge with their acquisitions. Adam is loading up the last shelf when his housemate calls through to him from the conservatory.

The room is tiny, too small for the washing machine, never mind the rat cage beside it. A single bulb casts a wan light, shining in the puddle below. The centimetre or so of water is as much a feature of the room as the washing machine or the cage. Adam has lost track of the times he’s tried mopping it up.

Liam is standing in the middle of the puddle, next to the rat cage. Bars splay like broken ribs where Roach accidentally mangled them after a night at Escape last semester. In hindsight, it hadn’t been their best decision setting the cage in the waterlogged room. It hadn’t been their best decision buying a rat in the first place.

‘It’s Shaniqua.’ Liam taps the misshapen steel cage with a fluorescent trainer. Behind the bars, the still body of the rat is just visible, protruding stiffly from a nest of shredded newspaper and sawdust. ‘Shotgun-not telling Flick.’

Chapter Six

They bury the rat in the back garden. It isn’t easy finding a bare patch of grass; six months of apathy have turned the lawn into a Boschian nightmare complete with

wine bottles, beer cans, off-white deckchairs, and the festering remains of a cheap Swedish bookcase. Roach arrives back from nets halfway through the hunt; together they locate a suitable spot near the dividing fence.

‘Looks like someone’s already had a go at the ground here,’ says Liam. ‘I hope my funeral’s better than this.’ It isn’t much to ask. Clouds have amassed overhead, obscuring the last of the sun. Only Flick seems genuinely moved.

‘Do you think rats go to Heaven?’ Grace eyes the darkening sky, as if any minute a golden ray of light might pierce the clouds and spirit Shaniqua’s soul away to a better place. It doesn’t happen.

‘This one won’t.’ Cerys lounges slightly behind them in the poäng. ‘It wouldn’t even let you touch it. Look at Flick’s arms.’

‘Do we have to say something?’ asks Grace.

‘Jog on.’ Roach has lit up a cigarette and is loitering around the outskirts of the gathering. He draws a sharp intake of breath, the sound hissing past his lips. ‘I’m surprised we’re even burying it, to be honest.’

‘Seconded,’ says Liam. ‘I’m going to be late for work at this rate.’

Everyone makes their excuses; Grace is the slowest.

‘I’m not doing it.’ When no one replies, she shrinks into her hoody, as though it might shield her from the task as well as the cold. ‘Flick loved it the most, she should do it.’

‘I looked after her for weeks when you lot lost interest; it’s somebody else’s turn for a change.’ Flick’s eyes settle on Roach. ‘You should do it. You’re the one who killed her.’

Roach takes another deep drag on his cigarette and looks up. ‘Say what?’

‘The things you used to feed her. Vodka in her water bowl.’

‘You don’t know it was my fault. She could’ve had a heart attack. Anything could’ve happened.’

Adam studies his housemate as he casually flicks ash from the end of his cigarette. It’s true that Roach used to feed the rat vodka. The memories of a hundred similar mistakes made by his housemate swirl nauseously through Adam’s mind.

Flick continues to stare him down. 'You're supposed to be the chemist. You should know better than to feed alcohol to an animal. Maybe if you'd actually been to a lecture so far this semester, you'd have picked up on that one.'

'Pot-kettle-black. At least we know how a rat reacts when you distil it with Smirnoff.'

'Too far, Roach.' Throwing some dirt over the hole in the ground, she marches inside.

Silence settles over the garden. It might be hallowed, if not for Roach's cigarette, any sense of reverence undone beneath the lingering smell of his Marlborough.

'Well, I'm not burying it.' Climbing from her seat, Cerys follows Flick inside. Grace ghosts after her.

Rolling his eyes, Liam assumes Cerys' spot in the poäng. 'I think you might've killed more than just the rat there, Chubs.'

'She'll be fine.' Adam glances back at the house and the conservatory light, spilling out into the darkening garden. 'Give it a day or two and everything will be back to normal.'

'Minus a rat,' adds Liam.

Roach flicks his cigarette butt into the bushes. 'Doesn't bother me either way. It was just a rat. It's not like I've offed her brother.'

Adam is pretty sure Flick cared more about Shaniqua than she does about her brother. At least she'd been able to cuddle the rat, if she wore a thick, long-sleeved top, held the rat down properly, and plied it with food first. He's about to say as much when he notices Roach trembling.

'Are you all right?'

'I'm fine. I'm just fed up of being blamed for everything around here.' Roach stuffs his hands in his pockets, presumably to hide the shakes, but it makes little difference. Maybe this is what happens to a person when they've been drunk since they were thirteen. Maybe this will happen to Adam one day, given enough time.

Wiping his arm on his shiny forehead, Roach coughs wetly into the back of his hand and grabs his cigarettes back from Liam. 'I think there's some cricket on. Who's coming?'

Liam exhales a cloud of smoke and scrapes his cigarette on the wall.

'Adam?'

'This rat's not going to bury itself.'

'Come on, mate.' For a brief second Roach is anonymous; a broad silhouette, unrecognisable against the light of the conservatory. Strangely, Adam thinks of Caterpillar. Then Roach coughs, the light catching his features, and he's Adam's housemate again. 'We've got time. There's beers. Please?'

'Give me five.'

Roach and Liam disappear inside, leaving Adam in the garden with the cold and the shovel and the remains of the rat. He's never buried anything properly before, but he doesn't think the hole will be deep enough. Portswood blinks around him, the wind racing across the tiled roofs. Another sound catches his attention; the yipping of foxes, and a buzzing, close but insistent. Dusk wells up from the undergrowth.

Teeth chattering, he turns back to the shallow hole. The rat is a small, pale shape in the gloom. He wonders what did kill it and whether Roach is responsible. It wouldn't be the first time his housemate had done something regrettable under the influence. Planting the shovel into the loose earth, he digs, then lifts.

A flash of white breaks the darkness. Soil patters into the weeds, followed by the muffled sound of the spade as it lands in the grass. He feels lightheaded, at once inside his body and outside of it. Night closes in around him, the garden shivering, but he has only eyes for the bottom of the hole and, partially obscured beneath mud and rat, the lower half of a face, smiling up at him through the encroaching darkness.

Chapter Seven

Adam dreams he's sitting in his parent's kitchen. The room is exactly as he remembers it being when he visited over Easter: white walls, plaster crumbling in the corners, low ceiling run through with oak beams, shelves and cabinets to

match. Everything is muted, like he's listening underwater, except for the bleating, growing louder and clearer every second.

For a moment he's tempted to remain where he's sitting. In front of him, a bowl of cereal swims in milk. Then Jess is barking in the hallway, his mother is dashing downstairs, and he drags himself from the chair. Jess paces by the coat-stand, her tail wagging as his mother struggles into her green Parka and wellington boots.

Outside is bright but cold. The morning nips at his fingers and the tip of his nose. It's still raining, although not heavily, and as he leaves the yard he slips on the dark stone of the step. The sky spins and his stomach leaps as he throws his arms out. From a low brick wall, a trio of crows scatter at the bite of an expletive, mortar crumbling beneath their departure.

'Shit!'

Like a stone hitting a lake, the syllable shatters the calm, fills it, then fades away, swallowed entirely.

'Adam, please.'

He tries to look at his mother but her features escape him. Behind him, the farmhouse sits like one of their old ewes, kneeling in the long grass to endure the rain. It has been in his family for five generations. The paint has long since assumed an indistinct grey, matching the clouds above it.

It's a short walk to the flock. He knows without counting that there are fifty-seven. The bleating is louder now, clearer, and he imagines the sheep are greeting his mother and him on their approach. The thought might have entertained him, once. The gate whines at the hinges as his mother lifts the clasp to enter the field. Some of the ewes turn at the sound, heads swinging dully in their direction, but most ignore them. Jess keeps to the edges of the field, attentive but distant.

Growing up, he'd given the sheep names, their own personalities, like the characters in the children's books his mother used to read to him at bedtime. Back then the whole farm might have been a theme park complete with petting zoo, space to run and explore, and vast machines to sit in and ride around on. He still remembers the heat of the John Deere against his hands, the roar it made as it spluttered into life.

He doesn't know what they're doing out here. It's years since he's helped on the farm and longer still since he's had anything to do with lambing, but he knows they should be in the barn. Once secondary school had started, the appeal of the farm had waned. Any similarities to amusement parks faded beneath hard work, responsibility and morning starts so early that it was still dark when his father dragged him out of bed. Sheep became different things, then; shapes to count across his ceiling at night while he lay worrying about homework or David.

The ewes know them but they are skittish, frightened by their contractions and the rich, nascent smell on the air. To his left, one of them shivers slightly, her eyes glassy as she stares him down. He stays back while his mother moves cautiously around her, inspecting her condition, scrutinising for complications that could risk the life of ewe or offspring.

When she's sure that the ewe is well, his mother moves onto the next. She inspects each sheep in turn. Some seem more wary of her than others, tottering on their legs at her approach. Others do not appear to mind as she opens their mouths, examines teeth and coats, lifting their docked tails to check progress.

A guttural groan announces the first birth. His breath catches as the lamb slides into the grass like a bar of wet soap squeezed between hands. The newborn shape flounders weakly where it has fallen but his eyes are fixed on the brightness of the blood in the grass. He blinks, and when he looks again, it's not a lamb but the lower half of a man's face, staring back at him from the mud.

He opens his eyes to darkness, and it's a moment before he recognises his bedroom. Shadows stretch across his room, the silhouettes of his chair and lampshade offset against the orange glow of the streetlights. What time is it? A draught tickles the soles of his feet, and he huddles deeper into his covers.

Blindly he fumbles for Paracetamol. His hand finds a glass, cool and slippery against his fingers. He drinks enough to swallow the tablets. His phone is here too, but it looks to have died sometime in the night. His charger is missing.

Gradually his eyes begin to adjust, grey shapes emerging in the dark: his desk lamp, the old armchair, a pile of clothes, which could well be from this evening. He sits up, slides his legs from the bed, is about to open another window when a second figure detaches itself from the armchair.

'Shit!' Adam scrabbles back.

'Jesus!' Roach's voice is unmistakable. 'Christ on a bike. How long have you been up?'

Adam stares across the room, his hands two fists around his covers. Roach's silhouette rises from the armchair, swaying as he approaches the foot of the bed. He sits. Bedsprings whine under his weight.

'Roach? What time is it?'

'Not late, almost one.'

Adam's chest feels tight, his lungs small. He's aware of his teeth chattering. 'There's a body in the garden. I saw it. I saw a face, in the ground.'

'Is that why you passed out?'

'What?'

Roach shifts, the bedsprings squeaking. 'When you didn't show, I came outside. Found you face down in the dirt. Pale as Grace.'

'I saw a face, Roach. I was just digging, and there it was.'

'Anyone I know?' Roach snorts quietly. 'You had a bad dream, mate.'

'Yeah. No. I was dreaming, but that's not it.' The darkness is disorientating. Adam fumbles blindly for the light switch, his fingers brushing across the cracked plaster wall. Something finds his arm and tightens. It's smooth, dry, almost velveteen, and several seconds pass before he realises it's Roach's hand. He almost recoils, except the grip holds him still.

'It was just a bad dream, mate.'

'It wasn't. It's real, I saw it. Where are the others?'

'Out. I stayed in, to keep an eye on you. You can thank me in the morning.'

A single *click* fills the room as Adam finds the switch on the wall. Light floods the room, dazzling. He squints automatically, shields himself with one arm. Roach is a blur beside him.

'Roach, listen. What if it's Tan?'

'Tan?'

'Ali's friend, the one who's gone missing.'

‘Oh right, yeah. Listen to yourself, Adam.’ His grip on Adam’s arm tightens. It still feels smooth, even pocked with burns from cigarette butts and Chemistry. Beer carries on his breath, and something else underneath it, slightly rotten, slightly sweet. ‘No one’s buried in the garden. We can look again tomorrow, if it’ll make you feel better.’

He pulls back from Roach’s grasp. Roach’s grip remains, and for a moment Adam doesn’t think he will let him go. Then, releasing his arm, Roach crosses the room and curls up into the armchair. Exhaling heavily, Adam sinks into bed. He sleeps with the light on under the shadows of two moths dancing around the bulb.

Chapter Eight

The prickly heat of the computer room bears down on him. It’s his third consecutive day here and he’s grown attuned to the hum of the desktops, like industrial generators in his ears. Closing his eyes, he resists the urge to power nap. He doesn’t remember much of the other night, or what time he eventually nodded off again, but he hasn’t slept properly since. When he woke up the next morning, Roach was gone. So was the face in the ground. He’d been so sure he’d seen it, had vividly recalled the pale skin, plump lips, jawline emerging from the soil, but standing over the empty hole in the cold light of morning he’d begun to doubt himself.

He’s sprawled across the workstation when his phone buzzes in his pocket. It’s a message from Roach, asking to meet for lunch. The prospect of food is infinitely more appealing than it was three hours ago, and lunch at the pub is always better than instant noodles at home. The decision is an easy one.

It’s a short walk to the Stag’s. The pub is usually crammed with students seeing out the day’s lectures or watching a match. Even first-years from the furthest halls bus here to drink and chill out. No one is sitting outside today. Inside is much the same; two girls are playing pool at the back, and two more are propping up the counter while they chat with a member of staff. Adam’s stomach rumbles.

Roach is waiting in the third booth. His eyes are dark smears in a pale face. When he sees Adam, he slides from the seat and they make their way to the bar.

‘I’ll get the first round.’ Roach produces a tenner from his back pocket. ‘You’re saving for that Grad Ball suit.’

Sweat glistens in a thin sheen on his housemate’s forehead and down his arms. It’s always hot in here. Pulling at his tee, Adam returns to the booth while Roach gets their drinks. Windows stretch the length of the wall, offering an uninterrupted landscape of Highfield Campus. A mixture of modern and traditional buildings meets his view. Chrome new-builds shine chrome beside the austere greyness of the older high-rise blocks. Sitting in their shadow, he feels tiny.

Glasses clink as Roach sets their drinks on the table. ‘Here we go, get that down your neck.’

The cold beer slides satisfying down Adam’s throat. Taking another swig, he sinks back into the seat and watches Roach over the rim of his glass. ‘Come on then, what is it?’

‘What’s what?’

‘I can’t remember the last time you volunteered a round.’

Roach shrugs. Cracking his knuckles, he leans forward, nursing his pint with something that might almost be considered affection. ‘I might’ve realised I’m pissing a lot of people off lately. I’m trying to maybe piss not so many people off.’

‘With beer?’

Roach frowns. ‘Yeah?’

Adam raises his glass in salute. ‘I trust labs went well.’

Roach shakes his head. ‘Fucking phenyl-benzine.’

‘You should’ve done a better degree.’

‘Like English, you mean?’

A billboard filled with posters and pamphlets hangs on the wall to their right. Adam scans over adverts for used bikes, second-hand cars, and a leaflet from Straight Edge, promoting a weekly gathering.

AA Meetings – Take Control One Day at a Time

The leaflet flutters as the door to the Stag's opens and four squash players wander in, fresh from the nearby courts. The breeze rushes after them, cool against Adam's face. Turning into it, he basks. 'Have you made up with Ali yet?'

'For doing Toby in? I've said sorry.'

'What, no beer?'

Roach's leans forward, elbows on the table, his chin coming to rest on the top of his fist. 'She declined.'

Adam winces. 'How did she seem?'

'All right, I think. I was pissed, there wasn't much to explain.'

Roach's pint is already half-empty. Adam hurries to catch up. He's closed his eyes to drink, but he still knows what's coming, hears the intimate hiss of Roach's lighter as he toys with it across the table.

'Come outside while I have a quick fag.'

'Do I have to?'

'Who bought the drinks in?'

The pair of them head outside and find a bench. Still standing, Roach lights up, turning his back from campus to shelter his cigarette from the wind. When he catches Adam's eyes, he looks away again. 'Look, there's something I want to talk to you about.' Taking a drag on his cigarette, he stares out over Highfield Campus. Sitting there, waiting for Roach to continue, Adam detects a faint drone, quiet but growing louder, like the soothing vibration in his bones. 'The other night, that fight with Toby. It's been going on for too long, the two of them.'

'Yeah, she really likes him—'

'And he's just playing with her! Messing her around, every time! She doesn't deserve it. He doesn't deserve her.'

'No, he doesn't deserve her. But that's not for us to say. It's her relationship. We're supposed to support her and look after her.'

'That's what I'm trying to do, mate. Look after her!' Roach spins around, beer still grasped firmly in one hand. Adam notices a fly clinging to the neck of his glass like a spot of perspiration.

‘What’s going on? You’re acting like you’re jealous.’

Roach meets Adam’s eyes, then looks away. He shifts from foot to foot. ‘Maybe I am.’

The realisation hits Adam with the force of Roach’s Warsop. All this time Roach has put up with listening to her talking about Toby, when all he really wanted was to be Toby. Or at least, be in Toby’s place.

Adam looks at Roach, properly looks at him, as though seeing his friend for the first time. The pint trembles slightly in Roach’s grip. The fly continues to taste the glass with its feet. A sense of dissonance grows at the absurdity of it all until he becomes aware of the rigidity of his grip on the table. His hands are shaking, fingers white against the scratched wood. ‘How long’s this been going on then?’

‘Nothing’s been going on. She doesn’t even know. It doesn’t matter. You said it yourself, she loves Toby. Why would she want anything to do with me?’

‘Can you hear yourself?’

‘I’m right, though.’

‘He’s got nothing on you. You know that.’

Roach hangs his head. This close, Adam can see the crusts of sleep in his eyes. His lips are chapped, his scent that of flat beer and too much cologne. It’s not easy to tell the two smells apart.

‘Not after the fighting. I’ve messed everything up.’

‘Stop being such a drama queen.’

‘No, really, I have.’

Adam feels the droning sound now, a buzzing inside his head, and a number of things, welling up like champagne in a bottle: guilt, shame, and the sudden pop of sympathy. He bubbles messily over.

‘You’ve not messed up. You just need to apologise.’ Releasing his grip on the table, Adam takes the pint from his housemate’s hand. The glass is cold, cloudy with foam and dregs. At some point during their conversation, the fly has slipped. It paddles impotently in the shallow inch, legs flailing against the side of the glass. Reaching down, Adam scoops it from the lager and places it carefully on

the table. It runs a circle before balancing on alternate legs and beginning to clean itself.

Chapter Nine

Adam and Roach share a big dish of nachos and another pint each before going their separate ways. Adam spends the rest of the evening at the library, the hours blurring into one long stretch of reading, writing and hair pulling, until he can barely see the screen any more. Feeling like a glass of sparkling wine left out too long, he packs away his books and begins the walk home.

He welcomes the cool breeze after so long stuck inside. The first streetlights guide him through the campus, past the market stalls abandoned for another week, the university shop. The evening air is still, broken only by the distant blare of car horns and the background moan of traffic, seeming distorted; drawn out by the growing dark.

All around him, the city appears to have wound down for the day. There are a few signs of life as he emerges onto Portswood; unfortunate souls in his own position, closing up, switching off and leaving the day's studies behind them, but not many. As he walks, he tries to visualise the contents of the freezer at home; an indiscernible drawer of ready meals, ice-lollies and packet-vegetables that do little to excite his appetite. He wishes someone would pick him up, carry him to the sink and pour him away.

It's dark by the time he eventually gets home. Removing his boots in the hallway, he treads quietly upstairs. Across the landing, Grace's bedroom door is ajar, light spilling across the carpet. Realising she must still be awake, he pokes his head around.

'Knock-knock. Is everything okay?'

It's easily the cleanest room in the house. Grace's fear of creepy crawlies allows for no slacking, meaning that everything from the small TV in the corner to the black IKEA bookshelf has a glossy, freshly swept look. The duster rests against the leg of her chair, where her foot taps habitually.

At the sound of his voice, Grace turns from her desk. Reading glasses rest across the bridge of her nose, fingers poised over the keyboard. 'What do you mean?'

'I mean, obviously you're okay. I just wondered how you're doing these days. It seems like ages since we've hung out properly.'

His phone vibrates in his pocket: another text, from Ali this time, wanting to know if he's free to meet up tomorrow. From somewhere inside him, buried underneath house pets and dissertation stress, he finds it in himself to smile.

'Do you remember that time last year, when you and I were the first back after the Christmas holidays, and we got absolutely shit-faced in the flat on cheap wine? I ended up riding around the sitting room on Roach's bike while you stuffed carrier bags over your head and pretended to be a ghost?'

Her face softens, lips twitching with a smile. 'Serial killer, actually. And you had carrier bags on your head too!'

'Not while I was riding the bike I didn't!'

He leans against the doorframe, his fingers running up and down the cracks in the paintwork. His nail catches on the paint, a scab of it coming off in his hands. He watches Grace watching its descent to the carpet.

'Are you okay?' she asks.

The question catches him off-guard, and it takes him a moment to orientate himself. He doesn't feel okay, but he doesn't know how much to share with Grace, and whether or not to confide in her about his dissertation, about Roach, about Ali and Tan and what he thought he saw in the garden. He chooses his words carefully.

'I'm just worried about Roach. He's not been himself recently. I know it makes sense, with everything that's coming up, but he's not good when it comes to dealing with things like this. You know how he is.'

'He could have depression. A lot of students get depression.' She stares blankly at her laptop. 'A lot of *people* get depression.'

'They do?'

'Yeah. We studied it in a lecture recently. I've got a book about it.' Rising from her desk chair, she potters over to the shelves above her bed and retrieves a textbook. **ABNORMAL PSYCHOLOGY** is printed in bold lettering down the spine.

She smiles politely as she hands the book to him. He'd never really noticed until they actually moved in together just how well mannered she is. When Liam used to tease her, or Roach goes off on one of his rants, she defends her corner fiercely, but she has seemed different this year. More distant. He wonders if she's also feeling the pressure of their third year; not just the workload, but the prospect of finishing, leaving all this behind, moving on.

Grace's laptop flashes and her smile fades. She brings up a Word document, then a spreadsheet. It's filled with multiple columns and numbers. 'Right, back to work. I haven't got all night. Fun times.'

'You know, I've got loads to do too. I'm re-reading my base text at the moment, don't even start me on that, but if you ever want to let your hair down, you know where we are.'

'I've got to get this done. My tutor's on my back about it. Need to keep the work up if I want to come out of here with a decent degree. I hope the book comes in useful. You've got a key—just stick it back on the shelf if I'm not in when you're done.'

Somehow, he doesn't think it will come to that.

Chapter Ten

'When Gregor Samsa woke one morning from troubled dreams, he found that he had been transformed—in his bed—into a kind of giant vermin.'

The words crawl in and out of order, but Adam still feels the sentiment behind them. It was his favourite part of the story. He repeats the process for another paragraph, and another, but no matter how much he writes, the inexplicability of that transformation and the way the text handles it sticks with him. He reads the quote again and again, looking for ways in which he might use it to inform his theme, until Ali calls to tell him she's outside. He finds her perched on the wall, scrolling through photos on her phone. She looks up, smiling when she sees him.

'Ready to split, Adam?'

He knows he should really go back inside. Instead he forces a smile. 'Ready.'

The bus stop is nearby, at the other end of the street. In his first year he'd always take the bus into the city centre and back. Halls are much further from town. He's closer now but the habit has stuck. He asks for two return tickets then finds a seat with Ali on the top deck, near the front. Outside and below, Highfield slides past. He still feels like he's not yet properly woken up.

The route is the same one that they always take into town but it looks different today. Perhaps it's just that the journey seems slower. Perhaps he isn't seeing anything he hasn't seen before. Through the bins, waiting to be collected, the wild gardens, the children playing in the road and the blue sky, the maze of streets seems to tremble. He fancies he can hear a buzzing sound again, small but growing louder, droning from the city or perhaps the earth beneath it.

The high street is heaving, and they move slowly from one shop to the next. West Quay is a rush of movement and noise. They make their way through the crowds up to the first floor.

'Cheers for this, Ali.'

'Don't be silly, chick. I'm in my element.' Ali produces a lipstick from her bag and begins to re-apply it in the reflection of the shop window. Behind the glass, a trio of mannequins watch her. 'Besides, between Tan and Toby, I could've done with getting out the house.' Smacking her lips together, she grasps his arm. 'After you.'

They move into the shop. Almost instantly the clamour of the shopping centre is replaced by quietness and the smell of crushed leather. Spotlights brighten the half-light, creating a studio feel to the layout. His wallet presses against his thigh as he climbs the stairs to the men's section. It feels heavy in his pocket. The aroma of leather intensifies, filling his nostrils. He wanders the rails with Ali.

He'd never really cared much about the clothes he wore before university. Then he discovered clubbing, pubs, a social life, and it started to matter what he wore when he left the house, or at least how what he wore made him feel. This place caught his eye on their first trip into the city centre; it's a rare day when he can actually afford something from here but that's never stopped him from looking. When the prospect of Graduation Ball came up last summer, he started saving.

There are lots of new lines since he was last here. Cement grey jeans, a linen jumper and a Rorschach pattern tee in particular catch his eye. Ali sees chemical reactions in the tie-dye print. He sees one half of a face. He quickly puts the tee back and moves on.

‘This is marvellous.’ Ali picks out a fine-knit oxblood cardigan that he noticed earlier and checks the price tag. ‘Are you selling your liver to afford this?’

‘It wouldn’t fetch much.’

‘You’ve never heard of *foie gras*?’

The formal wear is on a circular rack near the changing rooms. He finds himself pacing, walking three laps before he finds what he’s looking for. Ali has picked out his trousers, shirt, and tie but it’s the suit jacket he’s been saving so hard for. Lifting the jacket to one of the spotlights he examines it more closely, running a hand across the sleeves. It’s softer than it looked online and more crumpled; he traces the folds with his fingertips before draping the jacket over his arm. His heart races a little as he approaches the men’s changing area. He feels silly, then justified, then guilty for what he’s about to spend. They have everything he needs in stock except for cufflinks.

‘No fair,’ Ali protests as he slips behind the curtain. ‘I don’t get to see?’

‘You get to see at Grad Ball.’

Ceiling-high mirrors encase him. Standing under the spotlight before his many reflections, it’s impossible not to make out the dark bags under his eyes. His face is pale, his cheeks gaunt. His hoody hangs from him like a second grey skin. He can’t remember when he first started looking like this or when it became the norm.

He undresses quickly, then carefully climbs into his new clothes. The fit could be tailored, even though the suit itself technically isn’t. When he’s satisfied, he dresses back into his clothes and pays, before he can change his mind.

Immediately outside the shop, Ali and he find a free bench. His face burning, self-conscious of the statement his armful of bags must make, Adam sits back and tilts his head until he can see the sky. People stream past him, bustling on their way back to work, the office, or the next shop. Shouts echo within the centre, the distorted screams of children bouncing off the walls and the inside of his head. He feels dizzy again, and for a moment he wonders if he’s going mad. The bag by his

chair certifies this much: retail insanity, given a price tag and gift-wrapped over the counter. Beside him, Ali toys with her bracelets. Her fingers move in and out of each other, forming steeples, inspecting her polished nails.

‘I used to come here a lot with Tan when we were Freshers.’ Sliding her phone from her bag, she starts scrolling through pictures. Adam wonders how she’s concentrating on her revision, how she can focus on anything with the uncertainty, the not knowing. It’s keeping him up at night and he doesn’t even know the guy.

‘I’ve been dreaming about him.’

‘Oh chick.’ She looks up. ‘You shouldn’t be worrying, you’ve got enough on your plate.’

‘I know but I can’t help it. I don’t get how someone can just disappear like that. It doesn’t make sense.’

Despite the crowds, he can’t miss the clown’s balloon stall. Grey skies sag above grey buildings outside which railings flaked with grey rust into the wind, but not this clown. His long, red shoes slap against the pavement as he performs a trick for a small girl. His hair is green, his dungarees yellow, except for the straps, blue denim where they cling to his slight shoulders. A sunflower droops from his breast-pocket. Like the rest of the faces floating through the street, his is round and pale, but it’s an artificial pallor, highlighting the brightness of his lips. His trick finished, he bows. The girl claps. His painted smile illuminates the world, and it’s a moment before Adam hears Ali’s voice.

‘It doesn’t make sense now, but it will. Everything makes sense eventually. And it’s not on you or me to figure it out, Adam. Look at us, sitting here moping when we should be getting ready for tonight. I know you worry and I love you for it but there are people looking into whatever’s happened and they’ll figure it out. I’m not going to let it put a dampener on my last few weeks here and you shouldn’t either.’

The wind continues to make chaos of the clown’s stall. As Adam watches, the clown dances around like a frantic spider repairing its web. Fabric flutters while balloons rage from their tethering. Before Adam’s eyes, one breaks free and speeds away. It vanishes into the clouds.

Chapter Eleven

The sitting room is a hive of activity. Cerys is halfway through bronzing herself, one hand holding up her dress, the other nestled snugly inside a tanning glove. Adam and Roach have already worked their way through a crate of beer. Kneeling by the table, Liam mixes everyone vodka-cokes. A cookery show is playing on the TV but no one is watching it. The room smells of biscuits from the fake tan and vinegar from Flick's wine and damp, probably from the leak in the conservatory.

'So, Jesus was...'

'He was Jewish, Cerys.'

Mid-smear, she frowns, her teak face registering confusion. 'Are you absolutely sure?'

Flick gets there first, looking up with one smoky eye from her hand-mirror. 'Cerys, they teach you this stuff in primary school.'

'One-hundred per cent.' Roach half sits up from where he's slouched into the sofa, his voice daring anyone to contradict him.

Liam glances up from his row of vodkas. 'Old Testament, old school. I wouldn't know if you were right or wrong, but I think faith is about what matters to you, not what some book tells you to believe.'

Flick visibly cringes, her expression visible in the hand-mirror. 'Hashtag-vom. Did you read that on Twitter?' One eye complete, she reaches down the side of the sofa for a bottle. 'Oh my God - it's four per cent.' She brandishes the bottle, turning it so the label faces the room. 'It's out of date and it's only four per cent. This was my twenty-first birthday present from my brother, ladies and gentlemen.'

'What is it?' Roach asks.

She peers more closely at the bottle. 'Cider, I think. Fruit cider.'

'There is no God.'

Pouring a glass, Flick takes a swig then starts on her second eye. 'I wouldn't have pegged you for an altar boy, Roach.'

Settling back into the sofa with his beer, Adam watches with mild curiosity the series of expressions that sweep Roach's face as he swallows Flick's bait. Adam never enjoyed religious studies much; between Cerys' obsession with tanning and

the molecules Ali and Roach supposedly learn about in labs, there are mysteries enough gestating in the world without Adam adding God into the mix. Roach couldn't have looked more insulted if Flick had just asked him who Flintoff was or explained that six sausage rolls a day wasn't conducive to good health.

'What do you mean 'how come I know so much about it?'' Roach struggles back into something half-resembling a sitting position. 'I know loads of stuff, about all sorts.'

The corners of Flick's lips twitch but she says nothing, concentrating her efforts on her face. Slouching back into his armchair, Roach crosses his arms. His eyes are blood-shot and his pallor reminds Adam of the clown from earlier; not quite White Russian, but definitely washed out. He looks from Liam to the TV and back again. 'What time are you lot off out then?'

'We're leaving around ten.' Cerys has finished tanning, one of the reasons she needs so long to get ready before a night out, and the same time again to clean up the next morning. The lotion gives her a striking colour she couldn't hope to achieve naturally in her native Cardiff, or Southampton for that matter. Her clothes and bed sheets are usually stained with it the morning after; an unfortunate consequence of the bottled bronze, not that this has ever seemed to bother her. 'Shouldn't be too busy tonight. Is Ali out?'

'We're meeting her there.' Adam takes the vodka-coles from Liam and passes them around. 'She's drinking with her housemates for a change.'

Seemingly satisfied, Flick snaps closed her mirror and reaches for the stem of a large wine glass. 'I worry about her. Do you know if she's feeling better?'

'She deserves it for sticking around with him.' Roach wipes a layer of sweat from his forehead and takes one of the drinks from Adam. 'Toby's messing her around and she's just sits there and takes it.'

'Well that's a shitty thing to say.' Flick stares him down. 'I was talking about her missing friend, but it's good to know where you're at.'

Colour flushes through Roach's cheeks. For a brief moment, the only sound is that of the TV and a quiet scratching at the window. It doesn't last.

'I'll say whatever I want to whoever I want. You've got no idea what's going on with me.'

'No, nobody has any idea because you won't tell us. Instead you just sit there eating and moaning. It's not fair on the rest of us.'

'Eating and moaning?'

'Yes, literally those two things! It's like living with a three-year-old. Give us a break. We have to put up with you and your mood swings.'

Roach surges to his feet, spilling his drink and splashing the table. Charmander drowns beneath a puddle of vodka and coke. Grabbing a handful of notes from under a can, he storms from the room, his bedroom door slamming shut behind him. A photo flutters from the wall, caught in the draught. Adam watches it slip between the two armchairs.

'Well this party's lit,' says Liam.

Flick raises her wine glass. 'Cheers!'

'Christ.' Adam toasts, then drinks. 'This is just the start of it.'

'I genuinely don't care.' Flick shrugs. 'There's no excuse. He orders everyone around, expects us to jump when he claps, shouts us down whenever he thinks he's right. It's a joke. I'm sorry, but he needed telling. And then he starts on Toby in Escape? No wonder Ali isn't pre-drinking with us.'

Almost on cue, music erupts from Roach's room. Billie Joe drowns out the TV beneath the thrumming of his electric guitar.

Do you have the time to listen to me whine

About nothing and everything all at once

I am one of those

Melodramatic fools

Neurotic to the bone

No doubt about it

Rolling her eyes, Cerys reaches for the Smirnoff. 'Can't fault his song choice. Come on, we can move into my room. I have speakers and Sambuca.'

Everyone grabs their glasses and vacates the sitting room. Slower to leave, Adam finds himself alone. The carpet beside the sofa is brimming with empties, the table loaded with used shot glasses, takeaway boxes and essay notes. The TV continues to play beneath Green Day, 'Basket Case' adding frantic energy to the chef on the screen beating eggs.

Adam stares at it for several seconds, transfixed by the whisking, before walking over and switching it off. Bringing his drink to his lips, he necks half, the familiar taste helping to clear his mind. There isn't a problem in the world that can't be solved with a stiff drink. Vodka, the great healer. And if it doesn't solve the problem, he at least forgets about it. The Straight Edgers don't know what they're missing out on.

Chapter Twelve

They pre-drink until just before midnight. Roach is still playing music when they head out. This end of Portswood is just beginning to stir, and they beat the queue to Escape. Escape shines in the darkness, a low building lit by windows, streetlights, and the entrance, a narrow doorway spilling into the cool night. His eyes water as he approaches, the lights seeming to sway in the dark. His workload still weighs over him like the press of an unwelcome hug around his chest. Usually a nap dispels this, if not drinks, but this isn't the case tonight. Instinctively he brushes himself down.

Other shapes move around him. He knows they're just students, other third-years and second-years with a growing taste for Portswood, but the darkness renders them obscure until they emerge into the light of the club entrance and they are people again. Two bouncers stand waiting at the top of the stairs. They don't acknowledge Adam as he moves past them but they don't ask for ID either. Avoiding their eyes, he heads downstairs.

The dance floor is still mostly empty but a small crowd has gathered at the bar. He feels eyes on him, hears the murmur of chatter and shrieks of sudden laughter. He might be a small boy again, caught in the hallway during the after-school rush through which he pushed, lunchbox in hand, to meet his mother at the front gates. He wonders what the others are thinking, if they're checking him out him, judging him, if they're excited or impatient or slightly drunk from the summer and the end of the year and perhaps from the two-for-one drinks clutched in their

hands. Shrugging off the feeling, he passes his jacket to the coat attendant and joins them.

Even beside the dance floor, the drone of Escape's regulars rises over the music. Some are letting off steam after a week of lectures, forgetting everything for the sharp taste of cheap vodka. The rest are here for the hell of it. Adam knows this because he recognises their faces, the shape of a smile here, a surreptitious nod there. They are the ones who lurk here, night after night, round after round.

The three of them work their way to the front of the bar where the others are waiting. Cerys and Flick are already there, ordering drinks. 'Oh Jesus. The smell is back.' Ali crinkles her delicate nose and peers around. Adam draws her closer for a kiss. Her cheek is warm, fragrant.

'Fresh batch of rats, recently deceased,' proclaims Liam, winking over Ali's shoulder. 'Stacks of them, rotting away behind the walls.'

'Please.' She pulls a face, gold-coin earrings jingling. 'You'd think someone would clean the place, once in a while.'

'They do. They slosh buckets of water around, at least twice a week. Roach told me.' Someone waves Liam over, and he vanishes without a second glance into the crowd.

'Bye then.' Ali pours back her drink, eyes closed. 'Did you know I took one look at the floor, my first time here, and walked straight back up those stairs again? Three years ago you couldn't have dragged me somewhere like this. We've been, what, six-thousand times since then?'

Shrugging, Adam drinks eagerly. The crowd has spread to the dance floor now, a growing swarm lured by 'Edge of Seventeen', lit erratically by coloured lasers, the glint of earrings and glass bottles.

'Keep your eyes peeled for Toby.' Ali shivers bodily. 'He didn't say he was out tonight but if he is, I'll be having words.'

'What's he done this time?'

'I'm still livid with him for fighting with Roach. Why can't those two just get on?'

Adam struggles to recall anything of that night beyond vague flashes. It isn't easy telling one night from the next, and he's found himself increasingly

dependent on Roach, Ali, and Snapchat to piece together any details. He remembers dancing, the heat, spilling his drink down his tee, and one Very Drunken Caterpillar, swaying as he chugged down what was presumably the latest in a long line of vodka-cokes.

Ali double-taps her empty glass against the nearest shelf. Cerys and Flick are already prepared with two more. The glass perspires coolly against Ali's skin. 'I should never have gone there, Adam.'

'Gone where?'

'Toby. Honestly, I thought I was rid of him. Then he showed up the other night. Caught me when I was queuing for the loos, I didn't stand a chance. Roach's heard a lot of it from me in labs. I guess he thought he was doing me a favour.'

'Are you still into him? Toby, I mean.'

The glass in Ali's hand is cloudy, the rim smeared with pink. She brings it almost to her lips, where it hovers for a moment. 'He's been a big part of my life. But half the time all I want to do is bite his head off. Does that make any sense?'

He remembers sitting in a classroom in an English Language lesson. He was seventeen. They studied hard that first year, the early stages of their friendship founded on practical work and revision. They were doing group work, and David and he had finished early. Outside, snow had begun to fall. The room was hot, hotter for the central heating and the question hovering in the air. When he didn't immediately reply, David asked him again.

'Have you ever been in love, Adam?'

He thought about the likes of Samantha Jones and Martin Coleman and Thomas Smith. He felt his cheeks burning and he almost smiled. 'No.'

David laughed. 'Me neither.' Reaching across, he pressed the nib of his biro against Adam's hand. It felt cold and smooth and surprisingly sharp, where David pushed to force the ink. Slowly a plump, painful heart took shape.

Adam and Ali do two rounds of shots before edging onto the dance floor. He can barely move for the press of people jumping, heads shaking, hands thrown in the air. His blood races as a track he doesn't recognise fills his head. The song melts into the next, and the next, until he can't distinguish between the streams of pop, the auto-tune lyrics, and another sound, near the walls; a scratching, like

fingernails or small claws on vinyl. They drink and dance through laser-pens and Ali's smile until the sounds merge, becoming white noise. It buzzes through the crowd.

Shadows and heat float around Adam's eyes and in his head, the dance floor lighting up with flashes. The storm of light tears into the darkness, reducing the room to grinning skulls, waving hands, wrists like slender bone, and other shapes, glimpsed in the spaces between people and beneath them: crouched figures staring back at him with wide mouths, long limbs and eyes like glitter balls.

Thin hands stretch towards him and he stumbles from the dance floor, struggling through the press of bodies, Ali close behind him.

Rain spits through the dark. He runs from Escape, the streets emptying the further away he gets. The few people he does meet stagger down the road in the opposite direction. Taxis speed past him, churning rainwater. When he reaches the crossing for his street, he teeters on the kerb.

He realises he's soaked. Goose pimples creep along his arms, his nipples pressing hard against his tee. He glances down and realises his top has gone see-through.

'Adam!'

Ali shrieks, her voice echoing down the street. It's an alien sound, untamed. Her eyes are creased, hands wrapped around her bag, legs bowed as she staggers onto a low wall. Adam imitates her. He doesn't shout anything in particular. His voice carries across Portswood, and he imagines every stress, every strain that he's been harbouring about his friends and his dissertation and his final year, escapes with it.

He runs across the road. Headlights flash, horns blare and for a few infinite seconds Adam feels like he's ten again. His heart races as more headlights shine into his eyes, then the pavement is beneath him and he's on the other side of the road. His stomach turns, the street blurring behind his eyes.

'Adam, are you all right?'

He comes back to himself slowly. Ali is standing over him. The streetlight bathes them in orange. When his head stops spinning, he looks around for whatever it was he'd seen in the club.

'I feel sick.'

'Me too.'

Ali's hand slips around his waist, hauling him up from the ground. His palms are peppered with bits of stone.

'I saw something, in Escape.'

'It wasn't Tan, was it?' Rain patters against Ali's face, running down her cheeks. Adam's hands sting. The rain feels colder and he begins to shiver. Ali leans in, and for a moment he wonders if he should kiss her. Every doubt, every rational thought is suspended in sticky amber. He could kiss her. It would be the simplest thing, to lean forwards. He catches her eyes and realises she's probably thinking the same thing. The moment stretches on until she starts laughing. He finds himself laughing with her. The sound is swallowed by the street.

Chapter Thirteen

It's almost twelve when Adam finally stirs. His body aches from a different kind of hangover. Dragging himself out of bed, he wanders across the hallway. Grace's door is open. She's still in her pyjamas but it's her hair that betrays her; from the looks of it she's not long out of bed. He loiters by the doorway while she busies herself folding clothes and placing them in drawers.

'I feel like death.'

'Self-inflicted.' She starts pairing socks. 'No sympathy, I'm afraid.'

'You're a breath of fresh air. Have you seen Ali this morning?'

'She left about an hour ago. The others are at Hartley. No idea about Roach. I've been cooped up in here. Revision, revision, revision. Exams this week, haven't got long left.'

'I don't know how you do it.' Abandoning his post at the door, Adam wanders over to her bed. It's still warm. The whole room is warm, smelling of sleep and female deodorant and something else, sweet and familiar, like honey on toast.

'Do what?' she asks.

'Revision.'

It's Grace's turn to shrug. 'I just get on with it.'

'Yeah, but don't you get distracted?'

'It's boring but it's got to be done if I want to come out of here with a decent degree. I'm right on the borderline at the moment.'

'Are you kidding? You'll be amazing. I'm... finding it difficult.' The words sting him like a confession. 'I can't concentrate.'

'Maybe you should talk to Cerys or Flick. They have loads more to do than me, what with all their oral exams and practical stuff...'

He's not so sure the girls are the ones to turn to. He doesn't doubt their workload but he can't remember seeing either of the pair nose-deep in anything other than a wine glass all week. They've been to the library a couple of times, but beyond that they're as bad as him.

'Speaking of which, how are you getting on with my textbook?'

The book is vaguely familiar. He's got no idea where he's left it. 'I've still got a bit left to read. Do you think I could get it back to you over the next few days?'

She nods. 'That's fine, whatever.'

He turns to leave, releasing his grip on the doorframe.

'Did you mean that, Adam?'

His heart skips. 'Did I mean what?'

'What you said a minute ago. That I'll be... amazing.' She looks pale as she sits down on the corner of the bed. 'I don't feel amazing. I feel tired and average and... like every day I'm struggling just to play catch-up. Does that make sense?'

Adam remembers sitting outside the Stag's, listening while Roach mumbles about his feelings. Then he's walking down an aisle in Hartley lined with students slumped over their workstations. He's watching first-years queuing for Escape for the first time, then he's staring across the dance floor at a sea of expressionless faces, their eyes blank, smiles glazed as they wriggle and squirm beneath the strobe lights—

'Adam?'

‘Of course. I don’t know the first thing about psychology but I know you’ve put the hours in and that’s got to pay off when it matters. The only real time I’ve clocked is at Escape. Or the Ship.’

‘Don’t forget the Stag’s.’

‘Easier said than done.’ He smiles weakly.

He lounges downstairs for an hour but when Roach doesn’t appear he returns to his room. His back’s stiff as he lowers himself into the chair at his desk, his palms burning. Reaching across, he fumbles for the old cassette player in a drawer. It was a week after he’d moved in when he discovered the tapes locked in the desk. He couldn’t find a key but the wood gave easily enough when Roach had forced it. Adam found other things in the drawer, besides the tapes and player: yellowing sheet music scratched with notes, a doll with faded red hair, a clutch of snail shells still coated with grit. When he’d finished inspecting these things, he let the drawer keep them. As much as he loves listening to music, he can’t read it. If he was in the doll’s place, he wouldn’t like to be brought out looking so sad. The shells are brittle, and he finds them repellent in the way decayed things tend to repulse. Mostly, the drawer tells a story and he respects that.

He doesn’t much care for the tracks on the cassettes; he can’t remember the last time he actually popped in the earbuds, but there’s something soothing about the mechanical whir of the reels as the tape’s innards wind through the machine. He doubts if he could work without the quiet whirring. Sitting in his boxers, tea-stained mug in hand, he stares down. His dissertation draft stares back up at him.

The words mean less to him than ever. If he doesn’t get to the end of his notes today, he’s not sure he ever will. His tutor was right, of course. Without an intimate knowledge of his base text, he could only get so far. Swallowing a mouthful of tea, he rubs the worst of the sleep from his eyes and opens the book where he’d left off.

The house is quiet and he makes good progress. The sound of the tape slides soothingly into his ears. Aside from Grace, he has the place to himself. Occasionally his room stirs, pipes groaning, the plug-in radiator hissing. Twice, movement in the street outside causes him to lose concentration. Mostly he keeps his head down. The work is nothing special, but it’s progress. ‘Bum to seat’, his mum would say, when he was revising for his A-levels.

He pauses around four to make himself a proper drink from the bottle of Smirnoff he keeps under the desk. He only puts a splash in with some coke but it does the job. The taste is sharper than usual, tingling across his tongue. It's nice to drink when there's no pressure to down everything in sight and empty his stomach across the pavement.

He tops up the drink and returns to work. The laptop hums, barely audible over the background noise in the street. Someone's shouting, a man and a woman. He listens for a few minutes before getting up to close the window. He feels like he's drowning. Grace is right; he'll have to work if he wants to pass the year, never mind leave with a decent grade. The others seem able to go out every night and still scrape through their degrees, but that isn't him. He needs to apply himself if he doesn't want to fail.

He spends the rest of the day at his desk. Gradually his word count grows while, outside, the sky deepens. Sometime in the evening the shouting starts up again. It's louder this time, but his head is filled with images of bedbound Gregor while, downstairs, Gregor's family go on as though nothing has changed, or if they've noticed it they haven't acknowledged it, preoccupied with the mundane details of their own lives. Adam is still absorbed in his work, still typing, when something dashes across the keyboard.

Its many legs prickle his skin. He gasps, twitching suddenly, his arm jerking back. He slams the palm of his hand against his keyboard, mashes a sentence, misses. The spider's already gone by the time he recognises it as such, scuttled over the edge of his desk. Everything is still, except for his rapid breaths.

Swallowing the lump that's caught in his throat, he walks from his desk to the bathroom. He washes his hands, then washes them again before walking slowly back to his room.

Beside his bed, the alarm clock reads nine-fifty. He sits in the chair, hunched over the laptop, preparing to type. His hands are still hovering over the keyboard when he notices another movement, behind the laptop this time, across the street. He leans in closer, unsure quite what he's seeing.

It almost looks like a man crawling across the rooftops. Its movements are long, its arms and legs longer, except it makes slow progress across the old slate. He thinks of spiders again, of something overgrown trying to move with caution or patience. It continues to flail as it advances across the roof, and it occurs to him

that he can see more than four limbs, testing, pulling its body around the chimney. It scales the brickwork quickly, hovering for just a moment over the top, and in that second he imagines it looks back at him. Then it squeezes itself smoothly into the chimney.

Adam jumps back from his desk, frantically brushing his hands down the front of his hoody. He can still feel the prickly legs as they raced across his flesh, see the horrid movement, over and over. The hairs on the backs of his arms prickle.

He grasps the bottle of vodka by its neck and bins it. His drink splashes the sink, swirling darkly down the drain as he washes the glass out, refilling it with water. He pops two Paracetamol from the packet by his bed, then sits at his desk. He stares at the document, lit up in the gloom, and begins to type again. The keys click beneath his fingers. As an afterthought, he makes sure the windows are locked, then closes the curtains.

Chapter Fourteen

He works for a solid day and a half before Roach's music makes a comeback. Unable to bear another afternoon of Green Day and unwilling to face Roach, Adam showers, dresses, and leaves the house. He doesn't know where he's going. One minute he's standing in his bedroom, pulling a jumper over his neck, the next he's walking away from the house. The road drags beneath his feet, the afternoon stretching around him, prolonging his journey as much as possible. His feet move of their own accord, one after the other, his boots scraping the pavement until he finds himself standing opposite the Common.

It can't have been more than a couple of weeks since he was last here, yet it feels like months. Crossing the road, he takes the nearest path leading through the trees to the open grass. There's a memorial bench, near the middle, just off one of the paths. He settles back into the damp wood, the park shivering around him, and wonders how he's going to finish a dissertation in a matter of days.

He only has himself to blame. Perhaps if he'd spent less time in Escape or gestating on their sofa the morning after, and more time reading in the library, he'd have more to show for himself. He realises that now, and he has been trying. He just can't bear the thought of missing out.

A dog potters towards him. Coming to a stop about a foot away, it sinks to its haunches. She stares at him, tongue lolling from her jaws. He can't spot an owner. Turning, he peers around, but sees only trees, green with spring, and a couple of children on bicycles. A boy and a girl, they ride round and round, seemingly without reason or direction. Their faces are red, their foreheads shining. The grass is flat where their tyres have left tracks.

The dog is very calm in his company, considering she may be a stray. Perhaps someone has lost her. A collar circles her neck and, below that, a tiny silver tag. With a deep breath he leans forward and reaches out for the piece of metal; a name, a number, some identification. Everything deserves that much. Everyone deserves to be remembered.

His fingers are inches from the collar when the dog springs back. She eyes him warily now, her ears pressed back against her head. Turning, she dashes from sight into the treeline.

He finds himself alone again. The vast expanse of the park surrounds him; glowing still, but cooling in the fading light. Leaves that are green become slowly grey. The shadows lengthen, growing across the grass. From somewhere behind him, one of the children screams; a shrill, playful sound. Even out here, away from it all, he imagines he can hear Green Day, the second verse of 'Basket Case' buzzing in his ears.

Sometimes I give myself the creeps

Sometimes my mind plays tricks on me

It all keeps adding up

I think I'm cracking up

Am I just paranoid?

Or am I just stoned?

He thinks of how he'd been both anxious and excited at the prospect of university. It had been such a big step, moving away from home, from his family, from everything he knew. His parents helped him choose his course. There'd been

a moment when he'd almost studied Art. They visited several campuses while he decided: Nottingham, Winchester, UEA, Bath Spa. He'd never visited Southampton before but the city ticked every box. He remembers touring the campus first, then the city, exploring what he now knows is Old Town, window-shopping in West Quay. By day the city buzzed with tourists and local markets of the sort he recognised from home. It was an easy decision, coming here.

He didn't miss David very much. He missed his parents a lot. He'd begun to change, but not that much to begin with. His parents used to visit every other weekend, during which time they would go for meals at whichever pub he'd most recently discovered.

'You're working hard?' his mother would say. 'Got your nose in those books?'

'I'm working hard, yes. I'm enjoying reading.'

'For nine grand a year, I should hope so too.'

They would speak about his lectures, his tutors, the other students on his course. Sometimes they didn't talk for a long time while they sat and ate. The silences weren't awkward. He could tell that his parents needed these visits as much as he did.

He quickly acclimatised to living away from home, and by the end of his first year he hadn't wanted to leave. His parents' visits became less frequent, although they were no less familiar, when they did meet. It occurred to him that perhaps the weekend visits had been for his benefit, more than theirs.

Throughout this time, he'd convinced himself that there was nothing back home for him, nothing there that he missed, but sitting here he knows that isn't true. He'd give anything to see his Mum now, to sit quietly with his Dad, or walk Jessie through the fields around their house. Life was easier, then. He didn't have to worry about exams or the future. He was looked after.

A faint breeze shushes through the trees, a crisp packet scrapes a few feet across the pavement, and the dog reappears before him. He hadn't heard her approach, but is curious to note she's returned with an offering. Clutched between her teeth is what looks like a long sliver of bone. She deposits the object at his feet and returns to her haunches.

Slowly he bends down and takes up the gift in his hands. It is indeed bone: thin and cracked, the broken shard of a larger piece of a similar beige to his trousers. Damp soil clings to its side. He smells mulch and decay and something rank, which can only be the dog's lingering breath.

He examines the shard further. Words slip through his mind; femur and humerus. It occurs to him that he may well be holding a human bone between his fingers. The urge to throw it as far as possible sweeps through him, then vanishes just as quickly. It couldn't be a fresh bone. She must have dug it up from somewhere.

Running the underside of his fingers down the length of the bone, he realises an uncovered grave isn't such a stretch of the imagination. The Common is old. He bets the city is filled with remains. Reaching out with a trembling hand, he opens his palm for the dog. He's at arm's length when her ears fall flat. For almost a minute she doesn't move. Then, hesitantly, she closes the distance between herself and the bench to retrieve her gift. There's a quiet clack as sharp teeth close around it. Then she lifts it from his outstretched hand and, with a last look, trots away through the trees.

The children are also leaving. Their bikes squeak as they creep along the pathway, the sound growing fainter and fainter the further away they ride. It's getting late. He should be heading home too. Dusk wells up in the park, flowing after him into the street. The skyline blurs, the evening cooling the city and the boy walking through it, wishing more than anything that he was home, or his parents were here.

The house is still, save the lucid flickering of Cerys' fairy lights in her bay window. Adam fumbles for the lock with his key to find a darkened hallway. If Roach is home, he's uncharacteristically quiet. Adam glances upstairs, but can see no light from Grace's room on the landing.

The house creaks beneath him as he walks down the hallway. As he approaches the sitting room, he detects a sickly sweet smell, like honey. Light shines weakly in the distance; not the kitchen light but the conservatory. At the other end of the sitting room, standing in the kitchen doorway, is the woman from Straight Edge.

His heart races as he takes her in. She looks thinner than he remembers. If she ever gave her name, he can't recall it. She doesn't move or speak and he

wonders if she can see him at all. It occurs to him that she shouldn't be here. Then she twitches, neck clicking as she turns to regard him, her face starting to split down the middle, and he's hurling his keys at her. She vanishes before they hit.

He stands quite still, alone in the relative darkness, while his breathing steadies. Billie Joe whispers in his ear. When he feels able, he makes his way to the kitchen. He finds crisps, and some ice cream in the freezer. Arms loaded, he makes his way back through the house. He's in the hallway when Cerys appears at her bedroom door.

'Got the munchies, babe?' As she speaks, she curls a strand of hair distractedly around one finger.

'Sorry, I didn't mean to disturb you.'

She smiles, continuing to toy with the tips of her hair. In her other hand she waves a hot water bottle.

'It's only eight. I'll be up for hours yet, the amount of notes I need to get through. Need a refill. How about you?'

'I'm not sure.'

'Dissertation woes? Try going into placement five times a week.'

'You try going into placement five times a week.'

'I'm getting better, actually.' She smiles, her brown eyes and cherub cheeks visible by the faint glow of her fairy lights. It might be the relative darkness, but she doesn't look quite like herself. Seeming to sense his scrutiny, she shifts from one foot to the other, playing that little bit faster with her hair. 'No tan.'

'No Tan?'

'The St. Tropez, it's all gone.' He leans closer, realising what she means. 'I've decided I'm going to be pale and interesting. Just for the exam period. It'll stop me leaving the house, so I'll have to stay in and revise. Fool-proof, see?'

'Smart. No revision dodging for you.'

While they talk, they walk back through to the kitchen. He starts on a packet of crisps while she fills the kettle. Behind the walls and in the ceilings, the house stirs with the stresses of internal plumbing, and Adam fancies he can hear

Shaniqua's wheel turning, the scrabble of movement in bedding. When he glances into the conservatory, there's nothing.

'I hope we haven't disturbed Grace.' Cerys blasts the tap until the kettle is full. 'She's got a deadline tomorrow.'

She's not the only one. Shapes that might be Gregor Samsa or something else flit through Adam's head. 'I've barely seen her since the start of the week.'

'Library, babe. Unless you're packing a dictionary down those skinny jeans, I don't think we're good enough any more. She's practically moved in.'

At the bottom of the stairs, he wishes Cerys goodnight and returns to his room.

That night, tucked up in bed, he dreams of red wine dripping from a bottle, and the woman from Straight Edge, her mouth stretched into a silent scream. Dusk blankets the city, spoiled only by dark matchstick figures, distant but crawling closer across the rooftops.

Chapter Fifteen

Lying in bed the next morning, unable to organise his thoughts, Adam realises he needs help. It's just after nine by the time he makes it up to campus and everyone who's made the effort to wake up this early is already in lectures. He barely sees the city, his feet treading automatic routes, but he notices certain things on the walk in: the bottle smashed across the pavement on the corner of Alma, the couple, arguing on their doorstep, the punnet of overripe apples outside one of the newsagents and the dark brown of the fruit.

He tries the chaplaincy first, on University Road. He doesn't know where or when Straight Edge meet. He doesn't even know if they can help, but he remembers the rough gist of what the girl had been saying when she cornered him that morning in Portswood.

Gravel crunches beneath his boots as he turns from the street and approaches the chaplaincy. He knows before he reaches the end of the drive that it's a lost cause. Fire has gutted the structure. Plywood boards up the windows, scaffolding and sheet wrap clinging to the building like an external skeleton. He spends several minutes admiring the charred walls, the melted metalwork and the

glass where it's formed hardened puddles on the ground, before walking the rest of the way to the campus.

The square outside the Student Union is empty and the Stag's is no busier except for one table of students at the back. Early morning dew clings to the windows. Wondering where the bar staff are, he approaches the noticeboard.

The same adverts for second-hand bikes, used cars and student club nights stare back at him. There are two MISSING posters this time. Neither of them is Tan. He wonders how frequently the board is updated and whether anyone else reads it. Rifling through the various society invites, he finds the sheet he's looking for.

Living and Studying on the Straight Edge

There's a time and a date for the next meeting as well as links to the group's Facebook and Snapchat profiles. He takes a picture of the flyer on his phone. If nothing else, he might be able to find someone from the group, someone he can talk to. Almost as an afterthought, he reaches across and plucks the leaflet from the wall.

'You interested in coming?'

Starting at the unexpected voice, Adam spins around, finding himself face-to-face with a student. 'I'm just looking for an ad.'

'Yeah, I can see that.' He glances down at the flyer in Adam's grasp. 'I'm a member. Chairman, actually. Trent.'

He looks around the same age as Adam and is roughly the same height but, even relaxed, Trent's arms fill his short sleeves, a slim-fit tee tight around his chest tight. Realising he's staring, Adam crosses his arms and looks down.

'Sorry,' Trent says, peering a little closer. 'Didn't mean to startle you or anything. And you are?'

'I'm Adam.'

'Nice to meet you, mate.'

Trent's handshake is brief but firm, his smile catching. He couldn't be further removed from the woman who'd cornered Adam at the start of the semester, and Adam feels himself beginning to relax for the first time this morning.

‘So, what actually goes on at these meetings? I kind of fell in with my housemates in my first year and skipped over the whole society thing.’

Trent perches on the side of a booth and leans forward. ‘Well technically we’re a support group, but try not to think about it like that. It’s nothing that formal. I’d say we’re a safe place where anyone feeling down or out or just fed up with it all can come to get away and chill.’

‘What kind of stuff do people come to you about?’

Trent laughs easily. ‘Anything, really. People worried about drinking or drugs, obviously, but other stuff too. Whatever’s getting you down. Exam stress and revision burnout are two biggies around this time of the year.’

He pictures Grace, hunched over a workstation in the library. ‘I’ve got a housemate who’s practically moved in Hartley at the moment. I reckon she sleeps under one of the desktops.’

‘Fair play to her. At least she’s got her priorities sorted, I guess. You wouldn’t catch me in Hartley Labyrinth any hour of the day; I can’t work in there. Each to their own, though!’

He hasn’t thought of it like that before, but this guy actually makes a point. Grace might not have spent much time with them recently, but at least she’s sticking to her guns and getting her head down. It’s more than can be said for most of them. The students at the back get up to leave just as another couple wanders inside. Adam waits for them to pass before continuing.

‘I’m not really sure what I’m doing here, or why I’m telling you this.’

‘Come to the meeting. I think you’d be surprised. You never know, it might help. That’s what it’s all about, really.’ Jumping from the booth, Trent cracks his knuckles. ‘Anyway, got to shoot. The weights bench beckons. Hit us up online and I’ll see you at the meeting!’

Adam orders breakfast from the elusive barman then finds a table outside. His joints ache and his head’s pounding so he huddles into his tee and plants his boots on the seat while he loosens the laces.

The food arrives quickly; sausages, crispy bacon, and beans, served with a fried egg and toast. He eats slowly, reluctant to unsettle his stomach any further. Sitting here while campus gradually busies around him, he realises how tightly

wound he feels, how tense underneath his hoody. Students drift past, on their way home from 9 a.m. lectures, or on their way to their next. Lots of them make a beeline for Hartley. Ali will be among them, and Cerys, Flick, Grace and Liam. He should be there too. Everyone is up to their necks in it at the moment, except for Roach, who doesn't seem to care.

If it's true that Roach isn't himself right now, it's also true that he's always been lazy. In the time that Adam's known him, exams have never been Roach's priority. An excuse to moan, maybe, another reason to hit the Ship or Escape and to unwind, but not a priority. He has cricket and drinking for that. Maybe Trent is right; maybe everyone's feeling this way right now.

Mopping up the dregs of his beans with a piece of toast, he swings his legs from under the bench and wanders in the direction of the library.

Time loses all meaning in the narrow stalls. He applies himself, searches the aisles thoroughly, eyes scanning the shelves for anything pertaining to *The Metamorphosis* or its commentary on wider society. His insides continue to turn as his search becomes broader and broader. When his next glance at his phone reveals that only half an hour has passed, he heads downstairs in search of a free computer. Maybe he will have more luck with WebCat.

Not for the first time in the last three years, he wishes he'd gone on the Library Induction course. He'd been far too hung-over at the time, the morning after his first proper night at Escape. Looking back, it was probably his first proper hangover; a sort of induction of its own. His second and third year were similar stories.

Collapsing into a swivel chair, he pulls himself up to a desktop. The computer whines, even the warm air from its overworked fan a blessing. He leans in until it he can feel it against his face and tries to recall a search term from his existing research. If Rule One of research is diligence, Rule Two is brevity. Be concise. Be succinct. Take what you need and strip back the rest. He's surprised to realise he's actually learned something this year. For a brief, glimmering moment, he almost feels independent.

'Fuck.' His voice comes out unexpectedly loud in the quiet confines of the room.

'Adam, as I live and breathe.'

Liam is sitting two seats across at a station behind him. He beams at Adam, sliding from between his headphones and pausing whatever it was he'd been working on before wheeling across. A glance at his screen reveals Timone, Pumba, and adolescent Simba, frozen mid-sing-along.

By means of an explanation, Liam shrugs. 'Hey, I'm de-stressing. Besides, it's better than Modern History and Politics.' Leaning back in his swivel chair, he stretches, allowing his arms to settle behind his head. He turns casually, rotating at the hips. 'You should watch, you'll feel better in no time.'

'I'm fine.'

'You're about as fine as the British Empire circa 1960.'

'I don't know what that means, but please don't explain it to me. What gave me away?'

'Swearing in the quiet zone. People are trying to work here, Adam.' Liam studies his face. 'What is it, exams? Dissertation? The dead rat in the garden? That one's been giving me a few sleepless nights, I tell you.'

'You don't know the half of it.' Adam drags himself closer to the desk, then pushes away, studying the wheels of the chair as it runs tracks in the carpet. His chest feels tight, his throat narrow, but he forces himself to speak. 'I've been seeing things.'

'Nice things? Or not-nice things?'

'Faces. People. Things I know aren't real. And I don't know if I'm going to finish my dissertation on time, or if it's even any good, and everyone seems to have next year figured out except for me.' He takes a deep breath and lets it out slowly. 'I don't want this year to end.'

The corridor outside busies slightly as a group of students wanders past. Bags rustle, voices rising then falling as they continue into the library to research, revise, redraft essays, or perhaps just escape their desks at home for a few hours. Except there's no escape. They'll go back to the same houses at the end of the day, the same faces, the same timetables. They will wake up tomorrow with the same problems, the same anxieties shining in their eyes. Not just here, but in Winchester and Nottingham and all the other universities he visited and all those he didn't; a generation subjected to the same pressures the country over, scratching at their walls, tapping at their keyboards, nurtured on a diet of pressure and stress and

refined sugar until the enthusiasm's been sucked from them and underneath they're changed.

'I also have ice cream at home?' says Liam.

Adam thinks back to the bowl-full he had last night and feels his face burning. 'That's completely new information, thank you.' He shakes his head. 'If only ice cream could fix everything. It isn't that simple...'

'It sort of is, though, really.' Liam studies him a second longer. 'Have you talked to anyone about this?'

He opens his mouth to reply, then closes it again. 'Not yet. I'm thinking of going to a meeting sometime this week. There's a group called Straight Edge where you can talk about stuff like this, get it off your chest.'

Liam's chair squeaks as he wheels closer. Reaching around, he squeezes Adam's shoulder. 'Let's both go. If it makes you feel better, it makes me feel better. You can reimburse me in alcopops.'

Adam spends the rest of the day with Liam in the library. They share earbuds and watch *The Lion King* from the beginning, then take separate desktops to work. Liam leaves around four but it's almost dark when Adam eventually returns to the house. He heads straight for the kitchen, his nose crinkling against the damp permeating the hallway. Rummaging around the fridge, he finds enough supplies for a sandwich, if he borrows Flick's bread, and more of Liam's ice cream in the freezer. He searches briefly for a beer before thinking the better of it.

He's at the bottom of the stairs when Ali emerges from Roach's room. He studies her, thrown more by the state of her than the fact she's here. Her hair is dishevelled, her clothes creased. If it was anyone else, he wouldn't think twice, but Ali never leaves the house without brushing her hair, and he knows she owns an iron because he saw it behind her bedroom door once. Dried make-up plasters the corners of her eyes.

'Had a rough day, have we?'

'Don't get me started...' She rubs sleep and mascara from her eyes. 'What time's it?'

'Just gone nine. Roach not in there with you?'

'Nine? No, he went out... almost an hour ago now.'

'He went out?'

'Yeah.' She yawns, squeaking. 'Toby upset me again so I came over, but Roach said he was just on his way out. He looked awful, actually. And there was me, going on about the usual. I hope he's all right.'

Adam sinks down onto the stairs. Placing his plate on his knees, he takes a deep breath. In front of him, the ice cream has already begun to melt, a brown puddle soaking quickly into the bread of his sandwich.

'Did he say anything about where he was going?'

Chapter Sixteen

Adam trudges through the mud. Across the pitch, the building rises out of the dark. It looks deserted, but he knows otherwise. This is where SURF, the pride and joy of the university's rugby teams, train, and this is where Ali said she'd last spoken with Toby.

He might've got it all wrong. Maybe Roach is down at the Ship with the cricket lot like he'd told Ali, or maybe he's gone up to the Stag's. Maybe he's even headed to the library, to catch up on some work. He has enough of it to do. Even as Adam thinks it, he knows he's clutching at straws. He also knows what Roach is capable of, especially where Toby is concerned. He sees Shaniqua again, pickled in her bedding. Throwing his hands out for balance, he treks faster across the uneven ground.

Despite the rain it's a warm night, and he's sticky by the time he reaches the changing rooms. He can make out a light through the windows, flashing intermittently into the night. He isn't sure if this is a good sign; the uneasiness in his stomach says otherwise.

The first entrance he finds is the one used by the players to get on and off the pitch. He walks through, almost slipping on the slick lino. The tiled walls offer little support. It's cooler indoors than out but no less humid. The ripe smell of sweat and damp is almost physical. He hasn't been in a changing room like this since school. From what he can remember, little has changed. He hadn't liked them then and he doesn't now.

The only sport he'd half-enjoyed had been cricket and that was only because he'd played it with David. He spent many years trying to fit in with his classmates, his teachers, his parents. It never occurred to him that it mattered what he wanted. School seemed so important to everyone. What would happen if he stopped attending? What if he didn't finish his Science homework for Mr Cain? He imagined earthquakes tearing at the foundations of the world, shaking the country like a disturbed hive. Government agents; tall, broad men dropping through his bedroom window or kicking the door down in the middle of the night, catching him half-naked, unaware in his bed. The thought was exciting to his fourteen-year old self. Many were the nights he pictured these men, firearms strapped to their large thighs, coarse hands grasping for him in the darkness. Sometimes they had the faces of boys from school. The popular ones, like Martin Coleman and Thomas Smith. Other times they were masked, as he thought government agents should be. Both fantasies nurtured a heat in him that dissolved everything else. Anxieties faded into the darkness of his bedroom, stripped away by the imagined intruders even as they tore the sheets from his body.

A sound reaches his ears. It's wet and rhythmic; the kind of noise he's used to hearing when Roach chugs a bottle during pre-drinks. His mouth dry, he follows the sound through the changing rooms until he rounds a set of lockers and stops.

Toby is sprawled across the floor. His rugby shorts still cling to him, his boots twitching, but he's naked from the waist up. His head's thrown back, his throat exposed, but it's the bruise on his side that draws Adam's eyes and holds them. The area is black, in places purple, stark against his pale skin. Blood runs from the corner of his mouth to the locker room floor. Crouching over the body, hand raised, is Roach.

Adam's unable to move as Roach strikes Toby. The light continues to flicker, revealing the scene in broken flashes. The thump of flesh on flesh bounces from the tiled walls. Adam's stomach rebelling against the sight in front of him, he retches. When he looks back, Roach is staring at him.

His face is still pale but flushed with activity. He's breathing heavily, his chest heaving, sweat blossoming across his tee. His eyes stare, startled and unknowing. In the moment he's barely recognisable.

Adam shivers. He wants to run, to shout for someone to help, but his legs won't move. 'Stop...'

'I warned him.' Roach coughs or chokes, spittle flying from his mouth. He swallows visibly, wiping his mouth on the backs of his sleeves. 'I warned him this would happen. He needed teaching a lesson.'

Adam doesn't know what to do. He can't move, much less talk. He continues to stare at his housemate, at his right hand streaked with blood.

'I couldn't help it.' Roach lurches unsteadily to his feet, his arms outstretched, and Adam detects a familiar smell.

'Are... Have you been drinking?'

Roach whimpers. It's an unsettling sound, coming from him. The only time he's ever heard Roach whimper before was last summer when Roach's then-girlfriend left him, and he'd been off his face at the time. Now it's Toby who's smashed. Adam stares at him, spread-eagled beneath Roach, watching closely for the rise and fall of his chest. He can't remember ever feeling more relieved when he sees it.

'Roach -'

'I'm not pissed -'

'Yes you are! Do you even know what you've done?'

Roach looks down at the man lying beneath him. 'Ali was upset. He's been -'

'Yes, I know. That's no excuse for this!'

Roach lurches closer, and before Adam realises it he's taken a step back.

'I didn't mean for... this.' Roach paws at his hair, moans. 'Help me.' He stands there, swaying for a moment, trying to look Adam in the eye. Then he turns and runs, leaving Adam alone with the flickering light and Ali's unconscious boyfriend for company.

Indecision grips Adam. He doesn't want to drop Roach in it but he needs to make sure Toby's going to be okay. He steps closer until he's standing where Roach stood minutes before. He knows the figure beneath him is Toby but the light makes him appear like he's flickering in an out of being. This is how Roach must have seen him as he did what he did. Adam wonders if that made it easier, not having to see his fist as it connected, not having to accept responsibility as the body beneath got progressively more bruised. Dragging Toby into a sitting

position against the lockers, he moves just out of sight and waits. It's not long before Toby stirs, his groans filling the locker room. Adam's gone before he opens his eyes.

The walk home slips him by. He remembers feeling hot and wet, looking but not seeing as he retraces his steps through the city. When the front of the house towers over him, he wanders down the path, weeds dragging at his boots, and lets himself in.

He heads straight to his room. If Ali's still here he doesn't stop to talk to her. He doesn't know what he'd say anyway. Shutting his bedroom door behind him, he walks over to his desk and sits down, as if he's about to resume working. His eyes settle on the suit, hanging patiently on the front of his wardrobe. He wonders if what he's done is wrong, if he should've stayed with Toby or chased after Roach or gone straight to the police. Between Roach, Toby, Tan, the year's end, and his dissertation, he feels like he's falling apart.

For a long time he lies very still in bed, unable to sleep, while around him the room trembles like a cobweb shivering with prey. He listens to his breaths, and he thinks about all the bad things in the world and the people who make them happen. At some point in the night he rises and moves to the window. In the shadow of the streetlamps he sees Toby set upon by unknown assailants. The darkness moves, silhouettes shifting as they converge on him, dissimilating him with single-minded purpose until Adam's vision blurs and the street is empty again. Padding quietly from the window, he slips down the hallway into bed beside Liam.

Chapter Seventeen

He comes to slowly, gradually aware of his arms and the tangle of bedcovers around his legs. Liam is gone. Fumbling for his phone, he checks the time: almost eleven. Unwilling to face anything just yet, he stays curled up for another fifteen minutes before dragging himself back to his own room.

He spends what's left of the morning working. The task is mindless but he writes for as long as possible before the inviting scent of herbs and tomatoes tickle his nose. He follows it downstairs to be greeted by an unprecedented sight in the kitchen. Roach is standing in front of the hob, an apron tied around his neck. In one hand he clutches a wooden spoon. In the other he fingers handfuls of mince,

which he's tossing into a saucepan. As usual, Green Day is blaring out from his laptop. There are two open beers beside it.

Adam hovers by the doorframe. 'What's all this?'

Roach stirs casually at the hob. 'Bolognaise. Tastes good, too, if I do say so myself. Just the way my old man makes it.' He raises the spoon to his lips and nibbles. Some of the sauce streaks his apron.

Crossing the kitchen, Adam reaches for one of the open beers. The drink feels cool in his grasp and even cooler when it runs down his throat. 'Not like you to cook your food.'

'Well you've never complained about my cooking before.'

Adam hoists himself up onto the work surface and studies Roach's playlist. The prospect of conversation makes him feel sick. The screen offers a respite, an excuse for his attention.

Roach doesn't seem to have noticed. 'I tell you what, I've been bored stiff.'

'I thought you had an exam in a few days?'

'Tomorrow, same as the girls.'

Billie Joe and the bubbling of bolognaise fill the silence. 'Feeling confident?'

'Yeah, I'm backing myself. Smashed revision today, so I'll just go in there and nail it.' Roach grins, drumming the wooden spoon against the saucepan in time to the music like a child with a new toy. Steam billows out from the saucepan, shrouding his face in cloud and bringing on one of his sweats. 'You had a good morning, while I've been slaving away back here?'

Adam opens his mouth then closes it again. The bolognaise simmers furiously on the hob. His heart seems to skip several beats. 'Have you forgotten about last night?'

Roach continues to beat the spoon against the side of the saucepan, only now there's nothing rhythmic about it. More sauce splatters the cracked tiles behind the hob.

'I asked you a question.'

'I've said everything there is to say. He had it coming. I wish I'd had a go sooner.'

'You did have a go, remember? In Escape, weeks ago. You upset Ali then and you'll upset her again now.' Adam forces his mind back to the night, already a distant blur.

Turning back to the hob, Roach shakes his head. 'I didn't mean to go that far. I didn't. But I couldn't stop myself.'

'And what happens when the next person pisses you off? Flick, Liam, me? Were you even in this morning, or was that a lie too? I didn't hear you -'

Roach spins around, his cheeks as flush as the sauce on the spoon. 'This morning I revised. Ask Manzils if you don't believe me, I texted him for some answers.'

'Oh right, I'm sure he'll back you up -'

'And before that I walked into town and I took some cash out and I waited outside that shop of yours for it to open.' Striding across the room, he snatches something out of a carrier bag and hurls it in Adam's direction. A tiny box hits the cupboards beside him and clatters to the lino.

Adam stares from the box to his housemate. Roach clutches the work surface, his knuckles white, his jaw set against his teeth. 'Forget it. I'm going to revise. Finish the food yourself, I don't care.' He marches from the kitchen, his bedroom door slamming after him.

Muting the laptop, Adam slides from the work surface and retrieves the box from the floor. It's smooth and perfectly black. Prising it open, he finds himself staring down at a pair of moth-shaped cufflinks. Made of silver and purpose-worn, they're two small treasures in a world of instant noodles, hollow nights and empty promises.

Chapter Eighteen

Nobody is themselves during exams week. Cerys and Flick confine themselves to their rooms. If Grace comes home from the library in the evenings, it's well past Adam's bedtime. His modules aren't exam-based and he scraped together any coursework required months ago, meaning he just has his dissertation left. Liam

makes the short trip across the water to Hythe to stay with his parents for a few days. When he pops back for Adam's Straight Edge meeting, he looks almost like a new man: the transformative effects of home comforts and a few hot meals, evidenced by his bag of clean clothes and a freshly stocked kitchen cupboard.

Adam's relieved when Liam offers to drive to the campus. The traffic's good and they only stall at one set of lights. Highfield is uncharacteristically quiet; Adam expects Hartley is the complete opposite. As they park up, he spots a couple of students leaving the Stag's or heading towards halls. To look at them, it might be any other week, but he suspects that underneath they're as tightly wound as everyone else right now.

Liam is several minutes reversing into the bay. Adam occupies himself by rummaging for some shades in the glove compartment. He needn't have bothered; if Room 237 ever had windows, there's no evidence of them when Liam and he step inside. Four strip bulbs span the length of the ceiling, flooding the room with light. Already, half a dozen people fill the seats. Beside him, Liam sinks back into his chair, fluorescent Hi-Tops tapping a restless beat. Adam shuffles a little closer.

'Thanks for doing this. You didn't have to come along.'

'No problem.' Folding his arms across his chest, Liam peers out from under his hood. 'If it'll help you, I'm all up for that. Besides, I could use a sanity check myself. Yesterday I poured OJ onto my morning flakes. The day before that, I used a can of hairspray as deodorant. Mum thinks I'm cracking up. Let's see what this lot have to offer.'

They wait patiently for the meeting to get underway. The desk at the front is bare, save for the dark ring of a coffee stain. He feels like he's at the hospital or waiting for an exam to begin. Eventually Trent strides in, closing the door behind him. His rucksack straps cut into the crease between his shoulders and arms, visible in his vest top. Pulling up the waist of his tracksuit bottoms, he perches on the table.

Everyone inches nearer until a vague semi-circle takes shape. Adam and Liam introduce themselves and the rest of the group do likewise. Adam hears and forgets a dozen names in as many minutes.

'Right, let's get cracking.' Trent lifts his backpack from the chair and rummages around inside. A wad of hand-outs emerge from its depths, making their way around the circle. 'For the newcomers in the room, a big part of what we

do here is providing support and advice for anyone on the student body who feels like they need it. We're meeting today for a health check. Exams are in full swing, deadlines are looming and many of you might be worried about where to go and what to do when you finish this year. All good so far?'

The printouts reach Adam. He takes one from Liam and passes the rest along. The text is small, the page double-sided. It still feels warm from the printer.

The room fills with voices as the discussion gets underway. Several of the girls are worried about their dissertations. Another third-year is unsure what to do after the summer. No one's been sleeping well. Trent holds the floor, helping to facilitate the discussion. As Adam listens, he finds himself warming to the group, which could not be further from the zealous pitch he'd heard at the start of the semester. It's only when one of the girls near the back speaks up that he recognises her as the one who delivered that speech. He should've known she'd be here. At least she didn't seem to recognise him.

'None of my housemates had a clue what they were going to do next year. I think you can get so swept up in the university bubble that you almost forget it's a means to an end.'

'Go on, Becky...'

Folding her hands in her lap, Becky looks around the group while speaking. 'I think if you're going to be successful here, you need to know why you're doing your degree in the first place and what you want to get out of it. That gives you an instant direction.' Her eyes meet Adam's, and he looks down automatically.

'Great stuff. Becky, as usual.' Trent springs from his chair and paces around the semi-circle. He walks past and Adam tastes him like a mouthful of aftershave. 'And what about the people who aren't sure why they're doing their degrees? Not everyone gives this stuff proper thought. Other times, they forget or just get distracted from the real reason they chose to study here. It's easily done.'

Becky talks about some of the options she's looked into, from postgraduate studies to graduate schemes and straight-up jumping into a job. She speaks quickly and with the confidence of a third-year who's actually spent the semester revising for her final exams.

While the discussion deepens, Adam asks himself why he's studying here. Against the blank, glossy canvas of the whiteboard he tries to recall the drive, the

reason he chose to come to Southampton and read English. He remembers chats with his parents, helping him to decide, weighing up the pros and cons of this course versus Art. Half a dozen campuses paint themselves across the wall, different institutions across the country, each with their own identities. He sees himself, sitting on a riverbank not far from the farmhouse, heels buried in the mud while he flips the pages of his favourite book. Except he isn't reading, not really. He watches from above the pages while, across the river, in the opposite fields, the other boys from school kick a football, chase one another, sit messaging girls on their phones. He wonders if he came here to read English or if all he really wanted was to join in. The uncertainty brings to question everything he's said and done since waving his parents off on that first morning. His chest feels tight, his head dizzy. He sits quietly until he catches his breath.

'Do you have any practical advice?' It's the first time Liam's spoken. Adam turns to him, noticing everyone else doing likewise. 'Something actionable, for someone who doesn't know what they want?'

Trent cuts his lap short, returning to the desk at the front. It might be Adam's imagination, but he fancies Trent walks with less of a swagger as he digests Liam's question. 'You probably want to speak to one of the university's guidance counsellors or employment officers. They help students with this stuff every day. They'll also have a load of resources like job sites, suitable grad schemes, maybe apps they'd recommend downloading for emotional support and wellbeing.' He frowns, seeming to chew on his thoughts. 'Hit them up and see what they have to say.'

The rest of the afternoon passes them by in a blur of confessionals that all sound very much the same. When it's over, Adam and Liam thank Trent before slipping away. They emerge from the windowless room to find evening settling over the campus. They find a small lawn across from the library. Sunlight picks out individual windows, shining the length of Hartley. Adam lies back in the grass; at eye-level it's easy to see shadows gathering between the blades.

'Well that's that.'

Liam looks up. 'You heard what they said. We've plenty of options to choose from. Spoilt for choice, in fact.'

'And I'm no closer to knowing what I want to do with myself next, or how to choose. I'm prepared for everything except for where to go from here.'

They sit in silence for a moment, Adam lost in his thoughts. The campus is peaceful, the only real sound that of the seagulls crying overhead. Adam finds himself really appreciating the quiet. The rest of his year group comes here to escape revision. Somehow he's found himself attending clean living support meetings. God forbid he should find himself in the position where he's able to work on his dissertation. He's so close now.

Wriggling in the grass, he inhales deeply. The smells of the campus fill his nose: the summer trees, the freshly mown grass, the last warmth of the day mingling with the breeze off the sea. They should fill him with an underlying sense of excitement, anticipation for the coming weeks spent lying in the sun on the Common and ice creams in town and hung-over mornings in their garden with tall glasses of cider and the latest chart hits. Perhaps, if summer wasn't synonymous with graduation this year, they would have done. As it is, he feels sick to his stomach.

'I still say you give it a go. Talk to your tutor, apply to some grad schemes. You've just sat through an hour of self-help for it.'

'That was only an hour?'

'It hurt, right? Still, think about what they said in there. English is such a versatile degree; you're bound to find something. And if it doesn't work, then maybe we go to a meeting with an actual employment officer next time, rather than Straight Edge's weekly knees-up. I think we got everything we could from them, if I'm honest.'

Liam rips up a fistful of lawn and tosses it to the air. The blades falling around Adam's head like shards of a broken bottle, tickling his eyes and nose. He doesn't flinch.

Chapter Nineteen

Liam drops Adam off at the house before heading home to finish his dissertation. Treading nettles and tall grass filled with rusting cans, Adam strays from the path. Cerys' curtains are drawn, but he can still make out the fairy lights, flickering behind the layers of dust. His reflection stares back at him; a little thinner than he remembers it but just as pale and tired.

The hallway opens up before him. It's cleaner than usual; not because any effort's been made to tidy it but as a natural product of everyone being preoccupied this week. Trainers, shoes, umbrellas and satchels have already begun to pile up again beside the banister.

He hears them before he sees them, their voices carrying through the house. He lingers in the hallway for a moment, leaning back against the wall, listening while he steadies his breath. Flick's voice is the loudest.

'Keep those drinks away from me. The smell is making my insides cry. And don't even think about trying to persuade me to come out tonight.'

'Don't be a muggle.' Roach shouts her down. 'Ali and Adam are both out and it's been ages—'

'For you, maybe—'

'I've finished my exams, I want to get on it!'

Roach's sprawled out on one of the sofas. Flick also has a sofa to herself, tucked into her duvet like a small child. The room is already cluttered with bowls, crisp packets and empty beer bottles. He can smell something frying in the next room. Flick spots him first.

'Adam!'

It feels like weeks since they've been in the same room at the same time. He catches them up quickly on his day, leaving out mention of the support group. Cerys and Grace pop their heads around from the kitchen and everyone gives him a hug except for Flick, cocooned on the sofa. He brings the cuddle to her before sinking into the spare armchair.

Roach picks up the conversation. 'You can't still feel that rough?'

'In my esteemed medical opinion, I do.' Burying herself further into the sofa, Flick clutches at the covers. 'Anyway, just because you've finished your exams doesn't mean the rest of us are free. I've got a presentation tomorrow and I have precisely zero idea what I'm supposed to be doing.'

'I'm staying in too,' says Adam. He barely recognises the words coming out of him.

Grace and Cerys return with food from the kitchen and everyone leans across to the table to plate up. Fajitas are on the menu, filling the house with the aromas of fried onions and salsa. It's unsurprising; when Cerys is cooking, fajitas are always on the menu. She can't make anything else.

'Who's eating?'

'Everyone except Roach.' Grace places the last plate—a pile of steaming microwaved wraps—beside the guacamole. 'He didn't want any.'

'Haven't you heard? Eating's cheating.'

They share a minute's silence while they tuck in. Cutlery clacks against plates as sauces are spooned and wraps assembled. The TV flickers onto adverts, voices droning in the background, and Adam is reminded of another droning sound, faint but growing louder, like the crackle of static. He's taking his first mouthful when the doorbell rings.

Closest to the door, he gets to his feet. His stride shortens as he moves down the hallway and recognises Ali's silhouette through the glass. He hasn't heard from Ali since the night at the rugby ground and he wasn't expecting to see her today either. It's not that he doesn't want to see her, but he's a terrible liar and he doesn't want to put his foot in it. He's barely flicked back the catch on the lock when the door swings open and she marches past him into the hallway.

'I am through with that boy.'

'Which boy?'

'Toby, obviously.' She's breathing heavily, her eyes hard, bracelets shaking. Makeup streams down her face. 'I could tear him into a million pieces.'

He puts his arms lightly around her. He expects to feel heat, to burn himself on the anger radiating from her skin. She shivers in his embrace, and there's nothing he can say where he can't imagine her unfurling in his arms and devouring him whole. He leads her through to the sitting room.

'Babe, what's up?' Cerys makes her a plate of food while Ali flings her bag down and collapses into an armchair. It tips unevenly beneath her.

'It's Toby, I hate him. I hate all the rugby team.'

Cerys passes the plate to Ali. She takes a generous bite, salsa speckling her lips like it's Toby between her teeth. Adam wants to tell her to calm down but he feels this will be the wrong thing to say.

'Calm down,' says Roach.

'Calm down?'

'What's actually happened?' asks Flick.

'He's been dodging me all week. We were supposed to be going out for lunch today to celebrate my exams finishing, so I tried to ring him but he didn't pick up. Then I messaged him and he sent this one-liner back about how he was too busy.'

'Maybe he was actually busy?' ventures Roach.

'I didn't know what to do, so I went around anyway. He wouldn't even open the door to me. He said one of the guys from the rugby team saw me getting with someone in Escape and I was selfish and he didn't want to see me any more.'

'Woah.' Flick recoils. 'Who did you get with in Escape?'

'I didn't get with anyone in Escape! I hate it when he does this. He messes me around and treats me like shit. One day he's interested, the next he doesn't want to know. Something's up, I know it, and he won't tell me what.'

Sliding from her perch on the arm of Flick's sofa, Grace tiptoes over to Ali. She doesn't say anything, or do anything more than hug her, but the heat dampens. They hold each other tightly, and Adam's not sure who needed the hug more. Despite everything Ali's said over the course of the year, it's obvious that she loves Toby. Adam isn't sure why.

'His address,' says Roach.

'Roach, no.' The words slip out before Adam realises he's spoken.

'I'm not giving you his address, chick.'

'Give me his address. He needs teaching a lesson.'

'I don't need you to fight my battles for me.'

'Then what are you doing here?'

Eyes fixed onto Roach, she springs from the armchair. She's trembling again, if she ever stopped. Adam can't remember ever seeing her so angry; not a minute ago at the door, not when Roach hit Toby in *Escape*, not when she failed her second year because her dad was ill and she had to re-sit. With her makeup running and her cardigan hanging from one shoulder she looks like she's about to burst out of her own skin. Instead she grabs her bag, turns and strides from the house.

'Well done, Roach.' Flick doesn't miss a beat. 'You couldn't have handled that one any better.'

'She needed to hear that.'

'What's that supposed to mean?'

'It means she needed to hear that.' Pouring the rest of his drink down his throat, Roach jumps to his feet and disappears into his room.

Adam hangs out with the others for as long as he's able before retreating to his bedroom. Outside his bay windows, traffic backs up in the road, a line of brake lights glaring like red eyes. He watches while dusk paints the vehicles orange and deep purple. Cars shudder as they inch slowly forwards, exhaust fumes pouring into the evening. If he looks carefully, he can see figures in the drivers' seats. Faceless shapes press against the car windows, their mouths long, eyes wide, limbs thin and hard from living.

The shadows lengthen as the street begins to grow dark. He stiffens where he stands, knowing without turning that soon the shadows will reach him and then they will not be shadows at all but other things that he's tried not to remember.

The sun is a sliver over the rooftops. Then it's gone. Without taking a step, he reaches across and switches on the lamp. A *click* fills the room. Shadows flee across the walls.

There's no reflection in the bay windows but he can feel Tan standing over him. He sees only himself and the inside of the bedroom in the glass, and faint flashes of Cerys' fairy lights, reflected in the garden outside. Honeyed breath blows down his neck, and before he knows what he's doing he's picked up a half-drunk bottle of white and poured a glass into the used mug on the table.

The wine is cheap but it does the job. Gradually his breathing steadies. By the time he's drained the mug, he's sitting at his desk, browsing Facebook. He can't remember sitting down or logging in, but here he is, scrolling his timeline.

The others check in almost every day but it's been weeks since he last logged in. The usual array of Roach's mugshots and Cerys' selfies fill his screen. His favourites are the group shots, usually taken before they head out. A photo of Flick and Shaniqua brings a smile to his face, as does one from this time last year, when Cerys came back from a spray tan. Ali's status catches his eye, posted earlier today alongside a photo of her and Roach outside the university labs:

'We came to pass Chemistry and kick ass. And we're all done with the Chemistry.'

He clicks through to her photos, and before he realises it he's looking at pictures from several months ago: Ali perched on Santa's lap in some newsagent's, Ali waving sparklers back in November, a candid photograph of her doing her make-up at his place before a night out. He's still scrolling when a familiar face stares back at him from the screen. Clicking onto the photo, he leans in, peering through the best part of a bottle of wine for a clearer view. It's definitely him: Caterpillar. Ali is beside him, clinging to his waist like she's known him for years. He brings the cursor over his face and a name flags up: Tan Ming.

He reaches automatically for his phone. When Ali doesn't answer, he realises she's almost certainly in no fit state to talk. For the briefest moment, he considers calling the police, but he doesn't know what he'd tell them and he doesn't have the time to give a statement or visit the station and he doesn't even know what he'd say, not really. He saw Tan that night in Escape and he'd seemed fine. He had seemed fine, hadn't he? Was that before he'd been reported missing, or had something happened to him since then? Suddenly he wishes he hadn't drunk the wine or that he'd drunk more, or that he wasn't sitting alone at his desk. Almost without realising, he clicks away from Facebook and back into Word.

This isn't the hurried typing of before but careful, considered sentences. His further reading has left a lot to be desired, but something inside him clicks. He feels the pressure Gregor felt to take a certain direction with his life. He recognises its impacts, from Gregor's confusion and pain to his inability to move on. Between Adam's dreams and his arguments with Roach, the text's subjective viewpoint resonates with him like never before. At the core of it, he relates to Gregor and the absurdity of his representation, over one hundred years since Kafka put pen to

paper. If Tan going missing has shown him anything, it's that society is just as capable of discarding human life today as it has ever been, and in so doing, turning the human condition into an unspeakable thing.

His hands are a flurry of movement now. Words spill across the screen as the room begins to spin. He writes more than he's written all month. The work isn't especially elegant or sophisticated but it's honest and it's his.

Chapter Twenty

Sometime over the next few hours Adam thrashes out the last sentence. It's a small moment and it slips by almost unnoticed. The pop of breaking glass shatters his train of thought; a bottle, dropped from careless fingers or perhaps tossed intentionally into the road. Leaning back from his desk, he breathes in deeply through his nose. Air inflates his lungs and the narrow curves of his ribs, forcing everything else out of him and away except for the pinkish blur behind his lowered eyelids. Sitting back in his chair, he rubs his eyes and stares at his laptop.

He's not sure exactly what he's written over the course of the night but he's finished. It's done. Eight thousand words. His phone says four a.m., corroborated by his blurred vision and the birds in the trees outside his window.

First, he sleeps. When he eventually awakes, around eleven, he heads to the kitchen. The house is empty but he's okay with this, sliding yesterday's crockery into the sink and scrounging for enough ingredients to make a sandwich and a drink. He perches on the edge of one of the sofas to eat. The TV has little to offer, but he's content to sit and watch a re-run of *Pokemon* while he tucks into his lunch. He's halfway through his sandwich when a photo slides from the wall.

It's the picture Flick printed of Roach, Liam and him, sitting on their sofa in second-year. He tries to imagine another photo, one year down the line, and another after that, and another. The images continue, spiralling away with time, all the while their subjects becoming more sallow, drawn-out. He thinks of the lectures Roach has missed, the friendships he's lost, the physical injuries. Not a year ago, Adam had stumbled home one night to find him bloodied and unconscious in the hallway. After the ambulance had arrived and Roach had been stabilised, it emerged he'd tripped coming down the stairs and knocked himself out on the wall. His parents had flipped. It was a week before Adam happened to find his missing tooth, under the skirting board.

Adding this plate to the sink and capping a beer with Roach's bottle opener, he heads back upstairs. First on the agenda is to clear away his books and notes. Journals and textbooks vanish into his drawers or the small mesh bin beside the door. The latter is already crammed with crumpled paper and amber bottles filled with dead flies.

It hits him as he's reaching up to place *The Metamorphosis* back on the shelf. The book that has taken up so much of his headspace is done with. The dissertation still needs binding, but he can do that in town tomorrow. This was the last piece of work he needed to submit, and he's as good as finished. Rooting around for his phone, he sends a text to his mum and dad, then heads outside.

He feels like he's dreaming as his feet lead him down the street but he's helpless to follow them. The house he eventually stops outside could be any of those lining the road. Light glints in a broken windowpane and on the children's toys in the garden; gaudy plastic tractors and ovens still speckled with rainfall. There's a potting shed that doesn't look as though it has seen use in twenty years and flowerbeds thriving with weeds. Adam walks up the garden path towards the crumbling white porch, his insides squirming as his finger finds the bell. A shrill sound fills the house. The seconds are long and empty. His stomach settling, he presses the bell again, then knocks.

The windows on either side are hidden by curtains of the same floral design as those in his bedroom. Dust clings to the glass. The rooms behind are black, unlit, and it's impossible to see or hear anything within. He knocks again, then crouches to the letterbox. Lifting the metal sheet, he peers inside.

For a long moment, he sees nothing except darkness. Then, as his eyes adjust, he makes something out: movement, near the back of the hallway.

'Tan?'

Adam's breath catches in his throat as the silhouette vanishes from view. If that was Tan, he has to ask him where he's been and what happened. He realises he's trembling, the letterbox doing likewise in his hand.

Straightening himself up, he stretches, flexes his arms, then throws his weight against the door. When it doesn't immediately give he goes again, hurling himself into the wood. Realising that it's not going to give, he hops the gate to the rear garden and tries the back door. On the third try, it splinters and he falls inside.

Dust swirls on the unsettled air. It fills his eyes, his nose, the back of his mouth. He tastes ash, and the sweet tang of something else, sticky, thick. Slowly his eyes adjust to the still dimness. A chest-of-drawers emerges, a washing machine, one small pair of men's trainers.

'Tan?'

For a second he thinks he sees him, in the adjoining kitchen: a silhouette crouched beside the dinner table. Then Adam steps towards him and the figure flees from sight behind the door.

If it's Tan, he's fast. He leads Adam on a chase throughout the house. Twice Adam almost catches him, in the sitting room and back in the kitchen, but each time he slips away. Clouds of dust fill the air, mingling with the rotten aroma of the refuse in the kitchen. Rubbish spills out over the lino. Cupboards leak. A dark liquid swims in the fruit bowl by the sink. In the sitting room, more dust rises from armchairs like clouds of spores. The rooms shift with silent whorls in Adam's wake.

'Tan,' he shouts as he returns to the hallway. Ankles like bone flash past the banisters. 'I want to help.' He follows the man upstairs.

Another smell catches in his throat as he ascends through the house. It's deeper, sicklier, cutting through the squalor from the kitchen, reminding him strangely of Escape. There's no fighting the growing sense of familiarity as he moves through the house; from the floor plan and the aroma to the damp in the curtains, it could be his house, six doors up.

The first floor is brighter, light pooling on the landing. Beside it, a lingering darkness spreads like moisture in the recesses of the walls. He follows the scuffmarks around the landing to the room at the far end. The door is already open. Inside, the curtains are drawn, and after the glimpse of sunlight it takes his eyes a moment to readjust.

It was obviously Tan's bedroom. Gradually the furnishings emerge from the half-light: a wardrobe, a desk, a television mounted on one wall, a double bed and, sprawled across it, propped up against the headrest, a figure, fully-dressed.

Unease sinks into something instinctual as he glimpses limp arms, tattered legs, a head, lolling where it rests on its shoulders. Almost immediately he turns away, looking instead at the figure's reflection in the mirror on the desk. When he

acclimatises to the vague silhouette, he reaches for a wet-wipe from the dressing table. It's long since stopped being wet, but it does the job when he lifts it to the glass. Dust smears from the mirror. Wipe by wipe, the figure becomes clearer. He swallows the lump that has settled in his throat. His hands are shaking as he forces himself to address the sight on the bed.

Something is wrong. Even through his tears, he can see that. Tan's legs are flat, the skin papery, as though their insides have been sucked out. His chest had once comfortably filled a T-shirt. Now it's grey, almost translucent, speckled like the skirting board with rot and darker stains. Most of the head is torn, peeled away like wrapping paper. Its face stops just below where the nose should be.

It was Tan once. Now it's just an outer shell. He takes a step closer, at once repulsed and drawn to this thing which is so much like a person and isn't, when the body shudders and pitches forward. Adam stumbles back from the bed with a shout, floundering across the floor as a second figure begins to climb from behind the husk. Its movements are slow, as though it's unwilling to reveal itself, but he sees arms or legs and gets the fleeting impression of something at once taller and thinner than the bed it was hiding behind. Before his eyes it seems to unfold, inflating with a low hiss to fill the corner of the room. He's still staring at it when it retracts its bristly limbs, gathers itself behind the bed, and withdraws out the open window.

Chapter Twenty-One

He doesn't go home immediately. He's aware of very little as his feet carry him down the street. The afternoon sun illuminates the rows of terraced houses that are Portswood's ribs and spine. It's quiet and he encounters few people. He takes a left, then a right, until he finds himself outside the local shop. A bell above the door rings his entrance. He navigates the aisles without thinking, hands moving between his basket and the shelves: canned tomatoes, a tube of puree, packets of instant noodles on offer.

Turning left at the wines, a new aisle stretches out before him, and for a second it seems like there's no end to the shelved products. The same products stare down at him, brand names bleating. The same tiles line the floor; the same air-con blows across his face. Still, the aisle seems to stretch onwards, a tunnel shrinking around him.

His basket clatters to the floor as he struggles for breath. He clutches the shelves for support, pulling a box of cereal down with him. Gradually he becomes aware of a lady with a pram standing over him.

‘Are you okay?’

‘Butterfly,’ he says.

She seems to linger, and he realises that he recognises her from his street. ‘Are you okay?’ she repeats.

‘I’ve...seen it before.’

‘Let me get someone.’

The words mean enough to draw him from his reverie. ‘I’m fine.’

‘Are you sure?’

‘Yes. Thank you.’

He waits until she moves away before retrieving his shopping from the floor and paying. Outside, the afternoon sun is still shining. As he moves past the window, he catches his reflection, a waxy, indistinct smear in the dark glass.

His haul is heavy and the bags are thin. The cheap plastic handles dig into his fingers, but he doesn’t mind. The walk home isn’t long, and on a good day, when he doesn’t meet anyone he knows, it takes him less than ten minutes. Today is a good day.

He arrives home to a house crawling with movement. Adam stands rooted in the hallway while Flick dashes into Cerys’ room and Cerys nips into the kitchen. Roach’s door is open; Adam can hear him moaning about what they had to pay to attend tonight. Liam is upstairs, racing up and down the landing from the way the ceiling is shaking. He sees nothing of Grace. Gradually he becomes aware of Ali standing in front of him, leaning close to his face, shaking him by the shoulders. It occurs to him that she looks worried. She guides him upstairs to his room and pours him a drink. They sit together for as long as it takes to finish half a bottle of wine before he starts to feel awake.

He dresses slowly, studying himself in the mirror as he pulls on his trousers and buttons his shirt. The suit fits perfectly. Adam tweaks his collar, catching a

breath of the shop's crushed-leather smell. It's everything he'd hoped for. He's never looked smarter.

'I know what's wrong, chick.'

'I think it's too tight. Could you try loosening it slightly?'

'Of course, stay still.' She makes her adjustments, loosening his belt and tucking the stray corners of his shirt into his waist. When this is done, she reaches around to attach his cummerbund. It's the first time he's ever worn one and the word feels as strange in his mouth as the fabric does around his waist.

'Talk to me, chic.'

'I'm fine.'

'Come on, I'm not stupid. I know you've been dreading Grad Ball.' Ali joins him at the window, producing a cigarette and lighting up. 'I've been dreading it too. End of an era. Oh God, Adam. What are we going to do?'

'I still remember how nervous I felt on that first day, watching my parents drive away, leaving me in this new place, with these new people.' He hears himself talking but he's not really aware of what he's saying. 'I'd barely put my bags down when Roach made an entrance. I had no idea what I'd let myself in for. We spoke. I mean he spoke, I listened. Then we moved into the kitchen. There was this guy, sitting there, fluorescent trainers planted firmly on the table, bright purple tee screaming for attention like it's all he's ever wanted.'

'Liam?'

Adam doesn't hear her. 'He looked as nervous as I felt, but it was never awkward. We couldn't have said more than hello when the fridge was opened and cans passed around.'

'And we're back to Roach.' She brings the cigarette to her lips and sucks. Smoke trails through the air. 'I know you're worried about him, chick. He hardly did any revision, the idiot.'

'You think he's going to fail?'

'He'd better not complain if he does. God, I will have no sympathy.'

They stand in silence for a little while, both leaning over the windowsill, watching the road and the people walking past. If Adam looks carefully, he can just

make out the spire, rising like a rusted nail at the end of the street. A few doors down, another house sits in silence, still except for one set of curtains in the breeze.

‘Exams are just... exams.’ Adam struggles to talk. ‘He can always retake. Some things are more important, some things you can’t just sit again.’

Ali exhales, casting him a quizzical look. ‘Heavens above. Getting deep, here. All I’m saying is, if his exams go badly, it’s not my responsibility and it’s not yours either, chick, so try not to let it get to you.’

For a moment, he considers telling her everything. He wonders how she’d react, knowing what he’s been feeling, what he thinks he’s seen. Would she have bothered revising, if she were in his place? Then the moment passes. He turns to face himself in the mirror, begins cleaning his face with a wet wipe. The feeling is mildly invigorating, as though he’s sloughed a skin, shrugged from his shoulders, or taken off a costume after a day trapped in its confines. He takes a deep breath, which shudders through him like his first.

‘Do you miss Tan?’

‘Getting deeper, Christ.’

‘Sorry.’

She waves his apology away, a plume of smoke trailing through the air. ‘You know, I used to want to be a doctor. My parents are consultants, my brother’s training. For the longest time it didn’t occur to me that I could do something else.’ She takes a long drag, the nicotine seeming to steady her. ‘It was Tan who persuaded me to apply for Chemistry. Without him, my whole time here would’ve been different. I might never have met Roach. I might never have met you. I might never have come to Southampton. I miss him so, so much. But I don’t feel as upset as I did. I didn’t actually see that much of him any more. I think I was as guilty about that as I was upset when he vanished.’

‘Guilty?’

‘Over not being there for him. For being a bad friend.’

Looking back to the mirror, Adam is confronted by his face again, pink and plain in the reflection. He likens it to a skull, as though the flesh isn’t there at all;

an illusion, painted on every morning and worn with a bright smile until the evening, when he's free to wash it all away and be just bone again.

'You're not a bad friend, Ali.'

She purses her lips, blowing a cloud of smoke into the air, then stubs her fag out on the windowsill. 'Right. It's Grad Ball. Moping is forbidden. Bottoms up!'

He turns to her. 'What do you think?'

Looking him over, Ali grins. 'Dashing. Almost. Here, let me help.'

Chapter Twenty-Two

The taxis arrive just before eight. Ali had the good sense to order them that morning and just as well; they leave the house to a domino-line of black cabs the length of the street. Adam, Roach and Liam take one taxi, the girls the other. Only Grace is absent. According to Roach, she left after her last exam, locking her room behind her. No one has heard from her since. The air-con hums as they're driven into town. The inside of the taxi fills with a garage tune; an old-school classic Adam can only half-remember from a couple of years back. Liam has no such problem, bouncing in his seat as he raps along to every word. Pulling at the seatbelt, where it digs uncomfortably into his collarbone, Adam watches Southampton crawl past, content to be anywhere other than at the desk in his room.

The streets slide past them; Portswood, Escape, Bevois Valley, then the outskirts of the city centre. The closer they travel to the centre, the cleaner the city becomes, until they pass London Road and glimpse the newly renovated cultural quarter, an expanse of glass and chrome.

Their two taxis pull up outside the Guildhall. It rises above the surrounding quarter, its white walls tinged orange by the first of the streetlights. Pillars stand at the top of the steps, which in turn ascend from the street to the entrance level of the building. Banners hang from the stone overhang, each sporting the university's logo, emblazoned with 'Graduation Ball 2017.' The fabric is blue, like Liam's eyes or the colour of his favourite alcopops.

Almost as impressive as the building are the hundreds of students amassed before it. The crowd seethes, a swarm of tuxedos, suits, ball gowns and dresses,

and in the half-light it's difficult to see where one person ends and the next begins. They can't all be third-years. He guesses there are friends, family, other people's Ceryses and Flicks. The medics have another two years before their own ball, another two years of studying and exams without Adam, Liam, Roach, or Ali.

Roach's voice rises easily over the general chatter. 'There'd better not be a queue. I'm desperate for a slash.'

They all meet outside the girls' taxi. Adam catches a flash of leg, the glitter of a sequined black dress, and distinctly Welsh laughter as the three of them join the boys on the pavement. They dodge in and out of other people's paths, the two groups meeting each other halfway. Cerys' squeals ring in his ears.

'Everyone looks so beautiful. So smart!'

Roach has found a cigarette; he blows clouds of smoke above their heads. 'Do they not wear tuxes in Cardiff?'

'No, we're far too busy roaming the hills and sleeping with livestock to wear pretty dresses.' She rolls her eyes. 'Flick, babe, let's get photos on the steps. Under the pillars.'

'Oh my God, yes. Do you have battery? Everyone, get everyone together.' The two of them hurry towards the Guildhall, leaving Adam, Roach, Liam and Ali on the pavement. Roach sticks his cigarette between his lips and takes a long, deep drag. 'This had better not take long. I need the loo and I need the bar and I need a chair.'

The six of them assemble for photographs on the main steps, taking turns to pass their phones around one of Ali's Chemistry friends. Flashes light up the gloom, and for a few seconds there's nothing except this, the culmination of three years. Small moments come back to Adam with each flash of the phone cameras; spilled drinks, drunk friends, failed exams and scraped passes, pub lunches, Roach prostrate over Toby, grey mornings in the city and long afternoons rolling in the grass with bottles and music and sun. He sees Tan, grinning up at him from the hole in the garden. Roach, on his knees, sucking beer from a bottle, then crying. A fly, flailing in a pint. The phones continue to flash. Adam's smile begin to hurt.

They trickle into the Guildhall. Rope barriers direct them into the main hall beneath chandeliers and more temporary banners. Laughter and shouts echo from

the tall ceilings. They make their way to the nearest bar. Roach is the first to be served.

‘Fifteen quid? For a bottle of wine?’

‘Fifteen, yes.’

‘Five and ten?’

‘Yes, five and ten.’ The barman stares. ‘Fifteen.’

Fumbling in his trouser pocket, he produces his wallet. ‘I’ll have two.’ Roach takes the bottles by the necks and hands one to Adam. ‘Don’t get me wrong, I’m all for dressing up smart every once in a while and doing things properly, but there isn’t anything here that Escape doesn’t do for a fiver tops.’ He chugs straight from the bottle. ‘It’s sweltering in here.’

‘Go back outside if you’re hot.’

‘It’s just started pissing it down.’

‘The smoking area’s covered.’

‘I’ll give it ten. Cerys and Flick are still hovering around with their phones anyway. Nobody needs that many photos and I’ve seen enough of myself for one night.’

Adam reluctantly samples the wine before following Roach to the end of the bar where it’s less crowded. They wait patiently while the girls and Liam are served. When everyone’s equipped, they move through to the main hall together. They find their table near the back, in a far corner. The girls busy themselves filling wine glasses, comparing cocktails and posing with Liam for more photos.

‘Prime real estate, this.’ Roach swigs from his bottle.

They pull up chairs, drinks in hand. From where he nurses his wine, Adam has an uninterrupted view of the hall. The other tables crawl with students sharing appetisers, supping from champagne flutes, helping themselves to ice buckets filled with Prosecco. Across the table he watches Ali, head dipped, fumbling in her bag for more cigarettes. The evening wasn’t compulsory, but it had taken them all of a moment to decide to come, when tickets were first released. It’s not their scene, but it hadn’t seemed right going anywhere else. How could they not go to their own graduation party? The thought had seemed farcical at the time.

‘Do you think Toby will show?’ Holding her cigarette between her lips, Ali makes the sign of the cross with her fingers. ‘Tonight should be about us. No drama, no interruptions.’

‘Well said.’ Cerys pours the dregs of a bottle into her wine glass. ‘It’s the short ones you need to watch out for.’

‘You mean the quiet ones?’

‘Whatever, babe. Toby’s an idiot.’

‘Do you remember this time last year when we went down to the Common and we spent the whole day there?’ Adam hears himself speaking almost before he realises the voice is coming from his mouth. He feels detached, out of body, like he’s listening to someone else recounting a story he has no part in. ‘It was boiling, but Roach and Liam were still kicking a ball around. The rest of us lay in the grass, tanning. Cerys kept going on about how happy she was. I think she cried.’

‘Babe, of course I remember.’ Cerys grins across at him from the other side of the table. ‘One of the great days.’

Roach looks up from his wine. ‘It was the ice cream that did it. You were crying with excitement over Mr Whippy. And you were pretending to revise for your re-sits, Ali.’

‘Ah, chick, you remember too.’

‘Yeah, ’course I do...’

It hadn’t occurred to Adam that any of them had harboured memories of that day at the Common, least of all Roach. He looks across at his housemate, hunched over his drink, eyes fixed firmly on the table. It’s the first time he’s studied Roach properly since that night in the locker room and he still feels like he doesn’t recognise him, like maybe he never knew him as well as he thought he did.

Roach props himself up on an elbow. ‘What’s the plan of action for tomorrow, then?’

Flick springs to attention. ‘I’ve been thinking. I reckon we should get some food together. Not too early obviously. Late lunch?’

‘Yes!’ Liam’s face lights up. ‘Ravenous just thinking about it.’

More lights flicker across the room, a cascade of colour and shadow. Music follows and the crowd grows livelier, squirming with anticipation. Ali disappears to dance, Liam to one of the many bars. When Adam next looks at his wine, it's empty. He opens another bottle, one of the complimentary reds from the table next to theirs. Slumping in his chair and taking a swig, he quickly loses track of time. The seat beside the girls is empty, and when he looks again, Tan's husk is smiling back at him from across the table. He's as naked and hollow as Adam remembers him being, the vision imprinted into the makeup of his brain. He couldn't begin to describe the reality of the sight, and yet he knows he'll never forget it. Still sitting opposite him, it begins to move; its papery head drifting to rest on the table as something nudges it forwards and begins climbing over it.

Blinking it away, Adam concentrates on his surroundings. He doesn't have to look far to spot the chair's designated occupant as she stalks back from the bar. Ali totters the last few steps, drops into the empty seat and thrusts a glass of white into Adam's face.

'The barman, at the bar. You need to see.'

'Oh really? Where?'

'At the bar.'

She half rises, before sinking back into her seat. 'Jesus Christ in Heaven, I'm too drunk to stand. Adam, someone said they saw Toby here. Have you seen Toby here?'

'No, sorry.'

A hand grasps him tightly around the neck. The grip is strong, the skin velvety, and Adam shivers under the unexpected touch until he realises it's only Liam. His housemate leans into his ear.

'You're pretty.'

Adam turns and looks up at him. 'You're pretty pissed.'

Liam lurches back. 'I don't feel so good. I need a seat.'

'Take mine.' Wiping his mouth on his sleeve, Roach pulls himself from his chair. His hands are trembling. 'Toilet break.'

Adam tries to sit up but his own chair wobbles beneath him. As he grips the armrest, he notices that one of his sleeves has caught on something and started to unravel. A little further up, the jacket is stained. He can't remember drinking any cocktails but there's another mark on his shirt and one near his collar, dark patches seeping through the fabric.

Voices stretch across the table, distorted by the music and the overpriced wine. The girls are sprawled behind a two-deep wall of wine glasses amassed along their side of the table. Cerys is talking in Flick's ear while Flick stares vacantly into middle space. He wonders where Grace is and how her exams went and whether or not she's okay. Mostly he wonders when it was that she first saw what he's just starting to see now, and how he couldn't see it sooner. He's still staring when he realises Ali is speaking to him.

'Did you see where Roach went? Toby's text me, he's here and he's flipped.'

'I'll find him. Stay here.'

Lurching to his feet, he heads in roughly the same direction Roach took. He's got no idea where the bathrooms are but the dance floor is packed and instinct keeps him to the outskirts, where the crowd is thinner and it's easier to move.

He doesn't know how long he spends wandering the corridors. Away from the immediacy of the main hall, the building is surprisingly empty. He walks past one couple, slumped in the corner by the stairs. Someone has dropped a phone; he picks it up and places it on the table as he passes. Music from the main hall reaches him through the soles of his shoes, a tangible pulse beneath the floor.

He finds the bathroom down a flight of stairs just off the foyer. He was expecting to have to queue but no one else is here. He descends towards the men's, fingers trailing a rope barrier. It trembles beneath his hand.

The bathroom is empty. Wrinkling his nose at the tang of disinfectant, he relieves himself at the urinal before moving to stand in front of the mirror. It's a large, ornate thing, spanning the length of the wall, and he studies his face in it while soap and warm water run between his fingers. He barely recognises himself. Pulling a paper towel free from the dispenser on the wall, he wipes his mouth first. He presses harder, then begins rubbing, until all traces of red wine are gone. The tissue comes away dark and streaky in his hand.

Heat sears his hands as he dips another paper towel under a tap. Standing there with the silky, sudsy water on his skin, he thinks about things he hasn't dared to think about before, giving voice to the doubts that have gradually been hatching in his head. He remembers Roach's silhouette bumping against the Ship's door and the impossible softness of Roach's hand when it brushed against his arm that night in his room. He remembers a lecture hall and his tutor's voice, then the glare of a dozen pale faces, staring back at him across a dance floor. He remembers the coolness of the garden in the evening and the patter of soil as he scattered it over one half of the face beneath.

He thinks of all these things again, his eyes fixed firmly on his reflection in the mirror. His hands move automatically through the water, his mind turning with realisation: so much anxiety, so much stress and for what: three years of drinking and an average degree no better or worse than anyone else's awarded this year.

The wine stains are gone but he doesn't stop wiping. He covers all his face from his forehead to his neck, and with every stroke he feels more familiar, less false to his own eyes. And what eyes! He reaches up to pluck his lashes. The lids come too, peeled clean above the sockets, revealing bright, majestic orbs underneath.

He wipes his face harder, with less care, and it seems to him that every movement sloughs his skin. His flesh smears like concealer, revealing new skin underneath. The tissues tire quickly, turning red and rancid in his hand. Their remains litter the sink, and in the mirror, his new face, chitinous, iridescent!

He doesn't turn but watches in the mirror as two men stumble into the bathroom behind him. They're talking but he doesn't really hear. He wonders if they can see him, if they recognise that he's changing. He leans in, fingertips tapping against the washbasin, while behind him one of the men staggers into a stall. Adam is still watching him in the mirror when he begins screaming.

A man is slumped across the toilet. From where he is standing, Adam can't see his face and before he knows it he's walking over. The two men run from the room while he approaches, almost slipping in their eagerness to get away, but Adam's eyes don't leave the stall door. Pushing it fully open, he looks down and finds Toby staring back up at him.

He rushes from the bathroom, through the corridors and the people and the long, expressionist faces. The foyer blurs around him as he retraces his steps to

the main hall. The lights burn overhead. He smells Sambuca and the metallic tang of Toby's blood. One by one, people become less than people, or something else: starved shapes stalking through the building. He sees a long-limbed bouncer near one of the bars and the shape of the crowd around him as it swells and rushes. He remembers faceless bodies with phones stuck to their ears, hissing students scuttling down the banisters, and three men as they chase a waiter and knock him to the ground. He feels himself shaking until he can barely contain the pressure inside him.

The main hall opens up before him. The only lights are the multi-coloured lasers as they scatter across the crowds. Almost immediately he can see that the tables have been abandoned; everyone is dancing or at the bar. The crowd is an undulating mass of many jointed arms, flailing beneath the stage. Caught in silhouette, it's impossible to tell where one person ends and the next begins. Turning, he runs from the Guildhall.

Restaurants and traffic lights glimmer in the distance. Darkness has fallen without him realising. It has stopped raining, but probably only recently. He can still smell it on the air, see it in puddles across the courtyard. They shatter beneath his shoes. He barely notices the passers-by. He barely notices the street. Everything that should matter is mad or meaningless. Biting his lips, he turns into the park.

It's quieter off the streets. The trees are thin and dark. He lurches unsteadily down the pathway. More puddles splash beneath his shoes, the sound rippling through his consciousness. His vision swims until the path seems to shine like oil.

He has no idea how long Roach has been waiting here but he's quite visible by the street lamp. Stick limbs. Bristles like wild hair. The sickly-sweet scent of honey. Upturned to the street-lamp, his face bathes in the orange glow, and Adam sees his tight lips, his dusty skin, his eyes like orbs of polished stone. He watches himself in them a thousand times over, growing larger as he approaches Roach through the park.

In thirty seconds he will be standing underneath the street lamp beside him. He imagines it's honey making his throat stick. This close, the rips in Roach's trousers are visible. Adam glances down and realises his own clothes are not much better. Briefly he remembers how much the suit meant to him. He wonders how something so trivial could have seemed so important, and if he'd ever cared about anything as much as he'd cared about the fabric on that hanger. He knows that he has, because he's found his way here.

Roach smiles as Adam swarms in his eyes. He smiles back. Slowly, Roach turns from the street lamp to face him. His arms are at once Roach's arms and they aren't, concealed inside the loose sleeves of his jacket. He shifts slightly and Adam thinks he glimpses something, under the coat, under the flesh, too much for him to take in all at once: the flailing limbs of a moulting spider, a glass as it slips and drops from a hand, the sound of the glass as it breaks across the floor, the crunch of mandibles and an eclipse of moths, swirling silently. Facing him, and in the faceted surfaces of Roach's eyes, he's annihilated a million times over.

He realises he's cowering on the floor. His heart rages against his aching ribs. The first he feels of Roach's touch is his hand against his own. He knows it's not a hand in the true sense, any more than those are fingers clasping his. They slide up his arm, dry and smooth like velveteen laces, until they come to rest beneath his chin. They hover there briefly, stroking his neck, their featheriness soft against his skin, before gently lifting him upwards. Then Roach takes his hand again, and together they dance around the street lamp, and the night whispers with wing-beats.

1.10 'Escape'

Drink deep, and with the mellow taste lingering in your mouth open your eyes and see the world for the first time. Regard the narrow alleys down which lovers gorge themselves on each other's flesh, the offices where machines sing country songs while men and women queue up to step on their whirring blades, the traffic blowing black fumes into the bright sky: our city where we live, love, scream of life and death even as we walk smiling into those mellifluous meat-grinders and know peace. All this revealed in a half-measure from an old bottle, shining darkly on the shelf.

1.11 'Sarah'

A black frost spreads across Lynnwood, icing the tarmac with a lustrous sheen. Streetlights make pools of orange in the ice. Standing in the front room of Granary Cottage, Michael Collins clutches a tumbler of brandy — an old, thick-cut glass, inherited from his father — and he stares out through the window, to the street beyond.

It began around four with the setting sun. First one dog, then a second, a third, until every animal in the village was howling and spitting with salivary terror. In the following hours, the feral chorus became the only sign of life about Lynnwood.

Michael listens as the last dog trails off into silence. His face scrunches, reflected in the dark glass of the window. He barely recognises himself: thinning hair, bruised eyes, and slack skin, as though any moment he might slough it from his bones to reveal a smiling, carefree man twenty years his junior. It doesn't happen.

'Is it over?' Sarah's voice drifts from the kitchen, soft but probing.

'Love...'

'The dogs, I mean. The howling. Is it over?'

If anything, his face grows tighter. He knocks back the last of his brandy, which burns its way down his throat, then coughs into the back of his hand. 'It's over.'

Tomorrow is a Thursday; market day in Lynnwood. This close to Christmas, the village will be heaving, people eager to inspect the market's offerings. And the markets are special. Nowhere else in Hampshire can you find a finer selection of local preserves, all freshly produced and sickeningly sweet, courtesy of the Allwoods. Mr Shepherd's metalwork is of particular interest to Sarah, who loves browsing the various Celtic brooches and bee-themed jewellery. Catherine Lacey sells the very best in mulled wines: warmed, spiced and ready to drink, or else bottled and taken home for cold winter nights. Michael has more than a few bottles himself, sitting patiently in a rack on the kitchen worktop.

Turning, he moves stiffly across the room and collapses onto his sofa. 'Stick the kettle on, would you? I'm parched.'

'Your brandy?'

'Done.'

By means of an answer, a single, mechanical click sounds from the kitchen. It's tiny and mundane, yet it fills the silent house with its presence. Michael's chest tightens as his eyes flicker helplessly to the curtains.

Yes, they will visit the market tomorrow. He wants to pick something out for Sarah, for Christmas. She's shown him a number of pieces on Mr Shepherd's stall already, and they need supplies for the family lunch anyway. The last market before Christmas is always the busiest.

A second click sounds, followed by the splash of water and the clink of a spoon against china. His left hand grips the armrest, begins to tremble, grows white.

'Tea,' mutters Sarah from behind him. She places the steaming mug onto the coffee table and hovers there uncertainly. 'Your tea, Michael. Although how you can even think of food or drink, on a night like this —'

'I'm thirsty -'

'I'm terrified.' Her lips part, pause, then clamp shut again. All the while, her eyes remain fixed on the curtains. Those pale blue eyes he loves so much, soft as her voice or a butterfly's wings. 'I'm terrified.'

He hears her voice; the words that spill too quickly, then too slowly, from her mouth. He takes a brisk sip of his drink before rising to his feet, towards her, behind her, his arms finding her waist. He marvels at how slim she's stayed, after all these years. She always was the better looking of the two of them.

His thumbs smooth her jumper, rubbing small, circular motions, rhythmic and soothing against the thin wool. The jumper feels warm, familiar. Gradually, his breathing deepens. Silence settles over them before she breaks it again.

'I can't do this much longer.'

'We've been through this, love —'

'I don't care about myself. Don't get me wrong, I've had a good run. *We've* had a good run. But Danny...' Her stomach tenses under his touch; maternal terror, inherent sin or perhaps acute indigestion. 'He's twelve, Michael. Twelve. It's no life, with this night hanging over him, those monsters, like a cloud of flies around a stinking bin —'

He asks her something then, which he's always wondered but has been unable to put into words. He thinks the question might choke him, but it comes easily enough now that he knows what he needs to ask.

'If you could go back to the day we met, would you do things differently?'

'I love you. Michael. I always have, and I love Danny and this cottage and the village. I really do —'

It's as though her words unchain some monstrous appetite. She hears it first; she must do, for she tenses beneath her jumper. Then he hears it too; a low rumbling, as of a starving stomach, or the thundering hooves of Gwynn ap Nudd and those of his Wild Hunt, from the stories of Michael's childhood.

They have already checked the doors but they do it again, making sure every door and window is secure. Michael draws the curtains while Sarah looks in on Danny. She creeps quietly into his room, light spilling from the hallway across his clothes-strewn carpet. He's just as she left him when she peeped in twenty minutes ago. She glances once more at the hallway, then turns her back to the light to study her sleeping son properly. She runs a gentle hand through his hair, compelled to touch him, to reassure herself that he's still here.

He turns, murmurs, sighing softly in his sleep. He's just a boy, so small, so thin beneath his covers. She imagines he will always be a boy, to her, no matter how he grows up, or what he becomes. A mother's love is unconditional. And, of course, she will do her best to raise him right in the meantime. If Lynnwood is good for anything, it's this. Most of the year, at least.

She can remember little of her own childhood, which seems so long ago now, but she knows it was difficult. Those early years always are, even without the added pressure that the village imposes on them all; that unspoken evil, which sweeps through their homes for one night each year. How do they not remember, the morning after? Year on year, why do they forget?

The room is as still and as silent as the rest of the house. It could be a photograph; a greyscale snapshot in time, except that photographs last. How long will this last, she wonders? How long before this memory fades? Will she too forget in the morning? She licks her lips, continuing to stroke her son's hair. He has her father's features. Funny, how such things skip generations. It's his eyes, his mouth. She misses her father, on nights like this: his strength, his stubborn sense of purpose. She used to think she'd inherited those same traits from him. She'd been told as much by her mother, when she'd insisted on moving away with Michael. Remembered words stung her in the darkness of Danny's room: fling, cheap, no-good Godless man.

She hadn't listened. What did her mother know? She hadn't been to the New Forest. She hadn't visited Lynnwood for herself. She couldn't possibly have known its beauty, its bucolic charm.

None of it matters now. It's too late for sense or questions. The fog that holds them for the rest of the year has lifted, as it always does on this night, and she remembers fully what awaits them. It's too late to run. God forbid you're caught outdoors on Winter Solstice.

The memories are flooding back now. Horrible sounds, innocuous enough, except that she knows. She remembers. The tapping of fingernails on glass, her first year in the village. The strangled yelp, that night when one dog just kept howling. The Ashford's family Vauxhall in a ditch by the crossroads, high beams streaming, rucksacks, clothes and entrails for two metres in all directions. She'd been there, the next morning. She'd walked through the scene, picked up the teddy bear that had belonged to their little girl. And she hadn't remembered how, or why, or anything of that poor family at all, until now.

Danny moans, disturbed, and she realises she's been grasping his hair. She releases her grip, shushes him, then slips silently away. She won't leave him for long. It's the children they prefer.

Families will be found, tomorrow, broken apart across their sitting rooms. Husbands plastered bloodily to their armchairs. Wives in pieces down the landing, and both devoured; great strips torn from their backs, limbs and breasts removed, as though they're livestock and nothing more, like the pigs kept by McCready. Some years only the bones are left, sickening in the cold light of morning, the occupants of Lynnwood, reduced to their grinning, fleshless cores.

Of the children of these families, no sign remains: nothing except stray hairs found on their pillows or rocking horses still moving.

She makes her way back through the house, switching off each light as she passes. Darkness floods the hallway, the bathroom, the sitting room. In the kitchen, Michael has returned to the brandy; the bottle she's been saving for Christmas sits open on the worktop. She retrieves a glass from the cupboard and pours herself a precise measure. It smells warm, aromatic, and of Michael. He does love a drink in the evenings.

'I've got the lights,' she mutters between sips.

'And Danny?'

'Sleeping.'

He nods, watching her as she drinks. 'Feels better if you knock it back.'

'What?'

He raises his glass. 'Down in one, love.'

'I'm savouring it.'

He doesn't argue; he knows better than that, she likes to think. He continues to stare into his own drink, swilling the caramel liquid around the cut-glass tumbler. In truth, there's nothing to savour except the scratchy hotness as it slides down her throat. Somehow, though, that is enough. She gives no outward sign of her discomfort, just studies her husband from across the room.

The kitchen light shines on him, revealing his tiredness in the dark circles around his eyes, the lines around his mouth. Laughter lines, cutting into his face as though with a knife. The irony isn't lost on her. Lynnwood, their smiling, carefree community, hiding a deadly secret like the sharp teeth of Man behind his lips. Isn't that the point of a smile? To mask something behind it?

Another sip, stinging her lips and throat, and she tries to remember when she last felt such bitterness. Probably a year ago today.

They hear it again, then; that bass drone, like a swarm of bees, growing louder and louder in the air.

'Wasn't his school report good last week?' Her hand shakes, and she's glad there's no ice in her drink.

Michael nods, unsmiling, eyes fixed firmly on hers. 'Mr Jones, he seemed impressed.'

'And his tutor. She said he was really coming into himself. Showing promise.'

'We need to keep an eye on him.' Louder now, buzzing as if inside her head. She can barely hear what Michael is saying, finding herself watching his lips as he speaks: 'Make sure he stays on track. Not like that Briggs boy, or the Rankins' son over the road. Now he's a strange one.'

'I feel sorry for him,' she says. 'Always off on his own —'

Abruptly, the roaring drone stops. Then, from somewhere in the village, a scream cuts through the night.

Sarah's heart races against her ribs. She clutches the work surface, her eyes brimming, and stares at Michael accusingly.

'You said it was over.'

'The dogs, love, the howling.'

'You said it was over.'

He shakes his head, swallowing back his drink.

*

Shadows, stretching towards his window. Thin, black limbs, reaching for the glass. White figures in the moonlight; scrawny arms clutching at the thatched roof, faces long and pale and pained. Then sounds; clicking, like of tongues against the hollows of their mouths, or the cracking of joints, and a rank stench, like unwashed teeth, as the shadows swarm closer, a hungry hive, descending on Granary Cottage —

Danny wakes slowly in the darkness of his bedroom. Clutching his sheets, he struggles into a sitting position. He feels hot and damp. Sweat plasters his chest and beneath his arms, and he wipes himself down on his covers. What time is it? He can't see his bedside clock in the darkness.

His throat is sore in that way it always goes when his mother doesn't tuck him in properly. Coughing into his shoulder, he reaches for the glass of water beside his bed. He hopes he grows out of the throatiness; it's nice when his

mother tucks him in, but she can't do it forever. If Rob or Chris or Andy find out, he'll never live it down. Finishing his water, he realises he needs the bathroom. Placing the glass on the side, he kicks off his covers and slips out of bed.

Shadows flee from the movement, and for a moment he struggles to differentiate between dream and reality. Drawn by curiosity, he patters across the floor to the window. Wind buffets the frosted glass, rising like a scream into the night. Danny stares out over Oak Street. It looks a different place by night. The road stretches away like frozen syrup. Gardens glitter with frost, which clings like grains of sugar to front lawns, and all of it black, as though coated in liquorice. It's like a chapter out of the book his mother used to read to him, when he was little: *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*. All that's missing is the swarm of small, child-like men, rushing through the darkness —

Another rush of wind, another scream, and his reflection twists, unsettled. He puts the thought quickly from his mind and turns instead to food. His fingers poke curiously at his tummy and he realises he can probably sneak downstairs. The cottage is quiet, but it's late and he knows where to tread. He's done it a hundred times before, when everyone thought he was sleeping. One time his mother and father had even been up, gripped by the News or something equally boring. He'd still managed to slip unnoticed into the kitchen behind them.

Stretching, he turns from the bedroom window, from the cold, sugary blackness of the world outside, but not before he sees it. Long, apish arms clutching the window frame. And pressed up against the other side of the glass, a face: white, gaunt, like that of an old man but horribly childish, staring in through the bedroom window.

*

The second scream follows swiftly. Then a third, and a fourth, rising like the wind across the village until Michael loses count of the sounds. He's reminded of a fairground; the way the children shriek excitedly from the merry-go-round, their eyes bright, faces long, little fingers clutching reins as they ride round and round in an endless cycle of joy. He never enjoyed fairground rides as a child. Now he remembers why.

Sarah marches across the kitchen, fumbling for the light switch. She plunges them into darkness. The brandy smells stronger with the lack of light, suffusing the shadows with fiery warmth. He can hear other things now, too; the

wind as it rushes outside, the tick of the clock in the hallway, his blood, pounding in his ears.

‘They won’t find us,’ he says. Sarah’s silhouette moves to the knife-block anyway, retrieving two of the black-handled blades. They make keen sounds as they slide from the solid wood.

She makes her way slowly around the kitchen until she’s standing right in front of him. She smells sweet, of the honey-scented shampoo she bought from Mrs Gossamer at market last week. Her breath is soft and quick against his face. His Sarah. He wraps her in his arms, feeling the cold, flat side of a blade pressing into his chest. It’s strangely comforting.

‘They won’t find us,’ he repeats. ‘Not in the dark.’

She nods. ‘Then tomorrow we’ll figure something out. Everyone will be drinking at the Hollybush, we can slip away —’

‘Tomorrow we won’t know any better. You know how it is. The deaths last winter. The New Forest round-up of the year before that, when all those ponies were found on the heath. That one made the headlines, remember? And every year, the missing children...’

She stiffens in his arms. ‘I’ll find a way.’

They both know she means Danny. It isn’t that Michael doesn’t care for his son — that couldn’t be further from the truth — but Midwinter has hit Sarah strangely this year. She’s distressed, upset, where usually the lifting fog left resignation. He’s seen it before over the years, but never quite this badly. There’s no escaping their troubles. Can’t she see that? There’s no outrunning this night. It’s a part of them all, through and through.

He was born in Lynnwood, grew up here. He’s spent his whole life walking these quiet streets. The New Forest is his home and he’ll be damned if he’s driven out, not by the cold snap of ’89, which had coincided so typically with the death of their boiler, not by the ugly new-build on the outskirts of the village and certainly not by the Midwinter tithe, no matter how many the hunger takes.

‘You think we’ll be better off elsewhere?’ he says.

She makes a strange sound; strangled, hysterical almost, from the back of her throat. He can feel her eyes on him, even in the darkness, staring intently.

‘Have you ever heard of those things anywhere else? Do they stalk through Lyndhurst, too? What about London?’

‘There’s worse than this in London, love. We should think ourselves lucky. You’ve only to watch the News —’

‘Cowes, then. Let’s move back to the island. My brother —’

‘You’re not listening to me. There’s no escaping people —’

Something moves behind the kitchen window and she silences him with her hand. They can’t see it through the curtains, but they can hear it; a long, scraping sound across the glass. It could be the rose bush in their front garden; the plant often moves under the wind and, when it does, its tough stalks scratch the window. They’d planted it together when Sarah had first moved in, all those years ago, and it has thrived ever since.

Except they know it isn’t the rose bush at the window. They stand and listen as their home is inspected, the glass tested, the latches, as if testing Michael himself. The visitor moves quietly, respectful of the traditions that hold the tithe in place, whatever they may be. No one living knows the rules any more. No one knows anything, except to stay indoors, out of harm’s way. No one even knows what they look like, the *things* that come with the hunger. Stories — no, more than that, memories — rise in Michael, bedtime tales told to a little boy by lamplight:

‘...and a great many huntsmen stormed the night sky, lean and long with bright, burning eyes. They were huge and hideous as they crossed over Frey Ford and into Lynnwood, entangled with bracken from the woodland beneath. And in the night the people of Lynnwood heard their horn-calls, shrieking and bellowing, and the thunder of their horses’ hooves, the Wild Hunt come to the Forest...’

These are no horsemen, he knows that much, but they’re hunters all the same and the people of Lynnwood are their prey. There are no spears, just the ancient remnants of an ancient act, which have somehow endured the passing centuries, when everything else ancient has crumbled and is no more.

There’s something special in that sanctity. Sarah will never understand. There is no understanding it, in the conscious sense, but what they have here needs preserving. It exists for a reason, no matter how horrible.

‘The way of things...’

‘Quiet,’ she begs, ‘Michael, please.’

They stand quite still for what seems like the longest time. He has no way of knowing just how long, in the darkened kitchen, but it doesn’t matter. Even long after their house is passed over, they remain unmoving.

Let it feast on someone else. Let Sarah and he live another year. Guilt festers inside him, and he draws comfort from the knowledge that tomorrow this will be forgotten. Not just the hunger, terrible though it is, but the shame of acceptance, of submission, like a sickness in his stomach. Maybe that’s the real source of the fug’s strength. They want to forget, to release themselves of guilt, to eat heartily each day, sleep soundly each night. There’s nothing to be gained from remembering this nightmare. And so they forget it.

‘We’re safe,’ he whispers, when he’s sure the thing at the window is gone. They heard it as it scaled the side of the cottage, then nothing for the longest time. ‘For another year, we’re safe.’

Sarah detaches herself from his arms, the knives clattering to the work surface. Her small stature belies her strength of words.

‘I meant what I said. Tomorrow I’m leaving. With Danny.’

‘You’ll forget, love.’

‘How? How can I forget something like this? You’ve grown up with it, Michael, but I haven’t. It feels wrong, like an upset stomach, a cancer inside me. Tell me, how can I forget that?’

Silence carries on the shadows. The dark always brought out the truth, he realises. Stripped of everything but blackness, the truth has nowhere to hide any more. Like most of Lynnwood’s residents, he’s never liked the dark. He’s just rarely remembers why.

It’s then that they hear another scream, not distant or faceless, but the opposite: loud, clear, and from upstairs. Danny’s room. Danny’s voice. Michael’s heart races in his chest, his legs like stone, the darkness melting around him as Sarah snatches up a knife and runs.

She takes the stairs three at a time. In the darkness she slips, falling forwards. The knife blade slices her arm. Pain flares, followed by a flowing numbness.

She doesn't care. Worse than Danny's scream is the silence that has followed. It smothers the pain so that nothing else matters but her son. Her only son. Her little boy.

She rushes across the landing into Danny's room. Shadows envelop her, the only light that of the moon, winking through the open window. The curtains whip as she stares around her, the familiar suddenly so unknown.

It takes a moment for her eyes to adjust. When they do, the first thing she notices is Danny's empty bed. The second is her son, crouching in the corner of the room. She feels a rush of euphoria on seeing him, which melts with sickening steadiness into dread as her eyes refocus and she realises something is wrong.

Her son is rocking on his haunches, his head held in his hands. His hair is a tousled mess; he can't be long out of bed. Tears streams down his cheeks. She only sees them at all because they catch the moonlight, giving his face a pale, glittering appearance, so beautiful, so innocent, even in his terror.

Halfway across the room she falters, brought to a standstill by the pained, contorted face, the spidery limbs, the hunger in the eyes of the figure now hanging at the window. As she watches, it brings a thin, wasted arm to the windowpane, pressing a childish palm against the glass, and taps. Each clack of its nails undoes a part of Sarah's mind, memories spilling forth as though from a wound.

Then she drags her son from the room and down through the darkened house, conscious all the while of those bulging eyes, burning into her back.

The long stretch of the landing in front of her, then the top of the stairs. Michael is standing at the bottom.

'Danny?' he says.

'He's fine.'

'Are they here? Are we chosen?'

'The car,' she tells him.

Confusion sweeps her husband's face. He looks different, changed by the darkness. 'The car?'

'They're here. For our son. We're leaving.' She strides past him, Danny in tow, and into the hallway. Her boy clings to her, his fingers cold and hard, clasped

tightly in her own. There will be no breaking that grip, no breaking that bond, not tonight or any night.

Her free hand hesitates over the chain lock. She turns to Michael in the darkness, feeling him staring back. The seconds stretch into silence, broken only by Danny's whimpers. For a second, she thinks Michael will not follow. Then he snatches up his keys from the old pine table in the hallway and moves beside her, and all three of them step out into the night.

Lynnwood presses down on them, as vast and black as the waters of the Channel. For one paralyzing moment, Sarah thinks she might drown in this night; the sheer volume of darkness washing over her. The icy air stings her lungs and she struggles to draw breath. Then she feels Danny's fingers between hers, and she forces herself into movement.

Their grey Volvo glistens with frost, the door sticking fast when she tries to open it. Her breath comes fast and white on the air, as does something else; movement down Oak Street as shapes scuttle closer, converging on Granary Cottage. One and two at first, then more as they're drawn through the night; spiders to their struggling prey.

She wrenches the door free and all three of them tumble inside just as the swarm reaches them. Night presses up against the windows, and with it the shapes. They clamber across the bonnet and over the roof, scratch at the metal, bite into the wing-mirrors. And the sounds as their fingers scrape the paintwork, their mouths gnawing glass and plastic —

From the cold interior of the Volvo, she watches as their jaws dislodge, as needle-like teeth gnash together, and she understands. Beside her, Michael fumbles with the ignition, but it doesn't matter. She realises he's right. This close to them, she sees their eyes, the sharp turn of their lips, their desperate breaths, and she recognises them. These aren't monsters any more than they're people. Mr Shepherd on the bonnet. Catherine Lacey, mewing at the side window. Grace Allerwood's red handprints on the glass. Michael's words sink solemnly into place and rest there, like pebbles at the bottom of a pond.

It's several minutes before the windshield cracks and the first ragged hand reaches inside. Michael grasps it as Sarah clings to Danny, wrapping him entirely in her arms. She doesn't let go, not when they grip Michael, not when they drag him bodily from the car, not when Danny himself begins gnawing on her arm.

She feels hands on her all at once. The famished throw themselves over her, claiming her for their own, joined by every thumbprint, every finger, every palm wrapped tightly around her skin. She burns with their cold touch. Light flickers overhead as faces swim before it and she imagines the winter sun, speeding low through the sky, its dappled light fractured by the treetops. In this moment she's one with these ghouls, made whole by their hunger, stripping her of sight, of self, of any awareness save that of appetite.

1.12 'The Docks'

A ripe smell washes over Southampton's docks. For two hours, Mark patrols the boards, the scattered stores, the shipyard and the steel skeleton of the Britannia, chained to the ceilings and the walls. His nose wrinkling, he ducks beneath vast iron ribs, inspects rows of sheet metal, kicks at the crabs that have come to inhabit the dank spaces between these things: nothing.

It's almost midnight when the cruise ship parts the mists. She moves silently, her prow cutting clean through the small waves. She drags the smell with her. Sitting at his desk, Mark gags, drops his bus timetable, does a double-take when her name slides into view: Athena, four hours early, wreathed in dark slime, deck bright with the long lobster-limbs of her new monster crew.

1.13 'Tammy (3)'

Chapter One

Twin shots of coffee run into the shallow cup below, pooling in a coppery puddle at the bottom. When the last few drops have decanted into the cup, Tammy removes it from beneath the portafilter and presents it to the customer. The cup feels warm in her hands, the strong smell of undiluted espresso wafting against her senses.

Jake processes the order quickly at the till and the customer, a straight-backed, stiff-collared man with a tie and a briefcase, wanders off to find a seat. The day has been busy, by Grounds' standards. Most of the regulars have made an appearance and there's a steady stream of new customers, too. Gift has the morning off but Mr Allen appears around lunchtime, brandishing a bottle of cinnamon syrup and some tinsel. He says his greetings before disappearing into the staffroom, leaving Jake and Tammy to their own devices on the shop floor.

'So, has Tammy Becks been a good girl this year?'

She turns back to the coffee machine and begins wiping it down with a damp cloth. The espresso has splashed a little over the tarnished metallic exterior of the machine, giving her something to clean. Mostly, she doesn't want to meet Jake's eyes, as though in doing so he might see through her, into her hollow core, and find out that she's empty.

'I'm always good.'

'No men on the scene, then? No one been leading you astray?'

'You're starting to sound like my Mum.'

'I'm just looking out for you, being a supportive and communicative colleague or whatever it is Norman goes on about in that booklet.'

A smile tickles reluctantly at her face and she scrubs a little harder at the coffee machine. 'No, there's no one on the scene. I don't have time for all that.'

'Everyone has time for that. When people say they haven't got time for it that just means they haven't met the right person yet.'

She hadn't heard Jake move closer, but his hand covers hers as he presses a fresh wad of cloth into her palm. The material feels cool against her fingers; wet and antibacterial. Sterility stings her nose. She watches as he drags a finger over the spotless metal shell, inspecting it for stains and dust.

'Anyway, it sounds like you're due a nice surprise this Christmas. What have you asked for?'

There's nothing she wants that can be bought, wrapped up and left out for her beneath a tree. Instead, a single wish swirls through her mind. She swirls with it, smiling as she spins with her mother to one of Take That's hits. Her mother's teeth shine in the darkness of the sitting room, not because they're especially white, but because they are a part of her face, and it's been so long since she's smiled with them.

'I haven't really thought about myself.'

'That's sad,' he says. She supposes it is.

Jake spends the best part of the day familiarising her with those faces worth remembering. 'The Ling sisters,' he reminds her, as the two elderly Asian women order their drinks. Huddled beneath their matching, moth-eaten shawls, they're what Tammy's mother would call 'wallflowers,' except wilted and browning and, Tammy suspects, soon returning to the soil from whence they came. Watching the dwindling old women from behind the counter as they approach, she can't help but feel sorry for the pair of them.

'They order masses — just you wait. The same food and drink every time. Not just the Ling sisters but all of the regulars. They live for their routines.'

Two hot chocolates, four slices of carrot cake and a mound of salmon sandwiches slide past the till-point. As she processes the order, a mixture of cream cheese and pungent fish fills her nostrils, and she hurriedly counts out their change. She passes the coins to the nearest of the two women, their hands meeting for a moment. Her skin is immeasurably soft and cold.

To call the drinks hot chocolates is almost an insult; each creation is a towering edifice of squirting cream, chocolate and luxury. Beside them, the moist slabs of cake appear swollen against the small plates. Tammy imagines herself biting into a slice: the bouncy resistance of the sponge, the give between her teeth and the sweetness of the cream cheese as it seems to expand inside her

mouth, until she realises her mouth really is filling with saliva. She swallows automatically. It's almost lunchtime, and in her haste to get the boys to school this morning she's forgotten to make herself a packed lunch.

'Identical trays,' says Jake, 'except that one orders a skinny drink, the other a regular. She still has lashings of cream on top, though.'

Reg ambles in around early afternoon, bound as usual inside his crinkled black Mackintosh. Jake steams the milk in anticipation of Reg's latte. It's the fourth in as many orders, and a spare shot of espresso is ready and waiting.

The drink takes more familiar shape as it creeps up the side of the cup. The ambient sounds of Grounds wash over Tammy, like a gurgling stomach or a steady heartbeat. For perhaps the first time since she's started here, the place sounds alive, invigorated by the clatter of cutlery as drinks are stirred and cake devoured, the slurp of coffee past thirsty lips and the chatter of voices made busy by Christmas and caffeine.

Reg's head bobs loosely on its wiry neck, as if a screw has come loose and at any moment his head might topple from his shoulders. His usual smile plasters his face but his eyes are glazed as they stare unseeing past Tammy. Hard fingers press uncounted coins into her palm, and she notices how pale his doll hands look.

'Are you okay today, Reg?'

'Yes, thank you. Touch of the Christmas blues.' He makes a conscious effort to meet her eyes, before quickly looking away again. 'And you... Timmy?'

'I'm fine, thank you. Two-fifty then, please.' She eyes the handful of coins in her palm, sifting through the cold coppers until she thinks she's found the right amount. 'Here's your change, Reg.'

'Yes, thank you.'

'Would you like help carrying your tray?'

'I'm fine, thank you.'

His fingers fumble at the corners of the tray. When they secure purchase, the old man stumbles over to his usual seat. Tammy watches him as he leaves, toying idly with the latest receipt. It has come out bloodied with red ink.

‘Holy cow.’ She feels Jake’s voice in her hair as he moves to stand at her shoulder, tastes his minty breath in her mouth. ‘Do you think he’ll make it to Christmas?’

‘Don’t say that.’

‘He looks terrible. It can’t be doing him good, drinking all this coffee every day. Maybe it’s finally catching up with him.’

‘He said it was the Christmas blues.’

‘Whatever that means.’

As she tosses the receipt into the bin, she notices that the ink from the receipt roll has stained her fingertips. Mingled with near-permanent lines of black coffee beneath her nails, her hands look as if she’s cut herself changing the oil in her bike. Wandering over to the sink behind the fridges, she rinses all traces of the redness away.

When it’s her turn to take a lunch break, she returns to the counter and orders a coffee. She isn’t sure which one to go for, so she follows Jake’s recommendation. His back is turned to her while he prepares the drink, but she sees diligence in his posture and a care to detail that she hasn’t associated with him before now. In this moment he might be an artist at his workbench, toiling with tools at a craft still largely strange to her, unknown but alluring all the same. She hears the sounds of his trade: the purring of the coffee machine, the hiss of the steam wand, the scrape of a teaspoon against a saucer. Then he turns to face her, and he’s Jake again, grinning as he hands her his masterpiece.

She heads for a seat outside. The bell rings timorously as she opens the door, and again, as it closes behind her, then she’s free of the shop for half an hour. The quiet of the alleyway envelops her.

Huddling into her leather jacket, Tammy seats herself at one of the tables. A half-finished drink sits abandoned on the table. The cup’s rim is smeared with a thin layer of leftover froth, some of which has spilled over onto the saucer beneath, looking like condensed fog, coagulating down the side of the crockery.

A chill rushes past her, the melancholic moans of *Lonely This Christmas* carrying on the air, and she shivers. It’s cold, much colder than she’s anticipated, and for a moment she’s tempted to retreat back inside. Deciding against this, she settles back into her chair.

The antique iron presses icily against her back and thighs, at odds with the steaming coffee in her hands. She takes a deep breath, savouring the rich, earthy smell of the drink, not as bitter as she remembers, and the brisk air against her face. The cold pricks her cheeks, but it's not disagreeable. There's something altogether relieving about stepping out from Grounds, from its stale innards into the outside world.

Mr Allen's tree illuminates the shop front with dilute colour. She sees only an electricity bill, a fire hazard, a lump of plastic that in no way resembles a real tree, when she looks properly. Taking a tentative sip of her drink, she wishes she was elsewhere; out on her bike, tearing carefree down the motorway, away from Grounds, from Southampton, from this mulled winter madness.

Something is moving by the waste-disposal bins. She concentrates, expecting to hear Christmas songs, the chatter of distant shoppers, perhaps a hymn or percussive drums from one of the various buskers playing on the high street. The bins shudder again, a small landslide of coffee grounds spilling from over one side. She smells rotting food and the bitter aroma of used grounds as a familiar face springs over the refuse.

The cat skitters towards her, mud clinging to the familiar whiteness of its paws. It hadn't looked well the last time she saw it, and the grey light of day has done nothing to improve its condition. Its fur is sparse, becoming thinner towards the ends of its legs. Whole sections of skin are visible around the animal's paws and belly, its ribs a row of fine toothpicks.

It mews at her feet to be picked up. She knows she shouldn't handle the animal, but against its large eyes she finds herself helpless. Lifting the cat carefully from the ground, she satisfies herself with rubbing its neck and the backs of its ears. It savours the attention, milky eyes sinking shut, a resonant purr in its throat. She wonders how well it can see and whether or not it can see at all. Her hands move across its belly as it sinks into her lap, and, for a few minutes, girl and cat are content.

She feels its claws in her thigh at the same time as she hears the knocking at the shop window. Jake is waving animatedly behind the glass, his muffled voice distant. Perhaps his voice *is* distant, she thinks, studying the strange confines of Grounds through the glass. Jake grins stupidly until she returns his wave before vanishing properly into the gloom. Staring into the spot where he was standing, she washes down her thoughts with another mouthful of hot coffee.

Overhead, the first few flecks of snow begin to fall across Southampton.

Chapter Two

The boys' school shines in the darkness; a vast silhouette illuminated by classroom windows, fairy lights and the foyer, light spilling through the glass doors into the cold night. It's the boys' school but it was also hers once, and her neighbours', and theirs; a building belonging as much to itself as the community that it has helped to shape.

Her eyes water as she approaches the foyer, its lights seeming to sway in the night. It's still snowing but only gently. The coffee shop's stale breath still hangs over her. Usually the bike ride dispels this, the wind sliding inside her helmet to sting her eyes and clear her head, but she's not had this luxury tonight. She can still feel Grounds' closeness, like the press of an unwelcome hug, across her skin and under her nails. Instinctively she brushes her hands down her leathers.

Every Christmas, schools, clubs and playgroups throughout the city produce nativity plays. She isn't especially excited for the performance itself but it will be nice to see her brothers onstage, where she herself stood when she was a little girl under the heat of the lights, in the smell of straw, with the weight of angel wings against her back. Her feet carry her across the car park.

Around her, other shapes move in the darkness. She knows they're proud parents, siblings and family friends of her brothers' school friends but the blackness still renders them obscure, drifting like lost souls, or vast moths drawn to the bright foyer lights. As she steps from the shadows of the car park, she thinks of thin men with thinner faces and mouths filled with sharp teeth. Then they emerge into the light of the foyer, smiling humans again in scarves and hats and winter coats, and they make their way inside.

Members of teaching staff greet them at the entrance with glasses of wine and performance programmes. A glass of red is pressed into her hand by a man she thinks she recognises from a Parents' Evening. Avoiding his eyes, she moves towards the assembly hall.

The foyer is filled with guests milling around before the show. She feels eyes on her, hears magnified whispers and shrieks of sudden laughter. She might

be a little girl again, standing in the hallway during the after-school rush through which she ran, lunchbox in hand, to meet her mother waiting outside the front gates. She wonders what the others are thinking; if they're questioning her, judging her mother for not accompanying her, if they're excited or impatient or slightly drunk from the season or perhaps from the free wine clutched in their hands. More laughter rides the waves of conversation and she wonders if they're thinking at all or if they are moths again, empty shades; the swarm of servile ants. Placing her untouched glass on a side-table, she moves inside the assembly hall to find a seat.

The performance isn't due to start for several minutes but the lights have already been dimmed. The long crimson curtains lining either side of the hall are drawn, keeping the night out and trapping the theatrical darkness inside. Rows of chairs have been set out in front of the stage, which is lit up but as yet empty except for set pieces. She sees a plywood stable, a small manger and generous scatterings of pungent straw that may well have come from a local farm. A cardboard star hangs from visible wire in the air, slowly spinning under its own direction.

The first few rows are already filled but there are still lots of seats to choose from. She picks a chair to the left, near the back of the hall. If their mum was here, nowhere but the front row would have sufficed, from where she could watch uninterrupted while Chris and Luke bless the newborn saviour of mankind. It *is* a shame that Auntie Char couldn't make it, but this is a relief in itself. Char has agreed to look after the boys now that school has broken up for Christmas, yet an evening in her company would mean questions. Conversation. An inquiring mind pointed in Tammy's direction. The emptiness of the back row is peaceful.

Gradually the room fills with shuffling shapes as other guests make their way from the foyer into the assembly hall. In the absence of proper light they're stooped and misshapen as they sidle between rows of chairs, bend to retrieve dropped coats, hold hands like multitudinous monsters in the dark. The stage lighting fills the room with heat and the aroma of burning dust, and Tammy is shedding her leather jacket when the stage stirs with movement.

The children look adorable, in that way all children do when dressed up in clothes too big, too small or entirely out of character. She recognises sheep, and the shepherds who tend them; boys and girls in stitched robes and beige pyjama bottoms. Cotton wool accounts for fleeces and beards, so that it's not wholly

obvious who are the flock and who cares for them, but the audience laughs and claps anyway, and sometimes waves when enthusiasm overtakes one parent or another.

She's only vaguely aware of the details of the performance unfolding. The nativity story is familiar to her but no more than that, a story remembered from a similar performance with Lily and Sarah and the others, when they were no older than the boys and girls onstage now. She wonders if Chris and Luke could tell her any more, if they could clarify its modern significance with their newfound understanding. She isn't entirely convinced, of this understanding or the teaching that might have gone into it or the very nature of the re-enactment on the stage. It seems just that, a re-enactment repeated year after year, a tradition in its own right, nativities for nativities' sakes. To the casual observer, caught up in the throes of festive frenzy, she supposes it might appear meaningful.

Even without her leather jacket, she feels uncomfortably hot, and she finds herself turning every so often to dab her face and neck. Either side of the assembly hall, teachers stalk the rows, patrolling for forbidden video cameras and photography. Occasionally the darkness winks with the red light of a recording anyway, or an impromptu flash bringing to stark relief the faces of the people nearby: alabaster cheeks, fixed smiles, darkness in the hollows of eye-sockets. She thinks of skulls, and bones, and men made bones by the flashes of light. She tries her best to concentrate on the stage.

Chris and Luke and a third Wise Man make their appearance midway through the evening. She can't help but smile as they march onstage and repeat their lines before the cardboard radiance of the Archangel Gabriel's Dulux-white wings. She doesn't wave, but they know where to look, and she fancies she catches Luke's eyes before the Wise Men retreat from the spotlight. A small, fierce part of her wishes she'd sat closer to the front after all.

The evening drags on, during which Mary and Joseph play their parts magnificently. Offstage, the heat grows more oppressive, dampness clinging to the crooks of her arms and beneath her legs. An array of scenes and characters blur into one; shepherds, angels, Bethlehem and the stable where God's son is first born into this world, as though He was absent beforehand, as though His spirit could not be felt, His message told, until He was clothed in flesh and blood and made corporeal.

The Wise Men reappear with their sacred gifts, each wrapped in bright paper and bows. The shepherds offer their own presents, and the angel, and even the sheep, boxes clutched in what should be cloven hooves but seem no less obscene for being the small hands of children. The birth is a short-lived affair, the plastic Saviour dangled above his mountain of presents: King of Man!

Applause ripples across the assembly hall, becoming thunderous in her ears. Shadows and heat float around her eyes and in her head, before the hall lights up with camera flashes. The storm of light tears into the darkness, reducing the room to grinning skulls again, waving hands, wrists like slender bone in the light, and other bones, glimpsed in the spaces between chairs and under them, black as match-heads already kissed by flame and no less ashen; spidery shapes staring back at her with long faces and glittering eyes.

Thin hands stretch out towards her and she stumbles from the hall, outside, to wait for Chris and Luke in the cold moonlight.

Chapter Three

Whiteness blankets the streets, obliterating the last traces of the city Tammy knows. Tower blocks vanish into white skies, which stretch on for longer than any sky should, depthless and formless and cold. In the streets below, thin figures with red faces and long arms weighed down with shopping bags hurry about their business. Tammy glimpses pink cheeks, dark eyes, mouths clamped firmly shut, or locked into voiceless howls.

Char is almost half an hour late picking the boys up. When Tammy is finally able to leave for work, she doesn't feel comfortable riding her bike through the snow and resorts to the bus instead. The UB1 is slow, crawling from stop to stop with the same hesitancy that had kept her from the road, and by the time it reaches the city centre she's more than an hour late for her shift.

'You are late,' says Gift, when Tammy finally arrives. The dishwasher is a breath of foetid warmth. Steam engulfs her between each cycle, pouring from the absolute blackness of the machine's depths before clearing to reveal rows of glistening white plates and cups. Each blast smells slightly of chemicals and dank food, like rotten egg, but she endures the blasts for their warmth while the steam clears and the machine's insides become visible.

‘The snow is no excuse. You will make up the time.’ Gift continues to talk but Tammy hears none of it, watching instead while the woman’s wide mouth chatters, teeth flashing from behind her lips, and below this more teeth; older, more delicate, on a piece of thread around her neck.

With each cycle the heat grows more oppressive until sweat trickles down Tammy’s back. The drone of the machine assumes swarming qualities, like a vast cloud of insects by her ears or in her head, growing angrier but not quite masking another sound beneath, like that of ritual chanting or burial hymns —

‘Till-point,’ says Mr Allen, standing by the partition. She comes back to herself, unsure of quite how much time has passed. Behind her, the dishwasher stands empty. The ticking of the clock above the till reaches her ears.

‘Sorry?’

‘Till-point, please. Jake will make coffees.’

She remembers only a handful of the customers whom she serves. One is a crumpled-up figure of a man, with wrapping-paper skin and eyes like boiled sweets.

‘Small cappuccino, please.’

‘That’ll be one-fifty, please.’ He drops a small wealth of change onto the counter and retrieves his cup with a shaking hand. ‘Thank you.’

The growl of the steam wand purrs into life as Jake froths some milk. She finishes the transaction and passes the drink to the customer, watching as he hobbles away.

‘Thank you for waiting, madam. What can I get for you today?’

She serves a shrunken old woman with furry lips, her head enveloped by a swathe of thin cloth. The fabric looks smooth, almost velveteen, and is decorated with plush red roses. The flowers remind her of her mother’s rose bed, once lush in their back garden.

‘On the turn, Tams. My roses, they’re on the turn. Be a darling and give them a drink, would you? There’s not a sorrier sight in this world than dying roses.’

‘On the turn, Mum? Dying?’

'Changing, Tams. But they don't need to go thirsty. No need for them to suffer. Give them a drink. My beautiful roses, they deserve that much, before the end.'

'Do you sell food here?' The lady peers up through watery eyes.

'Yes, if you look to your left you'll see a selection of sandwiches and rolls in the fridges...'

'What sandwiches do you have today?'

'Today we have cheese and tomato, chicken mayonnaise or salmon and cucumber.'

'Cheese and tomato sounds lovely, dear, and a Camomile tea.'

The cheese and tomato sandwiches are one of their less-popular lines, and it takes Tammy a moment to find them on the till. The lady waits patiently, her hands clutching the counter for support. They are old hands made up of rigid fingers and soft folds of skin that seem to slide over their bones like loose fabric. It occurs to her that the lack of fresh blood must really be hurting Mr Allen's prospects. Where the competition has modernised with the turning decades, ground into sleek, gaudy coffee-producing machines, the high street equivalents of the very same espresso-makers that are their steaming hearts, this one has not.

As she hands over the change, she realises it isn't just Grounds that has lasted the decades. It isn't just Gift who has endured long past her years, even as those same years eat at her thin hands, her coarse hair, her solemn face. It's the customers, too. They're mostly ancient: decrepit, hollow-eyed and sunken-cheeked. Perhaps this is why they come here, to escape the accelerating hustle and bustle of the city. Perhaps the premises sing to them, in voices as dated and antique as the customers themselves. Perhaps, she wonders, it's Grounds that keeps them going, day after day; its coffee imbuing them with just enough vigour to return each morning for one more cup of espresso.

Her last customer of the day is Reg. The odd little man limps in around four, arms flapping loosely as he walks. He smells musty and cold, like he's spent too long outside in the snow. *Jingle Bells* follows him inside from the street, distorted and distant like a cracked radio transmission.

‘Latte, please, a small one, and the shortbread.’ His head bobs on his neck while he speaks. Something of a smile shivers across his face.

‘That’s two-fifty, please. Thank you very much.’

‘Yes. Thank you, Timmy.’

Turning to the coffee machine, she concentrates on the routine taught to her by Gift; removing a portafilter from beneath the hood and flushing the machine out. Black water swirls thickly through the grate beneath. She bashes the coffee grounds into the box below, before knocking fresh coffee in. Flecks of loose coffee scatter across the work surface; soil in a graveyard of discarded coffee detritus. The stench infiltrates Tammy’s nose, tickling her brain, singing strangely to her soul.

Behind her, Reg is talking quietly to himself. His low voice is bubbly with cold. Applying pressure with the grinder’s stamp, she locks the portafilter back in the machine. The fit is tight, and it takes her a moment to find the right position before she activates the machine. The button is hot against her fingertip. Patiently, she watches as a double-shot of rust brown liquid decants into the bone white of the china; a skeleton in its rich-roast graveyard.

The milk is harder to tame than she remembers. It screams as she applies the heat, like an animal branded with a poker, and at one point she almost thinks she can smell burning. When the milk reaches the required temperature, she adds it to the espresso.

The steamed milk combines curiously with the shots, the creamy milk diluting the tarnished coffee paler and paler until a velvety, beige drink appears. She presents the latte proudly.

‘Enjoy your coffee, Reg. I’ll just put that through the till for you.’

‘Yes. It looks lovely, thank you.’

‘Is there anything else I can get for you?’

‘Sugar.’

‘Sugar is on your right, with the sweeteners.’

‘I need sugar.’

His eyes fix on hers. As she reaches for a spare sachet from under the till, everything else around her seems to slow down. She hears as much as she sees the individual drops of espresso splashing from the coffee machine into the grill. Steam from the dishwasher coalesces like breath in the air, and cutlery scrapes jarringly against plates as Reg lunges suddenly forwards.

'Sugar-sugar-sugar-sugar-sugar...'

Tammy recoils from the counter into Jake. The coffee shop spins as they fall to the floor, the tray of clean cups he's carrying shattering like delicate bone around them. Her pulse thunders in her ears.

'Careful, Tams!'

'I'm sorry!'

She looks back to the counter but Reg is gone, pottering back to his seat, leaving only tightness in her chest and a fading drone at the back of her head.

Chapter Five

Like the descent into madness, or the subtle decline of Tammy's mother, the twenty-third slips quietly, almost imperceptibly, into the twenty-fourth. She wakes the next morning to a buzzing, loud and low, like an engine starting beneath her bed. The sound drones into her waking consciousness and she hides herself in her covers before she realises it is just construction work in the street.

Stepping tentatively from bed, she moves across the room to the window. Her fingers find the familiar latch, rusted from a combination of damp and draught. Lifting the small length of metal from the wood beneath, she swings the window outwards. Cold air and noise assaults her: pneumatic drilling, the unfettered hum of engines and the crisp aroma of fresh snow. She breathes these things in, feeling the touch of winter against her face even as the roadworks bore into her brain. At least they're finally fixing the road.

Grounds has seemed inoculated against Christmas up to this point; a world within a world made up of one day repeated, in which Tammy wipes tables, loads dishes, serves customers and, on occasion, makes a cup of coffee. She arrives at work to find today is no different. Jake mans the coffee machine while Gift fills stock in the display fridges to his left. The regulars have all found their

seats. The fridges whirr. The dishwasher groans. The clock behind the till-point ticks relentlessly.

Tammy has been standing attentive at the till-point since ten o'clock. It's now midday and she finds her eyes returning helplessly to the door. She still has lots to prepare for tomorrow, and it's at least half an hour since she's served a customer.

Nothing has changed in the last half-hour. Nothing had changed in the last month. The same worn-out leather sofas, with their sallow cushions and stumpy wooden legs, line the shop walls, offset by the assortment of chairs and tables, weathered but wiped to within an inch of their polished lives. The bleached-bone blinds hang low across the windows, as if trying to block out Christmas itself, but there's no denying the snow that's settled outside, dusting the city like the icing sugar across their mince pies.

She wants everything to be perfect tomorrow, for Chris and Luke's sakes as much as her mother's. If Christmas means anything to her, it's family and she will see to it that her little brothers have the best one yet, even if their mother isn't well enough to cook or wrap presents or smile this year.

A dusty cough draws Tammy back to the coffee shop. She realises she's been drumming the counter with her nails. Looking up, she finds herself staring at Reg across the counter.

'Sorry, Reg. I was miles away.'

The old man tries to smile. His skin is pale, like chalk or the cleaner pieces of their crockery, his fingernails blue, as though bruised.

'Can I get you another coffee, Reg?'

'Yes... No, thank you.'

He coughs again, a limp arm lifting to his mouth. His anorak crinkles around him, and she has the sudden impression of a caterpillar gestating inside its waterproof cocoon. If she were going to gestate anywhere in this cold grey city it would be here too, where there's heat enough to soothe old bones, steam to soften leathery skin, caffeine to revive even the weariest soul —

His hands clutch at his chest, and her first thought is that he's in pain. Shuddering, he stares behind her to the dishwasher partition.

‘Are you all right, Reg? Do you need to sit down?’

‘Christmas blues,’ he says, his hand slipping to his coat pocket. When he withdraws it, he’s clasping a dark-stained envelope. He pushes it across the counter. ‘I’ve got a Christmas card.’

‘For me?’

‘Yes.’ He stares around himself for several seconds, at the shadows, the steam pouring from the dishwasher, the shining tables, as if seeing something that Tammy can’t. ‘For all of you.’

‘Thank you very much, Reg.’

The envelope feels furry against Tammy’s fingertips. She runs them along the edges, feeling the peculiar fuzziness. The material is a faded, spoiled-milk yellow and there are blotches of brown, where liquid — most likely coffee — has been spilled. Then the tinny shop bell drifts across Grounds, and she places the envelope to one side.

Darkness falls quickly over Christmas Eve. Outside, the alleyway swims in moonlight and snow. The hours linger unfairly, the clock behind the till ticking with every laboured second until Tammy imagines she might never stop hearing it. Dust hangs lifelessly on the still air and an antique brown haze seems to descend over the shop, faded and opaque like an old sepia photograph. Tammy serves the Ling sisters again, and a Father Christmas. After another bout of inactivity, she and Jake decide to clean down the counters. They’re still doing this when Mr Allen appears around the corner. He’s dressed for business, in a crisp white shirt and black pencil tie, folders tucked tightly beneath one arm.

‘Time’s up,’ he announces, tapping his watch. Underneath his sharp attire, she thinks he looks tired. ‘We can start shutdown. Gift is filling stock. Lock up, Jake, so no one else comes in, then remind Tammy how to clean down the coffee machine. We can let the regulars out as they leave.’

Quiet creeps across the shop floor. It’s hallowed but not unsettling, and she marches confidently through it. In one corner the fridges hum while at the back of the shop the dishwasher groans as it churns through another cycle. Following the sound, she drops off a used cup and saucer before returning to the shop front with an armful of clean crockery. The china feels familiar in her hands.

She can tell without looking which are the small cups, the mediums and the larges now. They might have always belonged here, in her grasp.

Stepping behind the counter, she slows, her eyes narrowing at the blackness outside, which seems for a moment absolute. Then she sees the snow and the tables and chairs, glowing faintly by the rouge of the Christmas tree lights, and she can breathe again.

The crisp whiteness of the snow is pristine beneath the night. She knows it's not pristine. Nothing in the whole city can be called such; mud trodden beneath shoes, takeaway boxes and broken bottles as hollow and fragile as the men and women who've consumed them before tossing them to the streets, cigarette butts and carrier bags, all of these things and more mar the snowfall by day. For a few hours each night, at least, the snow appears pure, the city clean.

She's never shut down the coffee machine on her own before, but Jake is a considerate teacher. He talks her through the methods as they work together; removing the portafilters from beneath the hood and leaving them to soak, spraying and wiping down the shell and flushing out the machine itself for loose, stagnant grounds. She quickly forgets the names of the cleaning agents and the technical processes, but she thinks she can remember the motions, if the day comes when she might need to clean the machine herself. As she gives the gleaming metal hull one last wipe down, she wonders if this is what she's always done, remembering the motions without understanding the what and the why, her life one short, instinctual struggle for survival, no better than the worker ant who gives itself entirely to its purpose but never stops to consider what that is, or who it is, or how it might be different from the thousands of other ants swarming all around it —

Once the last of the cups is neatly stacked where it belongs, she busies herself tidying the counter. Anything remotely dirty goes into a plastic crate, to await the dishwasher. The rest she returns to their shelves. The coffee shop rings with the delicate clink of china, the rattle of metal as spoons and knives and other, more coffee-specific tools are dropped unceremoniously into the crate. She's emptying the grinder of any leftover beans when a shadow passes across the coffee machine. Turning, she finds Reg standing behind her.

'We're closing soon, Reg.'

The little man stirs when she speaks. This close, he smells musty and sort of damp, as if his raincoat hasn't quite done its job of keeping the weather out. Swaying on his feet, with his arms resting either side of his body, he reminds Tammy again of a cocoon, wrapped up against the season, the world. She's always thought him small, but looking across at him now he seems diminutive; shrunken into his coat as though being swallowed by it.

'Time's up,' he says, seeming to echo Mr Allen.

'Yes, that's right. Try not to be too long. We all need to get home soon.' She feels herself smiling, then wonders why. He continues to stare emptily at his half-finished coffee, cold and murky on the table. Words that mean little to her fill her mouth, tumbling out before she knows quite what she's saying. 'It's Christmas tomorrow.'

For the first time, she wonders if she's doing the right thing listening to her mother. Perhaps she'd be better off in hospital, where there are doctors and nurses and medicines that might lessen her pain. She'd do anything, to make her mother more comfortable. She reminds herself that she is doing everything. She's given herself to her mother's care; weeks, months, years spent looking after her in the continued hope that she'll soon improve. She'd hoped this Christmas would help, that this year they might celebrate as a proper family. Before that, she'd put her faith in the summer, before that, spring's promise of life renewed. But she hasn't improved. She's barely moved from her armchair while Tammy has worn herself thin between worry and work, all the while losing herself, forgetting her own face in the process —

It's already dark when she finishes her shift. The streets glow a crisp white from the snow. The cold evening air is rejuvenating against her skin, drawing back the shroud that Grounds seems to have draped over her.

She wanders with Jake down the fairy-lit street, two figures fighting the rush of the crowds. They avoid the worst of the footfall by keeping to the sides of the pavements and away from the German Market. West Quay beckons them through the snow.

Christmas lights stretch the length of the city's high street, flickering like tiny balefires in the night. Fog clings to the shop fronts and wraps around streetlights, a hesitant breath on the chill air. Artificial reindeer ebb and wane through the pearly wreathes and a Father Christmas flashes above the entrance

to West Quay, luring the evening's shoppers into the centre with promises of festive frivolities and tat.

'What would you like for Christmas, then?' he asks, as they step through the automatic doors into the shopping centre. Heat hits them, and sound, hundreds of voices magnified by the acoustics. Already sweating inside her jacket, she shrugs.

'I haven't really thought about it.'

They browse the bookshop first. She can't remember when she last read a book. She doesn't count the children's stories she sometimes reads to Chris and Luke before bed, or Mr Allen's employee handbook. She means a real book, with chapters and a firm spine and a soul all of its own. Despite the crowds ebbing and flowing outside, these aisles are quiet. She haunts the Classics for as long as she can, drawing comfort from the books, knowing she could quite easily stay here forever, if such a thing were possible. She gets five minutes before Jake is tugging at her leathers and they move on.

They ride the escalators to the floor above and dip in and out of several clothes shops. She doesn't buy anything, but Jake is quickly laden with bags. When they re-emerge onto the high street, almost an hour later, she's sticky with sweat. Her leathers cling to the backs of her legs, offset by the breeze across her face. The wind tosses her fringe into her eyes. They head to the Bargate Centre.

Once the retail heart of the city, the centre is now mostly abandoned. The wind follows them inside, filling the heights of the walkways with cold and the echoes of distant hymns. A group of boys and girls not much older than her brothers mill in one of the far corners, beside a Christmas tree that looks to have been erected in an attempt to bring some of the festivities into the centre. Their voices carry across the hall, laughing and swearing. They're playing on skateboards, perhaps drawn here by the long, empty spaces. Perhaps the snow has driven them from the skate-park. Perhaps there's no more sense to their being here than to her and Jake's.

Two of the boys look up as they walk past, cherubic faces illuminated by the yellow wattage. Dark circles around their eyes suggest sleepless nights of their own, and she wonders if the whole city is tired out. Then the gang is behind them and they're nearing Sugar Rush.

The sweet shop is Chris and Luke's favourite place in Southampton. Along the rows of traditional sweet jars she spots gobstoppers, sherbet straws, chocolate reindeer, chewing gum, crackling powder that fizzes and bubbles on the tongue and a hundred other treats besides. Jake quickly loses himself in the selection. Even Tammy finds herself drawn to several of the jars; the aroma of artificial flavourings and sweeteners is intoxicating. To the bags she makes up for Chris and Luke, she finds herself adding some strawberry laces for herself.

In the street outside, a small choir has appeared. Sheltered from the worst of the weather in the shadow of the old city gates, they stand and sing, cheeks pink, eyes thin, mouths agape. Tammy doesn't recognise the hymn, but the sound of their joined voices draws her close. Huddled in the same shadow, she listens with Jake.

'Do your brothers still believe in Father Christmas?' he asks.

'You'd better believe it. We still visit him every year. Once you take him away, there's nothing left but the presents really.'

'There's Jesus.'

'Yeah, I suppose.'

'You should bring your brothers into work sometime. Father Christmas is in most days for his lattes now. They could meet him in the flesh.'

Across the road, the queue for Espresso's spills out into the street. Further along, Coffee Bean is no better. Tammy counts at least a dozen people pressing into one another in their eagerness to get served. From both independents, the rich aroma of roasted bean wafts out into the cold, mingled with the sickly sweetness of the various syrups and cakes displayed enticingly behind glass counters. She wishes she were at home, at work, anywhere but right here, right now.

'Is there anything else you need?' she asks.

'Actually, there's something I'd like to show you.' Jake's face lights up from more than just the ambient glow of the streetlights. 'Follow me.'

This high atop the weathered heights of the old city walls there's no warmth, no cover, no respite against the season. Tammy shivers bodily, her arms wrapped tight around her, even her leathers offering no defence against the

elements. She might be naked, stripped of her skin, an exposed mass of muscle and nerves, alive with the kiss of cold.

The entirety of the high street sprawls out before them, a landscape of flickering lights across the blanket of night: reds, greens and gold all dancing random and indeterminate. It's almost ten years since she found her way back to the city, and yet here she stands, staring down at it all through a perspective previously unknown.

And it *is* unknown, she realises, a hundred tiny lights waxing and waning in the darkness. This is more than coffee shops and motorbikes and rundown terraced housing. It's more than money and customers and Christmas. It means something, however unspeakable.

'How did you find this place?' she asks.

From beside her, Jake shivers in his jacket. The city below reflects brightly in his eyes, which stare off into middle-space. 'I read in a newspaper someone had left on their table once that if you drink more than five cups of coffee a day you start hearing things.'

'Hearing things?'

'Bing Crosby, to be precise. *White Christmas*.'

A dozen different festive songs play out in Tammy's mind, heard at work over the past few weeks, and as many figures, reflections glimpsed in windows, the dishwasher and out of the corners of her eyes. 'That would explain a lot.'

'They found that people who were more stressed, and carried high levels of caffeine in their bloodstream, experienced psychosis-like symptoms. Basically, they went crazy. I wouldn't worry; you're hardly on five a day. Not just yet, anyway.'

If she looks to her left, the high street stretches on like a glittering runway, ready for Father Christmas to bring down his sleigh. If she looks to her right, she can see the docks. They too stretch on, all down the coastline; the bay where the expensive boats are moored, the marina, where the well-off can eat and gamble, and then the water itself, a vast spill of deep blackness.

'I thought I saw something, once, when I was in the staffroom.' Jake's voice is quiet, his words almost snatched away by the winds.

‘Saw what?’

‘I’d been in the cellar, getting a crate of milk for the coffee machine. It’s cold down there. At this time of the year, you can see your breath on the air. Not ideal working conditions but perfect for storing the milk. You need to keep it cold or it spoils and we can’t use it, see.’

‘Yes, I know.’

‘I was almost out of the staffroom when something made me turn back. It wasn’t a sound, as such. More a feeling. It was climbing out from the cellar behind me.’

‘It?’

Her eyes have adjusted to the dark enough that she can see him open his mouth then close it. She wonders if she should tell him about the things she’s seen, to confide in him, to share that which has up to this point seemed private and her own. She too opens her mouth but the words won’t come.

They stand there, gawping in the dark. Far below, waves slap against Southampton, and she realises that while the sea is black at night, it’s not the same black as the filter coffees they serve at work. This black shimmers, much more like the oil that sometimes leaks from her bike, lustrous in the light.

‘I’d just finished one of my first few shifts,’ says Jake absently. ‘I can’t remember when, exactly. It feels like a lifetime ago now. But I remember feeling tired. I got lost and I ended up here. I thought I’d be able to find my bearings, so I took these stairs — it was cold and slippery then, too — and here I was.’

‘What’s it actually called?’

‘A turret, I think. A part of the old city walls. Mostly tourists come up here, to look around and read up on history. My mother took me on a tour, when I was about ten. Now I come here to clear my head.’

‘It was nice of you to show me. It’s lovely.’

His shivering silhouette moves, seeming to unfurl in the darkness. ‘That’s what I figured. Merry Christmas, Tams.’

1.14 Epilogue

Long weeks working. Rain still falling. Heavy droplets, water crawling down bus shelter, dark skies bawling. Another day is done.

Through the grey a bus approaches, teeming inside, full of roaches, human insects, tired voices, 'Ticket please,' one grunts. Gift knows the feeling; hating, hurting. Sick of service, new-world weary. Inside bright. The windows dirty.

Loose change. Find a seat.

Near the front, two ladies talking, behind them, a young boy squawking, rows of faces, soulless, gawking. What's the world become? Tongues are wagging, swear words snagging, at the back three young men bragging. Stealing-shouting-almost shagging: Bus Route UB1.

All around her, buildings sliding, melting in the rain, subsiding, streaks of grey, rainfall hiding the city's sobbing face. Lived for ten years. Worked for thirty. Bones are tired, her body hurting. Heart hammering behind her ribs; an ancient, tribal drum.

At the back, the young men shouting louder, voices sounding harder, jostling they assess their larder: rows of easy prey. He knows the sort; no school, no teaching, fathers gone, their mothers breaching as they spawn clutches of offspring, hatching in the dark. The bus route is their hunting ground, their web where helpless victims found, like flies stuck to the city, to the monsters this world breeds.

Outside the road runs black with water; under doorways, people loiter, waiting out the never-ending rain that will not stop. Clouds were black at six this morning. Raining since the day was dawning. Since she stepped, long-faced and yawning, into another day.

Before her eyes, the young men changing. Altogether, outlines blurring. Faceless shapes, new limbs emerging. Monsters in men's skin. Arms are growing, bodies breaking.

Snap like pencils. Sounds like choking. Sucking. Slurping. No one worried, not awoken, dead to this, their world.

From the back it slowly reaches, twelve long legs, thick, dark like leeches bloated on a diet of human peaches; tender fruit. She watches as the creature prowls, she listens to its high-pitch howls. Once-hoodies, now great fleshy cowl, what is there to be done?

What can be done against this beast, which on soft female flesh now feasts, and when encounters men proceeds to beat them black and blue? This hatred has not always been, not always was, not always seen, but in this time, grown dark and mean, has found a place to feed -

- and breed, a human brood lusting for food and heat and life and dark corners to do dark things, now brave and bold, the human beast of Bus Route UB1.

Chapter 2 Critical Commentary

2.1 Introduction

Let us stand at the precipice and stare into the abyssal history of the sublime. Closest, we are faced by a front of absolute otherness, a postmodern backdrop against which a solitary red balloon bobs, tiny and untethered. Deeper, we can recognise a host of shapes: ghosts, angels, and innumerable Gothic monsters flitting through clouds that roll like the Carpathian Mountains across the void. Feel the 'Horror' and 'despair' John Dennis felt traversing a different set of peaks, even as he was struck by their sheer beauty, and recall the names of Wordsworth, Coleridge, Blake, Shelley: in the blazing eyes of the Romantics, the natural world shined with, or at least reflected, His divine light.¹ It is a brief, brilliant flash in the grand scheme of unspeakable things; stare deeper still and tremble at the undying heritage left behind by the Romans and the Greeks, classical myths and Ovidian verse composed from roaring rhetoric, its listeners and readers 'ravished or, more disturbingly, raped by the power of words.'² Listen as it elevates you and glimpse the commonality hiding beneath the surface of the rhetorical, the Romantic, the Gothic, and postmodern sublime, the experience of 'a sense for that which lies beyond thought or language'.³

The evolution of the sublime highlights a fundamental aspect of communication: while language is arguably the most powerful tool we have, it is not infallible. For as long as we have told stories, we have assumed the role of diary-keeper, seeking to commentate on the nature of the world around us, yet there are limits to our understanding, just as accepted reader response theory establishes our limited ability to communicate it.⁴ The creative writing field as we know it has been shaped by our endeavours to test these limitations, resorting to ever-more inventive genres, styles, and techniques in order to better offer commentary on our lives and our worlds. Teetering on the brink of the abyss and peering back across two millennia of sublime heritage, we can try to find new ways of testing these limitations in our fiction.

¹ *The critical works of John Dennis*, ed. by E. N. Hooker, 2 vols (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1939), II, 380-1.

² Philip Shaw, *The Sublime* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2006), p. 5.

³ Shaw, p. 3.

⁴ Roland Barthes, 'The Death of the Author', trans. By Richard Howard (New York: UbuWeb, 2011) UbuWeb ebook.

The sublime effect of elevating an individual above thought or language is key. From *The Iliad* to Ovid's classical epic the *Metamorphoses*, we recognise the important role that verse plays in engaging the reader and addressing them at sublime heights, particularly when it is delivered at the length and on the scale that Ovid in particular achieves.⁵ Cognizant of methods by which they too can achieve this, contemporary creative writers limited by word count or other constraints of scale or form can still hope to invoke the rhetorical sublime. The first method by which they can achieve this is through the considered use of lyrical prose made up of peaks, troughs, alliterative language, rhyme and repetition to create a compelling rhythm that elevates the reader and elicits a sublime response to the theme or story. The second is through the creative presentation of multiple narratives within a story and in the spaces between sequential narratives, both which serve to create a greater sense of depth through the fourth dimension while opening up opportunities to show, not tell, crucial characterisation and plot through backstory, painting a fuller, more moving and authentic picture of that which would otherwise evade description. (See 2.2, 'Rhythm, Verse, and the Stories Between Stories: Invoking Ovid'.)

Just as the Romantics' quest for the origins of the sublime led them to consider the role of 'the greatest Objects of Nature', so the creative writer seeking to employ the sublime as a literary device within a piece of fiction can employ the use of landscape and ineffable symbolism as its source.⁶ As demonstrated by Samuel Taylor Coleridge's response to a Gothic cathedral, this phenomenon is not exclusive to the natural world; by describing cityscapes, skyscrapers, underground transit systems, and other, suitably vast or staggering feats of modern industry, urbanisation, and human artifice, and by positioning their point-of-view characters as detached observers on the periphery of society, the contemporary writer can use components of character and setting to explore key themes, tropes, and issues important to them through the sublime.⁷ The use of ineffable symbolism to describe everyday objects can imbue those objects with a sense of the sublime, enabling the writer to optimise certain poignant aspects of their narrative for a reader response that transcends objective thought or the limitations of language. (See 2.3, 'Modern Cities, Social Media, and the Sublime Breakdown of the Self: Elevating the Twenty-First Century Reader'.)

⁵ Homer, *The Iliad*, trans. by Robert Fagles (London: Penguin Books, 1991)
Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, trans. by David Raeburn (London: Penguin Books, 2004).

⁶ Shaw, p. 29.

⁷ *Coleridge's Writings: On the Sublime*, ed. by David Vallins (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), p. 87.

Moving across the Romantic period, we bring to question the capacity for genre to influence sublimity, particularly when considering how ‘elements of cosmic horror [featured] in Edmund Burke’s notion of the sublime, and from there [...] passed into the poetry of the Romantics, and the first wave of Gothic novels.’⁸ From Bram Stoker to Mary Shelley, some of literature’s best-known and most-loved Gothic writers have produced works primed to elicit the sublime, not only through landscapes such as *Dracula’s* mountainscapes and the Arctic setting in *Frankenstein or The Modern Prometheus*, but through the overbearing sense of awe and the uncanny that Count Dracula and Frankenstein’s Monster induce as a result of their unholiness, their supernaturalness, their inconceivability.⁹ From Gothic horror novels to pulp horror, weird fiction, and the myriad of horror subgenres available today, the genre has transformed in significant ways, but the modern creative writer can still deploy, or subvert, Gothic and more recent contemporary horror tropes to align their text with the sublime and explore a theme or issue in new or dynamic ways. (See 2.4, ‘Terror, Tropes, and the Ritual: Genre as a Source of the Sublime’.)

That words have the power to raise the idea of the sublime was one of Thomas Burke’s key lines of enquiry and a founding principle of our understanding of the sublime as far back as Longinus. ‘It is language’, Burke writes, ‘that brings about the transformation of the world, enabling us to hymn the vastness of the cathedral or the depths of the ravine’.¹⁰ But Roland Barthes’ assessment that authors are always ‘dead’, in the sense that ‘they are not significant and do not control’ the way a text is read, could appear to challenge the creative writer’s use of the sublime to articulate key issues or themes; we write to express ourselves, yet the removal of the ‘author’ from this structuralist approach highlights our inability to objectively communicate meaning through a piece of fiction.¹¹ In this context, the writer’s decision to employ the sublime as a literary device becomes particularly poignant; by implementing the literary techniques capable of elevating the reader above thought and language, and by doing so in the context of a certain theme or issue, the creative writer can ensure that aspects of the text resonate with the reader on an emotional, if indescribable level, further opening it up to interpretation by the reader and, in effect,

⁸ ‘Enquiry into the Sublime and Beautiful’, *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, ed. by Vincent B. Leitch and others (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, Inc., 2001), pp. 539-551.

⁹ Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein or The Modern Prometheus* (London: Penguin Classics, 1992.)
Bram Stoker, *Dracula* (London: The Folio Society, 2009), p.33.

¹⁰ Shaw, p. 6

¹¹ Barthes, ‘The Death of the Author’

complementing Roland Barthes' notion of the 'birth of the reader' as it sits in popular culture.¹² The creative writer operating in this space should hold this awareness close in order to 'show, not tell' and provide the optimum textual environment for both the reader and sublimity. (See 2.5, 'Lost for Words: Roland Barthes and the Sublime Problem'.)

On the subject of theme, we turn full-cycle to *Metamorphoses* for evidence of the symbiotic relationship between sublimity and transformation. On one level, transformation can be observed across the collection, providing not just a theme but Feeney's 'unifying thread', a form of intertextuality that links even seemingly disparate stories and creates the satisfying suggestion of an extended narrative, even when the theme is explored in different ways across texts.¹³ The use of theme places a story in a wider body of literary discourse, from which the reader can draw to inform their responses and their understanding of the text. The writer cannot objectively define how their fiction will be received, but they can use language from particular semantic fields and extended imagery to consistently and imaginatively explore a theme in a manner conducive to sublimity. In turn, sublimity opens up the reader to 'feel' the theme, to experience and respond to it in a manner outside of thought or language. (See 2.6, 'Everything Changes, Nothing Perishes: Sublime Transformations in the Contemporary Tale'.)

We come back to ourselves at the precipice. Step forward and we will move through each of the sections outlined as we explore how to create the conditions necessary to induce the sublime in contemporary literature and how we can use sublimity as a literary device to examine that which otherwise evades description by arousing emotional, spiritual, or philosophical responses to key themes and issues in the reader.

¹² Barthes, p. 6

¹³ *Metamorphoses*, p. xiii

2.2 Rhythm, Verse, and the Stories Between Stories: Invoking Ovid

The origins of the sublime tradition can still be heard today amidst the slap of trireme oars, the Invocation of the Muse, and the sublime rhetoric, written or recited, that defined the literature of the classical world. Opening his seminal work, *Metamorphoses*, Ovid does not stray from this ritual, aligning his writing with the gods ('it is you who have even transformed my art') even as he reveals the scope of his narrative as being 'a thread from the world's beginning / down to my own lifetime, in one continuous poem'.¹⁴ The epic form's length as a source of the sublime cannot be demonstrated creatively within the academic restrictions imposed on this paper, but it can act as a springboard for the ideation of other means by which we are able to expand a narrative's scale, or the impression of such, beyond that which is explicitly stated. 'It is remarkable just how much of Homer, Apollonius and Virgil the *Metamorphoses* manages to encompass somehow or other', writes Denis Feeney, 'Great tracts of those epic plots and their accompanying characteristics find their way into the poem.'¹⁵ In doing so, Ovid positions his already epic poem within an even larger literary discourse, drawing from a wealth of pre-existing myths and public understanding to deepen the context in which he is writing and enrich its meaning and accessibility to an audience already familiar with many of the characters, settings, and sources of tension. As Wolfgang Iser's explanation of the virtual dimension attests, Ovid's use of multiple narratives across 15 books is key:

In whatever way, and under whatever circumstances, the reader may link the different phases of the text together, it will always be the process of anticipation and retrospection that leads to the formation of the virtual dimension, which in turn transforms the text into an experience for the reader.¹⁶

The effect can be observed when Ovid's narratives are broken into two parts, for example 'Phaethon (1)', which concludes Book 1, immediately followed by 'Phaethon (2)' in Book 2, reinforcing the virtual dimension's ability to deepen the reader's relationship with a text and its characters. The recurrence of

¹⁴ *Metamorphoses*, p. 5.

¹⁵ *Metamorphoses*, p. XXV.

¹⁶ Wolfgang Iser, 'The reading process: a phenomenological approach', *Modern Criticism and Theory*, ed. by David Lodge (Essex: Pearson Education Limited, 2000) p. 300.

characters and settings across the *Metamorphoses*' multiple narratives elevates the text above the ordinary and encourages the reader to respond to its people and places in a less cognitive, more emotional way. Looking to modern fiction and Poppy Z. Brite's *Wormwood*, we can observe a similar phenomenon; two different stories – 'Angels' and 'How to get Ahead in New York' – feature the same pair of protagonists, Steve and Ghost.¹⁷ The two characters also appear in a novel of their own, *Lost Souls*, as well as numerous other stories in chapbooks.¹⁸ In some instances, explicit references are made to events that have passed in the spaces between these stories, communicated through the use of flashbacks or internal dialogue:

Steve shook his head, then blew out a giant plume of smoke. 'It's cool. Terry said you could smoke right on the street up here, as long as you're discreet. He gave me this as a going-away present.' Terry owned the record store where Steve worked, and was the best-travelled and most worldly of their crowd...¹⁹

To the reader familiar with the multiple narratives, the effect is profound, offering stronger characterisation while connecting the reader to a larger, more rewarding story by hinting at further unwritten narratives in the spaces between each story, Wolfgang Iser's 'process of anticipation and retrospection'.²⁰ Writing within the thesis' formal limitations, the creative component adopts this approach by presenting itself as a collection of diverse yet connected stories. Instead of attempting to replicate Ovid's portrayal of a universal history within such constraints, its stories explore contemporary societal themes as a source of the sublime, which the modern reader will find accessible and relatable: in the opening prologue, we forego the ritual plea to Clio and her sisters in lieu of an inciting incident that at once activates the primary narrative while signposting the core themes and motifs. The children 'drink juice, help themselves to biscuits, laughing, throwing punches, wiping crumbs from around their messy mouths', introducing the importance of appetite, and we meet Lily, Tams, Winnie, Adam, Max, and Sarah for the first time, firmly establishing key characters with whom the reader will go on to build a sustained relationship and a stronger sense of intertextuality as they progress through the stories. In 47 words, we experience

¹⁷Poppy Z. Brite, *Wormwood* (New York: Dell Publishing, 1996), pp. 1-21, 135-160.

¹⁸ Poppy z. Brite, *Lost Souls* (London: Penguin Books, 1992).

¹⁹ *Wormwood*, p. 151.

²⁰ Iser, p. 194.

the uncanny through the juxtaposition of the children's 'calm, soporific state' with the violent act of their skin shivering and splitting, revealing shells and distinctly other 'long insect legs'. The closing notion that the children are trapped inside a 'steel penal-nest' further complicates the reading, capable of evoking contrasting feelings of relief that the 'hungry hive' is trapped and pity or sympathy for these seemingly innocent, carefree 'blue-eyed boys and blonde-haired girls' locked behind the gates of a 'steel penal' facility. Earlier drafts revealed the need for an opening story that defined the players and the context for the collection; this tapestry of issues, characters, and imagery aims to achieve this while creating a strong sense of dissonance conducive to the sublime.

It is not only Ovid's inference of stories between stories that contributes to the richness and sublimity of the *Metamorphoses*; in Book 1, Mercury's tale of how his panpipes were first created is presented as an 'Interlude', a story *within* a story that strengthens the reader's immersion in the text and contributes towards a more detailed web of narratives.²¹ A similar instance occurs in Book 3; when Pentheus asks the prisoner to 'tell me your name and the names of your parents. / Where is your home, and why do you practise this new religion?', the prisoner's story is presented as exactly that, a distinct narrative nestled within 'Pentheus and Bacchus (I)' and 'Pentheus and Bacchus (2)'.²² This layering of narratives is not unique to classical literature or the epic form; in the opening chapter of Alison Haben's *Dreamhouse*, the protagonist Celia shares three short stories — an untitled piece, 'The Porposal', and 'The Proposal' — written at seminal moments in her childhood, beautifully conveying the pedestal on which she places marriage in a way that simply telling the reader would not have achieved.²³ John Langan's *The Fisherman* explores this framework at novel length, with Part 1 and Part 3 of the narrative quite literally framing Howard's story, which forms Part 2.²⁴ One of John Langan's contemporaries, Jeff VanderMeer, affirms the power of stories within stories when he writes:

The intel begins to take on an almost luminous quality — hidden linkage and lineage interwoven with literary resonance to reveal a greater, deeper sense of the

²¹ *Metamorphoses*, pp. 39-41.

²² *Metamorphoses*, pp. 120-125.

²³ Alison Haben, *Dreamhouse* (Mandarin Paperbacks: London, 1996), pp. 4-5, 8.

²⁴ John Langan, *The Fisherman* (California: Word Horde, 2016).

complexity of the world.²⁵

In this context, the ability to arouse emotional, spiritual, even philosophical reader responses through the use of multiple smaller narratives within narratives takes on a much greater poignancy, enabling the writer to more impactfully explore broad, complex, or otherwise inaccessible themes and issues by layering stories on top of, or inside, one another. From its descriptions as ‘A haunting novel’, ‘illusory, frightening, and deeply moving’, and a ‘chilling tale, aching with desire and longing for the impossible’, we can determine that, for its efforts, *The Fisherman* has been previously received as such.²⁶ The frequent use of dreams is one way in which *Unspeakable Things* sets out to achieve this effect; in ‘Catherine’, the protagonist’s dreams take on the quality of narratives within narratives, as do the use of flashbacks, such as when she recalls visiting her father in his study. The dreamlike quality of the flashbacks and the lucid atmosphere of her dreams contribute towards the overall atmosphere of the story while calling out to flash fiction pieces such as ‘Imago Dreams’ and ‘Eve’, speaking to the theme that Catherine — and many of the other protagonists across the collection — are sleepwalking through their lives or living in a state of suspension, a ‘cocoon’, a suggestion that is furthered by Catherine’s habit of standing at the window and staring outside, setting her apart as ‘other’ from the world as she sees it.

The collection’s cornerstone story, ‘Adam and Roach’, is able to use its longer form to establish this more firmly. As a novella-length piece, it has the luxury of digging much deeper into characterisation and setting, signposting the importance of dreams as a means of exploring the protagonist Adam’s concerns and the story’s driving themes, in this case Adam’s repressed sexuality and, underneath that, the fear of change, which manifests more explicitly through his unwillingness to graduate and move on from what have been the best three years of his life. Through their presentation as vignettes within the main story, his dreams are crucial to these character and plot developments, the effect of which pulls the reader more forcefully through the narrative — and, on a larger level, the collection — even as they trace Adam’s changing nature and that of the world around him.

²⁵Jeff VanderMeer, ‘The Uncanny Power of Weird Fiction’, *The Atlantic* <<https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2014/10/uncanny-fiction-beautiful-and-bizarre/381794/>> [accessed 19 January 2017] (para. 6 of 17).

²⁶Langan, p. i.

The flowing sublimity experienced across the *Metamorphoses* owes its strength to more than the size of the text and the mythic scope of its intertextuality. We ride each poem, carried on an irresistible rhythm, observable across Ovid's writing and that of his classical contemporaries, from Homer to Virgil.²⁷ 'Inventive energy and driving self-reliance marked [Ovid's] writing from the start', Denis Feeney writes:

Poetry about passionate love and the conflicts forced upon a well-born Roman by a life of love had been at the heat of Roman literature since Catullus [...]. Following Catullus, a string of diverse and talented elegiac poets had in sequence collaborated on this tradition so as to produce a novel genre, known nowadays as Latin love elegy. [...] His major triumph was to make the tradition look as if it had always been destined to find its fulfilment in its Ovidian form.²⁸

The 'music' of Ovid's stories as it plays across each narrative and the body of work as a whole has the effect of elevating us beyond thought or understanding, lifted by its highs, brought low by its troughs, stirred beyond rational thought by each story's cadence, and that of the wider collection, as they build to their climax and resolution. 'The whole is often greater than the sum of its parts', writes award-winning novelist and short story writer Tom Vowler. 'Study the music of your stories. Motifs and symbols often repeat, allowing a greater connectivity with the reader.'²⁹ Take the presentation of the point-of-view characters as detached observers, which we will explore in more detail further on. (See Chapter 2, 'Modern Cities, Social Media, the Sublime Breakdown of the Self: Elevating the Twenty-First Century Reader.') Such characters repeat across the collection, becoming a central motif and a vehicle for the sublime, while the representation of night and darkness as liberating, if not soothing, can also be observed from the prologue to 'Adam and Roach' and 'Sarah'. Championing the use of rhythm is the epilogue, which was edited and reinstated into the collection to demonstrate lyricism's ability to evoke sublimity and in so doing stir the reader beyond rational thought and meaning. The opening paragraph sets a four-beat metre, 'Long weeks working. Rain still falling. Heavy droplets, water crawling down bus shelter, dark skies bawling', with the final sentence, 'Another day is

²⁷ *The Iliad*.

Virgil, *The Aeneid* (London: Penguin Books, 1991).

²⁸ *Metamorphoses*, p. xv.

²⁹ *Short Circuit: A Guide to the Art of the Short Story*, ed. by Vanessa Gebbie (Norfolk: Salt, 2010), p. 82.

done', setting precedent for lines that stray from this. Throughout, verbs are placed at the end of sentences to build and maintain rhythm both as a result of their active nature — each such sentence ends with the stress on a 'doing' word — and through the repetition of 'ing': 'Near the front, two ladies talking, behind them, a young boy squawking, rows of faces, soulless, gawking. What's the world become?' Rhyme is also employed to create the energy and pace key to sweeping up the reader and carrying them away:

From the back it slowly reaches, twelve long legs, thick, dark like leeches bloated on a diet of human peaches; tender fruit. She watches as the creature prowls, she listens to its high-pitch howls. Once-hoodies, now great fleshy cowls, what is there to be done?

Rhythm is also considered across the breadth of the collection itself. The flash fiction pieces punctuate the short stories between which they are nestled, providing the regular, repeated alternation necessary to create peaks and troughs of a rhythm while giving the reader the required space between the stories and feeding their imagination with what are effectively sound-bites echoing other themes or stories in the collection. We have already discussed how the prologue echoes many of the transformations and introduces the characters across the rest of the collection. 'The Flowers' reflects 'Winnie' for the way in which transformation empowers both female protagonists to devour the male characters. The flash fiction form meant limited space in which to explore a theme at any length; restricting the use of dialogue and focusing instead on description and imagery navigated this challenge, resulting in short yet impactful stories that nonetheless contribute significantly to the overall pace and tone of the collection.

'Adam and Roach' plays a key role in exploring the collection's themes at a formative stage in the collection's overarching plot, yet the inclusion of the novella-length story is unconventional and a challenge to both the collection's status as a gathering of short fiction and its rhythm. As Tom Vowler writes of longer works:

[They] can be lumbering beasts, cumbersome epics, weighed down by the contrivance of plot, creaking away even in expert hands [...] The novel's contrivance immediately sets it apart from reality as we know it; entertainment

and satisfaction seem its primary goals.³⁰

Furthermore, 'As it cannot be read in one sitting', Edgar Allan Poe writes of the novel that:

[it] deprives itself, of course, of the immense force derivable from totality. Worldly interests intervening during the pauses of perusal modify, annul, or counteract, in a greater or less degree, the impressions of the book.³¹

Such interruptions are not complementary to the burgeoning sense of sublimity the text aims to evoke in the reader, yet we have already observed in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and John Langan's *The Fisherman* that epic narratives can be sublime. By treating the collection itself as having a single, overarching narrative with a prologue, a conventional story arc that includes a beginning and an ending, and even an epilogue, *Unspeakable Things* sets itself out to emulate that structure and sense of connection, not to tell a universal history but to articulate in sublime terms a distinctly contemporary story speaking powerfully to its modern themes and societal issues. There is contemporary precedent for this; as opposed to many collections and multi-author anthologies, where tone, theme, and narrative are typically distinct or self-contained in each story, collections such as Laird Barron's *The Imago Sequence* more closely reflects the 'unified thread' effect Ovid weaves through the *Metamorphoses*.³² *Unspeakable Things*' opening prologue, with its reference to key characters, the dissonant tone, and the foreshadowing of events and themes to come, offers a brief yet assertive introduction to the collection intended to remain with the reader as they are carried through the stories. These characters' subsequent transformations in their own stories form the middle of this overarching story arc; visible across almost every story in the collection, conflict frequently arises from the characters' tensions with their setting or environment as a product of their otherness. In this context, the work achieved by the novella marks it out as a cornerstone of

³⁰ *Short Circuit: A Guide to the Art of the Short Story*, pp. 80-81.

³¹ 'Review of Hawthorne's Twice-Told Tales' <<http://commapress.co.uk/resources/online-short-stories/review-of-hawthornes-twice-told-tales/>> [accessed 3 February 2017] (para. 11 of 30).

³² *100 Hair-Raising Little Horror Stories*, ed. by Al Sarantino and Martin H. Greenberg (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1993).
Laird Barron, *The Imago Sequence* (New York: Night Shade Books, 2008).

narrative and plot, acting almost as a springboard from which the reader can dive, renewed, into the remaining stories.

Almost two thousand years ago, Ovid opened his epic by appealing to the Muses.³³ The relationship between the rhetorical sublime and divinity as set out by Longinus is immediately explicit as the text seeks to elevate itself 'above the ordinary', yet it is the epic scale of the narrative and the powerful movement of the rhythm driving it that we can most reliably draw from to elevate contemporary audiences unfamiliar with classical pantheons, less connected to religious experiences, and desensitized by popular culture to miraculous, otherwise superhuman feats.³⁴ Ovid does not offer the modern writer a map to the sublime, but he does provide us with a starting point. By devising and plotting a series of interconnected narratives that at once speak to each other and layer on top of one another, and by building a compelling rhythm into individual stories and across a collection as a whole, we can inspire exciting new dimensions capable of triggering sublime reader responses, better navigating the sublime abyss to create topical, contemporary stories indescribably rich in emotion and thematic resonance.

³³ *Metamorphoses*, p. 5.

2.3 Modern Cities, Social Media, and the Sublime

Breakdown of the Self: Elevating the Twenty-First Century Reader

Across the ages, the nature of the sublime can be glimpsed in the places we have looked for it. Thomas Burnet's quest for the origins of sublimity led the Romantics to perceive the natural world, 'the greatest Objects of Nature', as 'the most pleasing to behold'.³⁵ Eschewing seventeenth-century preferences for the 'serene', 'charming', and 'lovely', he saw in the natural world the 'Great Conclave of the Heavens':

And whatsoever hath but the Shadow and Appearance of the INFINITE, as all Things have that are too big for our Comprehension, they fill and overbear the Mind with their Excess, and cast it into a pleasing kind of Stupor and Admiration.³⁶

More viscerally, it was John Dennis who remarked, on crossing the Alps, that despite the beauty of his surroundings, the experience was 'mingled with Horrors, and sometimes almost with despair'.³⁷ So the contemporary creative writer seeking to employ the sublime's unique ability to elevate a person beyond thought or language should draw deeply from the world around them — both in respect to environment and their intended readership — in order to present their narratives in such a way that they have the best chance of eliciting this reader response.

Samuel Taylor Coleridge's response to a Gothic cathedral highlights how it is not exclusively natural landscapes that can inspire the sublime, but also suitably breathtaking examples of human artifice:

But Gothic art is sublime. On entering a cathedral, I am filled with devotion and awe; I am lost to the actualities that surround me, and my whole being expands into the infinite; earth and air, nature and art, all swell up into eternity, and the only sensible expression left is, 'that I am nothing!'³⁸

³⁵ Shaw, p. 29.

³⁶ Shaw, p. 29.

³⁷ *The Sublime: A Reader in British Eighteenth-Century Aesthetic Theory*, ed. by Andrew Ashfield, Peter de Bolla (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 59.

³⁸ *Coleridge's Writings: On the Sublime*, p. 87.

Cultural trends towards urbanisation throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in particular saw the development of increasingly expansive and advanced urban spaces so that by the mid-twentieth century, urban landscapes rivalled natural ones as sources of awe and inspiration, challenging the sublime's reliance on natural landscapes. This challenge is clearly visible in Clive Barker's short story, 'In the Hills, the Cities', a narrative revolving around two protagonists holidaying in Eastern Europe, who find themselves witness to a traditional battle fought in the hills between neighbouring cities.³⁹ Sublimity arises when characters and the reader alike discover that this battle is not fought with conventional armies but with two titanic effigies, the entire populace of each city bound together with harnesses and straps into the figure of a vast, organic giant, striding across the hills to do ritual battle with its twin, skin seething, rippling with faces and limbs as it marches on human feet, head in the clouds, screaming with the choral voice of a city stretched to breaking point. The first season of *True Detective* (HBO, 2014), itself inspired by the sublime horror literature of Thomas Ligotti, presents affecting aerial shots of modern Louisiana, communicating powerfully the sprawling scale of urbanisation, urban decay, and the insect-like nature of mankind, while Clive Barker's representation of New York in his short story, 'The Midnight Meat Train', further demonstrates literature's ability to capture the maddening scale, history, and sublimity of contemporary urban life:

After a hard day's work New York was on its way home: to play, to make love. People were streaming out of their offices and into their automobiles. Some would be testy after a day's sweaty labour in a badly-aired office; others, benign as sheep, would be wandering home down the Avenues, ushered along by the ceaseless current of bodies. Still others would even now be cramming on to the subway, blind to the graffiti on every wall, deaf to the babble of their own voices, and to the cold thunder of the tunnels.⁴⁰

Within the individual narratives and across the collection, the settings used in *Unspeakable Things* reflects this shift towards urbanisation, becoming sources of conflict against which the protagonists struggle in various differing ways over

³⁹ Clive Barker, *Books of Blood: Volumes 1-3*, (London: Sphere, 2013), pp. 122-149.

⁴⁰ *True Detective* (HBO, 22 February 2014, 9.00pm).
Barker, p. 12.

the course of the narratives. The presentation of a series of interconnected short stories as discussed in 'Rhythm, Verse, and the Stories Between Stories: Invoking Ovid' creates the sense of an episodic plot that extends across the narrative, creating the opportunity to explore this conflict through contemporary issues that speak to it, such as the growing tension between the rural and the urban ('Catherine', 'Sarah'), a widening sense of social inequality ('Tammy's Flight', 'Tammy (2)', 'Tammy (3)'), gender inequality ('Winnie', 'The Flowers'), repressed sexuality ('Catherine', 'Adam and Roach'), inner city crime (Epilogue), and more broadly across the collection, an endemic disregard for human life that is symptomatic of the world in which we are living and writing today.

As much as cities can be perceived as sprawling urban nests, they can also be claustrophobic, especially when examined through the lenses of economy, wealth, career opportunities, or other limiting circumstances. The narratives play on this to reflect the wonder/terror dichotomy of the sublime, incorporating a sense of the mundane and the claustrophobic that pervades the collection as a means of 'seasoning', or balancing, the sublime's strangeness and incomprehensibility. This is perhaps most visible in 'Adam and Roach', where the plot and university city setting allows us to follow the protagonist Adam across a wide variety of issues as experienced by the youth of today, from the trials of adolescence to leaving home, questions of identity, and the modern person's role in society. By layering these experiences on top of one another, the story builds to its surreal climax, wherein Adam's environment becomes menacing in an altogether literal way and reason breaks, leaving an absence of meaning and a creating a narrative primed to suggest sublimity.

Though it was ultimately omitted from the collection due to word-count limitations, the narrative for 'Human Prey' was heavily influenced by shots of the eponymous bridge and vignettes of Malmö illuminated in the night in Scandi-noir thriller *The Bridge* (SVT1, 2011–present).⁴¹ In particular, these scenes visualised the scale and scope of city, feeding into the way in which the urban environment was experienced and described by the unnamed point-of-view character. Driven by the need to create in this narrative and across the collection a sublime landscape with which contemporary readers can relate, these issues and the tension they create characterise the struggles of modern urban life in a way that its audience should find both recognisable and emotionally engaging.

⁴¹ *The Bridge* (BBC Four, 19 May 2012, 10.00pm).

Whether rural or urban, landscape draws its sublime power from its scale, its scope, its ineffability. The creative writer can draw from this same ineffability as a powerful symbol to describe an object that lacks the inherent grandeur of the sublime and imbue it with some of that power, in so doing turning it into a source of sublimity. Samuel Taylor Coleridge ‘Insists on the ability of the imagination to regard objects of sense as symbolic of the eternal’, an argument given practical expression throughout his writing and culminating in the philosophical musings of the 1820s: ‘Where neither whole nor parts, but unity, as boundless or endless allness — the Sublime.’⁴² In effect, this enables the writer to optimise poignant aspects of their narrative for a sublime reader response, highlighting or otherwise signposting a motif, theme, or description for the reader’s awareness. Examining *Unspeakable Things*, we can observe this in action across the recurring presentation of detached point-of-view characters and the extension of issues that echo from story to story, which creates a sense of the cyclical, the unending, the ineffable, that of lives repeating themselves over and over, time and time again, on an innumerable scale. The repeated visits to Tammy across three narratives lends strength to this, as do the various repetitions of familiar scenes across the stories: Tammy, Winnie, Catherine, and Adam staring into their reflections, repeated references to characters such as Tammy, Winnie, and Adam wiping down their faces or removing makeup, Winnie’s particular method of attack, echoed in ‘The Flowers’ immediately afterwards, and the characters’ sense of being apart from the rest of the world, whether we look at Adam watching traffic build up outside his house, Tammy noticing the same as she rides from work, or Sarah’s feelings of utter otherness when she remembers the village’s complicity each midwinter.

In ‘Swarming Phase’, another story that was eventually relegated due to formal constraints, this effect was achieved through the use of the colour red as a motif. The description of a barren, largely featureless landscape was a natural way of incorporating language suggestive of inconceivable sizes and scales. Presenting the landscape as being red in colour enabled comparisons to be made between it and other moments across the narrative, such as the red rain dashing the tower windows and the redness of the character’s menstrual cycle, thereby imbuing these otherwise commonplace, familiar events or experiences with something of the desolation of the landscape and the character’s world, ‘such that the distinction between the sublime object and its description no longer

⁴² Shaw, pp. 93-98.

applies'.⁴³ Repetition of the colour furthered this, suturing the story with redness as a means of overwhelming the reader's senses, in much the same way that Chris Beckett repeatedly describes the 'flutterbyes darting and glittering' and the 'bats chasing the flutterbyes' and the 'trees going hmmph, hmmph, hmmph like always, until all blurred together into that hmmm mmmmm that was the background of our lives' across almost every chapter and from almost every point-of-view character in his novel, *Dark Eden*.⁴⁴

The urbanisation of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries is not the only factor to have driven the shift in our perception of the sublime; modern historical events such as the World Wars, revolution, and third-world famine have had similar influences:

...providing painters with sublime subject matter with connotations of futility, ruin and waste. In a letter to his wife dated 1917, the artist-soldier Paul Nash attempted to convey the horrors of the battlefield and in so doing touched on the sublime theme of indescribability: the devastation is 'unspeakable, utterly indescribable', he writes, alluding to a 'Godless', 'blasphemous', 'nightmare' of a landscape 'more conceived by Dante or [Edgar Allen] Poe than by nature'.⁴⁵

No single quote or commentary accurately conveys the scale or reality of these events or the increasingly complex global political climate since, but through reading a body of such posts, a greater sense begins to emerge, a collective narrative that consolidates multiple individual responses into a larger, more affecting discourse. The enormity of events such as the result of the 2016 Brexit vote and Donald Trump's victory in the presidential election the same year could not be conceived by the opposition, whether due to lack of precedence, lack of understanding, or simply shock at the unexpectedness of the respective results. 'What we do know is that people like me, and probably like most readers of *The New York Times*, truly didn't understand the country we live in', wrote Nobel prize-winning economist Paul Krugman on Election Day.⁴⁶ In an article for *The Guardian*, Pankaj Mishra added to this commentary: 'Welcome to the age of

⁴³ Shaw, p. 6.

⁴⁴ Beckett, p. 4.

⁴⁵ Christine Riding, Nigel Llewellyn, 'British Art and the Sublime', *Tate Research Publication* (2013) <<https://www.tate.org.uk/art/research-publications/the-sublime/christine-riding-and-nigel-llewellyn-british-art-and-the-sublime-r1109418>> [accessed 1 September 2015] (para. 25 of 28).

⁴⁶ Our Unknown Country, *The New York Times* (2016) <<https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/projects/cp/opinion/election-night-2016>> [accessed 21 July 2017] (para.1 of 5).

anger.⁴⁷ It has become increasingly apparent that no single Facebook post or news report can adequately express the sheer enormity of these continuing events, the public feeling attached to them, or their potential repercussions. While public discourse flaps and flounders in its attempt to identify the whos, hows, and whys of these world-changing incidents, Pankaj Mishra acknowledges a much baser root:

[We] cannot understand this crisis because our dominant intellectual concepts and categories seem unable to process an explosion of uncontrolled forces [...] we find ourselves in an age of anger, with authoritarian leaders manipulating the cynicism and discontent of furious majorities.⁴⁸

The divisiveness of these subjects, and our inability to accurately and with any degree of authenticity commentate on them through any single social media post, article, or story, highlights the applications of the considered approach to form and intertextuality examined in chapter one, while demonstrating how those techniques can be used in collaboration with those discussed in this chapter to reinforce a text's ability to evoke the sublime and affect the reader in a way that exceeds thought or language.

Pankaj Mishra's approach to the subject and his emphasis in the article belies him as a writer of both political essays and literature; this failing of discourse has literary precedence in the sublime. He recognises the anger that many experienced when faced with this defeat of understanding. Traditionally, we rely on documentary photography and war artists to communicate the terrible reality of wars and disasters. This is even truer of the social media age, when it has never been easier to capture and share an image with worldwide reach. Conversely, this same technology has brought to question the accuracy and authenticity of what we read online, leading to the rise of fake news, 'alternative facts', and increasing numbers of lawsuits against the social platforms that facilitate them.⁴⁹ With increased scepticism towards the news journalism and writers' agendas, we could look instead to alternative forms, genres, and

⁴⁷ *Welcome to the age of anger* (2016)

<<https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2016/dec/08/welcome-age-anger-brexit-trump>> [accessed 23 December 2016].

⁴⁸ Mishra (para. 5 of 46).

⁴⁹ Joe Lazauskas, 'Facebook's Algorithm Has Unprecedented Power. Here's How We Need to Respond', *The Content Strategist* (2016) <<https://contently.com/strategist/2016/11/28/facebook-algorithm-response/>> [accessed 5 December 2016].

methods of storytelling in order to comment on such events; Alec Baldwin and Melissa McCarthy's sketches for *Saturday Night Live* (NBC, 1975–present) are a strong example of how satire achieved this following the presidential result, sublime perhaps for the way it highlights the ridiculousness of the event.⁵⁰ Here is a sublimity bereft of transcendence, representative of both a godless source of sublimity and a largely secular audience of onlookers receptive to it. Discussing the ability of *The Last Judgement* and other sacred art to inspire devotion in the godless, Pelagia Horgan writes:

I'd never been moved to tears by a painting before, but I was when I saw this one a few months ago in Florence. Yet if I step back and take in *The Last Judgment* as a whole – the saved on one side, welcomed by angels; the damned on the other, herded by devils; the celestial host above them, directing it all – it strikes me as an odd painting for a secular person to love.⁵¹

At surface value, the painting appears to have done just that; moving even the secular observer with its depictions of a medieval, recognisably Christian way of perceiving the world. And yet, as Pelagia Horgan identifies, it achieves this exactly for the way in which it 'sees people not as winners and losers, but as sinners and saints, and that sees the universe as ordered, purposeful and just, rather than chaotic, blind and indifferent.'⁵² Traditionally, on experiencing the sublime, the individual feels elevated, closer to god. As Pelagia Horgan describes it here, the contemporary onlooker finds sublimity in sacred art not through divine associations, but what they represent: a safer, more orderly universe, with clearly defined parameters. In this context, sacred art is still able to suggest sublimity in the secular reader precisely because that reader recognises the universe as being 'chaotic, blind, and indifferent'. To return to 'Human Prey', the text exemplified this for the way in which the protagonist described the monsters in the story's resolution as angels — not because he is experiencing a religious moment but because, after almost a decade of feeling lost and insignificant, he has found meaning to his life.

⁵⁰ Melissa McCarthy, *Sean Spicer Returns*, online video recording, Youtube, 13 May 2017, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sbpUcfpbnrs>> [accessed 1 August 2017].

⁵¹ Pelagia Horgan, 'Sacred art: Fra Angelico's frescos inspired generations of devotion. Can religious art still work its magic on the godless?', *aeon essays*, November 2014, <<https://aeon.co/essays/can-secular-people-still-be-moved-by-sacred-art>> [accessed 19 January 2016] (para. 2 of 36).

⁵² Horgan (para. 17 of 36).

On the subject of secularism, Philip Shaw writes: ‘together with increasing global awareness and media sophistication, we seem less inclined to regard the breakdown of reason and expression as indicators of a higher or spiritual realm.’⁵³ Instead, individuals experiencing the sublime reported a hollowness, an emptiness, an infinite void, not transcendent but immanent, marking a distinct change in the tone and feel of sublimity. In his article for the Guardian on depression, Johann Hari, an author who took antidepressants for thirteen years, writes:

Around one in five US adults are taking at least one drug for psychiatric problem. In Britain, antidepressant prescriptions have double in a decade, to the point where now one in 11 of us drug ourselves to deal with these feelings. What has been causing depression and its twin, anxiety, to spiral in this way? Could it really be that in our separate heads, all of us had brain chemistries that were spontaneously malfunctioning at the same time?⁵⁴

Johann Hari goes on to write, ‘There is strong evidence that human beings need to feel their lives are meaningful — that they are doing something with purpose that makes a difference’. Despite this, the evidence suggests that many of us are not. Here is the emotional trigger underpinning a range of contemporary issues endemic to modern life, many of which *Unspeakable Things* sets out to reflect in order to add weight to its characterisation and emotional resonance with its readers. Aside from the cornerstone novella ‘Adam and Roach’, which hinges on Adam’s anxiety around his life post-university and his role in society, this can be observed in ‘Tammy’s Flight’, ‘Tammy (2)’, and ‘Tammy (3)’, a series of stories that see the titular protagonist, a young girl forced to care for her dependent mother and two brothers, taking a job in a local coffee shop. In the same article, Johann Hari writes:

But between 2011 and 2012, the polling company Gallup conducted the most detailed study ever carried out of how people feel about the thing we spend most of our waking lives doing — our paid work. [...] Some 63% say they are ‘not engaged’, which is defined as ‘sleepwalking’ through their workday. And 24% are

⁵³ Shaw, p. 3.

⁵⁴ Johann Hari, ‘Is everything you think you know about depression wrong?’, *The Guardian* (2018) <<https://www.theguardian.com/society/2018/jan/07/is-everything-you-think-you-know-about-depression-wrong-johann-hari-lost-connections>> [accessed 17 December 2018] (para. 9 of 31).

‘actively disengaged’: they hate it.’⁵⁵

Many of the depressed and anxious people Johann Hari knows, he realised, were in the 87% who don’t like their work. Tammy does not hate her job, nor does the text aim to portray a critical or otherwise unfair representation of hospitality roles, but it is not the job she would choose in an ideal world. Her requirement to take on the role and the fact that we experience her in the position for two narratives, despite her intending it to be a temporary arrangement, demonstrates how, like many people today, she is trapped, or at least feels trapped, by society and her position in it.

Theorists like Friedrich Schelling deemed art a medium through which nature and mind could be consolidated, ‘this coming-to-be-reflected of the absolutely non-conscious and non-objective is possible only through an aesthetic act of the imagination.’⁵⁶ From our place as detached viewers/readers, experiencing the Gothic from the safe distance of a canvas or book, we are in prime position to receive nature and its sublime inferences. This relationship between society and individuals detached from it is supported by Johann Hari when he writes: ‘I kept learning that, in very different ways, we have become disconnected from things we really need, and this deep disconnection is driving an epidemic of depression and anxiety all around us.’⁵⁷ As detached onlookers, viewing the world from behind a window, the protagonists across *Unspeakable Things* quite literally fulfil this role, providing point-of-view characters that make the sublime more accessible to the reader.

‘When I interviewed social scientists from all over the world — from Sao Paulo to Sydney, from Los Angeles to London — I started to see an unexpected picture emerge’, concludes Johann:

We all know that every human being has basic physical needs: for food, for water, for shelter, for clean air. It turns out that, in the same way, all humans have certain basic psychological needs. We need to feel we belong. We need to feel valued. We need to feel we’re good at something. We need to feel we have a secure future. And there is growing evidence that our culture isn’t meeting those

⁵⁵ ‘Is everything you think you know about depression wrong?’ (para. 18 of 31).

⁵⁶ Friedrich Schelling, *System of Transcendental Idealism (1800)*, trans. by Peter Heath <<https://www.marxists.org/reference/subject/philosophy/works/ge/schellin.htm>> [accessed 4 June 2016] (para. 54 of 68).

⁵⁷ ‘Is everything you think you know about depression wrong?’ (para. 17 of 31).

psychological needs for many — perhaps most — people.⁵⁸

In our search for new ways of using the sublime as a literary device to elevate the reader beyond thought or language, landscape and environment was always going to play an important role. The sublime's relationship with place is well documented, but by identifying the issues shaping a place and by digging into the root causes of those issues, the creative writer can uncover not only the key themes their stories need to explore in order to be resonant, but also the emotional drivers that will enable them to create rich, authentic characters the reader is more likely to feel related to an empathy for, people as much a product of their environments as characters moving through them. By taking these steps, the writer can effectively weave their characters into the fabric of their settings, turning them into ineffable symbols as much sources of the sublime as the streets through which they walk.

⁵⁸ 'Is everything you think you know about depression wrong?' (para. 17 of 31).

2.4 Terror, Tropes, and the Ritual: Genre as a Source of the Sublime

In his essay, 'A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful', Edmund Burke posits that, as a sensation, the sublime can be recognised by 'overwhelming awe, astonishment, fear, terror — produced by great scenes in nature and powerful works of literature and art.'⁵⁹ The longevity of Bram Stoker's *Dracula* is a testament to the Gothic horror genre's sublime atmospherics, the seemingly immortal influence of which can still be seen across popular culture and in much contemporary writing today. Twenty-first-century audiences recognise the vampire and the existential threat he or she poses, whether or not they can agree on the nature of the undead or the rules by which they abide; over one hundred years since Stoker first put pen to paper, Count Dracula and his ilk remain an unknown force, even if they are no longer an unholy one in any meaningful sense.⁶⁰ Indeed, our perception of the sublime was to change again as this modern audience began to abandon its reliance on religion, replaced, and in part guided, by a global awareness and media sophistication. 'Less inclined to regard the breakdown of reason and expression as indicators of a higher or spiritual realm', His light began to fade from the sublime.⁶¹ In His absence, individuals experiencing the sublime reported a hollowness, an emptiness, an infinite void, not transcendent but immanent, marking a distinct change in the tone and feel of sublimity.

To understand how the modern creative writer can draw from the horror genre to evoke the sublime in contemporary fiction, we turn our attention to 'weird fiction' as a stepping stone between eighteenth-century Gothic literature and modern horror fiction:

It is perhaps appropriate that weird fiction, like so many of the beings and landscapes that populate it, eludes easy description. Is it a genre or an aesthetic? Does it represent a new literary evolution or a revival of underrated styles from a

⁵⁹ Edmund Burke, 'A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful', *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, ed. by Vincent B. Leitch and others (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, Inc., 2001), p. 538.

⁶⁰ *Dracula*.

⁶¹ Shaw, p. 3.

century ago?⁶²

Tobias Carroll's short essay on weird fiction resonates for the way it parallels the sublime's evasion of description. Predating the tropes, clichés and genre-centric motifs that would come to define a piece of literature as horror, science fiction, or fantasy, weird fiction was an amalgam of all these things. Certainly, some of today's most engrossing horror fiction draws heavily from its Gothic roots to inspire terror, awe, and supernatural wonder; John Langan's *Leviathan* lingers in the mind, while Clive Barker's descriptions of Lucifer ascending from hell are as beautiful as they are devastating.⁶³ Yet suggesting sublimity through the Gothic, even in contemporary settings, is not the same as identifying contemporary sources of sublimity; by this we mean modern scenes, objects, or experiences wholly independent of Gothic tropes, which today's readers find resonant and engaging.

Reflecting the concerns of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, weird fiction's predilections were less romanticised than those of its Gothic fiction predecessor. Themes of religion and God still persisted but they were joined by other, more progressive interests, many of which still bear relevance today, not least the sciences, rising tensions between race, ethnicity, and class, urbanisation, and man's place in the universe.⁶⁴ Mathematics, not magic, gave rise to portals; monsters became the biological products of interracial fears; gods still featured but these were monstrous, indifferent beings, dead or sleeping, sources of the sublime still but far removed from the Christian image of God. Sublimity and horror could be reconciled, then, in the absence of Gothic tropes, because the sublime is not bound to these tropes, rather, it draws its influence from what they represent, which is to say the unfathomable and the inconceivable, which form the backbone of one of weird fiction's most prolific writers and academics, H. P. Lovecraft. In perhaps his most famous quote, he echoes this when he attests: 'The oldest and strongest emotion of mankind is fear, and the oldest and strongest kind of fear is fear of the unknown.'⁶⁵ If there is a point at which the sublime begins to abandon its reliance on such

⁶² Tobias Carroll, 'Weird Fiction: A Primer', *Literary Hub* <<http://lithub.com/weird-fiction-a-primer/>> [accessed 3 March 2016] (para. 1 of 12).

⁶³ *The Fisherman*.

The Scarlet Gospels (London: Macmillan, 2015).

⁶⁴ Paul Di Filippo, 'Malign Universe: 13 Works of Cosmic Horror', *The Speculator* <http://www.barnesandnoble.com/review/malign-universe-13-works-of-cosmic-horror> [accessed 28 November 2015].

⁶⁵ H. P. Lovecraft, *The Annotated Supernatural Horror in Literature*, ed. by S. T. Joshi (New York: Hippocampus Press, 2000), p. 25.

overarching concepts as nature, religion, or the Gothic for more worldly and societal imagery, it is here, amid the sagging, downtrodden streets of H. P. Lovecraft's fiction, and those of his contemporaries. Huddled under sunken door frames, hiding out the driving rain, we witness for the first time a new kind of horror fiction bereft of its dependence on Romantic notions, and one which we can learn from when seeking to employ horror tropes in modern fiction to better evoke the sublime in contemporary readers. 'For such writers' as those of New Weird, Damien G. Walter remarks on the resurgence of weird fiction over the last two decades, 'the language of speculative fiction is the first and preferred means of expression, because it is the only way to describe a real world permeated on every level with unreality, fantasy and fiction.'⁶⁶ For sure, such weirdness permeates 'Adam and Roach'; from the description of Roach's arm when Adam touches it in the dark as feeling quite unlike a human arm at all to moment when Roach appears to buffet, moth-like, the door of the pub, the reader should pick up on an undercurrent of the strange and the other throughout the narrative without the story ever wholly revealing the true nature of these experiences or feeling like it belongs in the horror genre. This handling of what Lovecraft describes as 'weirdness' enables the narrative to speak to deeper themes like Adam's unwillingness to admit to or accept his sexuality in a subtle and ultimately affecting way while creating a web of familiar weirdness capable of evoking the sublime in the reader, particularly as the story builds to its surreal climax. A similar effect can be observed across the series of stories involving Tammy; allusions to characters appearing like insects feature throughout the narratives, from her first impression of Reg in his cocoon-like coat to her brothers buzzing around her in the kitchen. These allusions are kept subtle; Mark Chadbourn's *World's End* is an example of a novel where sublimity is undercut by the writer's decision to describe away that which could otherwise be indescribable.⁶⁷ (See 'Lost for Words: Roland Barthes and the Sublime Problem'.) Led by notable writers and academics including Jeff VanderMeer, China Meivelle, and S. T. Joshi, the modern resurgence of weird fiction gives a current context for research into contemporary sources of the sublime while serving as a reminder that there was a time when speculative themes were less strictly divided and

⁶⁶ Damien G. Walter, 'The new world of New Weird', *The Guardian* <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/booksblog/2008/jan/22/thenewworldofnewweird>> [accessed 31 August 2016] (para. 8 of 8).

⁶⁷ Mark Chadbourn, *World's End* (London: Millenium, 2000).

genre was more flexible.⁶⁸ Just as *Unspeakable Things* features moments of horror without feeling or reading like a work of ‘horror fiction’, the contemporary writer looking to manipulate horror tropes should not feel restricted by them when writing, enabling the writer to reference or encroach on themes of horror, the supernatural, and otherness in their text to elicit sublime responses without being bound to the genre as a whole.

Much like weird fiction, rural or folk horror is currently experiencing a revival across books, film, and television, led by novels like Adam Nevill’s *The Ritual* and programming such as Channel Zero (SyFy, 2016-present).⁶⁹ Hallmarks of folk horror are wide ranging but include predilections for pagan tradition, tribal beliefs, and an attachment to the land and its stories, all of which are ‘symptoms of the disease they purport to diagnose: manifestations of our troubled, citified response to anything natural, beautiful, and not mechanical.’ Michael Newton goes on to write:

Folk horror, which is the subject of a new season at the Barbican, presents the dark dreams Britain has of itself. The films pick up on folk’s association with the tribal and the rooted. And our tribe turns out to be a savage one: the countryside harbours forgotten cruelties, with the old ways untouched by modernity and marked by half-remembered rituals.⁷⁰

Here we discover in nature a contemporary source of the sublime far removed from its Romantic associations with God and transcendence; rather, sublimity arises directly from the frisson between the urban and the rural, and the dissonance caused by this twenty-first century tension. Across this research and within the history of the sublime, genre fluidity has precedence; as we explored in chapter one, Ovid’s poetic work was similarly transformative, leading him to make use of the theme of change in a variety of genres. ‘Characters and scenarios that the audience knows well from other contexts are transmuted into different genre and metre’, writes Denis Feeney, ‘with discordant effects that transform the way we think about both the old and the new contexts.’⁷¹ In

⁶⁸ China Meiville, *Kraken* (London: Macmillan, 2010).

⁶⁹ Adam Nevill, *The Ritual* (London: Pan Books, 2011).
Channel Zero (SyFy, 11 October 2016, 10.00pm).

⁷⁰ Michael Newton, ‘Cults, human sacrifice and pagan sex: how folk horror is flowering again in Brexit Britain’, *The Guardian* <<https://www.theguardian.com/film/2017/apr/30/folk-horror-cults-sacrifice-pagan-sex-kill-list>> [accessed 15 May 2017] (para. 5 and 4 of 18).

⁷¹ *Metamorphoses*, pp. xv-xvi.

Lynnwood, sublimity is clearly suggested through Gothic descriptions of the forest and the protagonist Freya's discovery of the village's macabre legacy.⁷² The setting is contemporary but the tropes are not; to push the boundaries of the stories and the ways they suggested sublimity, 'Catherine' and 'Sarah' play with Slavoj Žižek's reading of the sublime. In the former, Catherine's conversations with her cat set the tone from the outset as introspective, self-critical, and, of course, verging on the ridiculous, while the excess of tropes and other clichéd Gothic elements in 'Sarah' have a similar effect in the wider context of the collection, capturing 'a sense of schizophrenic nightmarish delirium' and offering different reading experiences to the traditional Gothic scenario.⁷³ In particular, their manipulation of Gothic tropes positions both narratives to construe meaning above and beyond their genre limitations.

By the end of the Romantic period, the concept of the sublime as inherently masculine was also being questioned by writers like Ann Radcliffe and Mary Shelley, which began to realign the sublime from a concept 'solely identified with the desire to manage and maintain a relation with threatening otherness' to one which instead explores 'the overcoming of restrictions, even to the point of death.'⁷⁴ Postmodern sublime sees this trend expanded on. By abandoning the sublime's slavish dependence on such overarching concepts as divinity, nature, and masculinity, 'postmodern culture endeavours to retain a sense of the unrepresentable as absolutely other.'⁷⁵ Folk horror has always been as much about frightening its readers as it is about crossing boundaries, whether societal, psychological or physiological. M.R. James overcame restrictions by bringing the traditional ghost story from its home in graveyards and castles to everyday settings, including the rural. Clive Barker used horror as a medium to discuss themes of sexuality, and Thomas Ligotti revelled in a particular kind of nihilism, which at once depresses while seeming to elevate the reader through sublime folk representations.'⁷⁶ The female protagonist for 'Catherine' and a strong female point-of-view character for 'Sarah' reflect this, demonstrating in these stories a conscious effort to step away from the Romantic sublime and closer to

⁷² Thomas Brown, *Lynnwood* (Sparkling Books, 2013).

⁷³ Slavoj Žižek, *The Art of the Ridiculous Sublime: On David Lynch's Lost Highway* (Washington: University of Washington Press, 2000), p. 18.

⁷⁴ Shaw, p. 114.

⁷⁵ Shaw, p. 116.

⁷⁶ *Necronomicon: The Best Weird Tales of H. P. Lovecraft*, ed. by Stephen Jones (London: Gollancz, 2008).

M. R. James, *Ghost Stories of an Antiquary* (London: Dover Publications, 2011).
Books of Blood: Volumes 1-3.

Thomas Ligotti, *The Nightmare Factory* (London: Robinson Publishing, 1996).

postmodern representations. On other rules governing folk horror, Michael Newton writes:

In these forgotten spaces, there are other laws: rules and rituals that are both familiar remnants of some tribal memory yet utterly strange. The locals understand, while we do not. Their rootedness in place becomes uncanny. Once, almost everyone was so rooted. But now – in the discontinuous world of modernity, where relationships are casual and work comes and goes – such belonging feels strange and even sinister.⁷⁷

The uncanny juxtaposition of the ordinary and the odd itself gives rise to a mood or atmosphere conducive of sublimity, one that suggests an ever-present menace, mostly succinctly surmised by H. P. Lovecraft when he wrote the following:

The true weird tale has something more than secret murder, bloody bones, or a sheeted form clanking chains according to rule. A certain atmosphere of breathless and unexplainable dread of outer, unknown forces must be present; and there must be a hint, expressed with a seriousness and portentousness becoming its subject, of that most terrible conception of the human brain—a malign and particular suspension or defeat of those fixed laws of Nature which are our only safeguard against the assaults of chaos...⁷⁸

From the unspoken suggestion of Catherine's repressed sexuality to the core conflict between nature and civilisation that defines both stories, this is demonstrated through its representation as something utterly alien to the protagonists: a base hunger, inescapable, uncompromising, and automatic, which overcomes both Catherine and Sarah as their respective narratives play out.

Wider reading of contemporary horror reinforces the presentation of *Unspeakable Things* as a short story collection; from Clive Barker's *Books of Blood* and S. T. Joshi's incremental volumes of *Black Wings* to specialist small press collections like *The Wide Carnivorous Sky and Other Geographies* and *Dark Awakenings*, some of the strongest and most influential examples of contemporary sublime horror fiction in print are short stories.⁷⁹ In sublime horror

⁷⁷ Newton (para. 9 of 18).

⁷⁸ *The Annotated Supernatural Horror in Literature*, p. 28.

⁷⁹ Clive Barker, *Books of Blood: Volumes 1-3*, (London: Sphere, 2013).
Black Wings III: New Tales Of Lovecraftian Horror, ed. by S. T. Joshi (Hornsea: PS Publishing, 2014).

literature, we find an experience that is deeply affecting, specifically the apparent oxymoron of 'sublime' horror, which denotes a genre capable of simultaneously horrifying its reader while moving them on a spiritual, emotional, or philosophical level. The writer looking to evoke these reader responses as a means of overcoming the limitations of language can also use genre to grasp their readers by the shoulders and point them at a mirror; horror has a rich tradition of social commentary, lending itself beautifully to the examination of contemporary morals and concerns.⁸⁰ If nothing else, horror is about these societal concerns; a genre brought to life by fear, terror, repression and the constant struggle for characters (and their writers) to overcome these things, or at least negotiate with them.

John Langan, *The Wide Carnivorous Sky and Other Geographies* (New York: Hippocampus Press, 2013).

Matt Cardin, *Dark Awakenings* (Missouri: Mythos Books, 2010).

⁸⁰ Susan J. Navarette, *The Shape of Fear: Horror and the Fin de Siècle Culture of Decadence*, (Kentucky: The University Press of Kentucky, 2011).

2.5 Lost for Words: Roland Barthes and the Sublime Problem

Like Family in Chris Beckett's *Dark Eden*, our ability to read, write, speak with and understand one another form the backbone of society, from information sharing, relationship forming, and emotional expression to the academic research even experienced writers find themselves wrestling with in the early hours over black coffee and feelings of existential dread.⁸¹ Portia and the other jumping spiders in the novel *Children of Time* demonstrate this beautifully; the ability to pass down what Adrian Tchaikovsky calls 'Understandings' enables the spiders to develop a sophisticated society more than a match for our failing human one, when the two collide toward the climax of the narrative.⁸² Yet it is long established that meaning cannot be communicated objectively through fiction. 'The manner in which the reader experiences the text will reflect his own disposition, and in this respect the text acts as a kind of mirror', writes Wolfgang Iser, 'the impact of this reality will depend largely on the extent to which he himself actively provides the unwritten part of the text.'⁸³ While this supports the use of the techniques around the writer's manipulation of intertextuality discussed in 'Rhythm Verse, and the Stories Between Stories: Invoking Ovid', it challenges the writer's basic ability to communicate meaning through fiction when meaning is so heavily dependent on what the reader and their experiences bring to the table. Roland Barthes' seminal post-structuralist work 'The Death of the Author' supports this, firmly positioning a text as the neutral party, with all possible meanings and interpretations sitting with the reader.⁸⁴ When Roland Barthes proposed this theory, the question of subjectivity was challenging traditional structuralist notions, which perceived the author of a text as highly significant in terms of their life, their experiences and how they intended their text to be interpreted. Roland Barthes' assertion that no aspect of a text's author, from their background to their recorded intentions, should or could be used by the reader to interpret their text means that text cannot have a single, objective meaning; it will mean a different thing to every reader at every sitting, a 'composite' of interpretations, as he describes it.⁸⁵ The subjectivity surrounding reader response also brings to question the writer's

⁸¹ Chris Beckett, *Dark Eden* (London: Corvus, 2012).

⁸² Adrian Tchaikovsky, *Children of Time* (London: Pan Macmillan, 2015), pp.554-593.

⁸³ Iser, pp. 194-195.

⁸⁴ Barthes.

⁸⁵ Barthes, p. 2.

ability to confidently evoke the sublime through writing, as noted by Edmund Burke in his examination of the relationship between aesthetic judgement and the sublime:

Thus some persons might seem not properly to value Virgil's epic poem, *The Aeneid* (19 B.C.E), not because their taste is defective but primarily because they lack knowledge and experience.⁸⁶

How, then, can we hope to overcome the limitations of language and better communicate meaning through fiction when meaning is so deeply personalised to each individual reading experience? Graham Mort offers us clues when he sums up the affect-theory potential of the written word beautifully: 'I'm still amazed by the potency of text – the way typography on a flat page (which means nothing to those not enrolled into that particular writing system) can have such power to transform experience.'⁸⁷ Key here and earlier throughout this chapter is the use of the word 'experience'. By using the sublime to elevate the reader above conscious thought and language into the realms of the emotional, the spiritual, and the philosophical, the writer is able to elicit deeply personal meaning, unique not only to each reader but to each reading. In its ability to achieve this, and its potential to evoke the sublime, the power of the written word remains unchallenged; we need only look to the transformative power and sheer longevity of the *Metamorphoses* for evidence of the sublime's intrinsic relationship with language. By presenting a theme, motif, character, or otherwise important area of a text in such a way that it is optimised to elicit the sublime in the reader, the writer can optimise these components of their text to be *felt* and responded to by the reader — whatever individual shape, experience, or configuration that new awareness takes.

When examining a text's ability to evoke the sublime, we discover that not only does our intention to evoke the sublime neatly sidestep the challenge of communicating meaning through fiction, but by embracing Roland Barthes' theory and focusing on showing instead of telling, as Anton Chekhov would have us do, we are able to create fiction that better evokes the sublime in the first place.⁸⁸ To demonstrate this, we can examine Mark Chadbourn's *World's End*, a contemporary fantasy novel set in modern times, populated with ancient Celtic

⁸⁶ *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, p. 537.

⁸⁷ *Short Circuit: A Guide to the Art of the Short Story*, p. 33.

⁸⁸ Anton Pavlovich, 'The Unknown Chekhov', trans. by Avrahm Yarmolinsky (London: Peter Owen Limited, 1954).

gods and goddesses beyond mortal understanding or representation:

They are more than they appear to be to human eyes, powerful symbols [...] These gods and everything they deal with are so alien they are unknowable. Their appearances, their motivations [...] Some are closer to us, like the woman you encountered between the worlds. Some are so incomprehensible we cannot even begin to give them form.⁸⁹

The text makes repeated references to the indescribability of these figures, and by all rights it should evoke the sublime from start to finish, yet it does not. Sentences such as ‘the attackers were preceded by an unpleasant feeling that operated beyond the five senses’ allude to why; by telling us that a character or object is sublime, rather than showing us in more creative terms that something is sublime, Mark Chadbourn reduces the fear, mystery, and unfathomability that is essential to eliciting sublimity.⁹⁰ Exposition defeats the exercise. *Unspeakable Things* reflects this for the way it in which it presents a familiar yet undefined setting; while references are made to real-life places such as London and Southampton, and the issues as explored in ‘Modern Cities, Social Media, and the Sublime Breakdown of the Self: Elevating the Twenty-First Century Reader’ are grounded firmly in the real, further details tying the setting to real-life events are revealed through non-specific hints, controlled dialogue, and vague references, preventing the stories from over-explaining themselves through the citation of events such as Brexit, president-elects, or any of the other specific nuances that shaped recent politics so markedly. No attempt is made to explain how or why the characters across the collection are transforming, only that they are and that this offers quiet commentary on similarly frightening and disturbing transformations happening in the world around us.

One challenge when limiting exposition is maintaining a compelling story arc. This will be a particular challenge if, such as with *Unspeakable Things*, the creative writer finds themselves experimenting with form and structure. Straying from traditional story arcs can surprise and delight readers or it can leave them frustrated and confused. By denying readers potentially key exposition, a novel (or interconnected collection) risks the reader’s ability to invest in and connect with the narrative(s). *Unspeakable Things* addresses this challenge using many of the techniques explored in ‘Rhythm, Verse and the Stories Between Stories:

⁸⁹ Chadbourn, p. 275.

⁹⁰ Chadbourn, p. 355.

Invoking Ovid' to draw the reader from one story to the next. When limiting exposition, the creative writer's success in this area will similarly depend on their ability to suggest narratives between narratives and create fourth dimensions for the reader to move through and draw satisfaction from.

Knowing what not to spell out to the reader, what to withhold, and what to limit to suggestion is as important for dialogue as it is plot. In Nadine Gordimer's words:

I learned to listen, within myself, when writing, for what went *unsaid* by my characters; what can be, must be conveyed in other ways, and not alone by body-language but also in the breathing spaces of syntax: the necessity to create silences which the reader can interpret from these signs.⁹¹

In literature and film alike, colloquial or convoluted dialogue frequently appears to harm a scene's ability to suggest sublimity. In Gareth Edwards's reimagining of *Godzilla* (Warner Bros, 2014), sublimity arises through the sheer majesty of the monster, the destruction it causes, and, at the climax of the film, the protagonist's realisation, alone on a small boat, staring up through the shadow of the monster at the night sky and the glimmer of distant stars, that his life is insignificant.⁹² Speech would have almost certainly broken the poignancy of this moment. Similarly, in Clive Barker's 'In the Hills, the Cities', the protagonists are struck dumb by the unimaginable sight of the two cities striding towards each other through the clouds. To interrupt this scene with dialogue would have detracted from its quality:

Poplac walked and Poplac sang. Was there ever a sight in Europe the equal of it? [...] The Englishmen remained where they stood, watching the spectacle as it approached. Neither dread nor horror touched them now, just an awe that rooted them to the spot. They knew this was a sight they could never hope to see again; this was the apex – after this there was only common experience. Better to stay then, though every step brought death nearer, better to stay and see the sight while it was still there to be seen. And if it killed them, this monster, then at least they would have glimpsed a miracle, known this terrible majesty for a brief moment.⁹³

⁹¹ *Telling Times: Writing and Living, 1950-2008* (London: Bloomsbury, 2010), p. 565.

⁹² *Godzilla*, dir. by Gareth Edwards (Warner Bros, 2014) [on DVD].

⁹³ Barker, *Books of Blood Volumes 1-3*, p. 147.

Instances do occur when dialogue seems capable of encouraging sublimity. Specifically, when used sparingly, and in a banal tone, dialogue can highlight a character's detachment from a scene or the dissonance between character and setting conducive to the breakdown of meaning. One example of this is the tone across Jim Crace's *Being Dead*, beginning as a matter-of-fact account of the biological processes taking place in Celice and Joseph's corpses and progressing into a dispassionate and cold perspective of their lives as told in reverse.⁹⁴ Here the tone works to prevent the reader from becoming too attached by perpetually reminding them that they are just that: an onlooker viewing Celice's life as a bird from above. In *Under the Skin*, Michel Faber accomplishes this expertly through Isserley's restrained dialogue when engaging in conversation, which generally extends to 'it's OK', 'I beg your pardon?' and 'Good'.⁹⁵ This disinterest communicates her literal perspective as a visitor, detached from Earth, and also the development of her character throughout the novel as she begins to reassess the meaning behind her role on the planet and her relationship with its people. Banal dialogue gives a subtle impression that the speaker does not care or is aware of the meaninglessness of their conversation. In some instances, dialogue can appear altogether insufficient at communicating meaning, leading the writer to forgo it in lieu of inarticulate sounds. Chris Beckett demonstrates this effectively in his novel, *Dark Eden*:

John started yelling, and then Tina. So I joined in, and then more and more people began screaming and yelling and shouting. And of course that made the babies yell too, and the echoes from all of us came back from the rocks on both sides of us, so it soon felt like the biggest thing in whole world was that screaming and screaming and screaming all around us. And the weird thing was that once we'd started, we didn't want to stop. The screaming said how we felt. The screaming filled up the whole world with our feelings.⁹⁶

When dialogue proved altogether insufficient, Antonin Artaud's Theatre of Cruelty inspired the use of inarticulate sounds as a means of navigating the limitations of language.⁹⁷ Winnie is an example of this, 'breathing hotly' on her husband's face before biting it off, as are the reported buzzing sounds heard in

⁹⁴ Jim Crace, *Being Dead* (London: Picador, 2013).

⁹⁵ Faber, pp. 290-291.

⁹⁶ Beckett, pp. 289-290.

⁹⁷ Antonin Artaud, *The Theatre and its Double*, trans. by Mary Caroline Richards (New York: Grove Press, Inc, 1958).

‘Adam and Roach’, ‘Sarah’, and ‘Tammy (3)’, suggesting swarms of vermin, clouds of insects, and inarticulate conversation variously. This is also emphasised in ‘Sarah’ when screams heard across the village herald the beginning of the annual feast, the announcement of a horrifying event that did not carry the same gravitas when explicitly stated.

There are striking moments in Mark Chadbourn’s *World’s End*, such as when Cernunnos, the Celtic god of the hunt, touches Ruth, where we experience the sublime as readers: ‘He reached down and took her hand. She shuddered at his touch; his fingers didn’t feel like fingers at all.’⁹⁸ Of note to the creative writer looking to recreate this sense of the sublime in their own writing, these instances are successful because they preserve the unfathomability of the subject or experience, maintaining the essence of the sublime even as they promote in us a strong sense of the uncanny. Earlier on in the novel, the sentiment behind Roland Barthes’ reader response theory is also beautifully expressed when Jim addresses the group:

We live in a universe where the language is one of symbols. Through it, the cosmos speaks directly to our subconscious, the symbols and messages repeating across the millennia. Words written by man are only interpretations of those symbols, so it’s never wise to trust them implicitly.⁹⁹

When looking plainly to communicate meaning through fiction, the writer will fall short, but by reducing their reliance on exposition, Jim’s ‘symbols’, and showing, not telling through their descriptions — in other words, trusting the reader to bring their own experiences to the text and interpreting it in their own way — the writer can evade the problem by elevating the reader above thought or language at choice moments in the text to highlight themes and facilitate opportunities for the reader to respond to — and in doing so, change their perception of — them. ‘A good book or a good film leaves us thinking, something moves in us and we are disturbed by a new awareness’, writes Alex Keegan.¹⁰⁰ This, the writer can achieve, particularly through the deliberate crafting of a text conducive to the evocation of sublimity.

⁹⁸ Chadbourn, *World’s End*, p. 441.

⁹⁹ Chadbourn, *World’s End*, p. 337.

¹⁰⁰ *Short Circuit: A Guide to the Art of the Short Story*, p. 134.

2.6 Everything Changes, Nothing Perishes: Sublime Transformations in the Contemporary Tale

To examine how *Unspeakable Things* employs theme to navigate the limitations of language, we turn full-cycle to Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and its handling of transformation. As described by Denis Feeney in his introduction to David Raeburn's translation of the text:

The title of the poem [...] and the myths that provide the source material for Ovid's torrent of stories are all linked together by this theme of transformation, which Ovid, with an insight of characteristic genius, had at some moment realized to be the single potential unifying thread that ran through the chaotically diverse bundles of stories in the Greek and Roman tradition.¹⁰¹

Ovid's extension of the transformation theme highlights how the creative writer looking to express a theme that otherwise evades satisfactory description can do so by threading it across a series of narratives, raising awareness of it. As a product of the time in which it was written, this notion of transformation is a fundamental aspect of *Unspeakable Things*, both in the individual narratives and across the collection as a whole; as we discussed in 'Modern Cities, Social Media, and the Sublime Breakdown of the Self: Elevating the Twenty-First Century Reader', the world is constantly changing, and people with it. The sublime experience itself is transformative for the way in which it elevates a person beyond thought or language and raises in them a new awareness of themselves and their world. However subtle, every story in *Unspeakable Things* features transformations in some altered shape or form, whether we are witnessing the children in the prologue shedding their skins, Winnie changing in response to her husband, the slow, almost imperceptible transformations of Tammy's friends and family, or the titular characters in 'Adam and Roach' accepting their true nature and taking wing. Within each story, these transformations are used to reflect different themes or issues. 'Adam and Roach' is about the university experience, specifically that the modern university experience is high-pressured and short-lived and accepting this is key to preparing for the next stage in life post-graduation. To build out this theme, the narrative is set in the characters' third/final year, a time when many students feel distinctly uncertain about what

¹⁰¹ *Metamorphoses*, p. xiii.

to do with their new degree and how to proceed after university. To these young people, rarely has the world seemed less welcoming or more unknown. This is a central source of tension for Adam, but communicating it explicitly does not carry the impact or gravitas it requires. A similar challenge existed when attempting to describe the transformation in the other stories. To portray them in an affecting, uncanny, ultimately sublime way, the collection borrows from the semantic field of insects, more strongly engaging the reader's imagination by animating the characters and their environments in an unsettling manner at once distinctly alien and inherently evocative of the broad urban themes such as swarm mentality, inner city congestion, and the human rat race.¹⁰²

From their physical biology to their life cycles, invertebrates and their transformations possess an otherness that writers have drawn inspiration from for centuries. In the *Metamorphoses*, we listen as Arachne's pride leads her to being reshaped by the goddess Athena into the original seamstress — the spider.¹⁰³ Equally, invertebrates demonstrate traits and behaviours that are all too recognisable; beehives and ant colonies are as close to societies as the animal kingdom provides, while swarms of locusts evoke images of the London Underground at rush hour. In his introduction to Franz Kafka's *Metamorphosis*, William Aaltonen likens Gregor's plight to being 'stuck in a 15-mile motorway tailback, or in voice-mail jail on the phone to an impenetrable utility company'.¹⁰⁴ More recently, *American Horror Story: Cult* (FX, 2011–2018) used bee imagery across its online marketing to comment on the hive-like nature of man while simultaneously playing to many people's aversion to insects.¹⁰⁵

As referenced earlier, *Unspeakable Things* introduces us to the theme in the collection's prologue. It is the first instance of transformation but it can also be read as every transformation that takes place across the stories, in this way mirroring *The Imago Sequence* — named after the series of transformations an insect undergoes from larva to adulthood — which alludes repeatedly to the emerging presence of an insect-like consciousness from beneath the surface of our world.¹⁰⁶ Ovid's, and more recently Laird Barron's, extension of their theme across their bodies of work does not only serve to highlight that theme to the reader but unify the collection as a whole, Denis Feeney's 'thread', furthering the

¹⁰² P. Passarin D'entreves and M. Zunino, *The Secret Life of Insects* (London: Orbis Publishing, 1976).

¹⁰³ *Metamorphoses*, pp. 210-217.

¹⁰⁴ Franz Kafka, *Metamorphosis*, trans. by William Aaltonen (London: Arcturus Publishing, 2017), p. 8.

¹⁰⁵ *American Horror Story: Cult* (FX, 5 September 2017, 9.00pm).

¹⁰⁶ Barron.

case for intertextuality made in 'Rhythm, Verse, and the Stories Between Stories: Invoking Ovid' and complementing the sense of the sublime that can arise from it.

For this to be successful, the writer's handling of theme must be deft, the premise woven naturally, almost imperceptibly, into the narratives. In *Unspeakable Things*, this is achieved by the considered use of language pertaining to the semantic field of insects and similar such details in multiple small moments across the collection. Kaaron Warren's short story 'The Human Moth' influenced the combined representation human and insect parts in 'Adam and Roach', as well as providing insight into the characterisation of how such a creature might move and think:

The human moth emerged covered in thin, downy hair. She has a photograph of herself newborn; she seems to shine in the bright light of the hospital. Her mother's arms, white, skinny, not hairy at all, encircle her. The human moth always loved the bright lights. Lying in her cot and later, on her bed, blinking at the light, screaming if it was turned off. [...] She liked it so bright it would make your eyes water if they were weak. [...] Maybe it was because she ate fabric. Strands of wool, pieces of material. They made fun of the way she ate, little nibbling bites...¹⁰⁷

The way Roach moves, for example when he buffets the pub door early on in the narrative, echoes the movements of the Human Moth, while moths' tendency to shiver before taking off to warm up their flight muscles added a further nuance to Roach's behaviour. In 'Where We Will All Be', Paul Tremblay's beautiful yet haunting descriptions of moths reminds us how fragile and beautiful they can be:

'Man, look at all those moths,' his father said. [...] The air was thick with thousands of moths, each the size of a nickel. [...] 'So, because it's warm out when it shouldn't be, these moths were fooled into hatching or de-hibernating, or whatever it is they were doing. I mean, they shouldn't be out, flying around like this.' The high beams were on and the extra light trapped the swirling mass of moths like a tractor beam from some science fiction movie. Zane suddenly felt like he was sinking again, this time into the car seat instead of his sneakers. He said,

¹⁰⁷ 'The Human Moth', *The Grimscrobe's Puppets*, ed. by Joseph. S. Pulver, Snr. (Florida: Miskatonic River Press, 2013), p. 43.

‘So what’s going to happen to all the moths?’¹⁰⁸

This awareness makes its way into various descriptions throughout the collection, most noticeably when we read of the softness of Roach’s arm, when Adam touches it in the darkness of his bedroom one night. Paul Tremblay’s story also had a direct impact on the conclusion of ‘Adam and Roach’, where the immediate horror of Roach’s transformation is eschewed for an affecting representation that better aligns with Adam’s character development and consolidates the theme; Adam has accepted the inevitability of change, coming to terms with the end of his university experience and this stage of his life.

Mimic (Miramax Films, 1997), inspired by Donald A Wollheim’s short story of the same name, portrays an incredibly disturbing take on human-sized insects beneath New York.¹⁰⁹ The collection draws from this in its representation of creatures that are part-insect yet part-human enough to suggest otherness and revulsion. When looking to express in writing the unique strangeness of transformation, there is no substitute for witnessing it first-hand; for the purposes of this research, invertebrate husbandry provided an up-close appreciation of how certain insects and arachnids move and behave, which went on to inform how certain characters were represented. In ‘Winnie’, the eponymous character’s attack reflects the way *phyllocrania paradoxa* (ghost mantis) strikes, while *rhombodera extensicollis* (giant shield mantis) provided inspiration into how Lily stalks her prey in ‘The Flowers’. Observing *lasiodora parahybana* (salmon pink bird-eater tarantula) moult demonstrated how truly alien this behaviour is and inspired the way multiple characters across the collection shed their skins at pivotal moments in their character development. Visits to the collections at the Oxford University Museum of Natural History, inspired by two eighteenth-century plate drawings of tarantulas and woodlice purchased from a second-hand bookshop in Edinburgh (Figures 1 and 2), revealed an entire floor dedicated to arthropods and invertebrates, featuring a working beehive where visitors can watch internal hive activity. The sheer scope of insect species on display feeds into the varied descriptions across the stories;

¹⁰⁸ ‘Where We All Will Be’, pp. 210-211.

¹⁰⁹ *Mimic*, dir. by Guillermo Del Toro (Miramax Films, 1997) [on DVD].

‘Mimic’, *Fantastic Novels*, September 1950 <<http://www.unz.org/Pub/FantasticNovelsSF-1950sep>> [accessed 1 August 2017] pp. 118-132.

the Smithsonian Institution attests to their being an estimated 10 quintillion insects alive on the planet at any one time, a breathtaking statistic used to inform the varied use of imagery to bring to life the individual transformations within each narrative.

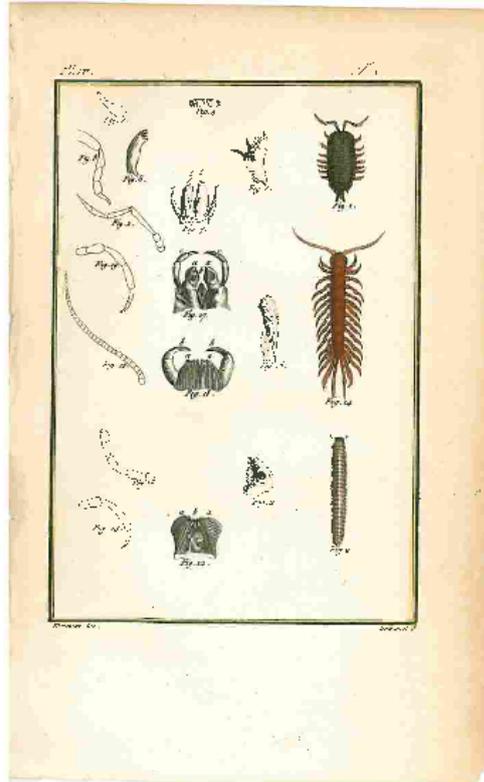


Figure 1: *Illustrations of insect anatomy*, undated¹¹⁰

The use of the transformation theme across *Unspeakable Things*, and the manipulation of insect imagery to evoke it, places the collection in a wider body of literary discourse extending far beyond Arachne to the earliest creation myths. In the *Metamorphoses*, this complements Ovid's mythical characters and settings, helping to bring the gods and their powers to life for the reader. We can imagine this being especially powerful to his contemporary readership, although the epic's longevity is surely a testament to how well that power still resonates today. Particularly in the grounded, contemporary, often urban setting of the stories in *Unspeakable Things*, the transformation theme suggests a mysticism and a sense of the otherworldly conducive to the sublime while providing a more objective

¹¹⁰ S. Duhamel, *Illustrations of insect anatomy*, Zoological illustrations. Collection unknown, city unknown, date unknown.

point of literary reference from which the reader can draw to inform their responses.

Research into the biological act of metamorphoses highlights its inherent violence; though we do not see it, the caterpillar literally dissolves inside its pupa only to be built back up from its imaginal discs. Samuel Taylor Coleridge's sublime response to a Gothic cathedral referenced earlier echoes this, as does the sublime dissolution of Isserley in *Under the Skin* when she contemplates being annihilated on an atomic level and becoming one with Earth's environment:

The aviir would blow her car, herself, and a generous scoop of earth into the smallest conceivable particles. [...] The atoms that had been herself would mingle with the oxygen and nitrogen in the air. Instead of ending up buried in the ground, she would become part of the sky: that was the way to look at it. Her invisible remains would combine, over time, with all the wonders under the sun. When it snowed she would be part of it, falling softly to earth, rising up again with the snow's evaporation. When it rained, she would be there in the spectral arch that spanned from firth to ground. She would help to wreath the fields in mists, and yet would always be transparent to the stars. She would live forever. [...] She reached forward a trembling hand. 'Here I come,' she said.¹¹¹

This process finds its way into the descriptions of transformations throughout the collection; from the children's 'skin splitting' in the prologue and Adam being 'annihilated a million times over' to the rhythmic yet repulsive 'arms are growing, bodies breaking. Snap like pencils, sounds like choking. Sucking. Slurping' in the epilogue, the characters' transformations are all the more disturbing when we consider the physical pain and the violence against the mental or emotional catharsis that they typically represent. This juxtaposition of pain and relief strikes a final balance, without which the sublimity of the transformations could be undercut by banal terror. Just as Samuel Taylor Coleridge's Gothic church is transformed into an emblem of the eternal and the unbounded power of the imagination, the characters are simultaneously broken down and remade under the enormity of their circumstances. Like the death's-head moths in *The Silence of the Lambs*, the insect symbolises change, and while the fear of change underpins many of the issues relevant to our times, embracing

¹¹¹ Michel Faber, *Under the Skin* (Edinburgh: Canongate Books, 2008), pp. 295-296.

it can lead to enlightenment, acceptance, even transcendence. In the context of *Unspeakable Things*, this is as true of its characters as it is of its readers.¹¹²

¹¹² Thomas Harris, *The Silence of the Lambs* (London: Arrow Books, 2013).

Chapter 3 Conclusion: Thesis, Antithesis, and the Synthesis of Meaning

We have always relied on language to dissect, discuss, and commemorate cultural shifts, but there are also instances where language cannot communicate the enormity of these events or their impact. In this context, Ludwig Wittgenstein's famous quote, 'Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent', assumes a more sinister tone.¹¹³ When we consider the crucial role storytelling plays in helping us to voice and make sense of these events, we recognise the importance of research looking at new and creative ways of doing so; in her lecture for the Nobel symposia in 2001, Nadine Gordimer presented an intellectual and affecting account of the nature of witness that writers can and should give to those seminal events that reshape the world and redefine what it means to be human. This research finds that, as an experience preoccupied with unfathomability and with the inconceivable, sublimity is key to achieving this; through its creative component and the transformations the characters within experience across the fourteen stories, it demonstrates that the modern writer can successfully draw on the sublime as a literary device not to mystify the reader, not to alienate them or to bring incite a religious experience, but to actively engage them in their stories and elicit responses from them to the indescribable themes they are exploring.

Identifying the means by which a writer can evoke the sublime through fiction meant tracing the concept of the sublime back to its classical roots, identifying the key intersections where it crossed over with notable literary movements along the way. In 'Rhythm, Verse, and the Stories Between Stories: Invoking Ovid', we identified how Ovid evoked the sublime in his epic *Metamorphoses*, providing the foundations for a set of similar techniques by which the modern writer can evoke sublimity in contemporary fiction, which is typically much shorter than the epic form and read by a public generally much more secular than Ovid's audiences.¹¹⁴ To build on the techniques evident in the *Metamorphoses*, we examined how verse could be used to elevate the reader by appealing to their imagination and compelling them to engage with the writing, highlighting the use of familiar techniques like alliteration, repetition, and rhyme

¹¹³ *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (Utah: Project Gutenberg, 2010), p. 23. Project Gutenberg eBook.

¹¹⁴ Ovid

to create peaks and troughs in the flow of a sentence and thereby incorporate aspects of verse naturally into prose writing. A second key to the *Metamorphoses*' evocation of sublimity is its epic form, creating a vast world that Ovid delivers as a universal history; to adapt this for the modern writer creating mid-length novels and other shorter works of fiction, we looked at ways of telling stories within stories, as well as taking steps to leave gaps in the spaces between stories, in the case of short story collections, citing contemporary examples such as *Dreamhouse* and *The Fisherman* as instances where these approaches are used effectively.¹¹⁵ In both cases, this attention to intertextuality creates a sense of depth (and in the case of gaps between the stories, a fourth dimension) that draws the reader in and encourages them to contribute their own suppositions, experiences, and responses to the writing. At much shorter length than Ovid's sprawling masterpiece, the modern creative writer can use these techniques to create compelling narratives that engage and create a rapport with the reader, not by telling them about the unspeakable event but by showing it to them over a series of rhythmic narratives.

A key channel of enquiry was the sublime's longstanding relationship with place; research for 'Modern Cities, Social Media, and the Sublime Breakdown of the Self: Elevating the Twenty-First Century Reader' began by examining how urban structures and other suitably awe-inspiring examples of human artifice could evoke sublimity with the same ability as natural phenomenon, enabling the modern writer to consider the use of setting as a source of sublimity even in contemporary, distinctly modern urban environments. Several of Clive Barker's short stories helped contextualise this relationship, but it was Johann Hari's article on depression that drove its development, providing insights into the hollowness or emptiness by which many of today's readers reportedly experience the sublime and how this corresponds with the topical discussions around depression, mental health, and questions of identity prevalent in twenty-first century Western society.¹¹⁶ The modern writer can use these links to portray more authentic characters embodying these traits and more believable settings reflective of the sublime that together can be used to communicate the indescribable.

¹¹⁵ Habens.
Langan.

¹¹⁶ 'In the Hills, the Cities'.
'The Midnight Meat Train'.
Hari.

The Romantic sublime's intrinsic relationship with horror was also a key avenue. As explored in 'Terror, Tropes, and the Ritual: Genre as a Source of the Sublime', some of the most effective contemporary sublime fiction sits comfortably in the horror genre, perpetuated by its supernatural figures, remote, often rural locations, and fixation with the unknown. From Bram Stoker and H. P. Lovecraft to Adam Nevill as examples from two-hundred years of Gothic and horror fiction, this chapter demonstrates firstly the evolution of horror tropes in relation to the sublime, and secondly how the modern writer can appropriate these tropes to incorporate elements of horror into their writing without having to embrace the genre in its entirety, creating points of sublime horror that speak to the conflicting emotions of awe and terror many attribute to the sublime experience in whichever genre it is encountered.¹¹⁷

One of the challenges that emerged when seeking to identify a means by which we can better offer commentary on indescribable events through fiction was its consolidation with Roland Barthes' reader response theories.¹¹⁸ It is widely accepted that there is no way of objectively communicating meaning through a piece of writing because the moment an author has penned a text, he is effectively severed from it. Any meaning the reader interprets from it is entirely of their own conjecture, the result of their experiences and preconceptions shaping their understanding of the text. Revisiting our existing research into the sublime provided the basis for a counterargument in 'Lost for Words: Roland Barthes and the Sublime Problem', specifically that by elevating the person experiencing it beyond thought and language, the sublime is not supposing to communicate meaning in the objective sense in the first place. Furthermore, by elevating the reader above thought and language, where they feel and respond to the subject emotionally, spiritually, or philosophically, the writer is opening up the experience to an emotionally driven, entirely personal response from the reader, actually complementing Roland Barthes' notion of reader response subjectivity.¹¹⁹ The limiting of exposition and considered use of tone when characters are speaking are simple yet effective ways of complementing this reasoning to ensure the narrative is showing, not telling, and providing the reader with a slightly detached point-of-view character facilitating the evocation of sublimity.

¹¹⁷ Stoker.
Lovecraft.
Nevill.

¹¹⁸ Barthes

¹¹⁹ Barthes

With the notion of meaning front of mind, the commentary turns finally to 'Everything Changes, Nothing Perishes: Sublime Transformations in the Contemporary Tale' and theme as a means of generating sublimity. In his chapter on theme in *Short Circuit*, Alex Keegan clearly expresses the relationship between meaning and theme:

Theme (capital T) (sometimes called premise) is NOT about a story's plot. It's what a story 'says'. It's what a story tells us. It's what a story explains to us about the world, or forces us to consider. Theme is a story's meaning.¹²⁰

By Roland Barthes' assessment, it is not important that we know how a text was written, what it forces the reader to consider, or why it was presented in its final form.¹²¹ What does matter is that it speaks to that which the reader recognises from the world around them, and that this theme is represented consistently and creatively across the narrative(s). For a successful example of this, we came full-circle to Ovid and the *Metamorphoses*, his handling of the transformation theme clearly illustrating how his text is positioned in a wider literary discourse, which the reader or listener versed in this area will automatically draw from to inform their responses and interpret meaning.¹²² We also looked at how transformations themselves can be sublime, at once a destructive and a regenerative process that, when highlighted in a text, can create a sense of dissonance and ineffability conducive to the sublime.

The referencing of texts throughout this research that to some extent demonstrate the written word's ability to evoke the sublime highlight that writers have been capable of this feat in some shape or form at least as far back as classical times. Where this research further builds on those examples is in its consolidation of multiple means by which the modern writer can achieve this and the parallels it identifies across the range of techniques identified. These parallels make it possible for the writer to layer or 'stack' these methods to create sublime works of fiction that truly sing. For example, the potential to create sublimity by telling stories within stories and between them, as identified in chapter one, supplements the consistent use of a theme across the multiple stories in a collection as covered in chapter five, further bolstered by the use of a recurring ineffable metaphor, motif, or mirror scene as explored in chapter two. Where

¹²⁰ *Short Circuit*, p. 134.

¹²¹ Barthes.

¹²² Ovid.

appropriate, these opportunities are signposted throughout the critical commentary, providing the reader with clear references to other techniques to complement the ones they are reading into. In this literary and historical context, the thesis as a whole should appeal to academic readers and other doctorate-level writers with pre-existing knowledge of sublime theory, the 'modern creative writer' referenced throughout, while remaining accessible, at least on the creative front, to general audiences more familiar with established and commercial literary genres.

A sublime response to an event or issue consists not of words but of inexplicable sentiments, of visceral reactions, of unspoken attachment, awe and indescribable fear. The search for means by which we can overcome the limitations of language to better communicate meaning is not a literal search for ways of using the sublime to tell the reader something, but of showing them something, of opening their eyes to a new awareness and in so doing changing their perceptions of the world as it appears on the page and all around it. 'Theme is the glue which holds together the whole, or the current the [book] sails on', writes Alex Keegan.¹²³ The writer cannot objectively define how their unspeakable subject will be received, but by raising the reader's awareness of it, they open up the reader to 'feel' the theme, to experience it in a manner outside of thought and language, what Nadine Gordimer calls 'the transformation of events from the immediacy into the enduring significance that is meaning'.¹²⁴ In doing so, the writer can turn it from an unspeakable thing into an unforgettable experience.

¹²³ *Short Circuit: A Guide to the Art of the Short Story*, p. 132.

¹²⁴ Nadine Gordimer, *Witness: The Inward Testimony*, online video recording, Media Player, <<https://www.nobelprize.org/mediaplayer/index.php?id=419>> [accessed 1 September 2017].

Appendix A

1.1 **Prologue**, earlier version originally published as 'Harvest House' on Pen of the Damned, *Damned Words 2* (Pen of the Damned, 2013) <<https://penofthedamned.com/2013/06/01/damned-words-2/>> [accessed 29 September 2017]

By night it's the children who rule at HARVEST HOUSE Correction Facility.

1.2 'Tammy's Flight'

Having escaped from HARVEST HOUSE, TAMMY finds herself alone for the first time. But the city is bigger and less welcoming than she anticipated.

1.3 'Catherine'

When the veil slips from the village's bucolic front, CATHERINE begins to realise that there is more to her neighbours than meets the eye.

1.4 **'Imago Dreams'**, originally published as 'Insomnia' on Pen of the Damned, *Damned Words 6* (Pen of the Damned, 2014) <<https://penofthedamned.com/2014/03/11/damned-words-6/>> [accessed 26 November 2018]

How many of us dream of an escape from a life we feel trapped by?

1.5 'Tammy (2)'

Years have passed since TAMMY reunited with her family. Now her mother is sick. To support her brothers, she takes a job at a local coffee shop.

1.6 **'Winnie'**, earlier version originally published as 'Lady Crocodile' in *Mirror, Mirror*, ed. by Dorothy Davies (North Carolina: Thirteen Press, 2014)

Staring at her reflection one evening, WINNIE embraces change, leading to a savage confrontation with her husband, SETH.

1.7 **'The Flowers'**, earlier version originally published as 'Pink Orchid' on Pen of the Damned, *Damned Echoes 3* (Pen of the Damned, 2016)

<<https://penofthedamned.com/2016/09/13/damned-echoes-3/>>

[accessed 29 September 2017]

LILY prepares to meet with a client. They rarely make it past dinner.

1.8 'Eve', published on Pen of the Damned, *Damned Words 9* (Pen of the Damned, 2014) <<https://penofthedamned.com/2014/09/23/damned-words-9/>> [accessed 29 September 2017]

The line between love and hate blurs when an affair is revealed, with deadly consequences

1.9 'Adam and Roach'

When a student goes missing, ADAM finds his perception of university subtly altered. With his dissertation deadline looming, he's forced to consider what matters most if he's to accept his circumstances and move successfully into the next stage of his life post-graduation.

1.10 'Escape', previously published as 'Half-Measure' on Pen of the Damned, *Damned Words 4* (Pen of the Damned, 2013) <<https://penofthedamned.com/2013/10/22/damned-words-4/>> [accessed 05 December, 2018]

There's nothing like a drink to shine a light on the world as it really is.

1.11 'Sarah', earlier version previously published as 'It Lives In Us' in *Twisted Realities: Of Myth and Monstrosity*, ed. by Gloria Bobrowicz (New York: Siren's Call Publications, 2012) and *At The Stroke of Thirteen* (North Carolina: Thirteen Press, 2014). Earlier version previously submitted for MA Creative Writing module assignment, 2012. Course convenor Aamer Hussein.

The COLLINS family remember the horror to afflict LYNNWOOD each midwinter, and in doing so glimpse the horror inside themselves.

1.12 'The Docks', earlier version originally published as 'RMS Valor' on Pen of the Damned, *Damned Echoes 2* (Pen of the Damned, 2016) <<https://penofthedamned.com/2016/06/28/damned-echoes-2/>> [accessed 05 December, 2018]

MARK is in for a surprise when the cruise ship ATHENA arrives at the docks.

1.13 'Tammy (3)'

Christmas is coming. But as the lights go up and the world goes mad, TAMMY finds herself more and more detached from the festive spirit.

1.14 **Epilogue**, earlier version previously published as 'Route UB1' in *Changes*, ed. by Dorothy Davies (North Carolina: Thirteen Press, 2014)

Riding the UB1 home, GIFT MOMBAL notices a change coming over some of her fellow passengers.

Appendix B

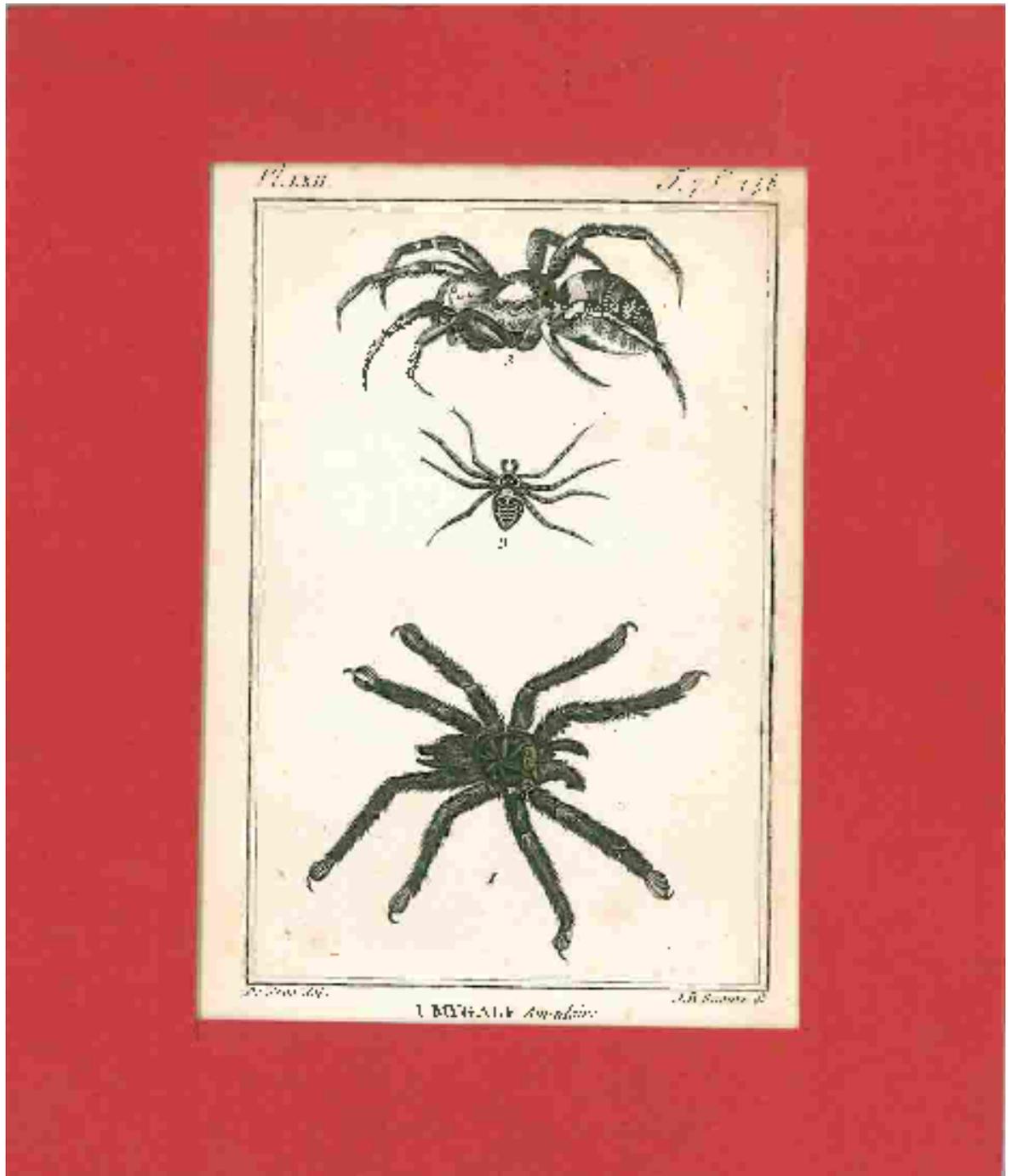


Figure 2: *Illustrations of various arachnid species*, undated¹²⁵

¹²⁵ J. B. Racine, *Illustrations of various arachnid species*, Zoological illustrations. Collection unknown, city unknown, date unknown.

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