

Dirty Work

By Ashley Dunn



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"We did have a slight lull, and so there comes a moment when you've just got to try it."
—Roger Bannister on BBC Television Newsreel, originally broadcast 7 May 1954,
"1954: Roger BANNISTER runs the first ever 4 MINUTE MILE | Newsreel | Classic BBC Sport | BBC Archive", <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Nb5AtK08gPM>

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So What Am I Supposed to Do?

Feel small, but not sure how I feel.

Like it's all false.

Like I'm faking it. A child, perhaps.

But not a lot makes sense still, regardless how much I read and learn and know. There's a lot of sense, I suppose, between abstract concepts – logical and rational sense dry on their own. But it doesn't feel like anything. Nothing feels like anything. Nothing feels like me. And no one or nothing feels like me anywhere, in the world or in these books.

Not sure if there's nothing for me – why there's nothing for me – it doesn't seem to be about anything I'm about on the outside anyway, as much as I pretend it is.

So many rules: show, don't tell; (any rule); do not swear on the first page. I tell you what, if I wrote a book, I'd write cunt on the first page and it'd be the best book ever written.

That Durkheim don't know shit. And that Leibniz – fuck me. Best of all possible worlds: right now? Right now is it? I suppose some people in here started to believe shit like that eventually: they saw the light, and we never saw them again. They suddenly felt good, got out the shit hole but I'm still here with me. And then I end up back inside too.

I don't feel a lot but I got a pen at least.

It's like it's the only tool I've got, this pen. To make sense of shit. As I got to understand me as no one else bothers. They just shout at me – shame me. Fuck them. I have to act even more perfect not to get shit, or feel I'm getting shit – when I'm being told I deserve to feel uncomfortable.

The things I could tell them too, the mugs. But show them, slowly. Show myself, slowly. That's the only way people handle and get it. Cannot tell people my shit directly – they just don't want to know. And I get that – got used to it. It ain't me, it's them and their biases and edges. Anything really good or really hard, they jolt at. Reject. Attack. So write it down and give it them at a distance. I know how it works.

Sick of it all. This feeling. This lack of feeling. Whatever this life has been, this ain't it.

My writing is alright, I think. It'll get better as I work shit out and practice. Just feel it out – fuck what they've all told me.

And I keep trying and trying and I end up in shit each time. Doing shit or being shit or with shit. And it's like it's my own fault and not. It's like I'm doing it, choosing it, and I ain't. I don't fucking know. I feel pulled or pushed by some shit that ain't me.

It's like I haven't lived any of it and I don't want to live any of it anymore. I'm either lying and pretending and wild and out of control, or I can feel something just ain't fucking right. I don't think it's a typical human thing, as why would it feel wrong? Against what would it feel wrong; what would feeling more right feel like? But something sits there unseen – unknown – and it fucking does my nut in.

I bet I could write something better than all them if I could be bothered. I bet anyone could. I'm sick of listening to all the shit saying it's hard, or that it ain't for us.

I act weird too, I think. I feel weird. I don't really feel like anything.

Feel like a freak. But it can't just be the books, can it?

Not seen there, but not seen here, and it can't just be sociological.

I have to care about so many things, and I want to. I at least pretend to. But, why doesn't it sit right yet? Why don't I care, feel like I don't care, feel like I can't care yet?

I don't care about anything but myself, and it feels right and wrong at the same time. Like I need to, but I'm not allowed to.

I want to ask questions. I want to work out what I think.

I've got to feel uncomfortable about everything before I feel anything.

I can't talk like this. Sounds adolescent. Amateur. But I can't do anything else, so what am I supposed to do?

They don't know what goes on there, but I have to know what goes on here.

But it still all doesn't make too much sense, all this discomfort. It doesn't logically, rationally make sense, to be this confused by it all. By all the world and myself. But it means something must make sense then: if all this is confusing and feels wrong, something must be left somewhere to feel – be – right.

Therapist said I won't do it on my own in my room, feel better. Other one said I'm difficult and need more support. But I got no one to support me, and she didn't even listen to me in the first place.

But I got something to say.

I don't relate to any of it. I don't see myself in any of it. I feel like I'm the one always being stamped on. Punched down. I have to know enough – know more, understand more – just to think they maybe ain't doing that, in case I get frustrated or angry, then they listen to me back at square one. But that's how it feels. Like the whole world and myself is against me. And I know it ain't no sociological or philosophical shit. It just feels like that and I'm fucked off with it now.

I think I'm actually alright too. Done some stupid shit. Like how I got back in there - oh my days, man, that was hilarious. We swapped all the number plates around at the garage that sacked Jimbo. And yeah we robbed a Merc and burnt it out down the road, but it wasn't like we was speeding and hurting people and shit. Wasn't even that bad really. I've read worse. But it was the final straw, the judge said, and I still chose not to listen. I've learnt the word for that too now.

They'll get what's coming to them. Like, they'll realise something, at best. That ain't a threat. No punching up or down at anyone. I'm just concentrating on me now. But once I get it straight maybe they'll get it too, then we'll all be cool with each other.

Because I'm fucking here like everyone else, feeling like a dog, and I am sick of it. And I am sick of being told it, when I don't know any different, and I am trying. I don't have the books or the words or anything that sounds fancy – that sounds clever or posh. I don't know – no one seems to want me anywhere.

I just feel laughed at everywhere because I know fuck all.

With all their wanky vocabulary. And you know what, I've read more than them. I just don't need to go on about it. I *can't* go on about it: try getting caught with a book or a pen where I'm from. Look like a right nonce.

Always telling me there's something wrong with me. All these "conditions" – I need proper assessment and "diagnosing" with something, they say. Just for expressing myself – getting angry or whatever. And the last one that said that kind of shit to me was about ten stone overweight, smoking, and let slip that she was on her second marriage and drank eight coffees a day – if she doesn't, she gets the shakes. And I've got something wrong with me?! Pfftttt it's a shit show out here man.

I'll take the pills they want to give me. Whatever man – cheaper than any other gear. But that's a racket too, and if I had mates I could trust I'd just get some shit off them still anyway. What's the fucking difference.

But the writing does help in fairness.

Hiding my light under a bushel.

And this poet come in or some shit like that. And I liked it, but I hated it too. Like, is nothing I'm currently doing good enough? And if it is, how the fuck was I supposed to know?

And I feel like nothing is for me. I don't even know where I'm allowed to go. I feel guilty about everything.

I just want to feel better. Books or writing or therapy or whatever else, I don't give a fuck what it is anymore. I just want to feel better.

I ain't poor or dumb or a weirdo or anything like that.

I ain't got no culture. What culture have I got? It all gets laughed at, and if I try anything I get laughed at. Or at least feel laughed at. What the fuck am I meant to do?

But I've got something. I've fucking got something. But there's something in the way.

And I feel stupid saying anything, or trying to be anything, or thinking I enjoy anything, or have a thought about anything. I feel like I know nothing, and can do nothing, and can like nothing.

I'm scared about saying anything. I'm scared about sticking my fucking head up to be honest. I feel I can't say anything. I just feel wrong about everything.

And I got all these different voices, sort of thing. Like, I ain't one of them nutjobs, but it's like all these different things playing out. I feel like different people, like I lose my fucking head, then I'm crying, then I'm out getting fucked and going wild and laughing again. And I don't feel in control of any of it.

And then I just get raging about everything. Like, when someone can't do something really simple, or when people say stupid shit, or when someone beeps at me on my bike. Just fucking raging, just like I was when I was like 15 or something. And I'm raging that I'm raging. Everything feels fucking tense in me, like simmering under my skin. In my bones.

There's not really any need for me to read or write though. Don't make much sense – no one does it around me. It's like some part of me is pulling me to it. Helping me or sumin. Because I get shit for it too, so why would I carry on doing it so much if I didn't need to, if it means getting so much shit? They can go fuc-

Nah actually. Not slating them either. They'll be a reason they're like that too, I suppose, and that's their story. But the stories we tell ourselves, man. The stories we are forced to believe.

They seem to help everyone though.

Haha fuck man as if anyone would believe I'd say shit like that in real life. Especially to anyone's face either.

I think everything is shit, then I read something I like and it pisses me off.

I tell the therapist the teacher my mates the inmates some shit and they just ain't having it. Then I ain't having it – I get confused and don't believe it. Then it's all your memory and shit that gets messed up – it's like a big blur in your head and your world. It's mad. Then I want to get out my face. That's the kind of shit I never read about really. But then I write about it and it makes sense to me, at least when I write loads and loads. Then that looks mad, man. Like, the amount of boxes of mad notes I've got. Fuck showing anyone that shit though.

Feel like dogs; feels like rats. And no one wants to know. It's like no one cares. And it all doesn't make sense. Feels like something is wrong with me and no one cares. And then it feels like it's my fault that that's the case too – that the world is wrong and that's my fault too.

I want to feel what beauty feels like, and joy, and peace, and happiness. Just some of it. I see these people that sit in the park with the sun on their faces, and I think they're cunts, but they can't all be making it up, can they? They must be feeling something like that?

Ah I hate talking this poncy shit.

Body feels ugly. Everything feels dead or disgusting and it doesn't make much sense, except that it has to eventually somehow, whether I work it out or not.

And then people look at me, and they see a rat, a dog. Then I see and feel it more too. But why does it land? If there ain't nowhere for shit to stick, it don't stick. So

I must feel like a rat, a dog, somewhere inside for some reason already.

I'd take that feeling a lot of the time too. Better than feeling nothing. Ah man it really does feel that empty sometimes. Some people can't believe it, but everyone I talk to around my way says they feel the same way too: nothing. Must just be this side of the world.

I tell you, it's lonely down here too.

No one likes me, it seems. Whatever I do is wrong, it seems. I have to be fucking perfect else I'm given shit, for how I dress or talk or act or feel. Then I'm just told I feel sorry for myself by everyone because I'm not, I dunno, one of the ones that has things shit or hard. Like I have it easy. Does anyone? It's like I can't say or feel anything.

I know it ain't really all that. Everyone can't be saying that and thinking of me. But that's how it feels. Not even feels. It's how the world is sometimes. Like everyone is looking and laughing and hating me. Like I'm filth. So where's that come from, if it ain't really happening out there?

You know what fuck it nothing made me feel that good and real and just normal if that's a thing – just writing down shit and working it out and seeing what happens. And in the weeks since I wrote that last thing and I've told a few people about it I've been laughed at again and been told that's weird and stupid and gay, and it don't even fucking make sense. My therapist even laughed about the gay thing, and he's gay himself, and I had to tell him that I got it though, why people say it's weird or stupid or gay, and he said he understood too. That was like some massive agreement – like we'd seen each other. But yeah, fuck it: I'm going to write and keep working shit out. Not to get at anyone else – I hope they get it one day too. But I'll do me first, then I'll go back and show them. That's if I get it myself. Because my body seems to hate this shit. It hurts getting it out. But it also feels like the only thing in the world.

All the encouragement in the world goes nowhere in me. Fucks me off at times to be honest – freaks pretending to be nice. But I suppose that's just me making it up a lot of the time too.

Building oneself up.

I feel like I ain't supposed to know this shit. People don't want me to know. Or they don't want me to know until they tell me. Or they don't want to listen to what I might know, might think, might feel. Constant fight, man. But if I look like I'm fighting, people give me shit for that too. And they'll still probably give me shit when I understand it all.

Ah man I hate getting caught up in putting it on others. It ain't them. Don't make sense else.

See it even makes more sense writing like this now – I know I need two words for feeling, like one for things I feel from or because of people, and one I feel in myself, or about myself. I mean they are still messy, but it helps me work out shit a bit.

I feel like my whole world is weird sometimes. Like the whole world is backwards, like it ain't all real or some shit. Something ain't making it all real.

Feel like that Truman Show shit.

I've thought some really weird shit too. Like, fucked up shit that those greebos and that think. Sad cunts.

I've felt really shit most my life too. Sounds a bit gay, but it chokes me up sometimes. Like, it takes my breath or whatever when I just look back and think, what the fuck has gone on with me.

But that's just poncey shit man what am I on about.

Feels like everyone laughs at me. Feels like I'm one of them freaks. Weirdos.

One of them said I need to wait to understand a lot of the stories. The darkness and beauty and humanity. But fuck that – I want mine now. Nothing feels

good. Nothing feels anything. I want to know something now.

Student

"I am the master of my destiny and I am all that exists. All will be mine to manipulate as I so desire. I have... no. I *will* have... no! Not that either...

"Fuck sake."

Saul S. Bound's morning routine ends here – with him reciting his speech to himself in the mirror. It begins with him writing a page in his journal and masturbating once while still in bed. He then gets up.

He puts on his dressing gown and looks at himself in the mirror. He then goes to the kitchen and puts the kettle on, performing thirty-two press-ups, twenty-four sit-ups and fourteen pull-ups while he waits for the kettle to boil (the number of repetitions per exercise has increased over time: they have gotten easier). He makes a strong black coffee, returns to his bedroom, dresses and drinks his coffee and again looks at himself in the mirror. He then goes to the bathroom and brushes his teeth, afterwards returning to his bedroom and the mirror to flatten his hair by wiping his palm from the back to the front of his head twice. Finally, he delivers his speech to himself in the mirror.

Today is day sixteen of the updated version of his speech and he is still struggling to remember it off by heart.

He reads the speech from the paper that is pinned next to the mirror, mouthing the words to himself, then stares back into the mirror as he attempts to recite it again.

"I am the master of my destiny and I am all that exists. All will be mine to manipulate as I so desire. I will easily be able to create a world of my choosing and all doubt and discomfort surrounding my being will be obliterated. I am destined for greatness beyond its human form."

Success. He acknowledges to himself that he will deliver the speech first time off by heart tomorrow.

Saul is in the first year of this undergraduate degree. He has moved to a big city and is studying at a reputable university. He has come from a background he considers to be other to academic life and everything is new to him. He is not fazed by this, having researched thoroughly what he was to expect from such a transition.

He did not move into university halls as is common for undergraduate students: he knew this would not suit him. Instead, in the summer at the beginning of his gap year, Saul started investigating the pubs in the leafy and green area of the city he wanted to live in. He began taking the two-hour train journey to visit the city and this area, befriending a man in his late forties in his third pub on his second visit. On Saul's third weekend visit to investigate the city, the man asked him if he wanted to rent a room in his house, "considering you are moving to this terrifying place – as you call it – for university, and you feel ill-suited to university halls, which I do not judge you for saying. Plus, I would enjoy a games night now and then, and everyone else around me is boring or twisted," the man said. Saul agreed to rent the room, but he would never participate in a games night with the man.

Much of Saul's gap year was spent researching, investigating, preparing for university in this way, something he labelled "Future Manipulation" in his files.

Room secured, Saul also knew from his research that it was important to "make one's environment (room) as conducive as possible to your own comfort and wellbeing when moving to university" (Saul's words, as quoted from "Future Manipulation"). Accordingly, Saul bordered his room with stacks of books, each stack containing around twenty books, all paperbacks, all starting on the floor: he has no

shelves. In the middle of the room he placed his wardrobe, an exposed rail from which hangs the same four sets of jumpers, trousers and shirts, as well as an array of band t-shirts. His socks and underwear are kept in a box under the rail. Next to the rail is a table that serves as a desk, atypically neat considering the large number of papers and books that are on it. Further along this middle section, next to the desk, is a filing cabinet. On the wall that runs parallel to this middle section, nearly covering it – top-of-book-stack to ceiling – is a set of whiteboards filled with notes, affirmations, schedules and algorithms. His bed is a mattress on the floor in the corner against two walls, a first-to-be-put-down afterthought that can hardly be noticed under the rest of this routine. He has two of the same coat hung behind the door. There is a portrait mirror on the wall next to the door. Next to this portrait mirror is a clock.

It is a sizable room (in the first week of living there, Saul had got the man to swap rooms, meaning Saul got the larger bedroom), but this only leaves a lot of empty canvas around function.

Saul has his first exam of his degree this morning. In fact, it is his first exam ever, excluding primary school assessment: his unorthodox route to higher education saw him qualify for university through a standout personal statement alone. The exam means this morning's routine is different, slightly longer. And while most of us would incorporate any novel preparatory tasks within our morning routine, still leaving a mirror glance (or speech) as the last thing we did before leaving the house, Saul decides this morning to complete his journaling and masturbation through to speech as per usual, and to then turn back to his room.

He goes over to his whiteboard and checks the bottom left-hand corner where there is a timetable and some notes under the title "Professor Fi". He is comforted by this check but annoyed that he could not trust himself to begin with. He then goes over to his filing cabinet and opens the third drawer down labelled "Assessment Preparation".

Inside this drawer there are dividers labelled such things as "Logical Assessment", "Freedom Writing" and "Retrieval", all marked with coloured dots. He flicks to a divider marked with a blue-coloured dot labelled "Pre-Exam" (core folders are shades of primary colours) and pulls out a sub-folder with a purple-coloured dot labelled "Clearing" (notice non-primary). It is empty, but he is here to put things away. He picks up some papers (all blue-and-purple-dotted) from his desk, being careful not to glance at them, and puts them into the folder, puts the folder back in the drawer and closes it.

He checks his watch and the clock. He does not want to, but he checks the "Professor Fi" timetable again. He then goes over for a final mirror glance.

"I will not repeat it again for you. You know. You already know."

Saul beams a huge grin at himself before leaving the room and the house.

"OK – this is good; keep going. Believe."

On this same morning, Professor Fiona Staple is in bed struggling to climax. She does not have an equivalent morning routine to Saul, performed diligently or otherwise. Still, she does routinely masturbate every morning (and every evening, sometimes twice, and sometimes at lunch), removing all her throws and cushions and teddies from her bed in the process.

After masturbating she sometimes smokes a cigarette whilst simultaneously making a coffee in her bedroom using the kettle she keeps under her bed. She will sometimes go downstairs to smoke and make a coffee with her housemates, conditional on what she hears downstairs. She may only smoke or she may only make a coffee though. She may do one upstairs and one downstairs, or both together, or neither at all. It depends on how she thinks she feels.

Her bedroom is the same layout as when she moved in: a desk, a set of drawers and a wardrobe line one windowless wall; the wall adjacent to this has two bookshelves; the third windowless wall has three bedside tables; her bed reaches out from under the window of the fourth wall, a four-poster sitting centre stage, drawing focus.

The wardrobe and drawers are closed but what is in them is tidy. The bookshelves share ten books between them. Candles in and on original and adapted candle holders – plates, wine bottles, tin cans – and many trinkets and photo frames, a lot of them decorated with the names of European capital cities, cover the rest of the shelves, all which are stained with burn marks. The desk houses six plants leaving little of a work surface, the bedside tables also supporting a plant each. Most other surfaces in the room hold plants too – they come up from the floor and down from the wardrobe. Fiona picked this room for its large window to nurture such vegetation. The throws and cushions and teddies that mask her quilt on the days she makes her bed are every shade of purple.

She rents this room in a house she shares with three other women. She met them when she moved to the city and into the house two years ago and she knows them well enough by now. At times they eat and socialise together, noticeably only in the second half of the week. She sometimes tailors her movements around where they are not.

“OK OK this is good this is good this is good just go believe please come let go... no... please...”

“Fuck sake.”

No success. She stops masturbating and vows to herself about tonight. Or lunch.

Fiona gets out of bed and dresses. She decides today is a bed-made day by making the bed, smoothly laying the quilt down and tightly tucking its edges between mattress and bedframe and meticulously placing each throw and cushion and teddy on top. She tries three different positions with one teddy before lighting and smoking a cigarette to study her finished work. Satisfied, she silently unlocks her bedroom door to check the corridor before slinking into the open bathroom to brush her teeth and hair. She glimpses in the bathroom mirror only as she slips back out through the door to return to her bedroom.

Back in her bedroom she checks the bag she takes to work, a perfunctory move she makes each morning, neither adding to nor taking anything away from it each day. She checks her watch; she knows she is late; not enough time to walk or wait for the bus.

“Staring at teddies too long – naughty little girl.”

Fiona rushes out of the room and the house.

Saul and Fiona are both on foot on the way to their destination. Saul affords himself his usual polished pace. Fiona fluctuates between running, speed walking and stopping to find her lighter so she can walk and smoke.

Saul rests on a bench near the entrance and closes his eyes for a minute. Fiona is finding her lighter. Saul gets up and approaches the building. Fiona decides against approaching the coffee van. Saul, walking into the building, says “Morning” to some students gathered early in the lobby. Fiona, still commuting, is “Excuse me”-ing her way through campus crowds.

“What the fuck are you doing here before 9, me old fruit?” Saul asks a peer, not waiting for reply. Fiona, not wanting one, asks herself, “Who the fuck would have office hours at 9 am?”

Saul heads upstairs. Fiona puts her head down to pick up pace. Saul finds the office he needs with the door open and takes a seat. Fiona lights another cigarette

and changes her pace into a walk.

The words “FACTOR DELAYS” come to Saul’s mind. He has these underlined in the bottom left-hand corner of his whiteboard. He checks his watch: it has just turned 9 am. He makes a prediction of six minutes and leans back into the seat.

Fiona is still moving across campus, temporarily ignorant to her hours to come. With the building in sight she lights one more cigarette, knowing that the first half will get her to the building and the second half can be finished at the front door. She arrives outside and leans on the wall.

Downstairs and upstairs, outside and in, Fiona and Saul check their watches. She stubs out her cigarette as he flicks through some papers. She enters the building as he leans forward to flick pencil sharpenings off a desk. She walks up the stairs as he eases back and down.

“Morning, Professor. The door was open.”

Fiona enters her office to find Saul sitting in her chair on the other side of her desk. He was facing the opened door, seemingly waiting.

They stare at each other, her still in the doorway holding the handle, him leaning back in her chair with his hands knitted together. Saul lets this last five seconds before saying, “Oh, do forgive me!” which parallels his exit from the chair. He moves around the desk to the chair on the opposite side while Fiona hangs her bag and coat on the back of the door. She then goes the opposite way to Saul, walking around the desk and sitting down.

“No problem. I’m sorry I’m late.” She checks her watch. 9:06.

“What are you late for?”

“Well, my office hours start at 9 am on Tuesdays. I assume that is what you are here for.”

“Oh yes – office hours. Yes – that’s why I’m here. I nearly forgot myself in all that palaver! Sorry again – I wanted to see how it was to sit in that position.”

“What position?”

“Professorship, do you call it?”

“Ah. I see. My career position. Well, how was it? Did it feel different?”

“I do not go in for feelings. It did seem the same round there though.”

“You must go in for *some* feelings, with a band like that on your chest. Excellent choice!”

This was in Saul’s favour, but he was unsure how to respond: he had forgotten his t-shirt; he had overlooked his method.

“Yes – thanks. I like them. I forgotten I’d put this on today.” This was an honest reply.

“OK. I enjoy them and your t-shirt very much. Anyway, good morning. What brings you here today, Saul?”

Fiona knew Saul. She had lectured to him this term and he had always asked sharp questions. There was talk of “the boy’s reputation” surrounding him – some trademarked infamy that had reached the department through Saul’s previous. This was his first visit to her office hours though – there were stories about his visits to others’ office hours. She remained impartial. She wanted her own demonstration.

“Well, I have the exam this morning, and I am feeling rather unsettled about it. Out of my depth. Imposter syndrome, I suppose, but I do not like to acknowledge the term. This may not be the time or place for this.”

“OK, Saul. Sorry to hear that. It is certainly one of the places for that here though. But I can assure you, from what I have seen and heard of you, you do not appear to be out of your depth. And I know imposter syndrome is a very common phenomenon for many students, especially if they are finding academia quite a contrast to their previous experiences.”

“Yes, that is what I relate to. My cultural capital was non-existent prior to coming here, you see, and I am not used to these people. These words. It can feel very overwhelming.”

“Well, I am sorry to hear that is the case, but I can only reiterate, that from where I’m sitting, you seem to have got off to a brilliant start. Your contributions in my lectures are much valued.”

“Yes, well, I am just saying what I think. I do not usually think what I say counts for a lot, so thank you for your compliment. But still, I am uneasy.”

Saul is warmed up. Fiona is warmed.

“What are you uneasy about? The exam?”

“I do not suppose I am now, no – although that is how my unease had initially manifest itself and it is why I came here in the first place. Now that we have talked about that though, I feel a sense of loss with the whole thing.”

“The whole thing?”

“It does not make sense, does it. None of it makes sense. The best I can come up with is tenuous links, not complete truths. Nothing seems to follow strictly from one thing. I can think of one hundred things that follow on from any one premise. It is all random bits thrown about. To pretend otherwise is embarrassing. I do not want to even get into that though. The point is, how can I write any of it – why have I *got to* – if I do not *want to*?”

“The boy’s reputation” comes to Fiona as she composes a smile on her face. Seeing this, Saul knows it is early days. Fiona starts to reply.

“Don’t then, if you don’t want to. Or more realistically, start there and use that as your tool of argument. Or your first premise. You-“

“I know the individual may need theories, stories, myths, meaning, fences, oceans to explain themselves. They want to be understood in conversation and shop windows – they want to feel the manners in exchanges. That requires understanding towers and webs, ones that reach up and stretch out catching everything. Hidden under floorboards somewhere, sometimes. But it must come back to *them*. We should not stay up there, going further up and out if there is more down here to be seen to, understood, fixed, completed. So I have no care for what a particular person said about a particular world far away *for its own sake*, and nor should you. Me-search, me-search, me-search. We should be telling everyone – *showing* everyone. Dangle the way in front of them as shiny signs, just to catch their eye. Stationary signs do not help. But, how can any of it be explained without the individual? How can it be reconciled prior to the individual? How can I feel like this and try to help anyone? How can there be an ontology without a self? It is all phenomenological, but I hate the word. How can I trust the word of the author – artist, scientist, accountant – if I do not know about their life? Their sins? Their prescriptions? There are not going to talk about that in their works, but they are needed to inform the reader. Sedatives will give an author their cool, so if they are not taking them, then what? No discovery. No output. But then no need for it either. The author does not keep going – no, I do not mean in that way; I mean maybe they have found their poise elsewhere, in just going for walks or shouting at things, so they do not need to produce; and maybe – fortunately – no one then needs to read them. But as I alluded to, I do not want to hear about people. About the individual authors. It is not important just because a famed-scholar wrote it. They produced what they produced; read it as it is – without the I – and stop making links they did not want you to make. And ignore who it went through too, like the unconscious artist that has been touched by the divine: stop trying to link it back to the conduit. It has nothing to do with them, does it, in these cases. They just produced what was dictated to them.”

Fiona is still composed but tickled with curiosity.

“Saul, we cannot discuss the specifics of how you plan to approach the

exam, and I am sympathetic to some of your positions here. But I am not sure how all this material is relevant to 'Texts in...'-' But again he cuts her off, this time by standing up and leaning over her desk looking at her papers.

"And you can stop working on..." Saul attempts to reread the title of one of the papers Fiona has been editing on her desk. She covers them up before he can see them.

"That there:" – he points at the papers – "that does not help. That just creates more of all this," and he swings his arms around himself in a wide circle, his hands starting at waist height before getting higher and higher until they are above his head. He stares at her the whole time he is doing this, around six seconds of silence and waving, then he lowers his hands and sits back down. "More of all this to be undone and forgot about. Get. Over. It."

Composure all but gone, worry has been added to Fiona's curiosity. "Saul, I am somewhat alarmed, but I am still somewhat with you. I can see you could go either way with this." She wants him to go one way. "As an aside – and I am just verifying something here – but have you tried talking to the student health service?"

"What do they know of metaphysics, or the lack of its importance? OK – irrelevant subject; but does it matter? Still, how can they help me demonstrate that we do not need names in books? Quotes from others to help me out – to get any of us going: is that really necessary? Is that really what you are recommending? *Promoting?*" Saul is aware he is having some faint murmurs of worry. He felt it would work by now. Fiona remains silent. She is still curious and worried, but underneath that she feels some excitement. Saul goes on.

"I will argue.' I bet you fucking will." This swearing sounded very other to him and for the room. It did not fit well. He noticed and noted this mentally: "Something to work on."

"I will argue.' 'This essay seeks' – no; 'This essay will' – NO; 'This essay will seek to'." He manufactures a grimace as he again waves a hand in the air to rub an imaginary whiteboard. "No. It is always – even when it is not explicitly written; even when the writing does not begin with it – it is always 'This essay will seek too.'" And he slants his whole upper body and seemingly the whole room with him. "That is all anyone is saying: 'This essay will seek too.' Look at the end; look at the full stop. 'I will also seek in the same way, in the same direction, down and down and down, pretending it is up.' Like I said: *me-search*."

He had worked on it by now: "Just fucking stop," he said, eye contact with Fiona, delivery to the audience. This one sounded much better. His worried murmurs had not lasted long.

Fiona, now not worried either, still curious, more excited, feels her cheeks twinge. Saul continues.

"People do not matter. It is not interesting that they had some awful, discarded work that informs their genius output. Sally produces a beautiful report at work: we do not then want her sums. We do not care about her mediocre training and how she survived it with one-night stands. We do not even care that Sally did it. But we would care if it was obscenely good, a ground-breaking report, and we may like to know what inspired her. Even then we can't though, can we: she was conduiting from the accounting Gods. And overall we should not care about any of it anyway, report or painting or academic paper. We just need to stop – sometime, somewhere. Are you not tired? Can we not just settle and enjoy this last question?"

"There is nothing to say, but I keep going. That man – I forget his name, perhaps purposely – because it is a name that we do not forget, at least for the next one hundred years – and I reckon he has about one hundred and fifty left, maximum: he was a beast that had no deeper insight into reality than Sally, and he just produced his own vile mindset while a gap in the market soaked it up. It was an empty decade.

He could have been anyone; it could have been anyone else doing anything. I might see if I can make the town drunk universal and eternal by marketing his unique ability to lose consciousness premised on the kindness of strangers buying him drinks continually. The world needs to see such genius! But I'll make the effort to graduate first."

Saul sinks back deeply into the chair, head leant back over the top, arms flopped down by his side, mouth resting in contentment, eyes closed. He then quickly realises he should withdraw all this: he opens his eyes, tightens his mouth, knits his fingers together in his lap, lifts his head, sits up straight, and crosses his right leg across his left knee. Fiona, settling for excitement, feels damp.

Saul checks his watch. "OK. Maybe slower next time. I do not want to be early or late for these things. Always steady and prepared." He is slightly alarmed to have said this out loud. "Is there anything else you wanted to offer?"

Fiona, coy, smiling, damp, looking. "Well, I think I follow you."

The words are irrelevant. The looking showed Saul. This was a fresh opening for him, and although time was tight, he wanted to push himself.

He had tight, methodical, rhythmical plans for most scenarios, ones that could be carried out to the letter without a hitch, ones that could be delivered regardless of other unscriptable characters playing a part. These scenarios could be controlled, and the other parties would not notice: false autonomy was theirs. But he wanted to cultivate an acuteness for spotting opportunities like the unforeseen look received here so that he could automatically exploit them. Such an instantaneous ability had been worked on, to go off-piste as the openings came up, to where the sex, money, love, success, truth, sex flowed – to also be able to remain and punch weight there. More so: to be the weight; to own the whole situation; to gain access to a purely individual benefit. To be able to instinctively pick out golden opportunities that one neither knew one was looking for, nor what they would lead to. And they would throw themselves up more and more for him now, activated by this initial look, and so dress rehearsal.

The look shows vulnerability. It is an avenue to wherever, leading to knowledge of whatever is wanted. Sex, money, love, success, truth, sex; general or grand hypotheses. But no names (or theories, stories, myths) – such riches are not yet accessible. This will come; we will advance into the really questionable but beautiful auto-manipulation pathways one day. Here today though, with Saul, we only want to be directed to less universal questions. These will help him get other answers prepared.

Saul delivers a look back to capitalise on Fiona's. "So then – do you know what will be on the exam?"

Fiona's face beams. "Do you promise to come back here after your exam for my lunch break?"

Saul flicks a smile into the air as he looks at the wall. "Yes," – he turns back to Fiona –

"that seems fair. But I need to say one more thing before we delve into anything else – either here now, or at lunch.

"Wherever we are in history, do not talk from that point. The latest knowledge – that trauma is generational, say; or that emotionally-perceptual learning is happening in the womb before we are even conscious: do not go on about any of it. I find it cringe."

Fiona, aroused. "Me too."

Fi? Are you awake? Hi. How are you? Sorry – this must be startling: it has been, what, 25 years? No, I was not watching you sleep. Not much. I have been here for around ten minutes.

You would not believe where this face can get me into now – a few Sunday breakfast interviews and most of the country recognises you. But letting me into a hospice so freely? I could have done anything to you!

I heard through the department you were ill. Remember that silly little name we had for it? I am still in touch with them. I like to keep track of how my history is getting on. I just had to come see you, of course. Cancer, they said. Inoperable. I am so sorry. You would have had no idea, would you.

I am guessing you know how I have been. Seen me around. All this kind of life was not for you, I know. You – we! – did not last very long once I started flying off. That is fine. A shame –

I liked you. But I knew you had your limits.

Sorry, I am ridiculous. I did not come here to clear that up. But I did come to clear up a few things, for your sake, you may come to see. But perhaps not.

Looking at where you are now, and where I am, maybe I could have done a bit more to explain my position back then, right from the off, right from that lunch break. Made sure it made sense to you what you should and should not have listened to – what was to be understood and what wasn't. It is not too late though. I am here to help.

It is usual for people to say they are sorry for how it ended, and I am, but – and you cannot argue on this point: you pulled away. No, no, this is not a debate. Maybe you could start, now – for the first time – letting just a little corner of what I say in; let the smallest twinge of doubt make your mechanistic response seem at least a tad hasty. Now – and I can feel the rumbles of incredulity from the audience already: consider that you could not handle the big time. Is there something in that? Can you begin to conceive of that possibility?

That purple stuff – it left you stuck. You kept looking at them and they were pointless. Distractions. And honestly, the number of times I had to say it: it was not about the sex. I know I mentioned it twice, but I feel it was of more importance to you than it was for me. As soon as it becomes an example it takes more focus than it needs to, though it was quite irrelevant to me. Just another means. Sorry if that hurts.

Another thing that left you stuck: that chair in your office. You could not imagine anything other than getting into that chair, and then you could not imagine getting out of it. I did not give a fuck about your chair, and you should not have either.

You must understand – for my sake; but this is all for you: it was necessary for me to be as I was, right from the beginning. It still is. I want my ways to be flawless, I know how to achieve that, and so I create whatever I need to for that end. I understand everything, quite effortlessly, embarrassingly so, meaning I have no other option but to manoeuvre the content for my highest end. But it is not just for mine. It is for ours – humanity's. I know there is no way that will be bought though.

Oh my, the things I used to say about people. To people! Remember Sally? She was harmless. Loved her job. Well, I say she was harmless: she is if that is what you are after. Actually – though you will not understand – but her and her like are the most dangerous people on the planet. Stick with her and we get nowhere. Ah – she just visited? Then you see my point. I suppose she is dangerous. She smoked, too, and smoking kills.

It absolutely is not disingenuous what you see on TV. Not at all. That is where I work from – that is where I act from. All this is merely a means for that, for the real good, if you could see that. I no longer get frustrated that people do not understand though. Let them have their erroneous moral compasses, basking in their

walls and ceilings. Some of us had places we wanted to go though, with a steady few who continue to want to be taken with us.

It was not supposed to make sense to you, to anyone. I acknowledge the line was blurry, but I did not know you would look at the logic. It was meaningless fun, me and you. I thought it was for you too. Yes – I see now that I got more out of it. I was using it to get somewhere; it made more sense, in that way, for me. You kept looking where you should not have though; and is that what I should have taken more responsibility for? Of course not. You were not ready – that was not my problem.

I know what you must see now: I am mechanical and cold; me and all my cronies are a law unto ourselves; everyone else is a conduit for our pleasure. But it is not like that. It really isn't. I clear things out the way, yes – but then I am good. I allow myself to be ignorant of where people are in life, and to then bypass them. To even mock them in the process. But then I am good. I even help them – everyone. I know I have no chance of explaining that here though.

I never let anyone speak? I never let you speak? There might be some validity in that. Maybe there was more to you that should have been allowed to be explained. You could have had more voice, place, space, importance. It is a common problem in the world, isn't it. I have lobbied on it. What am I to do in the meantime though – be quiet with all this experience? Would that really have made your movements sound more worthy? Would you have got in before me?

This cancer you have been bestowed with: what do you know of that? Where did it come from? Are you sorry now? I am not sure whether this is a shame or not now, but I feel there was potential for this to have gone further. A little bit more rinsed from it. But I am still what I am. I know we just need to stop – sometime, somewhere.

It is such a disturbing experience, acknowledging that I equally do and do not understand why you want and do not want to hear these things. Especially in this situation. OK, that is a fair assessment – and you're right: you did not ask for me. But it is near the end, is it not? And I wanted to... well... clear things up, like I said. But to try and explain as well. I know people would want to know. And I thought-

Oh, really? I thought the prognosis was short. Hence the hospice. OK. Well. Really? Are you sure? Surely they'll be no time for you to share stories though?

Do not listen to a word I have said. It was for me – thinking aloud – a story – it is meaningless. Honestly, do not listen to a word I have said. Ah, erm, you see, I told you about my job – yes I did – not all stories – I mentioned enough – I was trying to put you at ease – I shouldn't have even told you that.

No one needs to know about this. So you better keep quiet about it. Get over it now; it is cringe that you are still clinging on, the state you are in. It was years ago; it meant nothing; you still do. Hence you are down there and I am up here. I control things. Keep looking at the significance I hold.

But again, you sweet thing. I have been far, far too much again, haven't I. Is there anything I can do for you? Get for you? Or understand?

Oh – really now! Still the naughty little girl then. Well, I must be quick: there is someone else I must see in the next wing.

Can they see me from here as I do this? I am not sure if it is better if they can or not.

Yes, I'm glad we got that out the way too.

"The teacher of penmanship took advantage of the confusion and fled."
—Anton Chekhov, *A Slip-Up*

Christian in the Library

The young boy Christian could not step out of his own point of view: *I cannot step out of my own point of view.*

At the same time, he experienced the burden of others' experience, he felt. He would move inside their world unknowingly, seamlessly, and he could live from there, not happily or comfortably, but competently.

Though he couldn't complete a picture of his world, one where he felt compelled by his own interpretation, as well as the infinite personal truths of all. He thought he would never be able to reconcile these either – that is, if they are even distinct?

Where can I live? Where can I be? What am I talking about?

He wanted to work and love easily, but this felt groundless.

And he's in the library, coming here to feel safe. He has not felt safe much, but when he remembers to go, it is not the safeness he consciously goes for: he is not aware that this is something to want; this is his paradox.

He goes as it feels quiet, somewhere in him. Or he just goes.

*

He is young – seventeen. He wonders why he must wrestle with all this. He mistakenly thinks he is the first to see it and feel the weight of it all. He also has an insight that it is only his seeing, so he believes he does not have to truly be burdened by everything. Matters have slowly got uglier as he has: he recognises this; he remembers it; he tries to put it at the front. But his knowledge is no solace as he is experiencing everything as it is now.

How can there be an independent world of problems when they heighten as he feels worse?

He does not want to be the caricature, but the more he wants the world not only to be a reaction of his own teenage angst, the more he beds into it. He creates further turmoil. He sometimes thinks he is tested from elsewhere. But he also wants to be rational. This creates more avenues to go down: he wants to stay in the library.

Poverty is not only revealed in an existential crisis, but he accepts that some do not experience difficulty. He has read that there can be no suffering if it is what we collectively choose. He wants the suffering in his world to be contingent only on his world. He doesn't accept that he would ever agree to seeing any other suffering after releasing his own – after feeling all of this less – let alone not at all. Or that this makes sense.

There is nothing to gain in his pursuit that he would not be able to release himself from, but tonight, he's forgotten he can do this. The world ontologically is ugly, from his mood outwards: this is what he is choosing to believe. He wants to give it all away; there is a song or a movement that could stop this. But he knows this is temporary.

I have forgotten all the facts, he says to himself, tapping his head lightly on the desk (he is not so self-conscious). But this meant nothing. It was pathetic, he thought. He hated searching and searching and searching for facts, even hated talking about them. Knew he shouldn't. It is never about that: that is the point.

But am I scared? No – nothing really scares me now, as I consider fear to be conventionally defined. I fear myself and where I may stay. I fear being burdened by this. I fear me. So maybe I am scared? But nothing can hurt me but me. And I am fortunate for a material lot for much of that: I have not had to try for a lot of things. Why this path though? I do not want to question fear. Disrespecting the question being mine

will give me more troubles. I am young, but this is my life, but it may be like this for me. It appears irreconcilable and incomplete and groundless, but it is here. Maybe I must fight not to fight.

He has been here three hours now, sat in the same seat. He is sometimes aware of this fact and he hates it. He only looks at his hands and the desk in front of him. Anything could be going on around him: the world could come through and he would not notice. When will he notice that this contributes? He can look up. Slowly he can look up and test the scenery. But look down again now, Christian – try again tomorrow. But slowly, move away.

And he does not know what to read. And he may not want to read. He wishes the compulsion would go as he knows the answers are inside. He questions whether he is really feeling anything.

He glances around him, something he was aware he had wanted to do for a few minutes but had put off. He is glad there is no one around because of this awareness: he wanted company. Love or distraction; the sacred or the profane. When he wrestled too much and made progress he knew he would want to glance around again. He knew this was a sign, of sorts, but it was something else to bear. His reward was knowledge of progress. Unreasonable afflictions nodded his way. *Why this path though?*

Why this path though?

What am I talking about?

*

The library is closing. He knows he has choices now: the material could save him. He wants to walk home and wake up – and he might, he thinks – he screams – silently, internally (he is not so unself-conscious).

As he leaves, he remembers how he could wake up everything. All of it – not just for him. His own point of view could change; he could change others('); experience is malleable; the world could arc. He was the one person!

He hated this part being shouted. It seemed so unnecessary when others said it this way.

And he quickly forgets the alarm, slipping away again into a lost, broken sleep on the walk home.

But with his books and his questions and his experience and himself: maybe, Christian, just maybe one day, way off, deep inside, when it's ready to come out, you learn something, somewhere, for you.

*

I do not need a break. I am the most beautiful person to have existed. I feel experience and truth and beauty as I do and as I do not sometimes. This itself is complete. I can get to the end so easily. I am not young and I am not old and I am not to be measured. I do not need comfort; I do not need to answer anything. I can put it any way I wish and it will hold its own, if only for me.

chip paper

all this takeaway rubbish it will stop soon – pizza boxes chinese tubberware chip paper – that is all it is it will go soon you'll tidy it later

you are better off working backwards with the books putting them on

alphabetically but starting at the bottom as you don't know how much shelf space you will have and you need to double stack the shelves so the later ones from z will need to go on first – you cannot know yet how many books will go on each shelf so you will need to start right at the end at the bottom – it went quite quickly putting them in order finally you are glad you did it you could have done it before you've had loads of opportunities with all these house moves – there is more space to do it in this house and you hopefully will not need to move again and it will feel and look good to finally have them in order and they can be packed away in order now too so that should be it

i do feel better here but you know you am doing this task for no real reason it feels like you am doing this task for no reason. the way you have put the shelves will look good and she might have said it was cool or that she missed the books and you can feel her here already you am stupid again already for thinking she would come again

this move felt freeing for a few minutes or like it was the next stage but there is still a worry something sits under it all what am you doing with these books and how much do you still design my life for her but at least they aren't here

no that's ok those heavy ones on the bottom are ok and you can start on the next shelf up where can you put the spare non-fiction ones you am not undoing it all this is how you know it is not a really meaningful task for me as you am not focused overall on making it right overall as you am not undoing all the non-fiction books to get them in order. you can use that space next to the religious ones to stack the spare ones up the other way so you know where they are. you will leave some more spaces within the fiction in case you make mistakes or there are new ones

it makes too much sense how we got together what was all being played out is better in a song you think you wish you played guitar song lyrics are more ambiguous and creative they are not about anything that exists they have multiple selves

i am interested in leaving gaps so mistakes are rectifiable. there is a lawnmower outside that has nothing to do with that ice cream we had on the beach in france and you do not have words for how you see her face there now

do you have to understand how this comes out or is it inevitable after the difficulty between us that random memories will come up and it is not just her there are all sorts all the time you do not know if you have thought that before. you am still putting things on the shelves and you know it is not in the best order. what am you listening to seems irrelevant you am not connected to what you am doing and what the sounds are outside they happen and you am doing this task but it is very automatic let's see how is this possible

in this book there was something about the two hemispheres being able to work independently and as one and you think that means that neuroplasticity would allow her brain to change and that could mean that ours could then converge and we could get back together. this is so ridiculous you have no control over that do you not yet but it shows you can do anything and have no control but you can watch but if you watch then you am doing nothing anywhere you am not here at least and it makes the tasks redundant

working backwards from woolf she understood into tolstoy he could do everything rushdie you am not sure about anymore do you really mean that what if you am asked about it what could you even say

i can do the same thing another time and it will be meaningful and quiet

i tried so many times so ridiculously and you did not realise how pathetic it was and you did not respond to any of it. you only goes around because you am conditioned for the uncomfortably familiar and this always leaves me repeating the same things you were not able to talk about in person with those horrible people

the books fit well on the shelves. you think there will be just enough shelves. these do not make sense the letters wrap around the shelves in a way that one would

not really understand but you'll know. me knowing and being the only concern shows you do not care about the task really. that is her book you see those ones and you think about that dry reply a lot and it seems empty which feels good but you register it still

i am not sure about the ones you have left out the children's books and the short stories there is not really a justification of some books over others they will fit the other way at the top when the rest have been put in

i am saying this to myself you can hear it and then you can listen and then you can know that you am hearing it and you am listening and there is a conversation you am inside but not talking but not listening either. you am putting the books on my shelf having spent a few hours over a few days putting them in order having moved house that is what all of me has done and you feel no connection to it or the outside or the conversation but that is all that is going on

she would laugh at my new tables and you want nothing to do with her and you know you do not really care but you am being made to feel attached still it isn't me that is attached it is being born there

i can just put it in here for no reason. there was nothing there. everything you say would be better to music

there is a marquee moon now and you am imagining how awkward sex would feel if we are not emotionally engaged and you am planning the books and the words and you cannot sleep and it all happens at once. there are threads like these always and but this is the only a glimpse that demonstrates the real separation and simultaneity of how they run at a best guess

i identify myself a lot with you and how passive aggressive you are. the bhagavad-gita is on the wrong shelf the religious ones are on the other side and that other guru talked about english language yes that is freeing as he said our language is limited and cannot be used to define different internal aspects of ourselves so you do not need to feel alone or mad now nor do you need to bother with distinguishing the speech. we have a very diverse language for what is all around us so it must just have hurt more when you could not talk about pain and you pulled it all back inside. you do this because it was all internalised as a child when the outer speech was not regarded as much that is what you think or it is dismissed and you cannot say what you think anymore in the most important cases

i cannot concretely remember the particulars of the event and my feelings and you am only picking a select few of my erroneous memories to fit my narrative now. you am not sure what is the key thought what part is the conversation what part is me what part wants a story. there is no food it is slow going moving in you will go the shop for an easy dinner rather than get a takeaway it will be cheaper. you am gaining nothing from watching all this when it gets to this stage but there is always purposeless and function

i am changing the experience by observing me doing this so you am having a different experience on top that is what seems to happen. the shelf is wonky

i wish you was with you but some part of me is more coherent now

rational optimism is another arbitrary discreet thing. is it questioned as a result of something overarching because you do not care about disagreeing with this really

i get everything done despite the questions you am not having a constant out-loud-but-in-my-head discussion about the books really. all the noise seems redundant on the face of it it is redundant on the face of it. there are not separate distinctions to be made

working backwards into mantel she is a giant you like how you can hear what they are thinking you do not feel as comfortable mentioning kerouac anymore. joyce that is more credible nothing in you oh at least this shelf is hidden the man-child the strange dark grownup child's face you understand what he means but you do not

want to. you am not sure why you do it now it was maybe all pretend you hate thinking like that and this time my familiarity is a falsehood it is shambolic and it makes me feel like that but you do like the books. you cannot remember reading any of these it is like it was a different life. every moment can feel so monitored. she has no idea about anything it is alluring romantic attached and she is still here

it has been weeks you am still adding to it these breaks still appear it you such an incoherent waste when we go through it

i do not think that will help you never heard from her again how could she do that how am you still stunned by that you still cannot tell anyone. what is wrong with me what do you not see and feel that others do you am not dumb but you cannot do anything others do no actually we cannot do we simply read the experience that superficially fits to corroborate ourselves and feel better

i have so much more space here. you will bed in and feel better and at least people are around. you am not really understanding this year. you do not need to feel weird and other. back yourself

the shelf is the wrong way around the dent can be seen but it is too heavy now. her country is everywhere you say her country is everywhere all the time it is like buying a red car and seeing all the red cars you always notice that you say that

i always forget the best lines. you do not want you to say sorry you want to know that you would be ready and ok with it if you did. you could call you you could write something you could arrange the books

chip paper does not take up so much space and it is easier to get rid of

Pet Rat

I was picked up around three years ago and brought here. My owner, bless her, wanted to cheer herself up with a new pet. "Out the bins, he was," I heard her say to her friends on their first visit to see me. "Such a filthy rat. I washed him down. And look how cosy he is now!" I haven't seen them again. Strangely, she didn't get me out the bins: I was from a pet shop. And she must have known this.

She had an old cage from her last rat that she put me in. She got a new wheel which was, "A personal treat for you!" I knew I didn't really like wheels: I'd grown out of them just as she'd collected me from the pet shop. Still, I started to use the wheel: it had been bought for me, so I felt obliged. And the obligation quickly started to feel necessarily good.

It is useless trying to change things in the cage to how I like them: she just puts them back again. A tad annoying, but what do I know of cage décor? She makes things how she wants them; she's told me it is for the best. Eat here; exercise there; shit everywhere and she'll clean it up. She does let me know about it though: for a week, I shit in one corner – to try and help matters, once – and she was not as impressed as I would have been at a rat shitting in one particular place: she went mad at me. "I'm in control!" Whatever – I started shitting everywhere again. I noticed she did too, though not actual shit: she would scream a lot.

I am allowed out now and then. I collect bits of straw to try and fathom the days but it is too sporadic to formalise, I've noticed. One time I was left to roam around the whole house unprotected. It was early on and I didn't make the most of the time to familiarise myself with everything. Since then though, I've only been allowed out in the ball. I'm left in it in one room, probably for my own safety, so I don't fall down the stairs or break the ball: I'd be free to go wherever I wish then. Instead, I let myself go around and around in circles, or I bang the wheel repeatedly against the wall in one spot. And she starts going fucking mad when I do this, but I can't really help myself.

Still, I am a filthy rat in my cage, and I do not like my wheel but I'm on it now. My cage can feel empty and confusing, but in all honesty, I haven't yet fully noticed.

A Short Section for a Young Age

"Are you a vampire?" I only ever saw him at night. They did not like us talking in the day. My tablets made it hard.

"No," he said. "There are no such things as vampires. I am a child. I am twelve. Most children my age barely know there is no Santa Claus, but I know there is no make believe like vampires too. No werewolves or witches or gods or hobbits. No angels either – sorry. There is good and bad though, and dark and light, and it is all people.

"I know I should not have seen what I have seen. It has got really dark over me before. Otherworldly is a word. Surreal is another. It means a bit like 'not real'. They've tied me up and made themselves safe and talked of demons. It isn't demons, but it isn't 'not real' either.

"Seeing it all at twelve means it has been quite quick for me. And I knew what it was all along, so I am quite lucky. Some do not know, do not realise, or are not allowed to know. They see demons and angels, or only demons for a while, or sometimes only ever. I am a bit like an angel now though, as I can see over it all. But I do not fly – that's make believe again. I soar high, but only as a person.

"I am either brave or cursed, divine or damaged, fantastic or fantasist. The last one is the best: I am the only person I know that does not make up stories, and I am the fantasist! They seem to say that as both a good and bad thing. The ones that say nothing: they do not see me as brave or cursed or damaged or divine or fantasist – they smile or wink or hug me. There is a gap where their words would be that we both do not talk about. I like them.

"Angels can fight and demons can kiss and they are all people. Do not mention vampires again. If you think of vampires or demons, think of people as angels instead."

I was twelve, too. I was new and I had just begun to turn around. I stuck near him. No one else did – he said it was because they had not yet turned around. They may or may not one day, but you cannot try to face them in the right direction, he said. "They'll do it or they won't."

He told me that these places were temporary, that we were not evil, none of us, and that we can all turn around and get out if we have a speck of trust somewhere. The smallest pinprick of trust, he said. Better stories also help.

We left together a year later and stayed together forever. I write stories and he saves people. They turn around and fly, but only metaphorically! But that's even better.

And/Or

Teddy had seen her every morning in the park on his way to work for the last three weeks. He noticed her the first day she was there. He knew she had not been there before the last three weeks as no one had sat on the bench she was sitting on that early in the morning before this. Teddy had walked the same way through this park to work for just over a year and he felt he knew every inch of the walk.

~~No! You are not doing this one~~ – (Husband. To be ignored.)

He found her attractive, but he did not want to admit it to himself for reasons he could not admit to himself. Rather taken by her and scared, fascinated but unsure. She posed more questions than he knew how to handle so he could not hear any of them.

But she would help make love last for him. An eternal flame.

No. I am not having this.

Above is my wife starting a story. It is about me, Teddy, Theo. That is me commenting above “No! You are not doing this one”, and it is her that has crossed this out and put “(Husband. To be ignored.)” She said she was going to leave the first draft with those edits on in case the story got popular, if published. It might prove to be a priceless first draft edition, she said. We joked about all this over dinner last night when I said I would rather she did not continue with this story, but nevertheless, I can she has carried on today. Poor start, in my opinion, but what do I know of stories. My criticism may just be a reflection of my own unease about her starting to write this down.

Regardless – this is my draft now! I’ve lifted the goods from her desk and locked myself in my own office.

*

My wife, Neema, enjoys casually writing stories alongside her work. She is a therapist of some description. Now, I am an attentive husband, but she has a lot of fingers in a lot of pies in the therapeutic world, and I do not have the knowledge – let alone the vocabulary – to talk about what she does. But I know she helps countless people and is exceptional at her job. Most of it is somatic work – and sorry: I cannot expand more on that either. But she does not just listen to people talk or the like – it is beyond words. Anyway, she writes stories outside of her day job, “informed by the theoretical, but not the practical”, she says, meaning she does not use content from her clients’ lives.

I know nothing of this stuff, but something says to me that things within her could be influencing her writing more than she may be aware of, and that she may use her clients’ histories, at least unintentionally, in her writing after all. But I’ll let her and her own stories decide what she wants to believe.

(Sorry, not her – *you*. Yes *you*, dear! I know you’ll be reading this.)

I did not want her to do this story though, as this story is about me. It is all over and done with and we have discussed it much over the years. Thirty years ago this year was when it happened, in fact, a marked but insignificant time for me, at least because it is all over and done with now. But she has been obsessed with sharing this story over the years, at times, and I have always told her to leave it alone. I do not see the interest or fuss in it beyond our own lives.

Our personal lives have never come up in anything else she has written though (I am *certain* you must have at least *tacitly* used a patient or two!), so this story feels like it should be no different. Not that I have needed or even wanted to be aware of what she is writing all the time, and not that many people will see it(!). But I will admit, I have been mindful of this story being written, more so than anything else that has happened to me or us, for whatever reason.

I don’t know. I don’t know she just enjoys playing around with this stuff still. I’m not particularly bothered that she’s using my material, and it’s not that I don’t want her to have a voice. She’s always insisted I share more stories though, just to see how I get on, and I like the idea more so now, maybe just because it’s *this* story. I don’t know – I might as well talk about it now she’s brought it up. Even though it is not a big deal, I don’t think. One thing that happened one time many years ago.

(Nearly 500 words, eh! What do you think to that then? I didn’t plan to write a story that included you like this, by the way. Or anyone, in fact. And actually – I didn’t plan to discuss this in any kind of formal way ever, if formal is even what this is?)

Anyway it feels like it will flow out now, and I fancy finally giving this a go having watched you for so long, just to see how hard it is. I'll touch base with you along the way.

This first, final, *only* draft will be back with you by the end of play today though, my dear – I promise!)

*

It isn't even a story, really, is it – it is my perspective on something that happened and I just didn't want Neema talking for me, I suppose. So it will not look like a story at all – it is just me talking about something. Oh, she'll be involved too: it could be said that this event premised our whole relationship. I just wanted it to sound right – at least firstly – to me, maybe. I need it to make sense foremost to myself before others hear it. Or I just want to be the protagonist!

So it is thirty years ago... wait... *what*... next month! Thirty years ago next month I'd been walking through that same park to work for what seemed like forever. I say forever, as I'd been working as a labourer on a construction site for just over a year (you had this correct!), and it was a real drag. Really hard work – early mornings; long days. The money was good, but I'd grown out of what everyone else around me was spending it on: booze; fags; going out. Young man activities. And I knew I was a bit more than all that, even then.

Though actually, the site we worked on was interesting to me. We were building this new state-of-the-art theatre, one that was going to have the best such-and-such in Europe at the time, probably for all of about two weeks before the next best such-and-such was going to be opened, granted. But still, I did find it fascinating. I was never really into the arts as I am now, but back then that still caught the attention of something in me.

Anyway I'm walking to work through this park thirty years ago. I'd leave mine at 5:30 every morning and the majority of the walk was taken up by the park, from my house to the site. From my parents' house, I should say. They were happy when I got the job, of course, as I wasn't really doing much consistently before it, but they'd still give me a right earful if I woke them up at 5 am. Anyway, sorry – irrelevant. So I'd leave at 5:30 and walk the ten minutes through the park to the site, and I'd always see the same three people: young lad, my age, walking his labrador; old woman... actually, looking back, she was probably only about forty! – walking her dachshund; older man, much older than forty, jogging around the park. Actually the old man didn't run every day, but I was always impressed when I did see him. But yes, only those same three people were in the park at that time in the morning. It was busy most days on my way home though, even in winter or in the rain, but that hardly matters. Although it was not raining on the day that matters here.

Then about a year into the job a woman appeared on a bench I walked past in the morning in the park. Now, despite what Neema says, I never remember being attracted to her, not in a young, superficial way anyway. I was curious and fascinated by her, yes – but I did not fancy her. Fancy! That is what we used to say. And to be honest, if I would have fancied her, I would have stopped to chat her up back then, even at that time in the morning: I was that kind of lad at that age. But I was more interested in the fact that this woman was sitting on the bench at that time in the morning seeming to be doing nothing, especially as she was a new addition to the park and my walk.

I better make it clear what else was going on for me around that time in my life too: all I was doing was working, going out, and drinking – the usual stuff at twenty-two. Seeing a few women; not taking myself too seriously; acting cocky for no reason. I was not

really sure what I was doing, but I was also somewhat aware of that, but I didn't realise that that was something I had to do anything about either. An earning drifter, let's say, with something dormant in me that wanted to do more.

So I see this woman every morning for three weeks on the trot, along with the three other usual suspects. By week two me and this woman were smiling at each other; in week three we started saying "good morning" to each other every time I walked past her bench. And she was always sitting on that same bench on the path I walked along, which meant I passed within a few feet of her. So I got to know this woman, somewhat, I'd say. I mean I could pick her out in a crowd, sort of thing.

Then it gets to Monday on week four. It's 5:30 and I'm walking through the park, as usual, and she's there on the bench, as usual. I'm walking past ready to smile – to say, "Good morning."

"Good morning," she says to me first though. "What is your name?"

It had been me saying "good morning" first the week before, usually when I was a few feet away, but she seemed keen to get in with it first on that Monday. I was a bit surprised, you know, but not disturbed by it or anything, I don't think.

"Good morning. My name's Theo." (Why did you start calling me Teddy?)

"What's yours?"

"I'm Vessa."

"Vanessa?"

"Well, yes, that is my name. But people call me Vessa. Everyone calls me Vessa."

This was strange because I remember definitely hearing Vanessa, but she must have said Vessa the first time, if I'm recalling all this correctly. Maybe it's not strange, actually.

"OK, Vessa. Good to finally be introduced. Have you enjoyed being in the park at this time in the morning these past few weeks?"

"Yes, I have. Do you have a light?"

"Yes, I do. I have some spare matches actually – you can keep these." And I gave her some matches.

We had a conversation that was pretty much like this, and there are not many ways it could have drastically deviated from what I've put here: we both said hello; I got her name wrong and/or right; I asked her about her enjoying the park; I gave her some matches. That being said, I wouldn't bet my house on what I've just written as capturing the conversation... verbatim (you don't half rub off on me!), but I'm not sure it matters too much either.

Further – and I know it's still not too important for me to say – but I have thought about this conversation, this situation, this story plenty of times in my life, and if I was to pull it apart slightly and repeat what I've thought and said in the past, I would say there was nothing apparently strange to me at the time about our conversation. It really felt completely inconsequential as it was happening; I had no concerns at the time. Still, it has crossed my mind over the years that she may not have been enjoying the park in the morning truly as she said she was: "Yes, I have" – is this really a clear-cut answer? Could it be interpreted in some other way? I might just be questioning the truth of inconsequential statements after the fact, and though some doubt over this has occurred to me over the years, it has never been too much of an impingement.

It all isn't too important now. I didn't expect to be recording this so closely. It's nothing really – I gave some woman some matches in a park and I set off for work again. I've never been too sure how we parted but I do think I just gave her the matches and set off for work again.

*

This is quite an interesting thing to get right, isn't it. I've scanned back over it already – I think I'll have to break up the flow eventually. I'm enjoying how raw it feels though.

(This can feel very tiring, can't it!

It may not be only what I end up writing here, and I'm not particularly troubled by it – and it's only point my view of it all, after all, isn't it; but I suppose a storyteller continues with whatever they know they have, don't they?)

Bloody hell I'm indulging myself a bit.

OK here we go – a bit more straightforwardly: I'm walking to work thirty years ago and I see a woman in the park and she asks me for a light and I give her some matches and then off I went to work again.

*

OK I'll try settle in now!

Off I went to work again. The bench Vessa was on was near to my end of the park, as I called it then, this being the end near my parents' house, so by the time I got halfway through the park and Neema ran past me it must have been three or four minutes since I left Vessa with my matches.

I didn't know Neema then. I hadn't seen her in the park before – never seen her anywhere. But I remember thinking she looked really beautiful and really stressed: she sprinted past me wildly and I was focused on how attracted I was to her whilst being aware of how frantic she looked. There is a snapshot of this in my mind – of me on the half turn with a register of those two things: beauty and stress. Then I'm the full way round in another snapshot – and frankly, I was probably influenced both by beauty and stress in wanting to keep turning – and I see that she's sprinting towards a fire.

Multiple snapshots from someone else's position, they are, as I can watch myself in them.

It has been thirty years and I have talked about it enough and this has all settled in me somewhere. It is all lined up in the chronicles of one's life. It is not definitive in my identity or anything like that, but I can confirm that this significant event has bedded in, somehow. Regardless of this, what happened next is still an odd thing to say out loud. Could this ever not be odd – could words like this ever be innocuous?

As I turned around, my eyes following Neema, me following myself as someone else, I saw that Neema was sprinting towards Vessa, and that Vessa was on fire.

*

This has been processed for me. Honestly, it has. Some may think that someone making repeated noises like this, seemingly repeating themselves about it being processed, means they are still not necessarily over the event. But I am just covering my back. It is only strange getting it all out unexpectedly right now, as well as writing it down like this.

Yes, processed with all the proper stuff after witnessing such a big event too: therapy and/or counselling, and I obviously had to recall the event as factually as possible for the police too. And I actually only mentioned processing again because I was going to say that this has all been processed for me to the point that I have a go-to account of the events starting from when I turned to watch Neema run, and I usually simply repeat this go-to account verbatim when explaining what happened, this go-to

account arguably only being an arbitrary crystallisation of the particulars left after the process of therapy and/or counselling. But still, it's handy.

On the other hand, the particulars from before turning to watch Neema run – my conversation with Vessa, for instance – are still a lot of guesswork for me, but even now it's still interesting to put them together, considering their context.

Overall, then, some parts are more sure than others in the memory, but even the sure parts might not be too sure. But I'm new to this!

*

This may all be falling together a bit more formally then – maybe I'm getting somewhere with this writing stuff after all! Anyway, that go-to account. I even nearly see the numbering in shot as I watch the memories back now.

1. I half-turn and there is an experience of beauty and stress.
2. I turn completely and register Neema on the right on the path in the foreground with a fire on the left in the background.
3. I register that the fire is Vessa on fire.
4. I register that Neema is running towards the fire.
5. Some discrepancy between points 2-4: I am not sure if I registered these simultaneously and whether I even really knew them at the time.
6. I run very composed towards the fire around fifteen paces behind Neema.
7. On arriving at the fire I remain at a distance directly facing the bench Vessa is sitting on. I watch Neema attempt to get near the bench and Vessa in vain. She said afterwards she was screaming Vessa's name.
8. Neema turns and starts shaking me and screaming. She said afterwards she was telling me to do something.
9. Neema runs off and I stay at the same distance watching the fire.
10. Neema comes back with two of the park dwellers that I always saw at that time in the morning. The older woman stands on my right. The older man tries to put his coat over Vessa but pulls back.
11. The younger man arrives with a bucket of water and throws it towards Vessa. Most lands on her lower legs and feet. She is still on fire. He runs off again.
12. The older man stands on my left and I am not sure how long he has been there when I register that he is stood next to me.
13. I notice that I register that I think the flames are around six feet high.
14. The older woman says, "The emergency services are on their way." I definitely hear this as she says it but I wonder how it is possible. I do not reply. Neema said afterwards the younger man had told the older woman he had rang the emergency services.
15. Vessa falls to her right, my left. I register that she had not moved since I had arrived at the bench before that.
16. I hear sirens.
17. I move my eyes for the first time, looking to the left as I register the fire brigade entering the park on foot.
18. The older woman asks me, "What's all the white stuff on the floor?", and I notice all the white stuff on the floor around the bench for the first time. I do not reply.
19. The fire brigade arrive and ask us to move back. I take my first steps since arriving at the bench and sit down on the grass around fifty metres away.
20. Two firemen pull Neema away and hold her at a distance.
21. The older man is sitting to my right and the older woman is sitting to his right

and I am not sure how long they have been there when I register that they are there.

22. Two firemen pull Vessa to the ground as they cover her in a blanket.
23. The younger man arrives back with a bucket of water and a fireman knocks it out his hand.
24. The younger man comes and sits to my left with his empty bucket.
25. The two firemen roll Vessa on the floor and put out the fire. She is not moving.
26. Neema sits in front of me with her back to me.
27. Neema leans back and into me with her head and shoulders in my lap and her arms around my waist.
28. Point 5 could be repeated for numerous other points. This point itself was disregarded by the therapists and police.

There really has been twenty-eight points like this in my head for the last thirty years, and I've never actually wrote them down like this before. In fact it has been twenty-eight years, to be precise, allowing for the time it took to get them right in therapy and/or counselling. They are rather dry and formal, but like I said, handy.

Allowing for anything else that might be loose then, I know I need to explain me and Neema a bit more now, as I realised as I was writing that the matter of our relationship may still sound a bit confusing to the neutral. So I'll get away from the story of the fire as is necessary. As you know though, me and Neema are married, so it would be strange not to go into how that love story came about.

Oh, and obviously more happened after point twenty-eight of the fire too. We could not have just remained there stationary indefinitely! It's just that the numbering served a professional purpose at a point in time, so it is just easier to recall them as they are, and I recall the movements after Neema was in my lap a little bit more carelessly: it was not as crucial to the police or my own process to have itemised those events. So yes, I'll broadly explain what happened after point twenty-eight first, then go onto me and Neema.

Plan as we go!

I will say this now though, as it seems improper to ever let this point hang in the air for long when I tell this story: Vessa was dead when she was lying on the floor with the blanket over her, and they did not take her away until after we'd gone. It was pretty clear she was dead while we were there though, but it was confirmed to us sometime later.

(I'd watch your back now, my dear – I'm getting the hand of this! Maybe even without commentary eventually.

I feel more composed and back in the moment now too, unambiguously and unemotionally so. Potentially not as tiring as I thought!)

OK I'm going I'm going. And with purpose!

*

The five of us stayed on the grass for around thirty minutes in silence. The police had arrived and came over to us but no one wanted to speak. Instead, they took our contact details to talk to us another time. After those thirty minutes, we all got up and parted. No one said bye to each other but Neema smiled at me before she headed in the direction of my house out of the park. I hadn't really thought about her being in my lap. I walked to work and apologised for being late but didn't say why I was. I went home that night as usual and told my parents what had happened – vaguely what had

happened: that a woman had been on fire in the park. I didn't mention my matches or Neema. I hadn't pieced the numbers together yet either.

The police came round the following evening. They'd visited in the day but my mum had told them to come back later when I was home from work. They asked me how I was, had questions about the fire – about Vessa. Nothing too specific to my mind at that stage, and it was apparent that it was preliminary stuff.

When I said I didn't know Vessa other than seeing her in the park they told me a bit about her. This may have been strange as they were telling me about the details of the private life of a dead woman I didn't know. She was 18 and a university student studying Classics. I didn't know what Classics were when they told me at the time but I didn't ask for clarification. They asked me how I knew Neema and I said I didn't. They said they had assumed I did because of how we were sitting together on the grass. They then explained that Neema and Vessa were students together at university and were good friends; this was strange to tell me too, I think – I thought.

Before they left they told me there was a more thorough investigation opening up and that I would need to be interviewed formally over the coming weeks. They also recommended services for me to get support and suggested I may benefit from processing the fire with a professional due to the severity of the event. I didn't take too much notice of this. I was given a card and asked to call them early next week to arrange a formal interview time.

The next week went by uneventfully. I went to work as normal and I thought I felt OK. I called the police on the Monday the following week and arranged to go in for my interview on the Thursday after work.

The interview was uneventful too. I told them what I've told you, only it was not as structurally sound then. I did have a twinge of worry about the fact that I had given Vessa the matches which she presumably used to start her fire, but the police did not suspect that I had any prior knowledge of what she was going to do. They asked me about the white powder – their words – on the floor around the bench. I said I didn't know anything about it and hadn't noticed it until the older woman pointed it out to me when Vessa was already on fire. They were fine with this too.

As I left the police station after the interview Neema was going in. When she saw me she moved towards me and hugged me. She asked me how I was and we talked for a few moments and when we parted I had her phone number and an invite to Vessa's funeral.

The white powder on the floor – that needs clearing up now too, doesn't it. No – that wasn't intended!

What I told the police was what I really thought at the time and it was what I believed afterwards: I hadn't noticed anything on the floor around the bench before the older woman had pointed it out to me, and this is still probably what I think now. But there was and is some doubt – some imagery – now and then: I am not sure if I had seen the powder when I stopped to talk to Vessa that morning.

I sometimes think she had some kind of sugar, or salt, or flour, under her feet on the floor – all under her and the bench. I wondered if this was the case, and why it would have been the case, for so long afterwards, sometimes quite strongly, without it ever really knowingly being settled for me, except it's gone away mostly for me now. And it never really seemed to figure too strongly in the police investigation either. They suggested it may have been an agent for the fire, but they didn't get stuck on it. I probably got stuck on it more, in fact, but they were only small and natural maybes overall.

Oh, also – exchanging phone numbers and a funeral invite outside a police station after being interviewed about an act of self-immolation... Hardly orthodox, I know. But it was an emotionally charged yet instinctive time for us, me and Neema,

and we did not think anything about norms or otherwise at the time, and have not since, in regards to our relationship. It just happened as it did – as well as it did – as it always has.

Ah, sorry – yes: things keep popping up for explanation! – self-immolation: willingly burning oneself to death. That is what the police labelled Vessa’s “act”. So it was an open and shut case for them.

There are two more parts left to explain. There’s post-fire me as distinct from Neema, and there’s me and Neema. Me first!

(Some cadence developing now, perhaps? Steps after steps – that’s the art, isn’t it: remembering it all as coherently as possible and getting the order right. I’m enjoying being the protagonist, at least!)

*

I told you that before the fire I was working, going out, seeing women. Normal young man stuff; nothing feeling too meaningful. I then met Neema, as you know, and from then on there were no other love interests for me except her. All the other meaningless stuff – the drinking and the going out and the unseriousness: these all dropped away, along with the other women too. I didn’t notice this at the time either, but after a couple of years I realised that the drifting and aimless feeling that came with the meaninglessness had disappeared after the fire also. I didn’t do anything materially different that I’d say meant I was doing more for myself either, only the fire coincided with the emptiness going and my feelings changing, it seemed.

Also, I did start therapy and/or counselling around a month after the fire, and I say and/or because I don’t (and don’t!) really know the difference with these things (maybe I’ll let you rewrite the therapeutic bit!). I was rather dormant on the idea of seeking such support myself, but Neema chipped away at me to get me to go, she says – not that I really noticed that she was doing this; and she put me in touch with a friend of hers who was a trainee therapist.

I went to this trainee for around 18 months. It helped do whatever it needed to do for me in terms of the fire and probably influenced me finding life more meaningful, or at least me noticing that I’d started to find life more meaningful since the fire – since the aimless, emptiness, meaningless – whatever – feeling had gone away.

Now, me and Neema.

I rang her the day after we exchanged numbers outside the police station and we arranged to meet on the day after that, Saturday. We went for coffee and discussed Vessa and what had happened, but not too much, in all honesty. We then went for a long walk and got some dinner, then we went to her house in the evening. Neema was living with friends at the time and I ended up staying the night and we had an idyllic weekend. We became young lovers from that first weekend and it hasn’t really stopped for us since.

Vessa’s funeral was on the Tuesday the following week. I stayed in the background – me and Neema both did. I cannot remember much of the proceedings other than that I found it quite strange, briefly, that I was there with Neema – especially considering I had been staying at hers since the Saturday – and that it had been a odd couple of weeks, somewhat. No real words for it though. Some unsettled feelings, but then also nothing.

When we left the funeral I asked Neema about her and Vessa being “good friends”, as the police had said. Neema staying in the background with me did not feel too right if they were good friends, I remember thinking: this probably added to my

unsettled feelings at the funeral. They'd been at university together, she said, on the same Classics course, and had actually been meeting in the park for a few weeks before Vessa had died, "rather early meetings, but we were really invested in myths," she said. But beyond that there was nothing too strong between them, and, "their paths were always destined to diverge", she said.

Me and Neema were courting, it was called then, from that time onwards. We married two years later, and it has remained unashamedly idyllic for me (and I hope for us!) for the thirty years since, and words like "fate" and "destiny" do come to mind, although I am not too open to these kinds of coincidences. Like I've said, too, we've discussed Vessa extensively but superficially over the years, and at no time did our relationship feel premised on her or what happened, as others may think.

Is any of this strange? I'm not asking the question for my own benefit. I need a way in, I suppose! No – I am not asking the question because of any doubt that I may have about our relationship. It is merely to give the question an answer, and to confirm that it is not strange for me – that it never has felt strange to me – how this relationship started and blossomed. Unquestioned, things can just line up out of any kind of spark.

*

Well I must say, I did not expect to write all that! But that seems about it now. It all condenses down, doesn't it, I noticed – an extraordinary event on paper becomes a short affair in one's mind eventually. And when it does come out truly on paper, it is almost nothing. You can even forget what really happened and it doesn't really matter.

And love! Marriage! Needing a few mere words of focus! That might be the real love story.

I am relatively successful now, for sure. I work in the creative industry. Not as a creative, though: I do stuff behind the art. But that's all you're getting! Material success for me, then, for sure; but more importantly – psychological, mental, energetic success – whatever we want to call it: that is what I've gained along the way.

Neema would have different, better words to say (of course!). I'm together though. I feel together. And relative to and for me, that's success. No theatrics. We've made our money and are winding down now so there's nothing to go over.

Sorry – not too sure why my success came up. There was no real need to share that; it's easy to put too much here, isn't it! But I feel I got out what I needed to.

I'll leave it with Neema now. Maybe I'll do this again. I didn't learn anything new, but it's a freeing experience, somewhat. Tiring though, after all – yes!

And I've flicked through again and broken up the flow, somewhat – where I thought I was being unnecessary and where I thought that needed demonstrating. It is difficult writing such things in one go!

(There you go. That's how I see *my* story. I hope it's to your taste. You'll know to keep quiet about anything I failed to include, I'm sure!

Freeing, but tiring – yes. But I also feel a bit sick now. I'm not sure what enjoyment you could consistently get out of this, my dear. Or I might just be coming down with something.

Sorry – too much again!)

Oh, my sweet Teddy. You were our Pontifex Maximus and you needed to be freed. I thought you were ready – does it still feel too much?

Idyllic love is enough for you, and that suits us both. But my love burns

forever.

Train Baby

Such a hard morning. The minor difficulties that remind us of stress, struggle, pain. Memories. But I can move away from that here. That other person. I have made the tube.

I want a consistent version of myself, one that persists happily, easily, that doesn't have to negotiate conflicts when my parts split and re-merge. Can I ever statically remember and become emotionally whole?

Forgetting would be even better.

But I have made the tube. The morning has passed. Be with the tube.

*

There is a baby! So cute. Not sure if it's a boy or a girl? Doesn't matter. So cute and comforting. And it looks really smart and together! – unlike its parent (not that it matters: you're a harsh judge on such mornings). And it's sister, aunt, grandmother? There are four of them, anyway – maybe they're all just friends. They look about as together as me this morning though (see – don't judge!): do they have impersistent memories too? They're all bit dishevelled – maybe their selves struggle to stay together as well?

But the baby looks immaculate. Have they stolen the baby? They haven't stolen the baby. But they may have stolen from themselves: why have they put all their energy into the baby? It looks really commodified in its outfit, accessories, whilst the real baby underneath can't have formed into anything yet. O, it looks cute, but that's superficial. Do they only focus on the outer baby? That is what holds all their lives together, perhaps: spruce up the baby and we'll feel better: it's a great comfort. A lot of responsibility on such a small thing though, but why think about that?

Let's put some music on. I am understanding these means of distraction more. If we wait long enough and let the rhythm do its thing our experience alters, even improves. And to think I used to feel so arrogant doing this: nodding my head, bouncing my feet, dancing on the tube to my music. Releasing myself; feeling released; my experience being released: it felt shameful. But let others think what they need to.

And the outside is rushing away, and I can stand in the middle of the carriage and experience life moving past. And I exist in-between my body and the tube and life happening away as it wishes. It is just experience: the speed of what was once there outside; the music moving through my body. And I experience unselfconsciously, constant only with this speed and movement.

And there is no memory or reminders or emotion here. There is only experience and feeling for the sake of their momentary constancy.

Why does it not just stay like this, if that is even possible to say. I want to be held together, but for it not to be obvious where the holding takes place. Inside or outside myself: don't tell me. It's an experience – it's an emotion; but I don't really want it to be anything I know about. Nothing I'm forced to regard or remember. I want to feel static and whole without having to be reminded of that – for it only to be. Standing in the middle of the tube with my music on: I can wait long enough (letting it pass, as they say) and recreate this clinically, but I just want these times to be the case anyway, always, unknowingly.

I understand it – want it; but it should surely not take so many redundant

concepts to be found.

The baby gets it. It has no memories or reminders, but it remains static, whole, persistent in some way, at least for now. It looks around, moves, discovers, unselfconsciously always, up until this point and a little bit further yet, at its age. And beyond what these women might think of it, might have dressed it up as, this baby, it could be some kind of truth, some constancy, something static that is also safe without stress and struggle and pain to be remembered.

And it is looking at me! Straight at me! Hello, baby! Does it know what I'm saying? What I mean? Of course it does, in a primal sense. Not intellectually – its body knows though; its *being* knows. It can feel – experience – something in what I'm saying. No, no – this isn't ridiculous. This makes me feel better. I am releasing myself from fickleness, struggle, memory. I am then only here as the baby is: being, experiencing, persisting...

But it has looked away! The baby has gone to persist elsewhere! Oi! Hey! Baby! Look! But it won't. I cannot get its attention.

So where is my wholeness now? When will my difficulty flood in? I am no longer standing up; I am no longer dancing on the tube. Did my body stop as the baby looked away? I can't remember sitting down and I can't remember putting my head in my hands and I don't want to care about sitting down but this is what experience reduces to without unaware constancy. Questions reminders stress; cripplingly aware awareness: all can trap here. Whereas the baby freely persists, looking around every which way it wants to, remembering and recalling nothing. Nor does it care to know. And it certainly doesn't hold on to sensations.

And this music doesn't sound so good anymore, and I don't want it to either. And something is subtly creeping in a little again now. And the morning is coming back, meaning the memories can come back, and this might make the carriage not matter. And this all could become a flood. How do I release it all again? How can I release and experience without this?

The baby! The baby represents what can be good – what can just *be*! So I can find the baby again, get it to look at me again, and then I'll see the baby, *be* the baby, and the baby will...

But O no: the baby is gone! I didn't see them get off! And there are others flooding on and crowding me now inside and out and how can I be here? Please, just let me *be* here. All of me *be* here with the music, the tube, the outside, the-

Baby! There it is! The train pulls off and the baby is on the platform, and it kicks and it moves and it thrusts towards me. And it is beaming and smiling and laughing as it looks at me! As it sees me!

And it is life and experience and constancy with no reminders. With the most beautiful existence. As the most beautiful memory. The most stable, soothing, transient but beautiful memory.

Date With Ex

I had finally agreed to meet up, stating I would only do so if it was at this café right after I'd finished work: this closes an hour after my finish time – I can tolerate sixty minutes of such... conversation... at most.

And it was almost cute, us both arriving here at the same time just after 5 pm, entering together and naturally moving towards our usual table – or what *used* to be our usual table – as one. *Almost* cute.

"Afternoon, guys!" the waitress says. "I haven't seen you in ages! How are

you both? Shall I get you your usual jug of water for now?"

"Hi, Leri," I say. "We're good, thank you. And yes – some water, please. But maybe just a glass each, rather than a jug. And some time to order, thank you." I'll apologise to her for my impatience another time.

"Oh, OK – great! I'll be back in a few minutes." And I'm not sure which one of us is going to speak first now.

"Hi. Same seats, then. How are you?"

"Hi! Yes – same seats. I'm OK! How are you?"

"I'm OK, too. Did you want to go first then?"

"Not particularly. Did you want to go first?"

"I'm not all too keen to speak."

"I think it would be better if I spoke less though?"

"Maybe you should go first. I know it could stress you otherwise."

"No! I mean... I think we should get to hear from you."

"OK then – fine. If you say so."

"Oh! O... OK then?"

"Yes, OK. That works for now. It wasn't my initial plan, but I appreciate it probably took a lot out of you to... *allow it*," I say.

I'm here with my ex-boyfriend. It's been just over six months since we last saw each other – around ten months since we broke up after five years together. He insisted we meet up, and it appears he is *allowing* me to speak, which is a rare, yet potentially pointless gesture from him. Time will tell.

"I don't have a lot to say or share," I say, "but it is good to see you."

"Yes – it's good to see you too! And thanks for agreeing to come, finally! You said you'd had phone and internet trouble?"

"Yes – a few problems. But here we are."

"Yes, great! And yes – no need for anything *special* to be said or shared. But you first, as agreed? What's been going on with you?"

I don't know what his motives were in contacting me and inviting me out, and I'm not sure I even want to know. I don't really want to give him a lot of myself either, not that there's a lot to give.

"Nothing's going on with me, really. Work; a few nights out; flirting with doing a bit more exercise. Thinking of moving in with a couple of new friends too, actually. All the usual boring stuff for me, as you'll know. Nothing too dramatic."

"Oh, that doesn't sound boring!"

Now, I know this kind of surface chat is a struggle for him, and then it is for me when it's a struggle for the other person. But I'm not going to indulge his feigned effort just to ease his conscience. And I really do have little to say or comment.

"It does sound boring, but that's fine, as it's how I like it, as you know."

"Oh... no... it... it isn't boring. What... what kind of exercise? And moving again, eh – exciting!"

"Kyle – after five years, you don't need to feign interest or investment now."

"Oh no – it's not like that! I am interested!"

"Fine. I'm looking at joining a HIIT club with some friends on a Thursday night, and you aren't finding out where I might be moving to."

"Oh, OK. Well, that sounds good! And fair enough on the move."

"..."

"Look, I'm trying. I'm letting you speak as you wish, and everything yo..."

"You're *letting* me speak, are you, Kyle?"

"No... I... I didn't mean that. Who'd have thought it, eh: crossed wires again already! No – I mean, I *want* you to speak, and I want to listen. Everything you think you want to say can be heard now. I want to hear what you really think."

"No, Kyle – I'm sure you'll be guessing at, and then *telling* me what I'm thinking anyway – reading and *writing* between the lines. And I don't need to get anything out that I really think. Though just remember: you don't speak for everyone."

"OK, yes, that's fair – and I understand that more now. I just think getting things out that need to be said means they don't have to be... occupying again afterwards, let's say. So sharing what we really feel about..."

I must say, this is an unsurprising start by both of us. If only the waitress could come over to stop us every min-

"Hi again, guys! Here's your water. And girl – I've got to say: you are looking SO beautiful. Radiant! Kyle – you look fine too. Ha! Are you ready to order?"

"Thanks, Leri. That's nice of you to say. Flat white for me, please, and he'll have a black Ameri-"

"Actually... I... I've switched to decaf! A decaf black americano, please. And a slice of carrot cake. Do you want any cake? A bit of mine, maybe?"

"None for me, thank you."

"Great! I'll get those over to you."

Better ask him about that then. "Decaf?"

"Yes! I realised I get... pulled about enough, let's say, without needing to negotiate caffeine too."

"Fair enough. Wise decision."

"Anyway we were talking about sharing what we feel about things! So how did *that* feel – when she asked for our orders?"

And here it is again already: the analytic dissection of feelings.

"It felt like nothing, Kyle. And *you* were talking about that – not me.

"And it doesn't need to feel like anything – nothing deeper needs to be going on when it comes to ordering fucking coffee. And – as you know – sharing feelings was never going to be on my agenda today."

I'm going to need to be explicit with him.

"Look, Kyle – it is good to see you, but I'm not going to go over anything as you may have expected me to. Nothing needs to be said or hashed out or decoded from my point of view, though I can sense you needing to go that way already – alluding to that *feeling* stuff. But I'm actually feeling good right now, and there's nothing to go over from the relationship, I don't think. But, we can chat – have small talk. I know you struggle with it, but try?"

"OK, yes – that's fair! I understand that more now."

Whatever you say, Kyle. But benefit of the doubt? "Oh yeah? You sure you want to just chat about... nothing?"

"Yes! And it's not nothing, is it. I'm just glad we're here chatting civilly."

"OK – that's good. So, what's been going on with you?"

"Well... I... erm... I'm not working at the moment! So I've been visiting a lot of galleries and museums."

"OK. Why aren't you working? I thought you enjoyed the library?"

"Oh, I just wanted some time off. Like, I'm still there – I'm just having a break, kind of thing. I'm just enjoying having a break. They encouraged it!"

"Right. So, galleries and museums."

"Yes! So we don't want this to be a debate, do we, and it at least won't be for me – I'll try! But, I could – we could – talk about what I feel I see and know universally, at least currently, from all my cultural excursions. So the universal, not the personal – there'll be no particulars about us."

A very Kyle way – but *fine* way, I'll admit – of putting something. "OK, yes – the universal without the particular. And *especially* without the particulars of you and me, Kyle."

"Great! That's OK then?"

"Yes, fine with me. Look at that – an agreement between us. Maybe we should cut our losses."

"What? We're leaving already?"

"No, Kyle – I was just joking. What have you been thinking about *universally*, then?"

"Ha! Well, I've been looking in galleries and museums at art and culture – creativity and expression. *Human* creativity and expression, obviously! And it all just seems a bit... frivolous – a bit insecure and superficial. It's brilliant that people get rich and are deemed successes from such things, and – regardless whether it's pioneering architecture, or old cave drawings – it can seem good that we get to experience or in some way materially benefit from these things. But I cannot help thinking, that if the creators of these things had felt listened to, then they wouldn't have been so needy, and so they wouldn't have had to create such things to feel seen, and others wouldn't need to find themselves in another's creativity either, because they too wouldn't feel unseen or unheard, and therefore needy.

"Strictly, then, all human expression is misguided and a bit sad."

Right then, Kyle – some safe small talk on universals. I suppose I did agree to this. "Right then, Kyle. So anyone doing anything is pointless."

"No, not pointless. Look – *this* isn't pointless!" He points behind me: our coffees.

"Here you go, lovelies! One decaf black americano and one flat white. Oh, and one carrot cake! Did you... want an extra fork?"

Are they colluding in trying to get me to share his cake? "No thanks, Leri – it's Kyle's. Thank you."

"Yes – thanks, Leri! Anyway from an evolutionary perspective everything cannot be point-"

"Enjoy, guys!"

"Yes – thanks again, Leri..."

...so evolutionarily everything cannot be pointless. Misguided though – yes; as all expression – whether it is deemed artistic, like a beautiful painting; or practical, like a functional bridge – is only really there to fill a hole in the life of the creator: they just do it because of some emptiness or lack – an instinctive need to *do*. And then other misguided people then think they enjoy that painting or the bridge because of what it provides them in-and-of-itself, when really, they have to be looking in the first place *themselves* – for the thing that thing apparently has – for it to be able to provide them with anything. So it needs them to *want* to find it beautiful or useful for it to then be so, as it is redundant beforehand, yet they only find it beautiful or useful because of the hole somewhere within themselves."

"OK. And this captures all human expression, does it?"

"Maybe not all, but it's a way to get a need or problem manifested as something else. For instance, you're angry, so you paint a picture, and then that need or problem is in some way resolved in what you created, so it doesn't need to be worried about again. It's transferred into the painting, art, construction. But most wouldn't notice this is what they're doing – building a new building because we need more offices, for instance, isn't really about the need for new offices, as the need for new offices itself is just another insecure, superficial, misguided need from the drive to manifest problems elsewhere.

"But, on the flip side, there are some people that don't look for art, simply because they don't need to. They're regulated enough, let's say – they don't need anything to resolve anything, as they're already always maintaining resolution. Therefore, they don't create or look for as much to be created: they're settled with less. An extreme example might be a very primitive tribe: they don't need a Mona Lisa or a Beethoven or a Shard to feel beauty and awe and life, and so it follows that when

we do, we are misguided.”

I’ve been pulled into this now, haven’t I. “But the tribe: they’ll want and need their own practices, cultures, expressions.”

“Yes – but – with lesser wants and needs than we have, and even they’ll still be misguided slightly, if they have creativity comparable to ours. But they don’t seem to have the same breadth of “high art” or culture as we have, that’s inspired by how depressed and empty and ignored everyone feels.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“If what is wanted and needed is really only influenced by the holes in people – if we only connect with expression that relates to some lack within ourselves, consciously or not – then it follows that the most popular art, culture, expression is really only that which captures more peoples’ holes. So the best creator in any discipline – if we can even call it that, that is! – is only really the best because they capture more of what people haven’t already got, and they need people to lack whatever it is they lack to produce the “best” of something. This means any culture’s existence is contingent on misguided people.

“And to think, if we all talked and resolved things a bit better – if we all felt more comfortable inwardly with ourselves and with those close to us, meaning we didn’t have to express ourselves “out” in the world – well, maybe all the bridges might fall down, and the symphonies wouldn’t sound so good!”

I knew there was a risk in him being allowed to introduce his “universals”. I can only try to move him along.

“Right then – interesting. How’s the cake?”

“Oh – it’s good! I can enjoy just going out and getting cakes and pottering about a lot more now. Just existing, I suppose – you know how it is. Doesn’t all have to be so loaded, does it!”

“That’s good to hear, and no it doesn’t, Kyle. Going in early with all your good stuff here though, aren’t you.”

“Early? It’s nearly evening.”

“No. No, sorry – I didn’t mean the time. I mean you’ve brought up-”

“Oh, this isn’t particularly novel material for me, is it, as you’ll know. But I should say sorry: I’ve hijacked our time a bit. And it isn’t exactly small-”

“No – no small talk it isn’t. And there’s not really anywhere to go with it now, is there. So how do *you* feel about that?”

“Oh, I’m fine! Not really done though. Not really started, either.”

Might as well let him waste the meeting even further then. After all, it’s on his time. “Oh, by all means – carry on! This is slightly fascinating, as ever. But let’s make sure we stick to the universals – OK?”

“Great! Well, to make it maybe make a bit more sense then, it’s best to think of it all as stor-”

“I didn’t say it didn’t make sense.”

“No. No of course not! I’m just saying, that maybe it’s helpful – for some – to think of it all as *stories*, like the way stories exist so as to end – to have something completed; as stories *are* – they *exist* – to be completed, trivially so, by the author alone. I mean this in the narrowest sense of how they exist, ignoring the reading of or any other purpose they may serve – possibly being critiqued or whatever. It’s a bit like having babies: one may *want* them, so one *has* them, and so these fulfil each other: the need and the end result – the baby – fulfil each other. That is everything, in the coldest sense – everything that “is” exists just to go away again after its primal purpose: you have the story to begin with, and it *literally, physically* disappears again at the end – it doesn’t continue past its end point. And so, past its predetermined end *use*, it’s nothing. And so after this, it doesn’t necessarily need to exist, as it’s served its purpose.

"It's the same as buildings or bridges or art or anything else that's been created: they resolve something for the creator, and we can make and use them to do that something, but they can then eventually disappear and be forgotten too. Buildings, bridges, art – and... and I'm going to say it: even babies go away."

"Oh for fuck sake Kyle that is quite a fucking jump, no?"

"OK OK it doesn't feel as good with that example. But still! Do you get me?"

"The example of building a building is a good one. And isn't that statement indicative in itself: building a building! But we can see from *this* example that things just *are* to *be*, and that's it: they then end. It is an end when it's built, and even more of a complete end when it falls down and no one remembers it in a couple of generations..."

He is not even joking.

"...or, we could use a relationship ending – completing – as an example. Or a conversation! Some kind of conflict resolution!"

"No, I don't think we need those kinds of examples, or any more examples of your choosing, for that matter. But I might..."

"OK well maybe you can ask me some example..."

"I thought I was speaking."

"Ah. Yes. Sorry."

He does get carried away. "So, with art then – what about scary things? Vile things? The De Niro characters of this world, say?" Let's ground him again slightly, if that's possible.

"The Cady's and Bickle's? Great!"

"Yes. Why do they exist then, by and for the misguided? Just to be made by the creator with the purpose of going away again?"

"Oh, well... I assume their creators have some dark part they want to safely express – to safely get out – and the ones that enjoy these characters, films, expressions: it's because a dark part of them wants to be like them – to do, say, *be* as they are – so as to release and resolve something through them. That's just trivially true! Do you not feel that sometimes?"

"And they only exist for these misguided reasons, as you call them? This is the only way to model why people like them?"

"I'd say there are countless reasons as to why one might like or relate to a character, but most wouldn't truly understand why they do themselves – what buttons are really being pressed in them and which holes are really being filled within themselves when they're witnessing another's creative expression."

"All simply misguided though?"

"Tricking ourselves all the time a bit, yes."

"What about funny things, then? How do they work?"

"Ha – I love this! Well, analyse anything we find funny and you will see that we are all tragically laughing at or from the position of our deepest holes – from fundamental insecurity, or familiarity. And so this is even uglier misguidance."

"Right. And your misguided model: it captures all this?"

"Certainly not! Someone will rage at something that another finds hysterical! But it's still mostly misguidance – that's the constant of the model."

I'm struggling not to laugh at him now. I'm not asking him to break it down further.

"Right. Interesting. The problem now though isn't that it isn't small talk, as such, but that it's still..."

"It's still universal though! We both agreed on that! It isn't personal or about us..."

"I thought I was speaking."

"Sorry. Again."

Five long years, so what's a few minutes more? I can ride this out.

"This is still beyond anything necessary for right now. But OK – we are here – we agreed; and the main criteria of steering clear of talking about us has been stuck to. So – for argument's sake – let's say you're right about all this: it is all empty and superficial and we have all duped ourselves. So what's the consequence, then, Kyle – what can and does this mean?"

"I don't think it's empty: I didn't say that. It may just be that we don't know what we're doing and saying some things for, and we could maybe get things done a little bit better if we did know why we were doing them in the first place – if we acknowledged that we were doing them for the wrong reasons, at times."

"Yes, well – maybe that's something that's happening within the slow arc of progress. But most people aren't bothered in the meantime, Kyle, and they're quite happily doing what they're doing, as they *feel* they want to. Like, they may only want to hear half of the stories or expressions, and they may only be able to relate to some parts of the characters. We could judge more fairly – and less problematically – if we see things like that, and it's probably better to believe that people can truly and happily carry on in such blissful ignorance. Can you get on board with that?"

"Oh, yes. Yes! That's what I'm getting at too! But even more of us could be ignorant and happy if we *first* did what we needed to do in getting it all out, and *then* carried on again just a little bit more settled afterwards. You see, theoretically, on paper, in an ideal world, there would be nothing left to express, as it would all be resolved. Then we could go back to real blissful ignorance."

"But this is you speaking and thinking for everyone again, Kyle, whereas they might be settled already."

"How... how though?"

"How? What do you mean, *how*?"

"*How* might they be settled? How does that feel to you?"

"I don't know. People might feel..."

Ah. Ah.

I see, Kyle. I see.

"Have you really just gone the long way round to be able to ask *me* how *I* might feel settled, now, after you? After us?"

"Well, you do, don't you? Feel better? More settled?"

"Yes. But that isn't up for discussion. We are talking about -"

"You used to like me talking about this universal stuff, unless it touched on you, that is – unless it went a bit too close without you noticing. Then you'd get all ruffled."

And ruffled I am, Kyle. What does he expect?

Fuck him.

"Kyle – you are not Scorsese or Nietzsche, and you certainly are not Prometheus or Aristotle or whoever the fuck else you deludedly think you could be. You are doing nothing with whatever you think you know about all this stuff, or with whatever you think about yourself or me. Instead, all you are doing is talking to *me* – who knows *nothing* – here in this café. This is clearly after you've been having a difficult time again, and I'm guessing you're still in the middle of that too. I do sympathise, but you aren't creating or discovering or stating *anything* profound here, and even more so, you aren't *living* because of it either."

"Brilliant! I didn't know you knew those names! And that is interesting, isn't it – do you think all creativity and discovery could just be the epiphenomenal result of not living then?"

Right I'm done with him now. "Right, I'm done with you now."

"What? Why? Sorry – I wasn't joking. Honest! Or I was, if you want me to be? I'll let you speak and think. I won't suggest anything."

"No, sorry – I've had enough now."

"But we didn't get to acknowledge us at *all*!"

"That was never going to happen, was it."

"I just wish you were able to see what I see – feel what I feel. See what I think and know and experience."

"I don't want or need to do that, Kyle – sorry." And doesn't he realise how much longer this would've taken if I'd have had to see everything he was thinking too?

"I'd... I'd rather not think about any of this – you know that. I just want to enjoy cakes and have small talk with you."

"OK, well – I've got to go now. It was good to see you." And I wave bye to Leri and leave the café.

But I do still want to talk to him. I really do! About the universal and the particular – even the personal. But... but I just can't, for whatever reason. It's just too much all the time, Kyle.

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I feel a bit sorry for him. She gave him such a hard time from what I could tell! Talked to him like he was a piece of shit. And he was only trying to discuss art and be excited about something! But she didn't like that, for whatever reason. And he's hardly touched his cake too! I better go over.

"Kyle, are you ok?"

"Leri. Hi. Not really. We've split up – that's why we haven't been in here. This was the first time we've seen each other in six months."

Oh no! I feel terrible! That's why she was a bit short with me when I first came over. "Oh Kyle – I'm so sorry. I hadn't realised. That looked like a really difficult conversation too. How come you-"

"She used to love me talking about this stuff. It's probably what she was most attracted to about me, at first. Then she rejected it – shamed it as anti-small talk. And somehow that makes *me* look stupid! I thought we'd be able to clear the air and move forward, as friends or together. Or even nothing! I'm not sure. At least over it all."

"Ah, so it was you that asked her to come here then. Well, we don't get to decide how these things go, unfortunately."

"No, but we *can* decide what we say and don't say, and she got off lightly there. Does she not realise what she's got away with? I could have said so much stuff about her in front of you all, and then I wouldn't have sounded weird or too much. I didn't get to tell her anything again either – ask her anything again. Say how I felt or find out how she felt again. I only got to speak about stupid universals, and I fucked that up too. Wasting my time over and over on something that isn't heard or understood and just stays there in me wanting to be repeated over and over. And she hardly says anything, and I make myself look worse because of that. Then I buy into that myself – into the pathetic way she makes me look. And just like I was *trying* to say to her, it all gets forgotten anyway! She gets away with it all and I bear all the responsibility as it slowly, painfully resolves."

"And disappears, too, remember – turns to nothing, remember. Hold on to that. They go away, these feelings. That might be all it is."

"Yes, I know – just as I was saying to her too! Maybe this all wasn't fair. There's clearly nothing that can be shared with her, and I've learnt that lesson hard too many times. I hardly had the right to press it on her now."

"I don't think you really pressed anything on her."

"No, but it may have seemed that way to her. And that's the part she wouldn't have liked. But I don't know how else to be either, and I truly don't think I

need to be anything else? Why am I in the wrong for seeing and saying what's there? If we can say what's wrong *once*, there's no need to say it again: that's all I was trying to say *again* to her. And over and over I've done it; and she wants me to, too: I know it – as pigheaded as that sounds. Why else would she talk to me at all still, even if it was only for a short time? Some part of her *must* want to know.

“And I really wasn't trying to annoy her. And I really can just enjoy cake now.”

Poor guy. “Kyle, mate – I think you've got to let her go, trusting she'll make her own decisions that're right for her.”

“But her decisions are stupid and don't resolve anything. They'll... they'll be her end: that is what'll be expressed for her before she sees.”

OK – I'm not sure what to say to that. “I don't think her not agreeing with you will mean she'll... die. And-”

“This is the most stupid, unnecessary, misguided thing and I can't say anything about it.”

“OK – and it may well be that, Kyle. But that is only what *you* think, and you cannot do anything about it or her now.

“And I think in the future you'd regret saying anything further right now, so I'd be careful with what else you let slip out here. And I think you have to accept that you're still very much working this out too, that she isn't, and that perhaps she doesn't need to. You may think you're right about all of this, and you very well could be. But... well... it only seems to be getting you in more bother right now, doesn't it.”

“But she's gone, hasn't she. She won't come back again, will she.”

“I think she's gone and she won't come back, Kyle – yes. At least not for you.”

“But I'm not done with it all! It doesn't feel resolved! This doesn't feel like an end at all!

“If she could just *hear* me – if my words could land even somewhere small inside her. They would need to make sense just *once* – to change something in her *just once*. To be just a little bit difficult to hear, just once. Then she'd come back here, and I'd make full sense to her, and she'd understand everything. And then I could – and we could – *really* stop, these words all being pointless then – this all truly disappearing.”

Bless him! He is... he is *really* deep with her still, and really lost. In fact, he's almost incoherent, I'd say.

“Oh, Kyle. I wish there was more I could say.”

“I wish there was more I could say too – I wish I could share all I had to say. All my thoughts one last time, then never again. But she took over and left, now you're in charge, and I know you'll soon-”

“Yes, well, Kyle – I'm really sorry to say, but you're going to have to leave now, I'm afraid: we're closing.”

“But I'm not finished! You can see I'm not finished!”

“Well, I think you are.” As I've got to get him out of here. “You've got to get out now.

“But let me get you something to take your cake away in.”

Silly Seminar

We were talking about what we had studied that day; how the seminar had been; doing our “reflective enquiry”.

I am still not sure of the difference between enquiry and inquiry, but I have a reasoned exposition of how miracles logically cannot exist, and therefore how they fall into meaninglessness. We cannot coherently answer the question “Is there a God?”, but this puzzle is what matters today, and it is on this hill that I will readily live and die for

our squalid cause.

We moved on to the “critical suggestions” section of our session, and my peer (I had forgotten his name already; and, if truth be told (a new saying of mine since moving), I was distracted a lot of the time by trying to see what was written on his crumpled name badge that was tucking itself inside his denim jacket pocket’s left-hand seam, if you can at all picture that?) and my peer was telling me how he thought I’d responded too emotionally to Zadie’s point about it being trivially true that fictions can exist and that they can be unexplained; and so, that there can be miracles – “*at least for a certain amount of time until they are scientifically explainable*” (her italics).

I did listen and take it in and I saw the logic. It had started to make more sense what we were doing, both in this conversation and in the seminars. My vocabulary had also extended as necessary, and my understanding of others necessarily had too. But all this made sense to see and say and do in the same way as shopping for second-hand clothes in charity shops can make one feel better both about saving money and supporting the poor: it was bullshit. There were other ways and means, only seminars and charity shops propped up bullshit and closed other options off, and everyone feels erroneously safer in both.

Maybe I was tired. I was about to reply that I was tempering my emotions more and that I had been surprised to notice that I felt more comfortable to share with him that I was attempting to temper my emotions more for the cause. I might even have gone on to say that I understood the logic; I could have dressed up my target as they wished, got them to agree with the cut, and then I may have even been able to dismantle the frills more easily. And I really was about to reply with all this when the woman with the perfect hair moved into our collective view.

I am assuming it was a collective view. There could be no way my peers had not seen the perfect hair and not noticed her as I had. At times, I must allow myself to indulge in believing that collective consciousness must extend outwards from one view.

It hardly matters her hair was perfect, or why it was, or even if it really was. But it was. No reflective inquiry necessary. It is a shame it even needs mentioning.

“I have heard everything you have all said and have understood each level of why you have said it, where it has come from” (she whispers, “your minds,” by turning only her lips to me before continuing) “and why such young men would get in a pickle. But I am angry, for you have clearly learned nothing. You see, you will not land on any one single point here. You have no purpose except to fill your allotted hour. You may learn down the road from this perfunctory task – and yes, things can miraculously have positive outcomes but still be perfunctory; but you will not see causation. And this is fine! So repeat with me:” We don’t. I don’t. Fuck – her hair is everything. “This. Is. Fine. It is excruciating and hilarious to know you will still be looking for the causation, but stop looking.

“And you.” Her lips and hair are now on me. She points and her fingertip extends out, wraps around my neck, comes back around to my chest and gently circles my nipple.

“Stop using your fucking brain.”

Forgotten Yoga

“...OK and now I’d like you to get comfortable on your mat however you wish... you can be sitting cross-legged, making sure your spine is straight, or you can be lying on your back, your legs bent or flat, your arms resting at your side...

“...remember: there is no right way to be here now...”

Why do they always allude to relativism in yoga when there clearly is a right way to be here, or there are at least wrong ways to be here: I couldn't strip naked at the beginning of class and howl on all fours, could I.

Actually I probably could. It would probably be encouraged.

(Less cynicism. We are able to drop such negativity more and more. We are eased in. Our shoulders are not so tense.

And we are listening to this voice within ourself more and more.)

He sits cross-legged on his mat, hands resting on his knees, palms facing the ceiling. Everyone is lying or sitting cross-legged also. All their eyes are closed except his.

I think cross-legged feels more and more comfortable for me, and I'm not as focused on everyone else as I've been in the past? I am not as focused on everyone else – yes. I can zone out a bit and...

"...and close your eyes if that feels comfortable for you... just be where you are..."

...OK OK I need to close my eyes.

Everyone is lying or sitting still.

I do struggle with this woman. Do I struggle with most of the teachers? Yes – but this one especially for sure, as we're bound to get some sort of life drama from her before any downward-facing dog.

"...and the plumber had to come out again for the third time in *two weeks*..."

Too obvious!

"...and my weekend was quite hectic... busy and debauched... I am feeling the effects of it in certain areas of my body..."

She's hungover! She's been bang on it all weekend and then comes in here preaching wellness! Excellent.

"...you may have told yourself certain things today already... someone else may have told you things in the past too... we can hold onto old stories of ourselves like this... things may have happened that remain held in our bodies – our minds and bodies... pictures of ourselves and the world can remain stuck..."

"...there may also be certain things our bodies remember that other parts of us forget..."

Is she not telling herself "certain things" here too? Is she not *deciding* that she's feeling the effects of the weekend? If so, why doesn't she simply *un-tell* herself this? Then she'd have no hangover, and we'd have a proper cure, finally. And less drivel from her.

(We are not so heartless. She is simply unconsciously sharing herself.)

"...but these pictures are not static... they change and adapt and grow... we are all one collective consciousness, a manifestation of..."

(We are open to ideas outside of your perspective.)

"...and here in the West we have a discrete, mechanistic view of the body and the world... we do not consider the overall oneness of being, existence, consciousness... we erroneously consider our bodies and selves as their separate names, parts, organs alone... we believe they are only distinct things..."

How is she trying to consistently talk about *her* weekend and *her* body – presumably as distinct from *mine* – whilst also suggesting that there isn't actually any distinction between them?

"...whereas we know we have seven chakras in our bodies with thousands of energy channels for *prana* to move through..."

Oh, but chakras exist as discrete, distinct, mechanistic parts, do they? What a load of ontological ad-hockery!

(These labels – Western or otherwise – capture a point in time, and they are

merely more or less helpful for working within models, and so for moving toward more beneficial solutions, for health, wellbeing and life. As such, these models will oppose each other, but we know there are infinite ways for experience to be captured at different times, and that this does not necessarily mean they are stationary, and so contradictory.

For instance, our cynicism is not so persistent anymore, and the model – and so picture – we have of ourself is shifting and closing together differently all of the time.)

“...and before we got on to our mats this morning, Tanya here was telling me about her aerobics class... she feels tight and achy from it... these intense routines are *not* good for the body... we want to *undo* the tightening that yesterday’s aerobics class created in Tanya...”

Tanya fidgets on her mat.

So she can go out getting fucked all weekend but then shame Tanya for going to an aerobics class!

“...and we want to try and stay present in the body... we do not want to quiet the mind: we simply watch it... we do not need to check and balance each moment and movement... we can be here right now without a desire for anything else...”

Oh, I love this one: if these presence-promoters are now so present, how do they still have the inclination to help anyone else? How are they still even talking?

(We do not need to fall into rigid cracks that we ourself create because of our own inflexible vocabulary. We may have simply defined a concept unhelpfully using a word inside our own limited experience, and so our reactions are still only a reflection of us, not of the external phenomena we think it is a reflection of. This, too, is OK right now though.)

“...and remember today that I am not your instructor, as they like to call me at this gym... I am a teacher, or a guide, at best... it’s important that you follow your own body... your own wants and needs...”

She’s not an instructor but she’s happy to prescribe what our ontologies need to be and to tell us that poor Tanya’s other class was bad for her – right.

(We do not need to be a casualty of our own robust analyticity.)

“...so forget everything that has gone before us today so far... everything that has been said – even what I have said... only be in the class with however you are feeling...”

However I’m *feeling*? Bemused, after your introduction, as per.

He opens his eyes and looks around the room.

And no one else is bothered that we’re made to listen to her, only to *then* be told to forget it all again? Brilliant! I am surrounded.

Everyone is still lying or sitting still.

(We can sink down a bit further and ease in.)

She is a good test for me, and this kind of... teacher... comes with the package. I will try to relax and ease in.

“...while you relax into the beginning of our practice, I want to talk about the concept of the *koshas* of the Self, or Atman... the layers of our being... sheaths...”

I do find it hard to listen in here though, but I am more and more aware of this. My concentration drifts in...

“...we can become more aware of ourselves and our inner worlds through these *koshas*... acknowledging our physical, energetic, mental, intuitive and blissful elements...”

...and out between acknowledging how I am moving, what is going on in the class or with the teacher, how I am feeling, how agitated or relaxed I might be, how long the class is, how it has become less annoying, or what I am going to have for

dinner. I suppose I just fly around busy, not really sticking to any one thing specifically, never really existing in one place. And it is obviously more highlighted in here, as I'm gathering that the purpose of being here and doing yoga is to actually *be* here, and to be able to concentrate on what I'm doing and being. Concentration is probably the wrong word or concept – I struggle to pin down what part...

“...the mind sheath – *manomaya kosha* – most closely equates to personhood... personality... “I” or “you” as distinct... it is where we may erroneously be held inside what is a transient self... as the clouds move in and through and away again...”

...is me that is struggling to be here when this lack of concentration happens. I do not feel like me or think consistently like me – the classes highlight this – and it fucks with my mind a little bit. It isn't the kind of thing I notice at other times – I can go about my business quite happily. Which isn't a surprise, considering I don't have to listen to somebody subtly quizzing me about what I might be telling myself at other times... In fact I am quite content pottering along in my own little world usually, sometimes drifting off enough to...

“...and there is the intellectual or intuitive sheath – *yijnanamaya kosha* – the awareness of what is or is not for yourself and reality... the deeper witness of your experience... where we may reflect on or intuit an inner knowing or wisdom or experience...”

...merely watch what I am doing, saying, being, or what others are doing, saying, being, without it being so... personal? I'm not even sure it's drifting off – it may be a purer way of seeing things so I might understand myself or others, or even the whole world, more objectively: it can seem like that. It's like a deeper concentration, but I know I'm not really concentrating either: I'm not trying hard to find out anything. Sometimes I walk around the supermarket lost in some deep “knowledge” of something – but I'm really picking out potatoes – and I'll see myself...

“...these *koshas* are not necessarily distinct... their layers are not necessarily one inside another...”

...both picking out potatoes *and* getting at some universal truth, it seems. Existing in and as both, but not really sure of...

“...by their nature, the *koshas* are not tangible... you may not have related to all of them today... they are hard to rationally grasp...”

...where I am...

(This may be beyond us today, but these concepts loosely define something persistently human and universal. Our experience is getting there. We will keep hearing more and more.)

...which is fine, but I can easily lose myself and where I am sometimes. Or what I am.

“...you may not have taken in a lot of these concepts yet... all is just noticing... becoming more aware... becoming aware of what we are aware of... listening for where we may not be...”

He opens his eyes. Everyone is still lying or sitting still.

This is what I do a lot of in these things: drift off and miss what she's saying or what's going on! I start thinking random things about... concentration, ironically! And potatoes! It's weird and hilarious, really. But at least no one moved, I don't think?

I'm not sure what I feel about this *kosha* stuff though. It seems to leave a lot out.

He closes his eyes.

There is not a need to keep my eyes closed, but it feels automatic to do so now? It feels good, now, compared to other times here – so I suppose that's progress? And I have noticed that progress too. Go me!

“...now we can go back to prana... it is prana that permeates all of reality, as mentioned earlier in relation to *pranamaya kosha*... the life force that is the energy in and all around us... we use our yogic practices to move *prana* which we can equate with our breath as the vital principle persisting within us... breath is a powerful tool for ourselves because of this...”

I'm not sure I need to conceptualise the existence of some all-pervading life force to accept that breathing is important though – fuck me.

“...we can become more grounded in ourselves and aware of *prana* through a simple breathing technique to begin our practice properly...”

But at least I'm listening again.

(Our awareness can always ever so slightly expand.)

“...start to notice your breath... where it is in your body... how it feels coming in and out of your nostrils... maybe which nostril it is coming in and out of...”

No – I am not there yet, unsurprisingly: I am not yet noticing my different nostrils. But I can feel my breath going in and out, and not just in my shoulders either, but down to my belly, or at least my belly is going in and out as I'm breathing? It doesn't always seem to correlate with my actual breathing at times though. Am I just making my stomach go in and out? Does anyone notice this stuff?

“...and there is no need to change how we are here now... how we are sitting, lying... how we are breathing...”

They must realise that such things work in the same way as trying not to think about pink elephants, because if I notice my breath, I then seem to change my breath. I know how much I'm breathing, and I'm even starting to count how long I breathe in for, but I'm also making the count a particular count now, slightly, so I'm not just watching it. How do we just watch it?

(We can ease into this. There is nothing to manipulate. We can watch.)

I can *think* about watching, maybe? And if I can *imagine* watching, then I might just be... watching? This stuff, man – fuck knows.

Everyone is still lying or sitting still, bellies rising at different intervals.

“...and just be here experiencing your breath... experiencing...”

Not just watching then – *experiencing*. Because by watching, I can just experience my breath? What does that feel like?

(We are open to ourselves.)

“...and now, place the first and middle finger of your right hand between your eyebrows...”

Oh here we go.

(We benefit from this. We enjoy this technique.)

“...and alternate between covering your left nostril with your ring finger as you breathe out and in through the right, then blocking your right nostril with your thumb as you breathe out and in through your left...”

OK I am actually OK at this, and it does seem to relax me, but I think it is more of a placebo effect, just watching the nose, concentrating on getting the right order. It surely can't be too spiritual, just playing with my nose?

Everyone is still lying or sitting still, their fingers on their foreheads and nostrils.

“...and notice again which nostril may be easier to breathe through here...”

I think my left nostril is a bit more blocked and I know that's either to do with stress or not stress – I can remember something about that, at least!

(Left nostril breathing can increase the parasympathetic response in the body which can make you feel more relaxed and help the body recover from stressors.)

Yes! I knew I knew that.

“...and we should be trying to slow our breathing currently, with an equal amount of time for in-breaths and out-breaths...”

So I can manipulate my breath now! I never remember to do this though. I can't concentrate for long enough on the timings.

(1... 2... 3...)

I have to ignore how strange this could look to anyone outside of this room too, because thinking about that just throws me off.

(4... 5... 1... 2...)

I do enjoy the breathing stuff actually, and I think I'm accepting it more and more. And I've forgotten how annoyed I was at her at the beginning – how annoyed I always am with the instructor – teacher! – to begin with. I think that comes and goes with the practice in some way – some mixed responses from me, my body, my mind, to what is happening in the session.

“...and make this your last round of breath...”

(We are relaxed after the breathing session. We can potentially ease a bit more into the body scan.)

“...and now, I invite you to follow a short body scan to ground you in your body for the physical element of the class today...”

Fuck – I'm not too comfortable with these body scans. I don't think I can feel certain parts of my body for some reason, and this makes me notice that, so I can get stressed out, and she can really start to piss me off then.

“...and I invite you to stay in the position you are in, or to change to one you find more comfortable for your practice...”

An *invite* for my practice, eh? Relinquishing responsibility quite wonderfully now, isn't she.

(Our protective reactions to the difficulties we face due to body scans are natural, but we must be mindful of how these protective reactions manifest themselves outwardly, towards others.)

He comes out of a cross-legged position and lies down on his back on his mat, legs flat, arms resting at his side. Everyone sitting cross-legged also lies down, some with legs flat, some with bent knees.

“...and I invite you to start by noticing your left foot... what is going on here for you... what sensations are here...”

Intellectually I like the idea of a body scan – it is actually fascinating to notice for the first time that different parts of our bodies can have individual feelings and experiences, so my left foot has an existence going on separately to my left leg, or my right foot. Therefore, I am aware of it being there – my foot!

(This is good. We can ease into this activity well.)

My left foot is alive!

(Remain as present as we can for now.)

“...and now the right foot...”

And the right! And I understand how this can get us into our bodies more, and I am aware of myself day-to-day in a more grounded way. It can still feel a bit weird though.

“...and now move up both legs to the left and right calves... the shins...”

It's like feeling things I haven't felt before.

(Remain as present as we can for now.)

“...and now your left and right knees... behind the knees...”

I notice parts of me I haven't noticed before.

(Remain as present as we can for now.)

“...and now the left and right thighs... the hamstrings... the sides of the legs and the top of the legs...”

“...the groin region... the hips...”

(Remain as present as we can for now.)

“...what thoughts, feelings, emotions are coming up for you here... is there any discomfort...”

I do not feel anything here so why do I never feel anything here it really pisses me off – what emotions? I feel a bit numb and really pissed off. This is taking so long here. This isn't yoga this is not moving I want to feel peaceful and I'm feeling just stressed out now. Fuck off I want to move I want to start moving. These body scans do not ground me they stress me out I feel they take up too much of the class.

I never notice anything here and these body scans are pointless and she's a waste of my time.

(Remain as present as we can for now, if we can.)

He bends and straightens his legs, then crosses and uncrosses them with his eyes closed. Everyone is still lying still.

(Remain as present as we can for now, if we can.)

“...does this area cause you any pain or discomfort...”

Yes it clearly fucking does every time why do I do this every time.

(We do not need to change our position or experience or anything here. It is safe and comfortable and we are just here.)

“...remember you can always go back to your breath... feeling your breath going in and out of your nose... feeling the breath in the belly...”

OK I can feel my breath now but fuck me.

OK what is my breath doing? It is quite steady. Calming. It is actually going down to my belly and I'm not even doing anything so that's good.

(It is not our time for this yet – don't worry.)

I'm just going to stick with my breath in my nose and belly for now.

“...now the belly... the chest... the heart...”

I can feel these but I just want to stick with my breath in my nose and belly for now.

(It is not our time for this yet – don't worry.)

“...and now the arms...”

...

“...the hands...”

...

(It is safe and comfortable. We are here.)

“...the neck... the face... the head...”

...

“...and now I invite you to feel the whole body simply lying here...”

I can still feel my breath and my body as a whole and it's all a bit calmer. I fucking hate that body scan stuff though. Always the hips. What's all that about?

(It is not our time for this yet – don't worry.)

But I did forget myself a bit there too, after the stress. Maybe I can relax myself with my breathing more easily than I thought!

“...and you can wiggle your fingers and toes to come back into the room... you can feel more grounded here for the rest of today's session...”

(It is not our time for this yet – don't worry.)

I am so good at these Sun Salutations now though!

Everyone is standing at the front of their mat, feet hip-width apart, arms by their sides, shoulders back and down.

“...you can now continue into your Sun Salutations at your own pace...”

...

(3... 4... 5... 1...)

Everyone reaches their arms up into the air, then sweeps them down as they bend forward to place their hands flat on the ground. Some bend their knees to do this.

“...inhale... exhale...”

...

(2... 3...)

Half the group take the right leg back followed by the left and half take the left leg back followed by the right to transition into a plank position.

...

“...your hips and bum should not sag or stick up... if you haven’t moved, let’s stay here for five breaths in a strong plank pose... inhale... exhale...”

He stays in a plank position. The teacher comes over to him and lightly touches and presses his lower back down. “Just slightly... lower. That’s better.”

Fucking hell is she allowed to do that? And I thought I could plank well. This does feel more stable though, though harder.

(5... 1...)

I hadn’t thought of anything in ages before she came over either! In fact, I hardly even noticed I was here. Mad! Where we at?

“...inhale... exhale...”

He moves through his Sun Salutation, pushing back into downward facing dog so he can see the clock through his legs.

Fuck! Yes! I mustn’t have thought anything for about half an hour: there’s not long left! But I don’t want to rush through this. I can’t believe she distracted me!

“...we can believe we are fully conscious and working within our bodies when we actually aren’t... we are not present in our bodies and the world as we think... we can confuse this with being in *anandamaya kosha*, when really we are not experiencing what is *in* ourselves, and so what is also *outside* ourselves...”

“...our other *koshas* may be holding us without us being aware at these moments... we may still not be released from them...”

I feel I have moved through everything a lot better today too. Each time I come here I feel like I know what I’m doing a little bit more, and like I know what’s going on more. I feel more “in” my body – I’m not straining or pushing as much. And I know when I can – or I don’t want to – force it as much.

I still sweat a lot – that is a slight concern. I’m not sure what it means. I think I just get it a lot more overall though.

(We have had some presence. We can be present and peaceful here more. Our different sheaths are still holding and releasing us as is necessary.)

“...inhale... exhale...”

“...and as you go through your last Sun Salutation, I want you to stay back in downward facing dog...”

...

Everyone moves through their Sun Salutations at various paces to end in downward facing dog.

“...from here, take your left leg into the air, keeping the weight even between your right and left sides, your right heel, both your palms...”

...

Everyone takes their left leg into the air at varying heights.

(2... 3...)

...

“...and now I want you to take your left knee through towards your chin, and then rest your left knee down behind your left hand with the left calf and foot going across and out from under you behind your right hand...”

Everyone slowly starts to take their leg down. Some look around the room watching others. Everyone eventually has their left knee behind their left hand and their left calf and foot going across and out from under them behind their right hand.

...

“...this is pigeon pose... a hip opener... *Eka Pada Rajakapotasana*... from here, I want you to move your hands out in front of you as you slowly lower your heart and head to the ground...”

OK this feels tight. I never feel I can get too low in this. If that is what I'm supposed to do at all, that is.

(1... 2... 3...)

“...your back leg should be out straight behind you...”

My back leg is out straight behind me.

(4... 5...)

“...your back foot should be flat to the floor...”

My back foot is flat to the floor.

(1... 2...)

“...and use your inhalation to create more space, and exhalation to move lower into that space...”

I do not feel comfortable here at all.

(3... 4...)

“...slowly inch your fingers away as you are able to... lower your heart and head more and more...”

No this is getting really tight and tense and stressing me out and I am sweating more and more and I am getting fucked off.

(5... Remain as present as we can for now.)

“...notice where the space is and where it isn't... notice where you are resisting now...”

“...I will come around to see if anyone needs a bolster or other support...”

Everyone is moving down into their pigeon pose as best they can, checking their own legs, checking other people's postures. The teacher comes over to him.

“If you'll allow me, I would like to work hands-on with you today, to support you down further.”

I can hardly answer with her behind me whispering like that, can I. And her hands are on me already.

(Remain as present as we can for now.)

“I am going to apply some weight onto your lower back and slowly work up to help you move down.”

(Remain as present as we can for now.)

“That's it. Continue to breathe deeply.”

She pushes his back up, away, and down with each exhalation and his heart and head begin to sink further towards the ground.

Fuck OK I'm getting lower but this is potentially too much and I'm breathing and trying to stay cool but fuck me it isn't exactly pain but there are aches and pins and needles through my hips and legs.

(Remain as present as we can for now.)

“That's it. Continue to breathe deeply. Be open to where you're moving to. Be curious of the resistance.”

She continues pushing down on his back, applying more and more of her weight on him. He is moving his hands, first towards him, then back out in front of him again.

I am dripping. I keep pulling my hands up and resisting I know and I don't really know why but I feel the urge to push up somehow or away somehow and it's getting more and more annoying.

“Continue to breathe deeply. Be open.”

(Remain as present as we can for now.)

No this is too much I'm not curious of this resistance my body doesn't

shouldn't go this way fuck.

"Continue to breathe deeply. Be open."

(Remain as present as we can for now.)

I am shaking and sweating and crying what the fuck is going on here I can't go anymore.

"Continue to breathe deeply. Be open."

(Remain as present as we can for now. Remain as present as we can for now.)

I am crying. I am crying. It is too much here. Why does it hurt so fucking much here? I don't want to feel any of this I don't want to know any of this.

He cries on the mat with the teacher holding his body.

"It's OK – I'm here. It is just things leaving the body. It is just opening up.

Releasing. Letting go. It is just things that have been said – that have been done.

"Trust in me and the space here. You are safe in this space here. You are safe. It is leaving. It leaves."

He is convulsing and shouting and wailing. Everyone looks around at them.

Why am I thinking that why am I seeing that what is that what is this why am I thinking that?

"Continue to breathe deeply. Be open."

(It is OK here.)

"It is OK. You are safe. I am here."

...
"..."

(It is OK here. We are safe with her here. She is protecting us. We are OK.

Things are just being let out. She is not another one to hurt us.

We have less cynicism and barriers and we are open to ideas. We are not heartless. We are not a casualty. It was just anxiety-inducing. It was just protective. It was just resistance. It was just the difficulty of releasing.

The memories and thoughts and intrusions filter out slowly and then go away. We know this. You can be present and peaceful.)

She is a good test.

"..."

...

Breakfast's Up

The once-sweet couple both ignored what the problem was: an uneven Weetabix count. There must have been a time in the last few months when he had eaten three instead of four, and with a twelve-sleeve, this'll leave an odd 'bix after three days, providing there was only one day when three were eaten. Since then, the sleeves have been going nine, five, one; nine, five, one; and this creates disharmony.

Hard to say where this was caused initially. Hard to say because it shouldn't be said? As we should not disturb breakfast.

We could look back through the history of both parties: are either of you aware of anyone else in your respective families that has struggled with poor morning choices? They both knew the value of spontaneity: walk on the other side of the street on your way home from work some days; mix your drinks. But you need foundations for such things – there needs to be a steady job for different paths! And consistent breakfasts make for a happy life.

Leaving consciously untouched the psychoanalysis of biscuits, it will have to be accepted that whichever way the Weetabix dis-count had come to be, it was wreaking havoc well beyond what would have been considered possible now, causing untold butterflying and immeasurable ripples out over the coffee and croissants and

commutes of them both, into their meetings and briefs (more so hers), filtering through the networks of their suited performances.

And he held fast to this already-broken routine of four biscuits, and he unsuspectingly compensated for the unrelenting waves it produced through alcoholic measures.

On the other hand, she had affairs. A man's words, of course: they were not married, nor committed; and she'd feel no loss until he would.

Though when one of them realises they are realising, this will only be the start of the end. Then there will be another journey through hell to resolve this realisation. What will he do now instead: stomach a fifth biscuit for a single day for the good of the family?

Roll Up

"A monumental moment in our history!"

"Must do!"

"I wish I'd have thought of it instead of doing this."

These were just some of the reviews of the exciting new scheme to escape whatever comes at the end of this sentence! Never before had such a scheme been tried in front of an audience as large as the auditorium took on last night, if you can read that. There were people from all over – up and down society and all around the bend. Whilst it may have been a prolonged process, drawing together such themes as those that were on display, not for one moment did anyone need to stop and think, "How did he do this?!": it looked so natural on the white background.

It can only be hoped that much more creativity is undertaken by those that have seen and are inspired by such a force as this. Taking on such a challenge is no mean feat, but that barrier has been broken, and the mile will now forever come down. So enjoy your breakfast, kids. And watch! And watch! Because there's all sorts going on.

Season Two

Kyle. 23. Estate agent. Second-hand convertible. Rented one-bedroom flat. His girlfriend gone.

Tuesday night. He moves around the living room. "I have got better at making dinners" – an alert goes out to his mother. He goes from his phone to the pan to the fridge to the radio.

He swipes. He stirs.

"I am really enjoying the space now" – an alert goes out to his friends. He goes to the sofa. The pan is off. There is still a quiet bubbling he hears more and more. He enjoys it. He is listening to it more.

He can watch something for a while. He cannot currently read. He stirs as he swipes on his sofa. Pauses for longer than he expected. Longer than he wants. He hears and listens – watches – more. No enjoyment, but comfort.

This is the fourth episodic adventure tonight, the second of a series that he has blundered through. Pause. Distract. Bubble. Watch.

Pause. He cries.

Dawn, of What Does Not Matter

It is sooooo hot. Me and Trina are trekking over to Park. It's only ten o'clock on a Tuesday and it's a bit basic of us but we have our bikinis on already. Who gives a fuck – I'm lying down in the sun alllll day and getting burnt and I am *desperate* for some cock-tention: attention from some cock!

I swear as soon as it hits May everyone gets so much fitter and no one goes to work, they just go Park. Park is just the park but everyone calls it Park, like with a capital letter or something.

We literally look banging today. I said to Trina when we first left ours that we both look banging and that I'm *desperate* for some cock and she said, Kat, you honestly look a dish, babe, and I love how she says my name and says things like dish when I need it.

Wanting validation is a healthy, human need, too, she then says, and I'm like where does she come up with this stuff she is *hilarious*!

I could not ask for a better friend. We live together and spend so much time together and it is so good. She is so hot and so clever – like, ridiculously clever – and at times I don't know why she likes me at all.

We do hang out like obviously but she is super busy with other stuff and we don't like everything the same. She likes weird films and like art and book stuff and that but she says that stuff's just superficial and transitory and so it doesn't matter much. It's a good job it doesn't matter much as I don't get what the fuck that means at all. But she doesn't take herself too seriously either and we can laugh about it and we're great because opposites attract.

We're walking to Park through Wood which is cool to hang out in in the winter or when it's raining because you can hang out and keep cover from the rain but no one really goes in Wood in the summer. Creeps maybe. Actually sometimes people camp in Wood but people are doing that less at our age now because, like, why would they. Kids still do it maybe.

Anyway we're walking to Park and it is so hot already and I'm going to get burnt. I always leave putting cream on until it's too late – hopefully some lad will want to put some on me hahaha. There's usually loads of lads playing football there already even at this time. Morning tops off for the gals – oi oi!

I'm not sure what we've been chatting about but I say to Trina that they'll be some cock there already and that I'm feeling so ready to mingle and she just laughs and carries on with what she was saying. I struggle to keep up with what she's on about at times but like I said you can take the piss out of it as neither of us take ourselves too seriously. She says weird shit to me or about me, things that I scream at or whatever when she says them because they are just too weird. You know, like, I'll say, what the fuck are you saying? and then howl at her, and then she'll howl back too, but then say something like, I know, like, one's own incredulity at what the messenger said should never be misconstrued as a lack of sense *within* what the messenger said, and then we'll both howl more.

We're getting to the edge of Wood and it's a right bastard going up the final hill. It's like a flat walk to Wood from ours but then it goes uphill before it opens up to like the view down to Park. Trina's in front of me nearly at the top of the hill already. Shit like this makes me think I'm the fat one out of us because she can just breeze up the hill but I know that isn't really a thing – what we look like. Like, does it really matter? Who's deciding what we look like now anyway? It isn't even necessary.

Hurry up and check this view, you lazy bitch.

The cheeky bitch is shouting down at me.

Oh, but Kat – you are great to look down on though.

That's better: making a picture of me so I look fit. That's how I want to sound.

I've got up the hill but I don't really care about the view. I don't really get them. But you can see the hot lads down on Park already as I knew they would be already. Trina's looking past them at the view that we've seen like sooooo many times before – it is literally just Park then the rest of the city.

Trina, mate, you're looking at the wrong view: check out the totty down there!

She isn't even looking down at the lads!

Ha. I'm not looking at the view you think – look: you're missing the totty up here.

And she points along the hill to the right to some guy lying on his own.

Oh. My. Fuckin. God. He. Looks. So. Fit.

I am telling you this guy looks like something from a perfume advert.

He's lying there in the sun on his blanket on the edge of Wood with his dark flowing wanky hair and deep dark tan and I just want him NOW. He's like a surfer dude or something. Why didn't Trina say anything as soon as she got up here? He is literally so fit like this is so like unnecessary.

Trina, why the fuck are we still standing here – and I'm walking over to him already like no questions asked and I am actually wet.

I can hear his music on as I get near him and he's reading some book and has other books and notebooks all around him. This will be so easy to get involved with.

Hi! I'm Kat! I could hear your music from over there and wondered what it was? Sounds really cool!

I am so good with casual intros.

Hi, Kat. This is Pink Floyd. Early Pink Floyd. Syd Barrett era.

Erm, who is he on about?

Ah yeah – cool! Sounds really... different! It's so lovely today up here, isn't it. You must be out here loads to get a colour like that!

I am laughing so hard I am actually hilarious.

I'm not sure it's really a tan. I don't think about that too much. I lie here quite a lot just pottering about though, yes. It's quiet in the week too, usually, so I can get a lot done.

Erm, why so serious? Is he a bit dry or what? It doesn't have to be taken so literally, mate. God.

Ah yeah – cool! What you doing then?

Not a lot, really. I'm just reading and writing, but it's not for anything, if you understand. It's a good space to be in up here when there isn't too much going on, which is what I like. What are you doing? With your friend, are you?

He's pointing over at Trina. Fuck sake – here we go.

Oh yeah, my friend Trina. Trina!

I did *not* just need to shout her over. Why is she just standing over there staring at us?

We're just hanging out really. Going over to Park because it's such a lush day, you know. Hence the bikinis!

And I give it a little boob shake. I am such a slut.

That sounds good.

Is that all he can reply? I'm pretty sure he might still be reading in between talking to me too. But Trina's here now. Here we go: book chat.

Hi. I'm Trina. What's your name?

Fuck I didn't even ask his name.

Hi, Trina. I'm Tyson. Good to meet you – to meet you both. So, Kat said you're going down to Park?

He hasn't forgotten me yet then like fuck me.

Yes, going down to Park just to enjoy the sun. No real plans. What are you reading?

Told you: book chat.

Oh, it's just about the interactions and roles in conflict and how they can determine behavioural patterns from childhood, and how this can be analysed for roles and states going forward in one's life. We can take a cross section of behavioural patterns decided by the positively considered correlations of thirty pairs of twins and assess whether each pair will develop healthy attachments in their first romantic relationships.

What the fuck has he just said.

Erm, OK – psychology then. Sounds a bit of a convoluted way of explaining that though, at least to my – our – little minds. Like, it's hard to make sense of what you said.

OK Trina caught on obviously. But what are they even saying? She seems to be sort of, like, chuckling at him?

Oh, I'm sure it does. I can sometimes only make sense to myself and a select few. But yes – if you think so: psychology, then.

Tyson: you can relax. Me and Kat don't bite. At least not too hard.

Hahaha – love her.

I am relaxed, in my own way.

OK maybe he has some banter after all. But he doesn't look too relaxed, in our way.

Right then – maybe we're on the same page, but just have different words. But it *must* be explained so... clinically... in your words, mustn't it.

OK Trina is definitely laughing at something and that was definitely sarcasm then.

Does it not all need to be, at some point?

He's acting a bit cocky about fuck knows what here.

No, kid. Why is it necessary to get things so clinically right?

She has literally just called him kid! Is she fuming or something?

To label the right patterns so we know how things happen, then to forget them again.

If you want and need that spelling out, then crack on. Your book sounds a bit psychoanalytic, too, don't it, you edgy so-and-so.

Yes, for sure – although it is a little finer-grained than that. But that may go without saying.

Yes, always more fine-grained for getting the right patterns, doctor. And no – you definitely had to say it, I'm sure.

She is literally laughing like *at him* now for sure and I have to laugh too.

Hahaha.

Yes – quite.

He has not just said quite. Surely not. But I don't want Trina having the whole conversation.

So you studying or something or what? What you writing?

No, I'm not studying, I'm just reading some non-fiction for inspiration for some poetry I'm jotting down. But there's no real rhythm or structure or plan to it, or reason for doing it.

Sunny day lying in the grass listening to some weird shit writing poetry. I mean he is soooooo fit but this might be harder work than I thought. The hair was

genuinely a giveaway I mean really fuck sakeeeee Kat. This is Trina's bag all day long.

Any recurring themes miraculously coming out of the filter of your subconsciousness today then?

And this is the kind of thing she says and I just don't understand it. I don't know why she says it. She is still like laughing or grinning or like grimacing at him though I think.

Well, yes, I suppose so. It's always interesting, isn't it, what we don't expect to come out. But I suppose I feel a bit stuck right now, though I'm aware I'm stuck? Struggling to form things: that's the theme. But not in a writer's block kind of way, I should add.

Oh yes, you should of course add – again! Come on then, Ty, what you got down so far?

When Trina asks this he doesn't even seem fazed, like he just spins around and sits up cross-legged and grabs his notebook like he's ready to read? Aren't people like a bit shier about this weird stuff? Fuck it – he was on his front before and I was creaming over the sweat on his lower back and I just wanted to lick it, like I just love that little tuft of lower back hair going down to his arse shinning with a bit of sweat on it, but now I can see his front and I want to lick down that in the same way too, from his abs, all the way down to his cock. He is so lean and toned and fittttt this is all really not required like oh my god.

No though really he is actually going to read his poem fuckkkkk.

Emily, can tell me what it is
Yet can you tell me—
“It is nothing but a picture
Of the fading trees from summer,
Of the gaps before some
Dawn,
Of what does not matter
In the gap.”
That is how she is playing
With us all.

That's all I have so far. Still playing around with it though.

What the actual fuck has he just done? Is this happening? Who the fuck is Emily? Fuck this I'm asking him.

Who's Emily?

Yeah, who is this Emily, then, Ty?

Trina is hilarious calling him Ty already!

I do like the poem though, at least how it's started.

Urgh Trina why.

Thank you. Emily was in the song but it reminded me of someone else too. But it's not really important. I just needed a name.

Deep, dude.

Trinaaaaa. She keeps mugging him right off now though I'm sure. I don't know if she's doing it because she wants his dick or what? I've got to copy her though.

Yeah – deep, dude.

Not so deep. Like I said, just playing around. Do you two enjoy reading? Studying? Literature? Poetry?

Ugh – he is getting a bit dull. Is it obvious to him that I'm starting to think he's a bit dull?

Yeah Trina is super smart and reads and stuff but doesn't take herself too seriously. I mean I read now and then too but I don't take myself too seriously either

and I'd rather just have a laugh like go Park and hang out you know like normal stuff. We both like just having fun, you know.

But fuck it I winked at him when I said having fun and I licked my lips because he is still literally soooooo fit and the poetry thing is actually still hot in some way.

I might have just read you in the wrong way, Kat...

Oh, I'm sure you haven't, Ty: I am just a nightmare wanting your dick.

...but I should probably say that I do not go in for one-night stands. Or one-day stands, considering the time! Sorry – I shouldn't jest. But I respect my body and integrity and I do not like my sexual encounters to be so cursorily premised. And I do not want to commodify myself.

What the actual fuck I mean like I wasn't exactly going to just sleep with you right here right now. Has he really just called me out like that like dead straight?

Mate, chill out. I wasn't going to just like jump on you right now or something, you know? You're starting to weird me out to be honest.

Honestly – what is he doing.

OK. Sorry if I was being presumptuous about your motivations at all.

The loser doesn't even seem bothered when he apologises.

Hahaha – amazing!

I'm glad she's laughing.

Trina – Kat said you read?

Yes, I read. Don't most people in some way? Bus timetables, menus, shop prices. You didn't mean that though, did you – you meant books. So yes, I read – even big highbrow books, sometimes. Even reference them too when that's required. Impressed?

Yeah fuck it Trina go in on him.

Less impressed, more interested. What are you reading at the minute?

Oh, well, actually... I have, erm... well, I've been doing some research for a piece I'm planning to write soon, actually. Maybe an article or even a paper for a journal, you know. It's about the legitimacy of sexual misadventure and how it can be a valid choice for young women against patriarchal anxiety. No reason for doing it, though. Just playing.

I had no idea she was researching or writing anything and I have no idea what any of that just meant but he looks a bit stunned so fuck it I'm just going to shut the fuck up for a bit.

Oh, wow – really. That sounds fascinating. Can you elaborate?

Yes, I can.

...

...

Oh – sorry: *will* you elaborate, please?

Oh for sure! Well, young women will go out and fuck and have fun and that can be regarded as illegitimate, at best, and crass or demoralising or even *dehumanising* for ourselves, at worst. But it doesn't have to be judged in that way. For one thing, it is literally just young women having fun and learning about life and ourselves – a pretty basic thing. For another, it benefits *everyone* for young women to piss off those men that react nervously to our own controlled sexualisation, those men that because they do not have the opportunity to benefit from our self-governing sexualisation themselves – they do not get to fuck us, to be clear – they instead get nervous, stressed, uncomfortable. And so the more they get nervous, stressed, uncomfortable about how much they want to fuck us – something they then inappropriately rationalise and label as some *concern* for us, or whatever, *at best* – the more we should fuck and have fun, as a choice, right in their faces, but not with their faces.

Right then. OK. So sexual misadventure is beneficial to young women, and all the potential harm that comes with it?

Better the devil you know, kind of thing. Bad shit is going to happen anyway – we’re all going to learn hard lessons in life. Even you, young man! So it’s better to appropriately be inappropriate and have some control. We all need to go through some shit, most probably, but no one else needs to force us away from or towards it. We can do that for ourselves.

This could be construed as a call to young women to proactively go after trouble though.

Your point?

So you’re promoting promiscuity and all the risks it can bring?

I’m promoting sexual adventure – or, God forbid, *misadventure* – on our own terms.

What is to be gained from chasing after adventure and *risk* though? It ends in one way: the end of the adventure – and that can feel worse when you are not aware of the adventure you are on in the first place. What’s wrong with the *clean* paths – the *quiet* parks? Do you really require them to be muddy and energetic? In words that may be more basic – and potentially offensive, I should add, but I’m aware of this: do you not want less drama?

Trina sounded so fucking good for whatever reason with whatever she was on about before he said this but fuck him I’ve been called drama far too many times in my life and I fucking *hate* the word. He’s causing drama now too, that’s the thing. I’m getting involved here now fuck him.

The thing is, *you’re* causing the drama now, aren’t you, mate.

There I said it fuck him. Now Trina can let him have it with her better shit again.

So what if we do need – even *crave* – drama? If we are so conditioned to need its support right now – to be fully immersed in its blinkering shadow? Who fucking cares.

Yeah fuck him man I’m telling him he doesn’t even make fucking sense either.

You don’t even make fucking sense either.

Riddles.

Yeah, riddles is better.

He talks in fucking riddles. And, more to the point, he thinks he’s the only one with the answers to them. To us. What is it we’re *not* supposed to know exactly?

Trina is like preaching some feminist shit I’m sure. So good. To be honest I don’t really know what the fuck either of them have been going on about but fuck him calling us drama.

I’m not saying you don’t know-

Trina just stops him speaking dead though.

The irony is you can’t know any better than us, either, can you.

Her saying this sounds really fucking good somehow. But the smug prick still carries on.

Ignorance is bliss, are you saying?

He seems to be loving this somehow in like being owned or something? And I’m just like really fucking riled up now, probably because he’s still so fit, somehow, and probably because I’m just fucking bored and confused. Trina is still smiling though and she’s starting to go in on him now, I think.

Mate, no one is thinking anything like you, and that’s not a problem. It *ain’t* a problem. No one needs to give too much of a fuck most of the time, and that’s fine. What are we in your infinite wisdom: young? dumb? superficial? *unaware*? So fucking what – let’s have fun anyway. At least it ain’t all ticking over in our heads and being

checked and balanced all the time like some losers – we don't need that. And you know what, my mum hugged me as a baby, my dad talks to me like a person and I'm sure they also switched roles too. And that did enough; nothing to read about; no more twins to assess. What if we were copying you, sitting here informing our prose with non-fiction? Fucking intellectual creativity of the driest order: do you not see the fuss in that? Are these books protecting you from the sun, or do you think they're lifting you to it? Can you feel how fucking tight you are? You think us... you think *me* coming over here with the goal of fucking you means that I could not possibly also be aware that you'd just be something I'd go through during a moment in time – just a dramatic *risk*, if you want to stick to that thread – because I didn't read about it beforehand – because I don't have a thesis on my decision to get laid? I'll flirt with some lost, romanticised book worm and maybe fuck someone else that I won't spend the rest of my life with. I might even feel something during all of it. What's the fucking issue? Does it worry you? What don't *you* want to feel? I could have told you when we first came over that I wouldn't be talking to you in five years, but that hardly matters right now, does it.

You were hot. Now you sound like a fucking loser. Shame: I've great tits, Ty.

Oh. My. Fucking. GOD. What has she just saiddddd. Trina the dreamboat.

That hit him – even I noticed that that hit a fucking nerve somewhere. I've got to chime in.

Yeah, you sad prick. We've both got great tits.

Trina is so fucking good at the follow ups too.

And you're looking past them and getting nowhere.

Yes – have that, you fit, pretentious wanker.

If you think so.

He has not just replied with that! He is blushing but like smiling and this is just so fucking weird and well past a waste of our time now. I don't know how she's keeping it together so much to spout her clever shit.

Nah – maybe you're wrong there, as I suppose we *don't* need to think so. Which ironically means we can agree on something? Maybe we are all just talking to ourselves, and maybe I'm the only one that notices. Oh – and of course *you* do, too, Ty. But we can all just stay where we are, can't we.

And Tyson: we can even try and have some fun there, if we want to.

She sort of whispers the last bit to him and it is kind of like creepy and hot.

He's not blushing anymore but is like smirking like sort of turned on? Like, does he find it creepy *and* hot, all this being owned?

OK – I'll stay here for now then. Maybe you two should go down to enjoy Park as you intended?

He is actually telling us to go when we're clearly going anyway.

Yeah, don't worry, mate – we're going anyway. SO fucking dry up here. Trina – let's go down there to those lads playing football.

And the cunt has NOT just laughed under his breath at me saying that, the fucking cunt. I'm about to whack the prick. I'm glad Trina replies first.

Problem with football now too? Man, get over yourself. We'll have fun and learn if we need to. You stay up here on your own and bask in the sun if you want.

We're walking down to Park and we are absolutely screaming.

Trina, mate, what the actual was he?

Ha. Don't mind him, babe. He's somewhere else – we just need to allow for it.

OK maybe Trina isn't screaming as much as me.

And enjoy his type now and then!

OK she's just burst out laughing at herself saying that and I don't really get

her but she's so fucking sexy being smart as fuckkkkk and owning him.

Mate, you trashed him sooooo bad. What was he even saying? What were you both even on about? Were you pissed off with him or what?

He was mugging you off a bit – I heard him suggest you didn't understand something when you first went over to him. Fuck that. But then I was just playing with it all really. He was actually a bit of a laugh. Even some banter! I made all that legitimacy of sexual misadventure shit up.

What!

What! You mean you made that all up? You're not writing anything about all that shit?

No – not at all! I was just taking the piss having a bit of a laugh, seeing what he'd say. He was a bit ruffled at first, I think. Anxious! But not too sucked in to be fair. But fuck it he needed bringing down a peg or two. Head up his arse – stuck in his books: he's lost in all that shit. He definitely enjoyed it a bit though – maybe I broke through his lines. I wasn't making it up about my tits though, was I. Hahaha. Fuck the rest!

This! Girl! What even *is* she! I don't know why she likes me at all at times.

Trina, you are a fucking dreamboat. I don't know what you're saying or doing a lot of the time but it feels like fucking gold and it turns me the fuck on.

And I didn't even notice if he was like anxious or not or even like enjoying it or not but it feels like it was a good laugh now. And it is sooooo weird how me and Trina are friends like I do notice how weird it is more when things like this happen. But she just says it doesn't matter overall, like it's superficial and transitory she says to me when I say it's weird that we're friends and we do just create just so much fun and drama and we both just seem to love it.

*

I am so burnt. Those lads were so basic at putting cream on. Dead chat too – dry as fuck. I've literally no interest in football chat constantly and I made it pretty obvious but they didn't even bother to notice.

Need to stop spending hours on end in the sun like this doing nothing down here like this like it's a waste of time a lot of the time. Just a waste of summer like fading past me.

And I don't understand all that shit with Trina and Tyson either and like which of us is saying what and OH MY FUCKING GOD I thought she'd been gone ages but I can see her now.

I can see her – up there. She is up there, like, up there, with him. Up there, fucking him!

OMG actually they have just actually rolled down the hill a bit in the middle of doing it hahaha!

Reverse Park

The romance is dead. There is little to be worked with when you are on a train and the last stop is circular. How many people died? They never found out. Between Circum and Turcan all the knowledge of the situation was held but they were the ones that wanted to die. Or so they suspected. Unidentifiable bodies are the worst.

What is it we are looking for? Sometimes I put my head down, forget my fingers, just whirl and whirl. Like this woman with the hula hoop. She is dazzling. A fiction to be held when times are tough and the real world eats. I am not sure if there is anything to follow across the park when she goes. I watch her from a distance: no, I am

not stupid – I lift my head up then. Otherwise, romance is dead.

I do not want to feel as they do or I do. There must be a release? The man said he trusts me.

We can go back to the train. Circum wanted one last visit to the park. The large park at the “end of the line”: those were the coordinates Turcan had to navigate to. Turcan, as ever, got on the wrong line. It was not a line at all. It was a 360-degree spin to the city. They got on the round line of plenty that never stops. Turcan had been on his since birth; anyone with him struggled to get off. Circum’s body still pretended to enjoy it while she hid. Fourteen one-last-visits.

Why would there be more than two on the train? It was resolved as it went ahead; they decided that before they went. If there was a problem they would consult and solve it. They could not be seen to delete things; it all had to at least appear ad hoc.

Fourteen died, by the way. Circum was lying to herself and wanted the party. The not-yet-called-for drama. How it’s pretended by many – by most? – that the party is all there is. I have seen block parties go up in the air and they seem magical. No – not the street parties. We should call block parties those big skyscrapers, because they are an expression of drama and lies in glass. They paint them now to keep them cool. All I can do is shake my head and grin.

Have you ever heard of such... no... such... no... such... wonder?

How can this pair on the train get anywhere in a circle, when they are being followed too? It is approaching 450. The letters are going, they were given up on in January, and the words they have left need to be processed in a very fine way, else, they, are, fucked.

Jarring. Deal with it. Each part pulled together makes as much sense as any fine thing. That is the best that can be done. Masterpieces! Of course! I hate when they do that. How hard can it be? I am in that world. They came from Sheffield on a train and they made sense of it on the merry-go-round and fortunately they knew they were on it for a fortune and it did terribly well for their bank balances.

You will die a terrible terrible death. I cannot afford the subscription. I could but I spent it on books. I am free but I choose lines. It slowly unfolds and we are in one tucked away crease but some can read the whole letter too early. You will die a terrible terrible death. Please – just let me see it again. The woman hulaing. The circle train. Unfixed memories. “The voice of a generation.” “A troubled genius.”

A beautiful love story existing nowhere. A train off the tracks. The drama of the century. Was it always the woman that was actually killed? Did I really see any of this in the park?

Empire

The empires of CEOs, architects, drug dealers, authors and grandparents all go back to the same source. Neat cladding and gold teeth and matching dresses can all be beautiful veneers, especially if they are on daytime television. Once the superficial coatings are slowly peeled away – *feel behind your eyes* – there is an ugly source then nothing: it is brute and animalistic, the profane. But what drives it is the sacred. It’s underneath, but also on top. There must be this thicker, richer layer for the mud to stick to. Then on this mud we can manufacture sewing machines.

Epoch of Oblivion

Born as the most vulnerable creature on the planet, for its first few years the baby human is unable to sustain its own life without the protection and mercy of its carers. But then, quickly, it will be expected to work, decide, love, behave, regulate, emote,

tolerate, achieve and understand opposites, all without that early protection or mercy, which was mostly feigned anyway. This meant it stood no chance, of course, but try telling them that, back then.

And so, on tonight's episode, we start our look back on 'The Epoch of Oblivion'.

For No One

"You're still not sure if she had to die. Was there another way it could have gone for her? Could you have done something more – something differently?"

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And you want to tell everyone everything about it all. You wanted to scream it from the roof tops. But that wouldn't help you, and it wouldn't help them. You still aren't sure who is more important, at times: you force yourself to not fall down that spiral.

All the things you want to say still, but won't. Not to your daughter – not to anyone. Because just recalling it all is maddening in itself. And leaving it in the past still seems like the right thing to do. And mostly, it doesn't really matter what happens, deep down.

And you do see and feel more of all the history. Whether you were anything other than just a pass along her way. Can we really say that someone didn't love us when they say they did? Can we project that? But even that doesn't matter now. You may have been nothing – she may have seen nothing of you – but you saw all of her, eventually, and you love every cell.

And you picked her apart unknowingly. Every part of her being became something to fix because you were not noticing that is where you were going with yours. Not a negative, just trying to help, trying to help. You were not looking after yourself foremost though. You were trying to help the wrong body.

You mixed up each others' truth, one certainly a bit more, you think. You aren't sure. But you have to be sure that neither of you meant it. What needed to play out was being played out. You wish you could show them that.

You went through every explanation, looking at every theory for how you all fit together. Empath, narcissist, co-dependent, etc etc. And you moved through them all too – they all made sense for a time. Each model gave meaning; each story gave solace. But each of these structures eventually fell away, and the heat of the feelings cooled, and what was left was her and just love for her.

And you would scramble to make sense each time. Discrete entities for a neat model to make a pleasant story, until your thoughts and feelings changed again, and again, and so did their identity each time.

But people have choices. You have a choice.

How the fuck do people have choices? Who the fuck would have chose this? Most people don't have the choice. Think they have the choice.

Yes, you know you have, don't you.

And you know now it doesn't really matter about everything you think you know and see. You can't do anything with it.

You remember being a different person before her, and you wanted her to be the fault for everything you lost. But what was there before wasn't anything you wanted either, and we always find what we need, for better or for worse, and she needed to happen.

You wonder if she ever felt anything, and you know that would not be her fault. Yet she had moments of clarity, but this was wrong, too – that it was somehow her fault; that she had always been the wrong one. But she wasn't, really. She had

been thrown under the bus years before you, and she thought she'd pushed herself under, just like you used to. But you couldn't be the one to show her that, could you?

You manage to talk about it without talking about it with so many – all the still broken; all the open-hearted that are stuck in old ruins. You see it in faces: the ignorant scars. And the irony in all our closed books of wordless closure. You are alone with it all.

How torturous some of it was. Horror. Hellish. You assume for both of you? What did they say; what did you do? It replayed and replayed. Veiled games you didn't know you were playing; heartfelt but fake gifts and cries. Neither of you able to listen to anything, still wanting your parents' help, love. But it is not getting you away from this. It keeps us there. You kept trying, being pulled further in by past habits.

You wish there was violence. You wish there was violence. This would have made more clear cuts. Words take a while to appear and be seen, felt, and for many this won't form altogether, if at all.

Lights flashed. Much creative license was used.

Maybe it was only in her becoming bigger than God. She didn't ask for that, nor did you. But your child seemed to need it: someone like it. Then God let you down again, but how? Why? You'd been so, so good – what lesson were you still struggling with? Which God were you really missing here?

"And where do you think you're going?" you say to her smiling.

"And what the fuck has it got to do with you?" she replies, not smiling.

You were teasing, trying to make better relations again.

It felt like it was you or her at times. Like you couldn't pull away, as you were keeping her alive, but by doing that, you were slowing dying yourself.

Van the man again, dad. And you always turn it off before that last song. And that's my fave!

She flashes in your mind still. She wakes you up in the night. And she sometimes still chokes you – those funny little roles you played.

After all the processing, they're still love, but the attachment to what else they became comes out on bad days.

And you know they have to lie to themselves. They have to fight rather than acknowledge. They need those flawed beliefs, that self-deprecation, rather than acknowledgement. All the adaption is theirs to hide behind – to protect ourselves.

You lose yourself with her. You close your eyes and they are there as you want them to be, not as they are, but as you made them, and you are talking and laughing and in the sun and in love. And the room you are in goes, and the film behind your eyes plays the magic again. And you are well versed in this: you know to leave this theatre quietly, that the credits have already rolled, that you have to open your eyes slowly and adjust to reality's light safely. And you bring yourself back to the room.

You have had your relative success. You are single, aging well, successful writer, joint custody of two wonderful children. You are not exactly lonely, but still, in these moments, you ponder what ifs. Although you do enjoy this space and the comfort and solitude it brings.

But they still seem to have some chaos, from what you see and hear and feel, through friends, your children, your body. And it is what you wanted for a while, then you wanted to take it away – thought you could take it away. You felt you understood it all until you really did, then you knew there was nothing one person could do for another, truly, without them be willing to, consciously or not. The reality of this comes a lot sooner than accepting it though, and you rode waves of denial and ignorance in still trying to help, or control, or love.

You could eventually read every cell of her being, of her history, after you had both done too much for it to matter. This truth sang in your head for a while too, and still does, at times.

You see now that it was not just you, or her, and that these distinctions are only helpful, adaptive, for a while. Then you have to adapt further if you want to move past this. With this you have to accept that you will both start to speak different languages – inhabit different worlds. And when you replay the films you can laugh more and more, and acknowledge you both looked good, and that it was bad, really bad at times, but it was a different, younger time, and it was meaningful and sense making and necessary.

But sometimes the film can still look bad, on hard days, long nights.

And the anxiety, the vigilance, the reality of the true situation did not reflect love. But you know what they were before, now, and you understand what they became for you. And you love them anyway, still. Despite that turmoil and uncertainty – the push and pulling, by both of you; the release and reward. The highs and lows were not the love, nor those stories that play out through you, but pull that away – see through it all – and the love is still in the middle, maybe even carrying you both through silently still.

And you absolutely needed it all, all the drama, turmoil, abuse. It was exactly what you were looking for really, to see and realise and to get away from for good. It just could have been a bit quicker. It might have been nicer if it wasn't what you needed.

You keep some distance now, geographically, internally. But you try and send something that will slowly land. Slowly go somewhere.

You know what you needed. You know what they became for you. And she couldn't be that, just like who she had become couldn't be either. And you needed that showing – you needed to listen to what you weren't acknowledging.

So you reason – it wasn't really their fault – neither of you knew – it felt like you were playing out something more than you – it absolutely had to happen, and you are not free from responsibility too. But it still all hurts so much.

Everything you couldn't see before. No narcissism in a vacuum: your body wouldn't let you yet.

And the smears for a while afterwards. You could read them and hear them – feel them – even when they weren't in front of you.

You lost everyone, unable to share, unable to trust, too embarrassed to say what you were thinking, feeling – unable to accept any reality.

What does it mean to not know someone? To have not really seen them and understood them – to not have seen the unhelpfulness in their behaviour for you. In your shared behaviour.

We are always forgiving, understanding, empathising with the things people do that they may not know they are doing themselves.

And you still aren't sure, at times. What were you both not listening to? What did your pride stop you doing afterwards? Something wasn't acknowledged, was it – is it.

And you still do not really accept it, but the whole situation saved your life. It changed you – you needed changing, wanted changing. And try as hard as you did before, there was something always in the way, something in you that needed moving. And it was excruciating, but move it did with them – after them. And you know you're better off, in relation to them, in relation to life. And these little moments, flashes, reminders, come and linger and go less and less.

What was it you were not listening to? You knew something was there, but what did you ignore for so long? It was so hard.

And you really, really tried, not with full knowledge, but genuinely. Whatever that means – you were chasing something that wasn't there. You both were. So why do you think you are the better party? It was never yours to try with, really.

And you were a bit of a shell of yourself for a while afterwards, whatever

your self was before that. You felt empty without them, or you just noticed how empty you were beforehand. And it feels like the best years of your life were wasted – your prime – and that you put all your energy into something that was always wasting and wasted.

You were so wrapped up in yourself. Or yourself in her, or any other one of her.

You were fucking insufferable, at times. At least you felt like that. You found yourself so insufferable, and you didn't even notice: you thought only everyone else did.

And you were terrified to talk to anyone after. Ever interaction was heavy and loaded. You didn't notice for a while, but you operated as if you were waiting to be pulled up on something. That everyone was expecting you to say something wrong.

The other story you had to spill alongside this, just to clear up the balance. Still protecting her, offloading it elsewhere.

You felt smeared. You wanted to smear her too. You wanted her to be kept away from you. From everyone. You wanted to scream everything she was doing to you.

But what you want to do to your daughter now is uncomfortable. Some part of you recalls, remembers, and wants to fight. It wants to clear up that mess still. It wants to crush her.

You want to say and do all these things. But you know you had a hand in all this. You were one of the critical halves in this. And so you have to be quiet.

"I love you. And tell your mother I love her too."

"Yeah – like she ever enjoys hearing that, you sad act. Bye!"

All her past – all your past – all mixed together and stirred up, and it caused chaos. Horror. Unseen for too long – hidden behind the relative patterns of your existences. There were no other worlds to guide you – you did as you were told.

You remember how desperately you loved each other, so purely underneath all the need. You remember the confusion, the dissonance, that masked all the love, that almost made it fake – unreal. But it kept simmering up as you processed and grieved and got over it, the real love, and you remember the pain of having to get over it again each time as you worked through and away from it. From her. But the love remained, for better or for worse. Until it was just for better, only it can only be shared by yourself now.

The hyperawareness, the trigger of certain places. The difficulty with navigating the world you shared.

Kathryn

Six of us were sitting in the park when Kathryn's ex came over. I think I could feel him before I could see him. It had been sunny all day until a cloud came over as he got near. Some part of me felt something change but I don't think anyone else noticed. The cloud might have already been there. Later reflection was needed for correlation.

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Kathryn had gradually become a close friend. We were compatible and easy but not necessarily an enigmatic match. We steadily saw each other more through other friends and such young friendships are not so thought out. I had an oblivious indifference as to how and why we'd become so close though.

Jonathan, her boyfriend, was always lovely. I thought this both during and after their relationship, admittedly only based on limited interactions. Beyond lovely, in fact: he seemed to always make people feel comfortable and seen. He had energy. He

brought things out that were real – not always the most welcome thing to do, for many. But I always found it genuine and settling. I had a little crush on him, I'm sure.

They had been together three years, about the same amount of time I had known Kathryn. They appeared to have a steady relationship on the surface. They socialised, holidayed, spent time together and apart. But we were young; they had difficulties with themselves and each other. The surface never seemed very representative of the underneath Kathryn told me about. Or drip fed to me: that would be more accurate.

Even as we became new friends Kathryn was very available, but in inconsistent patches. One week she would want to see me a lot, say: Jonathan would be away, or I would find out on the third day of us hanging out that week that they had argued. Then the next two weeks after that I wouldn't hear from her. The drip feeding during those see-me weeks seemed to come from a woman reaching out though, tentatively giving a trusted outsider some insight on a difficulty, seeming to want to expose something.

What that something was was quite vague though, I noticed afterwards, long after Jonathan had come to us in the park. It was the same as the drip feeding and the nature of the see-me weeks too: these all revealed themselves quite differently to me a long time after both Kathryn and Jonathan had gone.

She would say, "Jonathan was being a dick again," or, that he had, "lost it again." Naturally I was concerned: what did she mean exactly? What the fuck had he been doing? Fortunately it never unfolded as anything too sinister, to my mind: they had usually argued over something trivial – at least it sounded trivial from Kathryn's vague drip-feeding – and it would look like a case of one half of a romantic relationship unsurprisingly blaming the other during the heat of emotions. And these arguments seemed to disappear quite quickly: she would slide past the topic if I asked how things were in the days after she'd told me about an argument, or I would not hear from her for two weeks again.

Her being elusive with details did not really concern me though either, given the fact that the urgency and drama would quickly subside or even disappear with her elusive contact too. Still, the drip feeding continued over the three years, and I was less moved by it as time wore on, even becoming expectant and bored of it. I did not really question anything with her, and I became less and less alarmed and invested in what she said about her relationship. I saw Kathryn as distinct from it, I suppose – perhaps ignorantly. And when I saw Jonathan, he seemed to unintentionally reaffirm to me that my lacking interest in their relationship dynamic was justified.

I have noticed since how Kathryn's contact picked up around two months before they first split up. I say noticed, as it isn't something you would be aware of at the time, especially in relation to Kathryn: there were still the arguments she told me about, but you wouldn't have known they were about to split up. Also, I say before they *first* split up, because the break-up seemed to last for months, months that saw the see-me weeks overtake the elusive weeks more and more.

She would tell me the latest of the break-up: one of them had contacted or cut-off the other; she had said this – he had done this. Although this information was more substantial than the drip-fed arguments, it was all still a bit dull to me, and incomplete, unsatisfying, strange. Words did not tally with actions in some way, and it seemed ugly, but simultaneously not. She was also be rather unnecessarily vicious about him, at times, with nothing substantial to support it.

By the time they had severed contact – that is, finally severed: Jonathan had tried multiple times to cut her off before being able to do it irreversibly, by all accounts – Kathryn would see-me nearly every day. I'd sometimes suggest to her that it was a shame how they'd broken up – that Jonathan seemed a good guy, and maybe they'd be

friends, but they'd need solid space. All the usual stuff. Young stuff. I cannot remember there being a further conversation about this though. And I was drinking more during this period. We were young and I had my own difficulties with myself and love. And though the picture was sometimes peculiar, it was good to see Kathryn more – I am sure I thought and felt that. And the drinking seemed to excite her.

I think Kathryn and I took a lot of solace from each other during this time. I had a lot of other friends; I would swim between them to drink and find inconsequential outlets. Kathryn would always be there though, mostly when others were not: she would say she did not like big groups – and at times, I saw why: she was different with them. Louder. Wilder. Uglier, perhaps. I didn't see this at the time – more so after.

I would see Jonathan now and then, and I am still a bit embarrassed to say that I would dodge him when that was possible. He would say hello and ask how I was and I would fumble out some civility, not caring to acknowledge that I did probably want talk a bit more. I needed to, in some way. I replied something about "catching up soon" once to him, a means to be polite and get away quickly, but some irony lingered connected to the fact that I actually would have liked to catch up.

I would tell Kathryn about these meets and we would both laugh and ridicule him. It was of no real consequence to me at the time: I didn't know him at all really and the whole scenario didn't noticeably have any bearing on my life. It sometimes doesn't sit well with me now though, how I colluded in the ridicule.

Jonathan came over to us in the park around three months after he'd severed contact with Kathryn. Around three months after that, I severed contact with her too.

I had started seeing a guy called Anthony just as Jonathan had severed contact with Kathryn. There were a lot of men floating in and out of both of mine and Kathryn's lives at the time, all very validating and fleeting and dull, but Anthony was exciting and calm. We gradually spent more time together and I spent less time drinking. My life became less inconsequential. I could be a lot more.

Kathryn was warm to Anthony as she was to everyone in our circles, or to my friends, as they really were. I noticed how she would actively flirt with any men that were introduced to her by anyone, something which seemed reassuring, perhaps comforting for the men, at least. But she was encouraging of me and Anthony and we spent quite a lot of those months together, just the three of us.

Anthony took an interest in Kathryn too, making it clear to me that he was only actively doing this for my sake. It seemed unnecessary at first, both the taking an interest and the qualifying of it, as if I needed him to do it for my benefit. But Anthony was good, warm, decent; and most importantly, perceptive, and I trusted early on that his motives didn't need questioning. He would ask me about her and question the basis of our friendship as the three of us spent more time together too. I shared this keenly with Kathryn: Look! My new man is interested in my friends!

It was subtle, but Kathryn slowly changed with Anthony's interest in me and her. She suggested it was insidious of him to watch and talk about her, or that he was really doing it to eventually start a relationship with her. She began to question his motives, who he really was, and whether I really saw the real him. She would bad mouth him to our friends, they would tell me (she was now able to come out in bigger groups, it seemed). She began to shun him when he met up with all of us too.

I would share this with Anthony; he laughed and said he knew all this anyway. He would only respond in the same way too: he would ask me about her and question the basis of our friendship. I really did trust him and his nature at this time; he never put Kathryn down in retaliation, and he seemed to be ahead of her story about him, knowing what she was going to say about him before she did. Still, there were worrying flashes of confusion for me during this period. I'm sure Anthony also felt this

confusion on my behalf.

The break between me and Kathryn happened after the three of us were the last ones left one night in a restaurant. There had been around ten of us there, and around five minutes after our other friends had left, Anthony said he was leaving too. It was midweek, and he had an early train to work away the next day. I said I would leave with him, anxious at the idea of being left alone with Kathryn now due to her increasing vitriol towards Anthony.

Anthony asked Kathryn if she was going to leave with us as well. She did not reply verbally. Instead, she threw her drink over him, launched herself across the table, knocked him to the ground and began clawing at his face. I was frozen. Two members of staff were able to pull her off with a little struggle. Kathryn then shrugged them off and stood on the other side of the collapsed table. She did not say anything through all this. The whole restaurant went silent.

She stood there glaring at him, her jaw very tense, her breaths short and spaced apart. The staff were shouting at her to leave but she ignored them. I stared at her, not knowing who she was, not grasping what had happened, still frozen, but shaken. As some security entered the room, she picked up her coat and bag and left.

Me and Anthony did not last too long after this. He seemed unfazed by Kathryn's attack and was reluctant to talk about it, as much as I wanted to explore it more. I realised later this was not a childish or defensive move by him. Instead, I believe my focus on a need to understand from him what he seemed to have reconciled for himself already – even as he lay on the floor being clawed at that night – may have pushed him away. He probably had some foresight of something like that potentially happening, in fact. And I do not think he wanted to have to explain more to me, or to have to take an interest in such things on anyone else's behalf anymore. I understand him and that only now though. I can see – feel – what I might have been missing.

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You could feel his easy smile and presence when he reached us. He stood tall and relaxed. He looked groomed and fresh and well. It was good to see him.

He flicked a hand up as a greeting to us all and moved his eyes warmly around to genuinely acknowledge everyone. He did not look at Kathryn any longer than the rest of us but she would not have noticed: she glared away from him and the group, her jaw tense. There were a few seconds of silence that may have been awkward had Jonathan's disposition not eased this.

The cloud moved on leaving something dull over us. It may have just revealed what was already there.

He then moved his eyes to mine, still warmly, almost lovingly, and spoke.

"Can you feel that? It feels off, no? Things we sometimes don't pick up on."

No Confession

His mind would run for hours, then he'd briefly catch it. It would creep upon him from... where? outside? inside? He told me there was no separation in noise.

And the sounds he would make. The howls.

He said he was so self-conscious during the bombardments. Legacy shock, he said. He was always talking to himself, he said.

But why did he make the mistake of doubt? Everything he did was beyond words. He was in love with us always, and he'd just laugh at it. "I feel it all and I am

bored." Of what?

And he really was always talking to himself. But he wasn't, was he? He saw what we don't, he said.

Nor would you want to. And he was always always always saying these things only to himself.

I was so in love with him but it became too much. What was he talking about? He'd not move all day, then he'd, *have to capture something coming in.* (But what, and from where? This could have been me, forever.) He'd get up in the night too; and I would feel his heart racing – his skin hot; and only when he'd traced it down would he say he felt better. He'd then sleep, but he'd only feel better after the next time again – each time, every time, endlessly.

But he was insatiable to be with. He consumed you. He had too much life and knew everything.

So for protection, I had to tone him down: I mixed up his truth.

This is no confession, but believe me, I didn't mean it. He loved all severely and it would come out everywhere all the time. If he faced you and you weren't ready, it was terrifying. Excruciating.

Sublime.

Michael Waterman

Grass. Sun. Music. Dancing. Feet.

Michael Waterman.

He wears double denim – jacket; flares – a white t-shirt and a cowboy hat. His cowboy boots lay to one side, his feet bare. Worn face; young mouth; just grown and enviable teeth. An ageless smile.

He dances in the sun. It came out for him over the stage during the first song. It arrives for Waterman always, but he tells no one, even at his age, even when it may help them.

His smile holds every answer to what he thinks and doesn't think about himself, what cares and matters – what doesn't – only for him inside his smile. Keep an eye out for it.

And for those rocking feet!

Is he a rocker? An aging rocker? An old romantic? He is an aging, rocking, old romantic – *the* aging, rocking, old romantic, to many; and whatever else he can be to whoever else too. The ethereal sound under the music; the tap in your foot; the woo in woman.

The deaf poet. The sentimental sensualist. The sad sack. Decide for yourselves.

He is with... someone. Another. Another other. He will be with her completely today: it is her time. Totally seen if still nameless.

He has been there with many other others too, for years, decades. Look at his rhythm: it could be centuries! But thousands of times with thousands of them. Or sometimes alone – it doesn't matter to him. Always full.

The smilers, frowners, brow-knitters, looker-on-ers: think what you like about me, Waterman, when I move in this field, when I steal the stage from the stage, when I wear this cowboy hat more rightfully than it was ever created for.

"Do not ask more questions / Do not ask anymore questions / Do not even think".

Only look at the man in the cowboy hat.

“We don’t stand firm for nothing / We rock-and-roll”.

A-moving and a-shaking and a-rocking and a-rolling-rolling-rolling: that’s what Waterman is here to do. Today and always. He takes to stages and fields for others to experience with him. He knows the band today, knows all their songs, has been there from the first. And then for him too, but he is less famously visible, spotted only once in these fields in five decades of artistic glory. Even at seventeen, telling them to brand the band, not his name: I still want to experience buying a pint of milk at sixty. He always knew success was his due.

This band bring some of his favourite lyrics: “Whatever we speak of / You just gotta feel it all up”. What he does to them in these fields is bury his feet in the ground, sometimes pulling up mushrooms with his toes, sometimes watching colours around the floor, the stage, sky, putting his arms up and down and around himself, around others, around the world, always nowhere but there, wherever he is, in the music, lyrics, but not just words. He lives – he doesn’t think about it, write about it. Experiencing without assessment. Dancing in a field. Where he is, nothing isn’t artistic or romantic.

No time for formalism. He is financially comfortable and unburdened by paperwork, regardless of his vacancy. Regardless of jealousies. The world outside himself is not for him, he always knew, yet he creates enough good to pump into it unintentionally.

“Do you want to be a runner? / Do you want to hide from your tune?”

He is no runner and no hider. Too unconcerned to be fit, and you cannot hide with that hat on. We see and catch him here, though he doesn’t care. Cameras with nothing to capture; he sees and experiences more pictures in his own lens.

And everyone could be sad here. They don’t see most of it and are ignorant instead. That man; that woman: both annoyed at the dancers that move past balancing toxins. Not Waterman’s concern, but after all these years, I still see it now and then – their contorted bitterness. He reaches for his own toxin to go further.

I want no struggle – no fight. It’s only me here. Freeloading free hippie; old haggard bad kit; kidding yourself for yourself alone, kid. Say what you want. I ain’t wrong for being here, he tells them – for being a child and needing no security. And it’s been a long time since he bothered to see someone shout at him.

Dancing, moving, being, childish, living. Not being an adult. Not caring. Oh well – enough care to not be concerned. This is him forever. No bad feeling; nothing too close. The poet always has his next verse.

“Bring whoever you like / We ain’t checking”.

And there so many hip-hoping other others for Waterman. Usually younger, fresher others. Ones needing relief and dancing. The one here now: tall, she is, when he glimpses, and on fire. Loads of envies want near the flame.

He gives them everything he can, in sex, love, intimacy, affection, feeling, listening. Attention. Wholesomeness. Dirt. He isn’t just mechanism: he is too many decades in. He has cultivated connections to offer genuine, good, true intentions and product. It doesn’t mean he gains any better from these himself – he kisses eyes for their sakes; it still sometimes feels cold for him. Truly all good, genuine attention for them though, truly.

Sometimes too good. He knew this early, but not his responsibility: he only lets it all pass through him to them. Long ago he’d accepted that what he was doing could be wrong or right or too much, depending who it was landing on. He kept it up,

though – kept providing it. Opening the world up. Such a child! Such free play and love! Permanently universal and life-affirming for most, even if only for a few days, weeks, months, years. Moments.

Some of this... opening up... is still shallow. Macho, old, base. Low brow sexual dynamics; myths repeated with dictated agency for what is nameless under the vocabulary. But what's the alternative? Shopping lists? Shared accounts? Compromise? No concern for bridging the gap with Waterman: he can give you the moon – the bridge!

He can please, ease, satisfy; be anything for anyone – in anyone; making himself everything or nothing. But he is still... there! Dancing in the field! More than anyone else could be. By himself but not for himself, but he cares little. Dead are the old vulnerabilities.

And the tall one today – she is going to love it and him for... moments. Moon and bridge: what memories for them both, hers lasting longer and getting sweeter, eventually. No need for any questions between them.

O Waterman I believe in you so much! Whatever you do in life, your beauty permeates. It is so... romantic! And that is all we want.

*

“It stops you, at times / That dull dull reflection”.

Only a few would notice him, on stages, in fields, catching what he is analysing and moving it elsewhere, nowhere, just sometimes. His feet momentarily drop cadence then. Offbeat slow dancing. He senses correlation between thought and something unsettled here, in moments either with himself or others. It doesn't matter how fresh the others are: an old life appears; he knows where they were born; he cannot live with the ghosts, just sometimes. In the mirror, on his own, he is less spooked by his makeup – and this is the best time to learn of oneself, when there are no others there to notice (but his type never would).

And the old visitors that come to his ripper, flourishing fields: they just needed hobbies. They never tried any hobbies! This is what improves the weather, the music, the dancing. The feet! They never wanted to know though, and there was nothing he could do. They couldn't even enjoy Waterman's dancing – imagine! He left so many where they are, dead to the world, laughing at... him!... the hobbyless!... the eclipsed moons!... laughing at... the Waterman! He visits these empty planets now and then, expecting more life, accepting there won't be. But this is his only bit of static before he remembers, again, that one can only move their own feet.

The smiles these analytics bring to his face are for himself, but he would rather not have them. Misinterpretation always possible – faces, colours, words in his eyes and whatever he looks at. It is not romantic. We are not being romantic! He's unsettled here, just sometimes, yet mistakenly shows his others pure love.

So sometimes he applies his own glorious makeup, and sometimes he paints his nails. All for the show – for the dance. And he has his feet! And sun and music and dancing and sun, still. Less important are the correlations down the years when you can learn to dance with them. Only a few notice his feet speed up again then. Most are too concerned with those painted nails.

He wants absolutely nothing of concerned onlookers – of the old, dead voice. They only hurt when you listen to them telling you it *must* hurt, and they can follow this up with nothing. He never went digging up graves, but he did bring them out to play with the quieter sounds at times. You still make me feel good in a sick way, you odd little corpses – but you are only ever one of many voices. My feet are in the grass; I'll throw your voices into romance. And Waterman smiles his new smile for those old,

dead voices. We pray for those that could not stay in the field.

Remember such moments. Forget your own and others' trespasses as reality distances what it needs. This is what he can do in life and love – it all becomes romance and poetry. And he smiles, still, after the latest in a series of smashed organs: he can be more than anyone else with his own voice. And in silence, silly romantic whispers float around, the past dancing with and through him; but he always flies forward in released carelessness. Past, present, future – deadlines – dates: listen to these and it goes wrong. But only ever momentarily. Unperceptively in a lifetime.

“Turn that old beat off and shake out what you can / This is new soul”.

He senses something but tries to ignore it: they don't know about any of these songs. When he is not feeling them himself though... well, he is not feeling them either. And there's nothing one can do then: he cannot be a gatekeeper all the time. Him, the world, the music: they are definitionally away from each other sometimes. Then it is not what we want to do but need to do. So move your feet! Work rhythmically! Break through genres!

But sometimes, he is really set in his ways – in his head. Even with all the romantic rationalism.

Come on, Waterman – get back with it! You brought us so much and we still want more. The women that have swooned, man; the divorces you have saved. Double denim with a cowboy hat never held itself so good!

*

“Rocks think nothing so do not / Learn to write...”.

...The crowd gets something of this one in unison, he senses. Rather the round boulder or the mountain, one assumes. Why was he not more selfless, this rockstar – why didn't he keep this story to himself? Waterman forever pondered his equals like this. They're forever pushing uphill rather than rolling.

At some point he stopped halfway into his journey, remaining adolescently developed with aged tools, demonstrating half a hypothesis to the uninitiated whilst feigning that it was all just deep deep pleasure. And it was! It is! And no – it isn't sad! Dross, useless, indulgent – poetic! – maybe, he'd agree. But who cares! No adult should be scared of a Waterman child, and he knew fear was behind all criticism.

“See me and bypass it as quickly as possible / There is no musicality”.

And what if he was behaving like a teenager? That is his essence, his character, his... libido! Essentially. Whatever needed restraining from a young age seemingly has not been restrained yet. The young causes and the reasons these remain active are dark and boring when one can dance. Stimulating effects can happen in an oblivious vacuum.

Go home earlier with them if you want. It is a long journey back. That seems so much better for everyone else, but it is too far into the night for him.

“Act romantic to be a romantic / Be soft; feel soft”.

Pleasing all women, all people, but not for pleasure. Thoughtless offerings; uncaring altruism. Giving away too much beyond the standard model trying to chase an exponentially expanding love. I cannot be bothered to be orderly for them just to be palatable with the world. I want to dance in the bus stop regardless of who has work and who is then forced to quit. And so he danced, always, and gave out stars. Incompletable altruism: even better. Some quit – some burn their hands. It is too enticing, romantic, poetic, yet other worlds call it psychopathic.

Slumped over, showered in resentment: no, I don't want anything. He leaves

over and over again in these moments for the good of all involved. Do not pretend for days, weeks, months, years – beyond any moment that is necessary – a climatic means to an empty end is all it ever might be. He doesn't expect clarity anymore, and he can ride the rough just like the smooth. This creates more love, though – and he felt more responsible for this for a while too. You are not in the wrong though, Waterman, for spreading what many can't. You do not need to feel guilty for the relative inadequacy that others put out.

Empty conversation, false passions, argumentative props. He didn't like stages at dinner parties. A plus one for a reduced life taken up by loud silence followed by resentment, deceit. Don't deceive or resent! He moves, talks, cries, gorges – dances – instead.

"I'm sick of the dead / I was the one that asked".

Never a narrow creative – what he makes is for entertainment purposes only. That's one label he will allow for himself: entertainer; and limited to needs: pleasure, dancing, ignorance, bliss. Don't give the listeners all of life – they get enough gross domesticity elsewhere. The moon: that's solid for them – and bright and safe is what he likes to give. Never the dark side. The wisest, usually the youngest, and a few timeless ones that continue to stretch themselves: they keep coming back for it.

A smile for any company; a twinge of hate for anything when he's on his own. Not sadness; potential loneliness. Sorrow for the world along with the knowledge that he is romantic, poetic, love, bliss, all alone at times. A quiet sphere that he has squared with himself, and no awareness is too deep when you move your feet again.

Anyway, unless he is up living at his own altitude somewhere, he feels bored, crucified, blocked. Nutritional values are irrelevant on a diet of whatever is in front of you, so he always breathes like an Olympian whilst only eating to taste – drinking to thirst. What is pleasure beyond... where is anywhere but...

Ah, it's nothing!

"Who ain't moving / Ain't too not serious for us".

Waterman – just give us some more! Just a little bit more! We don't want serious. Or order. Or coherence! "Don't take myself too seriously" – that's what the people scream as they push the set to the end. Don't end! Don't end!

He's not going to slowly die or lose it, with himself, a car, a mistress. Sorry, men: no alarms; no surprises. It's quiet in all his seasons. So steady with guaranteed fun.

Romantic; artistic. Unable to be mutually exclusive. Romantic artists are all there is. Base and lowbrow and sexy: it is all just wonderful, woolly, romantic dross!

"Yes, I can look at him: so handsome; so free. But come on – he is a bit of a sad-"

No! No you ain't no lyric, boy! Get off Waterman's stage. Or he'll take your woman!

*

"I am!... I am!... I am!... / What are we?"

Keep doing and being – saying! – the truest, deepest thing you are, Waterman, and people feel warmer and safer for it. Some of them you didn't want to make feel this way, but you learned to ignore, keeping that hat firmly pulled down. Always true and eventually knowing the full costs and benefits of this, gradually ignoring the guilt, not owning the price. Creating an ordered self in dogmatically-screamed axioms – "I am!... I am!... I am!...": he never needed folly off the stage or grass. A good beat; a good move; a good body – or none of it need be too good: as long

as it faces romance, poetry – truth! – for the night – the weekend – all is well. All would smile with him. Or resent... so be it!

He knows foremost that he is sometimes good for no one. He guarantees nothing can be found sometimes. But let's stay on the edge with him – make like jumping into the sea with the whole boat, cargo, captain. Or diving into the grass! He can stay there until the end and he wants you to. But not desperately. Not anymore. But he is certain you'll enjoy it.

Grass. Sun. Music. Dancing.
Feet!

Tony's Mate

That's better. Back to my seat. Such a long fucking day to get here. I need a pint.

I have my space at the bar and I can be bothered and not bothered to talk as I choose. I've gained some control over the years: I slowly let people in that come here often and exchange the same code as me: what is the score; what is the budget; no – you're right, you funny cunt: I do not fucking move. Names sometimes come over time.

I sit here every afternoon after work until the evening. I enjoy coming for a pint and for all of it to fall into place. The yard takes it out of me. I have long, hard days and I deserve some rest and to not have to think. I'm too old to keep carrying stuff. I'll give it up soon.

And this place looks after me. They know when to bother and not bother me more than I'd be able to say. They know what I like and dislike and keep others from me. They allow my outbursts; they do not argue with my entertainment.

This is my local and I have to give no shits or fucks.

Yes – this is my local and I have to give no shits or fucks.

*

I get here before Tony. Tony always works later. I wait for Tony with a pint or two. During the first two it is hard.

The first fucking pint we all love it ahhhhhhhhhh thank you very much.

I am not sure how I feel, but I know it is hard during these periods in my life. I look at the clock a lot waiting for Tony. I don't really want him to come but I need it.

I think about myself and life. I am hard-working and I drink and I do what everyone else does around me. Most people look like me so it makes no difference. While we wait for Tony I seem to expect something to be different. I'm not sure what part of me is a man. I'm not sure what part of me is here or working or drinking.

I'm married but we don't know each other and we don't say anything. I don't care about that – I care that I can't do anything about it. I don't know what part of me can't.

I'm not a man either, really. I'm not anything anywhere – I know that. Maybe that is what I feel. I don't want to be anything that I am and I repeat it. I act – *am* – what I'm not, but I don't know how to say that. When I act most parts of me do what they've been told to do and I only notice between work and Tony getting here.

I am not a man but I'm not anything anywhere but I ignore that I can be anything and do anything but I am still held here.

Of course I'm a fucking man it is some ponchy drivel to say you're not a man it is shite utter shite. Born with a cock or what? Some of the shite we hear. I leave people to it – it ain't harming me. But fuck me.

I'll have sex with the woman who grabs me tonight and I don't want to. It's infidelity towards my wife and myself and I don't know what part of me cares less about which one. I'll not enjoy it – I'll just be sex. It won't even be me. Somewhere there'll be a burning itch not to be there but I'll do what someone else wants anyway.

If she doesn't put out at home what the fuck does she expect. I want a greasy burger sometimes.

I enjoy things that I don't tell people. I'll discuss everything with anyone but I can't let them know what I think. We need to share our lives and experiences but I don't want to make mine genuine. I make sure I don't get drunk enough so I don't ask the younger men to hug me. I'm attached to love as sex and difficulty and I'm not sure anyone around me thinks it can be different.

Fucking love twat I love the missus and she acts like a cunt.

I shout in here at the wrong things too. I wear what I think I should. The young women don't wear bras and I objectify them but I want to take no notice of it all along with them.

Sometimes there is no separation. Tuesdays when it is much quieter. But I am still here and I still dress and shout and fuck and I do not want to.

I did try one Tuesday afternoon at home and it was too noisy. *She is a right pain in my fucking arse.* We didn't want each other there and we couldn't say it. Being was too hard. *The place is a fucking pigsty.* Being anywhere is too hard – acting – but I cannot undress.

I'm not sure I make sense. I'm not sure I'm possible. No one listens, but I want them to. I need them to. I tell no one. I have a noise between work and Tony; I know I ignore it every time and that it will eventually kill me off. *What the fuck has he got growing on his face the nonce.* I don't need to die off and I still ignore this. It is too hard.

Get a fucking grip nonce tash. State of him and he gets birds like that.

I don't want to do and be what I'm not anymore. I want to feel love. I have become nothing with what I now know we have underneath and I can't do anything about it. I hear younger people share themselves and I want them to listen to me. I want their clothes. I don't care how they are anymore – I want to know more about their choices and I want them to listen and understand me. I feel shame; I don't feel love. I don't want to want this drink, this job, this body, this life.

This beer tastes like shit most the fucking time I need to have a word else I'll be fucking off I'll tell them that for nowt.

And I don't want Tony to come but he always must. This cannot get louder. This must stop as I have.

Tony is a wanker.

My only choices are louder noises or being numb. I'm not strong enough to take off anymore. My friends have faded; my signs have gone. I didn't listen.

*

I'm glad that cunt is taking his time today. A third to myself is warranted. Noise noise noise: that's all I hear. I keep it away as none of it is right. I keep them away as theirs is incomplete too. I don't pretend – there's no choices. I turn the volume down however I like without ramming it down anyone else's throat. I don't speak to her and she doesn't speak to me: why would that bother anyone else? I'm not a man or a yard worker or a drinker or a miserable dead cunt. I'm nothing. Who gives a fuck.

Third pint is always a touch.

See Emily Write

Emily tried over and over to remember why she was writing.

She had been given the agenda in 1932 and there was no way she was going to be able to finish the project in the next thirty years. But it never was about that; her and her sisters had missed the point entirely and they had kept going down the same rabbit hole for decades, shocked each time, no idea how they got there and what the initial point was in the first place. Yet still Emily wrote.

Though we do have to consider that in the sky – where Emily was – she never would have been able to understand, that what she had undertaken was utterly pointless: when they'd first asked her to put together the paper it was intended she would be able to produce the finished article within three weeks; then, all the font could be changed at the mill and the naïve nursery of equivalence could open. The taking of over thirty years – a long time after there was still even any need for a nursery – left nothing for mysticism or interest. Rather, it was a complete waste of time, but no one could get Emily down from the sky, and they couldn't convince her to not write either.

"I'll finish soon." Emily first said this to the captain after two weeks of working on the project. If you ask her now when she'll be done (and you can either go and ask her in person, in the sky; or – as seems the habit of school children in the south west of Esteram – by screaming in your mothers face, "When the fuck will Emily finish?") she will still only repeat the same line: "I'll finish soon." She wears the same blue dress, blue shoes, blue socks, and blue headband, and she's sharpened her pencil down so much it's turned inside out.

New Coats

Look I don't want to talk about my accent you know. It's just my accent it's not even important it's just something I use I don't want to make a big deal out of it I don't even want to *talk* about it. I'll use it when I need to – explain it when I need to

I'm from a small town you know there's nothing like nothing going on you know it's part of the deal so I just use the accent

It's not really about me it's about the doctor like I went to the doctor like twenty five years ago you know like I went the doctor and I was sad you know and I didn't know what to do I didn't want no tranquilliser or whatever it is here no pills I didn't want no pills no medication I didn't want none of that. She didn't want no one to have that either. And she's prescribing these coats you know but you should see this doctor you know like oh my god this doctor, I mean doc, she's got this full bosom you know like thick hair long like you know full – I mean her bosom you know it wasn't that full they weren't too big – sometimes it's easier just to say that – but she's like a professional you know like it's a maternal thing it's not just boobs and hair that ain't fair it ain't fair like ten minutes, doc, per appointment? I need ten *years* with this woman I mean maybe that's better than pills or a coat you know – I'm telling her like at the time I'm saying I'm depressed you know I'm seeing girls I'm seeing this one girl and I'm indifferent and like she gets angry they get angry and then they disappear you know or that's what I do like I'm not there in the first place and they go and I don't even notice you know like I don't even know their name – doctor it ain't about the girls but you get my drift I'm saying to her I just don't care enough, doctor and I ain't feeling too good about things – and you go crazy for these girls if they go distant enough then you feel crazy or depressed just because they distant while you be making the nice girls crazy and depressed yourself – these distant girls doc I mean I want them to be my

mother like I want anyone to be my mother I mean I don't say that much to the doctor but you know it's not about mothers or me it's about this doctor and her coats man she's like super progressive – I'm there with her like I'm depressed doctor I'm anxious I'm getting anxious and I'm sick of myself of my own voice I'm like at the edge on the edge – I'm getting obsessive about these women too if they be distant and they going to parties I'm like whose there what's going on what about those other guys and I don't want to think like that you know so I'm telling the doctor like doc listen how I be with these things how I'm feeling you know not good just a few things and I'm depressed and she says

Why don't you buy a new coat?

You know that's her answer – *buy a new coat* – and I'm like what is this chick saying you know is this professionalism is it maternal you know is she listening I'm depressed and she's just not another chick this doctor is like is she making me more depressed and that's what I'm asking myself in front of her – you know at the time I didn't have this accent you know I didn't have nothing I was small fry and I was confused easily like what's this chick doctor saying to me I don't know what she's saying to me and she's still saying

You need to look after yourself. Buy yourself a new coat.

*

Well things changed from then on I gotta say you know this doctor this chick she did more than my mother ever did you know she was a bad woman but she ain't here forget it it's this doctor this coat it like changed everything you know

*

You know I'm six one six two you know about 170lbs and I'm in a small town you know I'm not there anymore that's gone you know I left I'm in the next town over you know the next city you know it's not a huge city like you know I'm not a big shot but I'm not there you know I'm not in that old town no more – I'm not depressed you know I've lived a *life* man I've done things I mean I was like three weeks with the coat and I went to the doctor maybe like once maybe three times afterwards you know and even then I didn't really need to I just got it with the coat but I went the doctor to see her you know but I knew I didn't need to like those urges were going man like those chicks weren't holding me no more – I just got it with the coat you know like it's not all this psychological stuff you know you got to look after yourself and the coat was just the thing for me to get me going man like I was just *ready* for it you know it can be material it doesn't have to be all that psychological that deep stuff you know like before that chick that doctor that coat I was looking at all sorts of stuff man like Kierkegaard and all that eastern stuff you know that like you gotta love yourself brother you gotta get above yourself like what was I going to do with that you know I wasn't a person you know I felt like nothing at times you know there was no person so what was I going to get above like I'm not there to get above any body in the first place you know but like the coat I just got it you know it made sense to me – a new coat you know that person they feel better you know they feel cleaner they feel smarter and there's no shame in that you know we need to feel good you know don't worry if there be them fads those social fads you know we're animals but we're social animals you know so the coat it just it just it just made sense to me when I needed it you know like there's no shame in it

I heard stories you know like I get it the coat isn't for everyone like you know we lost a lot of people you know like I heard you know not a lot but you know some people aren't always ready – I heard like this one guy he you know he he he killed himself you know he just couldn't handle the coat you know and there's more to it like you know the doctor said she said to me you know ok we'll get on to that but this guy you know he just couldn't handle the coat you know he put it on and it was just too much too soon you know it felt too *good* for him you know he couldn't feel too good too *quickly* he couldn't handle the *feelings* you know and I saw the doctor some other time like afterwards you know like this chick wasn't a doctor when I saw her again you know like this chick she got struck off for this you know she lost her name man like lost her livelihood her license you know like duty of care you know and she said to me like

What would have been better for that guy – being numb, being tranquilised for his whole life?

And you know what *gives* here man like what would have been *better* you know like him *drugged up* to the eyeballs you know that ain't *living* you know what do we wanna *do* like what are we what are we gonna be *choosing* here do we want him dead *anyway* like and you know like she lost her job over this like what's a chick supposed to *do*

You know the accent it just followed on from the coat you know like I wanted to make myself feel good I didn't like how I sounded you know so I changed it you know people didn't get it when I started using it you know like what's with the accent but you know you know like I don't care about that man you know like I get it it's not for everyone you know but like the girls you know it gave me you know it gave me *confidence* you know like the *chicks* like nine out of ten they like they *like* you you know like where you from what's with the accent and they get confused you know like nine out of ten I don't speak to them again but you know like one in ten they'd be interested like they'd like my *confidence* you know like *I'd* like it I mean man I changed that one thing and I was so much more *confident* and you know like three out of ten of those one in ten you know I'd go on a few *dates* with and then you know maybe one out of three of them I'd have sex with you know so what's that like *one percentage* of women I speak to or something like that you know so like whatever like that's a good *hit rate* you know people don't *do* that you know they don't *try* things you know they you know they stay *safe* like you know they stay in their *hometown* you know they don't *treat* themselves right you know they won't *buy* themselves a new coat you know they stick with that *lofty stuff* you know they doing their *yoga* and their *drugs* you know like you know ok it might work like ok it works for some but some of them you know you know they not looking *after* I ain't doing that no more they not looking after themselves you know like what they are doing you know what'd they think of me you know do they think I'm *eccentric* you know like do they think I'm *mad* or something like they hear the accent and they like what's with the accent you know like what am I supposed to say like you know they're miserable you know they ain't done nothing like you know I dyed my hair once you know I I I you know I painted my nails like so what it don't mean nothing you know it's just fun you know I like the different colours you know and it makes me feel good you know and you know I think my hit rate was even *higher* at that time you know it's just living like you know I'm not depressed and that's the important thing for it

You know but it's not it's not about me you know it's about these coats you know this doctor you know that doctor she just saw through it all you know she just got it you know like too many people they be lost in their you know shit like they lost in their stories like they lost in their thoughts you know and she knew they don't need to go over everything sometimes you know like I said like she said it like you know I saw

her and she'd been struck off by then you know so she was a lot more open and she was like you know fuck that shit sometimes you just send people down rabbit holes when they don't need talking or pills you know and she even had some second hand coats you know she'd go out and get second hand coats and she'd have them in her office you know like fancy coats like trench coats you know *designer coats* you know for *identity* and *meaning* you know it goes from the outside in like who needs to talk from the inside out that's what she thought like sometimes it ain't about that and they look smart they look *cool* they look *important* in those coats and then you know people start acting like that you know people treat them like that

She's an innovator you know she's like a maverick you know she she she could be like your guru your *guide* you know like she was like ahead of the game like they'll be looking back at her like we'll be looking back at her and *regretting* you know she had *ideas* you know and the world just wasn't ready like the world just wasn't ready for her coats you know I honestly like *do* like I honestly *like* the voice

Westlife

Eyes closed seeing black knowing when to stop. There is not an awareness of the surroundings needed. Where do they move to? The latest drama – script, war, headline – infiltrates seamlessly and is regurgitated.

If Oscar consciously thought of this process it was boring. He would sit and read whatever it was and smile, moving in and out of the words and his bed. He had always done this but slowly noticed. So what am I? he would say. None of it feels static. He'd felt absorbent and fraudulent for too long.

He started to be with people less and with his immediacy more. He would do this with busy parks or in bed, only he felt he knew that he was nowhere. But countless have. The problem was saying it back to the park, to the bed.

He wanted to remember that he had to leave most and trust only some, but he also did not want to know to remember it. Then he could create worlds of his own. There was a burden of moving around these circles though: try as he might, he was never quite sure of what he was soaking up. It would make him worry that the best conversations are uncontrolled, the best stories are not real.

More and more the glimmer of reality would be remembered though. Then all of it was not so serious. Moving in and out in and out in and out. Memory into day into nothing into bed.

He started writing a story for himself. He had forgotten to write for others long ago. These would not be published. Instead, he worked himself into a quiet routine to forget his hands and pen; he could ignore his breath and step in no rivers twice for a while. No emergence of any kind; there is a purge and then a quiet explosion. Unmentionables unmentioned. Here came Oscar's story.

At times he mistakenly absorbed the theatre during these periods: he would feel the characters flow in and out of him. It is hard to forget these dramas, even harder to trust that they are not needed at all.

*

"What does this all look like?" The forever rigid alert system beneath the covers. He

would fall down. Character assassination and blockades. He would believe in nationalism as well as the nation state again and he would eat heavy and be in the park. Everything would rub off on him. Allegories become metaphors become names. He would be forced to feel fixed. It is as dull and jarring and simplistic as this sounds. The tone switch is very ugly – you can feel it. If you have never been there we must apologise: this is how most people live; this is what most people numb out from. Seriously, look at this big lump, even with Oscar clinging on to it at the beginning. By this end it is flat and irresponsible and heavily cut.

*

The residue would have to be allowed. It might take a week, but he would come back. By now more was wanted and expected of him, but he had not quite mastered ability or action. What people do I want to see? What do I want to write? Revelation: there is still a little stain to manipulate. He never wanted to think it was hard, but pleasurable and comforting.

He would learn to take some time, to touch and absorb what was needed, then come back when it was all forgotten. Eyes closed, seeing black, knowing when to stop to be able to go again without needing to know. Slowly undoing others' stories to find his own. It is not nuance or intelligence – let them go. No need to listen; no need for them to exist.

*

Oscar married, worked, had children, went to the supermarket, paid taxes, did not interpret his dreams, and died in his bed of old age, rather settled.

screwed up

if i had a pen i could have won an award, if i had a microphone i could have got a platinum plaque, or been a ceo, a logician, or really good at finding efficient ways to do ever more elaborate things and then even more efficient at those ways. or a criminal. or a priest. or a time traveller because that's where i am anyway hehe way out in front hehe criticised by everyone down there stuck in the past without knowing it

you act a bit different, because you feel different, or need to feel different, then people say you're different, then you feel more different, then they say you're weird, then you feel more weird, then you act more different, then you act more weird, then you are more different, then they say you're more different, then you're really far away, weird and different, and you're saying you're weird and different, quirky, crazy cat lady, dramatic, crazy, weird, freak, away with the fairies, out of this world, from another planet, off in another. then lost in a world on your own, all mad, all weird, making up your own realities. easier for others to say you were weird from the start than too. but someone just put you there being different, weird, or getting away from their own different, weird, and everyone swallowed up the narrative of it being all in your head too

you think it, deeply, then you start to feel it, deeper. then you think it even harder again, and ignore the dissonance of the feelings

mad bad sad – mad bad sad – madbadsad, madbadsad, madbadsad –
madbadsadmadbadsadmadbadmadbadsadmadbadsadmadbadsadmadbadsadmadb
badsadmadbadsadmadbadsadmadbadsadmadbadsadmadbadsadmadbadsadmadb

adsadmadbadsadmadbadsadmadbadsadmadbadsadmadbadsadmadbadsad – hehe
beep beep beep – beep beep beep – beepbeepbeep, beepbeepbeep,
beepbeepbeeppppp – hehe

i'm up on the hill by the roundabout on the road that sounds like his
namesake, hehe, i stand here to watch the traffic and the busssssyness and they look
at me mad bad sad, hehe

i don't live on the street, i used to live on the street, i lived in the hospital
too, hehe, i live in a special house to keep us all safe from the future though, hehe,
that's where you kicked me, i'm not allowed a dog in here though 😞
but no he put me here really, hehe, it keeps him safe and sane if that's a relative thing,
hehe, like all the rest he used someone, he used me to go mad bad sad for him so that
is what i'm all about

he did not listen to what i had to say while i was in his bones – he did not
want to be mad bad sad like the rest so he used to say the others were too, just like
you hehe – he still thinks it is the others a bit but in a different way now – hehe – look at
the traffic and all the cars going beep beep beeeeeeeep – hehe – but he has all the
words now

i have all the letters from the doctor – hehe – all because no one listens to
me – all because they aren't able to and don't know they can't – hehe – so now i float
off into space instead and see the future and try to say that and they listen even less –
it makes them feel more madbadsad so they make me more madbadsad – hehe – they
say i'm more madbadsad – he has to write me as more madbadsad

i float further off then and i see things clear up here and in the future and
then i try and talk about it and it comes out mushy not clear to them so then i am more
madbadsad again – the best i can say is there's no dogs or madbadsad in future
though – hehe – but bark now, bad dog – no bark now good dog – hehe

he tried to tell people things – he tried to say more – he had all the golden things but
also madbadsad things too and his real story but they did not listen or want to listen or
want to see as they were beep beep beep instead at him and everyone

he did not want to be a good dog – hehe – he did not want to beep – but he
tried to drive and his body kept breaking down – hehe – like me on the hill, in the
hospital, in the special house – we try to go but our bodies don't let us and you don't
listen

madbadsad i am in a different way now – no beeping, no barking, no
listening, just giggling – hehe – don't try bark when you're here just go off and stay in
space, on the moon, on the hill – hehe – but he did dance and clap for people – hehe –
that's what he did – danced and clapped for people to try and be the same madbadsad
as them but that just got me more and more on the hill, in the hospital

all the stories get lost more and more then – more bones hurt on the hill but
the hill is then really away from us in space – hehe – and then they start saying they
aren't really beeping – hehehehe – that is the best one – hehe – they say they aren't
really beeping at you – hehe – and you might start seeing they really don't think they
are but then you're on the hill, on the moon, too farrrrr away then to show them or not

i think the boss is right – hehe – it isn't sociological – that is just a good idea – a lovely
excuse to not say anything – blame the big entitled non-entity society out there and
not do anything ourselves – hehe – not think about our own beep beep beep

o he used to beep too but then everyone else did the thing where they say
they weren't the thing – hehe – guess where you go eeeeeeven more when people say
that – hehehehe – space, moon, future, street, hospital, special house, madbadsad –
hehe – better to say someone else is doing all the beepbeepbeep, all the madbadsad,
than see your own – o no that is what he is doing with me, with me – with you? –

hehehe

i am special in the special house – hehe – i’m only here because everyone else isn’t yet
– i’ve seen the future – one big special house with all the doors and windows open –
hehe – the walls down

madness, genius, synthesis – hehe – just give it time and i’ll be on a different hill

the logic gets us there then all the bodies fall down – hehe

can’t go over it, can’t go under it, we’ll have to go through it – hehe – just a little
experience for now – keep going, keep going – i feel nothing now, not nothing, not one
little beepbeepbeep of what they say – hehehehehehehehehe (maybe the last
sentence?)

notice what you notice – hehe – push to the side what you don’t understand – hehe –
there’s millions of paradigm shifters in the special places with me – hehe – no one is
listening and the earth stays in the centre – hehehe

feel like a freak, wrong, mad, weird. disgusting. what we do to each other to make
ourselves feel better hehe

he has put me here, he has set me up to fall, he has put me madbadsad in the street
so he can watch me, so he can watch himself, then he isn’t madbadsad hehe he is the
creator and he can study write create what he wants now

being too much for people – too fine grained – too clever maybe that is the problem –
thinking too much

what’s weird is writing it down makes me feel better. brings me back down. makes
things real hehe

what’s weird is i needed this ending and i coincidentally decided to watch the truman
show hehe

touch the sky too but maybe only i see and feel it hehe

madness or genius o no not that one hehe i’ll be mad better for me better for you
better for him

- maybe double space between things?

genius see everything see where you are back there all down here over there i’m up
here, pushed away because of the bad stuff. but i see it all then hehe i only doubt it
again when i listen to others. i make total sense don’t i

the author this and that is he isn’t he – he’ll take all the flack he’ll soak it all up for you
hehe he’ll put himself out there further so you feel better that’s why i’m here out on the
road with him taking him away because he’ll do anything create anything to make
things a bit better that’s why i make sense

empathy? being pushed away? pushed away to own world just like anyone, just
doesn’t impact on others as much hehe

and they can’t come to where i am so they make me take tablets and blame me for the
distance hehe they get frustrated and need to beeeeeeep so i get the abuse hehe

i don't think there's anything wrong with any of us though hehe diagnoses don't ontologically make sense hehehe experiences are experiences and we move through them and come out but i'm not meant to know about that hehehehe but i am understanding hehe i am understandable hehe a rational response to shit hehe it might even be ssssscience

do not repeat yourself if you are not understood like me though hehe as then you are repeating yourself hehehe and how does that sound hehe how does that that that soooooound

and repeating yourself himself myself just in different words – hehe – new discrete identifiers all saying the same thing and we get to make new art life stories that are all the same, all the same, all the same always – hehe – so me and my friends will keep coming back in the meantime until you start to listen to your same beebbeebbeep

we should get reparations not acronyms – hehehehe

models are models they just look pretty – hehe – they do not say anything or listen – hehehe – no no no – not like that – i wouldn't know about that after where they put their hands – hehe

it's all trauma that's all hehe that's all i see, they don't like that, they don't like that it's that and that i see that, hehe, so they just blame me more, hehe, then what i say isn't real if i'm not there, if i'm not real, hehe, if i don't exist all the trauma doesn't either so put me out the wayyyyyy

if it cognitively doesn't exist then it doesn't exist, hehe, if your ontology, if your epistemology, if someone tries to add more than the beeeeeepers can handle then that's anxiety, then that's me in the category of madbadsad instead, hehe, and that's ironyyyyyy, hehehehe, the world was flat until it wasn'ttttt the world being flat is a rational response at times, hehe, any science, any society, any story is safe making for a time, hehe, the paradigm shift takes time and is maddddd, hehe, we aint weird, hehe, the beeps are old

pushed too far away from my body that's all it is hehe makes us think, makes us theories, makes us excuses, makes us stories, hehe, if he was just in his body he wouldn't be doing all this

i tried to tell the doctor therapist healer person about the scary things, the naughty things, the dark things, and she thought it was just a story, hehe, a delusional story, hehehe, i wish i could give her tablets and tell her she was a story, hehe, but i took hers instead and now it is a delusional story, hehe, now i am a delusional story, hehehe, now no one hears it properly 😞

the beepers say go to them for help but they just play out their own story to make themselves better for themselves, hehe, it's like the lights going on and offffff, hehe, o i'm not shaming, he's not shaming, it's just a shame

people don't like me, hehe, they don't like rats and weirdos and freaks and they don't like misery stories either, hehe, they like headlines but not the full stooooory, not the unpacking, hehe, just packed away and off the road, hehe, so they don't like rats but they don't like the stories to understand, to help stop the rats from coming either, hehehe, they just like beeeeeep, hehe, don't be madbadsad and don't try not to be either because it makes them beeeeeep more, and don't say that might be their own anxiety either, hehehehe, imagine all those people, he's a dreamer

and this is the paradox, hehe, this is the big sexy funny madbadsad thing about me and him and all of it, hehe, if someone just listened to me i wouldn't even exist, hehehehehe, o he does, i does, we does and doesn't make sense now, hehe, but at least he's here

don't step on the cracks hehe you notice the cracks and not yourself a bit too long now hehe the fly only buzzes when you want to ignore something else hehe abstract but abstract gets me and him and your mind awayyyyyy
why are you noticing the cracks still at your age hehe what is your mind keeping you away from

there's a homeless man outside the bank with a lifeboat charity stand next to him asking for donations hehe over the last two weeks how often have you been bothered by any of the following problemsssss

being too much? pushed away for that? but having nowhere to go? no belief?

people's edges not understanding being insecure better to say they're weird instead hehe

this is a shame what a shame i don't want to shame it's shameful hehe

not quite sure where i am in my head out there sometimes i feel the edge of my head like a camera scope like a tunnel but sometimes i forget there's a camera there and that's when we feel best

it's like it's all trauma that's what he thinks hehe it's like mental health is always the reason for reason for beliefs that's what he thinks hehe
it's like all the pain all the problems is all trauma but he doesn't want to say that he doesn't want anyone else to see he's been made to see hehe how the trauma makes you see all the world like that
all the characters all the poetry

he went mad too he ran along the street chanting mantras thinking he needed to save her hehe then he crashed down down down like he said and he burned her icon in the park hehe but then maybe it worked he wrote mantras on paper once and that worked and that's how i was born hehe

are you sometimes moved by overwhelming feelings for music or television that you haven't felt before hehe they are just feelings for the first time as they lost their horn

have you noticed an increase in your shoplifting or overspending hehe do you want to fuck more hehe no yes yes doctor i can afford the last two he's given himself the all clear hehe only the poor are poorly hehe

doctor doctor – i think someone made me feel like a piece of shit hehe i think the world is unsafe and people can be really really terrible hehe *well, we'll have to challenge that faulty thinking you've gone and got yourself into there, boys and girls*

o dig dig dig too, do do do too, be madbadsad not in the streets with me with he hehe this is why he wants a guitarrrrr

any discomfort i'm sorry again he's sorry again hehe hopefully it isn't just discomfort it's just right

it's like it ain't all random hehe it's like it's all preordained conditioning over and over and over again until it isn't hehe until we stop playing the stories going on behind our scenes hehe break yourself and make a new storyyyyy

if you tolerate this then you know who will be next hehe – but it has to not explicitly be in relation to sexual trauma?

maybe it is all just trauma hehe maybe we are all just playing out roles and dramas and stories that are hidden from us hehe ignorance is bliss hehe get loaded and hit your kids and repeat and repeat

survival of the fittest hehe your trauma will beat my trauma just as long as you don't know what you're doing hehe as long as you aren't responsible hehe as long as we are both ignorant

but we're here too hehe there's loads of different experiences rather than beep beep beep kick kick kick hehe and we are hereeeeeee hehehehehe

survival of the fitness or dog eat dog – hehe – maybe i'm not up here i'm just down there in the world now seeing how it actually works – hehe – individually savvy (individualism of some sort?)

she said he was madbadsad too hehe she said my friends said so too hehehe she still got mantras hehe maybe he made her up too hehe maybe they're always just characters in our heads trying to make them how we want hehe trying to make them something they are not hehe who could we possibly be modelling them onnnnn

it's like there's no dogs hehe it's like there's no cunts, it's like there's no evil or madness or genius or me really, it's like it's all made up to keep the beep beep beep safe hehehe

a woman just walked past and screamed at the pram to behave hehehe she wants the monkey to dance without teaching any stepsssss

trauma model there should be a trauma model hehe i see everyone's hehe i tell everyone everyone's then i am the baddddd man because i don't know they can't see it themselves too hehe he doesn't know they can't see it themselves too so we are out here on our own hehe

trauma seems to decide the whole game hehe it pulls together who it needs to try to survive hehe it pulls together who it needs to fight to the top hehe a mathematical trauma model to decide the oscars the olympics the freaks the dead (cannot be this as it is about the body and trauma holds in body/holds people – something different)

or an awareness model hehe a self-awareness model of everything hehe you wouldn't see anything in that thoughhhhh

toy story created a bully to get bullied hehe 🙄 i hope he's ok hehe don't want to be nasty to anyone here

maybe the world is trauma hehe create build make find into the future away away awayyyyyy from the past hehe maybe we made maths up to get lost

i live in the future, hehe, and see things you don't, hehe, and i didn't back myself 😞 i didn't have the chance

bad things happen and beautiful things result, hehe, but then he gets called the bad things it is crazyyyyy, hehehe, we are allowed to say that

call it an evil thing and be done with it, hehe, call me a broken weird freak thing and be done with it

your body rejects every word doesn't it, hehe, don't like me even more, it's ok, i understand, that's easier, it's ok, i can take it, my empathy pot is wiiiiide open like me, hehehe, like i was o nooooo, hehe

no one wants you to say the dirty and the naughty and the real stuff so you hide it, hehe, and you start to act look be weird with what you're hiding, then you feel that more and more, and you become that more and more, hehe, then it's all your own faulttttt

i am alone in wonderland and he is just watching me, hehe, he has put me here, himself here, and he is listening, watching, me and him and us at the edge of the universe to bring us all back, hehe

madbadsad thoughts hehe all unjoined up but they make a picture in his head

can't control yourself, can't look at yourself, hehe, get a dog, control them instead

don't stop me now hehe he's only just starting to wake up hehe he is awakening not maddening hehe look i make much sense on paper hehe the syntax is coherent hehe just watch me until he's back and we'll get some gold

all beliefs are adaptive they aren't true hehe madness can think it's genius, misery can think it's normal it's all helpful it's all normal

no one to blame and no one's fault and no one responsible hehe dance dance dance hehe head in the clouds or the sand hehe it's almost like we don't all know what we are really arguing about hehehehe

it has all been said millions of times hehe he has even said it, i have even said it, you have even said it hehe, you just haven't listened hehe, the science is too slowwwwwwwww it is all in us hehe, sometimes trap trap trapped, it's been kick kick kicked down, but we are safe (don't like this atm)

medicalise my experience and put me over here for now hehe, you're fine you've got drinking buddies and potato hehe, and beep beep beep

make the other people bad hehe, make the bad things different characters hehe, we're no different he just knows why he's doing me hehe, you actually do think it's your bosses fault beeeeeeeeeeeee

i see it all from here hehe good and bad, it's a lot to take but i'll take it over seeing other flashes hehe i have to know and be qqquuuuuieett else you'll get more madbadsad

people don't want to hear me hehe they don't want to see or think about me hehe, they just want things to be evil in the papers and tucked away out of sight after they've read

the headlines hehe

if i do come out they say weirdo freak crazy hehehe damned at the first and the last

i've got nothing hehe, you've got art that you don't know what it means hehe, i do i've been there

post-punk with no self awareness hehe o now he's just using me to throw insults now too hehe

10 billion existences to date hehe, try finding normal hehe, try finding yourself in them

get lost here with all the flashes and pictures and dreams hehe, they don't make sense but they are sense-making

it's almost like people just aren't airing their own dramas to anyone themselves then they're happy to attack others when they do hehe

they all say i'm the weird one hehe then they feel better for a bit
if i go away they find another one to make weird

he's not sure where he is now hehe is this truth or delusion or comedy or tragedy hehe
at least i am laughing with him here hehe o it's a tragedy going back down
remembering all the truth and delusions and not knowing which way up any of it is but
knowing somewhere somehow it is all real hehe he's on his own now

trauma makes the world go round hehe

don't want wetherspoons but don't want them anywhere else either hehe o now he's just having a moan

people see us as performing monkeys hehe have a meltdown for everyone's
entertainment hehe he used to act like a performing monkey hehe every little helps

don't let people speak and they'll keep it alllllll in and down down down and then
they'll not speak with others and then they'll not merge together as anything and then
they'll just be whatever else tells them they are more and more and more and that's
usually madbadsad and weirdo freak crazy and then eventually eventually keep chip
chip chipping away keep beep beep beeping away and they'll be out here with me
hehe

everyone else is mad hehe that means you are too he is too me is too hehe ok were all
madbadsad it's okkkkkkk

all the logic follows it just can't be seeeeeeeen it just feeeeeeeels off but it's here it's
here i say it as i see it hehe sorted hehehe

and then the logic and the meaning and the models are alllllll built up right to the edges
and then he sees it is all just how you look hehe all only how you are made to see it
hehe if you buy into it you are safe hehe if you buy into buying into it you are safe hehe
if you don't see it you don't see it and it doesn't matter

or maybe i saw everything to begin with and they just didn't like it hehe get kick kick

kicked farrrr away and then try to show everyone the view from up here and they don't like it hehe, show people the view of them from here and they don't like it then i'm madbadsad too but far away from them all 😞

loneliness friendliness madness genius they all love company really hehe that's why i'm here for him with all my friends

messiah or martyr complex hehe same shit different day hehehe he's thought he's him before hehe and look what happened to him hehe there's only so many cheeks you can have hehe follow him, him and me and you can be up here too

we try to say but they don't believe us hehe they go mad so we go mad hehe no chance to understand hehe no empathy so we have to go instead hehe why do they not want to hear it hehe why do their bodies not want to hear it hehehe

no madness or badness really just understanding just empathy hehe leave us on our own here – i don't want to hear it son – go to your room – go to the skyyyyyy

it's like we are all incomplete hehe everything is incomplete hehe so don't say it – can't even say it – they can't hear it – don't even try tell them the whole story because they'll kick kick kick you

sometimes people still shout and laugh at me and call me weirdo freak crazy hehe and they are still beeeeeeeeeeeping and i am just on the hill in the mud like a dog i don't do nothing to tell

and and and and anddddd the stories come on their own and then he'll hear the appropriate influence after hehehe honest honest honest you see all the foolish dots join together up here hehe o do come, do come, don't send me away on my own

how can evil be anything imaginable hehehe how can anything out of this world look earthly hehehe god is here, i'm hereeeee, hehehe, o i might as well, he might as well, everything else is made up they tell me

i even think there are no beeps at all sometimes hehe i squeak that out as a laugh and i get kick kick kicked again so i stay on the hill and laugh at the beeps and the shouts

i'll go mad 4 u, o i will i will, make someone believe they can't think or see straight and they'll be whatever you want hehe, there's millions like us to keep kick kick kicking down up away to make yourself feel really secure in your beep beep beepssssssssss

(end with the lines getting messy and blurry and not making sense, ready for the 'letter to the author' bit)

too mad too bad too sad but then too sensitive too intelligent too analytic too cerebral too weak too much too emotional too empathetic too good too nice hehe, if you're anything of these things you might be having a human experience which is over here or out there hehe, it's real and not but so are all the discrete atoms and you see them too hehehe

plenty of hugs plenty of hugs but no slipped fingers though that can cause trouble hehe, but it can produce a theory of everything that only slips through your fingers up

here too hehe, try and hold the truth it just keeps slipping away, slipping away, like the models that always open up until they don't need to capture anything anymore hehe, the smallpox vaccine disappeared with smallpox hehe, madness genius synthesis foreveerrrrrrrrrrrrr hehe, once he fixes himself he won't see me or all that anymore 😞 plenty of hugs and it all happens organically just as nature intended and then there are no words

how far do we go how far does he go hehe i'm only here because of what they did in the past but i also bring the future hehe he can only stop when i stop what they start hehe but then that would only make him o dear o dear hehehe big hehehehehe he can think it's only him then hehe if i and him and what happens to us are the only thing to design it all hehe if we make all our realities histories stories hehe ok stop now hehe we've all got a headache hehe even him but what a helpful clear out for now ahhhhh that's better that's better hehe should have stuck to beeps and drinkkkkk

i'm not mad bad and sad really hehe, i know i'm not even here hehe, i'm happy outside the beep beep beeps beyond all the roadworks

too much truth hehe we see it coming before you do hehe

he thought he was jesus once hehe good job that's a western delusion else he'd think he was the buddha hehe he's skinny he couldn't be a big fat man hehe that wouldn't make sense hehehehe

(so there is roadworks ruining people's plans and blocking people off)

i wish i had a guitar too hehe

Dirty Work (Your Song)

"This way of speaking is not altogether so laughable as it sounds."

—Carl Jung, *'The Personal and the Collective Unconscious'*, Collected Works of C.G. Jung, Volume 7: Two Essays in Analytical Psychology

"Why?"

—Kanye West, *'Famous'*

*

It is Christmas Day. One week ago Olga's father died. Four days ago she emailed Neil. "It's Olga. I'm hoping you still have access to this account? If so, could I have your number, please?" Neil replied two days later. "I do. You can. Call me on Christmas Day. Anytime. It's..." And he put his number.

Olga is now lying on her bed at 11 am on Christmas Day. She lets out a sigh. *Am I ready for this?* She calls the number and Neil answers.

"Hi. Neil? It's me. Olga."

"Neil?" He is sat at his desk scribbling into a notepad. He doesn't stop.

"This isn't Neil. It's Jesus Christ. Merry Christmas."

Olga rolls her eyes. "OK, Neil. Merry Christmas. And thanks... thanks for sending me your num-"

"Neil? No. I told you. It's Jesus. It's my birthday."

"Neil..."

“Oh, you didn’t want Jesus? But you made Jesus, Olga – that’s what happens when you send people fucking mad.”

She hangs up the phone. She holds it to her chest and stares up at the ceiling. *I wasn’t ready for this. Am I ready for this? Why am I doing this?*

She calls back thirty seconds later. Neil answers.

“My word, Olga Peroni – it’s a Christmas miracle! Because after all the times *you* put the phone down on *me*, I swear on the bible as the Second Coming *Himself*, this is the first time *I* didn’t have to call *you* back.”

Prick. She lets out another sigh. “Astute observation, Messiah. I’m sure you would have called back eventually.”

“Oh, Olga – have I annoyed you already? Remember: *you* wanted to call *me* – but I’m guessing the terms between us mean I’m still not allowed to point out what you don’t want to hear? Let’s see now – I’m... fifty-four. Which makes you... fifty-one? And yet we still sound exactly the same together, don’t we, baby?”

She starts rubbing her free hand against the duvet. “Neil – it’s been twenty years. I don’t really want to be going back over-”

“Oh, Olga – you are still so wonderful. It’s been twenty-*four* years and you know it.”

“I didn’t *know* it, at all.” She tilts her head to watch her hand rubbing the duvet. “I knew it had been some time. And if I’m being honest, I didn’t expect you to still be like this.”

But I did.

“Anyway I want-”

“Olga – you’ve just said you are being honest. So why don’t you stop saying what you *think* you should say and start saying what you *want* to say. As I’m sure you fully expected me to still be like this. You’ve known me thirty years.”

Prick. “OK then, Neil: you’re a prick. Is that better? I want- ”

“That’s better.”

Prick. “My pleasure.” She stops rubbing the duvet. “And there’s been a big gap between us in those thirty years. I’ve changed considerably.” She starts rubbing the duvet again. “I wanted to tell you my father passed away a week ago.”

He doesn’t stop scribbling. “I’d have hoped you would have changed, twenty odd years or otherwise. And yes, I know he’s dead.”

How... how does he...

Ah. Of course. He stalks me. She doesn’t stop rubbing the duvet.

“Really now. How did you know then? Social media?”

“Do you think I’m on social fucking media? Do people really share grief on there that’s inconsequential to the rest of the world?”

“I knew he’d died because you emailed me. Why else would you be emailing me? People do sometimes give me updates on you, not that I ever ask. But don’t go thinking I’m concerned enough to stalk you, Olga.”

She rolls her eyes. “OK.” She kicks off her shoes. “Well... I’m glad you know now.”

“I am too. Glad he’s dead, I mean. He was a prick.” He is still scribbling.

She stops rubbing the duvet. *How can he say that!* She takes the phone away from her ear to hang up. She stares at the screen for a few seconds before putting it back to her ear.

“Neil – how... how can you say that? He only passed away a week-”

“Fucking hell, Olga – if there was ever a reason to put the phone down on me, that was it. Interesting. Maybe you didn’t because it is *exactly* what you wanted to hear.”

Prick. “Fuck you, Neil.” She continues rubbing the duvet.

“See! I’m a regular idol for you still – do continue taking it out on me. I can

handle it.

"And we both know he was much more than a prick, Olga. Just because you never could say it, doesn't mean I can't"

Prick. Silence. She looks at her hand rubbing the duvet.

"Do you want to know why you really emailed me, Olga? Sorry – why I *think* you emailed me, I should say. And why I knew it was about your dad? They amount to the same thing.

"When your dad died your body was released from something that it had conveniently and unconsciously associated with me for all these years – all those negative feelings towards your dad; all that *rage*. And when that happened, I – Neil Killock – came racing to your consciousness as an entity that finally existed distinctly from all those negative associations, as a fresh, positive memory. Or perhaps as some kind of quasi-means of solace? Or of escape! Or this release may have even triggered some kind of regret, or even guilt. Even shame. But—"

"Neil..."

"—instead of you acknowledging that for what it is – a natural, though maddening, though also *amusing* episode that some fortunate ones among us have the privilege of experiencing in this glorious existence – you tricked yourself into believing that you wanted to contact me to let me know your dad had died, as if that was the only reason you called – as if that was all you wanted to discuss. But of course—"

"Neil..."

"—you could have just put that in an email, if it was even relevant for me to know, that is: 'Hi Neil,' it could have said. 'I hope you're well after twenty-four years. Oh, and I hope you aren't still mad! By the way, my dad's died. I thought you should know, for a reason I cannot quite myself fathom.'"

"Neil!"

"What? I was finished."

She takes the phone away from her ear and lets her arm fall flat on the bed away from her. She stops rubbing the duvet. She stares up at the ceiling. She has not stopped staring at the ceiling but she is now conscious of it. She hears someone putting rubbish in a dustbin outside. She shakes her head and closes her eyes. She takes a deep breath in and out through her nose. She starts rubbing the duvet again.

She opens her eyes, grins, and puts the phone back to her ear. "You're over it, then."

"Over what exactly." He is still scribbling.

Come on, Neil. "Come on, Neil. This is a bit much—"

"Olga – you rang *me*, remember?"

Silence.

"I don't know what I'm supposed to be over. At least I had the art to channel it all through, considering no one ever wants to have a real fucking conversation. A case in point is you not even acknowledging what I've just said about your dad."

She stares up at the ceiling. "Yes. Well."

"I'm not going to bother asking how you really feel about it."

She still rubs the duvet. "Fine. Don't." She pauses. "The... the art then. You did well with it?"

"Well? Let's be honest, Olga – tremendously well. And you know it.

"Neil Killock's sculptures broke the mould with what sculpture could do. They have garnered international fame and recognition and have blessed Mr Killock with fans from every nock and cranny of society – from the plebian to the patrician – and they have sold for millions of dollars. They are displayed publicly in forty-nine different countries across the globe, across five continents, and Neil Killock himself is contacted by everyone, all the time, for every single fucking thing. Don't I love it."

She genuinely grins. "That's amazing, Neil! I knew you were big, but that's quite something. I mean, I followed your career – at least... for a short time. And I was always very, very impressed. And... and proud."

He stops scribbling briefly, then continues.

"Proud"? Interesting. You know, when I got out the hospital – I was in there for three weeks after that Christmas: did you hear? – I had a voicemail from you that you'd sent on New Year's Eve. Twelve minutes past midnight you'd sent it. You'd said that then too – 'Proud'."

She stops rubbing the duvet. *How does...* "How do you still... I said what?"

"You were drunk and you said you were proud of me. 'I'm proud to have known your brain,' you said."

How does he... "Neil. I... I mean, I was proud. I *enjoyed* your brain. But I can't remember saying."

"Come on, Olga – you said you followed my work, didn't you? I even called one piece 'I'm proud to have known your brain'. Surely that piqued your interest? Got you excited?"

I knew some of them were about me. She blushes. She starts rubbing the duvet again. "I... I assumed I inspired a few. It made me feel..."

"Pretty good, yeah? Told all your friends all about my work early on in my career then realised you couldn't keep going on about me because it would seem weird? Still – 'Oh, he was so mad. But look what I inspired in him!': I bet it was cool to say that for a while, wasn't it."

Fucking prick. She is still rubbing the duvet. "For fuck sake, Neil. I'm... I'm trying to talk civilly."

"What? What did I say? Did I say something wrong? Did I say something that was incorrect?"

Silence.

"You know, being the inspiration for art is not necessarily a good thing, Olga."

Silence. She stops rubbing the duvet.

"I got out that hospital – and I say hospital, Olga, but you know it was a nuthouse, don't you? Because that's what people do to each other: they send each other mad. They lie, mostly to themselves, without noticing – without caring about the impact; they play out their own shit on other people – their negative feelings and their rage and shame; and then someone ends up believing the misdirected shit being played out on them is actually about them – that they deserve the negativity and rage – even that they're to blame for it; and then that someone ends up losing themselves and walking around thinking they're Jesus fucking Christ. So when I got out that nuthouse and heard your voicemail, I instantly realised I wasn't fucking mad: it's just what ends up happening to people sometimes – between people sometimes. There you were none the fucking wiser though, slurring your words with no idea that I'd been sectioned on Christmas Day. And it was gold, in all honesty – I was walking around the street naked trying to 'save' people on Christmas morning: kids going around on their new bikes; families arguing as they walked to their Christmas lunch. And I knew I was a bit much, even while I was doing it. But at no stage during our six years together did you seem to have any awareness about what you were actually fucking like – about how you behaved or treated people."

"Neil..."

"Honestly, when I got out and I heard that voicemail, I laughed for about a month."

"Neil – fuck you, alright? Fuck you. You cold turkeyed your medication: that's what I heard. And that's why you ended up wandering around the streets naked. I mean for fuck's sake – I know I could leave a mark on men back then, but not that

fucking much.

“And there’s no need to laugh at me. There’s no need to fucking shame me.”

“Laugh at you? Who’s laughing at you? I was laughing at the absurdity of the situation. I was locked up against my will for being ‘mad’, so-called, while you were out in the world telling me I was a genius. Whilst hardly being able to speak! Fucked out your head, as usual. What could be funnier!”

Prick. “I didn’t say you were a genius. You did not say that I said that.”

“Oh, Olga – out of everything I’ve said, you pull me up on that? Fair enough – you didn’t say ‘genius’. I apologise.

“And who’s being fucking shamed? I can’t control what you feel shame about. I know I’m full of the stuff – and not just from walking around naked thinking I was Jesus either. You think I’m shaming you for stating you were drunk?”

Silence.

“You must admit, Olga, it is hilarious, the fact that I was the one that ended up being sectioned between us. You were barely on the ground from one moment to the next when we were together – you’d go on manic spending sprees and declare that your ‘divine feminine energy’ was guiding you to do it. And then if I went to the pub on my own? You’d lose your fucking mind.”

Silence. She starts rubbing the duvet.

“See – I said it was funny. I can feel you smiling through the phone.”

Silence. She is grinning.

“But that’s a very tame example of your ‘energy’ back then, isn’t it, Olga.”

Prick. She swallows her grin. “Look, Neil – I’m... I’m sorry about what happened to you-”

“Olga.” He stops scribbling. “Did you... For the record, Olga, did you just say... ‘sorry’?”

“Neil.”

He continues scribbling. “No. No you’re right. Let’s not spoil the moment.”

Prick. She is still rubbing the duvet. “But... but I am. I really am sorry. About everything that happened back then. But... but you were out your fucking mind long before me, and you sound like you still are, to be honest. So I’m not really taking the blame for what happened.”

He stops scribbling again and puts his pencil down. “Did I say I blamed you?”

Silence.

“Did I at any time say I blamed you, Olga?”

Silence.

He stands up. “See, this is exactly the fucking problem I’m talking about: no one wants to... no one is *able* to have a real fucking conversation. They don’t want to fucking listen. They just want to hear what they want confirming.

“I did not once blame you, Olga – I did not use that word. And that was part of the fucking problem, because I wouldn’t blame you, so I just enabled you by letting our senseless insanity carry on unchecked.

“You would never take any responsibility for yourself – you just acted out your emotions however you fucking wanted and didn’t own anything you did after the fact. And I still don’t blame you: I realised in that deranged asylum that you were just not capable of taking any responsibility for yourself. So I took responsibility myself eventually, as hard as it was to accept that I had only been following every conflicting noise you made, because it was that that was only going to keep making me more and more ill. And yes, this was *on top* of how fucking mad I already was: fine. But I took responsibility for all of it in the end, to resolve it all for myself. And that included getting the fuck away from you, and... and from whatever you ended up representing to me.”

'To resolve it all for myself': right – sounds like it. She is silent a few seconds.

"Neil... I..."

"Neil." "Neil." Neil fucking what? I'm sick of hearing it. You aren't saying anything after it." He sits down. He picks up his pencil and continues scribbling.

Silence. She is still rubbing the duvet. She stares at a mark on the ceiling.

He continues after a few seconds. "Was that all then – 'Neil'? That's fine by me – I'll carry on.

"We could never fucking communicate, Olga, and that was *not* an issue that stemmed from me. Look at my work: I am excellent at articulating ideas and thoughts and concepts, so there was no problem my end in relation to communication, and I believe you would agree with this. Then, for the last six months of our relationship, you were either high or drunk, which meant you were even more volatile, swinging between moods and desires and beliefs. I couldn't get in touch with you for those final few weeks before Christmas – I was really, really slipping under. Not that it would have even mattered by then anyway: by that point it didn't feel like I was talking to you at all anymore – it felt like I was talking to that cuntish 'friend' of yours that you'd 'manifested' the year before. She was always talking absolute nonsense, about what 'destiny' your 'internal rhythms' indicated, or whatever other such garbage. Anna – was that her name? Absolute fucking lunatic. It was like you were channelling her voice at times near the end, repeating verbatim what she was telling you to say. Do you still speak to her? Is she still with that barista she was constantly fucking shouting at?"

She sighs audibly. She still rubs the duvet. "I see her around. And yes, they are still together. But he can't work. He is very much a depressive still."

"Fuck me – is it any fucking wonder being with her? Poor fucking guy. You surely don't still speak to her? He must be a proper state now. Did you actually think it was helpful at the time, the things she was saying to you? By the end it felt like you pair had created a Neil Killock-hating cult whose sole objective was to break me down to be honest, and I'd merrily go along with whatever tactic you deployed, making myself more and more ill in the process.

"Did you hear that, Olga – making *myself* more and more ill in the process. That's me taking responsibility *for myself*. Absolutely no blame stayed with you."

She is silent for a few seconds. "Neil..."

"What? Do you need me to break it down further? Do you really want me to lay out some of the finer details—"

"Neil..."

"—about what it was actually like? About what I knew and *felt* was going on at the time, but ignored?"

She stops rubbing the duvet. She sits up and sees herself in the full-length mirror.

"Come on – shall we go into, Olga? Do you want me to go into it all?"

She looks at her hands. She looks at herself in the mirror and pushes her hair away from her eyes. "No. No that isn't necessary."

"Seriously – shall I?"

She stares at herself in the mirror.

"Come on. I can share it all here now, if you like. Right here."

She stares at herself in the mirror. "Neil. No." She looks down at the carpet and rests her hand on her forehead as if to shield her eyes.

"I've shut the fuck up for twenty-four years, Olga, because I realised afterwards what was going on with you – with us – and how insane shit can just happen without anyone really thinking or caring about what they're doing most of the time, and certainly without understanding it, and... and certainly without meaning to. I didn't throw you under the bus – I didn't bad mouth or shame you. I didn't tell anyone anything that was not their business to know about us or anything connected to either

of us. Instead, I put it all into my work – which you used to laugh at, if you remember – and I tried as best I could to get on with my life, concluding that what happened between us was both totally necessary and completely absurd, and that what was going on with you didn't have anything to do with me."

"I..." She pushes her hand back through her hair and looks up into the mirror. She puts her head back down and shields her eyes again. "I was immature about your work. I didn't understand it. Art felt too serious back then. I... I didn't really understand what it meant to you."

"But... but like I said, I was so proud."

"The funny thing is, it wasn't and isn't all that serious – it just helps. I put everything I wanted to say into my art and said nothing about you or to you because I knew I couldn't – because I knew it wasn't fair or dignified. At least it felt like that at some point to my mind anyway. It's a good job I happened to channel it all through abstract art though, isn't it, Olga – because some of the things that went on: fuck me. I'm sure you could see how you 'inspired' some of my pieces, as you call it."

She takes her hand away from her eyes and wraps it around her neck under her chin. She grins. "Yes. I thought you were sending me signs at times."

"Fuck me again! You're still into all that shit then: 'signs'? Reminds me of when you used to say I was 'your person'. Your 'soul mate'."

Silence. She presses her hand into the bed. She stares at the carpet.

"No comment? Right then. I assume you missed at least one of my pieces too. 'Grow up and call', it's called."

She looks up. *Is he taking the piss?* She doesn't notice herself in the mirror. "Are you being serious?"

"Yes. A small piece. I'm not even sure where it is now."

He is fucking unbelievable. "I never –"

"Actually if I remember rightly I made it when I was doing a lot of self-reflexive pieces early on in my career. In fact I'd not long been out the nuthouse." He does not stop scribbling.

"Right. Well, I never saw that one." She pauses. "But... but all the others I saw, Neil, I loved. 'Proshai, Arendal' – is that how you say it? That was my favourite. I can't remember why now."

"Right. I wouldn't bother analysing that. But don't say you 'loved' them all so emphatically, Olga, because you can't have sincerely *loved* them all. I know that's not the real you talking."

Prick. She rolls her eyes.

"Or maybe that was always the real you. People with there faux fucking hyperbolic loveliness."

He is fucking unbelievable. They are both silent for a few seconds.

Neil eventually speaks. "So then, how's the British weather? And your kids? Gray?"

How does he... "Gray? How do you know about him?"

"I live in a shed in L.A. most of the time, Olga, but I'm not dead." He pauses. "Like I said, people from back home pop up out of the blue with some excuse to talk now and then, just like you have. One of them must have said you two got married."

L.A.? *How the fuck does Neil Killock manage L.A.?* "L.A., eh. I had noticed the international number. How is it?"

"Stalker. Did you Google the area code to work out where I was? Are spies watching me? Don't answer that."

She rolls her eyes.

"I've been here five years. It's warm. I took up surfing."

Fuck off – Neil Killock surfing? "Really?"

"No."

She rolls her eyes.

"I left the shed and went for lunch in town the other day. I rarely go out. Two men were talking on the table next to me. One of them said, 'But how do you *really* feel?' and the other one's extortionately-priced face twisted as if it was about to run its body out in front of traffic."

She covers her mouth to stifle a laugh. She digs her fingers into the bed. She then lies back down and twists her fingers through her hair. "Why – because of the question itself, or how it made him feel?"

"Who knows. Maybe it's like this everywhere now. Do I sound happy?" He briefly stops scribbling, then continues. "I suppose it's OK. I tend not to think about it. How's Gray? Did I ask?"

"Did you say something about a shed?" She brings her arm across her face, the inside of her elbow covering her eyes.

"Yes. A shed. It's my studio. But don't worry: it's attached to a very large property. There's a swimming pool. I'm sure the cleaners enjoy it. I spend most of my time in here though.

"I asked you how Gray was. Did I ask you how Gray was?"

She moves her palm to her forehead. "Gray. He-"

"You knew back then that I knew you two were together, didn't you, when I was in the nuthouse."

She closes her eyes. "Do you have to call it..." She stops herself. She opens her eyes.

"He's... he's OK. We've not been together the whole time, you know. Not the whole time since then."

"Do I know? I didn't know. How would I know? Is he still angry?"

"Neil."

"He was angry when we used to knock around together. Does he still deal? He must have calmed down now, considering you're speaking to me on Christmas Day. While he's... downstairs?"

He is fucking unbelievable. "Yes, he is downstairs. And no, he doesn't deal anything now."

"Right."

"And he knows I'm having a time of it because of my father, so he gives me space to lie down or whatever else I need at the moment."

"Right."

"But we're OK. Thanks for asking."

"Right. Space. Space to lie down."

Prick. Absolute prick. She looks at her watch: 11:25 am. *We've been on the phone for a while. And...*

She sits up. "Wait – you're in L.A.. What time is it there?"

"I was wondering if you'd thought about that. Some things don't change, eh – you just doing whatever you want, whenever you want, without thinking of the other end."

"I... I didn't..."

"It's fine. It's 3:30 in the morning. I work best in the early hours."

Of course you do, Neil. "OK. That's good. What are you working on, if I can ask?"

"Right now? Right now I'm scribbling into a notepad."

"Oh... oh right. Anything interest-"

"I'm not sure what it is yet. A poem, perhaps? I've got the line 'WHAT IS THE FUCKING POINT IN THIS CONVERSATION?' written around five hundred times in capital letters currently, but I'm not sure how to arrange them."

She sighs audibly. "Neil."

“What, Olga?”

She rubs the duvet and stares at her hand. “I... What are you doing today?”

“Today? Right now I’m writing and listening to the radio. Steely Dan currently. No doubt I’ll do some sculpting later. No other major plans though. You?”

She shakes her head and grins. *Of course*. “I meant for Christmas, Neil. It is Christmas Day. Are you doing anything for Christmas?”

“Oh. No. Nothing. But I’m fine with that. Elton John now.”

“OK. Well...” She pauses. “Are you... Do you have a wife? A partner?”

He stops scribbling and puts his pencil down. He puts the phone down on the desk. He lets out a loud, one syllable laugh: “Ha!” He picks the phone back up.

“Oh, Olga. What do you fucking think?”

She wraps her hand around her neck under her chin. “OK.”

“Are you feeling sorry for me? Did I just hear that, or did I just hear that?”

“I don’t... I don’t feel sorry for you. I don’t know. I hope you’re OK, that’s all.” She lies down and places a pillow over her face.

“She hopes I’m OK. Olga – Google ‘Neil Killock’: that’ll tell you how OK I am. Because I am disgustingly successful, so what does anything else even count for? Why would me having a partner even be relevant now? In fact, what was the need to even ask?”

She has her arm across the pillow over her face. She tilts her head to the side so she can speak from under it.

“I... I’m just being nosey, Neil. I saw you connected with a few women over the years, that’s all. Some beautiful wome-”

“Yes I was at times but not currently.” He briefly stops scribbling, then continues. “I decided at some point that being on my own was better all round, or it at least felt better to do that, rather than being neurotically attached to a stifling relationship out of shame and guilt, you know?”

She takes the pillow off her face and sits up. “What the fuck does that mean?”

“What do you mean?”

What the fuck is wrong with this man? “Fuck off, Neil. Tell me what you fucking meant by that.”

“Well it is, isn’t it? Better to live alone than to live a life that is only an unconscious reaction to what one feels so much shame and guilt about – a cowardly existence dictated by what one refuses to resolve.”

He stops scribbling.

“Come on, Olga: you knew what I was like before – you knew I wouldn’t have changed – yet you still rang me. And on top of that, you’ve now willingly listened to everything I’ve had to say throughout this whole conversation – about your dad; about what you were like all those years ago. On Christmas Day no less, too. So maybe you should drop the faux fucking outrage at hearing what you were so clearly ready to finally hear.”

He continues scribbling. She hangs up and throws the phone on the bed. She lies down and stares at the ceiling with one palm resting on her forehead.

Why did I do that? Why did I call him?

After two minutes she sits up and picks up her phone.

“Olga!” Gray shouts from the bottom of the stairs. She is holding her phone with her thumb over the call button. “Are you planning on spending any of Christmas fucking Day with us? You have things called children – a family – you know. Can’t just fucking think of yourself.” She hears a faint “Fuck me” as he walks back into the living room.

“Fuck me”: he wishes. Prick.

Absolute fucking pricks.

She stares at her phone. She throws it on the bed and goes downstairs. She walks through the living room passing Gray. "You do know what I'm going through, don't you?" He doesn't respond.

She walks through the kitchen to the back door and opens it. She stands in the doorway and lights a cigarette. Her children – one boy, aged four; one girl, aged eight – are at the top of the garden. They're playing in the snow. They wave at her.

She stares at them without responding as she smokes her cigarette. "Mummy's sad," the boy mouths.

The weather. I didn't tell him it was snowing here.

She stamps her cigarette out on the decking and walks back through the kitchen and living room. "You surely aren't going to fucking lie down again," Gray says as she passes. "I'm going to the fucking toilet," she replies. She kicks some wrapping paper out of her way as she goes upstairs. She grabs her phone off the bed and goes and locks herself in the bathroom. She puts the toilet lid down and sits down and unlocks her phone. She has one missed call and four new messages from Neil.

Texts and fucking emails – I hate using these fucking things.

It was good to hear from you. Don't think I don't know I was a fucking nightmare back then: difficult, miserable, cocky. I still am, you may have noticed. Together we were just chaos.

I might have gone too far on the phone. But come on, what did you expect? I'm sorry, but I'm also not. I had to say something. I suppose some things don't change.

I'm saying this begrudgingly now too, but if you need anything, you've got my number. BUT CALL ME. Don't fucking email or text. I'm sorry to hear about your dad.

Another message comes through as she finishes reading.

You never needed your ego fanning, but every sculpture was – is – about you, for better or worse. You probably knew that already. I hope things are OK. Merry Christmas.

She cries for ten minutes on the toilet. Gray shouts up the stairs but she doesn't acknowledge him. She then replies to Neil.

Thank you, Neil. It was good to talk to you too, I think... I was and am really proud of you.

I forgot to say: it's snowing here! The kids

love it.

*Oh! Also, I think you'll like this one...
Anna? She now calls herself "Mother
Gaia". You might be right: "Absolute
fucking lunatic".*

Merry Christmas. Maybe speak soon X

*

*"I don't blame you much for wanting to be free
I just wanted you to know
I've loved you better than your own kin did"
—Nina Simone, 'Do What You Gotta Do'*

*

It is 3 January – nine days later. Olga calls Neil.
"This number is no longer in service."

"This was, whisper it, fun."

--Phil McNulty, *'This was an England we haven't seen for years – and it was fun'*, 18 June 2026, BBC Sport, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/sport/football/articles/cwylqvgne7lo>