

MOBIUS

By Christopher Best

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Take a strip of paper ~ Put a mark on one side ~ Twist the two ends  
~ And join them together ~ To form a loop

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## **Part One:**

### **~ Daniel ~**

#### **Old St. Bart**

From the Millwrights Arms, chip shop and petrol station, Cooper's Hill rises for a little under a mile, past a hotchpotch of old and new houses, cul-de-sacs of flats and garages, a launderette, Chinese take-away and general store. On one side of the road, just before the summit, bricks and mortar give way to railings and high hedging, behind which lurks the sprawling cemetery of the local church. Nestling among the tangled yew trees and gravestones, the church itself looks rather forlorn and forgotten. From the road, only the spire is visible, the rest appears only when passing the north or west gates.

'Old' St. Bart's (the other Church of Saint Bartholomew in town is presumably younger) is not somewhere people come to seek out the finest stained glass or impressive stonework; or somewhere to gaze in awe at intricate screens or pulpits. Its hard, upright pews speak more of God's wrath than of His mercy. This is not a church to elevate or inspire, and for much of the time it stands idle, sanctuary only to lovers, drunks and vandals. Increasingly, the doors are simply closed for business. Every two or three months a family service might inject a breath of new life, or a funeral new death. Weddings or christenings are never held here. Of course there are the fixed points of the calendar: Easter, Lent, Harvest Festival, Christmas. The candlelit vigil with carols last night and the full-blown service this morning have undoubtedly been the highlights of the year. But few of the church's flock will have attended either, and the person now sitting five rows back on the left suspects he's been today's only caller since the vicar's parting amen.

The Reverend Nicholls would be surprised to see this man sat here. Daniel George was someone who never came to sing hymns or say prayers, or in any other way collude with promises of salvation and eternal life. It wasn't Christ's birthday that had drawn him in this afternoon, only the sudden rainstorm on his way to visit a grave. Graveyards he can kind of forgive; churches he can't. Even as the sermons raise death aloft in hollow praise, outside the lowly graveyard brings it back down to earth with a thud: those tenderly laid flowers withering and dying in mimicry of the loved ones they honour; the headstones blackened and crumbling; the weeds that endlessly invade.

Even here, walled up behind thick stone, the Almighty is forced to confront these

profanities of nature. Around the east window, great patches of damp peel back the whitewash and scatter it confetti-like over the choir stalls. For all the scented candles and applications of wax polish, the musty smells of mildew and mould still taint the air. And our good lord fares little better against the sacrilege of man. Every wall sports traces of over-painted graffiti; sweet wrappers and used tissues join the discarded orders of service on the floor; someone has stuck gum to the back of a pew. The profane eats into the sacred. The outside creeps inside. Death wins the day.

It was a death that first brought Daniel here more than ten years ago – though few memories of the funeral survive. Rain or no rain, he wouldn't otherwise have come. Memories are the last thing he needs more of today. Already they've been tumbling unstoppable into his head, like old photos tipped from a shoebox. This morning when he woke his window ledge had become a dockland of model battleships; at breakfast, the sourness of plum jam had whisked him up into the old greengage tree by the garden shed; dunking his hands into the kitchen sink after lunch had brought seawater sifting the sand from a clutch of exquisite shells. And, as he gazes up now at the vaulted roof crossed with beams, he's seeing only an expanse of Artex strung with paper chains. Those hanging tapestries are just cheap cards threaded on string. The altar, its pewter candlesticks and cloth, are a table set for three, laid with torn vinyl, unmatched tumblers, crackers and a solitary candle tied with ribbon. He's a child again, kneeling in the corner beside a plastic tree. Around him lie the spoils of a Christmas morning: boxed sweets; tangerines and nuts; discarded wrapping paper – still parcel-shaped at one end, but ripped through at the other like a head-on collision; two sets of colouring pens; a battalion of toy soldiers; the latest Bond car; a pair of trainers; a joke book and a box of magic tricks. The memory lingers over his hands, carefully fashioning a strip of paper, twisting the ends before gluing them together and meticulously cutting the loop lengthways into two. Ever the sceptic, he rechecks the instructions before making the final snip. Then, 'Hey Presto!' Just as promised: not two loops at all: still just the one, but twice the length. Bedazzled, he runs the strip repeatedly through his fingers to find the trick. But there is none. This is real magic. Another glance at the instructions and again the lengthwise cut and the boy Daniel is squawking with delight. Two loops now – yet miraculously intertwined like the paper chains above his head...

...Above his head, the start-stop drumming on the church roof – rain on slate – water on stone, like the drag of waves over shingle; new footage now spooling through his head, old, faded, VHS grade: Daniel, running for all his worth along a coast path towards some unseen end; a second boy running ahead, gaining ground, no intention whatsoever of

stopping or slowing down to let his brother catch him. Two children, so alike in appearance, so worlds apart in temperament, their fantasies caught against a backdrop of exaggerated hills and towering gorse bushes.

\* \* \*

A sharp pain reminds Daniel to breathe, only to check him midway. Somewhere in his lower back a muscle spasm is pinching a nerve; his backside has gone numb. The rain in the rafters is easing; it's time to make a move. Carefully avoiding the gum, he edges his way along the pew, slips out between the rows and heads back down the aisle. The sky has at last relented, and the low sun is casting intermittent shadows through the west window that push forward as though craving communion. As he pulls on the door and ventures outside he's met by the drone of traffic on two fronts, ahead and to his right. The glare from wet cobbles stabs at a hangover he's been nursing all day – a spreading yew tree beckons with the promise of cover. Daniel squints up at the clock. Still an hour or so of daylight to go: more than enough time for the graveside vigil that awaits him. For now, he can afford to see out the sunset, prop himself against the wrinkled bark and study the shadows as they spread from stone to stone. Phantoms slowly joining hands to form a single shade.

\* \* \*

The sun is now lower in the sky, turning the air sharper. He reins in his coat and takes the path down towards the hollow. As he does so, a posse of spectres seems to gather up ahead, everyone dressed in black, trudging silently with head bowed. Significant perhaps that their final procession to the graveside has left impressions where the service before it has not. A younger Daniel had held back from this crowd, had never actually seen the coffin go down – only the mound of earth that marked the spot, days later, when the tombstone finally arrived. It was a plot some way back from the path, near to the boundary hedge, one of a handful of young graves on a newly cleared site. The same spot is approaching now, but the passing years, the weather and the undergrowth have long ago erased the distinction.

As the familiar moment to leave the path arrives a disturbance in the grass draws Daniel's eye. A cat stares up with murderous longing into the bushes where a robin is busy stripping berries – with an added dusting of snow it could be the perfect budget Christmas card. Yet its resonances go somehow deeper. As it crouches there, eyes glued to its prize, this perfectly engineered creature of taut sinews and coil-spring muscle has no skeletons to hold it in check: no memories of the many kills it had witnessed as a kitten, or those long hungry waits for its mother's return to the litter. There are no last minute changes of heart here, no

questions, no remorse, no thoughts for the robin's orphaned fledglings. Just blissful, blameless instinct. A woman's voice reverberates through the air. The boy by the Christmas tree looks up from beneath a magician's hat to see his mother, something stopping her dead in her tracks. She has frozen with horror, is too terrified to breathe. In her eyes burns a look of fear that no child could ever forget; an accusatory stare never to be forgiven. He's stepping now through the long grass; the cat scarpers, furious and frightened, leaving an enduring presence that goes beyond either phantoms or felines. Is someone else keeping vigil down here? Are they covertly watching him? A hundred mourners could be lurking among these shadows and not be seen. As the gravestone's simple profile emerges from behind another its front face seems oddly obscured. A large bundle sits propped against it. Daniel quickens his pace; he slows again and stops, his brain struggling to unravel the shape.

Recognition is sudden and shocking.

"Oi, you, what d'you think you're doing?" He's already shouting the rebuke as the self-doubt kicks back. It's nothing but a large refuse sack. Someone has been clearing the undergrowth, removing litter or thinning the hedging, and simply stacked it there for collection. But another two steps, and the bundle re-forms as a person once more; no question this time; a male crouching on the grave, his forehead pressed up against the stone, arms slightly forward, his hands out of view.

"You! Get the hell off there."

But the intruder takes no notice, only continues staring down at the ground, determined to finish whatever he's doing. The idea that this man might be relieving himself, on the verge of throwing up or even, god forbid, masturbating, is just too disgusting to contemplate. Whatever is going on here it's a blasphemy, a personal attack, an affront to the George family name. Already Daniel is onto the grass and going for the man's collar.

"I said off there, fucker."

And at once it's plain that the man is not desecrating the grave at all. He's simply squatting – more precisely, kneeling – stiff as a board. When grabbed, he offers no defence; his head grazes the stone as the body topples, rigid as a statue. When dragged through the undergrowth his eyes never open. As Daniel finally lets go and stares down ruefully at the heap before him the terrible possibility dawns that this man might actually be dead.

For nearly an hour Daniel has been brooding over death and memories of death, but to stumble upon it like this – to have it laid out at one's feet – is no less of a shock. What are the protocols? Does he take action – administer first-aid – run for help – or simply walk away? If he just leaves, sooner or later a churchwarden, a passer by or the vicar himself is sure to find

the man, any one of whom would be only too delighted to do the Christian thing. But what if someone has witnessed the rough handling? Daniel may have been recognised. Besides, the man wears no coat, only thin jeans and a pullover, both soaked through. It promises to be a long and cold night ahead for someone in such a sorry state to be hanging on for salvation. A different kind of chill now begins to fuse Daniel's bones. For a moment he's that child again, making twisted paper chains in a stuffy room with something icy gnawing at his belly. It's the child's voice that tells him there is no way of turning his back on this tonight.

Okay, but some basic checks need to be made before going for help. Ensure that he's breathing; make him as warm and comfortable as possible; remove any hints of having been dragged about. Daniel is about to set to it when a voice – the first he's heard in over forty-eight hours – makes him gasp and pull back. He wheels around to find a woman standing on the path a little way off, her small body framed by the silhouette of the church; an angel sent down in judgement.

“Sorry,” she cries. “I hope I didn't... Oh! Is everything all right there?”

A thick coat, headscarf and gloves cover all but the full moon of her face, across which the guilty verdict is already spreading like a cloud. Daniel is half inclined to tell her to get lost, to mind her own business, but a kind of divine authority in the way she holds herself prevents him. He takes another step backwards and opens his arms.

“I just found him. I think he's hurt: unconscious.”

“Perhaps I'd better take a look,” she says. “I have nursing experience.”

Nursing experience; the phrase seems to ring in the air. Little wonder then that she'd made him wary – the number of times the medical profession has let him down over the years. Still, he's committed to it now and is nodding her over. She then does something very simple, but enough to soften his hardness towards her. As she crosses the grass to join him she makes the smallest detour to avoid treading over the grave.

He moves aside to let her kneel down before the man.

'Nursing experience'. What does she mean? A student in training perhaps, but a second glance suggests she's rather too old for that. Someone struck off for dereliction of duty? Unlikely – too diligent, too high in moral fibre. Then maybe a person so disillusioned with the NHS that she's quitted her job. Or a poor girl forced to acquire her 'nursing experience' by caring for some decrepit relative until they finally had the decency to drop dead. That at least was something he could relate to. She has bent down with her face close to the man's right ear and is gently shaking his shoulder.

“Do you know his name?”

Daniel shrugs. She shakes again. “Hello, can you hear me?”

He watches her remove her headscarf and put one ear to the man’s nose.

“He’s alive. But his breathing is awfully shallow.”

Now she runs a hand under his shirt collar and feels the skin beneath.

“The poor man’s absolutely frozen. And soaked to the skin. We really need to get him off the grass.”

Daniel steps forward but is told to wait. The authority figure again. She needs to see if it’s safe to move him. She examines the wound across the man’s head, checks his face and begins a fingertip search of his bones, working methodically down the body with incredible care, as though the limbs might come away in her hands. It grants Daniel time to study her more closely. Even in the half-light he can see that she’s dark, both her hair and skin. She could be Greek. In the few words she’s spoken he’d caught the trace of an accent, but no, Greek doesn’t quite cut it. Spanish, maybe. His age, or thereabouts – thirty-something – quite tall, not pretty, but a certain touch of class. The type he could maybe even fancy, in an odd sort of way.

“Well, there’s nothing broken, as far as I can tell. He’s grazed his head on one side and maybe bumped his face, but I think it’s now okay to move him.”

“Onto the path?”

She shakes her head, climbing to her feet and for some reason emptying her pockets. She strips off her coat – apparently oblivious to the cold – and lays it against the man’s side. “I want to put him into the recovery position. Would you call for an ambulance while I do that?”

Daniel looks away with a shiver. “I haven’t got a phone.”

“No,” she laughs, “of course. A cemetery is hardly the place to be making phone calls.”

She reclaims the one she’s just squeezed into a back pocket and offers it to him, but Daniel declines. She can ring, he says. He can do recovery positions; he’s watched it done a hundred times. Maybe she takes this as some outpouring of Samaritan spirit but in truth it’s just the lesser of two evils. 999 calls get recorded. Under the circumstances he’d rather not be on the system. And he really does know about the recovery position. A home-help had shown him years ago as a precaution. Even so, all this has clearly thrown the girl. She fumbles her words when indicating which way he should turn the patient. She might have saved herself the worry; Daniel is well aware which side of the man’s head caught the edge of the stone.

“Yes, ambulance please...”

He brings one of the man's arms out towards him across the girl's coat, reaches under the furthest knee and yanks it upwards.

"...Hello, can we have an ambulance to St Bartholomew's Church cemetery, north entrance... Sorry? No, no, the other one, on Cooper's Hill..."

As he brings the other arm across the chest and pulls on the raised knee, the man's own weight rolls him over onto his side.

"...We've found an unconscious man here. Yes, he's breathing, but only just. There are head injuries. My number..."

Daniel needs the man's free hand to become a makeshift pillow, but the fist remains tightly clenched. In prising the fingers apart he allows something – a ball of paper – to fall into the grass. He quickly retrieves it. The paramedics will be here soon, and the girl is hardly likely to let him frisk this guy for ID. The paper may be the one clue to his identity, and why that particular gravestone had been his target. Even when smoothed out, the paper is too crumpled for the words, written in blue ink, to be legible. Daniel turns the paper over to discover it's an old photo, but has no time to study it before the woman is covering her mobile with one hand and calling to him.

"Check he's still breathing, will you? Hello, sorry, yes, we'll stay with him. Rahmani. R-A-H-M-A-N-I. Gulnaz Rahmani. Yes, of course. Thank you. Goodbye –

"– And put your coat over him."

Daniel gawks at her. He might have told her where to get off had she not already given up hers. Instead, a muddled sense of chivalry kicks in; something about gentlemen laying their cloaks across puddles for ladies with dainty ankles to step in their flowing silks.

She snaps shut her phone. "They're on their way."

"I bloody hope so." He blows hot breath into his hands. It takes less than a minute to decide his noble act had been premature. What gentlemen chose to do with their cloaks was their affair.

"Bugger this. I've got a better idea."

"Where are you going?"

"To the church – to get something else to cover him with."

He leaves the woman to monitor her patient and hurries back along the path. An old robe in some back room should do it. Or they can requisition one of those tapestries. Failing that, there is of course always the altar cloth.

\* \* \*

Other than a solitary porch light, there's nothing at the church to fend off the growing

darkness. Daniel leaves the door ajar to cast some light inside. The night air takes its cue to follow, gusting from the doorway across shuffling pamphlets to some unseen open window. If the church earlier had seemed unfriendly, then, starved of conciliatory sunlight, it now breathes open hostility, the woken air heavy with bitter-sweet mould spores that choke him, that race to settle on his lungs, that sting his eyes and nostrils. The deeper cold and damp grip his naked arms and neck, creeping down his back and locking his fingers. The sooner this job is done, the sooner Daniel gets his coat back.

Enough light still filters in through the glass to pick out the pews from the aisles. At first he takes the familiar route – down the centre aisle towards the altar table. He passes the row where just an hour ago he'd sat in freewheeling reminiscence. He'd have expected by now to have paid his graveside dues and be on his way home, to a warm flat and a well-earned tumbler of whisky. Little had he known that some drunken bum was even then violating his sacred plot. His first instinct had been to assume a connection; some deliberate targeting of that stone as a statement, or protest, or punishment, or revenge. Now he's less sure. The guy could have been using the graveyard as a shortcut from Cooper's Hill to Church Road and made it only as far as the hollow before blacking out from too much Millwrights Christmas cheer. Matters needed normalising again. Get the fucker off his hands, send the girl on her way and head home.

Nothing suggests itself as a makeshift blanket among the hard seating – no cushions or throws or standby rugs for the elderly. Not yet quite desperate enough to pilfer the altar cloth, he makes instead for the doors at the far end. The first and most promising, marked vestry, turns out to be locked. The two opposite, leading to unnamed rooms, are also off limits. By the fourth, which opens only to a bare broom cupboard and electric meter, Daniel has made an almost complete circuit of the nave and is already wondering what the vicar will make of the stolen altar cloth with candlesticks left untouched, when something catches his eye beneath the table of evangelising pamphlets, visitors book and donation box: a bundle of old dustsheets heaped up against the wall. Grubby, paint-splashed and torn, they're the likely spoils of a recent graffiti clean-up. But did anybody promise the casualty fresh bed linen? And in any case, these are good and thick. Feeling triumphant, Daniel grabs the top two. The girl now gets to have her coat back as well. With one draped around his shoulders, the other thrust beneath an arm, he pulls on the door, gulps in the fresh air and is all braced to set off again when the porch light prompts him over the photo. Time to check whether there's more to their patient's story than mere alcohol abuse. The girl had indicated he may have been in a fight; he'd actually collapsed a good way from the path, and hadn't his posture suggested

some kind of fetishistic act?

Daniel feels in each pocket.

Nothing.

He thrusts his hands in deeper.

Fuck. The damn thing's in his coat.

The girl, perched against a gravestone a meter or so from the patient, rises to her feet and smiles at Daniel as he brandishes the blankets in triumph. She watches him swap one with his coat, but hesitates as he squats down to roll the man off her coat and onto the second blanket.

“Oh, no, wait. Don't do that. Better not move him again. I'll take the other blanket.”

“As you wish.”

She shakes it out, folds it double and cocoons herself within its dappled white and grey folds. The effect is oddly transformative. She becomes at once both the forlorn young refugee and the wise old sage. Somehow it seems to capture the surreal nature of the whole past half hour. Daniel tears his eyes away to look down at the man; he too has become otherworldly, so peacefully at rest beneath his snug blanket. So unthreatening, yet so easily a deception. Daniel feels for the photo.

“I'm going to the gate to see if there's any sign of the ambulance,” he informs her, only half truthfully.

From the cemetery's north gate the road runs sharply downhill to the right; the well trodden route homewards. The brow of the hill to the left, just meters away, leads towards town. A swan-necked streetlight cranes down from above as though keeping a watchful eye on Daniel's moves. Again he smooths out the paper and holds it up to the light. The writing is no longer legible, the wet grass having caused the ink to run. Turning it over to check on the image, his heart misses a beat before taking a giant leap through his chest.

“Jesus H Christ.”

It's simply not possible. He knows this scene.

“How the...”

He knows everyone in it. From long ago. The picture before him could so easily be just another of those snapshot memories that have hounded him all day. Three figures: a woman seated, a man standing at her shoulder and a small child to her other side. A background of dockland cranes, cargo, vehicles, crowds of workers. The photo does indeed embody a memory: a memory of being there when it was taken, looking on as the camera had looked on while his father, mother and brother Alex posed for the George family portrait.

“You little *shit*. How in fuck’s name did you get hold of this?”

He’s through the north gate, legging it back to where the man is lying. He’s tearing off the workman’s sheet and roughly rolling him onto his back – this man, this bastard – who’d had in his grubby little mitts something so dearly personal to Daniel. A man he doesn’t even know. Some creepy, stalking, pervert of a man. The girl is crying out for him to stop, demanding to be told what’s happened. But Daniel has no mind to answer, no longer the will to confide in any outsider. He doesn’t know this woman any more than he knows this stinking tramp. He needs her to go. This is just between the two of them. He can’t think with her around. The photograph, when had he seen it last? In an old album somewhere. In with his mother’s stuff at the back of his wardrobe. So this is a second print from the same negative. It must be. Mustn’t it?

Unless this bastard has just been ransacking his flat.

The woman is becoming frightened and angry. “Please, stop,” she protests, “leave him alone. He’s going to be okay. The ambulance won’t be long. Don’t upset yourself, he’ll be fine. You... you saved him, alright?”

But Daniel is now too distraught to respond to such babbling. In his mind he is already sprinting home to the crime scene: a break-in while he’s been daydreaming in church, every surface in his house fouled by this man’s touch, indelibly smeared with his prints. Drawers in disarray, clothing disturbed, boxes dragged out and opened. Nowhere left unmarked. Utterly exposing. Everything he owns will have to go.

Perhaps it was that incident a few months back; the day he’d come home from work to find the broken window, the trail of boot marks across the floor and the neatly coiled turd on his carpet. The CDs, the telly, his clothes, they’d all been left untouched – seemingly none of it worth stealing and he’d assumed the ‘gift’ was his punishment for that. The landlord had blown Daniel’s deposit on fitting bars to the windows, even eventually on cleaning his carpets. At the time, that seemed to be an end to it.

But perhaps this photograph was what the thief had really been after.

Surely that bloody ambulance should have arrived by now. How long since the girl telephoned? She’s returned the man to his side, and is crouched protectively over him, watching Daniel like a hawk. He steps away. He paces. He pulls at his hair, repeatedly looking back for any change. He mumbles and curses. He returns to the north gate, scans the road both ways and hurries back. Once more he picks over the imagined crime scene at home and checks his watch for the umpteenth time.

It takes them twenty minutes to arrive. Twenty minutes – from a station not three

streets away; two paramedics, one old and one young, sauntering towards them, sharing a joke. They'd not even bothered with sirens. Daniel's 'So, what's so funny? You want this fucker to die, or what?' does not go down well. The younger of the two calls him sir as though it meant asshole, and informs him there is no need to take that attitude. The girl does her best at peacemaking. "He's very upset," she offers quietly. From that moment, the men speak only to each other and to the unconscious casualty until they have him securely blocked and on the stretcher. Then one of them says, "And you're quite sure neither of you know him."

Daniel suddenly can't recall the face, isn't even sure he's actually studied it properly. He pushes forward.

"Give us a minute. I want another look."

There is a moment then of absolute stillness. A broken network of stares. The ambulance men's eyes fix upon Daniel's. His burn into the steel cold face on the ground. The victim's eyes stare out dead to the world. Only the girl catches the soft hiss of Daniel's in-breath. The others only see him shake his head, a reflex they take to be their signal to leave.

"Call A&E in the morning, if you're concerned," the older one suggests, as they raise the man. And then they are gone. Ambulance doors are slamming behind the hedge and the engine firing. Still no sirens.

Daniel has slumped himself against the nearest gravestone, feeling his whole body going into shock, a thousand contradictions swirling in his gut and tumbling through his brain, rebounding off the solid wall of reason. At first the girl waits in silence, and then finds her moment to speak.

"You recognised him at the end, didn't you?"

He nods weakly.

"So, who was he?"

He glances at her finally, catching in her eyes a fear that he knows must mirror his own. In one gesture he wants to both push her away and to take her in his arms. Recalling that face is like staring into a lake. The blooded forehead, the sunken eye sockets, the dark rings around the lids, the deep channels in the skin, the matted hair, the heavy stubble, they all distort the features like ripples on the surface. But through it all, without a shimmer of doubt, reflects back the ghost of his own face.

"It was Alex. My brother."

The girl stares wide-eyed, speechless, then rounds on him sharply. "What?? Your brother? Your *brother*? Well then... for heaven's sake... why didn't you *say* something? We

could have gone with them!”

“No, no, no. It looked... I’m sure it *was* him. But... but it can’t be.”

A hundred fresh pictures are suddenly shaken from that battered shoebox of memories. For the first time Daniel sees his brother across the playground amid a crowd of school friends. He’s watching him chase a football around the garden lawn and catches his profile up front in the passenger seat of a car, staring transfixed through the side window. And again the two of them are tearing along the cliff path, with the keel of a boat down in the water. Their mother is running too. This newly unfolding past throws a cloak around him and the girl’s voice sounds far off.

“Sorry, I don’t quite...”

He can’t possibly stay here. He forces himself off the stone, turns his back on the girl with a short laugh and strides away.

“It can’t be. That’s all. Alex is already dead. He’s been dead for twenty-four years.”

## Gulnaz

The girl is ushered into the outer lobby and the door slammed behind them. A little of the emotional turmoil that had impelled Daniel to run is shed at the doorstep, and for a moment he can be still. A second later, he pushes on through to his flat and steers the girl inside.

She peels off her wet coat and hands it to him. He spreads it out over the hall radiator, wedging the collar behind to hold it in place, throws off his own coat, and then leads her through to the kitchen.

Given the sight before them, his guest might be forgiven for thinking there had indeed been a burglary. However, to Daniel it's immediately clear that no-one has trashed the place; no-one has rifled his things. No-one but himself, at least. The Christmas festivities have simply licensed a greater degree of slobbery than normal. Christmases can be a tough time for anyone living alone. A time to be with family and friends. For those who have neither, such sentiments aren't so easy to swallow. Daniel's stand has been to down everything else with it. Breakfasts, lunches, those numerous toasts to self-pity, they all lie strewn around the flat marking the spot where each has been curtly dispatched. If in some backwater of his mind he does cringe a little as they plough through the mess then his conscious attention is wholly directed at the kitchen table and the half empty bottle of scotch upon it. Before he can begin to think about anything he has to kill the image of that face.

"Here," he grunts, removing the cork and sliding a tumbler towards her. "Merry Christmas."

"Thanks, but I think I'd prefer the coffee you offered me."

"Have this first. It'll make things easier. I'm going to need your help here."

It's then that Daniel wonders whether he resents her having followed him home like this; whether he would have preferred the isolation, some space to get to grips with what had happened back at the cemetery. A night alone might have given him a chance to reshape events such that, by morning, the unconscious man would have become a total stranger once more: a simple case of mistaken identity resulting from all the excitement. The photo – that was harder, but perhaps one Daniel himself had accidentally dropped there, from the pocket of a pair of trousers he'd not worn in a while, which the guy had picked up out of curiosity or obsessive tidiness. Alex was dead, and he could have damn well stayed that way.

But something tells him this girl is going to take them along very different pathways; the very fact that she had pursued him, all the way down Cooper's Hill, over the zebra crossing and down the side road into Sedgefield Court, quizzing him all the while about his brother. Though Daniel had determined not to look back or let her get too close, he'd also

stopped short of shooing her away. Those insistent demands for answers had propelled him forward with a nervous energy, powering through each leg, along the arms and up the neck to drive his hands and face. His voice cut across hers with unfinished outbursts. He just... He couldn't... How was he...? By the time they reached his flat, she'd put out fifty questions and he'd answered none.

No, if Daniel had really wanted to be on his own he wouldn't have caught himself slowing down and waiting while she hesitated at the crossing, never mind pausing at his front door to ask her in. Yes, it was Christmas evening and they were two people alone; yes they'd just shared an emotional encounter, but if he'd really felt compelled he could have just shut that door in her face. When he suggested they both needed coffee, it wasn't some euphemism trotted out to a latest conquest, he actually meant coffee. Coffee and companionship.

The girl gives in, but the whisky has barely wetted the glass before her hand goes out. Daniel mutters something, pours himself enough for them both and lets the drink hover at his lips for some seconds. Its impact is not at all what he'd been relying on; far from dispelling the image, the earthy aroma only draws him closer to the craggy face on the ground that had so caricatured his own.

"Say if you want me to go. If I'm intruding," she says through his silence.

Something stirs beneath the skin; a force from within the face that is not of its own making, pushing upwards to raise one eyelid. From the hollow blackness beneath, an earthworm, like a beckoning finger, wriggles into the light. It hauls itself over the rim of the eye socket and slithers out across the temple. In its wake, seething rivers of woodlice prise apart the jaw and spew from the partially open mouth down both cheeks, over the chin, onto the neck. A battle charge, a mass exodus... The whisky burns the back of Daniel's throat.

"Um, can I call you George?" she says unexpectedly.

He coughs, and the horror-flick images dissolve. Over by the fridge now, he flips the kettle switch and dredges up two mugs from the sink.

"I saw the name on the doorbell," she explains. A dirty saucer on the drainer catches Daniel's elbow and Frisbees over the edge. It turns and shrinks like a stone thrown from a cliff top, the moment of impact held, when for an instant it seems to come to rest before exploding across the floor. The sound stops him dead. The girl hurriedly makes a move to gather up the pieces.

"It's Daniel. George is my surname. Daniel – not Dan or Danny."

"Oh, right. I'll remember that." Her laugh is a little tense as she places the three pieces of saucer into the pedal bin. "I didn't tell you mine, did I?"

Still transfixed by the point of impact, he's no longer gazing down from the roll-top drainer, but from a fringe of grass overhanging a cliff edge. The soup-splashed Formica doors beneath have become a precipice of bird-splattered rock, the grey vinyl flooring a deathbed of lethal rocks. A salt breeze pushes aside the stale kitchen air and at once Daniel can taste the sea.

"It's a bit of a challenge, my name. You might have to work on it. Gulnaz. Try it."

The perspective shifts, and she's standing now on the coast path behind him. At first he can say nothing. Only his lips move, speech lost to the shriek of seabirds. Then at length the name slips out through clenched teeth. Gull noise.

She giggles. "Ha-ha, I like that, but it's nearer goal than gull. Emphasise the second syllable: Gul-*naaa*z, with a long A." It's all a ruse perhaps to lighten the atmosphere and get him talking. Maybe it's working, or maybe it's the scotch. Either way, he's back from the cliffs and into his flat. He repeats the name until the shape is right. Encouraged, she pitches in with another question about his brother.

"Would it help if you told me about how he died?"

The kettle begins to rumble on its base, clicks and settles again. Daniel reaches for the Kenco and spins the lid. At the sixth spoonful of coffee, three in each mug, he drops the teaspoon into the jar and gazes absently through the window.

"I don't remember much about it. I was nine."

"But you've been told what happened?"

Hot water fizzes over the granules. He seizes upon the nicotine blast.

"Kind of. He drowned."

Now he sniffs the milk and slops it in, shovels in a generous quantity of sugar and stirs.

"I think my mother knew. But it upset her too much to talk about it."

Daniel knows he's on autopilot, the lines pre-programmed. And in the normal run of things this would be his story told as far as brothers go. The subject sometimes came up when friends or colleagues asked about his past, or when a latest girlfriend felt she should properly 'get to know him'. But he'd never quite brought himself to answer the question 'Any brothers or sisters?' with a straight 'No'. He and Alex may have been parted for nearly a quarter of a century, but the bond they'd forged in the womb still held on by a thread; he just couldn't bring himself to deny his brother's existence. Instead, he'd mastered a patter that stuck pretty much to the truth while carefully avoiding a can of worms. Brother drowns when he's a child, doesn't remember much about it; his mum may have known more but had never wanted to discuss it. Family history over, demons neatly conquered... now who's for a drink?

But the normal run of things did not include him having identified the same long-dead twin brother only minutes before. Nor did it include having someone like Gulnaz as a witness. He has a feeling that his tactic for putting paid to prying questions isn't going to wash with her. There's a tenacity there that he ought to be quashing but instead is rashly indulging. And the realisation troubles him. A complete stranger: a nurse of all things, and yet here she is, sat at his breakfast table, eager-eyed, full of nervous energy and driven by some imperative he can't begin to fathom.

Back at the table now, Daniel takes the stool beside her, placing the mugs down between them. Somehow he's managed to give her the one with the awful stain inside, the one with the cracked rim – and the dirty joke on the side.

“Try to think what your mother told you,” Gulnaz suggests. She sips her coffee and lays her other hand on his arm. “Like, do you know the date he died?”

The hand is quick to retreat from Daniel's rifle-shot laugh.

“Ha! Easy. Christmas Day, 1982. Twenty-four years to the day. His anniversary. It's the only reason I went there today.”

He clears his throat to mask the crack in his voice that has shot through the word ‘anniversary’. It confirms this to be everything he'd feared. This woman is breaking through. Like the dirty coffee mug – place a crack like that under stress and it's going to spread. And he fears it has finally arrived; that moment when he comes to pieces, when his life falls apart and he can no longer pull the bits back together. Or maybe it's nothing but a dry throat. He's just so, so fucking tired. His head throbs. More than anything, it's the numbness he needs now, that oblivion upon which he can always depend. Without a second thought, he tops up his coffee with a generous slug of scotch and knocks back half the mug.

“So,” Gulnaz says in a near whisper. “The grave you visit, it's your brother's.”

At first the words trigger no response. There's no upward inflection in her voice to suggest a question or prompt an answer.

“Then it's easy to see why you made a mistake. When you saw that man you were wrapped up in thinking about your poor brother. In the heat of the moment you saw in his face what was really just in your mind.”

The caffeine and alcohol are just kicking in when the image formed by her first remark congeals through a fog. A sight so long denied him, a little stone in a quiet corner of the churchyard bearing the words ‘Alex George, Aged 9’.

“Christ, no. That wasn't Alex's grave, it's my mother's. Alex hasn't got a grave. They never found his body.”

Never a body, only a glove – wasn't it? His glove and his coat. Up on the cliff walk. Or maybe that wasn't right. Didn't they fish them out of the water? How the hell is he supposed to know? He was just a kid. They'd always made a point of hiding the facts from him. If he could only recall something more, but to hell with it, over the years he's tried so many times. Just that one scene, and he's not even sure it's connected: the two of them there on the cliff top and the black and white hull of a rowing boat down on the shore.

But yes, the boat *was* white with a black boot line. The first time he's recalled it that clearly. Maybe it's why that memory so often connected with the magic set; the one with the white-tipped wand and the black top hat. Then always from there back to his mother's face. Invariably that face. And it's the face that brings him round to the photograph at the graveyard.

"No. No way." The girl is beginning to irk him now. It had nothing to do with being 'wrapped up in remembering his brother'. It had everything to do with that emaciated tramp having a photo of him in his hand. As Daniel pushes himself off the stool the table begins to sway. He concentrates on the doorway to the hall and weaves a slight S shape to retrieve his coat from the floor. Dropping it onto the kitchen table, he searches each pocket, feeling for the wrinkled paper. The picture was of his mother: small, frail, seated in the middle, Alex to her right with his head cocked in a gummy grin, and his father, standing proudly to her left, a little behind, smart in his uniform. It wasn't a good shot, poorly focused and off the vertical. No, not in his coat. In his trousers then. One hand steadies him as the other gropes each pocket until the hands are forced to swap. He's on his back pocket now and becoming desperate. Damn it. *Damn it!* No sign of the bloody thing. In his shock beneath the street lamp he must have dropped it. Or it had fallen out in the rush to get home. He so needs this evidence to prove – to himself as much as to her – that he isn't going crazy. Once again he picks through coat and trouser pockets, this time turning out the lining just to be sure. He's left standing ridiculous, like a boy during a chewing gum confiscation at school. But still no photograph.

Then he must describe it in detail to her and search out the copy that's somewhere in his flat. Gulnaz is reassuringly struck by what he tells her. It pleases him when she swears beneath her breath, retracts her earlier theory and waits obediently while he disappears into the next room. There's only one place he could possibly have seen the album: in one of the boxes of his mother's things at the back of his wardrobe.

He kicks through the floor of scattered clothes and yanks at the door. It squeals and judders on its sliders. After pushing aside the hangers of shirts and trousers he kneels down

and touches the three boxes. None of them is labelled, the contents have not been categorised; they were all packed in haste when his mother's house sale suddenly went through. The best of her belongings went to charity shops, second-hand markets and pawnbrokers. Much of what remained was only fit for burning or dumping; the rest he'd bundled into these boxes. When he moved into the flat he'd stuck them in the wardrobe as a temporary measure, and as so often happens with temporary measures, it became their permanent home.

He lifts out the first box, staggered to think that a decade has passed since its lid was sealed; eight years since he'd even touched the damned thing. The brittle Sellotape breaks without a fight. As he lifts the flaps, something grabs him by the throat and throws back his head. He simply hadn't been prepared for the smell. If anything carries the mind to another place, another time, it's smell. Musty, stale, but with it a femininity – a perfume, a wisp of her soul escaping captivity. Having to confront the contents of these boxes is about the last thing on earth he needs right now. But he has to have that photograph.

At the top of the pile he finds a stack of paperbacks, beneath these, a pair of embroidered lampshades, and lastly a chequered vinyl tablecloth. No joy there. In the second box there's a sewing kit, more books, her favourite handbag and...

Daniel winces. Cards. Stacks of them. God, why had he kept these? All those sanctimonious verses; '...In your moment of sorrow', the knowing fiction of 'Get well soon', the downright lie of 'Thinking of you'. It's too much, this ferreting through a dead woman's chattels. He'll need another drink before attacking the last of the boxes. The vodka bottle is still by the bed. No need of a glass.

With more abandon now, the final box is dragged out onto the carpet and ripped open. Again the smell has him gagging, but this time he does not hesitate. He knows at once he's about to find the album. This box is familiar – one he must have had reason to open a year or so ago. He remembers seeing the half-used writing pad, the pack of envelopes (hadn't he even taken a few and used them himself?) and the bright red address book. There's her fountain pen, now clogged with dried ink, a blotting pad, a half empty bottle of Quink. Lying beneath, and just visible through the scattered papers, is the unmistakable brown leather of a photo album. He can breathe again.

There's no need to empty the box entirely. The other items fall back inside as the album comes up in his hands; a couple of envelopes he has to brush away with his palm. As he shuffles towards an empty area of carpet on which to lay the book, a wad of loose prints slips out from between the leaves. Fewer than half of the pictures have been properly secured

beneath cellophane. The rest have spent all these years awaiting their turn.

He'd forgotten all of this. Quite when it was he's unsure, but perhaps four years, even five, after Alex's death, his mother had launched into the project of bringing all their photos together in one album. Holidays, weddings, Christmases, birthdays, friends, family – she'd even sent him to Boots to have their slides made into prints. She must have stuck with it for, what, nearly a month? By then she'd come out of the worst of her depression (or the pills had duped everyone into believing so) and so-called expert opinion had it that a project like this might be cathartic. Night after night she would sit in bed with the album opened in front of her, fountain pen and ink on the bedside table with her water and pills, and the photos on the blankets in three piles: the sorted, the partly-sorted and the yet-to-be-sorted. Sometimes she could be so quiet that Daniel would fear her having dropped off; visions of ink spilled over sheets, her bedclothes up in flames. But no, there she was as before, reading glasses perched on the end of her thin nose, cigarette to her lips, scrutinising a shot and either indexing it there and then or making notes on the back to help pin it down later. Daniel had begun to notice the change in her. It didn't curb the heavy smoking, but she was drinking less, sleeping more easily, eating a little and even very occasionally smiling. Only much later did he understand the truth – that the journey back into the most painful recesses of her mind was driving her towards another breakdown. He can't remember in detail, but there was that awful night...

“Everything alright in there?”

The sound of a woman's voice quite freaks him out. For a moment, it's his mother's voice he's hearing. He'd forgotten all about Gulnaz. He swigs the vodka and calls back to say the album is found and that he won't be long. In an attempt to force his mind back onto the job he closes the book and reopens it at the beginning.

“Why don't you bring the whole album through? It might help you remember.”

Even the first couple of pages reveal what an understatement that is. To start with, nothing but fifties and sixties snaps of his parents as children, his uncle and grandparents, but even these are already putting him in mind of home, the pride of place they had taken on sideboards and shelves. And over the page he finds his parents' wedding photo. He remembers it hanging framed on a wall in the lounge. He turns another page. Newborn babies. The caption, in his mum's wild, spidery hand, reads, ‘Alex and Daniel – August 1973 – Derriford’. The twins' very own point of arrival, captured on celluloid. As he lingers over the next few pages, all devoted to Alex's tragically short life, Daniel can't help wondering what became of that vital coexistence they so briefly shared – why only random relics of it remain

in memory. And gradually, as the turning pages narrate the story of their years in far away Devon, he comes to a chilling realisation. Those recurring memories of his infancy, the garden, the beach, the cliffs, they're all caught here on camera. His recollections may never have been of the events themselves, but only of these photographs, shots he'd have known as a teenager and would have seen again when he last had cause to open the box. God, had his childhood been *so* screwed up, the loss of his brother *so* devastating, that nothing had survived that was genuinely his own? It means he could be anyone. No-one. Just a blank page clutching on to other people's camera clicks, his past given meaning only by someone else's scribbled captions.

He's gazing now at a picture of his mother holding Alex by the hand. The two sets of dead eyes stare up from the album both to taunt and to haunt. In the photo beside it, his father and uncle are grinning beneath their berets before a waiting bus. His father stands tall, erect, to attention, suitcases lined up at his heels like obedient dogs. 'Richard and Martin – March?/April? 1982 – Thurlestone', says the caption. That fateful year. Daniel's eyes freeze over the shot and the image begins to swim. With a nervous hand he slowly lifts the page, convinced that the picture he seeks is waiting overleaf.

But the remaining page is blank. As is the next, and every page thereafter. And suddenly Daniel understands. The final goodbye to her husband and brother was the last piece of the jigsaw his mother had been able to put in place before herself disintegrating into a thousand pieces. Frantically he gathers up the remaining prints and flicks through them. But the crucial photo isn't there. So that's it. He's remembered it all wrong. It wasn't in this album that he'd seen it. Gulnaz will think him a liar. Or a fool. Perhaps he's both. With rising despair, he throws the album back into the box, lobbing the loose prints on top like leaves onto a bonfire. He forces down the lid and slides the box back into the wardrobe, then begins reclosing the others and stacking them up. At the last box he spots some envelopes that must have fallen in when he was lifting out the album. And with them, a stray print. Lying upside down, it might easily have been missed among the sympathy cards but for the distinctive blue writing on the corner: 'Richard, Alex and Rose – April 1982 – Devonport.'

And there is his picture, exactly as he'd recalled it, a shot identical to that held in the clutches of the unconscious man. It hadn't been in the album that Daniel had seen this photo before, but simply lying loose in the box with his mother's envelopes and writing things. Now Gulnaz will have to believe.

He hears, drifting in from the kitchen, a kind of gentle percussion that nobody has struck up in weeks. Gulnaz stands with her head turned from him as he reaches the doorway.

She has the sleeves of her sweater pushed up so that they mimic its roll-neck, one bare arm elbow-deep in dishwater, the other methodically stacking the drainer. When she becomes aware of him she turns from the sink and smiles.

“Just thought I’d make myself useful.”

She registers his look.

“I hope you don’t mind.”

“Please just leave that. I want you to look at this.”

A winning ace could barely strike a table with a more triumphant snap. Wiped of her smile, Gulnaz quickly rinses her hands, dries them on her jumper and hurries over. For a while she studies the picture, turns it over and holds it up to the light. Daniel watches her, baffled. It’s the very image that he’d described, surely that much was obvious.

“Well? You see?”

She can see, of course. But the authenticity of the picture is not her concern. “I’m not doubting you,” she assures him. “It’s just that there has to be some other explanation.”

“Yeah? Like what?”

“Well, not just coincidence, clearly.” She picks up the picture again. “Maybe your mum had a copy and gave it to a friend. The man at the cemetery was... the friend’s son?”

“Oh, come on. So why track down Mum’s grave after all this time? And you’re forgetting, that guy was my double.”

“But *was* he, really?”

Daniel’s look is answer enough.

“Okay, then he’s a distant cousin or something.”

A war of attrition is slowly developing. A bizarre parlour game.

“Nope. No other immediate family. My mother’s brother never married. My father’s brother did marry, but they never had any children. In our generation there was only ever me and Alex.”

Gulnaz gives in, only to advance on a new front.

“So, if they never found your brother’s body then why declare him dead? I mean, if no-one actually knows what happened. Say he didn’t die, then maybe that man tonight really was your brother. Daniel, I do think the album would help us.”

He so doesn’t need this: this stubborn stranger in his flat, these obsessions in his head, this cocktail of spirits in his blood. For a moment every muscle is unable to move. Anything but those boxes again. Gulnaz gives him a sympathetic look and checks her watch.

“I think you need food. You’ve put nothing down your throat but strong drink since

we arrived. It's already half-six. I've not eaten anything since lunch either. With your permission...?"

She opens the fridge door and squats down. "What do you have in here?" She talks as if addressing the fridge, but even the sorry answer from within fails to discourage her. "Okay, how about you bring the photo album and something to write with, and I'll fix us a snack with this lot."

Neither the fridge nor Daniel has the will to argue further. Daniel climbs off his stool in weary surrender. Until now it has only made him angry – the irreconcilable certainties of the man in the graveyard being his brother and of his brother being dead. It's the anger of a child who feels the world isn't playing fair. But, short of Alex having risen from the dead, one of those certainties clearly had to be wrong. If it weren't for Gulnaz, the unconscious man's identity would have been the only contender. When the last two and a half decades of your life have been shaped by one central tragedy, a tragedy so terrible that it has destroyed everything you hold dear, and a tragedy accepted as fact by family, neighbours, the media, even the authorities, then it's not a tragedy to be questioned lightly. Yet Gulnaz is asking exactly that: what if Alex hadn't actually died?

If Alex hadn't actually died then the implications were beyond imagining.

As she clears the table and lays a spread of turkey roll, ham, sliced bread, pickles and tomatoes, Daniel returns reluctantly to his room and pulls out the boxes once more. The course of their long evening together is now set; perched side by side at the kitchen table, picking at their food and poring over each image in turn, Daniel declaring every few minutes that none of this can possibly be happening, that there is no way he can get his head around the thought that Alex might still be alive. Anything of any relevance is jotted down, until the account they've been seeking is finally mapped out across four pages of notes.

Christmas Day, 1982. Their mother is taking the two boys on an afternoon walk along the coastal path near their home. Definitely not before lunch, as she would have been too busy preparing food. Alex has raced ahead, spurred on by the sight of a boat down in the water – nothing in the album supports this, but it's the recurring scene that with each telling grows more vivid – and Daniel has chased after, equally excited, but also anxious for Alex's safety. With much of the rock face at Thurlestone falling vertically to the sea, some stretches of the shore can only be seen from the very edge of the path. But the grassy cliff tops overhang the sheer drop. Several photographs taken from the beach show these lethal cliffs in the background. By the time their mother has caught up, Alex is nowhere to be found. Daniel sees her crouch down, lean forward over the precipice and retrieve a single glove from the

crumbling rocks; a little detective work here, drawing together two distinct mental images. The local coastguard is scrambled, a thorough search made of the waters, but nothing is found of him but his coat. As the minutes become hours, all hopes of finding his brother alive begin to fade, and by nightfall the search is suspended. Though it resumes at first light, nobody really believes there is still a chance, and before the week is out Alex has been formally declared dead – presumed killed on the rocks and carried away by the tidal currents (buried at sea was all his mother would ever say).

No photographs offer testimony to this moment or beyond, but Daniel does remember a little of the aftermath; the reporter who came round, Alex's face in the paper, the headmaster's speech at assembly, the awful teasing and exclusion that followed. Somehow they had come through those dreadful, dark months, Daniel managing to bury all but the most fleeting memories. But here are those disparate fragments once again, freshly raked over, edited together now for the first time into a narrative. Incredibly freeing, in one sense. And to have done all this before a witness. But the lifting of one great weight only serves to burden him with another.

"Then where the hell has Alex been all this time? And why didn't he let us know he was alive?"

She won't get it, of course. Gulnaz can't possibly imagine the misery it had put them through, all those years with nothing but a letter declaring, 'Missing, presumed dead'; no death certificate, no body over which to grieve, never quite accepting, never quite losing hope.

She shrugs. "Maybe he's only just found you. Maybe he's been away, out of touch."

*Out of touch*, she says. He's been that, alright. "It just doesn't make sense, him being at the cemetery like that. And this photo." Daniel rounds on her. "So, come on, you're the nurse. What exactly was wrong with him? Why was he unconscious? Had someone attacked him? Or maybe he'd just fainted at the sight of mum's grave – waking him up to the fact that he'd left it a bit bloody late to come breezing home."

If Gulnaz feels she is being tested then she chooses to let it go. "I was just wondering the same," she says. "The scratch on his head seemed fairly minor, but I think he'd also received a blow to the face, perhaps enough to knock him out. But it could have been something else altogether: a heart attack. Or a stroke." For a moment she seems lost in the backwaters of her training, then suddenly she faces him.

"I'm sorry, Daniel. This must all be so hard for you." Again she touches his arm, less tenaciously this time, more the action of a child drawn by a 'Do Not Touch' sign. "I hope

you're okay with all this."

Daniel says nothing but shifts his arm. He fears she's reaching a diagnosis that he won't want to hear. But it turns out her thinking has moved on.

"Is it possible perhaps, when he disappeared, that Alex didn't fall here –" she covers the awkwardness of their broken touch by turning the pages back to the views of the beach and circling the stretch of sheer cliff with a finger, "– but here?"

The finger picks out the edge of one shot where an extrusion of harder rock winds its way steeply though not vertically from the coast path down into the water. To Daniel's mind her question is irrelevant, the exact location a petty detail in relation to everything else.

"This boat you mentioned," she persists. "Say he wasn't just trying to get a closer look, but was actually trying to reach it. Surely he wouldn't have tried climbing down a sheer drop; he'd have chosen somewhere easier. So, if he slipped and fell on *those* rocks he might not have been killed, only knocked about. People who've had a blow to the head can lose their memories, sometimes for years. They wake up one morning with their wife at their side and suddenly remember that they're not called John, that they're already married and have a bereaved family hundreds of miles away."

Enough is enough.

"I've already told you. They scoured every inch of the beach for days. You think they wouldn't have found some concussed nine-year-old wandering about?"

"Could someone else have found him first, taken him in?"

"For God's sake, it was in all the papers. And on TV. They'd have known immediately who he was."

He's begun to find the whole thing quite ridiculous. Gulnaz falls silent. Then she looks at him.

"I'm only trying to help, you know. Could he have run away?"

He groans. She's so off beam. Alex, run away! Strong, athletic, popular, apple-of-his-father's-eye Alex? The fuck he would. But Gulnaz isn't waiting for his answer.

"No, I suppose they'd still have found him soon enough. As you say, a nine-year-old isn't going to get far."

There is no point in this. Daniel wants it to stop. So far she's come up with nothing to challenge the official line. More worryingly, he's already imagined another possibility, something so dreadful that it must stay unsaid at all costs. His fear now is that she might voice it. The bleak look he throws her is by way of a warning. Gulnaz reaches carefully for her glass of water; Daniel reciprocates with the last of the Stellas. But he knows she is about

to embrace the darkness.

She whispers, "I think maybe he was abducted."

A pressure valve fails suddenly in Daniel's head.

"Don't say that! Don't you *ever* fucking say that!"

Outwardly, the torrent is stemmed right there, but inside the anger surges over the floodgates unchecked. How fucking *dare* she. She's known him barely ten minutes, bullies her way into his home, starts organising his life and then has the gall to come out with something like that. Alex, his own flesh and blood, kidnapped and, and, what, abused? Raped? Held captive for over two decades? She's sick! He's not having that. Any of it. Twenty-four years he's lived under the shadow of his brother's death. Twenty-four years that made his school days a living, fucking hell, hijacked his education, slowly killed his mother and is all but killing him. And, what, so it had all been for nothing? So they were all wrong. All of them, the papers, the TV, everyone. Alex had simply met up with some paedophile who'd been grooming him for sex all this time. Maybe they'd had a lover's tiff, maybe the pervert had died of AIDS, whatever, so Alex decides he might as well just come strolling back home to be with Mummy and twin brother.

"I'm sorry Daniel, I'm sorry!" Her lower lip is quivering as she stands to get her coat. "I'm not helping here. And it's late."

"No, wait." He's taken aback at the level of upset in her face.

For the first time Daniel puts his hand on her arm. He pulls it gently towards the table to sit her back down, then sticks out his elbows and sinks into his hands.

"I'm sorry. Look, you are helping. Really. It's just all been too much. Can we... Can we just let the subject drop for a while?"

And so an uneasy quiet falls over the room. Somewhere along the way a line was drawn that Gulnaz has unwittingly crossed. And in many ways so has he. Whatever need she had to stay and help him through this, it didn't extend to being directly insulted. There seems to be nothing more to say. He eats, she does not. Then conversation tentatively resumes, an unspoken pact between them to fill in with talk of ordinary things. He notices how carefully she puts her questions – about his work, his flat, his friends – and when she's sure these are not overstepping the mark she ventures a little about herself, describing how she works as an agency nurse. It could mean a week in A&E covering for holidays or sick-leave, a few days seconded to a GP's surgery or, as currently, longer stretches helping out in a care home. And it's after this that she becomes a little bolder and tells him how she'd gone to the churchyard straight from work and had seen him standing on the path, hugging himself to ward off the

cold. He learns that she'd passed by, wished him a merry Christmas so tentatively that he'd failed to notice and had then heard his shouts, watched him hurry into the shadows and drag something through the undergrowth. Of course she'd then seen the figure on the ground behind him.

They talk together for the best part of three hours.

When she discovers it is after midnight and says she has to get home Daniel goes into something of a panic. Not because he's been expecting her to stay, but because a whole lot of things have now settled in his mind that still need expressing.

"I'm going to go in tomorrow and see him," he stammers, as she moves to collect her coat for a second time.

"That's good, Daniel. You should go." Her approval sounds more dutiful than heartfelt.

"Okay, look," he sighs, "I think you might have been right. About, you know, the abduction thing – and maybe the amnesia. I mean, why else wouldn't he have made contact? But..." He so hates being in someone else's pocket. "...But, you'll come with me, won't you? I mean you know about hospitals and all that. They might not let me see him otherwise."

She considers for a moment. He has the awful feeling she's about to say no. He couldn't bear that, the thought of going there alone. But then she nods and says, "Ring them first. Explain who you are and that you think you might be family. No doubt they'll be anxious to know the man's identity, if he hasn't already been discharged."

There remains that awful distance in her eyes.

"If in the morning you still want me there, then call me and I'll come with you. I'll wait in till ten. But I would need a lift."

Without waiting for his response, she scribbles down her number and heads for the hall. He suddenly needs to hug her, or something. His emotions are all in a spin. Say something, Daniel, a voice urges him. Say *something*.

"Have you got far to go?"

"My bike's padlocked to the railings outside the church. I'll be okay."

"I can walk with you."

"Really, I'm fine. You should go to bed."

He's losing her. But only for tonight. Tomorrow is arranged.

"Gullnazz..."

The makings of a smile touch the corners of her mouth.

"...Er, you know. Thanks for helping out. For the food, and that."

He's not good at this. It doesn't come over casually enough. He begins to busy himself collecting the plates. Then he sees her mug.

“Oh, shit. You never drank your coffee. Look, sorry about that. I never meant you to have the cracked one with that filthy joke on it. You must think I'm a bit of a prat.”

She stops at the door and walks slowly back towards him, takes his hand and gives him a peck on the cheek.

“The mug was fine. And I don't think you're a prat. It's just that I don't take sugar in coffee.”

## Prentice

Dawn fails to wake him at seven thirty. The bells of St Bart's strike eight, then nine, also to no effect. The cat is likewise defeated at nine fifteen. Only his bladder finally makes it through, by sidestepping ears and eyes that are dead to the world and heading straight for his pain receptors.

Daniel staggers naked from his bedroom across the kitchen floor, garnering cat fur and crumbs with his toes as he goes. Neither the photo album on the table nor the clean dishes on the drainer succeed in alerting him. Some kind of an alarm is raised by a line of crushed Stellas, a drained Johnny Walker and a well thumbed Smirnoff, but only to remind him of his mother of all hangovers. He wavers dangerously over the toilet as he pees, using the sonar of water-into-water as his guide – the stream itself vanishing into a mist before reaching the pan. There's a moment when he knows he's about to be sick. But the heat flush, salivation and pounding chest leave as suddenly as they'd arrived. He shakes himself and pulls the chain. Danger over, for now.

As his feet slap the vinyl for a second time Daniel becomes aware that something is different about the kitchen and he stops. Scoff wastes no time in badgering again; flagpole-tailed, Morris-Dancing through his legs in a figure of eight, purring like a road drill. Jesus, he must have hit the drink last night. What day is it? Does he have to go to work today? There *is* something he has to do. But surely it's Boxing Day. Isn't it?

So what happened Christmas Day?

Daniel is suffering: a jangling head and a condition he calls Morning Mouth. Morning Mouth is like having gargled puréed Bombay Duck. Still naked, he flicks up the switch on the kettle and attacks the Kenco. Whatever went on last night, whatever it was he was supposed to do, it couldn't be more urgent than drinking strong coffee.

And it's the coffee, or rather the smell of coffee, that does it. In the space of a second he sees it all: the cemetery, the man on the ground, the ambulance crew, the photograph, the boxes, and of course he sees the girl. 'I think maybe he was abducted,' she repeats in his head. It takes a moment to be sure this wasn't just some awful drunken nightmare he'd been having, one of those recurring dreams where Alex is an ambiguous presence – just out of sight, not really quite there, alive and yet dead, an adult but still a child. But no dream could have prepared him for the bombshell of realising now that his brother might indeed be alive, languishing right now in the local hospital. He decides he might be sick after all.

Surely not. Surely. There must have been some mistake. Just because some deranged halfwit got done over in the churchyard, a guy who maybe looked a bit like Daniel on a bad

day, it didn't mean he had to go spinning off into this spiral of assumptions, or let himself be egged on by that drama queen who'd followed him home. He must have been out of his mind last night. And yet, the more they'd dug into the past, the more they'd picked through that album, the more plausible and real it had all become.

And on top of all that, of course there was the photograph.

So maybe it was true. Alex really had survived the accident, and has been living a life somewhere all these years. And chosen now of all times to drop back unannounced into his world.

Daniel sinks to his knees before the kitchen drainer. All those years ago, that family tragedy had torn through and shattered their lives. But it had long since been consigned to history. He runs a finger through the dust. So unfair. It should be dead and buried, water under the bridge. His brother's death was supposed to be the one thing that gave meaning to everything that came after. He swivels round and rests his back up against the base unit. What point was there in having suffered that childhood, in having witnessed his mother's slow death, having lived an adult life stripped of a very part of himself, if in fact Alex had survived the fall? What value in all that pain, if Alex could have ended it with a simple phone call letting them know he was alive? And yet, surely Daniel's greatest wish has always been to rejoin his lost twin, to have the two halves once more made whole. So why this numbness? Why this inability to feel? He finds that he's scribed two stick men hand in hand in the dirt.

'I'll wait in till ten.' Her voice again. All of a sudden, coffee is not the most important thing. The most important thing is to find a timepiece in the flat that works. He's on his feet now and swearing. For months he's been meaning to fit the alarm clock with a new battery – and to buy a new watchstrap, once he's remembered where he last saw his watch. He tears through each room. In the end, it's the radio that comes to the rescue. 'Pip-pip-pip-pip-PEEP. BBC news at ten o'clock. The Iraqi appeals court will announce today...'

The phone is nearly pulled from the wall. But there's no way he can dial. Bloody brain – what the hell was her name?? Where had she written her details? In the fog of panic the idea plants itself that by clutching onto the receiver he can somehow stall her from leaving home, at least until his memory kicks in. Think, think, think. His head is thumping. They were having supper and looking through the album and came up with a theory to account for Alex's reappearance. Then... then... she promised to come with him to the hospital if he rang her. It couldn't be, surely, that neither of them had thought to swap numbers. The room spins. He's definitely going to be sick. Then she went home and he went to bed. Except that he didn't. No. He went back to the scotch and the vodka and back to the boxes and got more

and more depressed leafing through that album and all those wretched photos.

The wire doesn't reach the kitchen table. As if hoping she won't notice, he gently replaces the receiver and steals across the room. He spots the pad at once, but not immediately her writing in the corner. It's a relief when he does to see not only the number but her name as well. It's *Gulnaz*, of course. And the number's a mobile – no problem if she's already left home. He rips the corner off the sheet and picks up the phone again.

'Ring the hospital first. Explain who you are and that you think you might be family,' the voice in his head reminds him. But should he waste time doing as she says and risk missing her, or phone her first, only to be told later by the hospital that the visit isn't possible? It must be ten fifteen already. While his head dithers his hands are already dialling directory enquiries and being put through. A disjointed voice informs him that he is number – 'twenty' – in the queue, before blasting his ears with Slade. The NHS, adding insult to injury. Well, no, actually he isn't 'having fun' and perhaps to 'look to the future' is an arse-stupid suggestion to give out to people who are phoning hospitals. But at least the bureaucracy gives him a pretext for not having called Gulnaz sooner. Well before advancing to number – 'nineteen' – he is dialling her number and listening for the ring tone.

"You have reached the 02 voice mail service for..."

The preamble feels interminable. At the tone, Daniel begins to babble down the phone. He's been up all morning trying to get through to the hospital. Idiots keep putting him on hold or cutting him off. He's phoning her now in order not to miss her. Hopes she got home safely. Would she *please* phone him back the moment she gets this message.

He quite forgets to leave a number.

The moment he replaces the receiver it occurs to him how much there is still to do before he can leave. He desperately needs a shower, but no time for that now. A wash and a shave will have to do. And breakfast – coffee! Something, anything, to settle his stomach and silence this throbbing head. Priorities: coffee, Paracetamol, food, wash, shave, dress, teeth. And it is half way through 'shave' that the phone rings. The razor nicks his top lip.

Gulnaz's voice is cool and neutral. Whether she is pleased to speak to him again or not isn't clear. He wants to reach down the wire and touch her, to reconnect with the intimacy of last night. She has left home, but only to buy a paper, and can be ready in ten minutes. She gives instructions on where to meet, clearly unwilling to reveal her address, only a street corner where she'll be waiting. Afterwards, he wishes he'd put the time back another ten minutes, but promises made, he scoops out the shaving cream from the ear piece and downs the phone.

Ten minutes. Five to get there, three to get the car out, leaving two to finish shaving and throw on some clothes. No problem.

As it turns out, the ten minutes is used up twice over even before leaving the flat. Little things add their toll; wrongly buttoned up shirt: one minute. Mislaid keys: three minutes. Scoff's insistence on being fed: three minutes. Nuisance phone call touting the wondrous economies of double-glazing: four minutes. Over-hasty tying of shoelaces: two minutes. A cold, neglected car engine adds another five. By the time he thunders round the corner into her street Daniel is over twenty minutes late. But when she sees him she smiles and waves. The excuse he's had at the ready proves redundant. As she opens the door he tries his best to maintain a matter-of-fact tone.

"All right?"

"Hello Daniel," she says, gently.

At the sound of her voice, the wave of urgency that had swept him along dies utterly. So, the frenzy had not been to get to the hospital, only to be sure of her company. Her legs arrive first. Mid-length skirt over dark tights. Nice. Then her hips and woolly jumper. She faces him now, hair tied back and a little colour added to eyes and lips. He tells her she looks good.

"And you look tired," she replies.

"I'm alright. Late night – a lot on my mind. Just give us a moment."

"Of course."

Never mind a frenzy to get to the hospital; he knows he's stalling now from making the visit at all.

"Gullnazz, maybe it's better if we... No, never mind. Appreciate you coming."

"That's okay." She grins. "And it's *Gulnaz*. With a long A. Or I may just have to start calling you Danny. Say it right for a week and you might even get to call me Guli."

"Oh, yeah. I'll try."

He hadn't anticipated her frivolous mood.

They set off through the ominously quiet streets, past rows of houses besieged by flashing reindeer and dancing lights. Daniel fumbles among some papers in the tray of his door for some gum. Old Morning Mouth is back. Two or three of the pellets he pops into his mouth straight from the wrapper in a single thumb gesture, not unlike flicking a cigarette lighter. He offers her the pack, but Gulnaz declines.

It's all rather weird. They're behaving like a married couple. He's unsure how he feels about that.

“So, is it an Indian name or something?” He chews furiously, all too conscious of his uncleaned teeth and the lingering stink of booze.

“Gulnaz? No, Persian. I’m Iranian.”

“Iran!” Daniel frisks her up and down with his eyes. “A Muslim. Okay! Tell you what, the moment we get Alex out of there, you go right ahead and blow that disease-infested monstrosity of a hospital to kingdom-come.”

“Stop the car. If you’re determined to be offensive, you can drop me here and go on your own.”

For once she makes no attempt at eye contact.

“Whoa, whoa, sorry. Only a joke.”

So, Gulnaz has a temper on her. A raw nerve. His turn to cross a line. He’d better watch himself. They’re not a couple yet.

“I don’t appreciate jokes like that. There’s much I could tell you about my life. But somehow I doubt you’d be interested.” She sounds bitter. “But you might like to know that not all Muslims are terrorists, and not all Iranians are Muslims. If you must know, I’m Christian. My father converted. His family were Kurdish.”

“Right, gotcha.” Daniel gives her a suitably punished look. It’s back to the uneasy standoff of the night before. Both fix their sights on the road ahead. He can sense her pain, but is only confused by it. He eases the tension by turning on the radio and taking more gum. When Gulnaz speaks, she has that dutiful voice again.

“I take it you never got through to the Mountjoy.”

“Nah. Waste of bloody space.”

Already she has her mobile open and is waiting for a dialling tone. What number in the queue will she be, he wonders, reaching over to switch off the radio. The town is probably awash by now with anxious callers, hanging onto a lifeline that feeds them nothing but Christmas tunes and pre-recorded assurances that their health is their number one priority. Hearts, lungs and livers all packing up from Yuletide excess as the countdown brings them ever closer to a human being, only to be tantalised by the number – ‘one’ – before being mercilessly disconnected. But to his astonishment, Gulnaz is speaking to a real person already. She’s managed to find out which ward Alex is on. Daniel takes his eye off the road and studies her. She is waiting to hear of his condition. Visiting hours? Ah, they must have asked whether she’s family. An oncoming car toots its horn. Daniel corrects his position and presents two fingers. She’s telling them about Daniel. His hands are becoming sweaty and slipping on the wheel. They clearly haven’t yet established their patient’s identity and yes, as

she'd guessed, they are most interested. The car is heading towards the ring-road now and everything is happening too fast. Gulnaz's account of the night before sounds too clinical for all this. In all honesty, he's not sure he can actually see himself setting foot...

Daniel yanks the car over and pulls up at the roadside. He simply can't do it. He's bottled out. Not that hospital again. No way.

Gulnaz hastily ends the call. "What's happened?"

"Bugger it. I'm just too freaked by all this."

He is careful to look only at his hands.

"I know this must be hell for you," she says, after a tactful silence. "Why don't we just sit for a minute?"

"The thing is," she continues at last, "I know you've a million and one questions to ask this man, but please don't get your hopes up too high. Apparently he hasn't regained consciousness yet. They might let you be with him for a short time, but there won't be much to see."

Daniel rubs his face. "It's not just that, it's... Nothing. Doesn't matter."

She returns an understanding look. "They do want to talk to you though. They're considering a DNA test to determine whether you two really are related."

No, no, no. If the doctors think they can let themselves loose on *his* body then they can think again – needles the size of skewers gouging their way into his flesh to suck up their forensic secrets. Some TV reality programme or other flashes before his eyes, of a woman's midriff being routed by a suction pipe and splattering down a tube into a vessel of mango and blackcurrant smoothie. But then again, it's vital to know one way or the other about Alex, so that he can get back to normal and move on, or...

Or what, exactly? For the first time he wonders what he might do if the unimaginable proved to be true. The amazing George twins, reunited after so many years of separation. The human interest angle; their identical gormless faces peering out from the centrefold of some local daily. Another twenty-four years on, would they be walking the streets together in identical clothing, same hairstyles, living like spouses – a middle-aged Tweedle Dum and Tweedle Dee? The brothers grim? Or after a brief spell of forced nostalgia might they simply drift apart, each as good as dead as far as the other is concerned, like nothing had ever brought them back together?

But to take his DNA. He searches her face anxiously. "What would they do exactly?"

"Don't be a wuss," she mocks. "It's just a swab, like a lolly stick. They scrape it gently across the inside of your cheek. Nothing to worry about."

Oh that. He's seen them do that on 'Silent Witness'. That he could just about handle. Forgetting to signal, he pulls back into the road and steps on the accelerator.

A sign to the hospital directs them off to the right, just beyond the next junction. They're getting close. Signposts dominate the roadsides now. Arrows to the left, arrows to the right, arrows pointing up at the sky. So many entrances to so many departments, it all depends on who you are and where's your pain. Accident and Emergency... Out-patients... In-patients... Paediatrics. Radiology.

A tremor has hijacked his left leg and Daniel's hands are wet again as he pulls up at the lights. His foot all but slips off the clutch. He throws the car into neutral, tugs at the handbrake and rubs his palms on his jeans.

"You really do hate hospitals, don't you?" Gulnaz says.

He begins to shake more visibly. Of course he hates hospitals. It stands to reason. What is there not to hate about hospitals? Already he can smell the disinfectant and the urine, hear the squeal of trolleys along corridors, see those sick people with their germs, bewildered families mooching about like zombies, the patronising smiles of doctors.

She chews on her lip. "Your mother?"

"Yep. Her last twelve months. Ward 10a."

"Here, at the Mountjoy?" Gulnaz looks genuinely shocked.

He nods.

"Right, I see. For some reason I'd imagined you only moved to the area after she died."

"God, no. The only point of leaving Devon was for Mum to be near family – mainly her mother, but also her brother. Some use he turned out to be, the tosser."

"So you're originally from round here?"

"Not me. My parents. Dad and my uncle were old schoolmates. That's how Dad met Mum. Then him and my uncle went to Devon together as Navy cadets. Mum followed later when they got engaged."

"But you say you came up here to be near your uncle, so he'd already moved back by then?"

"Yeah, got discharged from the Navy and came home."

He gives a motorcyclist both barrels with the horn for attempting a right turn without a proper hand signal, then smiles benignly at Gulnaz and falls back into his seat.

"We've still plenty of time," she says. He knows she really means he should bloody well calm down and stop driving like an arse. Her fault for dwelling on such prickly topics. But apparently she still hasn't learnt.

“What actually happened with your mother?”

Ah, the very question he'd been braced for last night. It's as well she waited. He can just about go there with her now.

“1982 was our first Christmas without Dad.”

“He was away at sea?”

“Hang on –.” The lights have turned green. Manoeuvring into a right-hand lane and negotiating a turning across oncoming traffic with a hangover is challenge enough, without having to recount a childhood sob story at the same time.

The junction safely behind them, he says, “And after Alex's fall she had a kind of nervous breakdown. I was too young really to know what was going on.”

They're heading down the final stretch to the hospital now. Even the road seems to foreshadow the approaching wards. Houses line up on either side like patients in their beds, each guttered with drips and tubes, little garages for their side tables, weed gardens for blankets, fences for bed rails. Every one of them looks terminal; condemned. Their darkened windows stare out in despair, unlaced and stripped of hope. The efforts made by a few to maintain some dignity feel purely token. Feeble applications of makeup, a cursory neatness of dress. A futile staving off of demolition.

“As Mum got worse, my stupid uncle Martin decided I should be sent to live with my gran for a while. I think because she had quite a bit of money – Mum's side of the family was more posh than Dad's. But then Gran became ill and eventually had to go into care, which pretty much wiped out her savings. My uncle wasn't going to have me, so I was duly packed off back home. By then, Mum was pumped full of pills. She'd been getting home-help, meals on wheels, that sort of thing. Most of it useless. Having me back there just made things worse. We couldn't remotely cope, so a few months after that my uncle had us both shipped back up here. You see, moved round and round, like some bloody pawn on a chessboard, as and when it suited others.”

Half way along the street now, the houses are all boarded up. These are the patients who've sunk beyond remedial care, whose eyes are bandaged shut, left to face death in darkness and in silence. And beyond them: the end of the road. Nothing but vacated beds of earth.

“Gran's place was sitting empty, and we just kind of moved in. My uncle was supposed to take charge of my schooling and things. The fuck he did. The Navy had really messed him up. And he was a shit anyway. Once Mum had gone a bit doollaly he didn't want to know us.”

As they turn and climb towards the brow of the hill, the hospital fortress begins to rise from behind the rooftops of new-builds, a gaol of Victorian brick and glass that holds the whole estate in its grip. He can just picture the residents' paranoia; all those young professionals paying their dues for painless, healthy living, for eternal youth, forever staring in the mirror, checking their pulses, reading the scales, watching their backs, lest the finger of fate should single them out and imprison them behind one of those thousand windows. Life's lottery. 'It could be you!'

"Second left," Gulnaz tells him.

"I know where I'm going."

Didn't he just? How many bus journeys had he taken along this route? Over a decade later he can still picture every detail. Cross the mini roundabout ahead, past A&E, ignore the first bus stop, alight at the second by the main entrance and head diagonally towards the dreaded sign. The one that reads 'Oncology'.

"No, I mean, they told me Blue Zone, Car Park F. The main car park is closed for improvements."

Closed it may be. Improvements, Daniel very much doubts. As the temporary road signs pull them off the perimeter road and around the side of the hospital, whole areas are indeed cordoned off by wire fencing, peppered with work huts and squares of cauterised tarmac, if not with any actual workmen. Beyond the car park, an entire wall of the building stands loosely draped in tarpaulin, the mark of yet more decay, of hopeless patching; a house of the sick which has itself become fatally afflicted.

Gulnaz is talking again. "So what happened after that?"

"Uh? Oh, don't ask. I did what I could. You know."

They slot the car in between a badly parked motorbike and a BMW. Daniel switches off the engine and sits motionless, staring ahead at the cancer-riddled edifice and the bandages that flap around its gaping wound. He laughs dryly. "Maybe she just died of a broken heart."

To be sure it ends there, he shovels up a fistful of coins from the glove box and skulks off to the nearest pay station, staring for a moment at the scale of charges before feeding in the money. Coin after coin after coin. Eventually the machine capitulates, coughs up its thankyou and lets him go.

"They'd rob the sodding shirt off a dying man's back round here," he growls, slapping the ticket onto the windscreen.

Gulnaz laughs. "Only to charge it back to him later – as a surgical dressing!"

"Yeah, too right. Come on." Her humour has briefly emboldened him. "Let's get this

bloody thing over with.”

They cross the car park to the entrance of glass and steel: an unfamiliar new wing. Inside, the queue from reception snakes around almost to the door. Daniel’s heart is thumping so loudly by the time their turn comes that he’s certain they’ll take one look at him and rush him straight through for cardiac surgery. But no, the receptionist doesn’t even look up when she speaks. What name? Daniel George. Nobody brought in with that name. No, *his* name is Daniel George: the patient is called Alex. No Alex listed either. No, obviously, that’s why he’s here – to make formal identification. Is he family? Well how can he know that until he’s done the identification? And isn’t there to be a blood test? Or a cheek test?

Not according to her records.

“Look, what’s your problem? We’ve already bloody well phoned...”

At last, she actually confronts him.

“If you continue in that manner, young man, I shall have security remove you from the building. You’ll have to wait over there until you’re called.”

Before he can argue further, the crowd behind has sensed movement and edged them aside. The receptionist is already busy with the next in line, and he and Gulnaz are left with nothing but the two plastic chairs in the far corner to which they’ve been assigned.

The minutes tick by. Hospital orderlies wander around like extras on a film set, heads down to avoid the faces of anxious first-timers. In all, four doctors in white coats stop to exchange words with the receptionist (regardless of whether Joe Public is midway through a sentence). Each time, Daniel holds his breath, convinced that he’s about to be called through to the wards. His head screams with the thousand and one questions he has lined up for Alex. But only paperwork is handed over, a laugh shared and the white coats lost again among the crowds. Anyone would think that they’re doing it deliberately – testing Daniel’s patience; his nerves are racking up. After thirty minutes he gives in and marches over to the desk, forcing himself back into the line. As the crowd turns on him, an ugly scene is averted only thanks to the timely arrival of yet another white coat – one that sidesteps reception altogether and walks straight towards Gulnaz. Daniel can only watch the pair of them in growing amazement, Gulnaz preening herself and making cow eyes; the doctor all over her. So, not out of concern for Daniel then that she’d agreed to come today; not out of respect that she’d smartened herself up. Just a chance to advance some cheap, work-based romance. She’s pointing Daniel out now and gesturing him back. The doctor scans the faces in the queue with a predictably disinterested smile. Despite himself, Daniel is forced to return a half-hearted wave.

“So you’re the mystery brother,” croons the doctor, once Daniel has re-joined them.

“We’re ready for you now, if you’d like to come this way.”

Once again, Daniel’s chest is pounding and sweat welling in his palms. Gulnaz squeezes his arm and tells him, “You go with Doctor Prentice. He’ll look after you. One of this hospital’s finest.” The sickly smile that flashes between them does nothing to lower Daniel’s blood pressure.

The doctor leads him away from reception and stops at the corridor for them both to cleanse their hands. “I’m afraid your brother rather has us baffled,” he confesses. “He does appear to have led something of a tough life. He’s had a nasty blow to the side of the face, which could have caused the coma. Brain shake – we’re conducting some tests. There are a number of older injuries too. He’s also very underweight and in need of a good dose of TLC.”

“Is that a drug?”

The doctor chuckles. “Kind of. Tender Loving Care.”

To Daniel it sounds like a personal swipe. “He fell against the gravestone when I found him, knocked his head. But he was already unconscious before that.”

“Ah no, I’m not referring to the little scratch on his forehead. That’s only superficial. But of course the coma could be any one of a number of things. Is there any history you know of?”

“History?”

“Diabetes, epilepsy, migraines, severe narcolepsy, anything like that?”

“Whoa, I’m just here to confirm who he is, not to tell you what’s wrong with him.”

The doctor looks startled. “Sure, sure. So, when did you last see your brother?”

“1982. On the day everyone thought he’d died.”

Not quite the answer the doctor was expecting, perhaps, but Daniel isn’t inclined to make this any easier for him. Let him do the job he’s paid for. Going through the whole story again is too much like hard work. He’s a wreck. His head is pounding. The cut on his top lip stings. This place is raising every phobia he’s ever had. The corridor down which they’re walking may be new to him, but the smells and sounds are the old ones, doorways every few steps of the way opening out into wards that are only too familiar. The stark spectacle repeats itself over and over; identical equipment separating identical beds, attended by identical nurses, crammed with identical patients. The same sterile, cold, anonymous NHS production line. Somewhere along this route the doctor is going to stop and take him through to one of these wards and stand him beside an identical twin. A truly surreal moment, like a foretaste of his own last chapter.

But Prentice keeps him moving, beyond the clatter of tiled flooring through more swing doors to the soft tread of carpet.

Daniel eyes him suspiciously. “So where is he?”

“Along here. It’s a brand new wing,” Prentice says, as proudly as if he’d personally funded the build. Something about the way the corridor divides and slopes gently upwards begins to ring bells.

“But I’ve been here before, surely?”

The doctor feigns interest. “You’ve visited us before?”

“Not for several years.”

“Ah, well, the refurbishment is new, but the building itself isn’t. I believe this was the way to the old cancer wing.”

Daniel nods grimly. “That’ll be why.”

An approaching plaque overhead insists on ‘Authorised Persons Only’. Daniel’s apprehension deepens. So, a standard ward isn’t good enough for Alex? They take a left, following a sign that only alarms him further. The three initials, I – C – U. Next thing he knows, he’s being ushered into a small private room, just one bed, a single window and a mass of budget-crippling equipment. Like groupies around a superstar, the tubes and bottles, monitors and wires gravitate towards the figure who lies there, all donned in white; the man who may or may not be Alex. The ends of those tubes disappear into plasters on his flesh or directly up his nose.

“What in Christ’s name? Is he dying?”

“Goodness me no, Mr... er.” Prentice checks his clipboard. “Mr George. It looks a lot more drastic than it is. His breathing was very erratic when he was brought in, so we put him on a ventilator for a time, but this has now stabilised. This machine isn’t even being used. But because he remains unconscious and dehydrated, we still need to monitor his vital signs and get fluids into him. He’s poorly, for sure, but in no immediate danger, as far as we can tell.”

As far as we can tell. The cunning disclaimer. Everything is fine, but if your nearest and dearest drops dead in two minutes you can forget about suing. The time has come to approach the bedside, to make formal identification. In Daniel’s ears the thunder of his own breathing builds to a roar. He feels weightless, like an astronaut aboard some futuristic spacecraft, approaching a crewmember in suspended animation. There’s a good chance he might faint. He peers over the face, deep into the folds of skin, the details around eye sockets, lips and nose. When he’d scanned that same face last night it was an emaciated doppelganger that had stared back. But was Gulnaz right in saying that his mind had been overloaded with

suggestion – the anniversary, his mother’s grave, the photograph? Last time there had been no trace of doubt in his mind. Now, with the face scrubbed up, the hair plastered back behind a skull cap, the vile plastic tubes connecting him to all the technology, and with the benefit of sober impartiality, in all honesty Daniel can’t be sure. The features refuse to connect with each other. Individually, yes, they’re like his. No question. But when Daniel encounters his own face in the mirror he doesn’t go ticking off some checklist of objects; he knows himself instantly. This face beneath him remains an assortment of parts – Daniel in cheap kit form. Taken together, these parts say nothing whatsoever.

“It might be him. It might not,” he admits at last.

“Don’t worry, Mr George. You don’t need to be certain. You just need to sign to say you’re willing to give a DNA sample. That way we can tell immediately.”

The pen is waving at him and the clipboard proffered. Though he’s known this was coming Daniel is racked by renewed misgivings. He doesn’t trust this man, whatever Gulnaz might say of him. DNA is a very private thing. Through his mind flashes a trail of petty misdemeanours, each leaving its trace of tell-tale chemicals.

“Actually, I’m pretty sure he’s not my brother. There’s probably no point.”

“It’s your decision of course, Mr George. But there’s nothing to lose; it would help us enormously and it only takes a few seconds.”

“And they won’t start taking fingerprints, or anything like that?”

“Goodness, no. And they wouldn’t help anyway. Twins don’t share the same fingerprints.”

“So... this DNA thing, does it get onto the database – police records, or whatever?”

“No, no, not at all. We’ll take a note of your contact details, but whether a match is found or not, your DNA data won’t be retained, only that of your brother.”

This, given the circumstances, will have to be assurance enough. To walk away now from the chance to settle things would be madness. Daniel snatches the pen and signs.

“Excellent. Now, I’ve cleared it with reception that you’re free to come and visit whenever you wish. You don’t need accompanying from now on. So, if you’d like to follow me, a nurse will take the swab and that’ll be that.” Professional smile, pen back in top pocket and white coat flourish; the doctor leads Daniel from the ICU back to the new wing and offers him a seat in a small waiting area off the main corridor.

“I’ll tell the nurse you’re here.”

A nervous wait follows. Even here the old smells seek him out; a cocktail of bygone waiting rooms, of times spent shrinking into tatty seats pushed against grey walls; of fighting

down a rising panic by reading and re-reading boards of dumb health notices. Eventually a nurse calls him in and he rises shakily to his feet. He is thirteen and terrified, the next in line to receive the BCG vaccine. Now he is seventeen and about to have a needle flush out his right ear. He is seven and tortured by toothache. But he clings to Gulnaz's promise of, 'Just a lolly stick in the cheek', and sure enough, there it is – longer and thinner than he'd imagined, but a lolly stick nonetheless. He just wishes now that he'd cleaned his teeth. They might not find any DNA among all the other crap in his mouth. But the nurse seems satisfied. It's over in a trice. Hard to believe that one little scraping of cells is all it takes to resolve the riddle of the thin man in the white room.

She drops the swab into a plastic bag. The hospital will write to his GP, who will inform him of the results some time in the next fortnight. Daniel is free to go.

By immediately, it seems trusty Prentice had meant two whole bloody weeks.

On the long return to reception Daniel is careful to keep his eyes from the wards. Emerging from the corridor, it's a relief to see that Gulnaz hasn't moved from the corner. It's somewhat less of a relief to find Prentice leering over her again. The doctor's fake smile lights up the moment Daniel comes into view. Gulnaz's gaze is more anxious.

"How did it go? Are you okay?"

Then the giveaway hesitation.

"Um, would it be okay if we get going now? You can tell me all about it on the way. I'm working at the care home again this afternoon."

If this is downright insensitive then Daniel frankly doesn't care. He needs no encouraging to get the hell out of this place. "Don't worry; I can take you straight there, if it helps," he offers, putting himself squarely between Gulnaz and the doctor. "It's not much out of my way."

Her smile dies a little.

"Thanks, that's really kind, only I need to collect my bike so I can get home again after work."

"That's no problem. I'll pick you up again afterwards."

But again Gulnaz demurs. "I really couldn't say exactly what time I'll be finished. Supposedly six, but so much depends on the residents."

"Doesn't matter. I'll wait for you. I'll take a historic novel or listen to Classic FM." He gives the doctor a cutting smile.

Despite the look she returns him, reluctantly Gulnaz gives in; a little mental arithmetic probably convincing her there is no way she could be dropped off at home, cycle the three

miles to the nursing home and still be on time. She says her thanks and warm goodbyes to her doctor friend, and at last she and Daniel are heading out to the car.

“Why were you so rude to Dr Prentice?”

“Was I rude? I didn’t mean to be,” he lies.

Nothing more is said until they’re finally freed from the network of hospital roads.

“I’d very much like to know what happened, when you’re ready,” she says at last.

What exactly did happen? That’s the question. With every yard Daniel puts between them and the ‘thing’ in that ward, the more his uncertainty grows. How could such a creature possibly have been the explosive, hyperactive bundle of energy that was once his twin? By the time they’re back on the ring road the very idea of it seems preposterous. As the familiar sights of town surround them once more the whole experience becomes little more than a bad joke. The only thing that remains crystal clear in Daniel’s mind is that fate, on Christmas night, chose to bring him and Gulnaz together.

“I’m pretty sure it wasn’t Alex. They did the DNA thing, but I bet it’ll be a waste of time. I’d made a mistake, for the reasons you’d said.”

So, this is his chance to win her over – now or never, judging by the attentions of her smarmy doctor friend. Daniel will cook her a meal, clean his flat, change his sheets, take that long overdue shower and clean his teeth.

“Oh, I am sorry, Daniel. Really sorry. But don’t give up yet. Let’s wait for the results.”

She puts her hand briefly on the wheel over his. He smiles at her. And does not withdraw his hand. This time he knows it’ll be perfect. Instead of ten minutes, he has six whole hours to get everything prepared.

## Saddam

Who would ever have guessed it – hallowed ground as a hotspot for meeting girls? It was rare enough to see anybody on those church visits; the occasional grieving widow perhaps, loitering at the grave of a loved one; a few people now and then using the path through the cemetery as a cut-through. But a lone young woman up for being propositioned? Never in a million years.

Certainly nothing could have been further from Daniel's mind that Christmas afternoon. Women hadn't really been on the agenda for some days. True, he'd been keeping his eyes peeled down at his local, but more out of habit than necessity. The Millwrights has been known to land the odd catch, but always small-fry, never anything classy like Gulnaz. And one always has to be so careful where to trawl. Fishing in the wrong waters is a sure-fire way to land yourself a bottle in the neck.

That much at least was unlikely in a churchyard.

In any case, working at Greenalls guaranteed enough rich pickings to ensure he need never rely on either the Millwrights or Old St. Bart's for a date. The great thing about Greenalls is the way the eligible ones stand out a mile. Obviously those with boyfriends are a nonstarter; two girls together holds out more hope, but the way they choose plants is critical. If they're not particularly fussed about each other's choices then the chances are they're just friends out together. If they keep close to each other and wrangle over every specimen then Daniel knows he's likely to be looking at eligible flatmates – less chance of them being attached. As for women on their own, much can be learned from the plants they're checking out. The girl choosing fruit trees is likely to live in a big house with a loaded husband, the one buying cheap indoor plants probably has no garden and only a pokey little apartment like his. Cacti are a particularly good sign; women love them, men hate them. Rival phallic symbols, apparently.

From there it all comes down to judging faces, searching for that expression of uncertainty, that niggling doubt about a plant's fitness for purpose, that need for professional endorsement. On spotting a distressed damsel wavering, say, between a palm and a fern, Daniel might roll up his sleeves, grab something heavy (such as the nearest pot or grow-bag), and chance by with a smile and a helpful, 'Alright there? If you need any advice, just ask.' On a warm afternoon he might even go so far as to pass through a water-spray en route, just to help the sweatshirt cling a little closer. Shameless. But women do like their men a little rough around the edges. Catherine had her Heathcliff, Lady Chatterley her Mellors. And the garden centre has certainly won him a healthy physique and a strong tan. No three-times-a-week

enslavement to the gymnasium for Daniel. In the past year or two the natural blonde highlights from the sun have also helped disguise the insidious advance of grey.

If the initial contact elicits a response then he can proceed to stage two: 'The Confidential Confession'. By offering advice he's violating a company policy, and he really wouldn't have stopped to talk had the customer not been so plainly in need of help. However (between the two of them), if she needs any more gardening tips or manual labouring he does do private work as well and has a card right here in his pocket. In fact, he's free the next day if she wishes him to help with choosing the right location, planting out or feeding. Daniel prides himself in never telling lies. But truth doesn't necessarily have to mean the whole truth. It truthfully is against company rules for unqualified staff to give horticultural advice to the public, for the simple reason that trained staff are on hand over at the customer services desk. And Daniel does do private work, indeed really could come over the next day, albeit at the expense of a day's wages and a bollocking from the head of HR. As for soliciting customers for outside work being a no-no: absolutely the case. A dismissible offence. Mum's definitely the word – his special offer to a special customer.

Stage three he calls 'The Sensitive Man'. On a first date, go for the snog and the fondle, but pull back as though he is the one being pressured to go further. Never sex on a first date. But his greatest pleasure would be to invite her over the next day for a meal. This is the one high-risk moment. He can spring-clean all day, fill the rooms with the most stunning plants, courtesy of Greenalls, lay on the finest wines and serve a gourmet dinner, and still that flat of his will look and smell like shit. But he's Heathcliff, remember. The labouring man. So it's on with the fresh bedding, a shower, a smart shirt casually buttoned, the lagers stashed away in the cupboard and the Chardonnays racked up in the fridge. And finally – a winner every time, sure-fire fast track to the bedroom – Daniel's own creation: chicken casserole with root vegetables in a mushroom and white wine sauce...

...Which he watches now splattering forkful by forkful into the kitchen bin.

All the time and money he'd wasted for this moment, the deliberation in the shops, the painstaking preparation of food, the meticulous effort of transforming his flat and sprucing himself up. True, when he'd dropped her off at the old people's home it had been a somewhat cool goodbye Gulnaz had given him. But when he went again to pick her up she seemed altogether happier. His lines were well rehearsed by then: how tired and hungry she looked, how much he wanted to express his gratitude for her support at the hospital, and how dinner tonight was on him. Yes, she made all the excuses about early starts, having some leftovers in the fridge that needed finishing, not wanting to be any trouble, but none of that

had fazed him in the least. He'd been expecting it, and was ready with the slightly hurt look and the admission that the surprise treat was one he'd lovingly prepared himself.

But it still didn't cut the mustard. "I'm sorry Daniel, I really must go home," she'd insisted.

"Okay, I guess it'll keep twenty-four hours," a slight note of panic rising in his voice. "Tomorrow, then."

"No. I think we should leave it."

"Then how about..."

"Please just take me home. It's complicated."

But it wasn't complicated at all. It was very straightforward. So straightforward in fact that Daniel could summarise it in three simple words.

Fucking Doctor Prentice.

Having dropped her, again on the street corner at her insistence, he'd driven around aimlessly for a while before crawling home to confront his Air-Freshened, Toilet-Ducked, Ajaxed charade of an apartment. Every nook and cranny mocked his presumptuousness: the flowers on the window ledge in the loo, the CDs laid out in playlist order, the tastefully chosen lighting. And there, at the heart of his audacity, the casserole, waiting by the stove for its final mouth-watering blast, the potatoes peeled and salted in the pan, the kitchen table laid. To have sat down now to all this alone would have been to court his own inadequacy, to eat humble pie, to swallow his pride. 'Stuff it,' he proclaims into the mouth of the waste bin as the last of the sauce slithers down inside the lining. Food greedily accepted, the mouth slams shut with a cymbal crash – Daniel's cue to leg it to the Millwrights for an absolute hammering.

The Millwrights' magic formula? Cheap, reliable beer and no-nonsense food. It's what has kept Daniel's local from going the way of so many pubs. If they ever did close down the Millwrights then God knows how he would cope. It's the ideal downhill stroll there and meandering uphill stagger back. The throb of chatter and music, even the blast of stale smoke and armpits that rushes to embrace him at the doorway, makes blessed relief from the flat he's just evacuated. Bar duty tonight is in the hands of Gorgeous Gail. He's pleased. The two of them had a brief fling a few months ago and somehow they've managed to stay friends. At this moment he could do with a friend, someone he can trust, who won't lift him up only to drop him from a great height, even if he can't exactly confide in Gail about another woman.

The usual crowd are busy in the games room; Jerry, his boss from the garden centre, Threadbare and Bladder from the pool team. These guys could be suffered for a laugh and a

bit of lounge bar philosophy but God forbid, not for anything personal. Daniel cases the haze-filled room and makes a pledge to keep recent events strictly to himself. But it only takes the odd, ‘Good Christmas then, Daniel?’ and a couple of double scotches to drive a coach and horses through that resolve. Before he knows it, he’s propped against the bar, relating his woes like some Film Noir antihero. Somehow, in telling his story – a story that should have every jaw in the pub hitting the carpet – he manages to cheapen the whole affair into a hybrid of schlock horror and soppy melodrama. Far from drawing a crowd of spellbound spectators, he succeeds only in pulling in the regular losers, backslappers and huggers who are already into their own stories half way through commiserating with his. Daniel finally drifts away into his usual corner with a large whisky, a beer and an assortment of crisps. A jukebox to his left is busy pumping out the latest number one. The sound mixes drunkenly with that of two self-absorbed fruit machines placed opposite, and all of this plays as background to a widescreen TV on the wall in front of him, whose silent images dance a surreal dance to the incongruous and discordant music. As he watches, footage of the capture of Saddam comes on screen. The song lyric asks, ‘What if I told you it was all meant to be?’ Along the foot of the screen runs the headline confirming the verdict to uphold his execution. ‘I wanna know that you will catch me when I fall,’ sings the disembodied voice. No-one’s going to catch you, mate, Daniel mutters. They probably won’t even cut you down, just leave you swinging till you rot.

Again and again they repeat the fuzzy clip of that once untouchable dictator being hauled from his hideaway pit. The moving writing says he’d survived on Mars Bars. No wonder he’d lost his teeth, if that wasn’t the handiwork of some off-camera Marine. The haggard face distorts further through the base of Daniel’s glass as the last of the pint slips down. Like ripples on a lake. Like the guy at the cemetery. Jesus, that’s how he’d looked last night as he lay there in the half light. The cheeks, the rings around the eyes, the furrowed skin, unshaven. It was true what he’d told Gulnaz: unthinkable for that man to have been Alex. How could an armour-plated, coiled spring of a nine-year-old who did everything at a hundred miles an hour ever turn into such a vile bag of bones? The TV answers back at him. Perhaps by spending years in hiding, surviving on Mars Bars.

Four days to go before the execution. “Oh, I can't believe it's happening to me,” bewails the singer. His father would have had a thing or two to say about that: ‘Should have taken the bastard out when we had the chance back in ’91.’ The twins’ opinion on the subject would have followed the next day at some hastily convened schoolyard rally, a trifle corrupted in the telling: “That dick traitor, ‘Sodom The Same’, our dad (who runs the Navy) says we should have asked him out, soon as we got the chance!”

And he could imagine his mother sitting sewing, her measured response ready for when their father was beyond earshot, 'No good ever came out of vengeance, boys. It just leads to more violence.'

And he ponders what Gulnaz's attitude would be. Her face swims before his eyes. Probably the same as his mother's. She was too saintly to want to see anyone harmed, this nurse whose calling was to save lives – good lives and bad lives. What an angel. Big innocent eyes. Ah, but she *had* done harm. Done harm to *him*. Made him think she would like to be wined and dined and have some fun. Why did she come onto him like that only to brush him aside? What about feelings, commitment? That's harm done, alright.

He needs another beer. With a chaser. He staggers as he stands and knocks into the table. Goolnazz's... Gullnazz's... *Gulnaz's* fault that he's doing this to himself. She'll be sorry when they find him in a gutter somewhere. Let guilt blind those big innocent eyes. *She* can bloody well look after Alex. And keep her tosser doctor friend.

The barmaid initially refuses him more drink, but he shows her he's on foot, turns out his pockets to prove no car keys. "And for Pete's sake Gail, it's Christmas!" he pleads. Suddenly he wants to run his hands all over her breasts. Again.

Saddam in battle gear now. A meeting of his war cabinet. Slow motion – all his fucking family round a table. A brute like that, would Gulnaz really shed a tear for him? And she being, what? Arabian, Irabian, no, *Iranian* she'd said. Her lot were against the Iraqis, he's pretty sure of it. Now the TV is showing village streets piled high with dead people. A woman, face down on her doorstep clutching her baby, bodies in rows on their backs. Unseeing, half-closed eyes. They look so like those poor sods laid out in the hospital. Those wards were bloody morgues too. The screen is too blurred to read. Halbaji or something. Kurds. Hadn't she said her father was one of them? Lebanon Kurds. Lemon Curds. He giggles then frowns. Someone who could gas his own people like that, surely even she would want rid of such a monstrous piece of shit.

Look who's talking: fellow piss-head, piece of shit George. Daniel George salutes Saddam Hussein, two losers receiving their long overdue comeuppance. Who'd bother with a jerk like Daniel when they've the likes of...?

"Alright Daniel? One for the road, mate?"

Jerry has found his way to the bar and is already getting a round in. With him stands a bloke Daniel doesn't recognise, but to whom he takes an instant dislike. A big bruiser with a soft blubbery face – like a baby crossed with a Sumo wrestler. Ugly fucker. The way the guy stares at him is unsettling, as though any minute he'll either get a fist in his face or a cock in

his arse. It seems prudent not to stare back.

“There’s a pool game on, if you want in,” Jerry says.

It never quite made sense to Daniel why he’d been recruited onto the pool team; his ability was middling at best. The invitation came soon after he’d delighted his mates by coining the nicknames Threadbare (a corruption of the name Freddie Bayer, in honour of the guy’s perennial woollen jumper) and Bladder (so-called for his friend Colin’s ability to go seven pints without a slash). For Jerry, a nickname never really felt justified. Daniel accepts the scotch but declines the game, mumbling that he’s off home straight after this. The Millwrights, he’s decided, is too public a place for wound licking. And a walk might do him good.

He’s almost reached the foot of Cooper’s Hill before realising that Sedgefield Court is the other way. But his legs keep right on going nonetheless. Down past the chippy, across the Texaco forecourt, and over a low wall into the road beyond, the units chasing each other around his bloodstream in a frenzied relay race, spurred on by the cold night air. All rational thought is fast ebbing away. Pure adrenaline now. Daniel has a nasty feeling he knows where he’s being led. Heading for trouble and regret. Oh no, no, no. It might take forty, maybe fifty minutes to reach the place where he’d picked her up. There is still time to stop it. Don’t go there. She already thinks him a loser – but to see him like this, and the scene he is surely about to make. Dr Smart-arse, poncey Prentesis... Princessst... *Prentith!* can bloody well watch out. A loose cannon right arm sends a waste bin clattering across the pavement. At once the contents tangle themselves around his feet in a feeble rugby tackle; someone shouts from an open window; his shoe skids on a chip: everything at hand fighting to bring him to his senses and avert disaster.

On the road where she’d been standing he counts seven shops, four padlocked, two shuttered and one heavily barred: blatant league tables for the value of the goods within. Handy ram-raiders tip. Somehow he’s made it here without changing his mind, without getting lost and without even falling over. He’s also failed in that time to come up with anything resembling a plan. Where does she live – is it even on this street? But hey, he must follow his heart, okay? He will open his arms and call up to her like Romeo summoning Juliet from the balcony: ‘Juliet, Juliet where frart thou. Let down your hair’; confess his feelings for her; tell her what her little smile does to him, compliment her on her shapely bum; sort this out with Doc George Clooney, man-to-superman, right here and now on the street.

Thank God for the police car that appears as he’s about to scream out their names. And thank God for Daniel’s instinct to mingle with the shadows at such moments. Otherwise

he might have seen something he really didn't want to be seeing in this state. He might have seen a light coming on in an upstairs window over the jeweller's, four doors along from where he now cowers. He might have snatched a glimpse of a woman's silhouette before the curtains come together, a woman he'd have recognised at once. And he might have had to witness the figure of a male, his face hidden but his body visibly undressed to the waist, crossing the room behind her as she stands. As it is, by the time Daniel has emerged into the light once more, the curtains are closed and the room is in darkness. Nothing to draw his attention at all. And with the patrol car safely out of the way, he finally does the sensible thing and begins snaking his way homeward, that plaintive chart song echoing through the street.

“What if I told you it was all meant to be?”

“Oh, I can't believe it's happening to me.”

“I wanna know that you will catch me when I fall.”

Getting home is a disjointed memory. After a pee in someone's garden there's a blank, after which he wakes to find himself between two dustbins, so numb and stiff with cold that it takes several minutes to crawl free. Re-emerging onto Cooper's Hill, he finds it all but empty; those still around simply ignore him. Sedgefield Court is also quiet. Only an inebriated Santa Claus waits to accost him from behind the neighbour's front door, his face beaming malicious goodwill. ‘Ho, ho, Merry Christmas’ flashes the sign, the swollen red nose answering, the eyes lighting up to complete the cycle. Daniel makes a dive for his door. Nobody else sees him enter his apartment. Once inside, the pervading smells of cleaning products, aromatic flowers and half-cooked chicken utterly deck him. He only just makes it to the toilet before being sick.

\* \* \*

The room is an antiseptic-white, marble-smooth, featureless cube. Only a bed and a life support machine and the interconnecting circuitry pierce its blank surfaces. The machine flickers and pulses on behalf of the eyelids and heart that lie frozen beside it. Under its white shroud, the body might have been laid out for despatch, were it not for the life signs registering via the wires onscreen. Even the face is covered. Behind the small windows in the swing doors Daniel watches and waits. A second figure steps into view: a nurse in blue-white, her legs naked beneath the short tunic. She walks over to the bed and turns back the sheet from the man's face, stoops and kisses his forehead. A transfusion of red passes from her lips into his. The eyes slowly open and blink. As recognition dawns, the skin around the man's mouth cracks into a faint smile. The woman's response is slowly to unbutton herself. Something moves beneath the sheet over his stomach, a creature there rising to make a tent

of the linen. The man begins to moan softly. Her slim fingers tease his neck and slide the sheet down his chest, beyond his waist and over his erection. Nimble she mounts the bed and climbs aboard, her back to the patient, her face towards Daniel, the open uniform exposing her fully. As her hips rise and fall, her eyes meet with Daniel's through the glass and fix him a lascivious stare. He feels the swing doors give against his hands and becomes swallowed up by the room's intense whiteness. He stands within reach of her now, at the foot of the bed, unsure whether he is about to embrace or to strike her. He can smell their lovemaking. Both she and her lover are approaching climax – faster and faster she pounds his groin. The man lies motionless, but his moaning deepens into a resonant bellow. As he orgasms, and as Gulnaz shudders over that twitching muscle, a howl of bestial pain rocks the ward. Her piston actions grind to a halt. Black liquid courses through the tubing from the patient's arms and nose into the machine. Deep crimson patches spot the sheet and spread quickly in widening pools beneath his entire body. And the whole time the room reverberates to the shrill alarm bell of a life-support system monitoring the eruption of a man's organs. It rings and rings and it rings. But nobody attends.

Eventually the phone does stop ringing, though Scoff's caterwauling continues, and Daniel can finally pull his head from beneath the pillow. He might have made it to the kitchen in time, but he already knows who the caller will have been. The bedside clock, despite new batteries, has failed to go off, and he's due back at work today. The dream is a fading memory now, its contents slipping through his fingers too fast to grasp. Something about hospitals? It had to be, to leave him feeling so knotted up inside.

His guts have other reasons to grumble. What was Threadbare's favourite quip? You drink when the bottom's fallen out of your world, only for the world to fall out of your bottom. If it were only that. After what he put away last night he'll be lucky the whole universe doesn't come crashing down on his head. Warily he lowers his feet to the floor, ready to abort, braced for Armageddon. But throwing up last night has saved him from the worst. Yes, it's just the guts. But by God it's urgent.

Scene by toe-curling scene, the whole sorry tale of the previous night unravels as he sits there, elbows on thighs, sweat gathering on temples. He can astonish even himself at times. That all-consuming obsession to have her, the devastation of her rejection, the dispassion he feels right now – all in under twenty-four hours. It's not healthy. He's only grateful that nobody else witnessed it. Another shooting pain cuts off his thoughts, and then he's done. He is on his way back from the toilet when the phone rings again. As predicted, the call is from Greenalls. To be more precise, it's from Jerry, his line manager.

Ah, what would he do without Jerry? Invariably it's Jerry who rings if he hasn't shown up by nine fifteen. The arrangement: Daniel gets to keep his job (just) and Jerry gets to enjoy a free lunch. Several times Daniel has come perilously close to the sack, not for his opportunism – he's too careful for that – but for his poor time keeping, constant hangovers and more than once for turning up drunk. But so far he's been lucky. Each time he's fallen into really deep water, someone further up the ladder has countermanded the ultimate sanction. And Daniel has a pretty good idea who that someone is: the company's senior partner and founder no less, the man whose name, on account of its neatly horticultural ring, has become the popular diminutive of Greenall and Blakeley – Mr Martin J Greenall.

This hunch hangs on the simple fact that Martin Greenall and Daniel's uncle Martin are one and the same. Not quite true to say that Greenall had done 'fuck all' to help him and his mother. Pretty useless in the face of his sister's terminal illness he may have been, but Greenall had also promised that her son would have a job to go to after she was gone, at a time when employment prospects for a twenty-one year old with barely a GCSE to his name were slender at best. No doubt the promise was as much to Daniel's father as it was to her; some pact they had made with each other at sea. But it could also have been his uncle's way of saying sorry for the fact that of the two of them, only he had come home.

Jerry of course, like everyone else at Greenalls, is quite unaware of the blood ties between lowly service assistant Daniel George and Managing Director Martin Greenall. Daniel has no desire to be seen as the stooge of senior management. Having delivered his mild reprimand, Jerry has now moved on to an enthusiastic account of the pool team's practice session. Great prospects now for the tournament quarter finals on Saturday. Shame Daniel couldn't have stayed to take part. And no, the earlier call hadn't been from Jerry after all.

It was probably those damned window salesmen again.

\* \* \*

Down on the shop floor, a mood hangs in the air. The Christmas holidays have done nothing to lift morale, only to leave limbs and brains clogged from overindulgence and torpor. Left for so long to fend for themselves, the plants are now wilting for first-aid. New stock gasps to be unloaded from lorries so that it can again drink in the daylight. Empty shelves cry out to be refilled. Piles of gaudy New Year sales placards shriek to be swung gaily from girders. But the staff drift about – blind and deaf to it all, ashen-faced, as though wading through gravy and brandy butter. The handful of customers, wandering aimlessly from plant to plant, look equally washed-out, doubtless for much the same reason. Whether they're too bored to wait

for the sales to begin or too stupid Daniel has no idea. Even the leaves and flowers are drained of colour under the bleak, sunless sky. And the rollercoaster ride of the past two days has left Daniel the greyest of all. Over the course of the morning, the knot in his guts has steadily tightened itself around his insides – his kidneys, his groin, his back – tugging harder each time his memory throws up more of that dream. The plastic tubing, black with Alex's blood, jumps him from a Hoselock garden-watering kit. As he pushes through the swing doors to the staff toilets he's suddenly stepping into the clinical white of the ICU. At lunch time, in a bid for exorcism, he goes through the palaver once more of ringing the hospital. Inevitably, much of his precious break is spent waiting to get through. And so shocking are the accompanying flashes of Gulnaz pounding away over his brother's torso that Daniel completely fails to notice when at last someone answers. The hospital nearly puts the phone down on him. Of course it's all for nothing anyway. The patient's condition hasn't changed, they're none the wiser as to why, or who he might be, and any DNA results are still a long way off.

Five thirty takes forever and a day to arrive, but eventually the store closes and his employers let him go. Daniel's grey has darkened with the sky. By the time the car is locked away in his garage and Sedgefield Court lobby has presented its latest obstacle course of bikes, boxes and boots, the tensions and frustrations in his body have built almost to breaking point. And it's while furiously untangling his trouser cuffs from a bicycle pedal by the stairs that the phone in his flat rings again.

The caller has hung up before he can answer, but this time he dials 1471 before anyone else has a chance to ring. It's a local code, but the number isn't familiar. 'To return the call, press three. There is normally a charge for this service,' a polite voice says. He considers, but stops and slams down the phone. It isn't the money; it's his state of mind. Fucking, fucking nuisance callers, day in and day out. And if someone genuinely needs to get in touch they can bloody well ring again.

The caller has turned his mood from grey to black. The knot inside him cramps his whole body. Finally the signals are recognised for what they are, leaving him in no doubt as to the appropriate remedial action. Bathroom before kitchen. As his fingers begin their work, he finally welcomes in the scene that has been gnawing away at his subconscious all day; the look she gave him with her tunic parted, her breasts moving freely, the shadow of her groin over Alex's hips. But for whatever reason, each time the image brings him to the brink something kills the moment.

Isn't she sexy enough? Is it the thought of lover-boy Prentice? No, only that even in his

fantasy Gulnaz is reluctant to play the game. One minute a saviour, the next a siren, rudely tossed between saintly virgin and sex goddess; she castigates him for taking such a shallow view of her, for making no effort to see into the real woman. He might argue that he's been somewhat preoccupied with other things, but for the first time now, his right hand slowly losing the debate, he does begin to wonder what she might really be about, what the deal is with this Middle-Eastern thirty-something nurse who pries into everyone else's business; what back story might lie behind that unreadable, foreign face.

Probably he will never know. He isn't even sure he cares that much. He may never see her again, at least not in the way he'd done in the past two days. Perhaps he should let her go. Well, maybe he will, but – what the hell. No harm in letting them share this one last moment together...

After a tough day, Daniel is as likely to hit the Millwrights for pie, chips and beer as he is to mess about fixing something in the kitchen. But three nights in a row now he's got himself smashed, serious binge drinking by anyone's standards. Inspired in part by the uncommonly clean state of his flat, and able finally to focus on the demands of his stomach, he decides that tonight he should give his liver a break, cook a decent meal, and spend the rest of the evening in with his cat.

After throwing together a quick spaghetti and retrieving a lager from the cupboard, he cosies down in front of the TV next to the creature sprawled immodestly over the couch. Becoming aware of the company, Scoff utters a sigh of pleasure, setting off a yawn that almost cleaves his little face in two. Daniel stares into the fleshy black and pink cave. The poor old sod, ragbag of matted fur and arthritis – hearing knackered, eyesight bugged and kidneys shot through, turned by old age and ill health from a live-wire feeding machine into the world's most sedentary and fussiest epicure. More of Daniel's time and thought now goes into preparing food for Scoff than goes into preparing his own. The name may once have signified the animal's sheer gluttony, but these days it rings truer to his ridicule of anything and everything cat food manufacturers can dream up. For Scoff, heaven is a warm room, a sturdy knee and a mouth reeking of lovingly prepared boiled fish. He's lucky ever to get all three, with his master so often being out late, but tonight at least it's to be just the two of them. Paradise. With those funny dancing shapes on the brown box in the corner.

“Right, pollock-breath.” Daniel circles his plate one last time with the bread. “Your turn now. Tonight's going to be a meal to remember.”

Back in the kitchen, he chisels five white fish fillets from the ice box and heats a large pan of water. As the surface slowly turns to froth, he stirs and stabs, breaking the flesh into

ever smaller pieces. One-time Dracula-mouth Scoff is now all but toothless, only a few baby incisors and a solitary fang hang on in there. Fish broth prepared, Daniel carefully pours the mixture into a Tupperware container, opens two tins of 'Prescription Diet' cat food and folds it in. When was it, six months ago? The vet had given Scoff three weeks at best. 'It's their kidneys, I'm afraid', he'd said. 'When they get to that age'. If the bastard had had his way, Scoff would have received the jab to end all jabs there and then. Euthanasia was apparently legit on animals, as and when they became a bit of a burden. Pity the same didn't apply to people. But Daniel had held out for his cat, stumped up the cash for the steroid booster and brought him home with a crate of special low phosphorous food. Unfortunately, Scoff liked his rich meaty chunks in gravy. Try telling a cat his lifestyle is killing him. For that matter, try telling a person. In pure desperation, Daniel had called in at the vets and was told by an altogether nicer young lady that a little white fish or chicken would do no harm. But here was this mountain of prohibitively expensive cat food stacked up on the shelf. By way of concession, Scoff had grudgingly tolerated a fifty-fifty mix. Only after he'd ordered a second batch did it occur to Daniel that the cat food was by far the more expensive half of the equation.

Leave it to cool for half an hour, et voila: gourmet cod and cat food bouillabaisse, ready to serve. Enough for four to five days. Every third day or so Scoff would throw the whole lot up on the bedroom carpet and spend a few hours feeling very sorry for himself, but he'd always rally in time for the next meal. A little like Daniel really.

But not from today. From now on, strictly no more binge drinking.

Sitting at the kitchen table, watching as those hind legs deftly manoeuvre for the next mouthful, the tail aquiver with pleasure, Daniel begins to calculate how much of his life has been spent looking after others. 1984, it all began, when he was sent back to Devon from his gran's. It must have been early in the year because secondary school hadn't started until some months later. His mum died in April 1995. Just over eleven years he'd been her skivvy. Scoff appeared on the scene eight years ago, but only in the last two have there been any serious health problems. So, eleven plus two – thirteen years all in, out of a total of thirty three. He quickly scribbles the sums on the back of an envelope. About 0.4. Two fifths of his life as a bloody carer. Near enough half.

And Gulnaz was a carer – by choice! Something he simply couldn't fathom. A job's a job, but old people's homes? Incontinence? Alzheimer's? Bath time? Bedpans and commodes? At least she could walk away from it at the end of the day. God help anyone saddled with something like that full-time. A scene forms in his mind of a park on a Sunday

afternoon, a pathway encircling a lake filled with ducks. Happy families mill about, mothers rocking their prams, fathers crouching by the water's edge, tossing stale bread in among the anarchy of birds, children jumping up and down with glee when their adopted duck catches a strategically directed morsel. Then all heads turning, all but the children's quizzing voices falling silent, heads turning quickly back, as down the winding path comes a twisted figure in a wheelchair, half buried under blankets, head cocked in a vacant stare. A condemned relative pushes from behind, repeatedly stooping to wipe away the drool, issuing pointless instructions and words of comfort, while inwardly resenting every second of every minute that passes.

Rocked by a sudden shiver of fear, Daniel recalls the coma victim lying prostrate in Intensive Care. His mind returns to the lakeside and sneaks another glance at the faces of cripple and helper. The terrible twins. The brothers grim. Oh Christ, let that never be Alex and him.

## Lucca

For much of the night, Daniel's mind drifts back and forth between fitful sleeps and half waking. The same themes and anxieties surface in shifting sequences; work, Alex, Gulnaz, Scoff. By the time the alarm rings out, a night that should have offered fulfilling rest to a head that for once was sober has instead left him utterly exhausted and quite desperate to be done with it. This, Daniel knows, cannot go on. For all his attempts to dismiss the 'man in the cemetery' episode as dead and buried, something just won't let it go. He crawls from the bed and fumbles through to the kitchen and the gravitational pull of coffee. When the phone rings he assumes in his dazed state that it must be Greenalls.

"Jerry?"

"Hello Daniel. No, it's Gulnaz. Sorry to ring so early. I'm just leaving for work. I rang to ask if you've had the DNA results yet."

Her voice brings him properly awake.

"Two weeks, they said."

There's a noise on the line like a stifled cough.

"Two weeks?? But that's ridiculous. Then, you still don't know either way?"

"Nope."

"Right, let me talk to Dr Prentice today, see if he can get things speeded up."

Like I could stop you, he muses, visualising the two of them snuggled nose-to-nose on the pillow, the phone propped up against her ear.

"The thing is, I've been asked to help out at the hospital this morning, on the children's ward. I just thought, if you were going in to see him, we could maybe meet up and have some lunch."

Her voice sounds edgy and calculating, impatient for an answer. Much as Daniel reviles any idea of another close encounter with that Frankenstein's monster, his nightlong ordeal suggests it may be the only way to lay Alex's ghost once and for all. He also has reservations about reconnecting with Gulnaz. By the sound of it, she has something of an agenda – probably some lame excuse to justify her rudeness over the meal. He certainly doesn't need that. Nor should he go stirring up fresh feelings for her. But the very thought of another day at work like yesterday's has him agreeing a time and place, then leaving Greenalls a message to say he's unwell.

In marked contrast to the hurried departure and drive into hell of the previous visit, this morning Daniel allows himself plenty of slack, and gives the car licence to treat the journey

like some gentle Sunday outing. When the hospital again rears its formidable face, this time he is able to handle the emotion. Its power before had all been drawn from his fear of the unknown. He's seen off those skeletons now. Sidestepping the queue at reception and ignoring the instructions to cleanse his hands, he forges past the busy wards to the quieter corridors of Intensive Care. It's only when the double doors of the ICU are pushed aside that Daniel's former sense of dread kicks in.

Within the confines of the room the air is hot and stifling, electrically charged. Standing alone is quite unlike having Prentice here to chaperone him. The space threatens and exposes; the resonant hum of equipment suggests he is caught inside a living machine. It monitors Daniel the way it monitors the patient. It plugs him in, swallows him up, feeds on his nerves. And there, at the heart of this machine, the inanimate figure is still laid out, dead to the world but for the slow rise and fall of his chest. Again, the partially masked face taunts with its familiar and unfamiliar nuances. The deviations from Daniel's own bone structure, nose, mouth and eyes may be slight, but to him they stand out a mile. These alone would be enough to lay the whole matter to rest, had this face not become so dreadfully wasted. The chilling truth is, starve him to the same degree and Daniel too might look exactly this way.

And there's something else to bear in mind. As children, for all their similarities of appearance, no matter how much their mother would dress them the same, arrange their hair the same, feed them the same, school them the same, pamper them the same, still they had stubbornly grown to be chalk and cheese: Alex the tough, sporty, reckless risk-taker; Daniel the nervous bookworm with a passion for military vessels, science and seashells. If nine years of life together could drive them so far apart, then where on earth would another twenty leave them, spent without contact of any kind? Two utterly different lifestyles could so easily carve out facial differences as subtle as these.

Wild, impulsive Alex; guarded, apprehensive Daniel. Two polar opposites, yet as locked together as Yin and Yang, Jekyll and Hyde. So much more than just brothers, so much more than best friends, for those extraordinary few years they'd been like two sides of the same coin. So often they would predict each other's thoughts and actions; much of the time they barely had need of words. Some nights they would test out their powers of telepathy, one of them furiously transmitting thoughts through the bunk bed while the other tensed every muscle in an attempt to capture the incoming signals. On a crazy whim, Daniel leans forward over the alabaster face and applies his mind with that same ferocity. He drills his words deep into the hardened skull; 'Are you really my brother Alex? What's happened to you? Where have you been all these years?'

The thoughts bore their way through flesh and bone, as he waits with eyes tight shut for a connection. But only the same words bounce back, delayed by some synaptic loop that scrambles the question. ‘Are you really my brother Alex...*other Alex*...Where have you been...*you been*...all these years...*these years*?’. Hopeless. Like one of those strange overseas phone calls, when he used to speak to his father, only to wonder why a small child at the other end insisted on repeating back everything he said.

For an instant, an impulse grips him to tear away the tubing and disconnect the equipment. It’s an overwhelming urge to put things back the way they were, a fear that on this bed may lie the seeds of his undoing, someone about to turn his whole life upside down. He could never have known this was coming. To have such power over someone’s life – the realisation sends a sickening thrill through his system. As if to defend itself, the dormant figure snatches a breath, a brittle inhalation of thick phlegm. Daniel pulls back in disgust and tries to counter with a rush of healing energy, something between a prayer and a commandment, anything to repel that need to inflict harm. In his shame, he turns tail, pushes through the doors and sets off to put as much distance between them as possible.

What madness this was to have returned; to have put himself through such horrors all over again and yet be no nearer the truth. If forced to make a judgement, Daniel would have to say no, the inhuman abomination in that ward wasn’t his brother. But then again he so could be. Gulnaz had talked of him being abducted as a child, possibly even held prisoner. Never mind different lifestyles, if she were right, that face could be the work of decades of torture and deprivation, each little disparity of detail the mark of some unspeakable violence.

His footsteps announce a curious opening up of sound. While Daniel’s mind has been elsewhere something odd has been happening to his surroundings. Carpeting has given way to a hard floor of patched linoleum. The impeccably spotless walls are gone. Scuffmarks now zigzag their way across faded paintwork. At the corridor divide, a sign indicates left for main reception and exit. It feels all wrong, back to front, yet at the same time foolish to disobey. But every step after that only leads Daniel further into uncharted territory: no more shiny plaques beside doorways, just signs strung badly from a ceiling of missing tiles and roof cavities crammed with ducting and wires. And still those signs egg him on. Not only the way out, but also Gynaecology, Oncology, and Radiology. Daniel suddenly clocks with dismay where exactly they are taking him. These are the very corridors he had walked all those years ago. This wing had once been his second home. Three, maybe four times a week for a year he would come here: nearly two hundred visits in all. He’d known every turn, every straight, every shortcut; a ground plan that was etched deep into his brain. If memory serves him right,

his mother's old ward would be a few yards further on. Ward 10a. To stumble upon this, now of all times, was beyond cruelty itself, a cynical twisting of the surgical knife.

Day after day he would sit there with her, never knowing what to expect, how much worse she would be. Good days and bad days. Then only the bad. He remembers the eight beds on that ward, how in the space of a year those eight beds had accommodated ten times as many patients. And every one of those patients had come to know him. Daniel became their family – in some cases their only family. Many simply vanished between visits. A lucky few escaped those beds under their own steam – not cured as such; 'in remission' they had bravely named it as they said their choked goodbyes. Ten years on, he wonders how many were still around to say that.

All the staff knew him too. By Christ, those nurses really got their hands dirty. They were old school, like Gulnaz. Day in and day out they dealt with sick, and shit, with misery and death – something those automatons in reception behind their computer screens couldn't begin to imagine. Yet ultimately even those nurses betrayed him. His own mother never saw 'remission'. She made it from the bed, just, but never from the hospital. Not on foot, at least. Only in a box.

But now there is nobody. What the hell is going on here? Instead of leading to the exit, these signs are drawing ever further into the bowels of the building. He takes a ward at random and peaks inside. The whole room lies in darkness, totally cleared out. Likewise with a second ward. Nothing, not even a whisper, along the corridor beyond the hum and rattle of ducting. He's rounded two more corners before muffled voices drift into earshot. He locates them behind a windowless door and teases it open. Two doctors and a nurse are busying themselves around a bed in one corner. Some sort of debacle is underway. A trolley is wheeled over, curtains hastily pulled across. Strange cries and moans rise from behind the screen. An urgency is spreading among the staff. Daniel edges back and lets the door close silently. This death is not his to be witnessing.

It feels like if he doesn't get out soon he'll go mad. The choice is a simple one. Turn back or stay with the signs. 'Exit and car park' – it's pretty unequivocal. He hurries on.

But no further than the next corner. Beyond that, the route is cordoned off with tape. Asbestos warnings everywhere. The riddle is finally answered: the tarpaulined wing of the hospital; the cancer at work. Someone has wedged a large piece of corrugated card, ripped from an old carton, across the handles to the doors ahead and scrawled, 'No entry. Refurbishment in progress,' and below, in absurdly small writing, 'Follow temporary markers.' A chalked arrow on the wall adjacent points back the way he's come. Arrows to the right,

arrows to the left, arrows pointing up to the sky – all the way to heaven probably, and heaven is doubtless closed for *referbishment*.

The chalk arrows lead down another maze of corridors, thankfully steering well clear of the ICU and slowly reconnecting with normal hospital hubbub. The last arrow points to a reassuring sign indicating reception, enquiries and waiting area. It's well past the appointed time with Gulnaz, and Daniel quite expects her to have gone home. But no, there she is, as they'd arranged, sat among those same plastic chairs. Fortunately her face is turned away. Before make his appearance, he needs a moment's grounding; time to shake off the ghosts that have been stalking him for the last half hour.

"Ah, there you are," she exclaims, when he finally feels able to present himself.

"Yeah, got a bit lost coming from Alex's ward." He's caught off guard, hearing it described as such, as though the matter were now settled.

She bristles. "Oh, those renovations! They're causing total mayhem. Someone should have escorted you."

"I'm glad they didn't. I needed to be alone."

"Of course." Gulnaz pauses. "Would you rather I left?"

"No, no, I'm fine now. Thanks."

Her face lights up again with a smile. "And you saw your brother?"

Time to call it, once and for all. Daniel bites his lip and nods. "Yes. But it's not Alex. It's like you said before. I wasn't thinking straight when we found him."

Her smile dies. "Oh, Daniel, I'm so sorry. But, you know, the DNA might..."

"I don't need to wait for that. I'm not coming back here again. Actually, can we just get out of here?"

"Ugh, try and stop me!" Gulnaz rolls her eyes a little too emphatically to convince, as though still struggling to find a plane on which to reach him. "Four hours with those kids is plenty for one day. How about we go and grab a coffee somewhere where we can talk properly? There's a new café just opened in town, if you don't mind driving. Or we can take the bus. They say it's really good." She tries again to smile. It turns a shade impish. "My chance to show you a real cup of coffee."

Wherever they go makes no odds to him, so long as it's far away from here.

As they head across the forecourt Gulnaz suddenly revises the plan – to leave the car and take a stroll along the canal. Daniel shrugs. If that's what she wants. And a walk might be just the thing to clear all the insane crap churning about in his head. But first he'll need to move the car, or he'll end up with a ticket.

Some way down the road from the hospital, on Gulnaz's instruction, Daniel pulls onto the kerb opposite a footpath that cuts through to one of the canal's disused locks. He's never before been remotely tempted to walk this pre-industrial relic. From past glimpses he's snatched between derelict warehouses he's always assumed it to be a cesspit, best avoided. Gulnaz, by contrast, seems transported by the experience. When they hit the water's edge she breathes deeply; a symbolic act, Daniel can only assume, as there's nothing remotely different about the air. The narrow towpath forces them into single file. Taking up the rear, Daniel spots something a little odd in her gait, as though a muscle in her back has been pulled, maybe at work, or maybe not at all. Perhaps he simply hadn't noticed the way she walks before.

"You must feel devastated," she declares, after some minutes. "Like you've lost your brother all over again."

He grunts. "I'm dealing with it."

Discussing sensitive matters into the back of someone's head, or in her case into thin air is hardly ideal, and their efforts at conversation soon peter out. The rhythm of their shoes on gravel and the slowly shifting landscape keep Daniel suitably distracted. There is actually something of the countryside about the route, though little to get worked up about; this is hardly some paradise garden. A few birds flit through the trees, but down in that dark, fetid water a fish would have no chance. Even out here, shopping trolleys and bicycle parts poke out from the surface; great dams of rubbish gather in the foamy backwaters; plastic bottles bob about. And all the time the town's drab skyline walks with them, rising above their tentative corridor of greenery; chimneys and rooftops, grey tower blocks, a disused gasworks, and to Daniel's left, a solitary crane (not of the flying kind) that points to the skeletons of yet another industrial estate.

Gulnaz is talking again. She's been using her connections to make some checks. Nobody has been reported missing from any of the local hospitals or psychiatric units. Now she's suggesting they attend the next service at St. Bart's to see if the rector or any member of the congregation had noticed anything unusual going on in the grounds on Christmas Day.

"And we should talk to the police."

That gets his full attention. Definitely not the police. Not a good idea at all.

"If I thought it was Alex, then maybe," he retorts. "But like I told you, it's not him. I know the hospital's keen to find out his identity, so let them call the police. I've got other things to worry about. Frankly, it's not my problem."

Gulnaz finally gets the message and says no more on the subject.

The next half a mile descends through a series of locks; graffiti-daubed, windowless rear walls of factories gradually hemming them in, litter beginning to choke the hedgerows, a continuous hum rising in the air from the advancing cobweb of electricity pylons to accompany the growing drone of traffic. At last the footpath sign steers them away from the canal and up through the industrial estate into the main shopping square. Its recent pedestrianisation at first leaves Daniel disorientated. It must be twelve months at least since he had cause to be here and so many shops have either gone or been vandalised beyond recognition. Ugly new-builds with exposed steel frames and dazzling halogen lighting bully their way between the few survivors of the old town. Café Lucca turns out to be a small, glass-fronted establishment just beyond the pedestrian zone, very seventies retro. Not Daniel's cup of tea at all. Brash and tacky would sum it up nicely. Everything brown and cream – okay, the colours of coffee and this is a café. Big shitty deal. The bitterness of roasting beans alone would have made that point. Their walk has given him a taste for sausage, beans and mash, but the menu proves to be all paninis and cold meats. Out of sheer necessity he grabs a pastry from the stack on the counter and opts for a cappuccino. Gulnaz, for all her zeal to take lunch, makes do with a salad.

“I can understand why you'd mistakenly thought he was Alex,” she announces suddenly, once they're seated. “But what I don't understand is the photograph.”

A muscle contracts in Daniel's chest. Shit, yes, he'd rather conveniently put that from his mind. Could he really believe that a total stranger had found a copy of that photo before conking out against his mother's gravestone?

“That's partly why I was suggesting the police,” her words jab again.

The pastry is suddenly too dry to swallow. “I don't know how he got hold of that photo, but believe me, I know the police. A trivial thing like that isn't going to interest them one bit, any more than it's going to draw the attention of a bunch of churchgoers on Christmas morning.” Talking with his mouth full isn't easy. The cappuccino is brought in to assist. “Believe me; round where I live, people keep themselves to themselves.”

The first attempt to drink delivers nothing but foam. He scowls into the cup. When on the second try the coffee touches his lips it's at boiling point and tastes like old fag butts. If this is 'real' coffee then he's happy to make do with the imaginary stuff back home, thanks all the same.

“I don't get this. Any more than I get that.” He points at her drink. Two pounds thirty. A cup straight out of a doll's house, half-filled with a thimbleful of tar. What the hell is that about? He returns his to the table, deliberately avoiding the saucer, wipes the scum from his

face and heads off to order something stronger. A familiar feeling is welling up inside. An anger. He wants to pick a fight with everything that's going on here. He wants to shake the whole institution by the shoulders and tell it to grow up. They're not in Italy, so why the Italian menus? These waitresses sure as hell don't read Italian and clearly nor do any of the customers. So why does everyone collude like this? Can't they see nothing has really changed? All this 'makeover', it's fooling no-one. It's still the same shithole of a town; all they've done is garnished it with tat.

The drinks menu, also in Italian, is of little help, but a rather elegant bottle of clear liquor on the bar between the vodkas and brandies catches his eye. The barman shrugs when asked about it, picks it up and reads the label.

"It's called Grappa. It's just, er, your white wine, basically," he says.

Daniel orders a double, downs it there and then, making sure his back is turned to Gulnaz, then orders a second to take back to their table. It most certainly is not 'basically just your white wine'. It has exactly the kick of a mule that he needs. This hasn't been the easiest of mornings. For most of it he's felt utterly manipulated. But if Café Lucca is where he has to chill then he might as well do it Italian-style. At least he can sink into these horrid brown leather chairs, sip his drink and wait it out until the world stops seesawing him up and down.

As he takes his seat, Gulnaz launches into an anecdote from her shift in the children's ward. To his surprise, Daniel finds himself drawing some comfort, not so much from the words themselves, but rather from the entertainments playing out across her face; from the little dances of her eyebrows and lips, from the melodies in her voice. A part of him wants to hold this moment. Let her talk, let him drink and let the world mind its own damn business.

But another part of him is tempted to break in with a different script, one that clears the air over where exactly they now stand with each other. They've been acquainted just three days, but already she has become so many things to him that he no longer knows quite which Gulnaz he's dealing with. At the start, she had been a meddling nuisance, then a welcome companion, then a brief obsession, then a two-timing heart-breaker. And now? Casual friend? Confidante? Private Eye? She might like to tell him just what they are doing here; why she wanted to meet at the hospital and why he'd agreed to walk with her. Here she sits, all sensitivity and small talk, no doubt expecting the same: what is she doing tomorrow? What did she have for dinner last night? They could be old schoolmates, or the product of a fleeting friendship on some past holiday – even ex-lovers: nothing really in common but a shared memory of something that's no longer there. Yes, he could return the polite chat. He could even raise the stakes, venture to delve into her past: how she got into nursing, when it

was that she'd left Iran, if any of her family were still alive. But for what? Surely that would require an investment of energy, something approaching commitment, and he'd have to be genuinely interested. In all honesty, if she's knocking off that doctor, it just didn't seem worth the bother.

The espresso she's ordered sits empty now at her side, just a deep stain remaining. The story over, she moves on now to the salad, lovingly anointing its varietal leaves with oils and vinegar. Daniel's half-finished Danish on a side plate looks vulgar by comparison. A charade it may be, but Café Lucca succeeds in shaming even him for not playing along. Another drink feels altogether more Mediterranean. She's going to be some time yet with that salad.

"Won't be a moment," he murmurs, pushing away his plate and taking his glass.

"Daniel, don't forget your car's waiting at the end of the canal. Won't another take you over the limit?"

Like a medical person needs to ask. It's true though, he'd forgotten about the car.

"Oh yeah..."

"No, actually it's fine. I can catch a bus from here straight home; pick up the car tomorrow."

Gulnaz drops her head and eats in silence – hard to know whether that's a green or a red light, so Daniel leaves her to it and re-joins the queue at the counter. By the time he's been served his third Grappa, another double, she has almost finished. When he sits again she makes no attempt to connect or even look up.

"Something wrong with the salad?"

"No, no. I must be going, actually."

"You alright? It's a bit sudden."

Finally she raises her head. "Well, I had hoped we might walk back together, Daniel."

"Yeah, I know. But it's just that there's no direct bus from there."

"It's fine. I'll go alone. Your drink is clearly more important."

She says it's fine; he swigs a mouthful. No, of course it isn't fine. Even Daniel George can spot neon flashing sarcasm. Shit. Why does he always have to be such a shit? Why can't he put this drink down, apologise for his moment of indiscretion and behave for once like a decent human being? They're on a date, for God's sake. Well, kind of. Whether they are or not, this is no way to treat someone you... respect.

"Well, if you're sure," he replies, and knocks back the rest of the Grappa.

## Escher

He's already thinking of her as he walks the hundred yards to the bus stop, and she's still troubling his thoughts by the time the bus pulls up. Through three successive bus rides he broods about nothing else. By the time he's reached the car and begun the snail-paced drive to work remorse and denial are waging pitched battles, each wave of guilt repelled by a counter-wave of excuses. As midday approaches, Daniel's defences finally give in. Okay, he needs to apologise. Yet somehow, by the time lunch has been queued for, chosen and paid for, eaten and cleared away, he has only ten minutes free-time left. The risk of having to cut her off mid-conversation is too great. He'll leave it till the afternoon break and phone her then.

It was all down to Alex – having to face the fact that he hadn't returned after all. And because of getting lost on the way from the ICU, and being plagued by all those shadows of the past. That was why he'd drunk so much, no reflection at all on Gulnaz. And he really regretted leaving her to make her own way home. He'd thoroughly enjoyed her company and, if she'd allow him, he'd love to make it up to her, perhaps tomorrow night (ah no, Saturday: the quarter-final of the pool tournament). Daytime then. And maybe they can do something together for New Year's Eve. Of course he'd go easy on the alcohol, just a toast for the sake of Auld Lang Syne. They could go to the... (no, *not* the Millwrights. Vinny's wine lodge in town. Altogether classier. After all, drunken louts don't sip white wine spritzers and perch on stainless steel bar stools eating tapas).

It all sounded great. But could he do it? When the three-thirty tea break arrives, a lot sooner than he would have wished, he goes to wash his hands and heads for the public phone by the entrance. For a moment he freezes before the booth, fists clenching and unclenching. A passing customer gives him a funny look; Daniel pretends to check his watch as though waiting for an incoming call. Once the coast is clear he grabs the receiver, only to slam it back in its cradle.

“Yeah, like I'd have known to bring her number with me.”

Gulnaz will have to wait until tonight.

In the end, he does ring her. Several times. First time around he gets her recorded voice and decides it's too impersonal to leave such an intimate message. Second time, he bottles out before the phone even connects. Third attempt and his courage fails him during the ring tone. Finally, before a fourth excuse can be found, there's a click and suddenly she is there, her voice sounding exhausted, yet her manner surprisingly soft and welcoming. All at once he's a

shy teenager at the school gates offering to carry the satchel of a first crush. Three openers are launched simultaneously: the remorseful child, the chirpy mate and the cool lover, all churned up into a right scotched broth. Yet amazingly she swallows it – sounds relieved to hear his voice. Of course she understands how difficult it must have been for him yesterday. She'd rather enjoyed the solitude of her walk back along the canal, and her bike ride home from the hospital. She's glad that he didn't risk taking the car after so much drink. Tomorrow? She's working all day at the nursing home, but if he wanted to come over in her break, there's a nice park opposite where they could sit and chat for half an hour. And she'd have been happy to spend New Year's Eve with him, but for the fact that again she's working. The residents are having their own New Year's Eve knees-up (Daniel has visions of thickly stockinged knees going up *very* slowly and not very far), so it's going to be all hands on deck. Maybe she could call round in the morning instead, after church.

They may be titbits she's throwing him, but the relief from his guilt is more than compensation. He'll see her tomorrow lunch time then, and, yes, he knows how to find the park.

Anyone who gets to have Prince Albert Gardens on their doorstep must be seriously in the money. God knows what this care home charges its residents. Newlyn House stands imposingly behind ornate, iron gates, just one of the many grand Georgian and Edwardian buildings that surround the park with deep-fronted gardens and high-bricked walls. As Daniel pulls into the drive, Gulnaz is already waiting on the porch. She's sorted him a parking space and waves him in. She looks nice. The jumper is the one she'd been wearing on their first trip to the hospital, the overcoat the one from their walk into town. But something about the collar is different. As Daniel approaches, a little unsure whether a kiss – even a formal one on the cheek – is permitted, it dawns on him that she probably has her nurse's uniform on beneath the other clothes. The stuff of dreams.

They cross the quiet, leafy avenue and walk the short distance to the park entrance. He wonders whether they ever let the inmates in through these gates; whether the locals would allow it. Daniel has been here a few times over the years. Prince Albert Gardens (or Prince Albert Gardens, as some wise-guy has renamed it through a judicious painting out of letters) is one of the town's few true escapes, a world away from the dog-shit and garbage, factories and flats. Given that entry is free, the humorist's jibe presumably targets the neighbourhood. This is where the moneyed people live: the bankers and lawyers, the university professors, the senior executives, the surgeons and consultants. Who knows, one of those proud brick chimneys breaking surface through the ocean of treetops might even belong to the palatial

residence of a certain doctor Prentice.

It's a thought that must be shoved aside. There are bridges to be built today. It's important to stay positive. "Of course this place will look better in the spring," he throws off casually, "but I must say, they've not done a bad job with these evergreens." He proceeds to detail the subtle reds, whites and yellows brought to the borders by pittosporum, photinia, aucuba, dogwood and Christmas box; the hollies and skimmias with their brilliant crimson berries. Textbook stuff, he declares (which is precisely where he's learnt it. It has been a long hard struggle getting to know his horticulture, and Daniel has never been shy in flaunting it in front of a woman).

Gulnaz nods and wheels around with outstretched glove. "Yes, and a fine spread of oak, cedar, beech, hawthorn, ash and rowan." She reels off the species in a single sweep. Touché. "Shall we take a stroll?"

Together they follow the winding path, Gulnaz leading the way. The route inscribes a figure of eight, working slowly through the mixed borders, down towards the bandstand. It's only then that Daniel catches sight of the duck pond beyond – so like the one to which he'd imagined taking his wheelchair-bound twin on his daily outing, rug, drool and all. Two care workers from the home are already there doing precisely that. As Gulnaz approaches, each of them acknowledges her with a wave and inquisitive glance towards Daniel. She returns their greeting but denies them their introductions.

"I'm afraid it's not exactly private here," she concedes, drawing Daniel away from the water. "Come on, I know somewhere better."

She turns her back on the pond and takes him directly uphill to a secluded spot on the edge of a clearing, where a dainty wooden bench has been strategically placed against a backdrop of cedars. She runs a forefinger over a little brass plaque on its top slat.

"In memory of John Barnes, who loved to sit here? So, what came first, the bench or John Barnes' backside?"

Her riddle makes Daniel laugh. Either way, that backside had made a smart choice. Not only is the seat well sheltered, but it would also have afforded Mr. Barnes a commanding view of the entire park, from east boundary to west and all the way down to the bandstand and duck pond. Gulnaz flops down, pulls a packet of cigarettes from her coat, lights one and offers him the rest.

"No thanks. I didn't think you would. Being a nurse."

"It's only the odd one now and then. After a hard day. It helps me unwind. You don't?"

He makes a face. No, smoking is one of the few vices that Daniel has never indulged. Too many associations. It was what the big boys at school would do. And Alex – Jesus, before he was nine! Not to mention his mother.

Pulling on the cigarette, Gulnaz begins to offload about the party, the amount of work it has already taken to organise, and how much more there is still to do. “We’re short-staffed as it is,” she grumbles, “but we’ll be three staff down tomorrow. The place is going to be heaving. They’ve decided that each resident can invite up to two guests. But I suppose we’ll cope, somehow.

“And how about you, Daniel, how are you coping, now you’re so sure that man isn’t Alex?”

“You really want to know? To be honest, it’s a relief.” Daniel drops his head. “I’d kept dreaming up one horrible scenario after another. You know, for the things that might have happened to him. I had this one idea of a man with a dugout in his garden...”

The image of a tortured Alex without teeth, fed nothing but Mars Bars, some burly, sweaty maniac leering over him in the semidarkness of his bunker, puts an immediate stop to the telling.

“And being in a coma like that. I mean, what happens if someone never wakes up? How long before they...? You know. And who decides?”

For the first time in days Gulnaz touches his hand. “Dr Prentice was sure he’ll come round.”

“Yeah, but say he’s all messed up, in his brain. If he’d been Alex, I’d have been the one left to take care of him.” He points back at her workmates. “Doing what those two down there are doing. That could have been me from now on.”

Every weekend for the rest of forever. Goodbye to Sundays at the Millwrights. Goodbye to pie and chips and a leisurely few pints of Pedigree. Goodbye to setting the world to rights around a beer-stained pool table. Hello to responsibilities. Changed priorities. Like becoming a parent to a helpless infant.

Yes, unquestionably a relief.

“Oh, I’m sure it wouldn’t have come to that,” Gulnaz insists. “He’s receiving the best of care. There’s no reason to suggest that the poor man, whoever he is, won’t make a full recovery.” She takes a final drag on the cigarette and stares upwards at the clouds. He watches her lips make an oval, and follows the trail of her smoke slowly disperse until caught by the wind and annihilated. If that unconscious, bedridden stranger is not Alex, then might it be better if he never recovered? Wouldn’t it be easier all-round just to have him deleted from

history? To think how close he'd come to ripping out the tubing from the guy's nose and limbs. The memory of it makes him shudder.

"You're cold," she says, as if reading his character as well as his movements. "And I'd best be getting back anyway."

Apparently, Daniel's thirty minutes is up.

She stands and turns, brushes ash from her coat. "I'll call by tomorrow then, shall I? After the service. Unless you fancy coming?"

"No, you're alright."

Of course he's keen to see her again.

But not that keen.

"I'll meet you at the north gate."

\* \* \*

Saturday's triumph in the quarter-finals, seeing off the Royal Standard Poolstars four games to three, inevitably leads to calls for a Sunday morning liquid debrief. Daniel's playing has been solid, if unspectacular, Threadbare's a little hit and miss but occasionally devastating, while that of team captain Bladder has been consistently fast, aggressive and deadly accurate, most crucially during the cliff-hanger of the final black. By Sunday, Bladder has been elevated from man of the match to hero of the day, affording him ample opportunity to live up to his moniker – not one visit to the gents during the entire morning's revelry. It all places considerable strain on Daniel's resolve to greet Gulnaz both sober and on time. Eyebrows rise as he begins passing up the offers of drink. By twelve thirty a consensus has been reached that Daniel is either sick or in love. Probably both. When at twelve forty-five he climbs from the table, a table still creaking under the weight of at least sixteen cued-up pints and twice that number of empties, only team mascot Jerry can muster a civilised goodbye. The rest of the mob simply shower him with tawdry abuse.

The uphill climb to the church does the power of good. The morning is clear and crisp, dry underfoot, with a breeze keen enough to freshen his clothes and breath. According to his watch he's early, though the church entrance can't be seen from the north gate, nor the hymns be heard through its heavy walls. But he can see the end of the path to the lichgate, as well as the track that winds his way. As yet, there is no-one in sight. Another five minutes passes before the first of the congregation emerges, and with them a faint crescendo of organ music. As more and more figures spill out into the churchyard Daniel finds himself growing more excited and more anxious, increasingly the latter as the crowd begins to thin again. Eventually though, Gulnaz appears. She's entirely dressed in black, hair buried beneath a

headscarf, never before looking so Middle-Eastern. For a while she vanishes behind the hawthorn trees and is suddenly close enough to spot him, her large white teeth lighting up her whole face. It seems the most natural thing, when he opens the gate to let her through, that they should kiss – just a friendly peck, a pair of them to be precise, one on each cheek.

For a second time in under a week they set off down Cooper's Hill, over the crossing and into Sedgefield Court. This time there's no hurry, and conversation can be a good deal more reciprocal. Gulnaz describes the service as having been simple but uplifting, the sermon promoting humility and grace for the year ahead. Daniel counters with the previous night's pool victory, no place for grace or humility in the fierce battle that now finds Millwrights' Mastercues poised to clinch the regional trophy. This morning's drink fest is hinted at, but not dwelt upon.

Anxious this time to make an impression, Daniel finds the welcome offered at his doorstep more than a trifle infuriating. With its general stink and clutter, the lobby is always the low point in bringing home a new pickup. Today it surpasses itself; swarming with human traffic, a blockage on the stairs, another at the pigeonholes as discarded junk mail is trampled underfoot, and a third along the corridor, one girl fumbling to release her bicycle from the two others chained to the stair rails. Unable to move, Daniel and Gulnaz can do nothing but wait; plenty of time for her to absorb the vulgar graffiti, the stained paintwork, the piles of empty boxes and bottles, the heady aromas of stale cooking and toilets.

She observes all this without comment. Only when they finally round the corner to his flat does she snatch a sharp breath and laugh out loud. "Oh my god!" She mimics the expression on the face of his neighbour's fearsome Santa Claus, "Now there's something to give me nightmares."

"Mrs Cropley's idea of seasonal cheer," Daniel snorts.

"And what's the story here?" Her attention has now fixed on the door to Mrs Cropley's right. Its window also contains a striking decoration: that of a spider's web of cracked glass centred around a bullet-sized hole. A wooden board behind holds the fragile mosaic in place. Across the lower half of the door the words 'Polack Shit' are sprayed in blue aerosol.

"That's been empty for a while now. Hasty evacuation."

"Oh dear. But now *this* is funny." She's scrutinising his doorbell. "I didn't spot it before."

He peers over her shoulder. "Uh? Oh that. Yeah, very witty." For the most part, Daniel's flat has escaped the vandals, gunslingers and aerosol wielders. The glass to his door is reinforced, frosted and curtained, triple protection against snoopers or intruders. The wood

is painted battleship grey, a near perfect match to the walls of the lobby, as if hoping it might disappear altogether. Only the doorbell has been targeted. His own personalised graffiti. Above the name George, some smartarse has written a column of other names:

John

Paul

and below his name, with an arrow curling up to the push button, the words: 'And Ringo!' Very droll.

Daniel sighs. "Better, I suppose, than 'Polack Shit' and an air rifle bullet."

Gulnaz wipes her feet and follows him through.

Kitchen aside, by the standards of her first visit the flat is quite presentable. And, though Gulnaz would never have guessed, it's really all down to her. Daniel's Boxing Day clean-up, embraced with such gusto in anticipation of their cosy night in, has generally survived the subsequent neglect. Daniel might have cause to feel good about this, but for the foul stench that now hits them both like a truck – of something having crept in and died. As it happens, this is also largely down to Gulnaz. The double bank holiday having postponed bin collection for a week, and with everyone's black bags piling up outside his windows, many already ravaged by vermin for their turkey carcasses, Daniel has been holding off putting out his own rubbish for as long as possible. For five days now, his gourmet meal of chicken portions with tinned carrots in mushroom soup has been mercilessly composting away in the kitchen bin. Somehow he's been oblivious to the stink until now. But that's the joy of bringing a woman into the home – suddenly becoming aware of all the little things.

He quickly ushers her into the sitting room in order to deal with the problem, quietly hoping to find her stretched out seductively on the sofa when he gets back. But he returns instead to discover her standing stiffly at the window.

"You have a cat," she pronounces. Scoff purrs at her from Daniel's favourite chair.

"Oh yeah, I do. He's called Scoff. You didn't meet him before?"

She shakes her head tersely. "I'm afraid I'm not so good with cats. It's their fur, it affects my breathing."

Not the greatest start then if she doesn't even like cats. He shoos Scoff away and closes the door to the kitchen. The most natural thing in the world now would be to fix her a drink, but with alcohol currently something of a dirty word, he can think of nothing to offer her beyond his vilified coffee.

"Do you have any tea?" she asks.

"Tea. Yeah, I think so. Tea bags."

“That would be fine. Black, no sugar.”

Almost certainly not the way she normally takes it. No warmed pot or fresh leaves. No tea cosy or silver strainer. No fine bone china. Just black, no sugar. Simple enough even for him not to ruin. He sets off for the kitchen, catches Scoff just in time from slinking back to his chair, and pulls the door to. Gulnaz may read this as him wanting privacy. Not a whisper emerges from the next room the whole time he is away. Itchy to finish and check on what she’s up to, he chucks the tea bag in the bin, sloshes milk and sugar into his own coffee, grabs a pack of digestives and backs his way through the door.

“I was having another look at the photo,” she says, as he hands her the mug. “I was looking at your father.”

The Devonport photograph he’d gone to such pains to dig out on Christmas Day now perches on the shelf over the radiator. Daniel can’t remember having put it there.

“He was handsome. He looked like you.”

With the picture in one hand, her tea in the other, Gulnaz proceeds to circle the room. Pausing at his bookcase, she crouches down and runs an eye along the titles with an expression of growing surprise. Books on seafaring, military history, astronomy, science-fiction, illusions and magic, travel, mathematics, marine life, conchology.

“Goodness.”

He grunts. “So what were you expecting?”

“I don’t know really. But not this. These are fascinating.”

Maybe they do have something in common after all, even if it’s not cats.

Standing again, she scrutinises a picture above the bookcase, a brightly coloured abstract of repeating geometric shapes that has been Blu-tacked to the wall. “Computer graphics?” she asks, puzzled.

“A stereogram,” he explains.

“I thought that was something for playing records.”

“You got to stare right through it. Then you’ll see a 3-D image.”

After a few seconds of staring, she shrugs and moves on. “Can’t see anything. What should I have seen?”

“A sailing boat. It works best when you’re knackered.” Or better still, pissed, he muses.

Gulnaz laughs. “Then it should work for me every time.” She’s stopped now before a framed drawing in the corner near the window. “And what’s this?”

“That one? It’s called ‘Ants on a Mobius Strip’. One of those impossible drawings by Escher – you know, like the people going up and down an endless staircase, the fishes

becoming birds. I've got a whole book of them, but this was always my favourite." He steps over to join her. "Partly because, unlike most of Escher's stuff, or the stereogram, a Mobius strip isn't actually an optical illusion at all. They're real. Easy to make, actually."

"What's so special about them?"

"Well, follow the ants – there are ants on the front of the strip and ants on the back, but really it's all just one pathway. Twists back on itself, round the reverse side and round again back to the front."

"Surely then that's impossible."

"Not at all. Hang on, I'll show you."

It must all seem a bit mad to her, this enthusiasm. Is this going to be his post-alcohol strategy with women? Hey, we can't get wasted together but I can sure entertain you with magic tricks. Wait till you see what I'm going to pull out of the hat later! Dubious. Very dubious.

He grabs a sheet of A4, some scissors, Sellotape and a pencil from the drawer. Before turning around, he trims a length off the side of the paper and pre-cuts a small square of sticky tape.

"Okay. First thing. Take a strip of paper." He holds it up to the light. No hidden trapdoors, no mirrors.

"Put a mark on one side to make it easier to follow." After a moment's thought he draws an ant half way along the strip.

"Now, twist the two ends..." He ensures the paper is kept taut to emphasise this all important step.

"...And join them together to form a loop." Pinching the tips together between his left thumb and forefinger, he takes up the tape with his right hand and makes a secure join.

"There you go. One Mobius strip."

He offers her the ring. She lets it nestle on the palm of her hand, compares it with Escher's picture, traces its single surface with a finger, from his drawing of the ant, once around to the reverse side and round again to where she began.

"Amazing!"

"Ah, but that's not the trick. Watch this."

He is nine again. He sits cross-legged on a loud, flower-patterned carpet. He wears a formidable top hat. A thin black wand is propped against the box of delights, Christmas wrappers everywhere, his mother in the kitchen. Delicious smells of turkey and roast potatoes. Darker evocations too, but now is not the time for those.

“If I take these scissors and cut along its length, all the way around the loop, what will happen?”

“You’ll end up with two loops.”

“Okay, try it.”

She does. When the loop remains a whole, twice as long, her cry of joy echoes his own from all those years ago. Daniel feigns surprise.

“Oh! That can’t be right. Perhaps you’d better try again.”

Not such a bad strategy after all. She’s become girly and bendy, tactile and giggly like girls do when they’re drunk. Gulnaz finds, just as Daniel had done that infamous Christmas Day, that having cut around the loop again, she’s created two interconnected Mobius rings. She laughs with delight.

“How clever. Are you Scientist or Magician?”

Daniel scoffs. The darkness breaks surface again. How often he’s asked himself that one. Who knows, maybe given a second chance he could have been both scientist *and* magician, not ended up as some poxy labourer. If someone would care to turn back the clock to 1982, give him the schooling he was owed – allow him the study that was denied him...

“If it hadn’t been for looking after my disaster of a mother, I reckon I’d have made a brilliant mathematician. I could have been a scholar. Cambridge or Oxford. The next Stephen Hawking. I’ve read it, you know – ‘A Brief History’ – when I was just fifteen. You’ll find it there in the bookcase. I know loads of people have it, just to show how sophisticated they are, but I bet very few have ever read a single page. But I have – well, as far as chapter ten; string theory didn’t work for me. I had my own ideas on that one.”

Gulnaz runs a hand along his arm. “You’re very clever. You must have cared an awful lot for your mother to have sacrificed all that for her.”

“Like I had a choice? She buggered up my education, that’s all I know.”

He bites his lip. Gulnaz is trying to be nice. Must he always keep kicking it back in her face? By way of amends, he brings their attention back to the magic trick, carefully placing his left hand beneath hers and lifting the rings from her palm with the other.

“After Alex had gone missing, I used to imagine me and him being something like this in our mum’s tummy. Our DNA was a Mobius loop that got cut in half, which is how we ended up as twins.”

“Profound!”

“Ah yes. A true visionary, that was me: like Buddha or Newton under their trees – only I studied the world from the branches of mine; up in my ‘Green House’ for hours on end,

just working it all out.”

“You had a greenhouse up in a tree!?”

“Not *a* greenhouse; *The Green House*. Well, originally the ‘Greengage House’. Alex named it that. It sort of stuck. It was our little wooden platform that Dad built for us up in the greengage tree. It wasn’t anything much, but to me it was a hundred magical places,” – the deck of a frigate, the command module of a spaceship, a makeshift raft, the battlements of a castle. “I remember, some months after Alex’s fall, I was up in the crow’s nest of a galleon, on watch. I heard a noise below and looked down through the wooden planks. And I swear I saw Alex sitting right beneath me with his back against the base of the mast. Only for a second. But I’d been practising the loop trick, and had all these Mobius loops scattered about. I think that’s when I decided that the two of us – like these rings wrapped around each other – could never truly be separated, because really we were only one.” That little fissure in his voice has returned. “Funny. There were moments in the past few days when it seemed I might have been right all along.”

And somehow they are kissing. Maybe she makes the first move, maybe he does. The Mobius rings get crushed somewhere along the way. It all begins in some innocence, lips brushing lips, restraint slowly yielding in waves. She doesn’t kiss like other girls. Not all coy one minute and eating him up the next. Her lips push and give, somehow communicating her whole character. And the taste of her mouth – freshened by the tea; he suddenly wants more than anything to take her to bed. Does his body give him away? Did the nature of his touch alter for a moment? Nothing overt, not a presumptuous hand or a pelvic movement, maybe just a change of motivation. Her body stiffens and the magic in her kiss begins to die.

As she draws back, a slight resistance briefly keeps their lips from parting. Just centimetres away, her eyes scan his as though probing for an answer. Or seeking reassurance. He stares back with equal uncertainty. Is this regret he’s seeing? Or censure? Does she hold him responsible for having gone this far? Has he destroyed everything?

“I’m going to knock it on the head, you know – the drinking. Drinking to excess. I’ve decided.”

Though he’s convinced it’s the very promise she’s been longing to hear, the words hang unclaimed in the air for several seconds.

“I’m glad,” is all she says.

“I mean, I don’t really have a problem,” he hurries on. “You know, normally it’s just social drinking. But Christmas night, and in the café, coming straight after the hospital, and everything before that, my head was just a bit messed up. I think the drink was just a way of

coping.”

“Yes.”

“Don’t worry; I’ve seen what it can do to people. I don’t want to go there.”

“That’s good.” Still she won’t be drawn, but her face radiates a certain calmness as she tidies her jumper and neatens her hair. It’s time, she announces, for her to be off. There’s a lot to get done at the home before the party. She’s been here less than twenty minutes, never even sat down. But she’s already swallowing the last of her tea and moving towards the door. Knowing it’s useless to argue, Daniel overtakes her and fetches her coat.

This woman. She’ll either be the death of him, or be the one to save his life.

## Long Mynd

“Now that,” Daniel proclaims to the small circle gathered around him, “was a party to remember!” and he gulps a lungful of night air. It carries a hint of cordite. Someone somewhere has chosen to celebrate with fireworks. It’s an autumnal smell, minus the bitter-sweet of bonfires, recalled to herald the turning of the year. The sky is clear, already a degree or two below zero, but its stars are lost to so many street lamps, late buses and taxis, pubs and houses still ablaze with festive light.

“The best New Year’s Eves are the ones you *don’t* remember,” comes a quip from somewhere in the group. Everyone laughs.

What a night! Vinny’s in town running special offers on all cocktails and sparkling wines and laying on a free ‘all-you-can-eat’ buffet with live jazz (tickets at twenty pounds per head). Time enough to pig out and get well oiled before grabbing the last bus to the Millwrights for the big Twelve-O, a theme this year (actually every year) of vicars and tarts, with beers at half price after ten and an extension till two, all the gang there in fancy dress: Threadbare, Bladder and Debs, Sami and Trish, Mick and Sonia, and best of all, Gorgeous Gail off duty. Gorgeous Gail in fishnets and a low-cut blouse! Then again, Threadbare with dog-collar *and* woolly jumper – what was he, the vicar of bloody Dibley? A complete riot. No, really it was a *riot* – they had to call out the police with dogs and ambulances. One drugs overdose, four cases of heat exhaustion and two bottlings, half a dozen arrests, several thousand pounds worth of damage and the pub closed for twenty-four hours.

All of which Daniel knows nothing of for now. He’s chalked up some pretty outrageous New Year’s Eves over the years, well on a par with such lunacy at the Millwrights, but tonight’s must surely rank as one of the most extraordinary. To his surprise, even the most ancient of the residents were an absolute hoot. He helped find seats for everyone’s guests, made sure their coats were safe, took it upon himself to pour the drinks and play at waitering with the trays of sandwiches. To everyone’s delight he even organised the background music and led the Karaoke. It left Gulnaz free to make sure everybody was warm enough, had their medication, could be helped with their feeding and had easy access to the toilets.

He lost count of the number of times he was told he must come again, or that he reminded someone of their grandson. ‘Who’s this handsome young fellow of yours then, Miss Gulnaz?’ one of them had teased. As 2006 tipped over into 2007, as poppers popped, glasses of squash or cups of tea were raised or spilt, as hands came together joining the seated, the standing and the lying down, and as New Year kisses were exchanged between those with

teeth and those without, Daniel felt he'd been awarded a new lease of life, with Gulnaz to thank for it all. Of course she was too professional to repeat the intimacy she had shared with him earlier. Even so, their entirely innocent kiss – a respectable ten minutes after the chimes and singing – induced a chorus of aahs and oohs and a clearly heard, 'Told you so,' from somewhere at the back. It didn't bother Daniel one iota.

While the other volunteers and care home staff say their goodbyes and go their various ways, he and Gulnaz slink back into the shadows to wait for the car park to clear. When she kisses him again it's a kiss he is reassured to discover that retains all the intensity and melting power of before. This time he is careful to keep thoughts of sex under wraps. The thick fur-lined Parka she wears puts another safety layer between them.

At the end of their kiss he feels again the separation of lips, finds her eyes once more searching his, but sees no trace now of anxiety in her face.

"You were really great tonight," she whispers. "Everyone said so. I'm so grateful to you for helping out."

He tudies the hood of her Parka around her ears.

"Ah well, it was fun. I wanted you to see I'm not just some boozy waster."

She pouts theatrically. "You mean it was all just to impress me?"

"Well, yes, to be honest: to start with. God, why else volunteer to spend New Year with a crowd of geriatrics? Though I knew you could do with the extra help. But it wasn't the way I'd expected at all. I mean they're actually a really fun bunch."

Her face lifts again. "You flirted all night with Mrs Shenton-Stevens."

He tuts. "Other way around! Other way around! She reminded me of my gran. Same moustache."

"Don't be horrible." She smacks his chest and laughs.

Daniel shushes her. "Guli, I've been thinking a lot about things. Things from when I was a kid. I want to go back there – with you. Can you take some time off?"

"Back to Devon, you mean?"

They're walking now, across the car park to the bicycle racks and Gulnaz is fishing for the key to her bike chain. He can already tell she is going to say no, but the disappointment when she does is no less painful. There's the care home to think of, she explains, the possibility that she might be required again at the hospital. And a few days from now she'll be going on a short training course. Plus, to be honest, it's too soon. "When I get back," she suggests. "Let's take it from there." The padlock clicks and she smiles, but to him the smile looks contrived. His is also a real effort. He clearly has more to do to prove himself. Tonight

wasn't enough.

“Okay, tomorrow then. Just the two of us, while we still can, out into the country somewhere. Malvern Hills or Shropshire. Anywhere but this shit-hole of a town.”

She has her cycle clips on and is wheeling the bike out of its rack. They walk together to his car; she mounts the saddle and balances on one toe. There is something about cyclists that never ceases to baffle him – why anyone in their right mind would ever choose such a mode of transport.

“That’s a lovely idea. I’ll do us a packed lunch with hot tea. Will you pick me up? Name a time.”

They agree midday – it’s already well after one and they’re both shattered. They kiss fleetingly. She pushes herself off and pedals into the sodium lights as he sinks wearily into marginally warmer upholstery, watching her go. Nice the way she moves her hips. Cycling may be daft, but what a spectator sport. He turns on the radio and starts the engine. Today has been a good day. When was it that he’d last said that to himself?

\* \* \*

Just six hours later, yet feeling brighter than he’s done in weeks, Daniel sets about knocking out one of his classic fry-ups. It proves to be one of the tastiest cooked breakfasts he’s ever made (perhaps because the full English normally served as his anti-hangover doomsday weapon, always having to do battle with forces heading up the other way); eggs just perfect, toast soldiers impeccably turned out, bacon crisp, the beans piping hot, tomatoey and sweet.

A quick sweep of the decks and a dash to the bathroom to relieve himself, clean teeth and check hair, and he’s ready for the off. Definitely a coat and scarf job, judging by the flapping bin bags in the yard. Warmth over sex appeal, regrettably. But one step at a time. The main thing is to be with her. On the way out he instinctively snatches a bottle of red wine. A picnic isn’t a picnic without... Then he replaces it.

She’d said tea. That spoke volumes.

The car rounds the corner into her street, his first visit since that cringe-worthy pilgrimage from the Millwrights six nights ago. Shutters are still down at the chemist’s, heavy bars still defending the jeweller’s, but the florist’s, a convenience store and a chippy have now opened their doors for business. Gulnaz is waiting on the pavement as usual. It’s a wonder she doesn’t get propositioned standing there like that. He wonders if she even *has* a home. She dumps her rucksack on the back seat, climbs in beside him, kisses him warmly on the cheek and asks, with childlike excitement, “So, where are we going?”

On the spur of the moment he opts for The Long Mynd. A destination that's more than an hour's drive, with the short midwinter day already half over, may not seem entirely sensible, but nowhere nearer has the kind of magical qualities he's after. In any case, it isn't long before the journey itself weaves a certain magic, turning ring-roads into A-roads and crowded towns into open country. The changes of scenery steer them from unpicking last night's celebrations onto planning the remainder of the day. By Daniel's calculations, they'll have sufficient light to trek about two miles out and back, leaving an hour or so for the picnic. It's Gulnaz's first taste of Shropshire. She's never even heard of the Long Mynd. Working such long hours and with no car of her own, she seldom gets away at all, never mind to somewhere as inspiring as this. Yet she's always loved the English countryside; the lushness, the softness, the wild skies, even the much maligned British weather, all so unlike the world of her childhood. Daniel insists that Devon is far superior – she only has to say the word.

As the road carves a way through the hills it seduces them with one archetypal English town after another – All Stretton, Church Stretton, Little Stretton – like a community closed to outsiders, all the Strettons descended from a single family. At Craven Arms (a place, not a pub, much to Gulnaz's amusement) the car pulls off the main highway and onto a steep, lonely B-road that zigzags its way up into the clouds. Gulnaz is assigned the job of spotting the first picnic site they come across. A few miles further into the wilderness she sees one: a perfect little hollow in the hills, sheltered from the wind, spacious enough for three or four cars but utterly deserted today, and bordered by wooden picnic tables. A footpath leads directly from it through a gate into the hills.

The weather holds out pretty kindly for them on their walk, all things considered. As fast as the cloud cover builds from the east it's dispersed again in its tumble over the peaks. Always the sun manages to keep one step ahead, even dodging the lower clouds that scurry along the horizon. The Long Mynd snakes ahead of them, a vast gorge of shifting light and shadow that leads their eyes from one gully to the next. Their chief antagonist, the wind, pulls them off balance, keen and determined to prise them from the slopes. Daniel feels like a speck of dust clinging stubbornly to the grooves of a record as someone tries to blow it clean.

Battling with such elemental forces always has a recalibrating effect. The converging lines of skyline and valley floor bring a renewed sense of perspective. His last visit had been two autumns ago, following a particularly harrowing and tunnel-visioned season at Greenalls. Everyone had gone into meltdown at the council's approval of a huge new Focus DIY store in the adjacent retail park. Protests and petitions were hastily mounted to 'fight the demise of

local businesses and keep out the corporate bullies'. Some local papers had rallied, others championing the consumer's right to greater choice and cheaper goods. In the end, money and influence had won over. The new store was built; Greenalls took the hit, refocused its range, laid off some of the workforce and staggered forward. Daniel had survived it. An afternoon of burning muscle and blowing off cobwebs in the Long Mynd had reminded him how trivial it all was; how pointless to get stressed over something so utterly beyond his control.

Now the landscape is talking again. Today it's something about scale and timelessness, the Mynd's total disregard for humankind, its mockery of those planners' sheep-like attempts to funk up his town with foreign fads. In less time than it would take for these hills to heave a single breath, their gimmicks will have been replaced by the next 'latest thing'; from London, from Paris, from New York, who knows, maybe even from China or the Middle East – maybe her lot: the Iranians, all depending on who gets the next turn to wield world influence and power. Before these slopes have been re-sculpted even by millimetres, great swathes of the town will have been demolished, replaced and demolished again. Famous high street names, family businesses going back generations, bold but ill-conceived new enterprises, all will have been wiped out to make way for fresh ventures; fortunes won and lost; the cycle turning over and over. These hills could tell him stories going back thousands of years, show off old scars inflicted by populations long gone: the scars of battle, scars of agriculture, scars of industrial revolution, even scars of trusts and environmentalists. The Long Mynd endures them all like a patient parent, shakes its head at man's foolery and arrogance and waits for time to take revenge and heal its wounds.

Progress along the steep-sided slopes is proving slower than he'd expected. Their walking window of an hour and a half most definitely won't get them two miles from the car. Last time he was here, the regular stretches of level track had offered some respite to his back and ankles, but rains have of the past week have turned these into deep bogs. Gulnaz too he can see is struggling, the stiffness he'd noticed before having visibly spread down her left leg. But none of that seems capable of dampening her mood. She's clearly ecstatic just to be here. She seems to drink in the space and the freedom. Recalibration: if it always dwarfs the bad things then what about the good things? Does the Long Mynd tell him that this woman is really an irrelevance? And Alex too? Does it laugh at the things he's feeling now in studying her? He watches her clamber further down the valley to marvel at a bird, at first drawn by its song and now watching it spring from the trees and do battle with the sky. As she gazes back up at him he sees her – not shrunk down to a speck, but magnified, almost as mighty as the

clouds and hills. The sensation is unfamiliar and slightly disconcerting. But as she climbs back towards him, stops, snatches her mobile from her jacket like a pistol drawn and cries out ‘Say Cheese!’ Daniel finds himself returning the demanded smile and holding it long after the shot has been fired. So no, oddly, Long Mynd does not belittle the good things. It holds them in respect; it elevates them.

They push on for another hour. She seems set to walk forever, pausing, racing ahead, taking more photos, but at two-thirty Daniel insists they turn around. Despite breakfast, his fuel gauge has dropped well into the red. When finally they make it back to the picnic site he is ravenous.

Gulnaz pulls her rucksack from the back of the car, lays it down on a bench and begins to unload the extraordinary collection that makes up their feast. First out of the bag is a large plastic sheet, which she spreads out, not over the table but rather over the grass beside it. A decorative tablecloth follows, placed at the centre of the sheet, then a container through which Daniel can see something white suspended in water, and another filled with small dark parcels. A tea-towel next, wrapped to suggest something fragile inside. Then a small glass jar of olives. One of tiny red chillies. A bag of flat bread. A biscuit tin with indecipherable writing on it like hieroglyphics. Fruits of all kinds and a large flask. Finally glasses, plates, cutlery, salt and pepper, other ground spices and napkins.

As the preparations unfold, one by one the hidden secrets are revealed. The white lump in water is in fact feta cheese, the dark parcels a serving of stuffed vine leaves. From inside the tea-towel comes a spray of assorted fresh herbs; in the biscuit tin: pistachio nougat dipped in flour, and in the flask: black tea flavoured with orange blossom.

She seats herself on the sheet just short of the tablecloth and gestures at the space opposite. “*Befarmaeed*,” she says. “Please, join me.”

Taking his place, Daniel pictures the pair of them in aerial view – knees to their chests, facing each other across this exotic rug like hippies who should be sharing kaftans and a bong. So incongruous and surreal: an iconic British landscape on a cold January afternoon in which sits a man who’s about to sample his first lazy Persian summer’s picnic.

Gulnaz proceeds to delight in offering commentary on each of the items she lays on their plates. The vine leaves are stuffed with rice, herbs and ground lamb, before being simmered in pomegranate juice (a recipe she tells him that came from her mother). The bread is made by adding yoghurt to flour and rolling out extremely thin before baking. The ground spice is sumac, the herbs a mix of tarragon, sweet basil, mint, chives, spring onions and radishes – an essential part of any Persian meal, as fundamental to an Iranian as a side salad to

a European, or a portion of frozen peas to an Englishman. Her gentle mockery helps Daniel to relax.

“I don’t get it. You only came up with this idea last night. But this is amazing. How on earth did you get all this together so quickly?”

She chuckles. “You’ve already seen what I can do with a fridge full of odds and ends;” modesty, he strongly suspects, that belies half a night of raiding cupboards and slaving away in the kitchen, if not an early morning dash through the ethnic supermarkets. Though the exotic flavours are strange at first to his palette, they go together so perfectly that they can’t fail to win him over. And to his amazement he finds, for the first time in years, that he has no urge whatsoever to wash it all down with a four-pack of lager or a half bottle of wine.

“God, it’s no wonder your lot don’t drink with food this good,” he tells her.

“Oh! We drink, alright – behind closed doors. Before the revolution you could buy wine, beer, spirits, everything. Muslims aren’t supposed to of course, which is why the government banned it. But as I’d said, I’m from a Christian family. Islam is not the only religion in Iran, though if you could see the country now you’d be hard pushed to believe it.” Her hands busy themselves in sifting herbs and tearing bread. “I was only six at the time of the revolution and didn’t really understand what was happening. But I remember a neighbour of ours keeping wine down in his cellar. One had to be ever so careful not to get caught.”

“What would happen if you were?”

She deliberates for a moment. “Let’s just say there were very strict penalties. They were Muslims actually, our neighbours, but not terribly devout ones. Most nights after supper they would sit on their *sofreh*, just as we’re doing now, with their tea things laid out, but their *estacans* actually filled with wine.” She raises her tea glass. “My job was to go round and sit on the small balcony that overlooked the street and watch out for Mullers.”

“Sounds a bit risky then. Did they pay you to do that?”

“Oh no. I used to take my homework with me.”

“So what was in it for you?”

Her mood darkens. “A chance to get my own back on those ridiculous little men in beards.”

“Didn’t your own family drink?”

“No,” she says, still stern-faced. “No, my mother’s constitution couldn’t take it, and my father was no longer with us by then.”

The closing words sound pointedly chosen. Ambiguous yet non-negotiable. He’s relieved now that he hadn’t started delving into her past in the café. It sounded too much like

his own. One screwed up childhood is enough for now. As if to underline his thoughts, she suddenly asks, “Do you mind if we talk about Alex again for a moment?”

He looks up in alarm. “What about him?”

She shifts awkwardly on the plastic sheet before replying. “Please don’t get annoyed, I know you’re convinced it was all a mistake and you’re struggling to put it behind you, but I went down to the ICU on Friday and had another look for myself. Daniel, I was just so shocked by the likeness. I see it now, because I know your face so much better. I really don’t think we should lose hope before we’ve seen the DNA results. Dr Prentice said he would hurry them along.”

“You never said.”

“I was going to, yesterday. But there was never a right moment.”

Daniel hopes that dusting the flour off the last chunk of nougat and refilling his tea will convey his indifference.

“I told you. It’s not him.”

“Well, okay.”

He’s not convinced he’s managed yet to close the subject. “Show me the pictures you’ve taken.”

Gulnaz wipes her hands and opens her mobile, scrolls through various menus and retrieves the images. She giggles before handing them over. About fifteen in all, some landscapes and cloudscapes, a couple of birds in flight and far too many pictures of Daniel looking windswept and unkempt.

“And I also had a chance to talk to the vicar yesterday after the service about Christmas Day. A few of the congregation were still around too, including the owner of the shop opposite, who said he knew you.”

He drops the phone on the tablecloth gawps at her. “And?”

“You guessed right: nobody saw or heard anything. But I gave the vicar and your friend my number, and they promised they would ask around again next Sunday. Maybe you should go and talk to them too.”

Her exposé of his private affairs leaves him unnerved. Vicars were establishment, like the police, and the guy in the newsagents was not his friend, just one more busybody. She may as well have gone the whole bloody hog – placed an advert in the parish times, or stuck a poster in the shop window.

“You did say it would be pointless, but I just thought it might help,” she adds, when met by his disparaging shrug. She surveys the *sofreh*, a little deflated. Pretty much everything

has been picked clean. A few olives, a bit of bread and some chillies remain. The herbs, vine leaves, the cheese, as well as the sweets are all gone. “Are we done here then?”

The daylight is fading, the temperature falling sharply. Daniel nods. “Looks like it, doesn’t it?”

On the return journey, Gulnaz’s tries to lighten the atmosphere by naming her choicest moments of their walk. When that brings no response she turns instead to the ‘Mental Health Awareness’ course she’s booked herself onto – a four day residential somewhere in London. It troubles him that she’s about to vamoose just as things between them seem to be taking off; and worse, that she appears so matter-of-fact about it. Having dropped her bombshell, she’s already veered off into new terrain: how she’s been mulling over his collection of books, and the weird pictures on his wall, the Mobius loop trick he’d shown her. Somehow she has come to the view that with his mother gone, Daniel now has no reason not to follow his dream of studying science. What better way to embrace the New Year, she suggests. He could start by signing up for evening classes at the local tech – see how it goes from there.

While the idea vaguely intrigues him, to Daniel this is just another attempt to take control of his life. He curtly points out that with a twenty-four year handicap, crippling rent to pay and bread to put on the table, never mind the slim chance – that she seems so keen to keep alive – of being saddled with a disabled brother, his chances of a new start in life are somewhat dead in the water. An unfortunate turn of phrase, under the circumstances. She tactfully lets the subject drop.

When they turn into her street Daniel slows the car in readiness for further directions.

“Just here is fine,” she says, at the exact spot where he’d collected her.

“It’s no trouble to drop you at your flat, you know.”

The moment has suddenly become a litmus test, a measure of just how far she is now willing to trust him.

“I need to get some things from the shop. Might as well grab them while I’m here.”

The fib is not allowed to go unchallenged. He insists he can wait.

“No, honestly, I’m only a few yards up the road. I’ll be in touch. Thank you so much for a lovely day.”

Her buckle clicks; she’s checking to make sure the way is clear before opening her door. Just as he’s expecting her to be gone she’s turning back, bearing over him and pinning him down. Daniel gasps. This is fresh even by his standards. What, she wants to do it in the car? Under the street lights!? Her hands are in his hair, running over his shoulders. Her kiss is more animal than before, her breathing faster. Under the weight of her it’s all he can do to

remove his seatbelt. The gesture is clearly misread and it seriously raises her game. Now her hand is on his leg, his inner thigh, fingers crawling across his groin, a spider towards his fly. In response, Daniel burrows his way under her coat and runs one hand up her spine, the other caressing the nape of her neck. He feels ready to explode. His fingers snag on her bra strap, unsure whether to attempt the catch before conceding that it's impractical. Instead, he pushes down the other way into her pants, but her trousers are tight and he doesn't get far. Why here, he wonders, when they could be so much more comfortable stretched out over a sofa or tumbling around on a bed? Take him to her flat, for God's sake. Yet the audacity of it all, the sheer impossibility, has become outrageously erotic. He could even come like this. Could she?

But touching her there is a mistake. Too far, too soon and she recoils, kindly but firmly.

"I'll ring you. We must arrange to do something before I go to London."

Just like that. Yanking on the handbrake – leaving him in fifth gear. But there is no time to protest. She's out of the car before he's even finished adjusting his trousers and wiping his mouth.

She does indeed make straight for the shop and is immediately lost among the shelves.

Sedgefield Court is deserted, still recoiling from the excesses of the previous night, if the littering of beer cans, fag-butts, streamers and smashed, stolen pint glasses is anything to go by. All the same, Daniel crosses the lobby with senses sharpened. Now that Gulnaz has mouthed off to all and sundry in the neighbourhood, he fears for the anonymity that he's worked so hard to achieve; everyone whispering behind his back, callers to his flat drawing the attention of other residents. He takes particular care to open and close his door without a sound.

Scoff greets him in the hall. The purrs crescendo as Daniel tops up his water and scrapes the uneaten scraps into the bin, dishing out the next helping of bouillabaisse. The late afternoon picnic has sorted Daniel's own food for the night, but he's more than ready now to move up a gear from orange-blossom tea. A few stiff whiskies should help settle his nerves. Like Scoff, he's happy enough with another night of TV. Maybe a film or two. It doesn't matter which. Just something to take him out of himself for a precious few hours. He stabs at the remote.

Film 4; 9pm.

'Twins'.

So, fate has a sense of humour after all. Talk about chalk and cheese: Arnold Schwarzenegger and Danny DeVito?? This must be the three-hundredth time they're showing

it, but Daniel has always steered well clear. Until then it's just game shows, makeovers and news. By the time the titles finally begin to roll he's well into his third whisky.

Ludicrous though the story proves to be, even Hollywood never actually asks its audience to believe in two such polar opposites ever emerging from the same embryo, at least not without a good deal of scientific meddling. But, rendered all the more suggestible by the drink, Daniel is struck at least by one side of the plot – the notion of one twin inheriting all the positive attributes and the other all the negative. Onscreen, the drama works from there towards the twins' finding understanding, respect and ultimately love for each other. The movie in Daniel's head has yet to shoot such a scene, but in his growing drunkenness, he feels he's being sent a message, a script for how to act out his coming future.

Other than Scoff (who'd taken up his seat on Daniel's lap the moment he'd finished eating), none of the feared busybodies has come a-calling. All the same, Daniel begins to sense he is no longer watching the film alone. A character he has never met yet has known all his life has slipped into the room and placed himself on the far end of the couch. Alex, fully restored, cleaned up, filled out, the perfect specimen of a healthy adult. Daniel lets the scotch tickle his throat and tries to connect with the emotional capital of having him here. At once there's the same old need to share every thought, every experience, in its wake the same impulse always to defer to his brother – should they change the channel, would he prefer a different seat?

Being forever tied to his stronger brother's apron strings, is that really what he desires when those DNA results arrive and the doctors ring to say the patient is out of trouble, making a speedy recovery? Can he live again with the inadequacy, with the many jealousies, the constant reminders of the favouritism shown by their father towards his brother?

Or might such a role model prove in the end to be the very inspiration Daniel needs, to shake himself up and pursue that change of career he's always dreamt of? No sooner has the thought helped him accept this visitor than they are joined by a second. On the armchair before him sits a second incarnation of Alex, crippled, starved and broken, his skin like parchment, irrigated only by tubes and wires. Nothing of this twin remains but a carcass. This is the Alex that has endured some deed so unspeakable that it has kept him locked away from sight for a quarter of a century. This Alex opens the door to the darkest places in Daniel's psyche, where people can do terrible, terrible things to a child, leaving unimaginable scars. This is the Alex Daniel has so far refused to confront. How dare medical opinion even define this as 'living'. Blood and breath may still feed the brain, but in that brain, what is there? Any sentience left of the terrible act that had struck it down? Does anything see through those

grey, dilated pupils? Is this a man, a lump of meat, or merely a vegetable?

The dreadful affliction has mutilated their visual likeness, but leaves the two of them no less tied together. Only their dependence is reversed. This switch of power, something as a child Daniel had always dreamed of, he sees now for the crippling constraint upon his freedom and drain upon his resources that it is. When similar ill fortune evened the score between him and his mother, placing her firmly under his thumb, was Daniel strengthened or weakened by it? He knows the answer to that well enough. This then is the irony: to become the stronger of the pair is to be made all the weaker.

Daniel turns from the vision in horror and disgust, refills his glass, and tries to drown him out.

The third seat in the room, the space beside him on the three-seater, remains vacant. But the sense of a presence here is almost as disturbing as the last. This seat is reserved for the unknown figure who shares Daniel's physical form but remains a complete stranger. If the DNA test proves the two of them to have no blood ties whatsoever, then one might expect this man to disappear from the picture. But the empty place for the uninvited guest must be held open. His identity will remain undisclosed, so the fear will perpetuate that his unexplained presence at the graveside clutching a copy of the photograph means that one day he must surely be back.

Daniel comes to with a sense of falling. The film has mutated into some mindless, late-night chat show. Scoff is nowhere to be seen, but a phantom weight in Daniel's lap still holds him to the seat. Through his half-closed eyelids the images onscreen begin to swim. Three seats are placed in a semicircle, the middle one empty, the others occupied. The host is talking and his guest responding non-verbally. The two faces are blurred out, but Daniel knows who these characters are. They no longer sit with him in the room.

If these ghoulish visitations are to leave him alone he must shake himself awake, get out of the seat, splash some water on his face, drag himself off to bed...

...When the phone goes, he nearly jumps out of his skin. Who the hell would dare to ring at this hour? But light is breaking through the window; he must have fallen asleep again and spent the whole night in the chair. It'll be why the alarm in his bedroom hasn't woken him. Late for work yet again. Another free lunch for Jerry.

But Breakfast News shows it's only 8:05.

So, not Greenalls. He's missed the call now. When he checks, it proves to be that same wretched mystery number – the local code. Those bastards will try to sell you double glazing night or day, in your sleep, even on your deathbed. Time to tell them where to stick their

UPVC windows, and what they can do with their timeshares and their lottery prizes. He jabs at the numbers and waits for the return call to connect. Of course it'll be a recording. And indeed it is: of a man's voice.

"Hi. Guli and Greg are unable to take your call just now. Leave us your message and number."

A punch to the testicles would have inflicted less pain, a bolt of lightning been less of a shock. Guli and Greg. Gulnaz and Prentice – they're only fucking *living* together! Her reluctance to invite him back, even to let him anywhere near her flat, it suddenly all makes sense. With a heat rising behind his eyes, Daniel feels his lips parting at the tone as if to speak, but in disbelieving slow motion he replaces the handset instead. Immediately it rings again; like this predator has further punishment to dish out and won't be thwarted by disconnection. The malevolent grey box rattles at him at second time; a third. He picks up.

"Mr George?"

"Yes."

"Good morning. Dr Prentice here. From the hospital."

Whoa. Malicious little prick. One moment too busy to take his call and now right here in his own fucking kitchen.

"I'm the doctor you met the other day, when you came to see..."

"I know what you are. What the hell do you want?"

"Oh, I'm sorry. I've obviously caught you at a bad time. Forgive me. But I thought you'd want to know straightaway. My apologies for the wrong information the nurse gave you – about a two week wait and you having to go through your GP? She thought the DNA test was just routine, you see, not connected with one of our patients here. She..."

"And?"

Daniel holds his breath. His future spins before him like a roulette wheel. The slightest disturbance could bias the outcome: odds, evens or zero. Two of those visitors with whom he has spent the night are about to be executed, the third brought out of the shadows and into the broad daylight of Daniel's life.

"I have the details here for you. You might want to sit down."

"I'm fine! Just tell me."

Prentice's voice trails off as the phone slips down Daniel's face.

Without replacing the receiver, he dials Greenalls, tells them he's sick and grabs his shoes. No change of clothes, no freshening up, no breakfast, either for himself or for Scoff. He snatches up his keys, leaves the flat and sets off at speed out of town.



## Millwrights

The only thing he can think of remotely equivalent to this is that very first bus journey – the day after his mother had been taken in. Then, as now, Daniel had been oblivious to everything around him, in a state of shock, aware of nothing but the overwhelming need to be at the hospital bedside.

He bursts upon the reception area and jostles the line-up with an urgency that immediately impels it forward. The same woman is there, but even she is drawn by his desperation, looking up from her desk with a startled expression.

“Daniel George,” he announces breathlessly, gripping the desktop. “Called in urgently by Dr Gregory Prentice. He has to see me *now*.” The words ring out more as a Biblical edict than a request. Though she frowns briefly as if to challenge him, by some miraculous conversion she is straight onto her pager.

Minutes later, in breezes the great man himself, the smile out front, the spotless coat billowing in its wake like a fine white sail. He carves through the sea swell of bodies, leaving in his wake a bow wave of lovelorn admirers. Eagerly he beckons Daniel over, not a trace of resentment for the earful of abuse he’d taken on the phone. Prentice remains the composed, polite and flawlessly diplomatic professional. Daniel climbs to his feet, anything but composed, suddenly hot and nauseous, his legs misbehaving. Prentice grips his shoulder and shakes him by the hand, congratulating him on the arrival into his life of a brother as though about to unite a proud but distraught father for the first time with wife and newborn child. It’s all Daniel can do not to thump the man.

Health-wise, Prentice pronounces, Alex’s condition has made little progress. Improved breathing and some signs of weight gain. No evidence of brain haemorrhage or stroke, but brain activity remaining minimal with no response whatsoever to stimuli. No matter how much Daniel protests, Prentice can offer nothing more. Every test has been run, every appropriate drug tried and every function monitored. All they can do, he insists, is to leave the body to deal with whatever trauma has befallen it in its own way and at its own pace. The one thing that might help is for Daniel to talk to his brother – about anything at all, especially shared memories. Daniel’s stomach turns at the thought of raking up such stuff with the likes of Prentice listening in, but if that’s what it must take to jolt Alex out of himself then so be it. He follows nervously in the slipstream of the white coat-tails, out of reception and through the first set of doors. As they hit the carpeted area he feels again the unwanted touch of the man’s hand on his shoulder.

“So. I’ll leave you to be with your brother. If you’ll forgive me, I have some matters to

attend to, and I'm sure you'll want some privacy. Of course if there's any change the monitors will alert us immediately. If you have any questions, I'm sure reception will be only too happy to help."

A trade wind whips him away, back through the turbulent waters of human suffering, to fuse more bodies and melt more hearts. But there is no time to dwell on the magnanimous Prentice, his goodly deeds, or the fact that the fucker is shackled up with Gulnaz. Daniel has arrived again at those little windows to the ICU. As before, the swing doors give in to the pressure of his hands, snapping shut behind him and leaving him engulfed in a blaze of white. In an instant all his anger is forgotten. Suddenly nothing else matters in all the world.

For two hours Daniel just sits. No fear left of tubing and technology, no attempt needed to link up telepathically, or to scrutinise the face for assurance. It's enough just to be here in the presence of his brother – not someone who may or may not be him, but actually *his brother*. Whether by act of sublime grace or unspeakable cruelty, Alex is finally back where he belongs. And after a ride on the world's wildest rollercoaster, Daniel can finally face up to the future. However challenging, it will be a thousand times more preferable to those long decades of emptiness. If Alex chooses never to speak to him again then at least Daniel will know he is out there. If he's left disabled or deranged, in need of a lifetime of care, then Daniel knows now he will not begrudge it. Even if Alex never wakes up at all Daniel will still rejoice in his miraculous return.

The moment slowly takes him. He senses the white painted walls and steel-green flooring bleed into the solid white of a winter's sky above the soft greys and greens of coastal rock. He hears the faint hiss of air-conditioning and his brother's slow breathing around him becoming the whispers of a sea breeze and the distant crash and drag of waves. For the first time this memory not only has colour, but sound too. In his thick grey duffel coat Alex is ahead – running, pointing and shouting. The words themselves at long last come through. 'Daddy's boat! Daddy's boat! He's come home. Daddy's come home for Christmas!'

If fate has a sense of humour then it can be twisted and cruel – striking anytime, anywhere, heartless and indiscriminate. Seeing his twin lying there, all skin and bone and muscle loss, Daniel is finally moved to voice their father's words.

"Alex, remember how pathetic I used to be; what Dad used to say to me?"

He's crossed now to the bedside, wishing he were brave enough to take the upturned hand. "'Get out and kick a football around', he'd say. Or, 'Go and take a swim, climb a tree.' It's why he built me the tree house. D'you remember? He wanted me to be more like you, not go burying my head in the clouds with my shells and silly puzzle books. 'Get some meat on

you, boy, before you waste away!’ he used to say.”

The courage comes to him suddenly to touch and then to grasp Alex’s open palm. “But look at you now, mate. It’s you who’s wasting away, and I’m the one with a body to d...” He checks himself. “You’re not going to stand for that, are you? Come on, Alex. Wake up, eh? Where’s your fight? Where’s your pride? That’s what Dad would have said if he could see you now.”

He recalls their last contact, knocking the man he thought was a total stranger unceremoniously to the ground and dragging him away from the grave. To hold his hand now is so much more than mere ceremony. He stares down at the rigid form a moment longer, in vain hope of catching some response. Their fingers separate, but the sensation of touch remains. Drawing a defeated breath, Daniel mumbles a nervous farewell, turns and heads out through the doors, elation and despair tugging him first one way, then the other. Walking the corridor becomes his purgatory between the two.

Prentice nobbles him as he rounds the corner.

“Ah, so glad I caught you. I have a message, from Nurse Rahmani. She asked me to tell you she’s just heard the news and is on her way.”

This guy is incredible. His audacity goes beyond words. Daniel eyeballs him with utter contempt.

“I have a message for her too. Tell her I’m down at the Millwrights, drinking myself into an early grave. If she’s at all interested, she’ll know where to find me.”

Prentice blinks. “Do you really think that’s the best plan under the circumstances? Of course I understand all this must be quite a shock. And I’m sure you want to mark the occasion. But if I may suggest, Mr George...”

The doctor’s wise medical advice is left to contend with the back of Daniel’s head, as he pushes his way through the glass doors and out to the car.

Of course he has no real intention of getting as legless as that. The urge to hit the Millwrights is driven by a confusion of impulses – to celebrate, to grieve, to plan, to brood. A part of him wants to offload into the nearest willing ear; a part of him seeks total anonymity. Neither is served by the discovery of boarded windows, two newly appointed bouncers on the door and a heap of broken chairs in the corner. And it soon becomes clear that any tale he may wish to share of reformed prodigal brothers will have to take its turn; Gorgeous Gail wastes no time in bending his ear over the violent conclusion to the pub’s New Year’s Eve bash. The usual lunch-time crowd are noticeable by their absence. If they’re not still nursing hangovers (or worse injuries) then they’re clearly too ashamed to show themselves. All in all, this is not the

best time to be filling his local with joyous-cum-sorrowful tidings. He blows out through his lips and heads for his favourite spot in the corner; discretely in the shadows, yet just within sight of the door. It's possible that Gulnaz will track him down. He mostly hopes that she won't – he has his brother now; what place could Gulnaz possibly have in this new chapter of his life? Still, each time the door opens his heart sinks a little when it isn't her. Maybe he just needs her to explain herself, maybe to have her congratulate him – or at least to bear witness. She's the one person after all who really understands, who has shared his journey this far. Only she knows what the DNA result means to him. There is so much now to get his head around. Gulnaz might at least be able to help him sort things out.

Three characters step noisily from the street, two males and a female – students, by the look of their clothes. They're held at the door by the bouncers and briefly interrogated before being allowed through to the bar. Then, drinks in hand, they advance towards Daniel and spread themselves out across the table next to his. Their intrusion narks him. They could have chosen anywhere. He considers whether or not to move, but decides instead to blot them out of mind. Up on the cliffs again. Poor kid, Alex really had thought that boat was their dad's. Well, understandable enough, what with all those bombshells their mother kept dropping. He still remembers her words, how carefully she'd chosen them, ever more formally delivered to hide the growing heartbreak: 'Daddy may not be home for Easter because he's about to go to sea... Your dad won't be here for the holidays because he's away at sea... Your father won't be coming home... Your dear father has been lost at sea'.

Each time their father had been called away, under strictest orders not to say where, why or for how long, Daniel's conviction had mounted that he must captain a special submarine, one so secret that it could only surface at night and never approach land. Those nights lying awake, sharing tales of their father's heroism in some far off country; it hurts just to think of it. After their mother had broken the news, he'd told Alex their dad wasn't really lost, but had been instructed to stay on the seabed and watch out for 'Argies', even though the war was already won. The shrinking ice cube at the bottom of the whisky glass goads the memory on. No wonder Alex thought a rowing boat was needed to come ashore.

Something to think about.

"Hello Daniel."

He looks up, half expecting to see Gorgeous Gail with an armful of empty glasses. It takes a moment to recognise Gulnaz. She's holding a white wine, and a whisky for him. She places herself opposite and raises her glass.

"Dr Prentice told me I'd find you here celebrating. So. We should celebrate. I can't

begin to tell you how delighted I am for you. To Daniel and Alex, reunited!”

He takes the whisky and eyes her incredulously. ‘To Gulnaz and Greg’ he might have toasted in return, but for a curiosity to see just how far she’s prepared to pursue this deceit – plus a certain need to leech upon her company. The whisky she’s given him, the fourth to be downed in one, is swift to make its mark. Gulnaz wants to know how he heard the news, how it feels, what he plans to do next. Though he hears himself returning vaguely coherent answers it proves impossible to identify with his own words. When your whole world is turned on its head, when something drops into your lap that has been so long out of reach, the distant past shunted into an urgent present, then the present is as far ahead as you can see. Tomorrow? A month from now? Ten years on? He hasn’t a fucking clue.

The loudmouthed students at the next table aren’t helping him focus. From the word go they’ve been rowdily spouting off with total disregard for others, and their mindless, leftist bullshit is proving impossible to ignore. Can a man not expect some privacy and quiet in his own local, a space to think? But as the TV continues to peddle the headlines and images of Saddam, so inevitably comes their clichéd, simplistic tosh – ‘Britain has become the lapdog of America, and in supporting the invasion of Iraq has laid itself open to terrorism attacks of which Seven-Seven was but the tip of the iceberg?’

“Can you believe these guys?” Daniel says, cutting off Gulnaz mid-sentence. She looks at him blankly, then widens her eyes and frowns.

*‘War On Terror’ is a contradiction in terms and can only inflame Islamic resentment of Western interference and domination.* One student in particular, a guy with a straggly beard and an especially annoying voice, is trotting out this garbage as though he’s memorised an entire Guardian editorial.

“I mean like, Britain should keep its nose out of other countries’ affairs(?) We should be getting more into Europe(?) Model ourselves more on, like, Scandinavia(?)”

The longhaired hippie beside him has been nodding furiously while teasing out strands of tobacco along Rizla papers, rolling and licking each one and laying them aside. Now he’s toying with his mobile. “We should dismantle our army (beep, beep, beep). Use all that taxpayers’ money on things like the Health Service, social programmes, infrastructure. Terrorists would leave us alone then (beep, beep).”

“Just ignore them, Daniel,” Gulnaz whispers, a trifle desperately. “Or let’s move to another table.” But Daniel is no longer distracted by their conversation. The unfortunate turn it has taken now commands his full attention.

Beard again. “Cool. Do you know how much they’re, like, planning to spend on that

Falklands Anniversary thing this summer? Thirty million pounds. Thirty million, man! Just so a bunch of old soldiers can, like, wave their medals about(?)”

Longhair: “No shit!”

The girl with nose rings pipes up. “I heard they’re not even going to invite bereaved family or anything, or anyone who’s been injured. I think that’s just *sick*.”

Beard: “Yeah, bad Karma, but then Britain should never even have invaded the *Malvinas*,” (the name is given a pretentiously Spanish flourish, as though to charge his statement with complete authority). “We’d, like, stolen them from the Argentineans back in the nineteenth century(?) It was just Thatcher’s way of boosting her re-election chances. We were well out of order. Jeez – I mean, did you see it on the telly, when they showed all those hundreds of ships returning to Portsmouth? All that flag waving? I was, like, ‘Ugh?’ Get real or what?”

Daniel slams down his glass and turns in his chair. “You want to learn to shut your fucking mouth mate, before someone shuts it for you.”

The group stare in stunned disbelief. Gulnaz clutches his hand.

“Daniel, don’t. Please.”

Beard mutters something into his beer and ignores him.

“Freedom of speech, man,” protests Longhair.

“No, I’ll tell you what it is, *man*. Leftist fucking shit, that’s what.” Daniel can feel the hard spirit now pumping through his veins. “Your type make me sick. Easy for you, isn’t it, sitting in your universities at the taxpayer’s expense, banging on about the state of the world? Well, while you’re sat here, mouthing off, our brave lads are out there getting themselves blown up in Iraq and Afghanistan to keep shits like you safe.”

Beard snorts. “Safe! Huh, that’s a joke. Try telling that to the bereaved relatives of Seven-Seven.”

Longhair proves to be more of a zealot. He even puts down his phone.

“Yes, but if the Government were truly serious...”

“How do you think our boys feel when they read the leftist crap you read? ‘Oh, the army is an occupying force, not a peacekeeping one’. Fucking hell: a couple of soldiers lose their rag because they’ve been fired on, pelted with stones, spat at, seen their mates blown to buggery. Okay, so they go and kick a few Iraqis. All over the news then, isn’t it? But what about the rest of the time? Overwhelmed by insurgents, doing their best with shit weapons, fuck-all medical care, hands tied behind their backs. When do we ever hear about that?”

“Oh, man. Where are you from?” snarls Beard again, with a provocative shake to his

head. “We weren’t even talking about that, actually(?) We were talking about the *Malvi-*”

“Look, you *wanker*, they’re called the Falkland Islands, and we lost over two hundred servicemen fighting to keep them British.”

Nose-Rings: “I think you’re a very rude man.”

Longhair: “But the Argentinians were just boys. We sank the Belgrano when it was sailing away from –”

“Ignore him, Owen,” interrupts Beard. “You can’t talk sense into people like that.”

“I’d like to go now, guys,” says Nose-Rings. Beard makes a point of staying put and stretches back in his chair, nursing his pint. Gulnaz stands up.

“Come on, Daniel, let’s go. I can understand why you’re so upset.”

“Yeah, go with Mummy. I think you’ve lost this one, mate(?).”

Beard nearly takes a fist in the face for that. But the whisky has loosened more than Daniel’s tongue. As he swings a right hook, his legs buckle and only the chair breaks his fall. The three students leap from their seats. Someone’s beer is sent flying. The two heavyweights on the door, who’ve been watching the argument escalate, march over, puffing out their chests. One of them grabs Daniel’s hair, pulls him over the table and head-butts him. Daniel goes down like a ragdoll. The whole incident is over in a matter of seconds and the rest of the customers remain stock still. The bar staff, however, have been swift to act. They’re already calling the police as the bouncers set about dragging Daniel from the bar. Gulnaz intervenes and miraculously they concede, allowing Daniel to climb shakily to his feet. Blood is streaming from his nose. The three students are nowhere to be seen. Gulnaz leads Daniel out onto the street. That’s when they see Nose-Rings, loitering over the road and sucking on a cigarette.

“You’re wrogg about the fabilies,” Daniel bellows out to her, in a voice charged more with pain than with anger. “They will be there. I Dow. I dow cos I got ad idvite!” Then he sinks down onto the pavement.

It’s the first time he’s ever told anyone about the letter, perhaps because at the time he’d been so incensed by it that he’d thrown the damn thing away. For their father’s company not to have checked first. Unforgivable. A letter addressed to his mother containing three tickets, one for her and two for her boys.

Still, this revelation is sure to blow Gulnaz away. He waits expectantly for her outpourings of sympathy and her healing, nursing touch.

But apparently she has no intention of offering anything of the sort.

“Why, Daniel? Why?” she hisses at him. To his amazement, she is livid.

“Why do you do it? The drink. It makes you... It turns you into a...”

He realises she is crying. What the drink turns him into is never said. A police car has now pulled up in front of them and a young constable, whom Daniel vaguely recognises, is climbing out of the passenger seat, talking on his radio. He sidesteps the pair of them, despite Daniel being the crime’s obvious victim, and walks straight towards the Millwrights. The students and the bouncers have now vanished. After the briefest of conversations, the landlord throws up his hands and disappears inside, leaving the policeman no choice but to interview his two remaining witnesses.

“I know you. You’re a troublemaker,” he says, jabbing a finger at Daniel.

“Officer, that’s unfair,” Gulnaz retorts. “This man was dragged and head-butted by one of the pub’s security staff. It was a totally unjustified use of excessive force. No-one else was hurt.”

“And you might be?”

“Gulnaz Rahmani. I’m an agency nurse working at the hospital.”

He gives her a visual frisking, then looks down again at Daniel, who is now rocking back and forth with his arms around his knees. “So, he’s one of yours then is he? Right, do either of you wish to make a statement or press charges and waste a lot of police time, or can I assume you’ll try and keep him out of trouble for the rest of the day?”

Daniel merely snorts. He is too preoccupied with gaining maximum impact by keeping his head forward and breathing out sharply through his nose. It throws highly impressive spray patterns across his jeans. The accompanying groans add a further touch of pathos: here is a fellow who’s been badly beaten up, an innocent bystander brought down by the excessive forces of the state. As soon as the policeman has re-joined his colleague and driven off, he throws his head back, drags a tissue from his pocket, presses it hard to the bridge of his nose to stem the bleeding, and begins to giggle.

“Well dud you! Guldaz Rabidabby, agetcy durse. Like you were F.B.I. You put the bastard right id his place. You were great. Add I wasd’t bad either, was I?”

“I’m serious, Daniel. I cannot be doing with this.”

For one moment he assumes she’s making a joke, but the tone of awful finality in her voice suddenly hits home. The laugh congeals among the blood on his lips.

“You’ve ruined everything,” she snuffles, wringing her hands. “I thought something was really starting between us.” His heart dips at her use of the past tense. “I know you’ve just heard about your brother; I know this is an emotional time for you. But I’ve just come through one violent relationship and I’m not getting myself into another.”

It sounds like a parting shot. But she is a nurse after all, and he's a man on the street pouring blood, and inevitably she yields. "Right," she continues in a softer voice, "pinch your nose and keep your head forward. I'm calling you a taxi."

But Daniel waves her away. He doesn't need this. He's done nothing wrong, nothing his father wouldn't have done in his shoes. When she holds her ground and tries to lift him he fends her off more roughly than intended.

"Don't bloody well mother me! I'm alright. Just go away."

Perhaps it's fortunate he misses the change in her face; that sign of having seen in him something she'd been trying hard to deny. She retreats, stares, then exclaims with a look of hopelessness, "It's pathetic. If you ever want to make a go of this, Daniel, you'd better sort out that drink problem of yours."

And with that she walks off. A few yards later she stops and turns. "And get some anger management while you're at it!"

It all leaves him feeling quite dizzy.

Relationship? Who ever said anything about a relationship? And a violent one at that. He has never, *never* hit a girl. He just wouldn't. But it sounded like old Doctor Perfect Prentice had been doing so. Fuck! Who'd have ever guessed that? Why the fuck hadn't she said something?

So, things really had been starting between them. Hey. Nice one. Nice one! Heathcliff scores again. God, what a liberty: get help to sort out his drink problem. Does he have a drink problem? "I fancy a drink. I buy a drink. I drink it. No problem."

He sniggers.

"And anger management? I need that? Me, angry?"

Grasping for a nearby lamppost to pull himself up, he feels the world pitch dangerously to one side. A wave of nausea crashes through his body and jets his stomach contents across the pavement. The seasick legs again give way and tip him over into the gutter and into the vomit. Beneath a hail of swearing he kicks out at the base of the lamppost and nearly breaks his big toe.

Blood on his face and trousers, puke all over his jacket, Daniel limps thoughtfully off to the bus stop to catch the number thirty-seven up Cooper's Hill.

"She may have a point," he concedes. "On both counts."

## Joan

A kind of turning point in a way, that episode. An all-time low. The driver takes one look at the state Daniel is in and refuses him entry onto the bus. In ever worsening pain, with the alcohol wearing off and the toe beginning to swell in its sock, he's forced to hobble the half mile uphill to Sedgefield Court. For the rest of the day he sinks into a kind of torpor, his home a miniature, fortified universe, the one place where he can control the parameters – what's allowed in and what's allowed out. Food and water are allowed in. TV isn't; the radio isn't; phone calls aren't. The cat is allowed in and allowed out. Waste is allowed out. Alcohol isn't: not allowed out of the cupboard, let alone out of the bottle. The little blue tablets that Threadbare had once given him are allowed out of the cupboard and back into his life. Their numbing effect is limited, but they have helped in the past to draw his mind from dark places. Right now he needs stability. He needs to be able to wake up knowing what the next day will bring. He needs to be able to plan, to divide time into manageable units. He doesn't need foreign girls walking uninvited into his life, turning it upside down and then walking out. He's not even sure any more that he needs dead brothers showing up on his doorstep after two decades, whipping up old memories without even moving a muscle. How the hell is someone supposed to deal with a... with a...

With a drink issue, when things like that keep happening?

The telephone rings three times during the course of the next morning before he finally gives in and picks up. It could be Jerry. It could be nuisance callers. It could be Gulnaz – or Greg. But then again, it could be the hospital with vital news.

“Yeah?”

“Daniel, thank goodness.”

Gulnaz. He makes a mental note to install an answering machine, in order to screen future calls.

“I just wanted to check you'd got home okay, and to let you know that I'm off to London today.”

“Yeah, I'm okay.”

Suddenly he misses her terribly. Suddenly he feels a welling of admiration and gratitude towards her, and sees how much he's squandered her affections, how utterly he doesn't deserve them.

“I've been thinking about what you said,” he blurts out. “I will get help, like you suggested, to stop the drinking. I need to, for Alex's sake. And that'll sort the other thing –

the temper. It's only when I've had too much that I get like that – particularly if I haven't eaten. You've seen me – I'm not like that the rest of the time, am I? And normally it's just swearing and seeing things a bit dark. Not lashing out like in the pub.”

The line remains silent. A sudden tingle of fear runs through him. Shit – the rough handling up in the cemetery – had she seen that as well?

Finally she answers. “I know.”

No, she hadn't seen, thank God. So, is this forgiveness – the green light to start over?

“But it frightens me, seeing you like that. I'm frightened you might turn it on me.”

Daniel can't believe she'd ever entertain such thoughts. “Whoa, hang on!” he starts.

But she doesn't hang on. Instead she butts in hurriedly with, “Greg – this guy I know – it was how he started.”

So, finally, her real reason for ringing. Here it comes, the great admission.

“Just temper tantrums. Little outbursts. Then objects. Then the dog. I should have stopped it when I had the chance.”

“Christ! The little shit.” Daniel already had Prentice down as an asshole, but he'd never imagined anything like this. You don't hit a dog. You don't *ever* hit a dumb animal. “But, come on, be fair. Lover-boy Greg is Greg, and I'm me. I would never do anything like that.”

“I never said he was my lover.”

“Oh, really? ‘Hi, Guli and Greg are unable to take your call just now’?? Sounds pretty cosy to me.”

Gulnaz groans. “Okay. You rang and got my answerphone. Now it makes sense. Daniel, I simply hadn't got round to re-recording it. Yes, okay, we were in a relationship. I should have told you. I'd wanted to leave him, but he told me he loved me.” Even the phone line can't hide how upset she's becoming. “He even had me blaming myself. He scares me. I could see where it was leading. Something in his eyes whenever I said the wrong thing, or forgot something, or broke something.”

“You mean he's been roughing you up.” She's crying now, he's sure of it. “For heaven's sake, Gulnaz, just kick the bastard out.”

There's the sound of nose blowing. “It's over. He left the apartment four days ago. We'd been breaking up for weeks.” She sighs. “Another woman, maybe. I don't know. Someone prepared to put up with the abuse? Then all I can say is God help her.”

“I don't get it. You say he's been violent towards you, but I've seen the way you two are together.”

“You have??”

“Yeah, at the hospital, ogling each other the whole time.”

“Daniel, what on earth are you talking about?”

“You and Prentice, at reception.”

“Prentice? Jonathan?? What...? Oh Daniel, honestly! Whatever gave you that idea?”

It takes Daniel a moment to realign. *Jonathan* Prentice. Not Gregory. Okay. So, all that lovey-dovey stuff, Daniel’s escalating assumptions. Two plus two can rather too easily make five.

“Right. Um, well, who’s this Greg then?”

“He was someone I met through...” She breaks down before finishing the sentence. He realises now that he is in way, way over his head, not remotely what he’d had in mind when opening up to her about his drink. Of course he wants to console her, but how the hell to convince her that never in a month of Sundays would he behave like this Greg bloke, no matter what the provocation. How to show he could be tender, mild mannered, when he’s not even there to kiss her. He’s getting desperate. It’s now or never. Time to explain properly about the fracas at the Millwrights.

“Look, you’re upset. I’m really sorry about what happened yesterday. I promise I only lost my rag with those idiots because of what they were saying. About the Falklands.”

Still Gulnaz refuses to yield. “They were perfectly entitled to those views. And there are plenty of people who would agree with them.”

“Yeah, well, but the thing is...”

She interrupts. “Daniel, I know what you’re going to say. But I’m not really in a fit state to hear about your father just now. I’m sorry.”

Her words strike him across the chest. Wow. She’d known it all along. He should have realised. All that bait he’d laid for her. All those offhand references to life without his father. The photos of the man in uniform. Each of her refusals to bite had been his reprieve, only for him to throw her ever larger scraps. The revelation about the invitation letter hadn’t so much been bait, more a bloody banquet. And of course all along Gulnaz had understood, had digested the meaning; she was far too savvy not to have done. She had simply chosen to hold her tongue.

“I’m just so glad he’s gone,” she adds, cutting into his thoughts.

“Huh??” *His father?*

“Greg.”

“Oh! Yeah, yeah.”

After several seconds of silence she breathes out heavily into the mouthpiece.

“So, tell me,” she says, – he takes her to mean his father and is about to begin – “Just how seriously do you want to give up drinking?”

“Drinking? Oh, hundred per cent!”

“Only, I know of a place that maybe can help. It’s not AA, or anything heavy like that. No rules. No long-term commitment. It’s just an informal drop-in place. You talk to them about yourself and they set you a simple programme to follow. That’s all it is.”

Daniel stalls for a moment. He thinks about Alex, about surrogate parenthood and responsibilities, about shameful fistfights in pubs, and about regaining Gulnaz’s trust, and finds himself agreeing to give it a go. She proceeds to give him the place and a choice of times and then says she has to ring off. She’ll be back on Sunday and will be in touch.

\* \* \*

A chewed biro hovers over a notepad, the page blank but for an idle doodle in the margin. The only way to cope with the next few days and stay focused is to establish a routine. He’ll go to this drop-in centre on both Thursday and Friday. Whatever they ask of him he’ll oblige, just so long as they sort out his drink and anger in time for Gulnaz’s return, and get his head properly together for the day when Alex comes home. He roughs out a timetable. Up at eight, shower, Cipramil tablet, breakfast for two, Greenalls from nine thirty to five thirty (main meal at lunch time), up to the hospital by five forty-five to sit with Alex for an hour, on to the drop-in centre for seven, home a little after nine, do whatever homework he’s been given, in bed by midnight.

He rises from the kitchen chair, tears out the page and Blu-Tacs it to the fridge.

The routine runs smoothly enough until the first drop-in session. From the moment he steps into the cold, bare surroundings of the community centre he knows it’ll never work. Seven other guys, all middle-aged and overweight with droopy bloodhound faces, huddle on plastic chairs in a half circle around a kid who looks fresh out of school, who duly declares, “Hey, I’m Matt.”

Matt soon turns out to be even more of a prat than he looks; arrogant, self-important, superior, smug and, on the evidence of it, totally untrained. To entrust any inner feelings to this dickhead, or indeed to any of this bunch of losers, is about as likely as entrusting his pin number to a gang of convicted thieves. Alex and Gulnaz are the only things stopping him from throwing in the towel before the first bout.

All newcomers are required to introduce themselves and, worse still, to make some

kind of physical contact, like a handshake, a high five or a manly hug. If only a smack round the chops would qualify. “Okay,” continues Matt with his unnerving smile, “so Daniel, perhaps you’d like to tell the rest of the group your main reason for coming here today.” In case the question is too complex for these Neanderthals he qualifies it with, “Do you have a problem with alcohol that you wish to address?” It’s an easy enough question to dodge. Asked next how they would each describe their lives at that moment Daniel wavers slightly, but a little self-deprecating humour gets him safely through. “Great! Not worth a lot, but just great,” he laughs dismissively.

It’s becoming apparent that nothing anyone says is to be picked up and explored in any depth. Matt only seems interested in getting through his checklist of questions. Quite when and how they’ll be allowed to demonstrate any newfound understandings related to drinking and aggression isn’t made clear. Perhaps they’ll all pass the medical on the strength of attendance alone, and the simple ability to open their mouths and put words into some vaguely coherent order.

“Describe a positive thing about yourself,” Matt says next.

At first, Daniel is stumped by that one, his powers of invention failing him at the crucial moment. Then, to his surprise, he thinks of Scoff, and of his slavish service to the poor beast. No need to fabricate the truth there; it’s something he’s genuinely proud of. And then there’s the way he looks after his body, and his ability to conjure up a decent meal for a woman – he’s on a roll now. After reeling off these qualities, which stand in marked relief to the shallow drivel offered up by the others, Daniel is inspired to announce that he has ‘untapped potential.’ Someone from the group asks cynically what’s holding him back and is nearly told to mind his own bloody business, but instead, with certificate now in his sights, Daniel charges for the chequered flag with his set-piece about his education being messed up looking after his sick mother all through school. The resentment in his voice comes through a little stronger than intended. He only hopes it hasn’t tripped him up at the finishing line.

And soon after that, the session ends. Their homework – what Matt calls the ‘Programme’ – is to write up and expand their notes, and reflect on what they reveal. If they meet with friends socially they are not to discuss the session. They should have alcohol-free days every other day and not more than two drinks in between: try to alternate them with non-alcoholic drinks. The instruction raises more than one eyebrow.

What, from all that, is worth committing to paper? In the time set aside for note writing Daniel can only stare at the session’s scribbled words and tap the pen on his teeth. Really, just two things stand out with any clarity: his brief moment of self-pride, and the statement that

his life just now felt pretty worthless. He's struck by the contradiction between the two, and more importantly between this sense of emptiness and his constant ambivalence about Alex – one minute promising to fulfil his dreams, the next threatening to mess up his life. But if life is so empty, so utterly stalled, then maybe change, of whatever kind, isn't such a bad thing. Maybe it's exactly what he needs to escape this perpetual stalemate. The breakthrough is a small one, but enough to persuade him to return the following evening.

An hour later, Gulnaz rings from London. He chooses not to mention the session just yet and she doesn't ask. She tells him briefly about her course, about her excitement at meeting eminent figures whose books or articles she's read. But he's not really listening. Suddenly though, she's apologising.

"You'd wanted to tell me about your father yesterday, and I stopped you. It was selfish of me. I'm ready now to hear what you were going to say, if you still want to."

His father...

...His father.

Yes, he does kind of want her to know.

Suddenly Daniel can't think how to begin.

"Well, yeah, the Falklands thing at the pub. It made me angry. Coz my father went there – I don't mean to the pub – I mean to..."

No, no, not the right place to start at all.

"It's just that, you see, I always saw my dad as..."

As what? So much of it was hearsay, and yet so deeply personal too. It was always there, twisting the way Daniel understood the world; the way he saw himself. He tries to think. Shameful really how his father's face could sometimes be hard to recall – his real face, in motion, not the frozen moment of a photograph. His voice even more so. Only the intangible things come to mind. Forces that tug on the present. The ever-measuring yardstick. His father's punctuality, his insistence on order and discipline, his neat haircut, his upright walk.

A father who was a hero, that much was beyond question. What rank he held, how long he'd served, Daniel could tell Gulnaz none of that. Only that his brave dad had been 'called up' and sent away to war across the waters from Plymouth. No-one had ever told him which ship it was that carried Richard Sebastian George and Martin Greenall off to the South Atlantic. For years he hadn't even a clue where the 'Falcon' Islands were. Some bird sanctuary off the coast of Scotland, he'd vaguely thought. A boy in his class with a broad Scottish accent had been from a place called Argyll, so his assumption was that the 'Argies' also lived

there: savages in kilts trying to drive out the English. During those dark months of April and May 1982, whenever the TV or radio news came on, his mother had banished them from the room, turned down the volume and closed the door. Sometimes she would emerge full of lightness and fun and take them out and buy them things. Other times her mood had been black, her eyes reddened, her voice edgy and hoarse. On those occasions she would just sit in the shadows, chain-smoking away, and if either he or Alex made any kind of fuss or asked any questions they'd be straight to bed and their father would be 'Sure to hear about it when he came home', a threat guaranteed to snuff out any hint of insurrection.

One by one these memories offer themselves up as Daniel's starting point. But each needs the others to make sense. In fact he's already speaking without having reached a decision, picking up from where they had left off on Christmas night. He's taking Gulnaz back to the boat on the shore: her suggestion that Alex had been heading down to reach it and not just leaning over the cliff edge, and adding in Alex's words that have now come back to him – words that confirmed she was right. He tells her how their mother had broken the news that their father wasn't ever coming home, how he'd lain awake at night telling his brother of a secret submarine and Alex's certainty, when seeing the upturned boat, that their dad had run it aground and needed their help down on the rocks. He recounts the days after they'd all said their goodbyes, how their poor mother had struggled on alone with two wild children to control. Sometime before Alex's accident, there had been a service for his father. No coffin, because there was no body for them to bury, but a line of men in uniform standing to attention and someone reading from a list of names. And then their guns were firing. Was he present, or was it on the telly? The first time his uncle had walked in through the door and stood there before his mother Daniel could only watch from the top of the stairs. It was the first time he'd seen his mother sink to the floor, wailing and crying, then sobbing and moaning and then just being still. The first time, but certainly not the last.

Everyone called his father a hero – the headmaster, their neighbours, the shopkeepers. Even Margaret Thatcher had talked of heroism and sacrifice and justice and liberty. That's what heroes did: they upheld liberty and justice by fighting pitched battles with enemies on foreign shores. And the most heroic of them got killed.

It isn't told quite like this to Gulnaz of course. He stumbles, he reiterates, he makes light of heavy matters and vice-versa. He lets her guide him with her prompts and questions, her empathy and understanding. He lets her do the emotional stuff.

"That's why those students caused me to lash out. Like they were poking fun at my dad. They were rubbishing everything he stood for. They don't know what it means to be a

hero. I had to do it – for him. Maybe another time I wouldn't have, but what with Alex and everything, all I saw was red, just for a second. I wouldn't have taken it any further.”

After an agonising silence Gulnaz says, “You know, I think that's why I stopped and talked to you at the cemetery.”

The connection between this and anything he's been saying is lost on him.

“Sorry?”

“You weren't just someone I'd seen there before. It wasn't only that you looked lonely. Or just about me and my break-up with Greg. There was a bond. As though we were destined to meet. I think I must have sensed it.”

“Er, all a bit too ‘Twilight Zone’ for me, sorry.”

She remains undeterred. “What happens to someone when they go through something like that? You lose a father when you're nine, and months later a brother. A *tw*in brother.”

“Dad left when I was eight.”

“Okay, eight then. What does that do to a child? You spend the next, what, ten, twelve years caring for your sick mother.”

“Yeah.”

“Even setting aside everything that's happened in the last few days, what does it *do*, Daniel?”

He's starting to feel seriously uneasy. This doesn't sound like the Gulnaz he thought he'd begun to know. What does she mean, *do*? Is she suggesting he has a screw loose? Is she about to hit him with something heavy?

“I think there's a couple of things you should know about me too,” she says.

Okay, something heavy indeed. Something he really isn't going to need right now.

“You see, in some ways we're kindred spirits, you and me. Over the years, one by one, you've lost everyone in your life who's mattered to you. So now you fear attachment. People die around you, and when you're attached to them it hurts too much to see them die. So you just shut them out.”

Oh, is that what he does. A shrink too now then, not just a pretty face, not just a damned good cook, not just a brilliant nurse.

“How much harder then,” she continues, “to deal with someone who's put you through all that having the nerve to show up again. I don't mean you're not overjoyed to see Alex alive. Of course you are. But there's anger too, for which you feel guilt. So you turn that anger onto yourself. And perhaps a little onto me. When you drink and get into trouble, it's a way of beating yourself up.”

“I thought you wanted to tell me about you.”

“I do,” she insists. “I’m just trying to establish why we’re such a good fit.”

Fit?? Did they fit together? Only two days ago she was threatening never to talk to him again.

“You sound like a psychiatrist,” he says.

“Do I? Yes, I guess I must do. Sorry. Too many hours spent in these lectures! It’s just that, you see, I’ve also lost both my parents. I have no brothers or sisters. My grandfather passed away just over two years ago.” Her voice sounds a little unsteady. “But instead of shutting people off, for some reason I cling to them instead.” With a humourless laugh she adds, “Even when they’re a complete swine like Greg.”

Daniel isn’t convinced. Naturally he’s sorry to hear that Gulnaz’s parents are dead, but everyone gets parted from their parents eventually. It doesn’t automatically make them an emotional wreck. In any case, her father wasn’t a national hero like his. And grandfathers? Two a penny. Their situation was hardly comparable. To lose a twin brother, now *that* was something. You had to be a twin even to begin to appreciate something like that.

“I know what you’re thinking,” she says. Oh, she does? A psychiatrist *and* a psychic. “But the way I lost my parents was awfully traumatic and, like you, I was just a child. And my grandfather took the place of my parents – he was my one link to my past and to my country. His death left me with nowhere I could call home. And nobody to make me feel secure.”

Daniel wonders where exactly she plans to take this.

“You okay?” she asks. “I didn’t mean to make you uncomfortable. I just wanted to open myself up to you a bit. You know, it’s what people do?...”

“...Daniel? Are you still there?”

“Er, yeah. Yeah. Um, sorry about your parents.”

Well, for crying out loud, what more was he supposed to say? With great relief he hears her take a long breath, as though this particular train of conversation has run out of steam.

“I’d better go. It’s getting late. Early start tomorrow. See you Monday.”

“Night, Daniel.”

“Good night.”

\* \* \*

When he arrives at the drop-in centre the next day there’s no sign of Matt – or any of his seven pickled bloodhounds. Instead, the group is being led by a rather attractive middle-aged woman called Joan. The circle around her are slightly more palatable too; five of them – two women to her left and three men to her right, an empty chair on the far side marking the

gender divide. One of the women is youngish with a child-weary face and hollow eyes, the other in her late forties and fat, with a head of thinning, dyed hair. The men look like labourers in their fifties or sixties. One of them is painfully anorexic. Joan welcomes Daniel as though he's a newcomer to the whole business, and when he tells her he'd been there the previous evening she explains that meetings are normally attended only weekly – to allow time for essential reflection. She suggests that he sits through the session nevertheless, so that he can make an informed choice for the following week. He takes his place between the sexes. As the process gets underway it's clear that Joan's manner and approach is to be very different from Matt's. She appears to have nothing to prove, no gold standard by which to judge people. She seems keener to listen, has her own set of questions on standby but is careful not to use them as her script, rather to stay with people's responses and see where the session leads. She's even clever enough to get Daniel talking. Of course he's careful to keep to his own agenda, but he also finds himself wanting to please her. After reading out his notes from the previous meeting he begins to describe Alex's condition, and the thoughts he's had over the past day about caring for him. He's careful to avoid any reference to the childhood accident and the mystery surrounding Alex's return. Even so, Joan is clearly moved by the account and is hungry to know more about his feelings for his twin.

"We lost touch after we were kids," he answers, carefully. "Back then it was good fun, mostly. I liked his toughness. Rough and tumble type, not like me at all. But he could be a swine too. Our dad died when we were only eight, and I think he never really got over it. He used to drive our mum bonkers – had her right where he wanted her." He points his thumbprint at the floor. Joan's look tells him she expects more. "Yeah, so it'll be my duty to take care of him," he continues, a little reluctantly. "You know, if something goes wrong and he's not quite right when he wakes."

She's about to say something when some clever git interjects. "So what I reckon is," he drawls, "you're worried you're gonna end up trapped like you was when you 'ad to look after your muvver." The speaker is the emaciated ex-Punk. There's a disturbing sense of earnest in his face. The man's close-set eyes, half-curtained by loose skin, seem to peer right into Daniel's soul. Joan is quick to take control.

"Thank you, Ian; I'm sure that's helpful. Daniel, in your notes you described feeling a degree of resentment towards having to be your mother's carer, because of the effect it had on your education. Could you expand on that a little for us?"

Peeved by this deflection, and starting to feel press-ganged now from all sides, Daniel refuses at first to answer and passes over to someone else. But a minute or so into the group's

trivial whinging he's compelled to start again. Suddenly he's blurting out how his mother had no right to depend on him the way she did; that she should have shown more self-control – drinking and smoking herself to death without ever thinking what harm it was doing to him. The outburst silences the whole group. The girl to his right asks if he feels okay.

“*Okay?* No I don't feel okay actually.” He'll not be back again, not for Joan, not for Gulnaz, not for anyone. “Frankly, I feel fuck-all these days.”

But again, Joan uses her mastery to calm him. Skilfully she reflects back what he has just told her, how this young mother had had to bear the loss of a husband and bring up two sons on her own; that to succumb to depression and illness is no-one's fault. While Daniel's instinct is to rubbish her words, he's aware also of a shift somewhere within him. Homework is note writing as before. Joan gives out the same drinks advice as Matt, and instructs them on how to draw a genogram.

Physically and emotionally, the day has been long and tough. It's a relief to make it back to the flat in one piece. Father Christmas, still leering out through the glass in No. 2, is down to one eye, giving him an obsessive wink each time the lights go through their cycle. ‘Ho, ho, merry Christmas!’ – nose flash – wink. ‘Ho, ho, merry Christmas’ – nose flash – wink. In Daniel's experience big red noses have little to do with goodwill, or presents, or reindeer, or Lapland, but a hell of a lot to do with booze. Much the same might be said of Christmas in general. No wonder this Satan Santa disturbs him right now. Its message flashes away: ‘Ho, ho, indulge! – have a drink – nudge, nudge’. ‘Yes, yes, spoil yourself! – get bladdered – know what I mean?’ ‘Do it, do it, give in – let them all down – you know you want to!’

Ho, fucking ho, Santa, mate – go fuck yourself – Daniel winks back.

But then, maybe the message isn't actually intended for Daniel at all. Maybe it's meant for Mrs Cropley. Perhaps this is how she spends the festive season. He hasn't seen her for months. Never a squeak from her during the day. No TV; no phone. All he ever hears is her snoring and elephantine nose blowing at night.

That night, he's too tired for notes. Besides, there are still two days to go before Gulnaz gets back, and a week before the genogram is expected. It's late on Saturday before he finally sits down again with his thoughts; too cold and blustery outside to do much else and the same old garbage on TV. On the little table beside him, next to the tumbler of scotch and opened bag of peanuts, sits his notepad of half-written comments, his pen wedged between them and the subsequent blank pages. He takes the book, opens it on his knee and starts idly writing names anywhere on the first fresh page, randomly, as they come to him. Each is partnered to one of two words, ‘alive’ or ‘dead’, and lines drawn to link certain pairs with

certain others; lines of marriage, of birth, of cohabitation. He imagines everyone in Friday's group, scattered around the town, all doing this right now. So many lines that radiate from his own name stop at the word 'dead'. The pen touches the paper beside the 'x' of Alex. Each night Daniel has sat and watched him in his blissful sleep, never any sign of change, but the machines flickering and humming their joyful confirmation: alive. Alive! He writes it twice. Just to see the word next to the name brings a lump to his throat.

And these branches seem incomplete without one for Scoff and another for Gulnaz, two more names against which to write that uplifting word. He draws them in too. They feel every bit as important as his immediate family, and mean way more to him than the other shadowy characters. Had he ever shared a quiet night in with his estranged paternal aunt, a picnic or a New Year's Eve party with his loopy maternal grandmother or a day in the country with his selfish and reclusive Uncle Martin?

The hard rain hits the window like handfuls of grit, the whisky warms him inside. Thoughts of his past; thoughts of his session with Joan; thoughts of his phone conversation with Gulnaz, and thoughts of their Christmas night together and a photo album of faded relatives and other forgotten faces. Thoughts too of New Year's Eve and New Year's Day. Before he knows it, he is leafing through a very different kind of photo album: the choice moments of their trip to Shropshire that Gulnaz had captured on her mobile. Recalling those digital snapshots that failed so comprehensively to portray the sense of a living being – Daniel himself – against a shifting landscape, it occurs to him that actually photographs don't embody memories, not really. Those onscreen images, like those trapped inside the family album, are wholly staged. Real memories capture whole events, small chunks of real time. No, not so much capture – *catalogue*. Events are pulled apart, using understanding and experience, and then stored. And he knows at once that he'd been wrong. Wrong about his mum's photos. He could never have confused them with real childhood memories. Those memories really did belong to him. They *were* him. They were his past.

He rips out the page he's been working on, places it to one side and begins with renewed zeal to make a neat copy of the genogram, starting at the top, vertical or angled lines for progeny, horizontal for match-making. The many branches of this tree converge inexorably as they descend, so many lines, so many lives, which finally root themselves into a single point. His own name.

It feels good to have located a place for himself at last.

## Hawking

When Gulnaz walks in through the door late the following evening Daniel immediately senses a barrier, as though a four-day crust has skinned over her softened heart – a layer to be chipped away again from scratch. No doubt she’s been bracing herself for bad news. While the cat was away had the mouse been at play? Was she to find an apartment strewn with beer cans, a pedal bin bursting with bottles and a tenant sozzled to the eyeballs? Or a more covert drunkenness, masked by careful waste disposal and mouthwash? Her scepticism disappoints him. Oh, she of little faith – wait till she hears what he’s been up to. The temptation is there to go diving in, or to pull her unceremoniously into the bedroom. But that crust of hers holds him back, forces him to follow the protocols that come with not having seen a close friend for some days. He must ask whether her course has been worthwhile, whether the trains were on time, whether she has eaten; things of that kind, while his eyes flicker impatiently across the table to the jotter and his mind dances with its revelations. His questions meet with summary replies; she’s clearly all too aware they’re of little interest to him. Perhaps she too can’t wait to talk of his experiences at the drop-in centre. Indeed, when the conversation can finally move onto the subject, her reaction is everything he might have hoped for. For one thing, she had never intended him to go twice in the same week; for another, she’d seriously doubted he would stick with it for the full two hours. Like Joan, Gulnaz was a believer in the slow, steady approach. What better moment then to sit her down and read through the session notes, show her the genogram, and let her see the benefits of a short intensive blast of self-analysis? Throughout the account she sits spellbound. The reading closes with his *pièce de résistance*; the final drinks tally: given the allowance of two drinks every other day, over five days he could legitimately have chalked up ten units.

“Daniel George, total alcoholic consumption Thursday to Monday: *seven* units!”

Seven units. Not bad. Her face confirms it. He’s encouraged to kiss her, and she does not resist. From this, the move to the bedroom follows seamlessly, from dressed to undressed, none of the frenzy of their first fumbblings in the car – her softer, gentler touch quickly slows his impetuous hands. Not some headlong rush towards the finish: she is keen to take her time and stay with the sensuality and intensity of the moment. Naturally she insists on protection, but its introduction is without awkwardness or embarrassment. Gulnaz speaks very little throughout, no whispered nothings in his ear or moans of pleasure, her few words serve only to guide and encourage. This woman is no beginner at sex. If anything, Daniel feels himself to be the novice here. Knowing all the right moves is one thing, but the supreme confidence that she exudes, her focus on the beauty and power of sex, this is something new

to him. So much is saved for the imagination – he never gets to see her fully naked. Once in his room, their physical contact remains beneath sheets, with the light off, just a smudge of sodium light penetrating the curtains. Underwear is slipped off unseen; the two of them lie face-to-face almost throughout. His sense of her body is that of a blind man, only his fingertips seeing her soft and pliant skin, the roundedness of her shoulders, the weight of her breasts, the slightly domed stomach and the widening out at the hips. In the semidarkness, the scent of her is all the more intoxicating too. She has showered before coming over – her own chemistry only gradually spices the smell of soap.

At their mutual moment of climax, through some involuntary flood of pheromones or synaptic spasm, Daniel is pulled from his body across a three-mile expanse of rooftops down into a stark, white room. The same life force erupting now into the woman above him floods through metres of tubing into the lifeless body lying there. As the couple cry out and unscrew their eyes, so Alex flinches, utters a gasp, and looks once more onto a bewildering world.

For him the night ahead is to be one of tyres squealing through corridors, of fleetingly glimpsed faces, of eyes probed by torchlight, nerve endings tested with hammers, feet and hands prodded. For Daniel and Gulnaz, a very different night. They catch the midnight chimes and the air detuning once more to the throb of an urban night, as they drift into a peaceful and ignorant sleep, their bodies entwined one around the other.

Breakfast the next morning proves to be somewhat less relaxed, incurring much tripping up in a kitchen too small to swing a cat – fortunately for Scoff, the tripping's chief culprit. There is little in the house to eat; no eggs, no bacon, no beans. Gulnaz insists it's fine. She seldom has more than a slice of bread and cheese in the mornings. But Daniel has even managed to run out of bread. In the end they both make do with cereals, plus tea for her and coffee for him. More than a little bemused by the notion of 'Cheerios', Gulnaz covers her mouth to stifle a laugh and works her tongue around in order to speak. Another of Daniel's magic Moby loops, she declares, fishing a particularly malformed specimen from her bowl. It reminds her to ask whether he's yet looked into those science classes at the Tech. As before, he shakes off the suggestion as being thoroughly impractical. In truth, the idea had totally slipped his mind. But with all that has happened since she first raised the idea – Alex back in his life, his drinking under control, the sessions with Joan, his relationship with Gulnaz at last on the up – to get himself out of the rut he's in and into a real career suddenly seems feasible. The thought is put on hold, as attentions are turned to dredging milk from bowls, draining tea and coffee from mugs, ladling fish soup from Tupperware, stacking dirty dishes, cleaning teeth, fixing hair, refreshing lipstick, applying trouser clips and fluorescent strips, and running

the gauntlet of a frenzied lobby, to kiss and part company in the forecourt and each set off for work. Only when he's alone again can Daniel unleash his imagination to see where it might lead.

First thing would be to check out the local college. Given his GCSE's, they would probably fast-track him through A-Level: he could be at university as early as September. Three years for a degree and the same again for a doctorate, a senior lectureship, promotion to head of department and, before he was even forty, tenure at some distinguished academy, probably abroad, probably America.

It would hardly do for someone so distinguished to be squeezing a clapped-out Golf from some corrugated iron shack for which the council charged a tenner a week. Time to place himself behind the wheel of a spanking new Mercedes convertible, gliding out of a spacious double garage attached to one of the grand Edwardian houses off Prince Albert Gardens. And no, he is not heading for a struggling garden centre on the verge of surrender to the giant chains, but to take up the professorial chair at one of the great universities in the city.

All just a bit of fun to start with. It's only later in the day, when some of those wild theories he'd entertained as a teenager begin to reformulate in his head, that things turn a shade more obsessive.

The morning begins innocently enough, mostly spent outside rearranging frost-proof pots and dumping those that have shattered in the cold. It's the act of rescuing a stray ball of garden twine from the shop floor after his break that sets him thinking about Hawking's String Theory. Ah, String Theory – the point where Daniel and the great theorist had been forced to part company. For the visionary teenager it had needlessly tangled and knotted the simplicities of dimensionality and the perceptions of time. To his mind, the universe could be unravelled in a better way. Thinking ahead to his interview with the university selection committee, he begins to scour the shelves for common-or-garden items that could illustrate his ideas. A solar-powered ball light, a foot pump for a paddling pool and a pack of birthday balloons come conveniently to hand.

It's all about having the power to imagine: for a three-dimensional being to visualise Hawking's multi-dimensional universe. Naming time as the fourth dimension is just the coward's way out. Extra *spatial* dimensions – along with up and down, left and right, forwards and backwards – that's the challenge. He runs a hand over the surface of the ball. The secret is to ask how our own world would look to a two dimensional being; someone who lives – at least who *thinks* he lives – only on its surface. He would know nothing about the third

dimension, wouldn't know that he has height. If anything in his world were moved up or down, away from its level, then as far as that creature was concerned it would simply disappear. A surface that stretches on forever. We see that it's a ball, but he's unaware that his space is wrapped around in another dimension.

A delivery of bark chippings and fencing material brings Daniel's introspection to an abrupt end. A shame. He was nicely on course to hit home with his counter-argument to the Big Bang theory, and in one fell swoop throw into disarray all the current scientific thinking about the expansion of the universe.

Half way through lunch, an inner voice urges him to ring the hospital, but the impulse to order a second helping of dessert soon robs him of the thought. Instead, at two fifteen sharp, with a store room of pre-Christmas stock still to clear out, Daniel, now Professor George, arrives at the Academy of Mathematical Sciences to give his keynote speech on 'Infinity and the Universes Beyond'.

He steps up triumphantly to the podium and savours the expectant hush that falls over the theatre. "Fellow colleagues," he begins. "I invite you to imagine that this balloon is our universe."

A party balloon hangs limply from the end of the pump, like a spent condom. Sandwiching the device between both palms, with a firm squeeze he sets this little red universe on its journey of expansion.

"The birth of a universe!" he declares, and turns the 'Happy Birthday' message towards the adoring crowd. "As it expands, no matter where he looks, our 2-D friend on its surface finds everywhere stretching apart from everywhere else." He gives the pump a couple more squeezes and the balloon grows to twice the volume. "But is there anywhere on the surface that you could call the *centre* of the Big Bang? Of course not. Its centre isn't on the surface; it's inside the balloon, out there in the third dimension."

A couple of world-famous scientists have already clocked where this is heading, about to undermine everything on which their reputations are built. Mumbling, tutting, shaking their heads, mopping their brows, their distress is a delight to all around them. And Daniel shows them no mercy.

"Now, like our 2-D guy in a 3-D universe, we look out at the stars and find they're all spreading apart. But suppose we're just 3-D beings in a 4-D universe." He points to a beetroot-faced rival. "People like *him* will tell you rubbish about being able to see back to the Big Bang and out to the very edge of the universe. Well that's bullshit! There is no centre and no edge – not in our dimensions! Those who say otherwise don't know the first thing about

anything!”

The room descends into mayhem, the first riot of academics the university has ever witnessed. Papers, cloaks and mortarboards fly in all directions, clenched fists rain down upon unsuspecting bald spots. Daniel slips from the building and into his waiting Merc, pleasure-cruising the streets for a while to savour his triumph, before reality draws him back to Greenalls and dumps him into its mustiest of storerooms. The time is nearly three, and he hasn't even begun to clear the place. The workload screams out for attention. Only when it's all done can he go home. Such are the trials and tribulations of the undiscovered genius.

Sorting the storeroom is something Daniel normally wouldn't mind. Mostly, it's to chuck out end-of-line stock or damaged goods, and sometimes the work turns up a few gems such as an off-cut of hose for his car or a chipped pot for a windowsill (turn the chip to the back and, Ta-da!, no-one would know). Today though, his preoccupation with loftier things makes the task demeaning and the windowless box-room unbearably stuffy. He sets to with grim resolve, determined to make light work of it and get home. The sooner he is gone, the sooner he can begin to plan his future sensibly. And there's something else. A niggling in his brain. A compunction about something. An unease.

It's all down to having not phoned the hospital. The discomfort in his belly bodes ill tidings. Something awful has happened to Alex and they have no way of reaching him. Naturally, he hasn't wanted all and sundry at Greenalls to know about his private life: rumour mongering in this place has become endemic; it might be one big glasshouse but people still throw stones. It was a mistake though, not having left a work number. He could of course take a toilet break and make that call now. It's really only fear that stops him, the same fear that would prevent him from seeing a GP about a lump on the testicles or an inflamed mole. And if he did make that call, only to hear the worst, where would he prefer to be, here in the middle of a shop full of worthless trash and dim-witted customers, or at home, in private, nursing a fine bottle of scotch?

Another five minutes and the strain would have forced his hand. As it is, he's thrown a lifeline – appropriately enough by his line-manager, Jerry's head poking round the door and announcing there's a phone call for him at customer service. A woman calling herself Omars, or some such. Daniel is like a caged lion released into the wild. Gulnaz? They've agreed to meet at the hospital, but not till six. He wrenches the phone from the receptionist's hand and calls her name, oblivious now to all fears of the rumour machine. Let them cast their stones.

“Daniel?” she cries, an urgency in her voice.

“Where are you?” he bellows back.

“I’m at the hospital. They called me in this afternoon to cover for a sick nurse. And good thing they did. Apparently Jon – Doctor Prentice – has been trying to reach you at home since this morning. It’s Alex. Daniel, he’s regained consciousness! But...”

“Christ! Stay there! I’m on my way.”

The handset is back in the receptionist’s grasp before he hears Gulnaz saying, “No, wait! I need...”

But her needs are lost to a disconnected line.

By means of a series of hand gestures and facial expressions across the shop floor, he lets it be known to Jerry that the storeroom will have to wait until tomorrow. Something has come up that demands Daniel’s immediate attention. He’s sorry, but there it is.

This is all so... so bloody... *typical*. So very... *Alex*. As Daniel nudges his way from the car park and forces himself into the swelling traffic he begins to see his brother’s grand blueprint. Unconditional love, it just isn’t enough. For Alex it never has been. For him one always had to shed *tears* of love. Their mother could never just take him shopping. She could never just get him ready for school. She could never just cook him a meal. Alex always had to make sure she was seen to *suffer* to do so. Alex couldn’t have simply brightened Daniel’s Christmas Day with a surprise visit, champagne and chocolates in hand – or sent a card, or made a phone call. Oh no, Alex had to arrive in *style*. He had to get Daniel’s blood boiling by draping himself over their mother’s gravestone. He had to give Daniel a fucking heart attack by disguising himself enough to draw him in close. He had to keep Daniel on tenterhooks until the DNA could confirm his identity. And he had to shroud his previous whereabouts in mystery by lingering on, mute, untouchable, for a whole damn fortnight, until he was good and ready, until enough tears of love had been spilled. Only now, at last, has he chosen to put Daniel out of his misery and come round. Only now has he finally decided that it’s time for this great riddle he’s posed to be answered.

## Alex

It is Gulnaz rather than Prentice who meets Daniel at reception. He's glad of that, if a little disquieted by the sight of her. Her outfit puts her in role, and yet not entirely so, like having a mum as the lollypop lady; neither side quite knowing the rules of engagement. Almost immediately she stops and leads him into a small room, another nurse's den: it has the same smell as the one in which the DNA test had been performed. "Please sit down, Daniel," she says. "We need to talk."

She's never sounded more serious, not on that Christmas night when sifting through the photo album, not when refusing his dinner invitations, not even when screaming at him to sort out his drinking.

"I tried to tell you on the phone. Alex has begun to come round from his coma, but something seems to have happened to him."

Daniel lowers his backside onto the hard, steel-framed chair.

"All night long they've been running tests. The MRI scan shows no brain damage – no tumour, no dead tissue, no blood clots. His heart, liver, kidneys, lungs are all clear and now working fine."

"But?"

"Now please stay calm, Daniel. But he's showing signs of paralysis. And he seems unable to speak."

"Oh shit."

The crushing reality throws him forward into his hands. Alex's games are not yet over.

"But it's probably just a temporary effect of the coma, or whatever's caused the coma. Even overnight there have been some improvements. He's remaining conscious for longer periods, and they're getting more response from his reflexes. He's started moving his head, even his arms a little. And he can utter sounds, but not words. Of course he can't yet walk."

She then does something that perhaps nurses should do more often after breaking devastating news to a relative. She pushes gently at Daniel's shoulders and places herself on his lap, takes him in her arms and simply holds him.

"When do I get to see him?" he asks into the thickness of her hair.

"He's conscious at the moment. I've just been in. We can go straight away. As soon as you feel ready. He's certainly alert enough to know what's going on. He responded to me at once. I've explained who you are and that you're on your way. The doctors were a little worried that seeing you might be too much of a shock, but I've talked them round. Just go easy. Don't overload him."

It's his worst fears realised. Alex as an invalid. Thirteen years the reluctant carer, now perhaps fifty more. With each step along the corridor a piece of his dream drops away. There goes his A-Level. At the corner falls his degree. The next set of doors and his doctorate is gone. A left turn – goodbye to his star-spangled career. From the great heights of fame and admiration he is hurtling at speed towards an abyss of servitude and invisibility.

Again they pass from corridors of echoing tile to plush carpeting, through the double doors and into the ICU. Having sat with his brother so many times in the past fortnight, Daniel isn't ready for the shock. Until now he's experienced Alex as a split presence: in his head an embodiment of childhood memory, while in the flesh little more than dead meat – sanitised and dehumanised by skull cap and tubing, and with skin as unyielding as wax. But to see Alex like this, propped up in bed and with opened eyes staring straight into his own, sears him like a branding iron. His head pounds to cries of 'Oh God, Alex. It's me. Alex, it's Daniel'. The words themselves emerge only as a whimper, strangled by the tightness in his throat.

Alex's reaction is infinitesimal; anyone but a twin would miss it. Twenty-four years it may have been since Alex had laid eyes on him, but recognition is clearly instant and unquestionable. None of the usual searching that comes with encountering a childhood friend as an adult: learning to see behind the wrinkles, beyond the grey, dismissing the added kilos and surplus skin to find the familiar features in a stranger's face. Alex will have no need to update his mental picture of Daniel, for Alex himself will have lived through every change. And Daniel can see at last just how alike they both are. True that he remains gaunt-faced, and the paralysis has left it asymmetrical; on his left side the eye drooping, the mouth turned down at its corner, but the bone structure beneath is all but identical, and the look – the piercing eye-to-eye gaze, even across the ward that still separates them – is no less than the look into the mirror Daniel gives each morning.

Introductions may be redundant, but still he approaches the bedside hesitantly, mindful of Gulnaz's request to go easy. There is no movement to Alex's head, only to his eyes, which pursue his twin every step of the way. For a second time Daniel touches his hand. It remains taut-skinned and leathery, but he now detects something else – signals hammering at the tendons, willing the fingers to respond to his touch. A thumb curls around his own.

"Alex. Oh man, oh man," he croaks. "Up to your old tricks again. Such a bloody long time, eh? You had us all so worried, you total bastard."

The words of course are facile, euphemistic to the point of absurdity; words carefully selected from a text that could potentially express unrestrained joy and deepest pain. His

voice is met by a guttural sound, the emotional envelope of which is unclear – somewhere between a child’s hum of pleasure on being handed a favourite sweet and the warble of someone trapped at the climax of a nightmare. But for Daniel it’s a bond with his brother greater than any moment in their childhood he could remember. The touch twins them soul to soul. And he holds fast.

“Hey, don’t get upset. They say you’re going to be okay. Just a few more days.”

He’s about to say more when a voice interjects from behind.

“Ah, good. I see you two are getting to know each other again.” Prentice is back, uninvited, complete with dazzling smile and spotless coat. “Our patient here is making excellent progress, aren’t you, Mr George? But I’m sure he is feeling a little tired and would like to rest now.”

At this, Alex gives out another gagged wail – wilder this time, clearly one of protest. Daniel squeezes his hand.

“Never fear, mate. I’m not going anywhere. I’ll see you again tomorrow, okay?”

With that obsequious hand of his, Prentice gently steers Daniel by the shoulder and escorts him from Intensive Care. Gulnaz trails awkwardly behind, her identity caught between that of duty nurse and fellow visitor.

“If I might have a word with you, Mr George, in private?”

“I want Gulnaz to be with me. Me and her...”

“Of course. As you wish. That’s fine.”

They reach a small office. No beds or smells or needles this time. Not like a hospital room at all, more like a holding area for breaking morbid news. Prentice is determined to make them comfortable, sits them down on cushioned chairs, offers coffee from a machine in the corner and, when it’s declined, resorts instead to the water dispenser.

They are all sipping when he begins. “It’s a most unusual case. We are of course delighted with his progress, but...”

“Progress!? My brother’s a bloody cripple!”

Gulnaz shifts uncomfortably.

“That’s true, for the moment, Mr George,” Prentice acknowledges with a slight nod and reassuring glance at his nurse. “But your brother is making a steady recovery.”

Daniel glares at him with disdain.

“When I asked you on the first day if he was dying, you assured me he was going to be fine.”

Prentice shrugs.

“I don’t have a crystal ball, I only wish I did. All I can ever do is reach a prognosis based on the evidence. But I think we can safely say that your brother isn’t dying. And that’s what I wanted to talk to you about. According to all our tests, he’s apparently as fit as a fiddle – perfectly capable of walking out of here and getting on with normal life. Mild concussion might just about have explained the coma, but we have nothing to account for the loss of speech and movement. The signs and symptoms might indicate a stroke, a bleed to the brain or a spinal injury, but our tests have all come back negative.”

“Don’t tell me you think he’s faking!”

“Heavens, no. But the problem is, in all honesty, there’s little more we can do.”

Ah, it’s clear now what all this is about. This is handover time. The washing of hands of the matter. Very handy.

“We plan to move him from Intensive Care to an open ward tomorrow. We shall of course continue to monitor his progress for the next week whilst you make suitable arrangements, but if he continues to improve, whilst remaining unresponsive to our tests and treatments, then I think it in his best interest to be transferred somewhere more comfortable.”

“You mean you need the beds,” Daniel growls beneath his breath. Prentice is unapologetic.

“And yes, we do indeed always need the beds. Our remit is quite clear: we are a hospital, not a rest home.”

Daniel only now looks at Gulnaz. “Come on,” he hisses. He scrunches his plastic cup and leaves it on the arm of the chair.

Prentice shows them to the door but hangs behind. Gulnaz thanks him on her way out. In the corridor, she and Daniel stare at each other. She whispers his name, hugs him, kisses his hair, and takes his hand as they break apart.

“Trust me, Daniel. There are care centres we can contact: psychiatrists, occupational therapists. The hospital will provide a wheelchair. And there are grants – round the clock nursing care.”

“Sod that. He’s my brother, for Christ’s sake. I’ve already lost him once. No way I’m letting *that lot* loose on him. I’ve seen it all before. How they treated my mother. What it did to her being taken away from home. I’m perfectly capable. Experienced.”

It’s again the brick wall he’d built between them on day one. Defences up. Hard as a nut. Eye contact broken. He heads towards the exit just a little too fast for her to keep up.

“Where are you going now? When shall I see you?”

“Home. Home to rearrange things.”

Finally he stops, one hand on the swing door, feet firmly set. There are no more dreams left for him to shed.

“Alex is coming to live with me.”

He catches a look of foreboding in her eyes. It follows him out as he threads his way through the car park until his view of her is screened by a parked van.

## Greenall

After a lengthy wait in the queue, Daniel carries his tray of pizza and chips over to the far side of Greenalls' crowded canteen and deposits himself at the last empty table. Empty that is, but for Jerry.

Deep down, Daniel has always had a soft spot for Jerry. Life for Jerry is all calm waters, no surprises, no tidal-waves, no Tsunamis; nobody ever drowns. Of course his reputation for being boring is wholly justified; this is not someone to be stuck with in a lift, or to have to go with on holiday, or even – under any normal circumstances – to single out as a lunch partner. When Jerry's head isn't filled with the intricacies of casual labour line-management it is engrossed in the escalating price of beer and the Millwrights' fortunes in the pool league. He isn't even on the team. He seldom mentions his wife and children – hard to think that this man has a family, would once have dated, married, saved, house-purchased, fucked and fathered. Or that he'd ever studied, been trained, applied for promotions and beaten down rivals for jobs. He is just Jerry. Slightly overweight, balding, sartorially uninspired, middle-aged and quietly contented Jerry.

"I need some time off," Daniel begins. "Compassionate leave."

Jerry's welcoming smile buckles slightly. His shirtfront catches a globule of ketchup as the sausage hovers before an open mouth. "Oh, sorry to hear that, mate," he replies. Whether censored by diplomacy or cowardice, Jerry – as Daniel had known full well – is not about to ask prying questions.

"Do you reckon I'd still get paid?"

Jerry returns the speared morsel for the time being to his plate.

"I'm not sure, to be honest. Not really for me to say, Daniel."

"I thought not. That's why I need you to arrange for me to see Mr Greenall."

Jerry's smile makes its final exit. These days even a line-manager rarely gets to see Martin Greenall. Reclusive and eccentric by reputation, Greenall has lately become something of a company myth; for weeks now, all day-to-day affairs have been handled solely by his partner, Blakeley. The latest word from the floor would have it that Greenall, only too aware of the company's rocky fortunes, has done a runner and left Blakeley to go down with the ship. No peace for the rumour machine: the one cog in this business that still has the teeth to turn with a vengeance. The inevitable suggestion to approach Blakeley instead is already forming on Jerry's lips, but Daniel is quick to scotch it. He isn't interested in speaking to Blakeley. It's a matter that concerns a shared history between Greenall and his father.

Of course, were Martin Greenall any normal kind of uncle, Daniel would have been

straight onto the phone to him the moment he'd heard the news about Alex. With any normal kind of uncle there would have followed much rejoicing and shedding of tears and no question at all over taking compassionate leave. But Martin Greenall has never been any ordinary kind of uncle. The two men have not spoken since the funeral. Daniel has no current address or phone number for him. He's not even sure that Uncle Martin could still pick him out of a crowd.

The sausage now discarded, or maybe just forgotten, Jerry downs his knife and fork and rises to his feet with tray in hand.

"Of course I'll ask," he pledges, before sidling away. And he will too, Daniel knows that. Dull as dishwasher he may be, but Jerry is a man who sticks to his word.

The glimmer of optimism sparked by the meeting steadily fades as Daniel's day lurches from hour to hour. The more persuasively he argues the case for paid leave the less he can muster any trust in hearing back from Greenall. His uncle always was and always will be a complete shit.

On the way home, as promised, Daniel drops in at the hospital. Alex's newly washed clothes are folded inside his holdall. The grisly receptionist checks her computer and directs him to Ward C, an open ward; she says there's no need to check in from now on.

Ward C proves to be one of those he'd seen opening straight onto the main corridor. Something about the way the patients are packed inside, languishing there in rows, makes him dread them suddenly. When his own turn comes he will do what cats do – slink off into a dark corner, close his eyes and breathe his last, not have medical science making some song and dance about it. He tries not to see them. But there is no avoiding the smell. Even above the odours of urine, disinfectant and boiled cabbage drifts their smell of despair. Despair at having entrusted their lives to the institution, at having had their self-esteem invaded by needles and drugs and scalpels and X-Rays, their dignity stripped and bundled into carrier bags and thrust into the arms of bewildered relatives, at seeing their humanity reduced to a whiteboard and clip-chart, seeing their name become a number. Despair in equal measure of dying and of living.

And there at the far end lies Alex, turned back by the Pearly Gatekeeper, forced now to suffer the same humiliations. Feeling all too conspicuous, Daniel crosses the threshold into the ward. A hundred eyes are turned on him – the damning eyes of the bedridden and their visitors into whose privacy he's stepping, the pleading eyes of those who lie alone and unloved. He makes a point of looking straight ahead, targeting a section of blank wall above Alex's bed. He inwardly counts footsteps. One, two, three... seven steps to three beds –

twenty-eight steps, all told. Twelve beds each side. A patient for every year that has kept him and Alex apart. Only when he reaches the bedside does he allow his gaze to fall and rest upon his brother's face. Alex stares straight back, the gaze of an animal caught in headlights. A look of awe, but no longer one of disbelief. Like one who has been waiting for a moment that he's known would arrive. Daniel's pledge to come for him has not been forgotten.

"It won't be long now, Alex. Soon as they give us the all clear you're out of here. I've even brought your clothes."

Speaking comes more easily now. Alex is noticeably more responsive: small movements of his body, the tiniest jerk to the head – perhaps involuntary, his fingers twitching across the sheets. But it hasn't yet become a welcoming response, not one of relief or joy. Maybe there are just too many facial muscles to which he still has no access. The few he does command – or perhaps they move of their own accord – only leave him looking traumatised.

"You've had it tough, I'm guessing." Daniel drops the bag beside the bed and suddenly can't think what to do with his hands. "Since your accident as a child, I mean. Something that's kept you away from us? Mum and me, we were worried sick. All those years, Alex! Everyone believed you were dead. How can it have taken you so long to make contact?"

He isn't really expecting words for a reply, but maybe something in the eyes at least, or a movement. Given all that Alex has put them through, it isn't a lot to be asking. But Alex gives him nothing more. Not so much as a grunt of affirmation or understanding. Daniel reaches irritably for his bag.

"Okay, well, you'll be explaining everything soon enough. The main thing for now is you came home." And with the same promise that he'll be back, Daniel pulls out the copper woollen jersey and grey jeans and lays them over the chair beside the bed. For now, he can do nothing more. He turns and creeps back towards the corridor; twenty-eight paces that feel like a hundred, tracked by forty-eight pleading eyes, two of which – Alex's – burn like lasers into the back of his skull.

Back at the desk, after some phoning around and checking paperwork, the receptionist is able to confirm that Alex is down for discharge on the coming Monday. A list of questions has been stapled to one of the papers; Daniel spots Prentice's name on the bottom. A grilling begins, an interrogation about what plans are in place for Alex's onward care. Daniel is too tired to make trouble. He answers every question quietly and fully. Yes, he's given Alex fresh clothes. Yes, he'll come with the car. Yes, he can pay the deposit and sign for the wheelchair. Yes, there are proper provisions in place, including regular home visits from trained nursing staff. No, Alex will not be left unattended, even for short periods. Eventually she seems

satisfied, taps something into her computer and lets him go.

Alone that evening, with Gulnaz on nights till the weekend, Daniel decides to focus on the one thing over which he feels he has control – converting his flat into an invalid-friendly home. He wanders from room to room, trying to visualise the scale of the task. They're on the ground floor, so no awkward stairs, no raised levels, a straight run of vinyl from the kitchen through to the hallway and bathroom. Easy enough. But the lounge and bedroom carpets are both potential trip hazards. The edges will need fixing down with gaffer tape.

Probably good that the apartment is always so warm. Sitting directly above the boiler room – a boiler churning out heat and hot water for all nine flats – it's rare to have to turn on the heating. But he might have to get hold of a couple of fans – never a wise move to open the windows. Though the bars rule out another burglary, there's the awful smell to contend with, the sole purpose of the high boundary wall being to keep fresh air out and the stench of rotting bins in.

Getting in and out of the building might be a sticking point. That bloody lobby and all its bicycles. Hard enough getting up the main step to the entrance door, never mind past the total logjam by the stairs. Well, tough. The owners will have to get rid of their bikes – or take them upstairs and block their own bloody corridors. Or do the decent thing like him and rent a garage unit across the road. He'll leave notes for them all at the weekend.

Transport. The next hurdle. He has absolutely no idea how compact a folding wheelchair becomes, whether small enough to stash in the back of a Golf with its rear seats down. He's seen those ludicrous Spaz Wagons, like double-decker Minis, like Postman Pat's van. No way is he going to be seen driving anything like that around.

And so to the allocation of rooms. The sitting room can be Alex's bedroom. It'll need a bed-settee or similar. This weekend, he'll pop down to that recycled furniture place in town. Daniel's bedroom: strictly out of bounds – Jesus, the flat is small enough as it is. He's going to need *somewhere* private. Maybe he can push the bed into the corner and make space for a couple of chairs and the telly. It certainly isn't going to be perfect – for either of them. But sacrifices must be made. Twins don't just abandon each other because it's inconvenient to be together. Daniel isn't going to see Alex left to rot in some care home on a diet of tranquillisers and bingo. Daniel will nurse him back to health – teach him to talk again, exercise his muscles and get him walking. A month, that is all it will take. And then the flat can be his once more. It's what he plans to ask for: a month's compassionate leave.

Exhausted from all the planning, Daniel fixes himself a coffee and sinks into the armchair. He tries hard to summon back the healthy Alex who'd sat opposite, to share a hot

drink, or a beer, and have a laugh with. But it can't be done. Only the immobile, dumbstruck Alex sits there. On second thoughts (wandering now through to the kitchen; *this will be the exception that proves the rule*), perhaps he's being a tad optimistic (reaching into the wall cupboard; *forgivable, under the circumstances*). Better to ask for two months' paid leave (the bottle in hand, out with the cork; *definitely an alcohol-free day tomorrow*), in order to give Alex the very best chance (his tumbler generously filled; *maybe leave this one off the drinks tally – still another day to go before the next meeting and already over the week's allowance*).

Daniel considers. There could hardly be a worse moment for calling upon the goodwill of the boss if the garden centre really is failing as badly as everyone claims. But what did he have to lose? His job, by the sound of things – whether he pushed his luck or not. But once he hears that his long lost nephew is alive, surely even Greenall, bastard though he is, will want to cough up some kind of a donation. Daniel isn't even asking for additional money, just his normal take-home pay. But then, Greenall is unlikely to believe him, or could start asking awkward questions – child abduction and all that – drag in the police. Daniel definitely does not want the filth sniffing about. He knows how they work. Even his distant past wouldn't be safe. They'd find some way of getting their grubby hands on it, twisting it around to implicate him somehow in Alex's accident. And almost certainly they'd find a reason to stop him taking Alex in.

The way ahead gradually becomes clearer: tell Uncle Martin about Alex in such a way that there is no mystery, only cause for jubilation. Bring Alex home and get him well enough to talk again. Then, and only then, if some grisly tale about his past does emerge, contact the law and hand the matter over to them like the good citizen that he is. This whisky really is clearing his head; the only time all week he's had any true sense of where anything is leading. Justification indeed for this one lapse in the 'Programme'. It's enough to get him back onto his feet and at the kitchen cupboard again. Might as well give this particular branch of therapy his best double shot.

In the morning comes the news he's been waiting for. Jerry catches up with him in the toilets. They eye each other nervously in the mirror as Daniel continues to gulp water from the tap. His boss's face reddens a little as he speaks, Daniel's own remains ghostly white. Greenall's response to Jerry's approaches (via Blakeley) is that Daniel must submit his request – and the reasons behind it – in writing.

When he should be outside sweeping, Daniel sneaks off to 'Garden Furniture' with some of Jerry's writing paper, sits at a picnic table and forces his mind to work. How to reformulate his case. He'd had it all rehearsed as a speech; each rise and fall, every

acceleration and dramatic pause, the hand gestures, the face; when to be lightweight, when to let his voice break a little. But to capture all that on the page is going to be so much harder. Whether to go really formal: ‘To the managing director of Greenall and Blakeley Ltd. Dear Sir’, or lighten up; try for a little nepotism: ‘Hey, Uncle Martin, Daniel here. How’s it going?’ He battles with it for over an hour, until finally emerging with a splitting headache and a message that more or less does its job:

10/1/07

*Dear Uncle Martin,*

*I know we haven’t corresponded for a long time, but I am writing to give you some totally amazing news. It’s about Alex. Like some weird miracle, he’s turned up – ALIVE! After all these years, completely out the blue. It turns out he wasn’t killed up on those cliffs. That’s why they never found him. I know it sounds incredible, I can hardly believe it myself. But we have no idea where he’s been all this time because he can’t tell us. We found him unconscious. He’s now in hospital – it looks like maybe a stroke or something. They plan to put him in a home, but I want to look after him and help him to talk and walk again. That’s why I need two months’ paid compassionate leave.*

*I’ve always appreciated you giving me this job. I know Mum did too. And I know you’ve always looked out for me here. I’d be so grateful for this one last favour.*

*Yours faithfully,*

*Daniel George*

He squirms at the letter’s sycophantic tone, but he does like his ‘weird miracle’, and how the comma after it works to slow down the reader ready for the capitalised punch line – just how he’d planned to deliver it verbally. He screws up his eyes to push the pain aside and carefully re-writes the words in his best handwriting.

On the way out that evening he drops the note off at the customer service desk with strict instructions that it reach the boss first thing in the morning. He knows that time is running out. The hospital had said a week and it’s already Wednesday. Unless Greenall’s decision is received by the weekend he might have to throw a sickie and blow everyone’s goodwill.

The pain in his head rules out another visit to the hospital. The journey home plays out like a video game, with the world beyond the glass making all the running – Daniel himself can feel no sense of movement. Headlights, tail lights, traffic lights, street lights, house and shop lights: all just a blaze of shooting-stars, dissolving against a smudgy black, their points

colliding on all sides and swimming before his eyes, stabbing at his optic nerve. The hubbub of rush hour is lost to his inner din of throbbing and pulsing. Afterwards, nothing of the journey sticks in mind beyond nauseating light, sound and pain.

Home again now, no idea how he made it; a spray of letters across the lobby floor. He gathers them all up and pulls out those addressed to him, stuffing the rest into the nearest pigeonhole. In his present state he can barely read, let alone sort them.

The kettle is on before he's even closed the door to the flat and removed his coat. The first mouthful of coffee washes down three Paracetamol. As the mug empties, as a second follows, as his temples are pressed between his wrists, so his eyes begin to clear, his mind to un-fog and his queasiness to settle. Ten more minutes with eyes closed, head in hands. Only then can he bring himself to take a second look at the mail on the table. A notification from his landlord of another hike in rent – the third in as many years, a credit card offer, various flyers, a desktop-published letter announcing he's won thousands of Euros on the Spanish lottery – they all go straight into the bin. One letter remains. Familiar writing and no stamp. A cursory lick holds the flap by its tip. Inside he finds a single sheet of lined paper torn from a wire binder and folded into four, the same handwriting inside in blue biro. He opens it and groans. Of course, Gulnaz. It says she called round just before her shift to see how he was. They must have missed each other only by minutes, but it's pointless phoning her now; her mobile is never turned on while she's on duty. The letter asks about Alex, and about Daniel's plans for the weekend. The words are caring and sensitive, and yet they leave him feeling unsettled. They give away nothing of her mind. They've not seen each other since that fractious parting at the hospital.

Something in particular in her note rings oddly. Something one might write to a close friend who is going through a breakup; Platonic – not the sentiment of one lover to another. 'There's always a bed for you here if you need one,' she's put. He reads it over again. A bed. Gulnaz's bed? With her in it? Or just a roof over his head? Does she not wish to sleep at his place any more then? Probably not; because of the cat allergy thing. And what's all this, 'If he *needs* one'? If he needs her, but not vice-versa, is that it? At first her letter angers him. He is all set to tear it up when a quite different meaning jumps off the page. Maybe she's thinking about him organising the flat ready for Alex, and wants only to offer some temporary reprieve from the mess. All the same, she might have said, 'Come over and keep me warm in bed any time you like.' Ah, but of course she's on nights. This is to offer her room to him in her absence. It must be that. He picks up the note and reads the sentence again. Now it's the word 'always' that proves irksome. A long-term word. He'll have the flat ready for Alex by

Monday, and she's only on nights till the end of the week.

Thursday comes – and hangs around like a bad smell. Having remorselessly tossed him from one crisis to another without letup since Christmas night, time, it seems, has suddenly exhausted itself and gone on strike. Getting through the day is like weaving a path through a freeze frame. Hour after hour he traipses from shop floor to conservatory, from garden area to café and back again, amid the statues of pensioners, stationary lines at checkouts, trolleys piled high with shrubs going nowhere, folks sat at tables staring into their teas but not drinking. And each time the clock tells him no, not hours. Minutes. That's all. Only minutes since he'd made his last time check.

Thursday is Jerry's day off, because he works Sundays. So there's no-one to badger. The girl at customer service confirms that his note has gone to Greenall's office. Has she seen him? No, only Blakeley. Tomorrow is Daniel's last shift before the weekend. He gives Greenall an ultimatum. If no answer by lunch time tomorrow then he'll break with protocol and march straight upstairs and, if absolutely necessary, appeal to Blakeley instead. Perhaps Greenall has talked about his past, has told Blakeley about Daniel – or even Alex, and with any luck, the more approachable Blakeley will be every bit as generous, if not more so.

The day brings no reply. Like everyone else, at five thirty Daniel is forced to fight his way out of the car park and lock horns with the ring-road traffic, merging nose-to-tail like the teeth of some giant zipper. He knows he should visit Gulnaz – or phone her at least – before she leaves home. A good brother would visit the hospital as well. But the traffic only nudges him homewards. All very well what he *should* be doing, but that takes no account of Alex's non-communication or of yesterday's note from Gulnaz that now makes him wary of speaking to her. Let Alex be alone for one more night. Let Gulnaz think him a little aloof. He can make it up to them both tomorrow. Things will return to normal next week when everything falls into place.

Back to work again next morning. Even if Greenall had known about his ultimatum he couldn't have cut it finer. The canteen is already shedding its lunchtime crowd and Daniel is due back on duty: mould and mildew removal from pots and troughs. He's all set instead to cut through 'Houseplants' and take the stairs to his uncle's office, when he spots him at the main entrance. The sight is unnerving. Daniel hasn't seen him, even fleetingly, for well over a year. Reclusive and eccentric indeed. The man might have slept in his suit. He speaks to nobody, avoids the eyes of those who hail him, sets his sights to the floor and scurries forward in that funny old stoop of his. Ever since Daniel could remember, his uncle had been

slightly deformed, with a gammy right leg. He'd always looked older than his years, but he seems to have aged another ten in twelve months. Greenall and his father were the same age – school friends: fifty-six or seven, but he looks seventy. Suddenly, Daniel doesn't fancy his chances one bit with this withered, stand-offish old man. Greenall reaches his office and lurches inside. Daniel needs a way of holding his ground – to see if his uncle reappears. Fortunately, he's accosted by a customer with a problem over a price reduction, the perfect excuse to hang about in sight of the stairs without having to stand idle. He pretends to struggle with the question, giving deliberately convoluted answers to draw out the exchange. 'The reduction applies to the family-size only, except where superseded by the three-for two offer, unless of course you're using your loyalty card...' Then, with the poor shopper on the verge of surrender, the office door opens and Greenall is hobbling again, down the stairs and over to the customer service desk, with something, a memo or a letter, in his hand. Muttering a single word, he drops the object into a wire tray and is gone: ten minutes maximum; a day's work for the top man in a toppling empire. Next thing Daniel knows, he is hearing his own name over the intercom.

"Sorry, got to go. Discount on the two litre bottles only, mate." He pushes aside the dazed customer and is at the front desk in less than ten seconds. The girl hands him the letter with an inquisitive smile and Daniel too is out of there. Posh envelope, the name typed, not computer printed. Quality paper inside, typed again and signed by hand. The language is formal but not excessively so, the content concise and to the point. 'A difficult economic climate... turbulent times... all hands needed on deck to ride out the storm.' Daniel's heart begins to sink. But... Greenall was so shocked and moved to hear about Alex that he visited him in hospital this morning to see the miracle for himself (bloody Nora!). After due consideration and discussion with his partner, Daniel is to be offered, 'A month's compassionate leave on half pay, subject to review in two weeks, depending on your brother's progress.' He hoped Daniel would understand that this was the best he could offer under the present circumstances, in order to remain fair to the rest of the employees. Signed, Martin J Greenall DCM.

Not the worst news. Not the worst. But, Christ, how's he supposed to manage on half pay? He's barely solvent as it is. An extra mouth to feed and so much still to buy. He remembers the rental demand in the bin. Money to find there too. There was that credit card offer, perhaps. No, no way – not another one – quickest pathway to ruin. Some additional part-time work then, just during the day to supplement his income. But if that got back to Greenall, he'd be in deepest shit. Benefits. Gulnaz had said something about grants. He will

definitely ring her tonight before his session with Joan. Whatever Gulnaz's feelings have become towards him, she isn't going to refuse him advice. If she starts her night shift at nine she'll probably be up and about by half six.

He rallies a little. The letter isn't what he'd been hoping for, but the prospect now lies ahead of a whole month unshackled from his stupid job. He has just three more hours to endure. Blasting the muck from those pots feels symbolic – a clean slate. Three hours of hard physical graft, the kind of work he likes best, and he'll be a free man.

There is just time on the way home to pay a flying visit to the hospital and break the good news to Alex. The clock is against him; he needs to catch Gulnaz before she leaves and has to be at the drop-in centre for seven. Much to his annoyance, Alex is not on the ward when he arrives – being 'attended to' by the nurse, is all they will tell him. And there isn't time to wait. When eventually he makes it back to the flat Daniel is straight on the phone to Gulnaz. But she can only give him a few minutes – he'd been wrong about her start time, and they do little more than make arrangements for Saturday; no chance to discuss his financial problems. Then, before he can so much as snatch a breath, it's time to head off to the drop-in centre. The thought of seeing Joan again actually gives him a slight buzz. He does feel more in control with her than he had with that idiot Matt, and something of a connection too. But all the dashing about has racked up his nerves. A bit of Dutch courage to loosen his tongue and calm him down might be wise before setting out, just a tot, and certainly nothing with a smell to give him away.

He reaches for the vodka.

Joan seems genuinely pleased to see him. The session begins with everyone recounting their drinks total for the week. Few have been as successful as Daniel; the comments from some make it clear they suspect him of cheating. The anorexic punk, who declares his tally to be zero despite slurring his words in so doing, most certainly has been. This leads to a round-the-circle reflection on when the dependency on drink first began.

For Daniel, it was when he was twenty-one, the day of the funeral. Something else to lay at his mother's door. Arrangements had been handled by his uncle Martin, Daniel himself being in no fit state after those final, long bedside vigils. The world that he'd known for ten years had just fallen apart. The moment it was clear that she was never coming home, his thieving, self-centred uncle had put the family house on the market. With his mum dead, and the house sale completed, suddenly Daniel had nowhere to live, nobody to look after, no job to go to, no qualifications of any worth. Beyond his uncle, and his aunt Eleanor from his

father's side, there wasn't a soul at the funeral he recognised. He'd sat in the shadows during the service, endured words of condolence in silence, and throughout the gathering afterwards skulked around in the kitchen.

He leaves the account at that, but it sits with him as the group offer their stories of financial crises, bullying at work, extra-marital affairs, abused childhoods. Just one new acquaintance Daniel had made that afternoon of the funeral; patiently waiting, her slim neck and slender shoulders glinting amber from the sun through the window. Someone in the group is talking about love at first sight. Yes, Daniel might call it that. And a wild honeymoon to follow. But how imperceptibly that power balance had shifted, until the day he woke to discover that his love affair with drink had soured into an abusive marriage. And, like the middle-aged woman now relating her twenty year ordeal at the hands of her husband, he too had done nothing to break loose. In all that time, his body has never built up a resistance. If anything, the passing years have made his hangovers all the more crippling. Only his mindset has moved on; shedding the delusions that he could quit any time, leaving him resigned to the fact that the daily abuse was for life.

He's struck by the parallels between everyone's stories. Always the seeds of undoing seem to lie within the family. Joan sees this too, and uses it as her means to turn to their genograms.

In picking out the key branches of his own tree, Daniel feels a sudden compunction to reveal all about Alex's fall and the miracle of his survival. But Joan has already latched onto the loss of his father and how it affected him as a child. He explains about his father's naval career, that he was away for long periods, that he lost his life in the South Atlantic. He tells them how Alex and he looked forward to their father's return, to his heroic tales and presents, fully intending to bring the story round to the tragedy up on the cliffs.

"But how do you think you reacted to his death?" she persists.

All eyes turn on Daniel. What? Hasn't he just answered that? She should pay attention and not interrupt when people are pouring out their hearts. She's murdered the moment. He can't believe he'd been about to lay himself so open. Sorry, but enough said. Next question.

But her next question is the one that finally decks him. Ostensibly posed to the whole group, it might so easily have been a personal swipe, a punishment for refusing to play ball.

"Okay everyone. Looking now at your genograms, who would you say you take after most, your father or your mother?"

Eyes turn to laps and foreheads furrow.

"Daniel?"

“Definitely my father.”

She lets it go at that and moves on, but even in hearing the words, Daniel knows it to be a lie. His mother wasn't strong like his father. Neither was Daniel. She was quiet and thoughtful. So was he. No wonder she'd always understood him so well. He often sensed that she favoured him over Alex;; always encouraging him – telling him he was the clever one. Cleverer than she was, maybe. His father had always insisted she was stupid. She and Daniel both. His father resented her middle-class background, criticised her for her blinkered view of the world, for knowing nothing about how nations grapple with nations. He mocked Daniel for his time-wasting, for the hours spent staring up at the stars and wondering how the universe came about. So there it is: in his mother's image was Daniel made. It figures. He could aspire all he liked toward the noble qualities of his father, but he'd always default to this. No drop-in centre, no therapist and no understanding girlfriends would ever change that.

Notes and overview for the week ahead, and a short creative writing assignment on 'being close to someone'. Complete the drinks diary and add up the week's units – something that might prove more awkward this time around.

Joan asks him to stay behind after the meeting. She looks up seriously from her papers and says quite openly, “I'm wondering if you're ready for this yet.” Daniel stares at her and clutches the back of the nearest chair.

“What do you mean? What's wrong? Aren't I doing everything you're asking me to? They're really helpful, these sessions.” He'd believed he was doing so well. He just hopes she hasn't smelled something on his breath.

“I feel you're holding back,” she explains softly.

“Holding back?? No way.”

“And saying the things you think I need to hear.”

He'd clearly been less in control than he'd thought. “But I've got to come,” he protests. “I made someone a promise.”

Her seriousness melts into a look of sympathy. “I'm sorry,” she says, “but you have to understand, this will only work if you're doing it for yourself.”

He scoffs and turns away, outwardly angry, inwardly cursing himself for being so utterly transparent. But next meeting he will show her. Tonight he will write such insightful notes. He will tussle again with all those questions and lay himself bare.

At three a.m., unable to sleep, he writes a short story about a blind boy who lives with his grandmother. Bullied by the other children in the neighbourhood, the boy saves all his affections and woes for his pet rabbit. The rabbit lives in a hutch in his garden, but each day

after school the boy brings it in and sits it on his lap, until one day, when his gran is out, he becomes disorientated and treads on the rabbit and breaks its back. He and the rabbit had been close. Too close.

From the story, he turns straight to his notes. They'd better be bloody good ones if they're to win Joan over again. Highly – what had she said? – 'reflective'. Maybe he should start by putting the record straight. Okay, he'd made a mistake. He took after his mother, not his father. But he'd spent a lifetime trying to correct that fault. Surely that was worth something. But it was also crucial to answer the question about the impact of his father's death. Why had he struggled so much with that one? It went deeper than feeling exposed in front of the group. He'd simply not known the answer. His father had always been the perfect hero. They'd grown up believing he was untouchable. Yes, that was it. His death must have been so devastating that Daniel was too stunned by the news to accept it. Like Alex thinking it was his boat. With their mother, now that was different. Daniel was so much older when she died, and the event so long awaited. He'd had months, years, to distance himself from the mortifying creature in his care, so that by the time the shrivelled impostor in that bed breathed her last he'd already let go of the person he could properly say was his mother. But then, he'd also *felt* her death more, because her weaknesses were so plain to see. She was flawed in life, so death had an easy way in – through the cracks.

Something like that.

He throws down his pen. Pretentious claptrap. And none of it accounted for the anger. When he'd walked again through those hospital corridors, when he'd retraced that bus journey, when Gulnaz had pressed him over his education, when the group had asked about his 'untapped potential', there was still so much fury burning him up inside. It's always there, eating into him whenever he thinks of his mother. It isn't just her illness and death, or the effect that had on him. He'd realised that well enough by now. He knows how hard she had worked at keeping the family together – even when their father was alive, never mind after he'd gone. Stupid, Father said she was – but she wasn't stupid with money. She was the one who'd kept them fed and clothed and seen them off to school on time – he couldn't rightly go on blaming her for getting ill. Nor was it true that she alone drove him to drink. His anger wasn't really about these things.

No, it was about *Alex*. She was accountable: for having taken her eye off him on that Christmas walk. There could be no excuse for that. How could any mother be so irresponsible? With a nine-year-old? Alex's terrible accident, it was all *her* doing. That was inarguably *her fault*. It made her a bad mother, a bad human being – by definition. Her own

look of guilt, the one that makes him shudder to this day, it convicted her, condemned her to eternal damnation. And it probably had every bit as much to do with her death as the cancer.

He pulls out the pen from the folds of the sheets and writes in capital letters, THAT IS WHY, MOTHER, I CAN NEVER FORGIVE YOU.

## Lazarus

As the car pulls up to the newsagent's, a little after three, for the first time there's no sign of Gulnaz on the roadside. Instead, she appears at a faceless green door some yards further along and waves him over. Behind the door, a flight of stone steps, also painted green, rises and turns from sight. After a quick embrace she leads him up to her flat, the cold concrete of the stairwell ringing to her apologies for the mess that awaits them. Daniel is reminded of Christmas Day, when the roles had been reversed, though he can't bring to mind any apologies of his own. She tells him she's only had three hours' sleep – her way of readjusting her body clock. Despite her obvious tiredness, she seems warm enough towards him; the hug had felt genuine and he detects no tension in her manner. His disquiet remains, all the same.

Over the phone, he'd listed the things for Alex he still needed from town, and Gulnaz had asked if she could join him. Now he sees just how much this has squeezed him for time. He's made two trips already this morning, but is keen to get back on the road. The sight before him as they step into her room suggests however that she's had other ideas. Her table has been laid; a teapot sits over a tea-light beside a tray of confectionery. He recognises *gaz* – the pistachio nougat he'd sampled on their picnic. Pride of place is given over to a giant wooden bowl stacked with different fruits, though he knows from the picnic that the heavy fragrance of citrus comes more from the tea than from the fruit. Another smell teases his palate too; toasted, biscuity, of warm linen. It's like having walked into a harem, or a gypsy caravan.

So where's the mess she's promised him? Everywhere looks immaculate. Sadly, all this will have to wait. He proposes a rain-check for the food and tells her they should get going. Gulnaz responds by taking her place at the table.

"Come and sit down," she insists. "Let's have tea and run through your list. We've plenty of time. Tonight's late night shopping and the recycled furniture place is open tomorrow till four."

It's so unexpected that he's already seated before it quite hits him what has just happened. She's done it again – like at the graveside – disarmed him, assumed control. She pours tea and offers him the sticky cakes. Conceding defeat, he begins to take her through the plans he'd made for the flat and lists the extra items needed for each room.

"Don't forget my offer," she prompts. Daniel stares back blankly. "You got my note? The spare bed, the folding one, it's yours if you want it. Greg used it sometimes when we weren't..." She shakes her head. "Anyway, he always insisted it was quite comfy." Then she laughs, "I trust I won't be needing it for a while."

Daniel thinks of her letter, the exact wording, and understands. So now he can rest easy. Once again he's been a prat. Always reading the worst into other people's words.

Over tea, they work on the finer detail, making lists of smaller but equally vital purchases: bibs, wooden cutlery, trays, toddler's drinking cup, incontinence sheet, extra pillows and blankets, a sliding board for getting between the bed and the wheelchair – he'd thought of none of these – dressing gown, slippers and pyjamas, and new clothes for when Alex is well enough to venture out. Though Gulnaz visibly fights her exhaustion, massaging her face with her palms and repeatedly filling her glass with tea, her mind still turns over with unwavering clarity. Now she has moved on to the DIY tasks, like a handrail for the toilet, special tap tops, replacing door knobs with long handles. There are the administrative jobs: organising home-help visits, applying for disability allowance and carers' benefits; a disabled badge for the car. To Daniel it seems endless. Looking after his mother had never been like this; he'd just been her skivvy until things got really bad and then they'd taken her away. He wonders whether he would have had the strength to go through with it all without Gulnaz, stuck in his flat for a whole month, trying to deal with all this.

Given that it might be their last evening alone together for some weeks, he finally makes up his mind to relax and enjoy it. Gulnaz is right; there will be time enough for everything tomorrow. He sits back and breathes in the magic around him. Somehow she has managed to transform this most unpromising of spaces into a Middle-Eastern paradise; her personal touches are everywhere he looks. Hand-woven rugs hang from the walls, each one a unique tapestry of reds, blacks, blues and greys. The lighting she's created is soft and alluring. Table lamps and candles are cleverly placed against windows or mirrors to make them sparkle. Even the ghastly fluorescent tube ceiling light is ingeniously disguised by a fine red muslin headscarf, throwing a blanket of warmth over the whole room. When she offers to show him the rest of the flat he readily agrees. 'It won't take long,' she assures him wryly. And she's right. The all-in-one kitchen diner leads only to a single bedroom and a cramped little shower room.

And Daniel thought his flat was small.

Further feminine touches adorn the bathroom, like scented candles and coloured glassware. In her bedroom, along with more rugs and candles, he sees tiny pastel coloured drawings set within frames inlaid with intricately patterned mosaic. It's all so seductive that he could happily skip food altogether and take her straight to bed.

Later, she serves him *kehoresb-e-bodemjun*, along with the steamed rice he'd smelled cooking earlier. Savouring the tomatoey aubergine stew, studying her candlelit face across the

table, Daniel can see now just how wonderfully foreign she is. Hard to believe that the line of her nose, her sharp eyes, the chiselled cheek bones, the large but perfect white teeth, her broad lips, coming together as they do into something unfamiliar, had led him at the graveside to judge her as plain. In fact, her beauty is extraordinary. It's only her work-a-day appearance that belies it – the way she normally wears her hair, her drab coat, the loose fitting sweater, the bicycle. But here everything fits together; everything makes perfect sense.

Does she see the look he is giving her? Certainly she must notice his eyes picking over the details around him. She's on her feet, leading him over to another set of pastel drawings and introducing each one. There's a young Persian woman poised with a pitcher of wine over her crouching, bearded lover; a polo match on cartoon horses; the swishing sabres of a ceremonial hunting scene. Each little gem, she declares proudly, is handcrafted in a place she calls Esfahan.

"I brought some of the pictures with me," she says. "A couple of the rugs were smuggled out much later by an Iranian friend on her way to Canada. Everything else I found here in England."

His curiosity gives her the confidence to open up further. Only after her grandfather's death had she really felt this need to surround herself with such things. She'd left Iran at thirteen. In taking her under his wing, her grandfather had felt a duty to reintroduce her to the Kurdish ways. She'd wanted to forget everything, to become British, to put the past behind her. "I'll tell you," she throws in with a despairing laugh, "I was one very confused teenager."

But losing her grandfather had cut her terribly adrift. Her flat, she says, became her way of making sense of it all. A way of reconnecting with her parents, with the child she once was, with where she once belonged. A kind of shrine.

"I remember when I told all this to Greg the first time he came here... Do you mind me talking about him?"

Daniel shrugs.

"I remember how poetically he expressed it. Apparently, I'm teetering between two – what did he call them? – two footholds, or something: anyway, the hospitals and care homes on one side, my life here, on the other. I agreed how unsettling it all was, and he promised he'd 'be my rock.'" Daniel cringes. She laughs. "Oh yes, Greg had a wonderful way with words. All very sensitive when it suited him. Can't believe how I fell for that stuff. A rock! Well, perhaps the kind that grinds you down into the dust." Then she smiles and puts her arms around his neck. "But that's all in the past. Now I have you."

Daniel isn't sure he's quite ready to be anyone's rock, being all so at sea himself.

The sex that night is intense but perfunctory. A combination of her extreme tiredness and his anxiety over the day ahead leaves them distracted and impatient. Climax for Daniel is rushed and unrewarding. He isn't even sure that Gulnaz reaches hers before they both roll over and fall into very private sleeps. But it's comforting to feel her rump against the small of his back, to touch her calves with the soles of his feet, and, when the din of shopkeepers wakes him next morning, to recall her half-lit face at the table. Gulnaz's deep regular breathing telling him she sleeps on, Daniel forces open an eye and finds himself staring at a photograph on the bedside table of a woman, a child and two men. Only half awake, at first he lays the faces in the picture over the remnants of a fading dream. The two men, one slim and handsome, the other moustached, overweight and considerably older, briefly assume the role of hospital orderlies. The young woman, her face round and troubled, framed in black headscarf, takes on the mantle of Gulnaz, neatly turned out in her nurse's uniform, wheeling a chair across the ward ahead of the men. The likeness between Gulnaz and this woman at once names them as daughter and mother; the men, by implication, therefore the father and grandfather. The group poses before a scene of red earth and high mountains – the real context becomes clear as the dream is shaken off. And though the little girl in their midst must be six years old at most, the characteristic lips and nose and piercing bright eyes belong unmistakably to Gulnaz herself.

The light niggles him, as does the relentless clatter of unloading crates, raising shutters and cocky bonhomie. Sunday is no day of rest for the shops on this street, or for its unfortunate residents. He slips from the bed and into the bathroom. By the time he's familiarised himself with the antiquated shower, Gulnaz has come awake. He offers to brew up some coffee, but the coffee grounds and cafetière defeat him. They breakfast at the table, still laid from the previous night. She eats 'Café Lucca' style; bread and cheese and a little cold meat. Daniel finds some wheat flakes, courtesy of ex-boyfriend Greg. Gulnaz's coffee is incredible.

The day quickly gathers momentum, the enormity and sheer physicality of the job soon hitting home. Getting the second-hand furniture to his flat without paying for delivery takes three return trips. Afterwards, Daniel leaves the rear seats folded, ready to receive very different cargo the next morning. As dusk falls, the last items are unloaded and carried through to their appointed rooms. By the end of it, the flat is in chaos, the worst case of fly-tipping Daniel has ever seen. They clear a space on the sofa and rest up for a moment with their drinks, but he can see just how exhausted Gulnaz has become, how each blink is slower

than the last, and it's no surprise when she admits her wish to sleep by herself, in order to be fresh enough for work next day. In truth, he's rather relieved. His is not the widest of beds. He insists he should finish the work alone, that she's done more than enough. Half an hour later, he drives her home and kisses her goodnight.

The final visit he'd planned on making to the hospital now seems rather pointless. He'd wanted to go after lunch. Visiting hours end early on Sundays and there's only an hour left. In a little over twelve hours he'll be back there anyway. One job remains, however, that Daniel must tackle before heading home, something he's been meaning to face for days: to make his peace with the Millwrights. It's a wonder the ruckus with the students hadn't landed him an outright ban, his long-term loyalties to the place doubtless counting in his favour, but it remains to be seen whether the bouncers will actually allow him back through its doors.

The pub is just opening as he pulls into the car park. To his relief, the two thugs are nowhere to be seen. All the windows targeted by New Year's Eve revellers have been replaced, and everything seems strangely back to normal. Inside, the broken chairs too are gone, even the barman is someone new; no apology or swearing on his mother's grave to behave apparently necessary. The bar is all but empty, the only real drama playing out on TV, busy as ever with News 24. Tonight, the jukebox is silent and the fruit machines switched off. There's something of a tension about the place. Of the handful of customers, none seems brave enough to disturb the air with anything above a murmur. Daniel orders a beer and props up the bar, speaking to no-one and avoiding eye contact. His mind is still busy with rearranging furniture and bringing Alex home from the hospital. It's some minutes before he becomes aware of the figure sat alone in the corner, and only then because of a tingle of discomfort that breaks his concentration. The sensation is the same as the one he'd had that night in the cemetery; a feeling of being watched. The glance he steals over a shoulder should be more than enough to tell any voyeur they've been rumbled. Their eyes should immediately drop, or flick to the side; a pint should be raised, a cigarette lit or a newspaper reached for, any kind of pretence to suggest the staring has been misconstrued. But this man makes no move whatsoever. He faces Daniel square on, his hands to his side, no drink, no fags, no paper at his table, and his eyes never once blinking. Even after looking away and back again Daniel finds no change. Then, from the memory of a night misted by drink, he locates this man: the baby-faced sumo wrestler who'd been with Jerry on Boxing Day evening, the night that Daniel had been jilted by Gulnaz. He'd had the same look then as he does now. A look to drain a man's blood. In response, Daniel downs his pint and climbs from his stool, heading deliberately for the exit that takes him straight past this weirdo's table. With escape safely in

his sights and the man directly to his left, he loudly clears his throat, neatly sandwiching within it the word 'faggot'.

The incident has probably spared him another night of disastrous boozing, and allowed him at least a fighting chance of finishing the flat before bed. Really, Daniel should be grateful. But he isn't. The encounter has left him fractious, nervous, confrontational. And it falls to poor old Scoff to bear the brunt of it. For the past two or three days Scoff has been particularly infuriating when it comes to food, driving Daniel to distraction with his endless pestering, only to leave his meal to go dry and rancid. Again tonight, the bowl has been virtually untouched, and, as the big sorting operation gets underway, one of Scoff's mega vomits comes to light beneath the TV.

"You sodding animal!" he cries. Three sheets of kitchen paper hastily cordon off the mess.

He heads back into the kitchen, collects up the dish, scrapes the furred and crusty mixture into the bin, pulls out the Tupperware from the fridge and ladles another dollop into a fresh bowl. It's a miracle how Scoff survives on this diet of thin air. Little wonder that when he isn't throwing up he's spread-eagled somewhere in a catatonic state. Tonight, it's the turn of Daniel's bed, from which he's whisked – legs dangling – out of the room and thrust in front of the food. Scoff withdraws drowsily, only to be firmly returned by the scruff and his head forced down into the bowl. After an initial meow of vague protest, he begins to purr loudly and take a prospective lick, then a few token bites. All appears well. Daniel lets go the scruff. Scoff promptly shakes his head, spraying bouillabaisse over a wide area, blows out through fishy lips and wanders casually back to bed. The incident ends there.

Midnight has passed by the time Daniel feels he's done enough to turn in. Too exhausted to start fretting over what awaits the next day, he's out the moment his head touches the pillow, oblivious to his cat's subsequent efforts to prise himself under the bedspread and curl up against a warm crotch.

All the symptoms of a hangover are there in the morning: the dry mouth, the churning guts, the sweating, the shaking, the tightening in the chest, the pangs of nausea and the pressure behind the eyes. But this time it is not a hangover – one pint, no matter how badly kept, could never do that to him. It is fear, pure and simple. No more problem-solving, no more focusing on a job to be done, and no more hiding away in exotic harems.

The arrangement with the front desk had been to collect Alex at ten. Still more or less on time for once, Daniel pulls the car off the dual carriageway and onto the hospital perimeter road. Immediately the butterflies begin their crazy dance. The next roundabout

presents a choice: left for the car park, ahead for the front entrance. The first exit is passed. And then the second. The car makes a complete circuit and heads back the way it has come. For the last mile, with that terrible fortress pulling him ever closer to its breast, Daniel has hardly taken a breath. He knows now that his body is in meltdown, his head mashed up. What's the bloody problem? Hasn't he been planning this for days? Hasn't he rehearsed this moment over and over, worked his arse off to make it happen? Absolutely he has. But the moment no longer lies some way in the future, safely at arm's length. It is here. It is now. There, just across that car park, Alex will be dressed and ready in his wheelchair, with Gulnaz at his side to help get him into the car. Daniel is heading the wrong way and there is jack shit he can do about it.

The hospital is fast receding in the mirror, and with it any idea of what the hell should happen next. One more roundabout and he'll be back onto the main carriageway, another two miles at least before he can escape it again. Just a few seconds to make a decision or there'll be no decision to make. The white lines approach, but his brain remains stalled. Nothing to be done but to watch his own actions – signal and U-turn, or just keep on going.

A look darts into the mirror, a hand moves for the indicator, a foot slows the vehicle and the arms cross at the wheel. Exits pass by on his left. Again he is facing the hospital and this particular crisis is over.

But hot on its heels comes a second. Drawing up at the front entrance, now nearly ten minutes late, Daniel is suddenly struck by a fear that the nurse waiting for him might not be Gulnaz. Again the butterflies, the tingling throughout his frame, an irrational wave of panic over not having cleaned and vacuumed the car, over not having pushed the passenger seat back to its furthest setting, not having brought a blanket, and over a hundred other petty details – his earlier crisis now splintered into shards of petty anxiety. He savages some gum to steady his nerves and sits for a couple of minutes with eyes closed, a sensation of floating in speckled blackness. Next thing, he is punching the wheel with both fists and leaping from the car.

Alex is seated just inside the entrance, exactly as they had promised. But, worst fears confirmed, Gulnaz isn't there with him, in fact Daniel can see none of the nurses he's met in the wards over the past three weeks. Behind the wheelchair stands instead an immensely tall young black man. Anxieties again begin to spiral out of control. But this man wears the most extraordinary white smile, one that eats up his entire face. It hits Daniel then that the other nurses never smiled; even Gulnaz struggled to do so when in uniform. The contrast is a revelation. And something else helps calm him. One overriding nightmare that has dogged his

thoughts for the past two weeks proves unfounded. Far from being reduced to a drooling vegetable under heavy blankets, Alex sits tall and alert. The side of his face that was slumped so strangely only days before has risen again more or less into place. His frame is given bulk and definition by the thick sweater and tough jeans. His lank hair now washed, it sits thickly around his ears and forehead, fuller even than Daniel's own. Both arms hang to the sides, idle but not useless, the thumbs extended and palms curved ready to grip and propel him forward.

The nurse offers a hearty welcome and has Daniel complete some formalities. Together, the three of them then roll out into the morning sunshine. Though it's the man's gigantic hands that actually power the chair, Alex is already busy rehearsing the grip-push-release-back, grip-push-release-back actions over the wheels. Daniel forges ahead and opens up the car's side door and tailgate. The nurse brings the chair as close to the bodywork as he can. But the next step isn't clear – no way has enough room been left for Alex to be lifted into the car.

“Come on now, Mr George,” the man intones in his crisp, African voice, “You know you can do this.”

Thinking he's being called upon to assist, Daniel rushes forward to await further instruction.

“The wheelchair is quite secure, Mr George. You can be sure of that. Steady now. One, two, three.”

Daniel clocks now that he is redundant; this is to be the patient's challenge, not his. At first, Alex seems reluctant to play. He holds fast at the wheels, threading his fingers through the spokes and pulling himself deeper into the seat so that the wires bite into his flesh.

“Please, let us not have a scene,” the nurse chides him. “You have practised this, Mr George.”

Like some giant praying mantis, the nurse leans over the back of the chair and gently untangles the fingers. Alex finally abandons his defiance and lets his arms go limp. Daniel freezes, waiting to see who will make the next move.

Lazarus rising. That's how it appears. Miracle on Gladstone Way North. Shakily, Alex pushes those hanging arms into service, eases himself forward onto his feet and grasps the car roof above the doorway. The chair is drawn back, the nurse taking its place but doing little more than guiding and reassuring as Alex manoeuvres one foot into the footwell and lowers his body with stupendous effort onto the seat. As he comes to rest, his mumbling explodes into a cry of triumph.

And all this, from the man who only days before had been laid out in white, adrift in

another world, plugged into a battery of equipment as though his very life depended on it. Daniel can only watch in amazement as this slick operation concludes. The crutches are brought from a pouch at the back of the chair, catches to the chair's front and rear are released, and in no time the two sides have concertinaed together, like a Keystone Kops getaway car sandwiched between two passing trains. The chair is so magically light that the nurse can lift it effortlessly into the boot of the Golf. And in it goes, perfectly – with room to spare for the crutches; no need from now on to fold down the rear seats or remove the parcel shelf.

Job done. A handshake. An induction leaflet on, 'Safety first! Best practice in the use of your wheelchair'. The NHS being as moronic as ever. Daniel is then instructed on how to strap the sticks to Alex's hands, and given a second leaflet obliquely entitled, 'One step at a time! From two-point to swing-through crutch gait'. With that, the nurse wishes them both good luck and is gone. Still no sign of Gulnaz, and no message of farewell either from Prentice. Well, so be it. Daniel doesn't need them. After one final scan of the hospital reception through the glass, he slips in behind the wheel and revs the engine.

The true enormity of this moment can now sink in at last: the pair of them, the dynamic duo, here together for the first time on their own terms. So, so long since they'd sat this way, side by side on those innumerable car journeys: the visits to their father's ship in Plymouth; little trips to the shops or to school when the weather wouldn't allow them to walk; those longer journeys from the South West to Shropshire for their annual caravan holidays. But always they'd shared the rear seat, fighting over their respective halves, never up front like this, never like grownups. True, when their mother hadn't come with them Alex was sometimes permitted to sit beside their father; second in command, the co-pilot and navigator, the lookout. But Daniel would always be left in the back. Daniel was only ever cargo, never more than ballast.

Well, today *Daniel* takes command. Poor Alex is no longer fit for purpose; no coordination for co-piloting, no voice for navigation. Only good for looking out – onto a bewildering world from that locked room of his mind.

On the journey home, Daniel feels compelled to clutter the silence with words, at first just stuff about the sights they're passing, but when that topic runs thin he turns to the home that awaits them. He's both quietly confident and proud of his efforts, after such a hard slog getting it all sorted. Alex hears him out impassively. His upper body remains twisted toward the side window, eyes riveted to the view, the characteristic pose Daniel so well remembers seeing from his rear seat vantage point all those years ago.

But just before they hit Cooper's Hill, he slumps back in his seat. Daniel turns the car into Sedgefield Court, stops outside the garage and leaps out to unload the wheelchair from the boot. Getting it to unfold proves trickier than expected, as the catches are not quite as he'd understood them. Twice the whole thing falls over before finally springing into shape. The next move is even less certain – whether Alex has actually mastered the art of getting into it unaided. Something to have checked with the nurse before leaving.

But Alex wastes no time in proving himself, and again his abilities outstrip all expectation. With the will of an Olympic gymnast he hoists himself up and almost throws himself backwards into the seat. By the time Daniel has garaged the car, Alex is already engaging the grip-push-release movement he'd practised earlier and powering himself towards the road. It's all Daniel can do to stop him from attempting the busy crossing under his own steam.

"You're amazing; you know that." Daniel is almost too choked up to work the door key as they reach the flat. Alex's progress has completely bowled him over. "It's not exactly five stars," he splutters excitedly, "but I've done what I can to make it comfortable for you."

Inevitably of course, the chair can't negotiate the step without help. Alex tucks his arms out of the way to allow Daniel to hoik it up and in through the doorway. Fortunately the clearance is sufficient. The same however cannot be said of the corridor. Not a single resident has taken heed of the notes in their pigeonholes and the way is littered as ever with an impossible array of junk: the same three bicycles, joined now by a tatty skateboard, three pairs of wellingtons, a large opened umbrella and a child's buggy.

"Stay there," he growls, as though Alex might leap from his chair in fury. He attacks the stairs three at a time and begins pounding at each door on the first floor. The old codger in flat 5 insists he doesn't accept cold callers and threatens to call the police. Flats 4 and 6 are either not at home or choose to ignore him. On the top floor, flat 7, the TV is racked up to full volume in response to his hammering. To its right, a dog starts to bark, snarl and scratch at the door, and at flat 9 the corpulent tenant emerges threateningly onto the landing, arms folded. Baby buggy? Skateboard? Bikes? You must be bleedin' jokin', mate.

Daniel is seething now, charging back down to the lobby, grabbing the pushchair and dragging it out into the forecourt. He rounds on the other items and hurls them after it. Not that it's cleared the way – all he can do with the bikes is to give them a sound kicking. Alex will now have to abandon the chair and attempt the last few yards on crutches.

"Well, you can't say I didn't warn the bloody-minded bastards." Daniel momentarily takes the strain while fitting each leather strap around his brother's hands. With his full

weight bearing down on his wrists, Alex looks stable enough, but evidently in great pain. All that training to get him in and out of wheelchairs must have left no time for crutch practice. Left stick first, right leg second, right stick third, left leg fourth. Each cycle takes over a minute to complete. Daniel does what he can to guide him, step by faltering step into the flat and across the hall and kitchen. The straps are removed. Freed again from the crutches, Alex props himself up against the kitchen sink while Daniel heads back for the chair. On his return, seeing his brother there, clutching on for dear life, Daniel's heart leaps back for a moment to that other place, the roll top seen again as a fringe of grass over vertical rock, but joined now by the clawing, failing grasp of a child. 'No, Alex, stop! You're gonna fall,' calls a distant voice. The fingers unlock. The child is tumbling.

And the wheelchair takes him.

"Alex, did you climb down the cliff to reach the water!?" The words are already out before Daniel can intercept them. "Just yes or no will do. Just make a sound, one sound for yes, two for no – or nod, shake your head, it doesn't matter."

Too late, if raising this now is the wrong thing. At first he hears nothing. When it comes, the solitary sound should strictly speaking signify a 'Yes', but the intonation suggests the opposite.

"Yes? Yes? Yes. Okay. And did you fall? Were you badly hurt? Knocked out?"

He wants 'Yes' to be a short unequivocal sound – the *equivalent* of a yes. When Alex emits a second single utterance, it's so drawn out as to mean nothing.

"So, did someone find you – before the police came?"

This time, no sound at all.

"Please, Alex, it's really important you remember. If you were... If someone took you away."

Another slow murmur, half drowned by a kind of choked gargle. But Daniel is now too intent on getting these questions off his chest. "I have to know why, Alex. Why you never once made contact. I have to believe there was good reason, and not that you simply didn't care, or couldn't be arsed. You understand that? Why that's so important?"

Either Alex has now forgotten the rules, or he's embroiled in some heated conversation all of his own. With a flash of horror, Daniel suddenly cottons on. He swings the chair around. The kitchen light picks out the tears streaming down his brother's face and the spittle on his chin. His entire body is shaking. His mouth hangs open, snatching at the air like a beached fish, his eyes rolling upwards in terror. Daniel freezes.

He has to call Gulnaz.

No. No way. He can just hear her reaction, ‘Give him up to a shrink – let them put him away.’ He must use the instinct of a twin and deal with this alone.

He remembers a boy in secondary school who used to have fits. They seldom lasted more than a minute, but they still left him in a terrible state; a second attack often followed soon after. Yet their teacher always instructed them not to interfere, only to make sure that he wasn’t injured. For a moment, those strict orders override the instinct to rush to Alex’s aid.

But there was a particular girl in that class. When the teacher wasn’t around she would seize the boy’s right hand and squeeze it tight. She said it helped her friend recover more quickly. Remembering this suddenly, Daniel squats down and reaches out. The joining of hands. Once again that special bond, the symbol of reconnection they’d established on day one at the hospital bedside.

“It’s alright, mate. You’re doing fine. I’m so sorry. No more questions for today. Take it easy. Deep breaths.”

He could kick himself for what he’d done. Alex just isn’t ready.

“You don’t have to say anything. No-one’s going to force you to explain things you don’t want to. It’s enough that you’re here. I’m just so thrilled you’re back.”

Slowly the shaking comes under control, Alex’s breathing settles and he closes his eyes. Without letting go his right hand, Daniel wraps a left arm around his shoulders. For several minutes they remain in wordless communion, heads close together, breathing in rhythm. Like embryos in the womb.

Alex is the first to break the link, slowly turning the chair around and propelling himself with grim determination towards the bedroom.

“No, wait. Your room is through here,” Daniel says, grabbing the handles. He immediately loses control negotiating the turn, wedging a wheel into the skirting board and having to reverse out. He tells himself to stop flapping, to steady his nerves and slow down. Alex is going to be okay. Everything will work out. The lounge proves to be perfect – plenty of room for the chair, a clear run through to the bed. He parks up and helps Alex onto it, midway between a pair of crisp new pyjamas and two folded towels. It makes quite a picture. Although some sign of appreciation would be nice, he’s grateful at least for Alex’s continued silence, hands in his lap, no suggestion that another fit might be on its way.

“I’ll go and make some coffee.” Daniel declares. It takes effort to stay cheerful. “Just through here if you want me, okay?”

For the time being at least, Alex had better not be let out of sight. Opening the door wide and stepping away, Daniel glances back from the worktop. Not such a pretty picture

actually. For all those hours he's toiled over that room, Alex just sits there, hunched forward, staring at nothing, forlorn and defeated, like some half-starved refugee hiding up in a cargo hold, perched on the folding bed like it's some battered old tea chest. Are they to have a whole month of this? What the fuck is Alex's problem? Would he prefer to be back in hospital, is that it? Or locked away in some loony bin?

But the voice of reason tells Daniel to stop, be patient, and just give the poor bastard a little time.

Time is not something they're short of. The morning drags painfully by. While Alex is sleeping, Daniel sets his mind to the logistics of food preparation. No guidance has been given over this; no instructions from the hospital regarding diet or feeding habits. Alex is no help at all. With its deep-lipped plates and baby-feeders, its thick wooden fork and spoon, the new tableware only seems to cause him offence. In the end, Daniel tests him on standard cutlery and finds it perfectly adequate. A total waste of good money. But getting the food itself right goes beyond a farce. Too hot, too cold, too tough. Eventually, he decides to stick with ingredients that cook into a pulp. For the time being at least, Alex's diet will consist of overdone vegetables, mashed potato and soup. Maybe jelly or trifle for afters. Hospital food must have suited him just fine.

It's hard work having someone in the house who won't speak, whose only solace is to stare despondently at the floor for hours on end. Again to keep his mind busy (and his lips sealed), Daniel turns to the long list of DIY tasks. They prove to be only marginally less maddening than lunch. The special tap tops with extended side handles go on relatively simply, but not the new handles for the doors: their spindles are so short that he has to fudge the job by reusing the old ones, packed out with masking tape. And then there's the handrail: easy enough to fix to the wall beside the toilet – a good result, he tells himself, until discovering there is no longer room to sit down. It has to come off again and be moved to the other side. But the efforts pay rich dividends. A little later, Alex takes his first trip to the bathroom and, thank God, thanks to the newly fitted rail he finds he can relieve himself unaided.

By the time Daniel has finished for the day and found some downtime he's left totally shattered. The mindless stupidity of game shows and a few Stellas is his absolute limit. The thought that this is but day one of thirty. A whole month of today's. Surely it can only get easier. Maybe not. He stares into the screen. Maybe he *is* the Weakest Link.

A sound infiltrates the TV chatter, a sound quite at odds with the presenter's exaggerated sarcasm. Plaintive, heartfelt, tender – it could almost be the call of a pigeon.

Intrigue getting the better of exhaustion, Daniel hauls himself to his feet and shuffles back to the sitting room. Alex is back in his chair, his eyes still lowered, but something has shifted his attention. A ball of ginger fur now sits in his lap between his hands, as if someone had thrown him their Russian hat. A familiar road-drill is hard at work, hammering away in sync with the tiny stroking motions along its back. The tears on Alex's cheeks are visible even from the kitchen.

Well, well, well. Kindred spirits. *True* kindred spirits. Thank God – Alex is fond of cats. No allergies or phobias. And old Scoff must have a nose for DNA. The wily scoundrel, the chancer, what a bonus for him. Four knees to lay claim to, two bedspreads, twice the fussing. Who knows, maybe in the goodness of time even dual rations. His master cloned for his sole benefit. Now Scoff can look forward to round-the-clock company and be more spoilt than ever.

Daniel finds a smile at last. Things just might be working out after all.

## Thurlestone

“But why couldn’t you? Surely Prentice would have let you go. Okay, okay, so he’s not your boss. Whoever, then. No, I’m not. I just felt let down... Well, because I *needed* you there.”

Daniel makes a scowl at Alex, rocking his head like a metronome.

“Yes, yes, if you must. Bye.”

He doesn’t quite slam down the phone.

“That was Gulnaz,” he grunts. “One of your ex nurses. Said she was too busy in the children’s ward to see you off. She’s on her way over. Probably to check that I haven’t accidentally killed you.”

Barely has Daniel sat down and caught up with the game show again when the main front door buzzer sounds. Just getting back on his feet feels like torture, and the walk from the bedroom, through the kitchen, out of the flat and across the lobby seems as interminable as the walk of shame over which he’s just taken such voyeuristic pleasure. At the threshold, he and Gulnaz glare at each other, the pair of them visibly wilting with fatigue and all but keeling forward and buttressing the other for support. Only the force of their gaze keeps their heads from touching – like repelling magnets. Somewhere along the way, someone’s pole has been reversed.

“What’s all that stuff doing out here?” Gulnaz asks, allowing Daniel to break eye contact. Surprisingly, no-one has yet reclaimed the junk he’d turfed out.

“Just clutter.”

Released from the standoff, Gulnaz takes a step forward and brushes against his shoulder. Daniel turns and leads her through to his flat.

“How is he?”

“He’s fine, of course. I told you, I’m taking care of him. It’s all sorted.”

She sees the new door handles and there’s a shift in her mood. A near smile expands into a yawn.

“I’d like to say hello, if he’s not resting.”

Daniel indicates the lounge. “Looks like you could do with a drink. Want one?”

At first she shakes her head, then rubs her temples. “Actually, yes. Tea, please, black.”

She steps out of sight and shuts the door. The sound of her voice drifts through from the sitting room, but not the words. When Daniel lays the mugs down on the kitchen table and calls to her she fails to appear, only giving some indistinct answer before resuming her muted conversation. When she does emerge her face is like thunder. Very deliberately, she

pulls the door closed behind her, places herself on the far side of the table and folds her arms.

“What?”

“You can’t leave him like that. He’ll go insane! No TV, no radio, no music, nothing to read. And for goodness sake, most of the time he’s going to be in bed. The folding bed was meant for *you*, not for Alex. He must have your room. A proper bed. And everything else.”

She shouldn’t be tackling it this way. Not on day one. She should be winning him over: allowing him to show off his DIY handiwork, acknowledging his achievements in getting everything ready and, crucially, offering an apology for having failed to show up at the hospital. Maybe then he could just about tolerate some criticism. But not handled like this.

“Have you any idea what kind of a day I’ve had?” he barks out.

She gestures to shush him. “Of course I have, Daniel. I do this every day. I know just how demanding it is. It’s why I never thought it was a good idea. I saw this coming the moment you told me what you planned to do.”

“Oh, you did. Well, clever you. And what would you have done? Prentice wanted him kicked out, anyway. You’d rather see him begging on the streets, is that it?”

Gulnaz turns her back. “Shall we talk outside? It’s not good for Alex to overhear this.”

That’s fine by him. In the kitchen, on the doorstep, all gathered cosily together around Alex’s bed, whatever she prefers. So long as everyone knows just where they stand.

Out in the forecourt now, Daniel braces himself against the wall, leaving Gulnaz with her back to the night.

“All I’m saying is you need to give him a better deal. I know it’s a sacrifice, but that was your choice. Look, there’s something Dr Prentice perhaps should have made clearer.” The little shiver in her shoulders might only be the cold, or might mean something more. “There was really nothing else the hospital could have done. They believe Alex’s illness isn’t physical. They think he’s suffering from a psychological condition brought on by trauma – his brain’s way of protecting him from some terrible ordeal he’s been through.”

“Maybe so, but...”

“Under no circumstances should Alex be put under any unnecessary stress. We’ve got to lower his anxiety levels. He was making good progress in the hospital, but there’s a real danger now of a relapse.”

She shuts him up with that. Having already witnessed Alex’s response to interrogation, Daniel has no desire to see it repeated. So, what is she saying – it’s all in his mind? Nothing really wrong with him at all? Alex is putting them all through this just to escape a memory? Okay, a stroke was one thing. A stroke was nobody’s fault. Or a blood clot pressing on the

brain and causing blackouts or personality changes. But to con himself into a coma, into paralysis, to cripple his own powers of speech just to escape a memory, surely Alex hadn't the capacity – or the gall – to do that.

“In time, he'll probably need some psychiatric help, followed up with counselling. They're very good at it these days. It's what the police get, and the army, if they've suffered or seen terrible things. It's called Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. It's...”

“Okay, okay, I know what it is. You've made your point; I'll swap the rooms around. We don't need any quacks snooping around here, thank you. Alex just needs time with me. I'll have found a way into his head long before anyone else would even get close. You'll see.”

There's nothing more to be said. Daniel turns to go back inside. Gulnaz might well have foreseen their encounter ending this way. She's left nothing in the flat and has no reason to follow after him. He closes the door on her without a word.

The remorse kicks in just a little too late. A minute sooner, and he could have called her back from the driveway. He could have apologised for his rudeness, held her in his arms and kissed her. Because of course she was right about Alex. If only she'd eased off a bit, been a little less intolerant. All this is so new to him – there are bound to be mistakes to start with. This is the worst possible time for them to be falling out. If ever he's needed someone, someone with specialist skills, someone with whom he could share his innermost thoughts, then it's now. He massages his face with both hands and groans. Perhaps he can ring her later, once things have cooled off a bit. But first he has to sort out this whole bloody fiasco. He sniffs and runs his knuckles along his spine.

In itself, making the change will be no big deal. Alex's bed has not yet been slept in; both sets of towels are unused. There's stuff in his room he'll need to remove, but much of it can stay. When he needs clothes from his wardrobe he'll go and get clothes. He'll return the music system to the lounge but leave the TV. He kicks again at the bikes on his way back inside and grazes his right foot.

Lying sleepless on the hard and noisy springs, staring up at the centre swirl of Artex, Daniel comes to a decision. For hours he's been thinking about Gulnaz and the things she'd said. Suddenly it made everything so much more complicated. Before, it was a straightforward case of nursing Alex back to physical health and coaching him to talk again. Now it turns out that all his ailments stem from the same place – his sick mind. It made curing him so much the harder. Thinking of his own therapy sessions, he'd wondered what Joan would do in his shoes. Maybe she would judge it best to leave things firmly buried. But then nobody would ever know what had taken place up on the cliff, or where Alex had been hiding ever since, or

how he'd found his way to their mother's grave. Could Daniel cope with never knowing? Or maybe Joan would spin her web of clever words, stir up memories and feelings – like she'd done in the sessions – in order to persuade Alex to reveal all. But at what cost to his health and sanity? All so way beyond Daniel's comprehension; he didn't even pretend to understand it. He could only hope that in the one short month he had to devote to this job, his instinct might show him the way – and that he too wouldn't go crazy in the process.

Out go the streetlights, and the lounge falls into darkness. Across the black screen before him their sprint to the cliffs begins again. He may have watched it a thousand times, but the details are always changed – those he can't remember newly invented around those that he can. Sometimes it's a road down which they run, sometimes a sandy track. Sometimes they see the boat from the beach before arriving at the cliff tops; other times they reach the edge from across neatly manicured hills. Always Daniel runs breathlessly in the wake of his faster brother. But then this other memory, the one that only surfaced when Alex was found at the graveside, which throws everything else into question – his mother running ahead of him. Something about that memory refuses to fit; where she was and what was she doing while they played their games, and how next thing she's on the scene, first to arrive, first to find the glove.

This is why, just before drifting off to sleep, he makes up his mind. For better or for worse, the moment Alex is fit enough they must drive down to Devon. Together they will revisit the scene of the fall. For Alex, it might prove to be the very miracle he needs to escape the grip of his trauma. For Daniel, it might be a chance to put each piece of the jigsaw once and for all into its proper place.

In the dead of night their journey begins. The three of them, Alex, himself and Gulnaz, are retracing the pathway from the village to the shore. The wheelchair bumps along the rough track, Daniel guiding and Alex feigning the moves with his fingers perilously close to the spokes. Gulnaz seeks out the safest route ahead of them. They can already hear the waves as a glistening steel horizon pops up from behind the hillock. Gulnaz pulls off her shoes and socks and picks her way down onto the beach till her toes are tickled by foam. She and Daniel now stare up from the water's edge to the towering cliff face beside them, its forehead of crumbling shale fringed by treacherous grass. But the chair is no longer at Daniel's hands. The two of them stand alone. A gull takes flight at a disturbance in the gorse bushes high up on the rocks, sending a cascade of small stones down into the water. A figure, no, a carriage – but containing a figure, pushes through the branches and teeters to a halt at the very lip; nothing beneath but a few centimetres of soil. Alex is trying to stand. He's seen something

down below. He's pointing. He's dropping to his knees. He's trying to call, trying to form the words.

The images dissolve, leaving only a disembodied voice in their wake. Every muscle in Daniel's body aches like buggery. Someone has glued his eyelids together. Slowly he prises them apart; the swimming clock-face reads 4:19. So this is it: the cold reality of being a carer once more. How tempting just to ignore the cry, just to bury his head in the pillow and wait for Alex to tire. How many times had his wretched mother woken him this way? How many times had he missed registration and assembly by oversleeping, how many detentions for lateness and poor concentration, all thanks to another night of broken sleep? But what was the saying – 'You've made your bed and now you must lie in it'?

They couldn't have got it more wrong.

He fumbles around for his trousers in the curtained darkness, then wanders, fly-zipping into the kitchen. The worktop fluorescent that Gulnaz had told him to leave on at nights throws its light through Alex's open doorway. The room is empty. A second light summons from the hallway. Incredibly, Alex must have got himself out of bed and all the way to the toilet unaided. Daniel discovers him squatting there, pyjamas around ankles, wheelchair and sliding board off to one side. It takes a moment to register the problem. Oh, please God, no. Daniel doesn't do bottoms. He does *not* do bottoms.

Kindred spirits. The same DNA. Try not to think about it. Just make sure to use lots and lots of paper...

\* \* \*

Daniel's bath time plan had been to leave Alex to soak, in enough bubble-bath to grant him some privacy and let the cleaning take care of itself. But even as the water comes thundering into the rusty old tub it begins to look doubtful that any of this is achievable. The bubble-bath has turned everything slippery; there's nothing to grab onto. Assuming Alex did somehow get into the water, there could be no way of ever getting him out. The whole plan seems ill-judged and unsafe. Alex is already out of his chair and perched half-naked on the toilet seat. Thinking fast, Daniel plunges a hand through the bubbles and yanks out the plug. He hurries to his room and tips out his wastepaper basket. He tears two bin bags from the roll under the kitchen sink, shakes them out and stuffs the basket inside one, teasing the other over the top and binding the overlap with Sellotape. The newly-improvised waterproof stool is then placed upside down in the emptying tub and Alex steered gingerly down onto it with the taps and shower fitting facing him.

Privacy is most definitely thrown out with the bathwater. No longer is it just a matter of

lying back and soaking himself; Alex must sit it out while Daniel sprays, sponges, flannels and sprays again; all clearly embarrassing and awkward for them both to begin with. Until a stray water jet strikes where it shouldn't and causes Alex to jump. He gives out a little squeal and covers his privates. Daniel can't stop himself from smirking – the next spray-off is deliberately playful. Alex hits back with a hand movement that redirects the water over Daniel's right arm. Daniel retaliates by targeting Alex's chest, one quick burst against each cherry-red bull's-eye. Now Daniel is laughing uncontrollably.

*Their childhood bath-time all over again. Two infants, one tub of water and a whole lot of splashing about. Sponges thrown, soaps dunked, plastic boats scuppered. Standing side by side on a wet bathroom floor for the rubdown, never a second thought given to running naked across the landing to their bedroom for pyjamas and bedtime story.*

When they're finally done, he draws Alex to his feet, wraps him in a towel and helps him out onto the tiles. All in all – with dressing and teeth counted in – bathroom antics have taken an exhausting two hours. But it's their best two hours together so far.

Breakfast follows in similar vein. Preparing food and getting it successfully from plate to mouth is as hit and miss as ever, but the barricades between them continue to come down. If the food finds its target, all well and good. If it doesn't, they exchange mock accusing looks and simply try again. Talking too seems easier somehow. Though an ideal conversation would be one that flows both ways, an eagerness for information in Alex's eyes encourages Daniel to stay with it. Before long, he's busy unravelling the social circle of the Millwrights, painting little verbal portraits of his friends Threadbare (the ragged woollen threads teased out just a little further for effect), Bladder (who can now go well beyond the full gallon between one piss and the next) and of course Jerry – Jerry, at once the dullest man on earth and the boss sent down from heaven. And so talk wanders onto the subject of Greenalls, the hard times it has hit since the arrival in the retail park of big boys B&Q and Focus, with their cut-price garden departments, and how Daniel was able to negotiate time off work. He's already talking about Uncle Martin's letter before clocking the potential risks of mentioning family. Just in time perhaps, he sees the light fading from Alex's eyes and cuts off mid sentence. To conceal the deflection he stands and peers up through the kitchen window. The bin bags are flapping against each other like crows, but the black plastic appears to be dry.

"I need to get some things. Fancy a trip out?"

By way of an answer, Alex swings a wayward arm towards his crutches.

Stepping out from the stifling heat of the flat into the bitter cold of a winter's morning is something that Daniel has got used to, and he quite overlooks the need to rethink what

Alex is wearing. All around the courtyard, fallen leaves are being whipped into frantic little cyclones, until the wind hurls them from the dance into the four corners. A low, aircraft-like rumbling joins the battering white-noise of treetops. They're out onto Cooper's Hill by the time Daniel makes sense of the wild shaking that rocks the chair.

The street is a mayhem of miserable souls pressing forward uphill, stooped, collars raised, forced to give ground to those being blown towards them at speed, hair obliterating their faces, litter scurrying along beside them. To save time, Daniel parks the chair in someone's drive before dashing back to the flat to grab gloves, scarf and a blanket. Once he's sure that Alex is properly protected from the elements, their intrepid outing once more gets underway. Everyone is too hell-bent on getting to where they're going to stop and gawp, or to point, or to make fun of a young man breaking his back heaving a wheelchair into strong winds up a steep incline.

First stop is the internet café on Town Street. Thirty minutes of peering into a screen and sipping coffee and Daniel is armed with a bunch of B&B phone numbers and a printout of directions to Thurlestone. Next stop, back down Cooper's Hill to the convenience store opposite St. Bart's, parking Alex in a quiet corner by the window, hopefully out of everyone's way. Never comfortable in shops at the best of times, he makes a hasty beeline for the usual aisles: bread, milk, cereals, tea, coffee, eggs, meat, potatoes, alcohol; enough to fill three carrier bags, and then they're out of there, heading safely home, shopping stowed around the wheelchair. All seems well – until Alex makes a sudden wild gesture across the road with his right arm, nearly knocking the bags from his knees onto the pavement.

A knot tightens in Daniel's stomach. They've stopped directly opposite the north gate of the church. The whole subject of how and why Alex came to be there has not yet been broached. Daniel simply hadn't dared. "In there?" he checks nervously. A single utterance confirms it. It would be easy to pretend the gate was locked. But it could be that Alex has come to terms with something, that his mind has started to unblock. "Okay, just a quick look then." No pressure. Alex has control. This is Alex's initiative, not Daniel's.

He makes the turn and decides to risk it. "You do know it's where we found you, don't you? Lying unconscious against Mum's..." The keen wind is left to sweep the remaining words away as they brave the road. With some deft steering the chair makes it through the iron gate. The cobbles are not kind either to chair or to passenger. But it's only a minute's shake out to the graveside.

"I don't know how you knew where to find her, but I guess you must be wondering how she died." Daniel mumbles the words almost to himself. "It was cancer. April '95."

Gingerly at first, then with growing candour, he fleshes out the story, intuition telling him to work backwards – her illness, her depression, her nervous breakdown, their move to the Midlands and their time before that in Devon, finally arriving at that life-changing Christmas Day in 1982. The dank churchyard, the failing light and the baying wind through the hedging all lend the narrative their added edge. Though he addresses Alex in the second person and their mother in the third, Daniel’s eyes never leave the gravestone, as though she were his true audience.

Not that he has any intention as yet of interrogating Alex again over the fall or its aftermath. The risk is too great. So he focuses instead on their last movements up on the cliffs.

“The three of us were out walking together that afternoon.” Again the remark might equally be directed at the headstone. “What I constantly struggle with is where Mum fits into the picture. How could she have let us run off like that when we saw the boat? What kind of a mother lets her children do that?” He’s drawn again to the wind in the trees, its rise and fall now uncannily like exploding waves. He pushes down on the handles to clear the front wheels of the cobbles and turns the chair around.

“Last night I had this idea – we go back there. It’s what I was doing on the computer – getting directions and addresses. Wouldn’t you like to get away from all this, spend a couple of days back beside the sea?”

Alex’s grunts and gestures say nothing about his take on the idea, and everything about the cobbled pathway.

They reach Sedgefield Court just as the light is fading. The last half hour has convinced Daniel of it now: the time has come. This isn’t the place to be convalescing, this depressing little town, this squalid flat, this miserable hill with its creepy cemetery full of sadness. A trip to Devon will do them both a power of good. Such an experience would be more than a change of scene; it would be a release back into those wonderful carefree days of childhood; of sand, sea air and summers. Whatever had happened to Alex that Christmas Day, however terrible, it could surely never obliterate the magic of those times.

“Just going to make some phone calls,” he shouts, and pulls shut the bedroom door.

But, one by one, the numbers on his list let him down. Where he gets a reply at all, it’s the same old story. No bedrooms on the ground floor, no facilities to cope with the disabled. Again and again one name crops up: the Thurlestone Hotel. Thurlestone Hotel? Since when did pokey little Thurlestone have its own hotel? And it sounded scarily expensive. Only one person takes the trouble to find him the number. With every B&B on his list finally crossed

through, Daniel bites his lip and makes the call. Yes, he's in luck: they've just reopened for the season and no, no problem whatsoever, sir, regarding a wheelchair user – the rooms are not on the ground floor, but there are no changes of level to and from the lifts. How many nights do they require?

Just the one should be enough. If it isn't, they can search out somewhere cheaper once there. They need to be back in two days anyway – a vital pool match on Friday night. Of course he's also due on Friday at the drop-in centre, but he's already had misgivings about ever going back. Joan has lost faith in him, the story he'd written about the boy and the rabbit now seems crass, and the stuff about his father unconvincing. Those sessions are surely irrelevant now; just something that had served a purpose for a period. And he's neglected logging his drink intake. He just knows it's already way, way over.

Certainly, sir. A twin room for one night it is then.

The cost leaves him winded, but all the same it is booked. They are going for it.

\* \* \*

First thing next morning, they are back on the case. Getting Alex up, dressed and fed is anything but speedy, but a whole lot slicker than the previous day. No shower today, and thankfully no need for serious toilet duties. Breakfast is cereals for Daniel and yesterday's leftovers for Alex. Leaving the dirty dishes for their return, Daniel downs the last of his coffee and gets busy. Back and forth between their two rooms, he hurls the clothes they need into an overnight bag and zips it up. At least they can afford to travel light. He hasn't just splashed out on a posh hotel not to be get his money's worth: complimentary bedroom slippers, dressing gowns, toiletries, toothbrushes, they'll have the lot, thank you. Minutes later, he has the bag across Alex's knees, additional luggage slung from the handles, and is taking the chair through the kitchen and out of the flat.

The extraordinary sight that confronts them in the lobby feels profoundly symbolic. For the first time ever the hallway is empty – a clear run past the stairs through to the exit. Sedgefield Court gives them its blessing to be gone. Even Santa – way past his allotted twelve days – winks them a fond farewell on Mrs Cropley's behalf.

Ho, ho, a Merry Christmas indeed.

## Greenhouse

For mile upon dreary mile there has been nothing but motorway. Grey, tedious, crowded, rain-soaked motorway. Only occasionally, seemingly at random, pointless roadside warnings break the monotony; ‘Tiredness kills. Take a break’ – erected miles from the nearest service station. ‘Keep apart two chevrons’ – try telling that to the arsehole cutting in in front. Alex is back in his habitual pose, twisted to his left, one hand pawing at the window. It’s a wonder to Daniel that he doesn’t crick his neck, sat like that the whole time.

Worcestershire, Gloucestershire, each county salutes them in turn: only Somerset and Devon to go. The world-weary Golf rattles and buzzes a punishing seventy, its protests modulated by the varying patches of roadway, the wipers squealing and smearing across the windscreen. The speakers add their spits and crackles to the din as the hills play havoc with the radio. But Daniel kind of prefers it this way. The noises drown out the uninvited thoughts, seal him off from the world and leave him alone to muse and to reflect.

They’ll all be there today, Blakeley, Jerry, maybe even Greenall himself, going about their business: shifting stock, balancing books, fighting to keep the plants from dying, this road putting an ever greater distance between them and him. Or perhaps they won’t – maybe it’s already too late. Liquidation. Such an unlikely, science-fictional term. Post-apocalyptic imagery. Flora and fauna, glass, steel, brick and mortar all reduced to a slurry by some futuristic weapon of economic annihilation. Someone should bottle it and sell it as plant food. Profits to be made there for some wily entrepreneur.

A little after two, they pull off at a motorway services for some lunch and a toilet break. Haute Cuisine it isn’t, but it does have proper facilities: a dedicated toilet with room to back up a wheelchair, double handrail and an emergency cord. Lunch is hastily plucked from the self-service counter and trolleyed out in Alex’s lap. They eat in the car. Having people stare at him pushing the chair around is one thing, but he’s certainly not ready to take the mock pity of a public feeding.

They hit roadwork warnings within minutes of rejoining the carriageway, the traffic staggering in fits and starts long before the traffic cones actually arrive. Then it’s nose to tail right through to Bristol. Beyond Cribb’s Causeway, things improve a little, but already the light is starting to fade. With the radio all but dead, Daniel is forced to fall back upon conversation. He picks his words with care. Returning to their childhood home could be a mixed blessing. Familiar sights, long-forgotten place names on road signs, all have the power to rekindle dark memories and maybe set Alex off again. The motorway is moving faster now, everyone in such a hurry to make up for lost time. Some wanker is tailgating them. Not the

best time to be swerving onto the hard shoulder because a passenger is midway through a fit.

In the end, it's the encroaching darkness and bad weather that spares them. They miss the 'Welcome To Devon' sign altogether. Only after Exeter, beyond the motorway, do they have any real sense of the change, cresting the hill as the rolling peaks embrace the gloom like a pop-up book unfolding by torchlight. After that, the glare of oncoming lights exploding across their soaked windows wipes out all contact with the outside world. It's all Daniel can do to watch the road. Locating the correct exit isn't easy either with zero visibility and a page of scrawled directions almost impossible to read.

The road sign he's searching for flashes briefly into view, and they're safely onto the next leg of the journey. A nervous thrill begins to fill the car. In the sweep of the headlights, names from the distant past do indeed leap out: Buckfastleigh, Dartington, Totnes – place names that ring with bell-like resonance. Something about a steam train they'd once taken with their parents – a quaint old railway station and ice creams, coal smuts on their faces from leaning out of carriage windows. A long winding river and a big round castle on a hilltop. It's with the awestruck eyes of a child that he now begins taking in the Disney villages, the lonely roads that tunnel through the trees, the caricature hills that he himself might once have designed and hastily filled in with black felt pen.

Their final approach to Thurlestone becomes perilously narrow, the lane snaking its way blindly between the hedgerows. But at least the road is now entirely theirs. Somewhere ahead, they must turn a corner or drop over a hill and be reunited with their old home. Time here might almost have frozen over, their old headmaster, their teacher, the old corner shop owner, all waiting for Daniel's return. He senses he could walk straight into school and find his wooden desk exactly where he'd left it; that he could call in at the local store with his hard-earned 30p and buy the same time-honoured 'Pick-n-Mix' of sweets; that he could saunter down to the village, unlatch the wooden gate and skip up the front path to his...

To his...

Whoa. Something there isn't right. A 'No Entry' sign bars his way. This untouched past stops at their doorstep. It's a collision between adult and infant selves that cannot be. But there's one place he can still go, a place set aside for his exclusive use, and to reach it he must tiptoe around to the back garden, scale the wooden ladder and hack through the branches that time will have woven between the slats. Only then can he squeeze himself up onto the platform, rest his back against the trunk and press his lips to the cold, bare skin of his knees.

And it's from this safe place in his head that he spots it, at a road junction on their left, nestling behind a palisade fence; clean white render beneath a slated roof. All Saints' Primary.

Their old school.

“My god, Alex,” he cries. “See where we are?”

He slows the car to a crawl, opens the window and inhales the memories like a fragrance. That Monday morning smell of polished wooden floors and disinfectant, souring as the week passes into one of off milk, used P.E. kit and old socks. All those classrooms decked with artwork and papier-mâché masks, reeking of Plasticine, paper glue, brushes in bottles and squeeze tubes of paint. Decorated window panes greeting them every day as they climbed those steps, waved their goodbyes and joined the bottleneck of chattering knees at the entrance door.

“Do you remember Miss Ellison?”

Longsuffering Miss Ellison, who always waited inside to line them up by year group and shepherd them into assembly. Laughter and school shoes ring out along corridors; satchels and gym bags jostle and collide. He can hear the headmaster’s voice, the hymns and prayers, then the clatter of footsteps as they run off to their studies – or walk, when reprimanded by Miss Ellison.

The bell sounds for playtime: a climbing frame, a playground marked out for ball games. Everything comes rushing in on the outside air – the laughing and screaming of boys, large and small, some to befriend and some to avoid. Pretty girls with long blond hair skipping and jumping in their white blouses and pleated skirts, the tease-worthy ones in spectacles who only stand and watch.

Strange, how the school, for all the extensions and add-ons accrued over the years, nevertheless appears so much smaller. Daniel has an urge to grab Alex by the hand, leap from the car, scale the fence and run amok through the playground. But Alex sits rigid, unmoved, still staring at nothing. His time at this school had been so cruelly cut short by the accident that it probably isn’t wise to stay longer.

“Come on then.” Daniel gently coaxes the accelerator. “How about we try and find the old shop? It’s somewhere along here. What was it called – Morten’s? Martin’s?”

The cottages lining the street look just as they ever did, but there’s no sign of any shop. They’d told him on the phone to look for the pub on the left, the hotel being an adjoining annex behind it. Daniel imagines it as rambling and Dickensian, probably several dwellings knocked through into one, with different levels and low ceilings supported on vast beams. When it comes into view, the Village Inn seems to confirm it. In fact, he remembers the pub now. He remembers the intrigue he felt as a child, watching customers sat along its narrow front, sipping their beers on bench seats as the cars brushed past. The Thurlestone Hotel sign

beckons from a lawn beyond; he slows and pulls the car off the road into the entrance drive.

“Fuck me!”

This is no piddling little annex. The place is vast. A lumbering white giant from the Costa del Sol. An ocean liner that has run aground at night and flattened half the village. Four storeys of sheer stone and regimented windows dwarfing the skyline. Terraces and balconies, steps heading down into the unlit grounds beyond. Never was an edifice more at odds with its location. No wonder those few remaining B&Bs had thrown in the towel and referred him here. Against this beast they didn't stand a chance.

The car park is empty; Daniel can pull up right by the entrance. Just as well, as the rain is relentless. He's already drenched by the time he's erected the wheelchair and brought it round to the passenger side. And there's another problem: despite the promises, the main doors are five steps up from street level. It takes several minutes of heaving backwards, one arm-wrenching step at a time, just to get Alex safely inside. Reception may be all classy marble floors and plush furnishings, but they're not intimidating him so easily. Someone has some explaining to do. The lobby is quiet, just a solitary woman behind the counter. Daniel is strutting bullishly over when a bellhop hurries in from the rain and steals his thunder.

“Sorry, sir. I came as fast as I could. I saw you struggling back there. As soon as you've checked in I'll show you the other entrance. It doesn't have those steps. And I can show you the lifts that'll get you directly to the garden area.”

“Yeah? Well, someone might have explained all that on the phone. Would have saved me from nearly breaking my arms.”

He turns his back on the bellhop and props an elbow on the counter.

“Daniel George. For one night.”

“Good evening,” the lady smiles, checking her screen. “You're the twin?”

The question makes him start. He'd never said anything about them being twins. What relevance was that? Was that even her business? Christ, did these people know who he was, even after all these years – was their story still such a talking point in the village?

“Ah yes, here we are. Mr George – twin room second floor. This is your swipe key, if you'd just care to fill in your car registration here and sign at the bottom please.”

Get a grip, Daniel tells himself, chewing the pen. Get a grip; you're overtired.

Despite the earlier brush-off, the bellboy reaches eagerly for the luggage and leads them to the waiting lift, and from there to their room. “I trust everything is to your liking, sir,” he says, after a rather affected pause.

“Yeah, cheers. We can cope from here, mate. Go and dry off. Show me the other way

out later, yeah?”

The boy nods and turns from the room.

Daniel scoffs at Alex. “Fuck that for a laugh. I’ve paid enough for this place as it is, without tipping the staff every time they lift a finger.” He unlocks his neck with a rotation of the head and drops his shoulders to stretch his spine.

A relief, certainly, but it’s also something of an anticlimax to have the journey behind them. The two twins now study each other across the room. Alex still looks most unsettled. Their escape to the country has not yet worked the magic Daniel had been banking on, perhaps not surprisingly after such a long drive. Tomorrow, when they can explore the village properly and take in the sea, surely then things will change. Tonight, they’ll take things easy. Daniel dumps his hold-all on the bed furthest from the window. Ideally, he’d have wanted the view – come morning, they’ll be waking to a stunning view of Thurlestone Rock, standing like some giant’s croquet hoop on a shimmering white lawn of water. But better for Alex to be nearest the bathroom.

Two identical twin beds for two identical twins – green studded headboards, white turned back covers and soft golden cushions. A flat-screen TV to die for hangs on the wall above a tray of tea and coffee things. But it’s not tea or coffee Daniel needs now. Nor is it TV. After five hours on the road it’s a double scotch and soda, with a hot curry or a thick steak to follow. He opens the mini bar and reaches for a couple of miniatures before flicking through the room service menu only to discover the scandalous prices. Suddenly, being a mealtime freak show at the pub seems preferable to being robbed in the privacy of one’s own room.

Firstly though, a few minutes to unpack and get settled. He arranges Alex’s things before sorting his own. Smallish bathroom, but large enough to take the chair. Good sized shower. Loads of freebies. He can’t help wondering what Alex is making of all this. Nothing in his manner gives anything away. He slumps immobile in his seat, head a fraction to one side, lips slightly parted and just a trace of saliva on his chin, following with his eyes as Daniel busies himself about the room. How the brain could do it, Daniel wonders: shut down the links with the body like that in defence against some terrible event. The urge is almost irresistible to try again and gatecrash that mind: to force Alex to talk, make him react in some way, get him remembering. But instinct says to wait until they’ve reached the beach and the coast path. Seeing those locations again is sure to unlock something. A high-risk strategy, of course. But once there, the truth will surely out, kicking and screaming if it must.

As he pushes backside first through the doors, chair following, Daniel can already sense the

now familiar sequence of surprise, morbid curiosity, discomfort and faked disinterest spreading through the bar. A few individuals, mainly geriatrics, offer a civil smile and a nod as they steer past, but always sure to keep their eyes pinned only on Daniel's face. A newfound protective pride begins to override Daniel's initial repulsion at being saddled with a cripple. It's somehow easier now to square up to their mindless gawping.

All the same, their meal really doesn't go well. The pub is cramped and narrow, with tables partitioned off into cubicles too small for a wheelchair. Only the table directly in front of the bar has room enough for Alex, and only by placing him squarely in everyone's way. His feeding skills, pretty accomplished now at home, are badly upset by the change in routine. His capacity to get food from the plate into his mouth repeatedly deserts him. Most of it ends up on the floor, which does not go unnoticed by the dog tethered to the leg of the next table. Daniel is forced to squat beside the chair and spoon the remaining pieces of chopped fish into Alex's mouth, while shoving the animal aside with his right foot. This in turn upsets its owner who tells the mutt to keep away from 'those men'. The whole ordeal quickly descends into farce. Once feeding is over, Daniel can't get Alex out of the place fast enough. He'll see him off to bed and slip back later for a few jars when hopefully this lot have buggered off. He needs time alone to recover, time to plan for the morning and time to digest this lingering, choked-up feeling he's had ever since they arrived.

The bill is settled and a way forged through the bar out into the night. Their next hour is spent getting Alex washed, undressed and into bed. "I won't be long," Daniel assures him, turning off the light. "Just a couple to help me sleep."

Over the course of that hour the pub atmosphere has thankfully transformed. Few of the diners remain; most seats are now taken by drinkers. There's an altogether more local air about the place. Without the wheelchair, Daniel can easily work the crowd. He prises himself between the bodies at the bar, inexorable yet unchallenged, with skills honed from many a Saturday night at the Millwrights. In no time, after downing-in-one a stiff scotch at the bar, he is pirouetting his way out again, holding aloft two pints of local brew, targeting a corner where one empty seat has gone unnoticed. The din of conversation won't bother him there.

It was the school, wasn't it? That's what's brought on these emotions. A few bebies should get to the root of what's upset him. So, why has he reacted this way? Had he hated the place as a child?

He thoughtfully swigs a mouthful of beer, and then another.

No, not really, it had been a good school, he'd had friends there – well, friends of Alex's who'd let him join in their games.

Half the pint down.

Had he been a bad pupil, then?

No, not to start with. He'd done pretty well, considering he and Alex were the youngest in the class. He got fair enough grades, satisfactory reports, behaved himself. Not like Alex. Never the kind of playground scraps that he got into. True, Daniel was known to have a bit of a temper on him – a short fuse, his mother called it. If Alex ever messed with his shells, or their mum tried to dust his model ships, then he was rather prone to lash out. If someone at school went into his desk and rearranged his books, if they moved his duffel coat from its peg or knocked into his satchel, then he could become something of a stampeding bull for a few seconds. But, for the most part, when other kids left him alone, he was as good as gold.

His talent for maths and science was first spotted by Miss Ellison. And she was the one who got him interested in astronomy. All her stories about the planets. Saturn with its rings was his tops. And that project where she had them go out every night for a month and plot the phases of the moon. His insistence when she drew the classroom's initial findings on the blackboard that they'd all got the first quarter the wrong way round. Daniel was so adamant, and Miss Ellison so trusting in his eye for detail, that the drawing was promptly reversed and each subsequent drawing thereafter. Then the dawning horror when he'd understood his mistake. He'd taken the shaded area on the board to mean the dark side – but it was white chalk on a black board and the teacher had intended her shading to represent the lit side. All so devastating back then. Now he could afford to find it rather endearing. He's actually chuckling now into his second beer. They were days that began in such innocence; days when he was like everyone else, a child with a mother and a father and a sibling. So normal, and yet special too because they were twins and because his dad sailed in gunships. He recalls how he and Alex would entertain the class by confusing the teachers: pretending to be each other for whole lessons. They would gather crowds around them at playtime with tales of their father's derring-do. Admittedly, it was Alex who told the best stories, who gathered the biggest crowds, who attracted the prettiest girls, who fended off the burliest boys, but Daniel hadn't minded, because he was accepted. He fitted in. He pushes away the second empty.

And these were the days that crashed around his ankles so cataclysmically when in close succession he lost first a father and then a brother; two tragedies that became major local news, affording Daniel an utterly different kind of status. Suddenly he was famous. He was the child about whom one only whispered. The kid in the paper. The boy picked out in assembly, belonging to that George woman whom everyone's parents gossiped about.

The beer has given him stomach cramps. Far too gassy. He should have stayed with the

scotch. The empty glasses chink to the tune of his own emptiness; the emptiness of the boy no-one could understand and must therefore poke fun at. The boy who vanished for a year and came back just a few months before they all went their separate ways, when everyone had realigned their friendships – mostly to the opposite sex. When there was nobody left for him to befriend or fall in love with. What a bloody stupid idea that was – sending him to his grandmother’s. No wonder he became the angry and disruptive child in class. No wonder he played truant and began to bully the bullies. The child that grew from a lover of science and nature into a despiser of life itself. So obvious now why seeing the school had left him feeling so knotted up. It was the stolen potential, the defiled innocence, the denial of hope. The pain of losing all his possible futures but for one.

He rises to do battle once more at the bar.

“Is this seat taken?”

There’s a red-faced old man in a smart blazer looking at him. He hadn’t noticed the seat opposite becoming vacant.

The man sits himself down without waiting for Daniel’s answer. “I saw you earlier with the chair,” he says. “Difficult place this, with a chair. Difficult village. Three years I had to cope with that, before my wife passed away. Helping out with the hospice up the road are you?”

“Er, yeah.”

It’s all Daniel can think of to say.

“Well, good for you. This village needs more keen youngsters like you. I remember a time when everybody helped each other out around here. Even the young ones. I haven’t seen you here before. On holiday, are you? Voluntary work?”

“I’m... just getting another drink.”

The old man waves his newspaper. “You go right ahead, young man. I’ll watch your seat.”

Daniel makes for the bar, still shadowed by an infant mob who stare and whisper; who wink at each other; who taunt him with stories about their dads. He’s forgotten all about the old gent by the time he makes it back to the corner.

“It’s all changed now, you know,” the man continues, as though Daniel had never been away. “Half this lot in here aren’t locals. Not really.” He leans forward with narrowed lips. “It’s all down to that new estate. All those posh houses with their swanky sea-views. You get these la-di-da professionals charging about in their 4x4’s, bussing in their kids. It doesn’t matter what they say – they’ll always be blow-ins as far as I’m concerned. I don’t care if they

stay another thirty years.” He guffaws. “Not that I’ll be around to see that, of course!”

Getting into a conversation had been the last thing on Daniel’s mind, and he’s taken aback by the idea that suddenly hits him. “How long have you lived here?”

“Me? Oh, I’m a true local, I can assure you of that. Devon born and bred, me.”

“Yes, but how long here?”

“Ah, now you’re asking. Well, I was born in Kingsbridge in 1924. Long, long before most of this lot. My pops, now he was the postmaster there. During the war I was sent out to...”

“Here! In Thurlestone.”

The old man blinks nervously and strokes his pencil-thin moustache. “I was coming to that. It was after I got demobbed. 1946.”

“Then I guess you might have known my father.”

Daniel hadn’t meant to word it like that, giving away his own identity. He wishes he’d just given a name. But there’s no turning back now. “Richard George. Navy man. Killed in action in 1982.”

The old gent stares dumbstruck at Daniel for a good two minutes, the turning of the cogs almost visible behind his spectacles.

“Dickie George? The Petty Officer, you mean? And you’re his son?”

Why had it never occurred to Daniel that this might happen? Coming here was supposed to be about unlocking memories, but only Alex’s and his own, not about tapping into the memories of a community. But of course. It was a potential goldmine. He can see those cogs now winching up great nuggets from the depths of this man’s past. His little faded eyes scan back and forth as though newspaper articles are being dangled in front of his face.

“Young Dickie George! Well I never. Falklands, wasn’t it? Tragic, tragic. Yes, I can see the likeness now. Handsome chap. Liked his beer, same as you. Good darts player. I remember his poor wife after they told her the news. And then that terrible tragedy with their boy just after, as if she didn’t have enough on her plate. Oh heavens, you said you were his son, didn’t you? That poor little chap would have been your brother then.”

The old man is now so worked up that Daniel doubts he can usefully squeeze much more from him. In any case, he’s getting the oddest feeling, not unlike finding the photo at the cemetery. A feeling of invasion. For over two decades he’d enjoyed anonymity as far as his past was concerned. He’d got used to being whoever he liked. Moving from Thurlestone so soon after the loss of Alex may have been traumatic at the time, but it had grown to be a life-saver. It let him leave everything behind – no prying questions, no more staring, no name-

calling, no need to prove himself. Over the years, he'd grown accustomed to having sole ownership of this tale. Yes, he'd begun now to share it a little with Gulnaz, but strictly on his own terms at his own pace. But here was a complete stranger painting a portrait of his father that even Daniel didn't know. As with the school, the street and the pub, it was like stumbling upon scenes and characters from inside his own head.

He's not even aware of having finished the previous scotch, let alone of having acquired another, or how a small crowd became summoned to his table. But they're all talking now, bearing down on him with torrential, head-spinning questions. How was his mother? Where did they move to? Would they be attending the Falklands Parade? What has brought him back to Thurlestone? In his desperation to get away, he nearly hands them ammunition for a whole new line of assault:

"I need to get back to my bro... to my friend."

He covers the slip with a shake to the head and rises to go. "But I just need to know, um..." He must think quickly. How to turn the situation to his advantage before escaping the clutches of these people. "...Two things. Can anyone tell me exactly the spot where my brother fell – in case I want, you know, to put some flowers there or something?"

A short exchange of opinions leads to a quick consensus. It's the blazer who answers on behalf of the group.

"Yes. It was reported in the papers to be out at Leas Foot. You can't miss it. Park up at the clubhouse and take the beach path – you can tell it by the big red safety information board. Take a right onto the coast path, uphill for a couple of hundred yards. There's a spot there where the cliff face opens up right beside you."

"If you get to Warren Point then you've gone too far," someone adds unhelpfully. "And take care. You could easily fall."

Everyone freezes at the faux pas. But Daniel barely registers it. He can't believe those instructions, how perfectly they equate with the dream he'd had just two nights ago.

Someone else hurriedly chips in. "What was the second thing you wanted to know, son?"

"My house. I want to see my house. Where did we live?"

In that short journey from the school to the hotel Daniel had seen nothing but pretty stone cottages. His memory of home was of a stark council house, concrete built, one of a line of identical semis. The two impressions didn't square at all.

"I'm sure Charlie will know," says the blazer, and he hobbles stiffly off to the bar. There's a short conversation with the barman and he's back.

“Charlie thinks it was Parkside. Right opposite: the road heading up off the high street.”

Nice work, Charlie. *Parkside*. Yes. Quite something to be able to suppress the memory of one’s own address. The men move aside to let Daniel through, until the one nearest the door taps him on the shoulder with his pipe.

“In my book, Dickie George was and always will be a hero. You remember that, son. And be proud. And when you’re up there laying your wreath, or just saying a few words to his memory, you be sure to send a few thoughts from us too.”

Daniel nods and gives him the thumbs up. Like the old man, he’s becoming muddled about his purpose in finding the cliff path; the whiskies have gone to his head. Somehow he’s outside on the road again, staggering slightly, and heading over the road into Parkside. After just a few yards, the road turns sharply and is thrown into total darkness. Nobody home; not a single street light; not a hand in front of his face. Symbolic perhaps; a barrier to partner the one he’d imagined across his front door; darkness to mark the spot where revelations for today must come to an end.

He knows he should be getting back, that Alex has been left alone for well over an hour, but the urge to keep walking is too strong. He retraces his steps and takes a right, down past the hotel. The high street is marginally better lit. Thurlestone at night is not a total graveyard. At the bend in the road he sees, emerging from the gloom, the distinctive monument on the village green, the one as a child he’d thought looked so much like a wedding cake because it was tiered and topped with a cross. People had referred to it as the war memorial, but he’d been too young then to understand its purpose. The meaning is crystal clear to him now though: his father is sure to be there among the honoured – nothing more than the great man deserved, a fitting tribute to someone so long denied their own grave. This will be why everyone remembered him so well down at the pub. Stepping up close, he scans the surface for names. The smaller top tier bears the arced inscription, ‘IN GRATEFUL MEMORY’ and beneath, ‘OF THE MEN OF THIS PARISH WHO GAVE THEIR LIVES FOR US DURING THE GREAT WAR 1914 TO 1918.’

The Great War. What, Daniel wonders, is so great about a war that robs a community of twelve of its young men? The names are hard to read in the darkness. Clifford... Corswick? – no, Creswick... Dyer... So hard to imagine how a place this small could bear the weight of another twelve stories like his own. Twelve more family trees needlessly lopped; twelve more abandoned homes. On the next face, again on the top tier, a second dedication troubles itself with nothing more than the dates: 1939-1945, as if the sheer quantity of human

sacrifice by then had left a chilling legacy of indifference. Below this is carved another list. He counts the names with growing morbidity. Eleven more soldiers to join the parade of the dead, and in their shadows another eleven widows, and another generation of scarred children.

1914 to 1918, 1939 to 1945 – it's a chronological sequence working clockwise. The third and fourth sides will be the ones to mark post-war conflicts – the Falklands, Iraq and Afghanistan, perhaps Northern Ireland. His father would understand if it meant having to share wars.

But nothing is written there. Not even some tribute to a prehistoric irrelevance like the Boer War. Just empty, wasted stone. So much for a community looking out for its own. Suddenly Daniel detests the lot of them. How those old men in the pub could have dared rally around him, wax lyrical about his father and his bravery, offer their words of remembrance, when they couldn't even be arsed to add his name to their roll-call of heroes. Okay, so they'd lived in Shit Street, but what did people expect of a lowly sailor? Prejudice, fucking prejudice, that's what it was.

He should go to bed, but he can hardly walk away without leaving some kind of a signature. Give him an aerosol and he might add a eulogy of his own. The memorial's left him plenty of space. As it is, he can do no more than spit his protest onto the stone and watch it slither its way to becoming the first stroke of the first letter of his father's first name.

He stands back against the hedge in the deepest shadow, takes a leak and watches his father amid the hell and high waters of battle, dive-bombed by Argies, standing firm on the bridge and gallantly firing back with the ship's great guns. Sailors fleeing for their lives, fireballs billowing skyward from the deck and earthwards from the planes. Petty Officer George stares into the jaws of death and thinks proudly of home, of his loving wife Rose, of wild, unruly Alex and above all, of his genius son Daniel. And Daniel's is the image forever burned into his eyes as the ship is blasted to smithereens and scattered upon the waters.

Cold and bitter, Daniel zips up his flies, steps away from the green and trudges sullenly back to the hotel.

\* \* \*

Contrary to what the receptionist had implied on the phone, their room isn't facing the sea at all. Much to Daniel's annoyance, the view from their window is of nothing but roofs and treetops. No Thurlstone Rock, no majestic cliffs, not so much as a sniff of water. Over breakfast, he nobbles the waiter for information. Just how far are they from the coast? Which way should they go to find... what was it called... Lee's Foot? The man looks uneasily at

Alex, describes the route with some reluctance, and suggests it's too far and too steep to push a wheelchair, especially coming back, but if they're mobile they can park up a few yards from the beach.

It was what the man in the pub had said too.

Alex's deterioration is becoming a worry. He'd been dead to the world when Daniel had slipped back to their room last night. The night had been uneventful, but from the moment they'd awoken he'd been distant and fidgety. Now he's being thoroughly tiresome. Even scrambled eggs and finely chopped bacon are causing him trouble. Feeding him is once again painfully slow. Daniel's own breakfast is a struggle too, in the aftermath of all that whisky. He orders a refill of coffee and downs a second slice of toast, determined they'll get what value they can from their all-inclusive breakfast, but the bacon, egg and sausage stay untouched. It isn't long before he's chivvying Alex to finish up, so they can check out and be off.

Clearly, the day ahead is going to need some careful handling. They'll start with a stroll along the beach. If Alex is fine with that then they'll tackle the cliff walk. If that doesn't upset him then they'll start searching for the clearing. It's time to get going. All the signs bode well: no threat of rain, patches of blue opening up. As the car reaches the main street the whole village becomes doused in sunlight. Like a portent. But there's a job to do before heading down to the sea. Rather than taking a left, Daniel pulls out into the far lane and turns immediately into Parkside. "There's something I want to show you first," he declares.

He'd been expecting a deluge of fresh memories, but in all truth even Daniel hardly recognises the road, or at least the properties on it. With their new roofs, double-glazed windows and extensions, they look nothing at all like council houses. And all having the kind of immaculate gardens that only a true homeowner would ever create. The further they go, the greater the struggle to strip things back to basics, to scythe through the neatly shaped hedges and cultivated beds, and see instead scrubland cluttered with weeds, half-dismantled cars and children's broken toys. Because of its location, there is no mistaking their own house on the corner; but in every other respect it's just like the rest. Seeing it in this state – with a dignity and glamour that the George family could never have dreamt of – Daniel finds himself strangely torn. The house has been improved a hundredfold, no question, but the makeover has come at a hard price – the price of obliterating his very place in its history. No wonder the darkness repelled him last night and the door refused him entry; his family were no longer even recognised, never mind welcomed here.

He swings the car into a parking space just opposite and tells Alex to wait. After sizing

up the property for a moment, he saunters over and takes the side road, a vantage point from which he's able to peer over the back fence. Just one peak, for old time's sake. A passing cloud throws the garden into shadow. It looks so tiny now. To think of all those adventures it once hosted: putting Corgi toys through their paces on punishing rallies over rough ground, emerging from their Tardis-shed to brave a thousand alien worlds, doing the long jump over the shrubs, chasing each other in and out of trees. A kitchen extension now encroaches rudely onto the patio. There's a central path of crazy paving and a reshaped lawn with fancy, curving beds. But something else has been changed. To tamper with the house is one thing, even to landscape the garden. But for the bastards to do *this*. He turns in disgust. Too late to tell himself he should have let sleeping dogs lie. From the other side of the road, where a front wall is undergoing repairs, he takes a weighty chunk of stone, dusts it off and steadies his legs. The abomination glints at him as the sun re-emerges, egging him on. For the sake of the lost child, for all those miserable, lonely times when the whole world had stacked up against him, in homage to his crow's nest, his makeshift raft, this one safe haven where solace could always be found, he takes careful aim and hurls the stone into the air. Even as the sound of glass shatters the silence he's across the road, and the car is gone from the scene well before anyone has had a chance to run to their window.

Powered by pure adrenaline, the Golf thunders downhill, past the hotel, the village green and the memorial, and out onto the coast road. "Chopped it down," Daniel screams, in answer to the unspoken question. "Believe that?" He punches the wheel with both fists. "Felled the fucking thing." Then, as Alex's nervous eyes settle on him, he adds with a cry of euphoria, "Well, it was only fair, wasn't it? Their 'Green House' for ours!"

## Leas Foot

The faster the village shrinks in the mirrors the more violent the shaking in Daniel's hands becomes, until it's messing so badly with his steering that he's forced to pull over. The exhilaration of the vandalism has become spent fuel. He winds down the window, hot and breathless, picturing an old man hurrying from his kitchen extension towards his beloved greenhouse, hastily tying the cord of his dressing gown before sifting through the shards of glass to rescue his lovingly tended tomato plants.

"I shouldn't have done that," he mumbles as the engine dies, suddenly too ashamed to look Alex in the eye. He's been well out of order. But then, hasn't everything been at odds with the old order since their arrival – all these resurrected pasts, these bitter revelations, these childish emotions? Is it any wonder that he's not behaving as he should?

"Don't know what came over me back there. I just lost it, I think. Before we leave I'll stick some cash in an envelope and put it through their door."

Whether he will, or whether it's just something to say, Daniel isn't yet sure. They felled his greengage tree, after all. Already the sense of guilt is hardening into one of resignation. Wherever his feelings end up, the important thing is not to lose sight of the purpose of the trip. He pushes aside the man in the dressing gown and focuses instead on the old gent in the blazer.

"Let's go and find that clubhouse."

He restarts the car.

It'll be a yacht club, most likely. The sea hides somewhere beyond the hedgerows. They leave the verge with a bump and begin a slow crawl along the coast road, Daniel keeping a close watch to his right, searching the spaces between the trees. Minutes later, as the land opens out, he catches a glimpse – not of the sea, but of the clubhouse itself. At the corner it comes properly into view: a sprawling shack of a place, not at all the classy joint he'd been anticipating. No seasoned wood panelling and leather armchairs for its port-sipping members, just a single storey, sixties-style square box totally encased in windows, like some giant conservatory knocked up out of plywood. There are no boats in sight, no sign even of a shoreline, just rolling hills heading off a short distance that stop abruptly against the skyline. But there is a car park, as he'd been led to believe. Pulling in, Daniel pauses to read the sign.

It's not a yacht club.

No, it's a *golf* club.

Of course. Golf: the neatly manicured hills he'd so often traversed in his mind, chasing Alex onto the cliff path. Now it's coming back to him. This is good. This is very good.

A stinging, icy rain begins to fall as he unpacks the chair. Wheelchairs and rain, the two always in partnership, it seems. A strong onshore wind has whipped up since leaving the village. The pathway to the beach is marked clearly, even here the SOS notice pokes up above the horizon, and already the smell of kelp and salt is tangible, the rumble of distant waves at their ears. Daniel feels a sudden need to add his voice to the din.

“A golf course, Alex. Do you remember? Every time we tried to play out here we’d be shooed off by the golfers.”

Alex nods his head, but then he’s been doing that since the wheelchair began its bumpy ride over the track.

“So, I wonder whether Mum brought us here because...” As Daniel looks up again from the chair the thought is swept away. A vast cauldron of molten lead has just materialised ahead, seething and boiling, thrashing at the lips of the vessel that struggles to contain it – the craggy shoreline of Thurlestone bay. Slashes of silver-white foam surge across the surface, colliding, breaking apart and re-forming, causing the light to dance; every moment the shapes and colours fiercely satirising the changing sky above. The wind swells to a thunderous roar; sea grasses quiver and bow down before it, while a lone gull soars in defiance. There’s a smell of ozone, metallic on the tongue, stewing seaweed, dead fish. This is the scene he’s recalled so many times, but here, for the first time since he was a boy, laid out in all its high-definition, stereophonic and panoramic might.

To return here one day was an ambition he’d never allowed to die. Those defining childhood years had clung on through all the later misery. Yet for all that, he’d never once stepped into a boat, travelled abroad, or even made it to a seaside resort. And now he knows the reason. The sea leaves him aghast, its immense power and cruel beauty cheating him of words – something about this giant body of water, this living creature, this singular entity that encircles the globe; the same entity that once claimed the life of his father and so nearly that of his brother – and how it smoulders right here, pulses and snatches at the sand, fixing Daniel in its sights. A psychological drowning if not a physical one.

As for Alex, his reaction is not visible from behind the chair. What impact on him of encountering the very monster from whose clutches he’d once so narrowly escaped? Squatting down to check on his coat and covers, Daniel risks a quick look at his face. What he sees turns him cold. God knows what Gulnaz would say if she too could see this. He’d known it wouldn’t be an easy quest, not a time to be faint-hearted, but only now is it clear just what demons they’re up against.

“I want you to wait here a moment, okay?”

Daniel is on his feet again and running down onto the beach, setting off little landslides with every footfall as he stumbles and staggers. Like Gulnaz in his dream, he makes it to the water's edge and stares over towards the cliffs. Holding that iconic image in his head, he closes his eyes in order to picture it, not as it is now, but as it was then, using again the eyes of a child. There, down in the surging foam, just beyond the line of rocks, out beyond the reaches of the sand, is there a boat? Is there? For them to be running along the cliff path, for Alex already to be shouting about their father coming home, they must have seen it first from this beach. And where was their mother at that moment? Those cliffs look so unbelievably dangerous. A mother must be insane to leave a child unattended up there. Insane or drunk. Was that it? Christmas afternoon – had she been hitting the bottle over lunch? Hell, was she already an alcoholic by then? Not later – not from losing Alex – but from being widowed? Or even before: when news from the South Atlantic had been bad and she'd emerged from behind closed doors, were those eyes reddened by tears or by drink? Jesus wept. To leave a child to run up there, to let him scramble over the edge to some horrible fate because she was too pissed to notice, too wasted to care. Daniel hates her suddenly like he's never hated anyone.

But did it really happen like that? This is hopeless. His memory gives nothing away. It's all just guesswork. Their only hope is to find the exact spot where Alex had fallen. Against the opposition of shifting sand, and against his own rising dread, Daniel fights his way back to his brother.

"I can't remember, Alex. Any of it! How it happened. Come on, please. Snap out of this. This has gone on long enough. I need you to talk to me now. I need you to help me here!"

From beneath the covers an arm reaches out. Alex raises a palm in the same pawing motion he'd used at the car window. Always his left paw. And he gargles a single cry, a 'yes' according to their agreed code.

"No, no, no. Not back there! The other way. Come on, surely you remember that much. Up there's where you fell – off those rocks."

They're pushing on that way now. The going is hard work for them both. Small retaining logs laid into the footpath keep jamming against the wheels. Each time Daniel must turn the chair on a sixpence, tug it towards him, then turn it again before continuing. The logs are a pointer to how much of the shoreline may have crumbled away over the years, the path rerouted time and again. This whole stretch could have changed beyond recognition since they were kids.

And yet a spot is approaching where the cliffs open up directly to their left, just as the man in the blazer had described. Only there's a problem. If the boat had been down there they'd have had access across the rocks from the beach. They need to go further.

A second clearing a few minutes later must also be dismissed. They're now some way around the bay from Thurlestone Sands, but this drop falls to a deep cutting – any boat run aground here would be too far from the cliffs, or if dragged further inland would no longer be visible from the beach. But have they already reached Warren Point? Alex is becoming fretful and agitated. Everything in his movement is a warning to turn back.

“Okay mate, we're nearly done. Just to the top there, see what's on the other side. If we don't find what we're looking for we'll call it quits for today, okay?”

But the right place is unmistakable. They see it the moment they top the hill – a vertical drop beneath them down onto lethal rocky waters, and there, just beyond it, stands the gentler sloping outcrop, unmistakably the one Gulnaz had identified in the photo; the face down which Alex had almost certainly climbed. In confronting it again, Alex's distress reaches critical point. He's groaning now and thrashing about. Another fit must be just moments away. Frantically, Daniel tries to take it all in, kicking himself for not having brought a camera. Ahead, the path is protected on the seaward side by a hedging of gorse and open to the land on the right, marking a boundary to the golf course. Behind, the path winds back to the beach and the track to the car park. Looking inland, with its neat, rounded bumps and isolated hawthorns, its flags and sandy bunkers, the golf course stretches back to the club house. And all at once he remembers. Every detail. The sequence.

They'd been playing catch on the golf course. They'd gone there because they'd already lost their ball several times over the neighbour's hedge. And of course, being Christmas Day, for once there was no-one on the fairway to send them packing...

Alex had thrown badly and Daniel had missed the catch. The ball had rolled away onto the cliff path...

Yes, that's right. It was then that they'd seen the boat down in the water. Alex had become very emotional, but didn't try to climb down there and then. He charged off down the path towards the beach. Daniel had eagerly pursued him.

He's forgotten to breathe. The sudden gulp for air jolts him from the memory. Alex is staring up into his face. All signs of agitation and struggle have gone. In his brother's eyes Daniel sees not fear or anguish, but – Christ Almighty – he sees *pity*.

“When we got down to the beach we realised we could no longer get to the boat. It was cut off by the tide.” Daniel's voice trembles so much he can hardly spit out the words. “You

said you'd seen someone struggling to right it. So you started running back up the coast path. I swear, Alex, at first I didn't realise what you planned to do. I did chase after you – I called out to you to be careful. And then I saw you squeezing through the gorse hedge, right here.”

Daniel's moment to face the truth has arrived. No more special pleading. “I was too slow. Too much of a coward. By the time I'd caught up, you'd gone.”

Both of Alex's arms are now freed from the blanket. They're reaching forward and upwards. They beckon Daniel down onto his haunches. Daniel leans forward and falls into his brother's arms. “Why, Alex? Just look at that bloody drop. Why did you try to climb down? You bloody fool. I'm so sorry. I couldn't... I couldn't do anything to help.”

Locked together, their bodies are shaking, their soft cries indistinguishable from each other. But another sensation has already begun its crawl up Daniel's spine to the hairs on his neck. The terrible realisation of something he's been suppressing all along. The only possible conclusion to draw from these reclaimed memories.

“She wasn't here with us, was she?”

“Nnnnuh, uuuh.”

“Mum played no part in it. It wasn't after lunch, it was still morning. We were up here without her knowing; she was still in the kitchen, cooking. Christ, Alex! Christ! How many times had she rammed it down our throats never to come up here on our own?”

A history totally rewritten. Not a family outing to walk off a heavy Christmas lunch. Not some irresponsible adult too drunk on sherry to keep watch on her sons. But two unruly boys, defying their mother's orders and bunking off to a place that was strictly off-limits. Clearer than ever now, he sees himself, standing helplessly at the cliff edge, looking down for his missing twin, hyperventilating, terrified out of his tiny wits, running home as fast as his feet would carry him. That's when he'd seen the dread on his mother's face that still haunts him to this day. When he told her. That crippling sense of guilt, and their frantic dash back to the cliff. And so to the memory of running behind, across the golf course, of that poor woman finding the glove. All these years their mother has stood accused, blamed for Alex's death, when in truth her only crime was to let them slip away from the house – a single mother who, in trying to conjure a decent Christmas dinner on a shoestring, was too overworked to keep them under her watchful eye.

Very, very slowly Daniel rises, tucks his brother's arms beneath the blankets and begins to push the chair back towards the car. It is time to escape this place. There is nothing to be gained from loitering here. The trip has brought the enlightenment they sought. Now they have to find a means of living with it.

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Part Two:

~ Alex ~

George

Coming out of the coma is a slow and baffling experience. It's a long time before he really understands what is happening. The way towards his waking is paved by a lone voice that drifts in and out of awareness. He can hear it demanding answers, and recognises it as a voice he knows, but the words themselves just ripple through thick, murky waters, too muffled and distant to follow.

Each slide back into consciousness brings fresh voices, enigmatic sounds, sometimes no sounds at all. It's those silent awakenings that unsettle him the most. Incapable of exploring his whereabouts, he's forced to turn the questions onto himself. Who is he? What has happened to him? But answers remain elusive, coming only in pictures; a dockyard; a man in uniform; a room with no escape. Then he's adrift again, losing the connection. He needs something to pin down a fixed point in space. And like some ancient mariner plotting uncharted waters he finds his answer in the stars. Just a pinprick to begin with, puncturing the black, far out in front; an axis that declares itself as 'up'. A woman's face hangs somewhere beneath, drawing close, their bodies connecting; rising towards the light, so slowly that the pinpoint wanders without noticeably growing. He kisses her eyes, her nose and lips. The light above gradually grows larger and more diffuse, its rays bleeding into the surrounding darkness; their breathing moving into phase, their bodies rising and falling in unison. Deep inside, a pressure is building, mobilising for action. And then, with a rush, it is over; the cry shattering this inner world and the insane, garbled contours of another crashing in to fill the vacuum. A world as witnessed by a blind man suddenly given eyes. Hard edges, sharp angles, impossible contrasts, dizzying movement, fierce perspective, nauseous colours, terrifying shadow – he wants to bellow for help, to cling to someone, to run for safety. But there is no way through to his body, no ties to anything solid beneath, around or even within him.

His brain becomes a battleground between sight and sound, one minute shooting white lights thrusting aside the jumbled noises, the next his head engulfed in a cacophony of grating, whirring and clunking too shattering to see anything beyond. Only when a truce is declared and his senses form an uneasy alliance can some degree of understanding return. Shapes can begin to settle and their edges be defined. Sounds can be attributed to images. Movement can be contained without giddiness. He can at last make some sense of his

surroundings.

He lies in a white room, his eyes fixed upon the ceiling. Crisscrossed by harsh white lights, it's a most unremarkable ceiling, yet one that sets off instinctive alarms. On his left side, a blank wall is cut only by a single window. On his right, the ceiling spills downwards to the edge of his vision, white and featureless but for the play of light from the window opposite. Beneath, just beyond view and sensed rather than seen, a confusion of angular shapes encircles him, like the hint of a city skyline. Figures move through the space, shaping the light. The din that woke him has softened into hushed tones. The walls seem to absorb rather than reflect the sound. He tries to raise himself for a better view and work out where the hell he is.

But something quite extraordinary holds him tight to the bed: a total inability to converse with his body. Somewhere around the base of his skull the nerves have become tied up by a continuous vibration, an 'unobtainable' signal, as if a cable in his spine has been cut. The sensation confounds him. A vestige of sleep? His body telling him he's woken too soon?

Closing his eyes again feels unreal. Just a head with no body; a liberated consciousness, no way of telling where the physical self ends and the rest of the world begins. He takes what comfort he can from the afterimages that hang on in the dark. Before, in his blindness, it had made no difference, whether eyes open or shut. But here the orange-brown screen plays host to geometric patterns, to passing shadows, to flecks that dance and jump. He can squeeze his lids tighter to reduce the brightness and his eyes remain free to move beneath, to chase little shapes that rise to the surface, cross-fade with others and then expire. The negative imprint of the window becomes the parallel black lines of ceiling lights, becomes the silhouette of a figure. Some seconds into this private viewing he realises its importance. He has *chosen* to do these things with his eyes. At least one conscious link still holds brain and body together.

But the vibration persists.

He fights to suppress a rising fear. Sleep. Why can he not make himself sleep? Sleep should be easy for a mind that floats untethered in space like this with no gravity to hold it down. Sleep should simply carry him away – and safely return him as and when his body is ready to hand back the controls.

The muted voices move back and forth across the orange screen. They pose no sense of threat, yet something countermands his instinct to look – a hunch that it will end exchanges that are surely about him but probably not meant for his ears. He tries to tune in; the words themselves do make sense, but keeping them in order and drawing out their meaning proves impossible. They leave him only with crumbs, that fall through his fingers as

fast as he can gather them, ‘...Regaining consciousness... partial paralysis... things slowly improving... need to determine... move him out of ICU...’

At least it tells him this is a hospital. So why has he nothing to account for being here? No flashback of slipping at the top of a flight of steps – or sitting at the wheel and catching a flash of headlights or a frantically sounded horn. Maybe arms and legs refuse to respond because arms and legs are no longer his to command. That terrible whirring and grinding – the sound of being hacked from wreckage, limb by limb...

Is he unable to sleep because this is already a dream?

Or because he is already dead?

Now he can hear the man asking to be fetched when the patient awakes, and saying something about an ‘oral feed’. As silence falls, he steals a first glance. A nurse, dressed in blue, busies herself with something down at his shoulder, a little too close for comfort. He drops his lids again quickly. At once the screen deepens to a richer brown, as her shadow crosses his face, laying a trail of perfume laced with sweat; not pleasant, but at least another connection to the outside world.

There is maybe a way out here. They said he’d been unconscious. This paralysis might be nothing more than an after-effect, or some hallucinatory drug they’ve used to bring him round. Another bout of half-sensation tingles in – a halo of pins and needles as the nurse’s hands cradle his face, fishing for something around his top lip. So outlandish is the experience that follows that he can only imagine it as a ringworm being pulled from his guts and out through his left nostril. Faced with his look of utter astonishment, the nurse loses no time in calling back the doctor.

“Ah, Mr George, you’re awake. I’m Dr Prentice. Now there’s nothing for you to worry about. You’ve been very sick, but we’re taking good care of you. Can you remember anything at all about what happened?”

Inside, the answer rings out loud and clear. ‘No I bloody can’t. And why the fuck can’t I move?’ To the world outside it emerges only as the thinnest whine of dismay.

“That’s alright. That’s fine. You’ll be sensing a loss of movement and muscle control for a while. But all the signs are that these will come back over a period. We’re just going to do a few reflex tests, and I want you to indicate whether or not you feel anything.”

Not from their drugs then. God help him, this paralysis is for real. ‘All the signs are... come back over a *period*...’, the doctor’s words jump about in his head. ‘We’re going to do a few *tests*...’ Holy shit. No power to veto their torture – like a cadaver on a slab, his mind the only thing free to squirm and scream. He watches helplessly as wires are taped to his head and

body and machinery is calibrated. Evil-shaped instruments arrive on trays as the doctor explains the rules of his 'experiment'. Various locations are to be tapped, squeezed, prodded and pulled; he must grunt once for 'sensation' and twice for 'no sensation'.

But only the latter is ever called for. The whole sorry episode is over in minutes. For all the physical discomfort the paralysis may spare him, each of his negatives jabs like a knife. Nothing from his legs, nothing either from his arms. No to his stomach and his back. Not a thing. Total abdication. No longer the proud owner of this body. Scrapheap job. A total write-off.

Well, at least they now know it. They know, and it hasn't alarmed them. So they are on the case. They must be. And, thank Christ, from what they're saying it seems he hasn't been involved in some crippling road accident. They'll mend him. He *mustn't* panic. They are experts. He must have faith in these doctors. He focuses the resolve to be strong on a point on the ceiling and refuses to let it go.

The space around him is cleared again, the medical instruments wheeled away. But the peace is a short-lived one. As the doctor and nurse leave the ward they're accosted by another white coat and held at the door in conversation. Papers are swapped. The second doctor nods and advances upon the room, his own young nurses tailing him. The entourage annexes the bed in a horseshoe, everyone behaving as if the patient on it were nothing more than a corpse. The doctor talks fast and bored from his notes.

"This is a Mr George: a thirty-three year old man found malnourished, dehydrated and unconscious two weeks ago, now revived from coma and due for release tomorrow from ICU. Evidence of extensive paralysis. Possibly impaired speech function. Tests suggest a heavy drinker, but otherwise physically fit. Recent injury to side of face causing minor cheekbone fracture. Additional older injuries including evidence of scalding. A small head wound, reportedly sustained at the time of discovery, but none of these injuries appearing to relate to either the coma or to the paralysis.

"So, any thoughts?"

"Sounds like someone beat him up," chips in the group's only male nurse. The doctor eyes him disparagingly.

"Perhaps you would like to join the police force, Nurse Peters, while the rest of us confine ourselves to medical diagnoses. Anyone else?"

Another voice pipes up enthusiastically, "A severe stroke, doctor?"

"Hmm. A reasonable suggestion, but no, nothing shows up on the MRI to that effect."

"Brain-shake causing haemorrhaging or pressure on the brain?" the male nurse again.

“No, PC Plod. As I just said, nothing from the MRI.”

“Drugs overdose?” This more cautiously from a third nurse.

“Possibly, possibly. Say more.”

A fourth voice, quiet and authoritative, picks up the thread. “Certain psychotropic drugs, taken in excess or mixed with alcohol, can lead to coma and or temporary paralysis.”

“Indeed so. But a clear tox report.”

“Yes doctor, but many of today’s club drugs rapidly break down in the body to produce naturally occurring chemicals.”

“Okay, now we’re getting somewhere. You’ve clearly been doing your homework on Friday nights, Nurse Chatterjee.” Everyone but the nurse herself forces a laugh. “Well, Mr George here is certainly in safe hands. Dr Prentice tells me there are signs of improving mobility and reflex responses to stimuli, but we shall be continuing to monitor him closely. Now, in the next ward is a Mrs...”

More twists and turns to tighten the screws. Drink. Drugs. A catalogue of injuries. And in a *coma* – for two whole weeks? None of it had meant a thing; they might as well have been describing the patient next door. For fuck’s sake, what kind of a god-awful life has he been leading? Maybe he’s an addict; a homeless bum. Or more likely just some wild, spoiled twat. If this paralysis turned out to be his own stupid fault – some mad, drug-crazy antic to impress his mates, some out-of-his-skull act of showing off that went horribly wrong – how would he live with that?

Focusing again on the ceiling, he wills his mind to pick through the few morsels of evidence and scraps of memory he can muster. The doctor said he was thirty-three. His name was George. Both sounded plausible. And his first name? When he first awoke he’d recalled a dockyard – where was that? And a seaman in uniform – who was he? And a room that entrapped him – why? But there is something else too. Something he knows he’s missing that lies at the very core of his being; something that fundamentally defines him.

He goes on racking his brains until the effort fries his mind, until the lights begin to diffract from his despair, until a new sound melts softly into the room, the first recognisable utterance he’s heard himself make. Speech may be denied him, but not the faculty to sob. And the sobbing carries on until pitying sleep finally snatches him up and sweeps him away to a safer and kinder world.

* * *

He’s woken again by the approach of two nurses, one on each flank. Sleep has not returned him to his body. It hasn’t all been a dream. Waking merely throws the horror straight back in

his face. His plight now takes on a darker sense of reality. For the first time he feels truly afraid. This, for all he knows, could be his lot from here on. He tries to picture a mind that could take in sight and sound, capable of understanding the world around it but with no way at all of responding. Would that be living or just being buried alive? A husk, a rotting vegetable – in everyone’s eyes barely a living creature at all. And wouldn’t they be right to think that of him, if he was never again to talk, never to move by himself, never to feel his own body, never to love or be loved, never to have sex, a family, a life? Wouldn’t he rather fall prey to some malignant illness like cancer or heart disease than be left that way? At least then he could manage the terms of his own death.

The blue coats are now upon him, the tall and wiry one from earlier and another, broad and matron-like. In a brash, singsong voice the first one asks him, “Awake now, are we? Happy to try and eat a little something? Let’s see whether we can manage that, shall we?”

The questions are as puerile as they are patently rhetorical. Before she’s even closed her mouth the other nurse has raised his upper body and slipped three extra pillows behind. The shift to his organs sends through an urgent message; ‘Warning. Bladder full to bursting’. That much at least he can detect, albeit lodged somewhere vague beneath his brain – more a craving than a physical pain. So what is he supposed to do? And what about when he needs a dump? It has to happen eventually, no matter how little they’re planning on feeding him, even if it’s only liquids. Even newborn babies crap themselves. Shit, for all he knows, he might already be in nappies, or plumbed into one of those dreadful bags.

The removal of the feeding tube has left an irritation at the back of his nose like the soreness that heralds a cold. Suddenly, as the matron bends to pick something from the trolley, he knows with absolute certainty that he won’t be able to swallow, that they’ll be stuffing his mouth full of food and he’ll be unable to tell them to stop and will simply choke to death. Her thumb is now drawing his jaw downward, her other hand pulling back his head. Inside, he wriggles and strains to free himself, but to them his alarm goes unseen. Smiley, talky nurse closes in and niftily empties her spoon into his mouth with an upward flick that wipes it clean against his top lip.

For all their abuse, he’s distracted for a moment by a startling explosion of flavour; unidentified in itself, but another bridge to the world around him, as fireworks of savoury-sweetness burst into his brain. He’s also conscious of limited physical sensations in his mouth, like a dentist’s freeze-up. A mouth that’s become a vast cave. He knows the puréed food is being coaxed backwards towards his throat, but it might as well be the nurse’s finger in there – impossible to think of this as his own tongue. At the moment of truth, choke or

swallow time, the food catches at the head of the shaft, a mortified potholer peering into the abyss. His brain screams at it to jump. But the morsel remains adamant, and the command ‘swallow!’ has no effect at all. The more he tries, the worse it sticks. The down-shaft has squeezed tight; the vent to the nose is sealed, starving him of air. Not in a million years will he ever manage this. Push the stuff away again to the front of the mouth and spit it out or suffocate. And it’s only then, while his attention is suitably distracted, that the reflex takes over, abseiling the food down to some subterranean cavern, resetting the system and allowing him once more to breathe.

Too late for self-congratulation, already the next spoonful is coming. This time, the slurry gets caught in his windpipe. Again, that heart-stopping moment – no reflex to clear the airway, lifeline corked. He can tell he’s being slapped on the back but there is no sensation of touch, only of acceleration and jarred vision. And suddenly food is flying everywhere – across the sheets, coughing good and proper, bull’s-eye onto the blue uniform. A neat retaliation. By the fourth mouthful he has the technique. No more mishaps. Smiley nurse is delighted.

“Well done, Mr George! We can well and truly say goodbye now to that horrid feeding tube, can’t we?”

Matron says nothing. Perhaps she prefers the feeding tube. Cheaper laundry bills.

Before they can wander off, he must find a way of communicating his need for a leak. The only thing he can think of is to furiously eyeball each of them in turn and then his own crotch. Too bad if they take it the wrong way. But talky sister comes immediately to his aid.

“Oh, no need to worry about that, pet. You just go right ahead.” She bends closer. “You’re fitted with a catheter.” She says it like his is the only one in the hospital and others would give their right kidney to steal it. So, what, just lie back and let himself go? How curiously liberating.

But actually performing proves less than straightforward. A deep-seated instinct takes charge of his bladder. Brain and body begin arguing it out, as in a dream – where the dreamer is all set to pee onto a cushion, or into a pile of blankets in the corner of a room, in two minds as to whether it’s the right or wrong thing to do. For all he knows, he might wake from this nightmare only to find himself back home, soaking his bed. But nature demands that he act sooner or later.

So let it be sooner.

The need slowly shrinks away with a slight sensation of deflation, the bubbles rushing along the snaking yellow tube at the bedside, like someone drawing thirstily on a drinking straw. He looks away in disgust. The nurses exit, victorious.

Now propped up by pillows, he's at last able to take in the whole room. Equipment clusters around the bed, as though drawn to him for company. Into the cold whiteness beyond flows a continuous humming and hissing, and an intermittent beeping that measures out time; a ruler against which to count his breaths. For now, these four walls delineate his whole world. Only his eyes reach beyond, to the boughs of a tree through the high window and the slowly shifting cloud cover behind. The room itself remains motionless, simply monitoring, controlling, diligently awaiting instructions, spewing wasted data into the air. For what feels like an eternity it stays this way, until a new face appears at the door.

If being delivered from the womblike state of a coma into the hands of the hospital has been a rebirth, then what follows becomes his moment of baptism. Unlike her two predecessors, the new nurse checks to see that he's awake before entering and smiles as she approaches.

"Hello, Alex," she says softly.

Before he has time properly to ponder the christening she draws up a chair and sits. "There's something I want to tell you."

More bland assurances, no doubt. He's sorry, but soft soap is not what he needs right now. Give him something concrete, a timescale, a get well plan, anything to get things moving.

But when she speaks again, it's not about feeding tubes or catheters; not vague promises about the temporary nature of his amnesia or loss of sensation. There is a visitor on his way; she puts the words carefully so as not to shock. In about half an hour, she says, then he'll be here.

His twin brother.

The words are an atom bomb exploding over an ocean; a tidal wave crashing through the flimsy construct of memory he's so far managed to assemble; each moment instantly irradiated to place her words at its heart. This is the core he's been missing. He, this thirty-three years old, first name Alex, surname George, caller at docklands, ex-captive, victim of circumstances unknown that has left him body-broken and mind in tatters, has a twin. And that twin is on his way.

Malik

A shock of electricity leaps the air between them; the kind of connection that only a twin could possibly know. It makes no difference that Alex has yet to see his own reflection, this face is unmistakably his own. The fit goes beyond memory into a deeper, genetic matching. He watches his brother (Daniel, the nurse is calling him) approach the bedside and take hold of his hand. Seeing but not sensing their touch takes his mind back at once to a game from their childhood – cross the arms in front, palms together, and interlace the fingers, rotate the hands, bringing the elbows to the stomach. The other nominates a finger but makes no contact with it. Always it's impossible at first to know which muscles to move. Such a trivial memory, but this weightless touch means everything: no more suffering alone; being lifted into the arms of family and held; clinging to a lifeline of hope. Daniel's bullish words are the only thing stopping him from going to pieces. He wishes to hold this moment forever.

But the doctor is already pulling his brother away.

The nurse returns almost at once, before there's been a chance to process these new twists in the story. She seems anxious about his saline drip, running her finger around the entry point, as though all that hand holding might have dislodged it. "So," she ventures, once satisfied, "how did it feel to be with your brother again?" The final fall in her voice makes it understood that a verbal response is not expected.

But if he could reply, what would he say? What words could convey the overwhelming relief of knowing that someone out there was willing to help him through his sufferance; and not just someone: his own twin, a twin that only minutes ago he hadn't even known existed? Except in one sense he had known, deep in bones. "He's promised to come back tomorrow," she continues. "We hope by then you'll be out of here and into a proper ward where you'll be a lot more comfortable. You'd better rest now for a bit. I'll be in later with your supper."

'Supper', she calls it, not 'your next oral feed'. She almost makes it sound palatable. But force-feeding is force-feeding, however nicely put; still a galling reminder of his condition, like the pee now shooting along its tube, like his inability to decline her food, or to respond to her questioning.

A light sleep claims him for a while; a quieter place where he and Daniel can briefly reunite. They're repeating the party trick with the fingers. They're running around a bedroom and clambering onto a bunk bed. They're in the garden playing catch. They're on a beach kicking down sandcastles. He tries to fast-forward the dream, into their teens, into their years as young adults, but nothing materialises to bridge the gap. Only today's Daniel comes forward,

bemoaning the fact that it had been so long: that everyone had been worried sick about him. How long is so long? The dream refuses to say.

He slowly becomes aware of the nurse standing over him. He tries to focus on her face. There's a connection somewhere there to the dream.

"Ready for a bite to eat?" she asks, raising him up. As the feeding ritual once more gets underway Alex drills deeper into her eyes in his efforts to grasp the significance that evades him. The nurse understandably misreads the signs.

"Just relax, Alex, and let your mouth do what it's trained to do."

All of a sudden, he knows with dreadful clarity. Whatever it was that had put him here in hospital, it had involved violence and humiliation. Through his mind flash tiny dramas; people shouting, smashing things, a woman getting hurt. But the moments are too short-lived to identify the players, or to pinpoint his own place in the scene. By the time the nurse has finished and left the room, the fleeting insight has dissolved into nothing but a churning in his gut.

Daylight has returned to the high window by the time sleep finally reclaims him. The dream that follows only knots him up further, forging a cynical fiction around his paralysis and those unplaced scenes of brutality. In it, a figure, never seen or named, holds him captive in a filthy hovel, the unknown woman held also. Her terrified sobs reach him from the next room. Though his windows are locked his door stands ajar. The certainty of retribution is enough to keep him imprisoned

Freedom is finally granted by the summary demand to 'Wake up!' As Alex comes round, his liberator takes shape as the broad, surly nurse from the day before. The morning's oral feed has arrived – not breakfast: matron has no time for such kindly euphemisms. She has him upright and jaw opened in a single sweep of the arm. But Alex now has the measure of things. He's able to get through it without choking fits or helpless convulsions. This particular ordeal is normalising.

More than can be said of the ordeal she puts him through two hours later. Armed with the trolley-load of ferocious items she wheels in ahead of her, suddenly this psycho-nurse commands more than just ridicule. He can see plastic sheets, towels, tissues, scissors, latex gloves and something resembling a baby's feeding bottle, only with a longer spout, the sort a farmer might use to rear an orphaned lamb. But a spout that Alex feels sure is going nowhere near his mouth.

The nurse yanks him forward and tosses aside two of the pillows, pulls back the blankets and slides him down the bed to lay him flat. She rolls him onto one side and draws

up his knees. Before he quite knows it, she has his pyjama trousers around his thighs and jacket hoisted to the waist. Only then does the penny fully drop. This is not to be a bed-bath – degrading enough though that would be – but something far, far worse. The ultimate violation. After a rustle of paper at his back and some sorting of her supplies, he feels it going in: a lubricated, gloved finger. The noise and the smell tell him the rest. From time to time she moves away and returns, rustles more paper and begins again. The invasion circles his insides – spaces he never even knew about, almost touching his spine one moment, pressing against his bladder the next, each time pausing at some obstruction, hooking around it and withdrawing fresh booty. The fact that he detects something at last down there is little compensation. Just as it seems the horror can get no worse, his bowels begin to fill with a warm liquid. He fears it might be blood – maybe she’s ruptured some vital organ within him – but her baby’s feeding bottle dispels the idea curtly with its final flatulent squeeze.

“No need to be alarmed, Mr George,” he hears her say through the sound. Her voice, the first time he’s hearing it, is curt and businesslike, but not hostile. “We’ve been doing this every other day for two weeks. We call it a reflex bowel. Once your mobility returns you should be able to handle this yourself.”

A Severn bore is already discharging through his intestines towards the estuary of her waiting sheets. A foul, sour stench and then she’s wrapping up, wiping and washing his backside, drying him off and returning him to his back. But the torture he’s just been through has moved more than his guts. It has totally shifted his thinking; a red-hot resolve now pushing aside the earlier helplessness and panic. He is going to survive this living hell. He may have just surrendered his body to the will of these sadists, but he’s damned if he’ll surrender his dignity. No matter how degrading they make it, no matter where they poke and pry, there’ll be one place they can never touch, an inner fortress into which they will never break. A fortress built here, inside his head.

* * *

They come to move him around midday. One by one, the tubes and wires that have plumbed him into the mighty machine are pulled, leaving only his catheter and the saline drip – the bottle of clear liquid suspended from a hat stand on wheels, which they guide along behind the bed as it travels the corridors.

He’s glad to have escaped the ICU; less enthusiastic about the ward they take him to, packed with bedridden strangers, some only just visible in their deep sleep or unconsciousness, their white skin and hair barely distinguishable from the sheets around them. Others sit raised by pillows, hands on laps, mostly staring into deep space as though

lost in another life; one old man gazes chirpily around with an air of forced optimism, no doubt desperate to convince himself that being here isn't actually his worst nightmare come true.

Nightmare or not, Alex knows the move has been a vital first step in his plan. That dreadful experience with the nurse has delivered a salutary message. He has to get better, and has to get out. Immediately. Mobility is his key to survival.

Alex needs a wheelchair.

And a perfect chance to obtain one presents itself later that day. Visiting hours have arrived, the ward already under siege from a steady stream of relatives. As an old man is wheeled in at the far end, Alex sees his moment to attract the attention of the impossibly tall black male orderly who pilots him. All afternoon, Alex has been increasingly aware of changes in his body, just the odd twinge here, a twitching muscle there, like the slow thaw of a local anaesthetic. Now he just needs to force open his mouth, push air from his lungs and call the nurse over, make wheelchair pushing movements with his hands, throw a telling look towards the corridor...

But the four paltry moans that spell out 'Nurse...nurse...over...here', while perfectly mimicking the phrasing and shape of each word, fail miserably to rise above the ward's general hubbub. The nurse, having seen his patient safely into bed, refuses to scan for further volunteers. He simply withdraws his impossibly long arms and strides out, covering his tracks in barely three strides. Alex swears at his failure, lets go his straining muscles and finds himself urinating once again down his tube.

The awful waiting game resumes. The vital thing when Daniel arrives will be to get his message through. A clear, unambiguous signal. With renewed determination he concentrates his mind, travelling the nerve pathways from brain to fingertips and pushing the orders along those hidden wires. At first, nothing. Then a slight quiver of the hand, each finger assuming a tiny life of its own. And finally a result, as his index finger lifts from the sheet and rocks from side to side – not the finger he'd been targeting, but still progress of sorts. The childhood game again. In focusing so intently on his own hand, he misses the moment that Daniel actually steps into the ward.

The sight of him is something of a shock. Daniel's whole demeanour has changed. He avoids eye contact. When he speaks, he does so quickly and coldly. Alex studies the sallow and pasty complexion and wonders if he might be ill. But his words at least offer some comfort; they'll be going home together once the hospital gives the all-clear. He's even brought fresh clothes for Alex to wear. Alex does everything he's been practising to send

something back. 'Don't wait, Daniel. Tell them to get me a chair. Let's get the hell out of here now.' But how to say all that with a single raised finger, a widening of the eyes, and the smallest twist to the mouth?

And suddenly the nature of Daniel's message is shifting; casting everything into a whole new light. Those scenes of screaming and shouting he'd recalled the night before had felt to Alex like something recent enough to connect with him being here in hospital. But Daniel is now telling him of a traumatic past that spans virtually his whole life. There had been another incident – not days or weeks, but years ago – when they were just kids. Some kind of an accident had taken Alex away on that day, and not once since then had he made any effort to re-establish contact.

It's an allegation he's powerless either to refute or accept. The desperation to reach out and say something, at least to assure his twin brother that it means the world having him here, becomes unbearable. But Daniel is already turning to leave, not another word said; no promise to return before the hospital gives the go ahead for his release. Salvation is slipping away before his eyes, his brother exiting the ward, swallowed up by the corridor beyond.

More than a day passes before another opportunity to escape presents itself. Alex has already noticed that those who, like himself, cannot see to their own toilet needs get 'done' about two hours after their first feed of the day. Having been told that his own 'conditioning of the bowel' takes place on a two-day cycle, it's not hard to work out when the next appointment with the truffle hunter is due. Much has changed down below since the matron's last foray. Not only is the urge to go more tangible, but he's sure he can now access the muscles needed for the essential push. Making this fact known is another matter. His brainwave comes only after having been turned and exposed. Hearing the rustle of papers behind him, he's quick to pre-empt the well lubricated finger. A moment's concentration... and Hallelujah: a peace offering – on a plate!

Within minutes of delivering his gift Alex is being wheeled out to the disabled toilets, free, albeit under supervision, to work at his own pace in his own time. The sense of achievement is everything. If not yet his passport out of the place, it's a crucial first victory all the same, over his disability and over the system. When they return him to the bed, even the catheter is swapped for an object that looks rather like a condom, simple to put on, simple to take off, ready for the next spin in the chair. His success has put him back in the driving seat; he can think again, plan the next step. Every opportunity will be seized upon to take in more liquids and food, to boost the number of toilet trips and show everyone just how keen he is to get himself mobile.

The final reward arrives late the next morning. “I’ve some good news,” the pretty nurse says, as they make their way back from the toilets. “We think that you’re now ready to start on your rehabilitation programme.” As they turn the corner, Alex can see the beanpole black orderly waiting in the ward. “This,” she says, “is Mr Abdelgadir. He is to be your physiotherapist.”

The man gazes down from the heights with a frown. “What are you doing sat there, Mr George!? Are you waiting for next Christmas!?” His face then creases into laughter. “Time for you to get yourself in and out of this thing by yourself!”

The orderly takes over command of the chair and whisks it at speed through new corridors, the pad, pad of his giant strides slow and even behind Alex’s head. The signs they follow say only ‘Rehabilitation Ward’. When they arrive, it proves in truth to be an entire gymnasium; the equal of any well-healed sports centre or health spa. Alex can see little in it that’s likely to be of use to him. Only now is he starting to regain control over neck and shoulder muscles. But to advertise the fact might be to have the physio wheel him straight back to the ward.

“Now then, Mr. George, I want you to listen very carefully and do exactly as I tell you.” Mr Abdelgadir locks the brakes and places himself some feet ahead of the chair with arms outstretched, the pinks of his upturned palms offered like steaks to a wild animal. “You must push against the armrests until you feel yourself rolling forward. Don’t worry; your weight will do the rest.”

The instruction sounds like suicide – serious injury at best. But something tells him this giant of a man is not the sort to take no for an answer, more likely to turn up the heat, while diverting him with that impossible grin. By sheer willpower alone, Alex drags himself forward far enough to reach the tipping point. From there it’s just tumbling, the sense of it minimal, seeing only the extended arms growing suddenly larger and saving his fall, and feeling his head buffeted against the taut belly laugh. Clearly delighted, Abdelgadir helps him back into the chair, skips over to a cupboard, pulls out a selection of weights and brings them over. Engulfed by his tarantula fingers the weights seem innocuous enough. On the table they look preposterously heavy. These, Alex is told, are to develop his upper arm strength. Logical enough: his arms will soon be called upon to propel the chair, to support the crutches, to feed and dress him. Fine, if his recovery were to end there. But Alex is a man in a hurry to walk. They must proceed at once with equivalent exercises for his legs. But no, next it is to be facial muscles. The chair is wheeled over towards the wall and parked in front of a tall mirror. Jaw up and down, forward, backward. Tongue in and tongue out, round and round.

For the first time Alex is presented with a view of his own face. It is indeed a striking replica of Daniel's, minus the flesh and muscle; the same contours, only etched more deeply; less a carbon copy, more a humourless parody of his twin.

Use what you see to correct what you do. Scrunch up the face. Relax it. Mouth open as wide as it will go. And back. Smile. Frown. Blow a kiss. Look startled. And rest.

Beneath the right eye he can make out the slight swelling from the hairline fracture. One of the nurses had thought he'd been beaten up. A fist or a boot? A half memory stirs, perhaps a false one, of a boot, striking him while down on all fours. He shivers. It must have been quite a kicking. Hopefully the other guy got worse.

Make a sound. Hold that sound. Eeeee, iiiiii, aaaaa, oooo, uuuuu. Alex reckons he's scoring about twenty-five percent on each test; his abysmal performance infuriates him. But Mr Abdelgadir just goes on chortling and smiling and incentivising and gently chastising.

After an hour of unbroken punishment they finally return to the ward, every muscle in Alex's body on fire. Within seconds he is flat out – the first really deep sleep he's known in days.

Perched at the foot of his bed when he reopens his eyes is a gaunt-faced, grey-haired man wearing spectacles and a crumpled suit. The man's posture suggests he's been standing for some time. It must have become evening. The ward has all but emptied, the nurses already shooing out the last of the visitors.

"Sorry, if I woke you," the old man begins. Alex tries to move, but his burning muscles kick back spitefully. The stranger shuffles uneasily. "I only found out today that you were here. I thought I should visit. I... knew you. Before your accident."

The words are enough to rally Alex's full attention. Any light this man can shed on the last few weeks is too important to miss.

"I don't expect you to recognise me," the man continues, "but I'm your uncle: Martin Greenall. Maybe you remember: your father and I fought together in the Falklands. You were just a child the last time I saw you. I'll never forget your little face – when I had to break the news to your mother about Richard."

Even from these few words a scene begins to build in Alex's mind. A figure at a doorway – a younger incarnation of the man before him, Alex watching heartbroken through the banisters as this man reduces his mother to tears.

This uncle of his seems oddly reticent, yet eager to talk; something decidedly confessional in his tone. "I suppose we're two of a kind, you and me," he says. "Two people who survived when they really should have died. The sea nearly took us both. But your father,

and the others,” he shakes his head. “They weren’t so lucky that day.”

Alex wants him to pause, to allow him time to digest these words. This man is implying that his accident had been at sea. It fitted – he’d had flashbacks of a dock and of beaches. Okay, say he’d fallen and nearly drowned – it would explain the head injuries and possibly the memory loss. But where did that awful domestic scene fit in with that, battling through a room under a barrage of missiles? His assailant had given chase, followed him down to the docks, cornered him down at the breakwater and forced him to make one last bid to escape. Was that it? So Alex had jumped. Or been pushed.

No, this is all nonsense. None of it rings true at all. For one thing, in that memory he’d been the observer of the violence, not its victim. Nobody watches themselves from outside their own body in a memory. His uncle is seated now, a little way off, his head lowered and hands between his knees, only snatching the odd glance at Alex’s face over his glasses.

“It would have broken your father’s heart to know about your fall. Well, it’s something at least that he was spared that, I suppose. Did you know he kept your photos with him at all times? ‘My two sons couldn’t be more different,’ he used to tell everyone. It’s funny; he always said you could look after yourself. It was your brother he worried more about. ‘The philosopher’, he called him; the one who preferred seashells and stargazing to football. He said he regretted the way he’d treated you both, particularly Daniel. Remember when I told you that? You were very brave, you didn’t cry. I hope you told your brother.”

Alex has no idea whether he’d told Daniel or not. He is losing the thread of this narrative completely.

“He said if he ever got home again he was going to make it up to you. He said you’d know when you got your Christmas presents. You probably don’t remember what they were, but I hope you do; I hope he was right.”

At last Alex begins to understand. This is not a recent story he’s being told here. This is the same childhood incident that Daniel had talked of. He remembers one those presents. Running shoes. Now the references to the sea make sense. Wearing those shoes, running along the beach. He waits hungrily for more.

A conflict now appears to be playing across the man’s face, some sort of inner battle of conscience. He rises to draw the curtain around the bed, just enough to give them a little privacy, and sits back down. He thinks for a second and says, “You know, the way it was reported in the paper, it wasn’t fair on your father. I mean, if that’s what’s been keeping you away all this time, your shame of him, then you need to know: I was just as much to blame. There – I’ve finally said it. But I just can’t keep it to myself any more, not with you coming

back like this. It's too late for my life to change, Alex, but yours still can. What your father did, what we both did... well, he's already paid the ultimate price for it. But not me. Every single day I'm still paying. It's the guilt, you see. That's the thing. It eats you up from inside."

Alex has an idea that all this is terribly important, that these words form a crucial part of the bewildering puzzle that makes up his past. And yet the only image of his father he can muster is of a man standing in uniform, nothing that fits with newspaper reports or family shame. It's unbearable to have the story end there. But his uncle is already back on his feet. In a bid to stop him from leaving, Alex throws everything he has into moving some part of himself and uttering a sound. Greenall stares down at the absurd wriggling and warbling, appalled, ashamed and embarrassed.

"Ah, listen to me," he stammers. "The ramblings of a sad old fool. I'm not after your sympathy, really I'm not. I just wanted you to know that Richard didn't deserve the mud they slung at him. He was a good seaman. You've nothing to be ashamed of. People should know what really happened. Someone should set the record straight. Maybe I will. Maybe I'll write to you."

The promise, if that's what it is, is made with back turned, as Greenall takes hold of the curtain and slides it back against the wall. "I've got to go," he says, turning again. "You'll get well. Believe me: you're in good hands. It was your brother who told me you were here. He works for me, you see. He wrote to me to say he planned to look after you and I'm giving him time off work so that he can."

And as mysteriously as he'd arrived, this Uncle Martin is gone.

* * *

Left crutch forward, deep breath, right foot advance. Restore balance. Right crutch forward, another breath, left foot advance. Breathe deeply and repeat. After another gruelling session of upper arm strength building Alex is finally being introduced to his new crutches. Mr Abdelgadir takes delight in playacting the role of cripple, as he demonstrates a succession of techniques. A week or so of this four-stage cycle and a patient could normally expect to move on to the simpler left crutch and right foot together, right crutch and left foot together – a move that takes more strength but gains substantial speed and stability. Another week, and he should be ready to tackle left crutch forward, right crutch forward, drag both legs up to the crutches. And finally, the ultimate goal: both crutches forward, take the full weight and swing the legs through, a move that Abdelgadir particularly enjoys showing off.

"From today, we shall be friends," he says, heaving himself gleefully around. "My name is Malik and you I think are Alex. In front of *them* I shall of course continue to call you Mr

George.”

He stops and advances on his patient with the sticks. “Now, Mr Alex, I have some news for you! The doctors have agreed for you to be released from here on Monday. So, now we must work three times as hard to get you fit.”

The huge smile spreading across his face in no way seems at odds with the stern instruction that promptly follows. “Stand up!!” he yells, steering the chair into position beneath a steel crossbar.

“You are like me,” he declares. Faced with the Herculean challenge of raising his arms, never mind of lifting his whole bodyweight from the seat, Alex can see precious little that makes them alike. “We are both preparing ourselves for going home.” Then the thunderous laugh. “For you it is easy, and will only take two days. For me it is to be six months!”

Six months, he goes on to explain, to gain the qualifications needed to return to the Sudan, armed with the right experience to make a meaningful contribution there. His face turns from childish excitement to sadness so softly that Alex almost misses it.

“In my home town of Juba we have many parasitic diseases. Bilharzias and sleeping sickness. And there is much to do in raising awareness of health issues, sanitation, getting people to drink only the water that is safe.” He stays a moment with a memory before adding, “And too many of my friends there have died of AIDS, Mr George.” Then the dazzling smile is bursting through again and he is talking of love. His parents have been arranging his marriage – to a second cousin he’s met only the once, a few years ago, and hardly remembers. They assure him that she is well matched and a hard worker. But the girl’s own parents are insisting that they cannot be wed until Abdelgadir has secured an honourable wage and a respectable position. Suddenly he is laughing again.

“Alex and Malik. Malik and Alex. We sound like brothers, no? You must come to the wedding! A fine celebration it is going to be, lasting many days. I tell you, Mr Alex, by then you will be truly on your feet. On your feet, do you hear it! Running and jumping about, thanks to me. You will dance at the marriage of Malik Abdelgadir and his beautiful bride, yes? But enough of my talking. Why are you still sitting there? Lazy man! To work!”

The support is suddenly being pulled from beneath him. He must either take his own weight or fall gracelessly to the floor. For an instant, he’s able to suspend himself in mid-air, just long enough for his rescuer to come along broadside, scoop him up from under the shoulders and strap a crutch to each wrist. Alex clenches his teeth and braces his arms.

Right crutch forward, left foot advance...

Daniel

They come for him early on Monday morning. They shower him, wash his hair, dress him in his freshly laundered clothes and serve him food with an unprecedented air of deference. At the stroke of a pen, on the whim of a doctor, everyone is suddenly treating him like royalty. Alex has been promoted from over-demanding inmate to honoured guest. Convicted criminals released on appeal could scarcely find the change in their fortunes more bizarre.

It's the outcome he's worked so tirelessly to achieve; the hospital is about to relinquish its hold. Alex has won. He knows he should be overjoyed. So, why this hard knot turning his insides, like a fist grinding against his stomach wall? Maybe it's having to take the next steps without Abdelgadir – that inspiration of a man who'd given him the resolve to stick with such a gruelling work regime. Without Abdelgadir, he wouldn't now be sat here ready for release; stronger, upright and poised for action.

Or is it facing a future without the gentle, dark haired nurse who'd comforted and reassured him during his bleakest moments? With almost no memory to police it, over the last few days his brain has been in meltdown; his imagination running riot, half the time not knowing what was real and what was not. Throughout it all, that nurse had done more than anyone to keep him sane.

By leaving here he's choosing to turn his back on them both. Without their professional help it's likely to be a long, rocky road to recovery. Over time, he'll probably regain the ability to walk, given his progress so far. But what of his speech? And his mind? The wall clock tells him Daniel is due. Even at this eleventh hour he wonders if he should turn tail and throw himself back on their mercy – Prentice, smiley nurse, even matron, Dr Sarcasm and his crowd of toadies. Is anyone else remotely as qualified? Or as committed? Five minutes late now. How exactly does Daniel view this long road ahead? Alex watches his own hands rise from the armrests and form a white-knuckled grip around an imaginary steering wheel, the dual carriageway shooting beneath him as the hospital looms large. Then in his head he is reluctantly pulling to a halt, just before Daniel himself comes into view and draws up at the kerbside. Daniel's rising dread as he darts from the car comes flooding into Alex's brain in a kind of drowning madness. A meeting of minds. And then of eyes – as they face each other across reception. For a moment, Alex isn't sure through whose eyes he is seeing.

They're wheeling him out now into the daylight, his first lungful of fresh air since coming round. As conversation bats back and forth behind him, he stares at the great challenge up ahead – the unaided climb out of the chair into that car. A dozen times they've rehearsed this, but the madness still wells around inside him, dashing his confidence. At the

moment of reckoning, every muscle fine-honed for the job chooses at once to rebel. Instead of raising himself slowly and taking hold of the roof, he sees himself tumbling clumsily forward, landing spread-eagled across the roadway, Daniel cowering backwards and swearing that he wants no more part in this. Next thing, Alex is still in the chair, Abdelgadir's voice soft but firm in his ear, opening a channel through the panic attack, and finally allowing him to proceed.

The chair is being stowed. Doors are slamming. The nurse is waving and turning away. The car moves off. There is no going back. The rising unease, as the hospital road winds its way towards the exit, Alex realises suddenly is not only about leaving the hospital. It's a form of agoraphobia; a fear of being returned to the outside world. No-one out there is going to stand by him, to protect him. Society has no time for the disabled. To them he won't be a victim. He'll just be a freak, an object of ridicule.

The hospital is shrinking from view, gradually being swallowed up by the suburbs and ring roads. And he begins to recognise some of the buildings and names on road signs. That familiar places should exist here is not so surprising; it does make sense for him to have been living somewhere nearby, for them to have taken him to the nearest hospital. But being able to remember these things, after weeks of having remembered next to nothing, is not something he'd dared expect.

With every turn, the veil seems to lift further from his eyes. There on the left is the Park and Ride that nobody ever used. And here comes the train station, with its fancy ironwork and gaudy green paint – memories of grey coffee in its platform café, train delays, diesel fumes and throbbing engines. Past the Drive-Thru McDonalds he would sometimes visit after work. His heart is racing. These are not isolated, disembodied memories from childhood; these at last are tangible, verifiable, from the here and now.

The further into town they drive, the more familiar it all becomes. Nobody could possibly mistake the overbearing new Tesco's that had brought shopkeepers onto the streets with placards. And the central bus terminus. How many drunken nights had he ended up there after falling asleep and missing his stop?

With these memories comes an additional fear: that he's heading straight for trouble; the murky question mark of a past he can't yet unravel. This is the town that had spawned the horrific domestic violence he'd witnessed, that had harboured his vicious attacker, a monster who'd perhaps held him against his will in a room somewhere. And Daniel seems intent on driving him right into the heart of it.

But Daniel chatters on, oblivious. Apparently, as children they used to come here on

holidays. A strange choice for a holiday. He also seems to know the area well, and is enjoying the challenge of matching those distant memories to the vastly altered scenes around them. “That’s where the cinema used to be,” he says, pointing at nothing in particular. “And that was the old Co-Op. Remember the sports centre? It’s a retail park now – where I work, actually.” He indicates off to the right, toward some featureless exit road and a cat’s cradle of flyovers. “Not too far to go now. I hope you’re going to be comfortable. You have a room all to yourself. Central heating and plenty of cupboard space. And you’ll be able to park the wheelchair right up against your bed.”

It dawns on Alex now that his distress isn’t even just about this town. It’s about Daniel; the things he’d said on that second visit to the hospital: that he and Alex had been out of touch for years – that nobody had known if Alex was even alive. And yet, by all accounts it seems the two of them had been living only streets apart. Nothing in Daniel’s story stacks up. Alex takes a deep breath and turns from the window. He should stop worrying. An explanation of some kind exists. He just doesn’t have the full picture. He doesn’t really know anything.

But this has to be a coincidence too far. As the car takes a right at the lights he knows immediately this is his own street. The petrol station on the corner. The chip shop. The launderette. The mock-Tudor fronted pub over the road – it’s the pub’s name that really cuts him up. Drink, drugs, a mugging, whatever it was that happened to him, this ‘Millwrights’ was at the heart of it, no question. A really bad crowd. And some thug or thugs from that crowd had been out to get him. When word gets round that he’s back on the street, aren’t they going to want to ferret him out to finish the job?

Daniel shows no interest whatever in the Millwrights, his eyes stay fixed on the way ahead. Just so long as he keeps on driving. But halfway uphill the car swings into a cul-de-sac and Daniel parks up before a line of garages. He follows with the last thing Alex wants to hear:

“We’re home.”

Home?

Daniel’s home?

How can that be possible? Not streets away from each other then: quite literally on each other’s doorstep.

Or does he mean Alex’s home?

Of course, that must be it. They’ve just called in to pick up his things. They’re not stopping here. They’re still en route. He sees the whole thing now: when the hospital had

established his identity (probably from his wallet) they'd managed to track down his family. Daniel had driven many miles to spend time with him, and because of the distance had booked himself somewhere to stay.

It explained how he'd had time to get to know the town again.

But Daniel said he worked at the retail park.

The theory didn't hold water.

They're over the road now, into a concrete forecourt facing a block of flats. *Is this his home?* The place is so utterly without character or soul that he simply can't say. Just one of ten thousand such flats that he might have passed on his travels.

"Welcome to my pad," Daniel says, with a slight bristle of pride as he turns the key. "I'm afraid it's not exactly five stars, but as you'll see, I've done what I can to make it comfortable for you."

So, there it is. Definitely Daniel's home. Utterly crazy. They really had been neighbours the whole time.

The door opens onto a small lobby, a stairway over to the right. The space is too cluttered to allow the wheelchair through, but he can perfectly well make it on crutches. Only, Daniel has other ideas. The moment he sees the state of the place he totally loses it. Alex watches in growing alarm. *Is this the brother on whom he's going to have to rely for his safety and welfare? Is this how Daniel is going to behave every time his disability slows him down, every time he fails to live up to expectation? Is it any wonder that when the crutches are handed over they prove too much to handle?*

But somehow they make it through to the kitchen, the drainer taking his weight as Daniel heads back for the wheelchair. Bent low, regaining his strength, at first Alex fails to take in his surroundings. It's the closely packed vertical lines through the light that finally draw his eye. Barred windows. He pulls back, takes in the room as a whole, sees the bedroom through the open door to his right and hears himself cry out. *The room from his nightmare. Worse still, it had all happened right here, the woman bursting from that room into this, bent double, face covered, protecting herself from a hail of flying objects. Quite where Alex had been at the time isn't clear; he seems to be shooting the scene from multiple locations. But the attack had taken place on this very spot, without a shadow of a doubt. The kitchen is suddenly hot and spinning. Alex wants to be sick. This is where he'd been held prisoner. This is where he'd been beaten up. Daniel's own flat! Was it Daniel then who'd done that to him? Three weeks of convalescence, only to be duped straight back into the very hell from which he'd escaped? His knees begin to buckle.*

Someone far away is shouting something at him: how did he fall; where did he hide; was he abducted. The voice pulses in his ears. He no longer understands what is happening. Why is Daniel grilling him this way? It doesn't square with the flashbacks. Nothing makes sense any more. Why can't he walk or talk? Why is his brain in such a jumble? He doesn't know! He doesn't know!! Too many twists, everything drawing in, closing down. A growing barrage of noise.

It's a while before he realises the interrogation has stopped, that he is safely back in the wheelchair, and that his hand is being squeezed.

"It's alright, mate. I'm so sorry..."

Something new is seeding in his head. Something way beyond the words Daniel is speaking. That connection again. The electricity. The fusing of minds.

"You don't have to say anything. No-one's going to force you to explain..."

Not through these words, but again through their touch, through their oneness, through their DNA, Alex just knows that his panic has been absurd. Daniel could never have done anything like that to harm him. There's no accounting for what he's just witnessed, but all the same he becomes calm, consumed by a crushing tiredness. All he can think of suddenly is sleep. He begins to move towards the bedroom, but Daniel wheels him the other way, helping him out of the chair and onto a bed in the lounge. He sits there for a while, too bewildered to think, then lies back against the pillows, legs still dangling from the side, and lets the curtains of darkness fall.

* * *

He's awake again before Daniel comes for him. He can hear food being prepared next door. In a moment he'll be back there, once more to suffer the unfathomable confrontation with those memories. He must interrogate those memories thoroughly while there's still time. In the first, what exactly is the woman doing? He closes his eyes in an effort to recapture the elusive fragment. Yes, there: she's fighting her way past him with one arm covering her face. So, what then are the objects she's dodging? Again he tries to run the sequence, but it's impossible to tell; he can only guess it must be household objects. What does the woman look like? He can't see her face because it's covered. Okay, but is she old, young, short, tall? And what is she wearing? He doesn't know – something dark; she's slim. Describe the room. Is it really the same as the kitchen next door? And where is he viewing from? There's a door and a table behind her, a window lighting her from the left. She's coming towards him and passing on his right, like he's standing at the sink. Everything fits. But he'll need to check it again when Daniel comes. Can he see the person who's throwing things? No, they must be

behind him, where the cooker is. Is there anyone else there besides the three of them? Nobody he can see, but maybe, in the next room, maybe even with her. Thinking through that memory, he knows how he feels now, but how is he actually feeling *in* the memory, is it the same? Hard to say. It's easier to feel the memory than to remember the feeling. But no; the picture in his mind's eye sickens him, but in the memory itself he senses anger and betrayal.

And this whole thing about being held captive, about being kicked and beaten. Well, the latter happened alright: he has the injuries to prove it; those injuries had put him in a bloody coma for two weeks. But what does he actually remember beyond the boot in the face? Is it the same incident as the one with the girl? The same perpetrator? And was it just the attack? Was the whole incarceration thing just in his dream – a blatant metaphor for his paralysis – being plumbed into intensive care, imprisoned within his own body?

The room in the dream did look like the room he'd caught a glimpse of beyond the kitchen. But a dream is just a dream; a dream surely means nothing. It was any old bedroom, with a bed and normal bedroom furniture.

Except it had bars on the windows. Why the hell does Daniel have bars on his windows?

Ten minutes or so later, he's returned to his chair and taken back to the kitchen. Lunch is laid out ready. Such a benign domestic scene; so hard suddenly to connect to those other scenes of violence. But the bars to the windows remain. Daniel catches him staring and follows his gaze.

"Those? Oh, yeah. Landlord's idea, stupid git. Right pain in the arse, and probably illegal. Death trap if there was a fire. And all because of one break-in. But at least they're on the outside; the windows still open enough to let the air in."

And the other things? The table, the window, the door to the bedroom, and what he can see of the bedroom itself; they all agree with the memories – more or less. Only, there seems to be more space, more depth, more separation between objects. Crucial question. *Is this the same place?*

Not necessarily.

A thousand identical flats: he'd said it himself when they'd pulled up outside. Every flat in this block has probably the same floor plan, and every block in this part of town perhaps built to the same specs. Admittedly, coincidence has already been stretched beyond reasonable limits in explaining how he and Daniel had been living so close by, each oblivious to the presence of the other, but to suggest that they – two identical twins – had been living

in two identical flats pushed the limits of that coincidence almost beyond belief. It hardly sufficed as an answer, but Alex discovers that he wants to let it go nonetheless. What matters is that with Daniel he feels safe: the safest he's felt since waking up in the hospital. He's desperate for this arrangement to work. Daniel is doing all this for his benefit, and Alex wants nothing other than to feel protected.

In the bathroom after lunch, propping himself up against the toilet, he catches sight of his reflection in the open cabinet mirror above the washbasin. The swelling to his cheek is now all but gone, but there's a red stain on the side of his forehead that he hadn't noticed in the gym; presumably where he'd struck his head when knocked out. As his hands become available, he leans over and ruffles his hair for a closer examination. A fainter mark just shows on his scalp – another old injury perhaps, maybe just a natural pigmentation of the skin, though the colour is not unlike the pale brown darkening the nurses had found on his stomach when they first showered him. Scalding from hot liquid they'd suggested. All in all a pretty sorry inventory of misadventures – or misdemeanours. He blows through his lips, draws back from the mirror, pushes down twice on the large flush handle and tidies himself up.

For the rest of the day he stays put in his room. Daniel keeps himself busy; there is little exchange between them. The TV rings out from the bedroom; something about Saddam Hussein and the authority's bungled efforts to hang one of his henchmen causing him to be beheaded. For some reason Alex is more than repulsed by the report. It stirs other emotions that seem inappropriate, of rejection and inadequacy. He nudges the door shut with the chair's front wheel.

The television is still blaring away when, some hours later, the door pushes open again. Expecting Daniel's face to appear in the widening crack, Alex misses exactly what it is that comes padding in across the short stretch of floor. Something reddish brown. A throaty cry and asthmatic purring tells him the rest. A scrawny-faced, ginger cat emerges from behind the sofa and approaches with an inquisitive but cautious nose. Meeting Alex's stare, its face opens up into a yawn of pink and black blotches. Alex can only think of salmon skins. The cat threads in and out of the chair's wheels, stiff on its feet, but no less hell-bent on making the jump. The springboard of a footrest and a set of hooked claws into Alex's shins help him achieve his goal. A sniff of trouser, and a pointless circling of knees, and the cat is ready to belly-flop down for its nap, the back briefly arching and tail lifting as Alex lets his hands wander over the ragged fur. The instant attachment between them is as disarming as it is unforeseen, almost as powerful as Alex's first meeting with Daniel in the ICU. Here again, it

feels like being granted the return of a long lost friend. The brittle sound of purring pricks something in his heart. As his hand continues to stroke – thin, rounded bones rising and falling beneath his fingers – Alex’s delicate touch reports the tragic news. This poor animal is mortally frail. He suffers a sickness that causes him constant pain, and stops him from eating. It leaves him with insatiable thirst and a tongue too parched for washing. Life is to be a matter of weeks only; a life that for all the love and attention heaped upon him by a doting carer has become sickeningly cruel. Death at least will be kinder – a quiet end, while sleeping. When it happens, Daniel will find him peacefully curled up in his basket. But the discovery is still set to break his brother’s heart.

* * *

The moment Daniel answers the phone Alex knows it’s his dark haired nurse. And even before the call has ended he’s sussed out that she and Daniel are an item. Looking back, their behaviour towards each other in the hospital should have been a dead giveaway. The thought of seeing her again pleases him greatly. But the way Daniel is now talking to her on the phone doesn’t please him at all. Such ludicrous accusations. Alex has seen that nurse at work on the ward. He knows she’d have made every effort to see him off if humanly possible. Held up in the children’s ward, was she? Well, a nurse can’t just walk out on a child mid-feed or mid-bath, or halfway through reassuring them that their surgery is safe, or promising them that their hair will re-grow, that their scars will eventually heal, that the pain will soon fade. And now she’s on her way over. He rather wishes she wasn’t, not while Daniel is in this vindictive mood. She’d do well to stay away.

There are no raised voices as such when she arrives. Her voice is focused and professional; she virtually ignores Daniel and comes straight through to the sitting room – it seems her business is with her patient, not her boyfriend. She tries for the same old comforting smile, but her look of anxiety gets in its way.

“Hello, Alex. I’m so sorry I didn’t catch you before you left this morning,” she begins. “But then, you know what it was like in that place.” Her eyes search the room for a while; she then sits on the arm of the sofa, hands on her lap, facing him.

“I’ll be helping Daniel look after you while you’re here – while you’re getting back on your feet.” With a smile she adds, “I’m Gulnaz, by the way. I think first name terms from here on, don’t you?” Her face turns serious again. “Of course we’re hoping that you’ll soon be able to tell us where you live. We’re worried for you, and for anyone who might be back home, desperate for news.”

She waits, as though her prompt might just free his tongue. He grunts a weak negative

and hopes that his eyes will do the rest in saying that even if he could speak he couldn't tell her.

“Well, we don't expect you'll be here long,” she continues. “Still, I think we can do rather better than this, don't you? Let's get you a decent bed, and some entertainments. You need quality rest, but you also need some stimulus. Is there anything I can be getting you now to eat or drink?”

Alex moves his head and tries his best to return the smile, but his heart is no more in it than hers. She stands up to go. Daniel is calling from the kitchen.

“Oh! I nearly forgot. A message from your physiotherapist. Seems you two rather hit it off. He said to remind you you've promised to dance and sing at his wedding. So you need to get practising. Working your voice. Building your muscles.”

She feigns bemusement, chuckles and leaves him to ponder his orders. She's careful to pull the door closed behind her, but it doesn't stop the ensuing argument from reaching him. Nurse Gulnaz, it turns out, does not approve of him being here. She doesn't trust in Daniel's competence. Or his patience. If only she'd witnessed the incident with that child's pram. Their voices begin drifting away from the flat. Alex's instinct is to follow. The front door is still open, the lobby entrance door as well. Still blockaded by the bicycles, he can go no further than the stairwell, but it's enough to catch the gist of their quarrel. They're parting. Alex spins round in the chair and takes the corner just fast enough not to be seen. He's back in the lounge by the time Daniel slams shut the front door.

Good god.

His illness.

All in the mind.

That's what the nurse had said.

Could it really be that? They were not real memories. They were nothing more than some quirky side-effect of his injuries, or the coma, or the alleged drug-taking. Not only did the attack on that woman have no connection with Daniel or this place, it had never even happened. Alex has never been anywhere near these streets, never seen that pub before, never set foot in this flat or any other similar, never met that poor little cat before now. It certainly gets Daniel off the hook: his version of events, their years of estrangement, no longer needs jaw-dropping coincidence in order to hang together. All very tidy for Daniel. Not so tidy for Alex. For Alex it means facing his entire past as a totally blank canvas once more.

Hardly surprising then, that when their rooms are swapped he has little enthusiasm for television or reading. The last thing he needs is a head filled with more fictional drama. He

lies back on the bed, turns to one side, eyes picking over the details laid bare by the solitary streetlight. A fitted wardrobe, a chest of drawers, the TV, and his wheelchair with crutches propped against the handles. The space is carved into trapeziums of light. No need to look to the window to tell him why. No need to be reminded of his sick fantasies filled with prison cells and desperate escapes. He rolls over and buries his face in the pillow. This is no time to be letting the despair back in.

But in it comes, regardless. In his next dream he is back behind bars, this time alone. Either the woman has gone or she is dead. He lies on his back, naked, paralysed by the terror of the approaching figure from the doorway. His captor, an ugly giant of a man, carries a bowl of steaming soup in his oven-gloved hands, each step weighed with the exactness of a tightrope walker. As he comes alongside he smiles, extends his stubby arms and slowly pours the boiling liquid over Alex's belly. Alex wakes with a cry, still clinging to the horror of the moment, before a gripping abdominal pain rudely puts him straight. It wrings him out, hand over fist along his gut – one potato, two potato, three potato, four. For all his nurses' conditioning, nature has chosen to kick in twelve hours early. He rolls over with cramps, allows himself a controlled fall from the bed onto the floor and manhandles himself backwards into the chair. An unstoppable shift is already underway inside. Experience tells him he has about four minutes. The old board Daniel had found for sliding him between his wheelchair and the bed, though it had proved unusable due to their difference in height, for this job would have done perfectly. Too late to wake Daniel now and waste time trying to communicate the nature of his crisis. His only hope is to reclaim the board from the hallway and somehow get it up onto his knees.

The board has been upended against the coat rack. Luckily, it's long enough to reach without him needing to bend more than a little, and light enough to grip between the wrists and raise over one armrest. In tandem with some deft reverse steering, Alex finally gets it across his lap, still just enough room to squeeze through the bathroom door, and with a minute or so to go before disaster strikes. With the chair forty-five degrees to the pan, brakes firmly on, he pushes himself as far forward as possible and eases down his pyjamas. He makes a bridge of the board, resting one end on the toilet seat and pushing the other beneath his right buttock. Heaving on the handrail, he shuffles along until the toilet has his full weight, withdraws the board, and blissfully lets go...

...So, now for the one job that remains beyond his powers. He's been through this so many times with the nurses. But it's in their job description to deny patients their dignity and privacy. Out of hospital, with a brother who is still a relative stranger, what he's about to do

remains deeply humiliating. But that's the deal. He closes his eyes and draws as much air from his lungs as possible. He feels sorry too for Daniel, rudely awoken and dragged out of bed in the middle of the night, only to be confronted by this.

* * *

The second day. No mention is made of last night's episode. But maybe it's been a turning point. The next hurdle, bath time, which has the potential to be every bit as awkward, proves to be a light-hearted and bonding experience. Only one moment threatens to spoil it. As the shower sprays over his upper body, working playfully down towards his groin, Alex is met with a vision. Down among the soap bubbles at his feet he sees pieces of his own skin circling the plughole. Instinctively he gathers in his knees and elbows. This has nothing to do with modesty. It is to protect the area around his genitals from the needle-sharp water jets. Daniel is sweet about it. He says nothing and judiciously redirects the water to a less sensitive area. He's careful too over drying him, though Alex feels no pain down there and his skin is perfectly intact. Just his brain up to its old tricks again.

For the rest of the day there is nothing to do but eat, sleep, trundle the short distances between bedroom, kitchen and bathroom, and have his mind go round and round in circles. No visiting hours to bring distraction – no people-watching, no eavesdropping on everyone's private dramas. None of the light entertainment of having new patients piloted in on beds or wheelchairs, escorted in on crutches, or tottering in slippers and loosely tied gowns with faces like zombies. No sorry souls being whisked off for examination, for surgery, for home, or for the morgue. And no Mr Abdelgadir to set him free in the gym for his two hours of backbreaking exertion. He's not had a proper workout in over thirty-six hours. Today he must find a way of getting Daniel to fix him up with the crutches and give him enough space to work through his moves.

So when the offer to go out finally comes Alex leaps at it for all he is worth, despite the howling gales outside. There's no way that Daniel, even in his present good mood, is going to allow him to make the whole trip on foot, but with luck there'll be a park, a playground, a supermarket forecourt, somewhere for a half-hour burst of frenetic activity away from the confines of the chair.

He isn't prepared for the image of a church that comes crashing into his brain the moment they turn onto the hill. The nightmare, the shower incident, and now this. Gulnaz's diagnosis that these are no more than mental aberrations has done nothing to put paid to such things. Clear as day he can make out the course stonework, the grimy windows decked in rusty iron gauze, the dank porch-way and battered oak door. He can gaze up at the clock

tower and along the ridge of the roof, sagging at its centre and missing too many tiles. He can smell the wet grass, mowed short between the graves, left long around the headstones. Stones of all shapes and sizes, a path doing its best to steer a course between and around them towards the lichgate. And he can step away, take a second path downhill, something deep in the shadows drawing him like a magnet.

As they approach the hilltop, true enough, right on cue, the tip of a church spire begins to protrude over the hedge. Even this glimpse is enough to tell him it wasn't any old church in any old churchyard that he'd seen in his head; but *this* church, *this* churchyard. Before he can get nearer, they're off down a side road, stuck for the next half hour in some greasy spoon internet café. But once Daniel has tired of computers and coffee, and brought him back around the corner to the grocery shop, Alex finds himself again pointing straight at the steeple. His mind takes its cue to springboard from the chair, high-jump the hedgerow and touch down among the grass. The church now stands slightly off to his right, someway back. The path winds around and behind it, but also slopes away to his left. Older graves; everywhere overgrown, untended, unloved, a scent of mildew. A deep gloom and a sudden dip in temperature, a pressing silence, a warning or an omen not to approach, but a compulsion all the same to do so.

Daniel is wheeling him from the shop now and setting off for home. Tracking the churchyard boundary, Alex is convinced they're about to encounter a second entrance, a gate that would have meant nothing to him on the way up. No proud archway with name board and service times, just an unassuming opening in the hawthorn. And there it is. Closed, maybe locked, perhaps too narrow for him to get through, but all the same he begins waving wildly towards it.

"In there?" Daniel looks mortified. "You sure about that?"

He seems to deliberate over his next words. "You er... do know... it's where we found you, don't you?"

Whoa.

No, Alex certainly didn't know that.

Found.

Here in the cemetery. Beaten up. Unconscious.

His head striking a glancing blow against a gravestone.

Yes, actually he did know. They are through the gate now, bumping along the rough cobbles. Wait a moment, of course. This was where *their mother* was buried. Even as Daniel is talking him through the story Alex's memory keeps him one step ahead.

He already knows about her cancer and the long years of depression. He even knows about the funeral. But how the hell can he know such things, with everyone telling him over and over that he'd been off the radar, lost to his mother, lost to his brother? More tricks of a diseased mind? But whatever the truth of it, Daniel himself has just confirmed that he'd been here. He stares intensely at her simple memorial. Had he seen it before? Yes he had. For sure. He's convinced he'd even touched it.

The narrative is now reaching back to their childhood in Devon. And for the first time Alex realises that he even knows about their day together on the cliffs. This is the closest he's come yet to catching the moment he was alleged to have fallen. Yes, he sees the approaching gorse, and yes, the dizzy drop to the rocks below. A boat? Yes, there, upturned at the water's edge, flaking black paint. Someone with it? Perhaps – he can't be sure. And their mother, where was she? Alex has no answer to that. He's reluctant to turn and look. He's compelled to stay with the view down into the waters. The time has come to confront the moment they all say he's blotted out. He tries to relive it, to push himself through the gap in the bushes and stumble on loose rock or foolishly attempt a descent. But his feet refuse to budge from the spot. Why – if it's his own mind that has chosen to censor the memory, why can't he now choose to release it? It was too long ago to harm him any longer; there is nothing to fear. Whatever had happened, he'd survived it. He is ready to take ownership of his stupidity and all the terrible suffering it has caused. And still nothing. Suddenly he hears Daniel talking of a trip back to Devon to the scene of the accident.

Yes, if Devon is the only place where he can break through this maddening stalemate, this impenetrable wall of denial, then it's definitely where they must go.

* * *

The hotel has fallen silent. There are few other guests staying here and it's not yet late; people are out eating, drinking, generally having fun. Daniel has decided to return to the pub alone. It's a relief to have this time to himself. For the first time since leaving the flat Alex feels able to reclaim his own destiny. For the first time he has no idea what is about to happen. The strange madness of these premonitions, visions, whatever they are, has intensified to the point where he fears he might be losing his mind.

Is all this just *déjà vu*? And what is *déjà vu* exactly? A fleeting sense that what is currently happening has happened before, never possible to pin down. Sensory messages entering the brain in the wrong order, the subconscious before the conscious so that things being experienced appear to be already in memory – caused in his case by some perverse cross-wiring resulting from his head injury, or the drugs he's taken. If so, then these are no

more than illusions, nothing to fear: with no genuine power to predict. Could he have actually directed them to the hotel, even though he seemed to know every hedgerow, every turning, every house on the high street? Could he have described the school before they found it, even though nothing about it surprised him? Could he have pointed out which pub table they would eat at, or say in advance what food they would be ordering, even though he felt he had the words on his lips just moments before Daniel spoke them? Impossible to say. All he knows is that the effect is perturbing, disorientating and totally exhausting. Like a play he's already seen. He seems to know everyone's lines, learned all their moves; a theatre of the absurd. And only now, left alone in this room, has the curtain finally come down.

Even on the drive here the natural order of things had seemed upside down. Watching those white lines in the headlights, the way ahead had appeared so clear, so certain. In the rear view mirror the weaker taillights had left the road already travelled to fade into obscurity. After that long tailback they'd encountered he'd watched the approaching cars speeding towards a future that to them was quite unknown, to him certain. Their future was his past. And before the roadworks the reverse had been true – those on the other carriageway had been all-knowing that his and Daniel's fate was to plough blindly into the oncoming jam.

He feels tired now. He must sleep if he is to be ready for tomorrow. Tomorrow they are going to find the coast path that will take them to the spot where he fell. His sense (if that can be in any way trusted) is that it will change everything. It will finally tell him where he has spent the last twenty-four years; how and why he'd found his way to his mother's graveside; how he could have known about her illness and death and where she was buried. And what had left him in this physically sub-human, mentally strangely super-human condition.

As his eyelids drop, the near-dark hotel room gives way to the dim light of the village pub. A crowd of locals surround him. His senses are somewhat numbed by drink. Outside again now, breathing the night air, the steady clop of hard shoes on tarmac taking him up a short road into blackout, then turning him around and sending him the other way towards a green. Approaching an obelisk; some kind of monument. Reading names inscribed into stone. Growing anger at not finding the name he is looking for...

...Suddenly, there is birdsong and daylight pouring in through the hotel window.

* * *

Daniel's mood is darker this morning. He must have had a heavy night. The short detour they take to find their old house is a clear recipe for disaster. Alex can already foresee what awaits in that garden. When it comes, the sound of shattering glass sends a shiver through his body, as does the coldness in Daniel's eyes as he legs it back to the car, the hysteria in his voice, his

maniacal joyride from the village, foot to the floor.

And that's when Alex realises that finding the spot on the cliffs is the last thing Daniel must be allowed to do. The truth they'll unearth there will not be the one he's seeking. If a greenhouse in a garden can do this to him, then god knows what impact breaking through the denial about the accident will have. Daniel's mind has become as unstable as those crumbling rocks. It might quite literally drive him over the edge. Maybe there is still time to prevent disaster. Maybe the future is not yet written – Alex's one hope is to play on his confusion and lead him the wrong way. As they hit the beach, he focuses all his attention upon the track heading back towards the car, and gesticulates as furiously as he can. But Daniel is having none of it. A second, even wilder arm gesture is thrown off course by the twists and turns of the chair. At every stop Alex points and grunts again, but the work needed to wrestle the wheels over the raised steps, the bumping and shaking that follows, ensures that his efforts go unheeded. The fated confrontation with the truth now seems inescapable. Alex braces his arms and legs and clears his mind for action as the critical moment draws closer.

But that moment, when it comes, is not of the kind he'd feared. Not one of turning the chair broadside to block some suicide dash, or of being tipped like rubble into a pit. A moment only to take in the tidal wave of remorse and self-loathing that comes crashing through his brother's mind. He looks deep into the eyes of the broken soul who now holds him in his arms. He studies each line of the sea-stained skin, hair blown back wildly from the tormented face. A moment to share the confessions, to absorb the white-hot pain, and a moment to embrace the tears – Daniel, finding his way into his head, just as he'd sworn that time to Gulnaz that he would.

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## Part Three:

### ~ Mobius ~

#### Take a strip of paper

As they chew up the endless miles of motorway, a cloud settles over Daniel that obliterates all thoughts of a future and blackens the past into one long, festering deceit. All those years of resentment he'd felt towards his mother and the terrible, subversive ways he'd punished her for it. If once he might have justified those punishments as impulsive acts of spite, forgivable for a child, now he sees nothing but the deeds of a bullying little coward. He senses the evil close around his hands at the wheel and draw his eye to the fast lane to his right. How easy just to flip the wheel and send the car careering into the central barrier.

But the car only carries him further and further into a black hole. Gulnaz told him that he rejected closeness for fear that people might die. Well, now he knows she'd been wrong. He's been turning his back on people to stop them seeing through the veneer – into the rotten core within. But, fool that he is, Daniel had failed to realise that they'd clocked the masquerade right from the outset. That's why no-one had ever truly let him into their lives, why no-one had ever trusted him, no-one ever cared for him.

No-one, until perhaps Gulnaz.

Arriving home to her string of ever more perplexed phone messages does not exactly help matters. The new machine plays them back, while Daniel gulps from a coffee mug at the kitchen door. Alex, the silent critic, sits studying him.

“Okay, okay, I'll ring her,” Daniel hisses.

Yes, he should have let Gulnaz know. But hang on, Alex can wipe that 'holier-than-thou' expression off his face. They were both out on the golf course that day. Sure as eggs is eggs it wouldn't have been Daniel's idea to flout their mother's orders. And they might have got away with it had Alex not been stupid enough to fall. They certainly wouldn't be in the bloody mess they're in now if, in the days, weeks, even years that followed, he had only bothered to make one simple phone call. So, just who the fuck is Alex to sit there in judgement? Hadn't Daniel run to get help, done all he possibly could? No point in getting himself killed trying to tackle those cliffs – what good would that have done? He may have done his mother an injustice – yes, guilty as charged, but Daniel wasn't the only one with a marked, fucking card.

So clever, so cunning. In those few years they'd been together, Alex had always

managed to get one over on him. Always the first to be championed, always keeping Daniel in the shadows. And through that one reckless act of machismo he'd succeeded in extending his grip over the next quarter-century of Daniel's life.

On a floral carpet a boy in a top hat takes a strip of paper. The boy's chest is heaving, not from gleeful absorption but from running. There is something he's desperate to confess. A battle rages in the theatre of his little brain, the clashing of Titans – like the battalions of soldiers that face each other across the battlefield of new toys. On one flank stands the army of compassion, its front rank of foot soldiers: shock, urgency, the need for action. Behind them, the generals: brotherly love, responsibility, courage, honesty. Across the hill, their adversaries: guilt, fear, retribution, denial, blame. An unstoppable force meeting an immovable foe.

“Have you seen Alex, dear?” his mother is asking from the kitchen. Beneath the hat Daniel's scalp tightens. He stares at his hands, watching the Mobius ring take shape before speaking his lie. The army of compassion suffers heavy losses.

“Go and check for me whether he's up in the tree house. And tell him to wash his hands. Lunch is nearly ready.”

A small advance as the enemy regroups. “I think he said he was going to the cliffs.”

The clash of weaponry becomes the clatter of kitchen utensils as his mother downs tools and appears at the doorway, wiping her hands on her apron and already untying its strings. “When? What do you mean? Daniel, look at me!” She rushes forward, squats down and grasps his shoulders. He reads her face. “What do you mean? On his own!? How many times have I told you!!”

And so she is running from the house. The scene plays out as before. Compassion is narrowly the victor, but the shackles of guilt and blame remain the child's lifelong burden.

“No. Damn you, Alex,” he breathes, “it didn't happen like that. I didn't just sit there. I got help straight away, just like I promised I would. I know what you're up to – trying to piss around with my head.”

He pushes himself off the wall and strides across to the window. With a trembling hand he pulls the scotch down from the cupboard and refills the mug. Its fire cauterised the pain enough to give him courage to pick up the phone.

“Hello?”

The note of anxiety he'd heard in the messages still infuses her voice.

“It's me,” he grunts.

“Daniel? Where have you been?”

“Yeah, I’m sorry. We went for a short trip. I had to get away. I should have said.”

“Your car wasn’t in the garage. I was worried about Alex. You know he needs complete rest.”

After a deep breath, he hears himself promising not to leave again without telling her, and says he’ll call by the next evening to explain properly. In many ways he aches to offload everything, but how to own up to what happened on those cliffs? She already thinks he’s a selfish idiot – no time to be admitting to having disobeyed his mother, failed to look out for his brother, to having conveniently forgotten the whole episode in order to wash his hands of guilt. So he says only that the trip was a short convalescence. All sightseeing and gentle strolls.

By the time the conversation is through his head is done in. She must never see him like this. In no time at all she’d have Alex out of the flat and banged up somewhere. For two weeks he’s been relying on the Cipramil tablets, but the last one was taken before they’d set off for Devon. Now he knows he urgently needs more. He swigs back a third scotch to help him think. Threadbare will be at the pool semis tomorrow. It means ringing Gulnaz again and changing their meeting to Saturday. Not good. But at least it’ll give him a chance to do a deal before he sees her.

Nervously, he picks up the phone and presses redial.

\* \* \*

Daniel’s game is atrocious. Only Threadbare rescues any hopes of a place in the final. Jerry’s support and encouragement hold fast as his workmate bungles shot after lousy shot, missing easy pots, downing nothing but whites and opponents’ colours, but the rest of the crowd are quick to switch loyalties. When it’s all over, the team gives him a thorough pasting. Daniel hangs his head and offers no defence. But once they are through, he corners Threadbare and draws him away from the bar.

“I’m worse, Freddie. Much worse. You know, the depression? You saw how it bugged up my game. I just can’t sit still. I can’t sleep. I think I’m going nuts. You remember those pills you gave me? I really need more.”

Threadbare looks doubtful. “Christ, Daniel. I don’t know what you’ve been up to ol’ son, but I’d say you need something a bit stronger than Cipramil.” He lowers his voice. “Maybe you should talk to Jerry.”

Daniel looks at him blankly. “To Jerry. Why??”

“He knows people.”

“Yeah, the fuck he does.”

Threadbare shakes his head. “No, straight up, mate. You didn’t know?”

No. He didn't know. In fact, the thought of Jerry having anything whatsoever to do with the criminal underworld – for him to put even a toe outside the law – was so laughable that Daniel can only assume Threadbare is winding him up. He snorts, pulls a face, and wanders back to the bar, where Jerry is still dissecting the game shot by shot for the longsuffering barman.

“Sorry. I need a word, Jerry.” He hadn't meant it to come out so mysteriously. Jerry agrees keenly, perhaps expecting more juicy morsels of game strategy to pick over. Daniel leads him to a far corner, well out of earshot from the rest of the group, and carefully puts his request again, quite expecting Jerry to recoil at the very subject.

For a second, Jerry stares at him, and then answers calmly, “I do have a contact. Give me twelve hours. I can sort it by lunch tomorrow. I'm afraid he's not cheap. Two hundred: one bottle, it contains about sixteen hits.”

Daniel is inclined to pinch himself. Of all people; ‘No surprises, no tidal waves Jerry’. His boss is waiting for his answer, but Daniel is too dumbfounded to respond. He had not been looking to experiment. In any case, that kind of money was quite out of the question. Jerry, though, has more to say. “I know you wouldn't ask if it wasn't important, Daniel. Compassionate leave, right? For a sick relative?” He thinks for a moment. “I'll see what I can arrange. Pay in instalments. I can deduct it from your pay packet each week.”

He pats Daniel on the shoulder. “Don't worry. Colin's checked it out on the Internet. He says it's quite safe.”

Threadbare, Jerry, and now Bladder. So, all this time Daniel has been hanging out with a ring of bloody smack-heads. He knew that dealing went on at the Millwrights: soft stuff, like dope, E's, maybe even a little speed. But all that shit just wasn't Daniel's scene. Even the Cipramil episode was a one-off. The only reason he'd accepted them in the first place was because of Scoff; because of the callous death-sentence the bastard vet had pronounced over him. For two nights Daniel hadn't dared to sleep. He'd kept an almost unbroken watch over the poor creature, convinced that their last few hours together had come. When he did put in an appearance at the pub (a key practice for another important pool match), Threadbare had been so anxious for his welfare that he'd handed over the tablets free of charge. For a few days afterwards Daniel had taken them, but as the crisis over Scoff's kidneys gradually passed so the pills were abandoned, left forgotten in his kitchen drawer. Until a fortnight ago.

“Okay,” he says. “It's a deal.”

Jerry shakes his hand and they part.

Someone a little more clued up might have been more wary of the substance Jerry slips into

his pocket the following day. They might have thought to question its origin, why the absence of labelling, why there was no accompanying leaflet listing dosages and potential side effects. And they might even have thought to consider the risks to personal safety, and moreover, to the safety of anyone in their care.

Someone might have. But that someone was not Daniel.

That evening, as arranged, he makes time to visit Gulnaz. Climbing the stone stairs, he runs again through the words he's been rehearsing all day. Tonight he must be the peacemaker. As she stands at her door, he pulls a bunch of flowers from behind his back and waves them in her face (a last-minute touch courtesy of the florists' shop below). Stepping inside her intoxicating harem, he begins to kiss her with an urgency that spells a need for sex. But Gulnaz pulls away, visibly unsettled. He's forced to hear out her telling him to 'go slow'. He has to bear her saying that she can't cope with his hot-and-cold behaviour. A trapped feeling he's had all day begins to crowd in on him. His hands are becoming clammy. Little trickles of sweat start itching his back. He needs the confidence of the old Daniel, the one who can charm a bit of skirt from garden centre to bed in under a week. Only one thing for it: the tried and tested strategy – he'll cook her a meal.

Her response is lukewarm, but affirmative.

“Okay, tomorrow lunch, then,” he insists. “Roast beef with all the trimmings. Twelve thirty.”

\* \* \*

The morning feels wrong straight from the off. He opens his eyes to unfamiliar surroundings. It still confuses him for the first few seconds, waking up in the sitting room. But today the ceiling looks lower, the walls closer. A thick fog hangs about his head. A bad case of Morning Mouth. Coloured lines have drawn themselves around his furniture and the carpet slowly ripples in gentle, nauseating waves.

He stumbles into the kitchen, knocks into the cat's water and sluices it over the floor. Two green eyes glare at him from under the table. What is this – another hunger strike? For the third day running Scoff has barely touched his food. Or some kind of perverse loyalty – Daniel himself has eaten almost nothing in all that time. Like Scoff, he just can't find the appetite. He prods the hunk of dead flesh that sits on the worktop. The thought of cooking it turns his stomach. A moat of blood encircles the meat, almost breaching the plate's shallow rim. The joint appears to float, as though twice as much again lies beneath the surface, the indent from his finger returning slowly to shape. An unnerving sight – as if the slaughter hadn't killed the beast – still it breathes. Today carries a warning. Today is an ominous

distortion of surfaces and angles and objects. Somehow he must pull himself together and get the meal prepared, the flat spruced up and everything ready for his conquest.

But there remains the question of Alex. Not a squeak out of him as yet, but just having him around spells doom for the whole venture. Time for a few new ground rules. He'll explain about Gulnaz, man-to-man. Alex will understand. Daniel throws together a light breakfast on a tray and carries it through to the bedroom. To his surprise, Alex is already out of bed, seated by the window and staring at the backyard through the bars, the crutches propped neatly against the side of the chair.

“Here. Listen, I want you to stay put today, okay – until tonight.”

He's granted one of those unintelligible replies. It hasn't escaped Daniel's attention that Alex's speech is the one thing not to have improved. How convenient; it wouldn't surprise him one bit if it was deliberate, a way of making a point: Alex stays answerable to nobody. Man-to-man doesn't bode well. Better to say nothing about Gulnaz.

“I mean it, Alex. I'm going to be busy. I won't have time to watch over you. If you do this, tonight I promise we'll watch a video or something. And tomorrow I'll take you out, round the park. Deal?”

His proposal meets with the most chilling of looks. Recently, Alex's eyes have begun to make Daniel's flesh crawl. Daniel knows when he can push his brother and when he can't. He withdraws without further word and leaves him to his breakfast. That clawing sense of claustrophobia is back. His hands are shaking as he begins to season the joint and lift it into the roasting tin. It isn't only Alex who refuses to behave. At some point the pilot light must have gone out. Only the strong smell of gas finally raises the alarm. Even then, Daniel has the matchbox opened inside the oven before pausing to consider the wisdom in that moment of a naked flame. After flinging open every window and door of the flat he tries again. The first match fails to catch – and the second, the shakes so bad now that he can barely bring match head and strike zone together. With a whoosh, the oven lights on the third attempt, but his temples are thumping; the sweat from his hair stings his eyes. Perhaps that's why he turns to the vodka – almost unprecedented at ten thirty in the morning. By the time the beef is in and his attention turned to the potatoes, Daniel has pretty much lost the plot. Sod the meal, he's beyond caring now. Either it'll be edible or it won't. There'll either have sex or they won't. If they do, it'll be no thanks to Alex. If they don't, it'll all be Alex's doing. Daniel has the strangest sense that Alex has taken control of his movements as well as his thoughts – the knife in his hand that pares away the potato skins, leaving them creamy-white and slithery, could at any moment turn upon his own flesh and peel it back to the same weeping,

translucence beneath. He fancies himself stretching out a hand and lowering it onto the blue flame of the gas hob, Alex all the while willing it with those menacing eyes from the corner of his room. Alex, jealous of his affair with Gulnaz, no doubt coveting her, wanting what is rightfully Daniel's.

Great bubbles jostle each other around the base of the saucepan as he scoops in the hunks of potato, water jumping out across the cooker at every splash, sizzling its way down the sides of the pan, leaving starch trails in its wake, the flames tickled yellow by its touch. For five minutes Daniel stares into the pot. He can smell the starch, feel the warmed air rising, see the thickening water; his mouth salivates but without hunger.

He fails to notice the movement behind him. The figure emerging from the bedroom simply doesn't register. And the fixed gaze that drills into the back of his head is deflected by the wall of concentration needed just to carry the pan from the stove to the sink. There could not be a worse time to call out than this. Nobody could calculate their timing with more deadly precision. And nobody could react more catastrophically than Daniel.

As Alex's cry shatters the silence, so Daniel's wrist flicks upwards. The water in the pan sloshes forward over the handle, splashes his forearm and triggers the instinct to let go. Impossibly slowly, as though giving ample time to escape it, the pan falls and strikes the edge of the sink and showers its contents over Daniel's stomach and crotch.

The scream must be all of three octaves outside his normal range. For a moment, he just stares down at himself, arms apart and hands opened like he's bragging over a catch. His scream was one of shock, and the shock his brief analgesic. But a nerve-splitting, flesh-stabbing pain racks him suddenly, the pain of a thousand potato peelers stripping him from belly to knee. Then he's a mad thing, tearing at his shirt and trousers to remove the steaming cloth, standing glistening pink over the sink and heaping handfuls of water at himself. Expletives explode like grenades into the air.

"The phone! Get me the fucking phone!! Shit, shit, shit. Now! I need it now! Alex – you useless heap of shit – not tomorrow fucking morning..."

Like stepping wet from a shower to retrieve a forgotten towel, he totters naked across the kitchen, petrified of creasing any part of his torso. His shaking hand fumbles with the phone and stabs at the numbers.

"(Hurry up. Hurry up, damn you). Hello!? Hello, yeah, 'course it's me. You gotta come over, *now*. Never mind 'early'. I'm fucking injured here – really bad. Alex just tried to kill me! No – I'm fucking *serious*. I'm really badly burned." Just hearing his own words sends him further into a state of hysteria. "What? What?? Water! Boiling water all down my front. Yeah,

yeah I did that. No of course not for *ten minutes*. Uhu? Really? Okay, but hurry up!!”

He slams down the phone and staggers through to the shower, shivering violently. Gulnaz’s first-aid instructions didn’t actually include knocking back a half bottle of scotch, but then, even Nurse Gulnaz couldn’t begin to imagine the pain, especially once those needle-sharp jets begin pricking into his skin. The water pressure literally strips away a whole layer. He has to watch as little rolls of flesh just slither down his legs, past the hideous lobster slung between. He thinks he might pass out. Desperate to stay with it, he swigs hard at the bottle before unscrewing the showerhead. Heat such as he’s never imagined defies the spouting water, springing back to the surface the instant it passes. It seems impossible for flesh to go on burning for so long. He lays himself gingerly onto the cold metal of the bathtub, takes the hose between his knees and leaves it to pour across his whole belly.

By the time help arrives at the door, the scotch is finished and Daniel semiconscious.

\* \* \*

He stares up at his ceiling, shifts his weight and grimaces. The headache from hell should have kicked in by now after all that drink. Instead, he’s aware only of a weird ‘out-of-body’ numbness. Shock, perhaps. Maybe the effect of Jerry’s potion. Or just a debilitating tiredness. What he desperately craves now is sleep. Not another night of mental torture, but sleep, deep and dreamless, in all its merciful release.

It is tempting but irrational to blame Jerry. Sooner or later, something like this was bound to happen, even without the drug. The cramped conditions, his exhaustion, Alex becoming such a free spirit. Confined together in this tiny, cluttered flat, an accident of some kind was all but inevitable. No doubt Gulnaz could have told him that, and Prentice, and the nurse up at A&E. He wonders whether Gulnaz had seen it coming right from the outset. Maybe that was why she’d insisted on home-helpers and wooden spoons and door handles with blunt edges. But did she appreciate just how much it was her fault? She must have seen just how dangerous Alex was becoming. Or was she so blown away by his progress that it blinded her to the obvious? Alex’s determination to master the crutches and charge about the place, not the least bit bothered by the knocks and tumbles, only too happy to be hoisted to his feet and let loose again. He was a time-bomb; an accident just waiting to happen. And even trained nurse Gulnaz had failed to spot it.

But then again, what she didn’t know, and what Daniel is now sure of beyond any reasonable doubt, is that what took place today was no bloody accident at all.

What happened after she’d found him in the shower remains something of a blur. He remembers being corseted in cling film and led in his dressing gown to the ambulance. Then

a lot of sitting around in A&E. Then losing his rag with the nurse, not so much because of the pain, or because of the long wait – he actually failed to notice the time passing, and the breathing space gave the alcohol a chance to pass through his system; he could at least stand when he was called. No, it was the nurse's summing up that had so pissed him off, telling him he was lucky. Why do people always say that to someone who's just been randomly picked out of a crowd and had great misfortune heaped upon them? Why do people always say, 'It could have been worse'? Well, okay, in theory anything '*could have been worse*'. Tell the poor bugger who gets knocked down by a bus that he *could* have been hit by a meteorite at the same moment, or swallowed up by an earthquake. Tell Mrs George that instead of just falling ill with cancer she *could* have caught double pneumonia and had a heart attack on the same day. Of course Daniel's burns *could* have been worse. Had he not turned off the gas a little before taking the pan from the ring; had the sink been ever so slightly nearer to the stove; had he been wearing pyjamas or, heaven forbid, nothing at all instead of jeans and tea-shirt, then of course the water would have been that bit hotter when it poached his cock – burning right through instead of just leaving it pink as a lobster. But if that nurse expected gratitude then she shouldn't have warned him that pissing might make him cry. She most definitely should not talk about luck after instructing him to avoid sex for three weeks.

Three weeks. Three bloody weeks! Maybe that was it. Alex's intention all along – why he'd chosen that moment to jump him. Because the stupid jealous bastard couldn't bear to have his weaker, cowardly, unpopular, unloved twin enjoying a good humping when he himself was just an impotent dick on crutches.

Time to shift again. The options are seriously limited when you're forced to lie on your back. A coffee table straddles his hips, draped in sheets and blankets – an improvised tent that cocoons him. One of Gulnaz's inspirations. She hadn't even come with him to the hospital. Someone, she'd said, was needed to watch over Alex.

So much rebuilding to do before they can properly connect again.

His mind is wandering. He'd looked like supermarket pork in that cling film. Sleep is coming at last. Did anyone eat the roast? Is he dreaming now? Merciful sleep. The intimacy they'd shared has slipped through his fingers like sand. Almost certainly his fault. These things always were. Too many words left unsaid. Not enough attention given to the little things. Everything assumed and never asked. She had waited for him to come home. Her touch was tender. But so are his wounds. This burning invades every movement, every detail. How did he become stretched out beneath a scorching Sahara sun, unable to find shade? Who are these people running? Someone is shouting 'fire!' They've trapped him at the end of

a corridor; his belly is crushed against a searing-hot fire-door. He's sinking beneath the weight of dying bodies, unable to breathe, darkness closing in. Body and pain separating. A ball of pain that sleeps beside him throughout the long night.

~

The world outside has come alive by the time Daniel wakes. Everyone is busy, busy. Doors are slamming, car engines firing, people shouting, others laughing. Somewhere there's a baby screaming. The thump, thump, thump of house music shakes the floor above. The clock shows 12:00. Either it has stopped working again or he's overslept big time. He vaguely recalls being roused earlier by Alex rummaging about in the kitchen. More crutch athletics. But now his own flat is idle, merely a sponge for everyone else's noise.

Yesterday now seems like a dream. The dreams themselves feel more vivid and real. But there's no denying the contraption over his bed. The blankets rise from his shoulders into a pyramid above his waist – like some humungous erection. The bitter irony; heaven help him if he got one of those right now. There's also no denying the pain: violently hot and already worsening. He has prescribed painkillers in the kitchen. 12:01. His clock is okay.

Bracing himself for imminent torture, Daniel slowly eases back the blankets and raises his upper body. The crease line across his stomach terrifies him the most. The dressing reaches up that far; it's quite possible that the wound does too. He draws his body backwards to free himself from beneath the coffee table and tentatively swings both feet down onto the floor. Each movement brings its own unique stab of pain, as though some joker has filled the bandages with razorblades, but so far he's not howling into the air like yesterday. It's going to be fun getting dressed. He has no trousers big enough to accommodate this great strap-on cushion. Perhaps Gulnaz could steal him a maternity dress from the hospital. Oh, the guys down at the Millwrights would have a field day if they could see this.

For now though, he must improvise with a loosely tied dressing gown. Stiffly, he crosses the room. Walking isn't easy, the burns spread across his groin and around the tops of his legs. The skin has become tight and unflexing; the dressing chafes like coarse sandpaper. Before he can face looking in on Alex he must find those pills and wash them down with a shot or two of a more familiar painkiller. He's struck by the kitchen. Yesterday's disaster zone. Ground Zero. The bulldozers have already been in, the forensics done their job and left. Gulnaz must have been busy during those hours he'd spent in A&E. She's cleaned and tidied around the worktops. The joint of meat turns up in the fridge, perfectly roasted, sliced and covered with tin foil. The potatoes, last seen tumbling in a boiling cascade down his front and scattering across the floor, are now bagged up and safely despatched to the bin.

He feels kind of sorry for her. As if it wasn't enough having a crowd of senile delinquents to deal with each day, now she has not just one, but two extra patients on her

hands. It's what he's become to her now: a patient. And she to him little more than a home-help. But then, so much has changed in the past few days. Deep down, she'll still be the same Gulnaz – somewhat bruised, but nothing that couldn't be sorted in time with gentleness and affection. And him? The same Daniel who'd savoured Persian delicacies, who'd made love tenderly in the dark? The one who'd walked hand in hand across hillsides and grinned inanely at a camera? The Daniel who'd vowed to control his drinking and sat in confessional groups with strangers? No. It would take more than gentleness and affection to bring that Daniel back. The package she has before her now is quite altered; a frightened and crippled shadow of his former self, someone who has finally woken up to his past. Hasn't she been fishing all along for someone with a sickness to be healed? Well, fine and dandy – that's exactly the haul she's gone and landed.

She said something about calling round in her lunch break. Maybe she's already here, in with Alex. Standing at the doorway to the bedroom, Daniel looks back across the kitchen, the scene from Alex's viewpoint – Daniel with his back to him at the cooker, but turning now towards the window with the saucepan in his right hand. Terrorist attack or tragic miscalculation? Why would Alex have cried out like that at such a dangerous moment? It did sound somewhat like a warning. Maybe Scoff was under Daniel's feet, maybe the cupboard door beneath the sink was half open and about to trip him up. But it also sounded ominously like a 'boo!' And what did Alex do next – during those vital minutes that Daniel spent pulling off his clothes and splashing his burns with cold water? Plenty of time even for a cripple to cross the room and bring him the phone. But not Alex. When Daniel begged him for help he just stood there, frozen in the doorway, a most extraordinary expression on his face. Not shock – well yes, shock – but more than that. Hard to put into words; a kind of look of recognition. Like someone taken aback at seeing their sordid little scheme actually come to fruition.

The nurse's words shape themselves on his lips, telling him just how serious the injuries might have been. He remembers turning off the potatoes, all set to drain the water but choosing at the last moment to take out the roasting tin first, a little time spent searching for the oven glove. For some reason the details need unpicking and retelling in order to keep them true. Because really that was the delay that had saved him. That, and the substance he'd knocked back the night before, generally slowing him down. Otherwise the results of drenching himself in a panful of truly boiling water would have been catastrophic. Full-depth burns, the nurse had said, needing skin grafts. The very thought of it forces him to run again through those crucial decisions.

That anyone would wish such harm upon their own twin beggared belief. Daniel's fury yesterday, which had him shrieking down the phone and hurling abuse around the room, was purely instinctive; not a reaction to the deeper implications of what had happened. But for the first time now he senses real fear – something truly nightmarish about being targeted by someone on the face of it so benign. He sees that he's cornered. No-one is going to believe that Alex set out to hurt him like this. To think of the hate that must be raging inside that twisted mind – a kind of insanity. Daniel could rationalise all he liked about the two of them sharing responsibility for Alex's fall, for having disobeyed their mother, for all her suffering. But such intense hatred surely heeded no argument. So, what is he saying, that Alex has become a monster? Daniel stands rigid at his door, outstretched fingers playing over the handle. He sees a child driven crazy by the trauma of his fall, turned mute and psychotic by the cruel baiting of the sea, rescued secretly and locked away in an institution, the family never told. A child prone to fits and cataleptic episodes, now escaped to wreak revenge on the man upon whom he's focused the blame for a lifetime of suffering. Is that what waits through that door, a brother out to destroy him? And fresh from his first assault, does Daniel now just walk in as though nothing has changed? Does he play this psycho's game?

He turns the handle. What other choice does he have?

In the bedroom the curtains are still drawn. The bedclothes are pulled back. Alex sits by the pillow with the flats of his hands on his knees, gazing at the floor. When Daniel walks in he looks up slowly. A monster with blazing eyes, horns and three-pronged tail? No, just his brother, slight, hunched, voiceless and frail. And that look on his face; neither one of atonement nor one of vengeance. Alex simply looks ill. On his pyjamas and on the sheets around him Daniel can see streaks of yellow-brown liquid, a pool of it further down the bed. The telltale stench catches his nose at the same moment. He takes a step backwards.

“Oh Jesus, Alex, have you puked up, or something?”

Alex shifts delicately, but the smell suggests he may have parted with more than the contents of his stomach. Revolted though he is, Daniel is buoyed up by the sudden restoration of power and his chance to get even. Alex will have to sit with his mess until someone is ready to clean him up. And Daniel gets to choose when and whether it'll happen.

“Love to help, but can't bend, see. Just think of the pain.” He draws aside the folds of the dressing gown. Alex's reaction pleases him. “Unless of course you beg me. No, not like that; let me hear you say it. Go on, I bet you can. The doctor said there was nothing wrong with you. All in your mind. Oh, didn't you know that? Stand up and say it: ‘Daniel, please clean me up’. *Say it*, damn you!”

Alex's eyes rise again limply, like those of a beaten dog, then fall to the ground. Punishing him much further suddenly loses its appeal. Like it had done in the cemetery after dragging him off the gravestone. Maybe just leave him to stew in his own filth for an hour or so. To remind him who's boss.

Some fifteen minutes later, the hallway rattles to the sound of key searching for lock and mating with barrel. Gulnaz's calling-card feet-wiping follows, and then her voice. Always, 'It's me,' she calls. Her protocol for not intruding at an awkward moment gives Daniel time enough to pull open the drawer and dig out the spare bedding. He can intercept her in the kitchen before she has a chance to reach Alex.

"Hey, look at you, up and about," she cries, with a smile Daniel hasn't seen in days. "How are you; did you manage to sleep?"

"Yeah, I coped. The burns are torture though."

She opens her arms and hugs him very carefully, leaning forward to leave an archway between their lower halves. In parting, she clocks the significance of the bundle he's carrying.

"Oh, here, let me. You can't go doing that."

"It's Alex. He's had a mishap. He's been sick on his bed. And crapped himself, I think. I just found him. Of course I immediately..."

She's in role at once.

"Okay, don't worry. It's probably just eating too much after having starved himself for so long. Or maybe because of yesterday. He was terribly upset after seeing you get hurt like that. Last night it took me ages to console him. Leave him to me. Just sit tight, and I'll be with you in a minute."

So, Alex needed consoling. Interesting. Perhaps the injuries weren't serious enough for him. Or a genuine accident after all? Alone again at the crime scene, if that's what it is, Daniel lowers himself tenderly onto the stool and notices Scoff, all curled up in his basket.

"How the hell you can just sleep there with all this going on."

Yes, a cat's life was easy alright. Give them food, shelter and a warm knee, lots of fuss, and their life is complete; no questions, no remorse, no pity, just blameless instinct. Next time around he'll insist on being a cat. Preferably a deaf one like Scoff.

Gulnaz is leading Alex through to the bathroom. The bedroom smells of air freshener. She's unbelievable – they don't even have any air freshener. She's changed the sheets and made the bed in under a minute. She'll have Alex cleaned up and in fresh pyjamas faster than Daniel could tie his brother's shoelaces. She's a natural. He is not.

Something in her manner has changed today. Compared with those awful phone

messages, and her mood when they'd met on Saturday, she's being upbeat, jovial and high-spirited. Even yesterday, she'd been slick and efficient, but hardly what he would describe as warm. In short, she's being *nice*. Too nice. The kind of nice intended to soften someone up. There's something she's about to hit him with, he can tell. And all these pleasantries are just a preparation. It might be wise to prepare himself too.

"I'm putting the kettle on," he calls to her. "Tea for you, yeah?"

"Please. Black. Won't be long."

He reaches for the bowl to prospect for mugs, only to find the pool emptied and dredged. No crockery anywhere to be seen.

"Where d'you put the mugs?"

She's following Alex back to his room. She points to the wall unit.

"There, in the cupboard over the kettle."

Gulnaz has been even busier than he'd realised. But what she's done makes complete sense. Coffee, tea, sugar, biscuits, mugs overhead – kettle beneath, over the fridge – pedal bin moved into the corner. Maximum efficiency. Someone could be superglued to the spot and still prepare themselves an entire breakfast. Only, on this occasion his drink requires a finishing touch, even if it does mean taking three steps to the left. Thirty percent vodka and seventy percent coffee should be enough to soften whatever blow she's about to deliver. As one hand stretches upwards for the drinks cupboard the other settles on the handle of the drawer below. He has a word or two to say to Jerry about the side effects, but Christ, the buzz when it first kicks in. Most of Saturday had been spent in a state of heightened awareness; sounds, smells, colours, textures all bursting with meaning. And a euphoria that for a few blissful hours at a stretch could blow away all of life's little headaches. For him to have seen the poetry in the felling of his greengage tree, the symbolism of its fall from grace so powerful that he'd been reduced to tears. For him to have heard his mother's voice at night, soft and forgiving, and for his father's voice for once to be gagged. Any substance that could achieve all that was worth the consequences.

Gulnaz must have crossed behind again while he was retrieving the pipette. Lucky, given her fondness for reorganising his things, that he'd taken the precaution of decanting Jerry's elixir into the cough linctus bottle. Hopefully she didn't notice him spiking his coffee. The look of sunshine on her face as he carries their drinks through to the lounge suggests she hadn't, but the sweetness and smiles are a worry in themselves.

"He seems fine now. He's happy to rest for a while. I don't think he can have slept much. And, guess what, he... spoke to me."

“He did what!?” Before she can elaborate, Daniel has thrust her drink into her hands and is making for the door. “I bloody told him...”

“Hey, steady on. It was just one word. I almost missed it.”

“Well, what did he say? Did it give any clue to...”

“My name. He said my name. Just softly under his breath.”

Her name. After all Daniel has done for him. Given all that Daniel is to him. He says *her* name before anything else.

Gulnaz sips her tea. “Listen, I can’t stay long. I’m late already. But I have some news. Do you mind closing the door?”

Ah. This is it. This is where she tells him they’re through, that she and Prentice have shacked up together, or that she’s pregnant, or that the police have been round. But she mustn’t. Not yet. There hasn’t been enough time for anything to knock out his system.

“You’ve done a great job here, you know. I’m sorry about being cross with you over the trip you took. What you did was probably the best thing you could have done for him. He’s got so much better over the last few days. The thing this morning, his upset stomach, I’m sure it’s nothing.”

Surely this isn’t where she finishes. No, it can’t be – she said she had news.

“And you’ve done all this to the flat, sacrificed so much. But now that Alex is on the mend, I’m wondering how you’ll cope with all the extra demands. The flat is so tiny. So many hazards. I mean, what happened yesterday – you could have been horribly disfigured.”

So that was it. A very longwinded way of telling him he’s incompetent.

“I coped. It was a chance in a million. It’s not going to happen again.”

“I just thought – now with you being in need of looking after yourself – it’s going to be a lot harder for you over the next week or so.”

“And?”

Gulnaz lowers her voice. “The nursing home I’ve been working in, Dr. Prentice has explained the situation to them and they’re happy to have Alex – just for a few days, until you’re better. They won’t charge a lot. And I’d be there to see that everything is fine.”

It’s kicking in now, at last. He can feel the first surge of power from the caffeine and the vodka dismantling his defences. Nothing yet from Jerry’s magic potion.

“But I suggest we don’t tell Alex just yet. We don’t want to unsettle him any more than we have to. And maybe I should be...”

*“Prentice did what?”*

She purses her lips. “Calm down, Daniel, please.”

“Who the hell does he think he is?”

“That’s not fair.”

The sudden escalation in his own aggression unnerves him. He’s not sure he can keep a lid on it. “Did you put him up to this? I told you I can manage. You had no bloody right...” He’s like a pilot flying into enemy fire, losing control. He wants to eject. She’s losing it too.

“Oh for God’s sake, Daniel, stop. Just look at yourself. You finished off a whole bottle of whisky in that bath. That’s not coping. Anything might have happened.”

She’s spitting tracer bullets at the windshield. There’s black smoke filling the cockpit, the alarms ring out in the darkness. His guts tell him they’re plummeting to earth.

“Did I tell you? Or perhaps *he* told you during your cosy chat. He did it deliberately, you know. Crept up behind me and gave me the fucking fright of my life just when I had the pan in my hand.”

“Oh don’t be ridiculous!”

Flames on all sides, the ocean rising fast through the parting clouds. She’s getting to her feet. She’s going to leave him to his own private conflagration.

“Yeah, get the hell out, why don’t you? Whenever things get too hot.”

Pursuing her now, back to the kitchen.

“You’ve been drinking again. I know you have. Or you wouldn’t talk to me like that. And I can smell it. You promised me. It’s pathetic.”

She’s in the hall grabbing her coat. Waves, rocks, the hull of a warship, terrified sailors gazing upwards, crowds scattering, screaming, a great shadow spreading across the deck. Gulnaz has gone. Gulnaz the traitor. Conniving, devious, conspiring Gulnaz. They’ve planned this together, the two of them. She wants Alex for herself. The deafening fireball as Daniel’s half-empty coffee mug shatters against the kitchen wall. He’s running through the burning wreckage, fighting his way towards his brother.

“Talk to me! Fuck you, talk to me! You talked to *her*. You’re in this together. I’ve got to know. It’s driving me fucking mad. You’re out to hurt me, why? What is it you think I’ve done, huh? HUH? What’s going on in that fucked up little brain of yours?” He has Alex by the collar now, the pyjamas rucked up tight around his armpits. “You went over the cliff. Then what? What!? Someone found you. Where did they take you? Why are you back here? What do you want from me? What? WHAT!?”

A terrified Alex cowers in his hands, dribbling, shaking, more than likely soiling himself again. It comes that close. The beating. But something stops Daniel short. You don’t *ever* hit a dumb animal. He lets go, buckles, feels the tearing across his belly, turns on his heels, knees

giving way, falling forward and sinking to all fours, crawling across the bedroom carpet onto the hard kitchen floor towards the toilet. There are fragments of broken mug impaling themselves into his hands and knees. Ahead of him, above his left shoulder, the impact site, the brown spray pattern already weeping downwards from the tips. And beneath, the three largest pieces – the handle, the base and a section of the rim. The opening line of a filthy joke. They lie strewn over a wicker basket, half buried among the folded blankets. So unlikely an image, Scoff lying there, blissfully unmoved by events, unwoke by a rain of debris.

The dawning horror of realisation. There is no rise and fall to the fur around the ribs, no gentle whistling of air through those parted black lips. The half-opened eye has no milky screen to shutter it. White-tipped paws and crooked whiskers do not twitch in time with the nimble leaping of dreams. No stretching of limbs, no splaying of claws, no chomp-chomp to wet a dried palate. Beneath Daniel's unwilling fingertips there is no warmth, no pounding little heart.

Evidently, Scoff has been dead for hours.

The shock again numbs all physical pain as no drug, no wizardry of medicine, no nurse's touch ever could. Daniel is squatting on his heels now, and cradling the lifeless ball to his chest. He should have known it was odd. Like any cat, Scoff would sooner settle himself down onto a heap of junk mail, a cluttered tabletop, a creased shirt, a vacant patch of window ledge, than snuggle into the warm blankets of his official bedding. Scoff had gone there for one purpose only. And that was to die.

The din of the past few minutes has died too. The whole world seems to be holding its breath. Just an engine somewhere revving. Then with it a single note. Then another. And a third. As he lowers the creature back into its blanket, Daniel gives way to a cry that would melt a heart of ice. Scoff wasn't just his cat. Scoff was the feelings for his mother that he could not express. Scoff was the companionship with his brother denied by fate. Scoff returned the affections never shown by his father, and the trust never earned of his friends. Scoff never criticised, judged, deceived, betrayed. Scoff made demands that were fair, demands that gave Daniel's life fulfilment and purpose. Scoff made it worth his while getting up in the morning and going through the motions of another day. Scoff made life bearable.

And now Scoff was dead.

Through a distortion of tears he sees above him a figure framed with light. An unearthly, four-legged figure with curved back, broad hind legs, the forelegs thin and narrowing. A creature wearing his own face, rocking gently from side to side. Daniel watches his lips move and sees the look of pity – the same look he'd seen up on the cliffs.

“Ssss-o-rrrr-y.”

Alex said that. He really said it. Bearing down, hunched over his crutches and gazing into the face of his brother, he actually said he was sorry.

## Put a mark on one side

He was, when all is said and done, just a cat. And a very old one at that. Scoff's life had been full and pampered, and at least he'd died peacefully in his sleep. An hour has passed and shock has given way to dull pain. The two brothers stare in private, thoughtful silence, Daniel with his back to the sink, Alex, in the wheelchair now, beside him. Their sightlines meet at a bundle in the corner, wrapped in a blanket in the wicker basket, always Scoff's least favoured retreat, now his chosen deathbed.

"I'll get a box," Daniel mutters.

He's remembered there's a stack of them out the back. A shame they couldn't bury Scoff in the garden; make a little plaque and place it in a flowerbed somewhere. To have laid Scoff to rest in Sedgefield Court would have been a most fitting end. The flat and the cat belonged together. When Daniel had moved in eight years ago he'd wondered about the cat-flap someone had fitted into the kitchen window. A little over a week later, in saunters Scoff (though nameless as yet), takes a drink from the washing-up bowl, picks his way across the worktop and singles out the pedal bin as his step down to the floor, all the while Daniel watching from the table. Scoff had noticed him then, mewed confidently, stuck his tail into the air and crashed a wet nose into Daniel's ankles. The name came over the next few hours, seeing off more obvious contenders like Orlando, Geri, Marmalade, Tiptree. He hit on the name Scoff after the animal, clearly starving, had devoured every last morsel in the house. Whether the abandoned pet of a previous tenant, or merely an exile from somewhere up the street, Scoff made No. 1 Sedgefield Court his home from that day onwards and Daniel his adoptive parent. Though the small-print in the tenancy agreement forbade it, the landlord never once passed comment on the matter.

But the flats have no garden and no flowerbeds. Short of Daniel smashing up the concrete, or opening up a drain, there is nowhere here for Scoff's burial. A cardboard box handed over to a smugly self-righteous vet are about the only funeral rites he can expect. Daniel is doing his best now to fit his coat around his bloated waistline. He knows he must look ridiculous, but he won't be outside for long. He slips through the front door, across the lobby and round to the rear of the building. Heavy rain has fallen again, but the boxes are piled up beneath a Perspex roof against the wall and most have avoided the wet. Something not too large or flat would be ideal. There, at the back. As he pulls out the box and turns around, his brain is momentarily flipped upside down. A flash of lightning shoots through the

yard, the three-storey tower block is pulled upwards and sprung back. Someone is giving his senses the full CGI. But it's passed in a second. Delayed shock, probably. Again though, having made it back inside, a ripple sweeps up the staircase; there's a funnelling of the corridor. Daniel closes his eyes and waits for the world to stop pitching. Okay, he knows now what this is. It happened like this on Saturday. The effect had quickly faded, giving way to that wonderful state of happiness. With luck, it will help him through the next two hours without going to pieces, and help take away the pain. Because no way is he going to the vet's dressed like this. Nothing else for it, those wretched bandages are going to have to come off.

Standing otherwise naked before the mirror, Daniel slowly unties the retaining tapes around his waist. For all he knows, his stomach might just fall away, his manhood come off in his hands. Bit by bit, he peels back the dressing, starting at the top left and easing down towards his right leg. At first the skin is normal, then pink, then orangey-brown. By the time he reaches his pubic hair there's an area the size of a plate covering his abdomen, the inner circle peppered with blisters, mostly crusted over now and oozing a foul yellow liquid. The dressing could easily be mistaken for a baby's soiled nappy, the liquid having soaked into the sterile pad and congealed around it like wax. Thankfully, his genitals and thighs are spared the worst – the splash patterns are more irregular, patchy, the burns not deep enough to have stripped the skin. It's merciful to have the air again down there against the searing heat that even now draws to the surface, but tender, dreadfully tender – impossible to entertain any idea of putting clothing directly against the wound. The cling film comes to mind: wrap himself a few times after applying that tub of aloe-vera they'd given him, wear something loose and pop a few painkillers and he might just make it through the afternoon.

When he presents himself at Alex's door an hour later, showered and trussed, outwardly there is little sign of anything untoward. He may just pull this off, so long as he doesn't move too suddenly, or let anyone get close enough to suffer a noseful of the foul-smelling gel.

"I'm off now," he says. "No idea how long they'll keep me there. In case I'm not back for dinner, I've left you a tray of cold meat and mashed carrots. There's sliced bread on the table. If you're still hungry, I got you some Spar trifles. Just make sure you keep away from the cooker."

He closes Alex's door, takes two painkillers, and pours himself a glass of water. He then drops carefully to his knees, scoops up the cardboard box and heads out into the street.

The waiting room smells of antiseptic and wet dog hair. The floor is hard and grimy, the

bench seats unforgiving and placed against all four walls, forcing everyone to confront each other. But for some reason everyone has chosen only to stare only at him. They've been at it from the moment he sat down. Maybe it's the way he winces all the time, maybe the stench of the gel. Since ignoring them hasn't worked, he decides to out-stare them instead.

In one corner there's a scruffy couple with a cardboard box like his own. At first just a beak, then a whole duck's head pokes out through the top flaps. Who in their right mind would want to keep a duck as a pet? Away to their left, an old lady sits legs apart, exposing her slip. A little dog yaps around her ankles. A nasty, whingeing child runs back and forth across the room, ignoring the monotones of her mother – 'Kylie, siddown. Siddown, Kylie.' No sign of their pet – theirs must be the one currently under the knife. The vet should have hung onto the three of them while he had the chance and had them all put down. Directly opposite Daniel, perched on the very edge of the bench, jeans and shirt far too tight, squats a thug with tattoos, his slavering Rottweiler staring up cross-eyed and quizzical between the man's stubby legs. It's the old cliché of people choosing pets that exactly mirror themselves.

All these animals look too full of life to merit any place here, but Daniel has no desire to start a conversation about ailments. His own box sits silently at odds with the rest of the room. Its interlocked flaps surround a small rectangle of open space; a skylight; an air hole. Curled up inside, freed from all this, Scoff needs neither air nor light. Had he been alive, the poor thing would be out of his wits by now. Dogs always terrified him. So did children and old ladies – and being caged up in strange places, with or without skylight. On the day Daniel had brought him in over his kidneys, getting him into a cat box had been deeply traumatic for the pair of them. Such cowards, both. All creatures become fearful as age overtakes them. Infirmary breeds mistrust. Before Scoff became ill there was no enemy too fierce to take on. Daniel surprises himself with a faint smile. He was Scoff the merciless when it came to attacking a drinking straw or a bird's feather. Every night (the mad hour it came to be called), he would scurry under the bed and wait for Daniel to flick the prey from side to side beneath the eiderdown that reached to the floor. Each time Daniel snatched back his hand, a ginger-white paw would pop out from the shadows, claws extended, faster than the eye could see – 'Dap!' to the left, 'Dap!' to the right. And away again. Then with the passing months the game was demanded less often, played with less verve, exhausted more quickly. The mad hour shrank to minutes and then to nothing. For the last year he'd really done very little but sleep and eat, in the last few days only sleep – a life lived through dreams alone.

So sleep now little friend and dream eternal. By stroking the dimpled cardboard Daniel can almost feel the touch of the fur within, his eyes following his fingers and gradually

coming to rest on the writing on the sides of the box. 'Whiskas Supermeat' it says. How the hell had he missed that? But the irony is too pointed to raise a second smile. Things have happened while his mind has been travelling. It's nearly his turn; only the Rottweiler and his squinting dog remain. The room has turned stuffy and hot. The walls crush in on him. His whole body burns. And now they too are gone; all of a sudden he is the only one left and the door to the consulting room is opening, someone is speaking his name. They're helping him to his feet – why? Is he so blatantly incapable? Maybe he faltered back there for a moment. Ah, thank mercy, it's her – the girl with the nice voice who'd once recommended chicken or fish when Scoff was refusing his diet food. She looks sexier in her uniform than Gulnaz does in hers, the turquoise tunic stops just above her knees. She's shapely. There are daggers jabbing at his crotch and he fears the swelling but can't stop it. She's trying to ignore the messages he's putting out; she's adopting her 'sympathetic in your time of bereavement' voice. Something about a pet cemetery if he would like their number, or simple 'In Remembrance' cards available in dog, cat, rabbit, horse, bird, goldfish, or blank for the owner's own favourite photo. Her voice sounds unreal and the words absurd. *Cards for a goldfish???* She's telling him she understands, and asks him just to leave the box on the examining table (and the cheque at the desk). They will make all the arrangements.

And he's back on the street. Which street? Where did he park the car? Where can he get a drink? It's not yet six o'clock, the Millwrights won't be open, and in any case he needs to be incognito for a while.

And so he begins walking. The daggers are hard to bear, but there's a lightness in his stride all the same. Scoff is dispatched. The end of an era. The night air has turned chilly. No more rain tonight – it's a clear sky already. Streets busy with homecoming. Is he coming home? Maybe. Home to his attacker, if Gulnaz hasn't already taken him away. How ironic having his weapon, his *pistol*, decommissioned by a son of the military. Yeah, well Alex's own equipment is well and truly caput for the foreseeable future too. Fuck him. It's all they're allowed to do these days, the Armed Forces: disarm people.

"Gotta make sure they're 'armless,'" he sniggers.

No proper fighting. Their old man would never have approved. Who gives a shit – Gulnaz can have him. Chuck Alex in among that crowd at the care home. Let the moustache woman, Mrs Shunting-Steamers, get her hands on him. Forget it old lady, you'll get a better ride from your dead husband than from this guy. And think of the confusion. All of them mistaking him for Daniel –

"More games. More games!" he shouts across the street in a withered voice. After all,

these days Alex has started to look more like Daniel than Daniel himself. Certainly a good deal healthier. “Bring the tea and sandwiches. Music, young man!” He mimics the old lady’s mad eyes and manic dancing. “What a charming young fellow. Let’s have a sing-along. Happy New Year! I told you they were stepping out together.”

Why hadn’t he seen the funny side of this before – his injuries: that great fat baby’s nappy. What’s that fetish called – infantism, infinitism? Anyway, men in diapers getting off on having their bums wiped. Oh, it hurts when he laughs, but this is too funny. When he sneaked out to get the box, wrapped just in a coat, with that huge bulge and his bare legs showing. “I’m a nappy flasher. I’m a fucking perv!”

He’s attracting attention. People are looking, giggling. Sorry, sorry, but it’s funny you see. Profound. It’s all connected. Take that box. That was no accident. That’s fate that is. That’s what that is. A box of cat food for a cat who refused to eat. Get it? What was it again, Kitekat? No, must have been Felix, or Katkins (is that a cat food or just those dangly bits on trees?).

Shame it wasn’t Iams.

“IamScoff.”

Oh, that’s hysterical. The tears are flowing now.

“No, I got it,” he shrieks. “They’ve even got a big ginger cat on their box. ‘Go Cat! Fucking brilliant. ‘Go Cat Senior’. The perfect fucking epitaph.”

Daniel has absolutely no idea where he is.

In fact he’s standing right in front of the Millwrights.

And it’s just opening its doors.

But he doesn’t know it.

And Jerry is approaching from the far end of the road. There’s a fat man with him.

But he doesn’t know that either.

“Hello, Daniel. Glad to see you looking so much happier.”

Well, there you go. See. Connected. Destiny. The very place he wants to be and the very guy he wants to see. He’s a poet n’ he know it.

Like a thespian walking the boards Daniel begins, “Happier, Yes, I’m laughing into the eyes of fate,” but he can hardly spit out the rest with grinning. “Cos my cat just died and cos someone’s trying to kill me.”

“Oh dear. Well, no wonder you’re waiting for the pub to open.”

Jerry leads him inside. The fat man follows quietly behind.

“Bit of a change from the other day,” Jerry continues.

“I didn’t know it, then. That everything is laid out so lovely for us.” The thespian again: “Heartache is there to purify the soul for the coming of wisdom.’ Who was it said that? Was it me? A poet *and* a visionary.” Daniel grabs his boss’s collar. “That stuff you gave me. What in fuck’s name is it? That stuff will evolve mankind. It lets you see in seven dimensions.”

Jerry looks anxiously at the fat man. “Yes, yes, well, keep it down, hmm?”

“There’s plenty more whenever you want some,” the fat man says in Daniel’s ear. Daniel wheels around.

“Oh, it’s yooouu! Hello.”

Even through the man’s thick, neatly cut winter suit the smell of lavender is eye-watering.

‘Faggot,’ he mouths towards Jerry. Jerry turns puce and pretends not to notice. “Er, you two already met?” he stammers.

“We’ve not been introduced,” says fat man, his little beady eyes lighting up.

“Oh, right, well, Daniel, this is Sullivan. Sullivan Morris.”

For a moment Daniel stands open-mouthed.

“You’re kidding me. Oh, that’s tooo much!” He can feel his bladder loosening, maybe his whole lower half falling to bits, for all he knows. “And there’s me nicknaming you Sumo. Sumo, the baby wrestler. Get it? Su-Mo, the perfect moniker: Su-Mo, SU-llivan MO-rris. Fate. That’s what that is.”

There’s nothing Sumo-like now about the colour of Morris’s skin. Dreading a major incident, Jerry holds up his hands to the man and pulls Daniel backwards out of earshot.

“For Christ’s sake, Daniel, button it. You don’t mess with a man like Morris. He’s been known to turn very nasty. Anyway, if that drug is as good as you say it is and you’re ever likely to need more, I suggest we stay on his right side.” He lowers his voice further. “And there’s a problem. He’s not happy about the instalments. He wants the money upfront. I think you’d better cough up or return the merchandise. We really don’t want to get him angry.” A look of genuine fear crosses Jerry’s face as his voice falls below a whisper. “Morris can be a right bloody psycho.”

Money, money, money, the root (or should that be route?) of all evil. Rats live on no evil star. Ah, baby Sumo wants his money. His mummy. His dummy. Give this man his rattle before he starts to cry, before he wets his nappy. When they’re all sat down together the two of them can share nappy stories. Nappy New Year. But now they must drink a different toast. Ladies and gentlemen, I give you Scoff. We raise a glass to you with the words, ‘Go, cat senior. Go to a better place where you can eat all the meaty chunks in gravy you want, where

you can scale a tree without pain, scrap with other cats and never suffer a nibbled ear or a punctured paw. Go to...’

“Daniel, are you listening to me? When do I get the money?”

“You? Why give it to you?”

“I did the deal with you. That’s how it works. If Sullivan isn’t paid, it’ll be me who gets it.”

“Okay, okay, I’ll get it. You know damn well I’m on half pay right now. Money’s tight, but I’ll get it.”

“Good. But when?”

“Tomorrow.”

“Promise me.”

“Yeah, promise.”

“Okay. Meet me in the car park tomorrow at seven.”

“I’m glad that’s settled, gentlemen.” Morris has waddled over to eavesdrop. “A drink then, I think.”

Jerry orders two pints and a mineral water for Sullivan. “Now,” says Sullivan, after the water has wetted his lips, “who exactly is trying to kill you, my dear? And has your poor cat really just died?”

Jerry looks relieved by this apparent drop in tension. He gulps at his pint gratefully.

“Uh? Oh, just someone I know. Someone I pissed off.”

“Oh dear, oh dear, we can’t have you coming to any harm now, can we?” Sullivan lays a smooth, manicured hand on Daniel’s shoulder.

“Sorry about your cat,” Jerry throws in from behind his glass. “Maybe I should get you something stronger with that.”

Morris pretends to be shocked. “Jeremy! I trust you’re not encouraging our friend here to mix alcohol with... his other medication.”

This guy isn’t a psycho. This guy is just a ball of girly lard. Mineral water, for fuck’s sake. And he used the word *dear*. If the faggot wants his money so badly he shouldn’t have parted with the goods upfront now, should he? Like Daniel has two hundred quid to give away on a whim. Maybe steer clear of the Millwrights for the next few days; get to know a few other local haunts.

He tells them about finding his cat’s body, and about this woman who’s after him but in whom he has no interest. And then he talks about something else that he can’t remember afterwards. And drinks a lot more beer with chasers. And is helped home by Jerry and fat

boy. And crashes out on his bed without checking in on Alex first. And has horrible dreams where everyone is out to get him. And wakes up drenched in sweat and feeling very, very sick.

And is sick.

Before he can get to the bathroom.

Not a trace of that euphoria by morning. It's as though he'd exhausted a month's reserve in a single hour, leaving nothing in his brains but an inky-black vacuum. He knows today is going to be a long, long day. Communication with Alex has all but ground to a standstill; they barely acknowledge each other. Alex is edgy. Why? He's forever moving about, sometimes in his chair, sometimes on crutches, now and then attempting a few steps unaided. No more words, nothing since that one 'Sorry' was wrung from him by the sight of a dead cat. Daniel has resisted baiting him any further, but it bugs him why Alex had felt so compelled to say sorry. Sorry suggested remorse. Maybe he'd poisoned the poor animal. Maybe he'd tampered with the water supply.

He begins to dread the phone ringing, or a knock at the door; the sound of Sullivan's voice, or Gulnaz suddenly turning up to take Alex away. He can't wait for dark and a chance to slip out unseen to some distant quarter of town. Impossible to keep his hands away from the drinks cupboard, or from the drawer beneath. It's becoming a worrying habit. Just until his wounds are mended, a few more days and things will sort themselves out. So he can get through this. The burns are driving him crazy – intolerable itching beneath the scabs. All night long, never a wink of sleep. The slightest wrong move, a bend or a twist, and the daggers make him shout. Even now he can't believe the furnace that still blazes down there. The pain or the itching, he can't decide which is worse.

Below the fire, another kind of pain jabs at his belly. It's been so long now since he last felt it that it goes almost unrecognised. Hunger. Of the most maddening kind – a hunger that refuses to recognise a remedy. There's nothing that doesn't leave him feeling sick at the thought. Until he sees two eggs propped up on the top shelf of the fridge door. Suntanned and smooth, like two naked infants – twins almost, but one with a spotless complexion, the other lightly speckled. Maybe they are meant to be sacrificed.

In among a bag of crumbs he finds a dog-eared slice of bread and a thick end-crust. Into the toaster they go. The bitter smell of carbonising crumbs further blackens his mood. On with the gas ring. Putting on the water. Soldiers fashioned from the toast, bludgeoned by the butter knife, bloodied with ketchup; they lie now like fallen knights at the foot of their silver chalice. For them the grail quest is over. The pan spits and sizzles its echoes of Sunday. But today the bubbles are not out to turn twins against twin; this is a holier water, blessed to

purge the two babes of evil. Each egg is lowered with reverence into the font, to bob and spin in the presence of its saviour. 'I baptise you *Alex*. I baptise you *Daniel*'. The first rises to the surface, a little froth, a tiny column of bubbles from its perfect shell, eternal life. The second quickly drowns, the skin ruptures, and threads of white DNA ejaculate into the water. Sperm and egg parting company, conception undone. A child too flawed for God's mercy.

Proof, if ever it were needed, that Daniel and Alex are not identical. Others may not see differences beyond their character, but Daniel sees them more and more. Differences in their bone structure; how their noses and mouths twist in opposite ways. Two decades of masking his pain have buckled Daniel's face to one side; two decades of god-knows-what else have buckled Alex's to the other. But like those eggs before the baptism, as infants they were still untainted, differentiated only by a single flaw to the skin. Daniel alone had it under his hairline. Their mother always used to say that God put a mark on one side of his head so that when the twins went to heaven He would know which of them was which. Daniel believed her back then. Now he sees that Alex alone was left clean for the gates of heaven, Daniel branded for the fires of hell. The first to be decapitated is Alex. A rich, liquid yolk. And then Daniel. Hardened through. Thick-skinned. Hard-boiled.

This is fucking cannibalism. He pushes his plate away.

The numbness, the highs, the suffocating lows, the despair, the sickness, each day retreads the footsteps of the day before it. Night after night he's out getting wasted in a different backwater pub, always keeping well clear of the Millwrights. How long since he was last sober – two days, three? He neither remembers nor cares. Missed phone calls and untouched mail are stacking up; he's too scared to go near them, senders and messages all too easily guessed. The flat sinks into its own waste. A growing part of him longs for Gulnaz to come and end this, to deliver him and Alex into care. Deliver them from evil. Give them their daily bread. Maybe a home-help will finally arrive – all that early correspondence never followed up. Maybe Social Services, the police, a concerned neighbour – Mrs Croyley. But then again, maybe not. Maybe Mrs Croyley lies in her bed, a rotting corpse. Maybe the state has written off his case. Maybe Gulnaz is buried in the arms of the great doctor: her next victim for moulding into a better person. How on earth to make Prentice a better person? Surely not a better doctor. Perhaps a better lover then, perhaps a less arrogant, infuriatingly perfect little nothing.

All day long, the hammering in his head. The booze hasn't silenced it, neither has his magical hit. Sooner or later this has to end. He cannot sustain this indefinitely. But for now the

drumming just goes on. Thump, thump, thump, and still it gets louder, and yet louder. Shit, shit, there's someone knocking. This is it. She's come. It's over.

He staggers from his chair and opens the door to a hard salvation.

"Hello Daniel."

A face all inflated and flushed. Lavender water.

"Remember us? Our little arrangement? Tuesday. Such a cold night. We waited you know, for nearly an hour."

In the shadows behind, Jerry stares down at his shoes, a broken man. His clothing is drenched. Morris comes over as taller and wider than before, the eyes so tiny that they're lost in their sockets, all but hidden between the lids and the bags. He looks murderous, grotesque and unstoppable.

"Two-fifty, wasn't it? May we come in?"

Daniel wedges the door with one foot while trying to gather his thoughts. How did the bastard know where to find him? Oh shit. By having been brought here the other night by Daniel himself.

"Two hundred. We agreed two hundred."

"Ah, but you forget the interest. You didn't show up, remember?"

"I was going to. I've been unwell. He'll tell you."

But Jerry says nothing. They may not exactly be closest of friends, but all the same, they've long been drinking mates. And drinking mates always stand up for each other. By the look on his face, Jerry is a drinking mate no more.

"Well, we'll settle up now and be off, if you don't mind," Sumo says.

Nothing could hold back the door from that thick, advancing left arm, or from the right that follows it, yanking Jerry inside.

"A glass of water please," Morris smiles, leaning a wet umbrella against the wall. "And I think Mr Rushworth could do with a beer. Oh! Dear me, you do need a housemaid. Dirty, untidy. Not good for your health. Through here, I think?" He pushes past Daniel, wipes his wet boots with mock politeness on the sitting room carpet and spreads his glutinous limbs across the sofa.

"Sorry, no, you've got to go." Daniel is genuinely freaked now; things are getting seriously out of hand. "I've got someone next door... asleep. I'll get you the money tomorrow."

Jerry looks alarmed. "You've got a woman through there, Daniel?"

"Oh, I don't think so," Morris says, with a salacious sneer. "Not Mr George. Not the

side his bread is buttered on at all.” He stands again and steps into the kitchen. Daniel knows he’s made a terrible mistake.

“No, no, don’t go through there.” Morris turns from the bedroom door. “It’s just my brother, okay? He’s not well. Really sick. Contagious.”

“Tut, tut Daniel, telling porky pies. I happen to know that you lost your kid brother when you were just a toddler. Really, such negligence. Time, I think, to tell Sullivan your big secret, eh? A young man tucked up in there? Bottom is he, or top? Now that would make Sullivan a teeny bit jealous, what with you giving me the eye like that the other week.”

Having his masculinity challenged is not something Daniel appreciates. Something elemental, a raw nerve from way back, is pricked by Morris’s jibe. The delicate child in a tree house, pockets crammed with shells, head full of shapes and theories, struggling to deal with abusive remarks, mocking comparisons with his sporty brother. Sarcastic, confidence-crushing names like ‘Mummy’s girl’ or ‘Danielle from the man he idolised. When Daniel squares his shoulders against Morris it’s someone else he’s really standing up to.

“I want you out of my flat. You’re wasting your time. I don’t have the money.”

Morris smirks. “Then I’ll take a deposit. Tell you what, go lie yourself down on your sofa. Let me fuck your cute little butt for half an hour and we’ll call it quits.”

All of Daniel’s pent up fury is released at once, a singularity of purpose that blocks his other reflexes, a greyhound triggered by the hare. There is no space to calculate the odds or weigh the options, no moment to fear the pain. He rushes forward, swings at the vile, rubbery face and connects with a left temple. It seems to cave in beneath his fist. Morris reels drunkenly and crashes into the waste bin but manages to stay on his feet. Those little eyes roll upwards before refocusing on his assailant. Jerry has already fled from the flat. It could be that Morris will turn tail also, or maybe fall backwards unconscious. A precious second is wasted in waiting to find out, the chance to throw a second punch and finish the job is gone. Daniel never sees the powerful right arm jab forward from the waist. He sees only an intense white light as something hard as rock scores a bull’s-eye with his stomach. Even Morris must be astonished at the impact of his punch, in seeing Daniel’s shirt so readily pool with blood. This is pain so intense that Daniel has no air or muscle control to scream. He simply creases forward, drops to his knees and vomits violently over Morris’s boots before collapsing in a heap. His bowels give way. Morris’s kick is neatly timed to meet with Daniel’s lolling head. The sense of falling is bootied into touch by an explosion of stars and a violent jerk. Before the blackout extinguishes the light, Daniel hears, as if from the end of a long tunnel, Morris’s chilling, parting words.

“If I can’t do you, my dear, then I’ll have to do your poorly little friend next door, won’t I?”

\* \* \*

There is only silence and darkness. A black fire rages through every fibre, and yet with it the bitterest cold. A strong reflex to gag, his mouth tasting of iron, his throat stripped dry with acid. He is crawling through blood and vomit towards the door. It doesn’t matter what that bastard has done to him, whether he’ll bleed to death, die of a brain haemorrhage, choke on his own tongue. He knows now that if he has one purpose left in life it is, before he dies, to save his brother. It’s all been leading here. This is the sequence that began the moment Alex took flight along the cliff path. Daniel had been tested then, and by his failure had set in motion a chain of events that would bring this one last chance of redemption. With the aid of a cupboard handle he pulls himself to his feet. From the cutlery drawer he pulls out his sharpest cook’s knife. At Alex’s doorway he pulls on the handle, turns on the light, ready to pull the knife on that great blubbery fat fucker and shove it straight into his kidneys.

But Alex lies there alone. The light has dazzled him. He clings to the blankets, but Daniel takes them from him and rolls him over. Oh God, no, please God, let it not be true. There is blood down there. He raises the pyjama top – sees scratches all down Alex’s back. He can barely bring himself to do it, but he pulls down the trousers – there’s yet more blood, and worse. Alex is becoming hysterical and frantic, screaming in short syllables.

‘Nu, nu, noh! Izaal-a-mizde. I yav be rape!’

The words aren’t important. His blind terror says it all.

“No. I’m not going to rape you,” Daniel sobs. “I’m sorry, Alex. Sorry... sorry...”

She’ll have been sleeping when the phone goes. Yet still she manages to pick up before the call is diverted. In hearing his thin, trembling voice, she must know at once that something unspeakably awful has happened, even though he simply implores her to come and refuses to say why. It can’t take her long to realise that he is too incoherent to explain, and to clock that telling him to ring the police or an ambulance is quite futile. Why else just cut him off? She’ll be phoning for a cab now, to bring her straight over.

And when she does arrive, bursting unannounced into his flat, the scene before her makes no attempt to reveal the real story. The stench, the empty bottles and cans, the trail of sick through the kitchen, they invite few readings. She barely looks at Daniel, huddled in the corner by the fridge.

“What on earth’s been...? Where’s Alex?”

Before he can speak, she is through to the bedroom – “Ugh, Daniel, he’s filthy! What are all these marks down his back!? Has Alex had a fall?”

Daniel shakes his head. “No... a, a man came.”

“An intruder? You’re saying someone broke in and attacked him?”

“No, he was from the pub.”

“*What??* You deliberately brought someone back here who did this?? And look at his neck. It looks like someone’s tried to strangle him!”

His howling, his contrition, his begging, this time they don’t touch her.

“Alex, can you hear me? Don’t worry; I’m taking you out of here right now.”

And then she’s standing in the doorway. “Get up, Daniel. Now you listen to me. First thing in the morning I’m calling Social Services. Until they can sort things out, Alex is coming with me. Before anything else happens.”

She’s calling the waiting cab, saying she’ll be out in two minutes.

“I’m taking the wheelchair. Have his bags packed by morning. And phone the police. If you don’t report this pub friend of yours then I will!”

How can he just stand there and let her do this? How can he permit her to take Alex from his bed, to dress him and gather up his crutches and lead him from the bedroom? How can he do nothing to prevent her from reaching that waiting taxi, to stop her from robbing him of his brother all over again?

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When Daniel finally surfaces, amid the devastation of his flat, there is no more violence left in him. Just the self loathing of knowing that yet again he's betrayed the brother he loves. Long ago, he'd betrayed him to the sea, and now he's betrayed him to that repugnant monster. All those delusions that Alex had been out to get him, when all along who was *really* programmed to destroy the other?

The derisive answer calls out to him from the gaping jaws of the oven.

Daniel compels his body to drag itself through the carnage. He's able to stand just long enough to push, turn and hold the knob until the flame ignites, before sinking back to the ground and aiming his face at the dancing blue light. He blows, and the light disappears with a pop. Now he must edge forward, into the arms of that scornful hiss. The bitterness of burnt fat helps with the smell they add to the gas. He must breathe in deeply and let his blood absorb the poison and drive away all remorse. For a moment, he is swallowed up in a dentist's giant chair, the terrified child who tries so hard to take tiny, inconsequential breaths. But he pushes the image away. There is nothing here to fear. It cannot be long now – yes, he can already hear it coming: the roaring in his brain – swoosh, swoosh, swoosh. The back plate of the oven advances ahead of him down an ever lengthening shaft, the shielded fan venting lethal retribution. It's the perfect way to end it. They may not find him for hours. And when they do, they will turn on a light and blow the whole of this stinking, disease-ridden building to kingdom come; tenants, dogs, bicycles, pushchairs, graffiti, Santa Claus and all.

Maybe somewhere up there Scoff is waiting. Fully restored of course; God would not be so cruel as to have him spend eternity in dying torment. Seeing him again might just bring the peace Daniel craves. Scoff will not judge him, or love him any less for what he has done. Love without condition. What is that shape approaching through the tunnel? Could it be Scoff? Yes, there he is! Oh, but why so sad? And so thin, pushing his little head between the broken blades of the fan and poking a dry nose through the grate. This is not right. Scoff was an innocent. He should be lithe and frisky, not forever damned like this. Daniel's shoulders are shaking now, his body beginning to spasm.

If Scoff, then maybe his mother too. The prospect chokes him even more than the gas. He longs for her, but dreads her appearing. How ever to find peace if she does? Why is unconditional love between man and beast so attainable, between man and woman so beyond reach? Something is standing there aloof. She sings to herself. It is his mother's voice, but what form does she take – the sprightly young bride or the skeletal, cancerous widow? The

image is fuzzy; she won't step forward into the light. His view of her is impeded by the blades of the fan. Though the fan still recedes her song grows louder. It isn't song – it's a wild keening, the cold unearthly baying of a soul racked by grief.

And... wait, if his cat and his mother, then maybe... oh God, there's another voice breaking through the cries. Assertive, judging. Daniel wants out. The man is demanding something that he cannot quite hear.

Click.

Swimming through blackness.

Nothing.

A pale morning light bathing the room. No hiss. Just the drumming still in his ears.

Slowly, in and out, Daniel breathes to check he's really still alive. No more gas. Somebody has saved him. Have they? Then why is nobody pulling him clear, or opening a window, or calling an ambulance? Still on his belly, he draws back slowly and stares at the room. Definitely no gas. Nobody here. Then the penny drops – or more precisely, the pound. Fate's dirtiest trick yet. Saved by the meter, by the petty lack of a quid. One measly pound sterling, the price upon his head. Because he'd been out of pocket Daniel gets to live. Fate has decreed it.

Quite how long he slumps beside the cooker with his back propped against the sink makes no odds. It could be minutes or hours – it's all free time, it's all a bonus, fate's special offer on life; two for the price of one. It's however long it takes to sift through the wreckage and formulate some kind of a plan. Like waking up on a desert island, surrounded by the flotsam of the sunken ship and wondering how it assembles into a survival kit. Time is no longer measured in those arbitrary divisions of the clock face – tick, tick, tick – but in live-or-die tides of hunger and thirst, waking and sleeping, day and night, heat and cold. When he does rise, it is to step warily but with purpose into the bathroom. It is to strip off his soiled clothes, squat over the toilet bowl, and clean himself up.

Seeing his own nakedness, touching his own skin, smelling his own waste: such basic affirmations of life. So universal, so commonplace. To think he'd just tried to *kill* himself. Christ alive. What kind of a hellish darkness was that? For life to mean so little as to throw it away on an impulse. Look at his hands; they hold, they grasp, they respond to the instructions of the brain, intelligently – not 'move this muscle, now move that one,' but 'reach for the soap, take up the towel'. The hands will do the rest. He'd come so close to relinquishing that mystical partnership between brain and body. For a near lethal moment he'd valued at zero the very spark that keeps him from being just meat. Any old piece of meat in any old oven.

He survives, yes, but that spectacle staring back at him in the mirror still screams of a

man destroyed. He wipes an arc through the misting glass and looks closer. So much muscle has been lost from his face. The skin hangs from the bone like wet washing on pegs. There's a lifelessness to the eyes, the pupils dilated, the whites turned pink. A cherry red mark, courtesy of Morris's boot, sweeps down from one eye and along the cheek to the left side of the mouth, just missing the nose. In some ways he's been lucky. Whiplash to the neck, brain shake, but no broken teeth. He'll bruise handsomely, but hopefully that's about it. The harm done by that flying fist to his stomach is the much greater worry. That sensation of having everything pile-driven into his flesh had been truly sickening. As he steps into the shower, as the gentle stream of water loosens and dislodges the matter around the wound, allowing him to unpick and peel away the cling film, he's given better measure of the damage. Where Morris's knuckles had struck, the thick black scab has fractured into tectonic plates. Beneath the crust, the scarring has been pummelled a deep scarlet, and already the waxy yellow magma has renewed its flow. The healing has been set back at least a week. Lots and lots of gel and bandaging. Lots of rest. Housebound for the foreseeable future. His desert island.

Stepping out into the hallway, for the first time he sees how totally his flat has been trashed. The kitchen is in disarray, drawers yanked from their runners, contents strewn across the floor, every cupboard door flung open, broken dishes everywhere. This has to be Morris's work, searching for money that wasn't there, or scrabbling around for his liquid prize – only finding the pipette, never for one moment suspecting the cough mixture bottle. Daniel can't help but feel victorious when he spots it lying there on the floor. Almost out of spite, as a trophy, he picks it up and raises it to the light. Only for the gloating over, certainly not for the drinking.

But the price of this trophy – to have Morris do that unspeakable thing to Alex: his brother pinned there at the hands of that beast. He must stop this, deflect his thoughts, anything to block out the image before it tries to destroy him again. At first Alex would have been confused, then outraged as his sheets and pyjamas were disturbed, then terrified and suffocated by the sheer weight and brutality of the man. All those marks; so much blood. Oh, Christ. Alex, poor bastard. Did he put up a fight? How much pain did he suffer when Morris...?

No! He can't bear to think about that. It's an act that shames him – shames him not as the impotent bystander, but as though he's both victim and perpetrator of the act itself. He must never tell anyone what has taken place here. He must destroy the evidence, wipe his memory, reinvent the whole scene. Tearing the soiled sheets from the bed now... no-one beyond the three of them must ever know. Bundling them with the discarded pyjamas into a

bin bag... Gulnaz may guess the truth, the doctors might even diagnose it, but Daniel will never corroborate their suspicions. No good putting the sheets out with the waste: the police would find them there, riddled with Morris's DNA... Morris might brag of it – no doubt other victims of his would have good cause to believe him, and certainly they'll know the reason on the day that Morris's body is dragged from the canal or dug up on waste ground. But nobody will ever hear of it from Daniel. Nor will he ever confess to the murder; he only knows that it will happen. Morris may be built like a tank with firepower to match, but Daniel will one day stand up to him, like that guy in Tiananmen Square. And Daniel won't be armed with carrier bags and reasoning to turn away his enemy, he'll be armed with a knife, to finish the job he'd sworn to do last night.

The black bag on the floor. Launderette. No, safer to burn the lot, tonight in some back alley.

It's afternoon now. For the past hour he has sat on the camp bed. When he can find the energy, he'll strap himself up again and throw on some fresh clothes. Tonight he must go out with those sheets. Eventually he might be ready to start reassembling his flat. For now though, he's not ready for anything. For now, he'll just sit here, naked.

"Hey, come here."

His words are a reflex to a mistaken visual cue, spoken before rational thought can challenge them. That shape under the chair is only a pair of shoes. It'll take time to get used to Scoff not being around. No more Scoff, no more Alex, and no more Gulnaz. A desert island indeed. Just his mind. Just his demons.

The clock is smashed. Maybe an hour later he stirs, maybe two. Dusk is already falling again, but in truth he won't be able to leave the flat tonight. He takes some scissors from the drawer and drags out the bin bag, begins hacking away at the bed linen until he has a soiled pile separated from the rest. Only this needs destroying. It can be done round the back out of sight; the rest disposed of safely with the garbage.

Had he really tried to take his own life? Such a terrifying thought. There may be little enough to live for, but he must never ever try that again. For some reason Gulnaz hasn't been back for Alex's things. Nor has she sent for Social Services or the police.

They're all packed up in an old suitcase now and waiting under the stairwell for her to arrive. He's left her a message saying as much. She needn't knock at his door; she needn't see him at all. She can just call by, collect and disappear.

A day later, he notices that the case has gone. Just his spare door key lying on the mat.

\* \* \*

Generally, it's best to stay naked. Best for the injuries. Little by little, day by day, the scabs are starting to flake and fall off – along with a little coaxing when the itching gets too great. Each scab is as thick and hard as chocolate – chunks of broken Easter egg. The skin beneath has become a shiny, vivid pink, the colour of Gulnaz's lips. The colour, but not the feel. This skin is stiff and tight and dry to the touch, not soft, moist and giving. On Gulnaz's lips, a million nerve endings. Immediately beneath his burns all sensation is gone, the nerves cauterised.

Scoff continues to fool with the edge of his vision, ready to morph at the speed of an eye into a shirt, a carrier bag or just an empty space. Daniel's ears too have begun to play tricks – a snatch of a remark caught here or there in a room beyond. Another sound will always interrupt it, leaving it to fade into doubtful memory, and the words never quite reach him, but the inflection is perfectly clear. As clear as it was in those last seconds of consciousness before the gas overcame him.

Daniel knows he is slowly starving himself to death. But hunger evades him, and besides, there is no longer anything in the flat to eat. Of course he should venture out and buy some essentials. Everyone needs their five a day, he doesn't need a girlfriend or a mother to tell him that. But the world out there is a sick and frightening place. In the world outside there are rapists and drug dealers, rabid dogs and fascist thugs, waiting for their chance to get him, waiting for a wrong move, a lowering of guard.

Noises outside. Each to be carefully weighed – for fear they may come a-knocking. Teenage girls on the stairs, rushing off towards narcotic oblivion, staggering tearfully home. Drunks singing on the pavement. In the morning, wives shouting at husbands, husbands slamming doors (slamming wives?). Engines igniting, cars roaring up the hill. The clang of bells of St. Bart's, a squall of wind flapping the rubbish bags beyond his window. Silence for a few short hours only at dead of night. The loneliest hours. The inside noises take over then – the hum from the boiler room, the click-click of cooling water pipes, someone on the floor above creaking their bedsprings, an occasional door, the flushing of toilets. And flies, even at this time of year, spinning a death dance on his windowsill. One night he even hears nose-blowing from the flat next door, and loud snoring. For the first time in weeks.

It's a shock to discover how much he misses them. For years he'd never missed anyone and now he grieves for them all, Scoff the most. But at least Scoff comes to him each night in dreams and might stay for an hour after he wakes. Alex he never sees, but sometimes there's a

clatter of crutches against furniture, or the squeal of tyres on the vinyl, at night his breathing or muffled moaning. Of Gulnaz he's given nothing – except a sensation, the smell of her hair on his pillow, the taste of her skin on his lips. And maybe, just maybe, a streak of black as she hurries to be somewhere else, attending to the needs of everyone but him.

It's other company he's forced to keep now; the uninvited guests he'd allowed to cross over before passing out. His father's voice has grown bolder, more obsessive. He should be freaked by it, but in many ways this voice has always been with him, in his head until now, but speaking nonetheless. Like the gods men create to subjugate themselves, this voice has been his lifelong arbiter of sin, his means of measuring his own failure. But Christ, how that voice does go on. His failure today is in not standing up for himself. He should be out there, bringing Alex home, winning back Gulnaz and settling the score with Morris. So much to be shamed by. It's a voice that hovers nearer at hand now, somewhere over his left shoulder, but still refusing to show itself. The hungrier he is, the more he drinks, the louder the voice. Only Morris's potion shuts up that mouth for a few blessed, blissful hours. But every time, the aftermath: the tremors, the terror and the character assassinations, multiplied tenfold.

As for his mother, her presence never alters. When she appears she is always in shadow, nebulous and intangible, always half hidden behind the back-posts of a chair or the bars of a window. And always silent until he tries to speak her name. Not a good idea to speak her name, not unless he wants another drowning in her devastating howls of misery.

The handrail by the toilet. The sliding board. The unused bubble-bath, the ruined wastebasket wrapped in torn bin bags. Their separate towels and flannels, soiled and screwed up.

Oh, Alex.

Will Gulnaz be showering him with the same care? Will she clean him as thoroughly after his toilet? Does she dress him and make his bed and cut up his food and launder his clothes and...?

Yes. Yes, of course she does. She will do all this willingly and lovingly. Because she is who she is, and because now they are together, Alex and Guli, just as they planned it.

What a fool he has been. A girl like that, one-in-a-million. And she was the one who said they belonged together. Kindred spirits. She didn't like cats, but cats were no longer an obstacle. She was everything he could have wanted. She had opened him up like a flower. She could have taught him so much about passion, about sex, about people and how they work, how normal people deal with emotions. How to feel love. She could have made him happy.

Maybe that's why he had to go and throw it all away.

'When did it start, Guli? When did you first know?'

From the beginning perhaps: the moment she witnessed those bouts of jealousy and obsession.

‘And I thought I’d done well in hiding them from you.’

But he’d never hidden the drinking, or the outbursts of fury. ‘You told me your limits then, didn’t you?’

She had, yes, and given him an ultimatum, but still she’d bounced back with even greater forgiveness and affection.

‘Then, what? When did I screw it up?’

He waits for her answer. She won’t speak it of course; he never hears her voice. He must read the perfume trail of any words she chooses to give.

‘It started with Alex. When he woke up and came home. It all started to unravel at that moment, when you wheeled him out of the hospital, when I couldn’t be there with you.’

‘Because I was angry with you? Is that all? Can a simple apology put it right?’

‘No. It’s not that. It’s something in you. Your capacity to connect. One person at a time: it’s all you can handle. It had to be me or Alex; it could never be us both. Just as it once had to be your father or your mother.’

The scent of her is fading now, but those damning words leave such bitterness in his mouth. So there it is. If she’s right, then it’s hopeless. If forced to choose between Gulnaz and Alex, there could only ever be one outcome.

From the bathroom to the kitchen. No scotch left, enough vodka barely to wet his lips. A half can of Stella, three days old – anything to take this taste away. But is she right? It doesn’t feel right: like there’s something she’s overlooking.

How magical, the many forms a revelation may take. In that moment it’s to see an old jumper under the table and to mistake it instinctively for something else. It throws him a lifeline to go on fighting, to keep on living. An incentive to turn the tide. He grabs the garment with one hand and squeezes it tight.

‘Not true, Guli, not true! All the time we were together, I always took good care of Scoff.’

The jersey is Alex’s. Daniel had missed it when packing his clothes. ‘‘And then I had Alex to cope with as well, but that didn’t stop me looking after my cat.’’ He hurls it into the bedroom. ‘‘But now I don’t have a cat, do I? My poor old Scoff is dead and buried.’’

Doesn’t she see? It can be Gulnaz *and* Alex. If he could devote himself to two at a time before, then he’s perfectly capable of devoting himself to two at a time now.

He spits out the beer, drains the can into the sink and kicks it into the air. Tomorrow

will be the day he puts his life back together.

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Twist the two ends

Something dreadful is coming. Alex has felt it ever since that moment on the cliffs; watching, powerless, as Daniel sinks ever deeper into depression – their psychic connection now so strong that Alex is dragged down with him, copied in to each step he takes closer to the precipice.

Daniel's mood swings have become wilder, the drinking more determined, the listlessness and insomnia more debilitating, the refusal to eat more self-harming. Towards evening on their third day back from Devon, his behaviour worsens dramatically. Something he keeps slipping into his drink from a bottle in the medicine drawer is derailing him far more drastically than alcohol. Balance, coordination, his whole personality is sent haywire. And again, Alex's own body is obliged to mimic it. He falls several times in the night, by morning his head feels woolly, his vision bizarrely impaired.

Sunday first thing, Daniel orders him to spend the day out of sight in his room. It doesn't take telepathy to tell Alex the reason. Gulnaz is coming over. It angers him; Daniel should be willing to take him into his confidence. He would have understood; he wouldn't have minded; he'd have kept out of trouble – more than can be said for Daniel right now, as he clatters about from room to room, shouting at the air, shaking the flat with bumps and bangs in his desperation to knock it into some sort of shape.

And then everything falls silent. The stillness is eerie. Not a whisper for over half an hour. Unable to bear the tension any longer, Alex feels compelled to break curfew.

When he peers from his door Daniel is right there before him, with back turned, preoccupied. All looks to be in order, but Alex's eyesight still bothers him and he ventures a step forward to look closer. He's not even reached the table when something white-hot slashes violently at his abdomen. He bites his lip and screws up his eyes to stifle a cry. When he opens them again his view has shifted. Now he is at the cooker, staring down through rising steam into a saucepan of boiling water. Another shift, and he is lifting the pan in slow motion from the ring and turning towards the sink. A blackout – a kind of edit – and somehow the water is all down his front. He's not even aware of calling out as the blistering agony strikes a second time, but clearly he must do, for Daniel's reaction to the sudden noise is instant and cataclysmic. Their places are swapped again. Back at the table, Alex can do nothing but stand paralysed with disbelief and take in the vile replay; the howling and swearing, his brother stripped naked, the terrible sight of those burns.

* * *

With the ambulance dealt with, and her patient safely seen off to A&E, Gulnaz sits and takes Alex's trembling hand, trying everything in her power to pacify him with assurances that the injuries are not life-threatening, that Daniel will make a full recovery. Of course she can have no idea of his real distress; she'd never believe him if he told her, but simply having her company does, to his surprise, help him feel a little calmer. It's less the words she uses, more the gentle sound of her voice that slowly quietens the screams. And by dissecting every detail of her face he's able to assemble an image of composure over the one that has seared into his mind – of a face thrust upwards with teeth clenched, muscles in spasm. He focuses on the way she winds a strand of hair around three fingers as she speaks and how, each time she catches herself slouching, she pushes herself upright with her hands at the small of her back. Those other hands, outstretched; the other back, naked and hunched, are gradually pushed from his mind.

Herself still in shock, no doubt, Poor Gulnaz looks exhausted and dishevelled. Her eye makeup has smudged across one cheek; her skin is shiny with perspiration; her hair refuses to lie flat. And yet, the more Alex studies her the more perfect she seems. There's a familiarity, a rightness to her face that seems disproportionate to the amount of time he's known her, an intimacy that feels hard earned, as though they've already let go their defences and spent time building trust. Like two people who have previously walked, talked, laughed and cried together, shared food together, touched, kissed, even made love.

So easy to dismiss, to say that attachment to a carer is understandable, to point out that patients are forever falling for their nurses. But Alex is convinced that something else is happening here. For her part, Gulnaz remains the strict professional. Only her eyes give a hint of an inner struggle with her loyalties. And who could blame her if she were having second thoughts about Daniel? However loving their relationship at the outset, Daniel's behaviour towards her now is in freefall. Is she too besotted to object? Or just too scared to speak out? Fact or fiction, Alex's visions of a woman dodging objects as she fights her way blindly through a kitchen still refuses to relent.

When at last she's convinced herself he's okay, she leaves him with the television and busies herself in the kitchen. But Daytime TV holds no interest for Alex. He's far keener to stand watching as she begins mopping up the spilled water, rounding up the potatoes and sorting out the roast. She is busily adapting the coffee table from his room to form an improvised cage over Daniel's bed when the doorbell rings. From the moment she disappears to meet the waiting taxi, Gulnaz's priorities are quite understandably with her patient, bringing him through to the sitting room, helping him to undress and climb into bed. Alex

maintains a guilty watch from a distance. He knows the burning will plague his brother for days. He knows that tonight Daniel will lie awake under that cage and sting and itch for hours, so that even sleep cannot spare him. The pain will drill on into his dreams, inventing a hundred new ways to continue its torment.

Meanwhile Scoff, oblivious to his master's misfortune, wastes no time in clambering up onto Daniel's bed and burrowing through the blankets to colonise the tent. Daniel shrieks out for fear of those claws. Gulnaz drags the cat out and shoos him away, leaving Scoff to wander disgruntled through to the kitchen, push his nose into his bowl, take one look back at the room from which he's been banished, and pad ahead of Alex through to the bedroom. Alex's discarded pullover offers token solace; Scoff makes two complete circuits, pummels it and curls up into a ball.

The company is gratefully received. Alex wants Scoff closer; an intuition perhaps about what is to come. Before she leaves for the night, Gulnaz looks in on the room and cleverly reads his mind, picking Scoff off the floor and laying him at his side. Scoff stretches, yawns and begins head-butting the turn of the covers to open up a channel through to the warmth beneath. There's a comfort in feeling the cat's shallow breathing rhythmic against his chest, lulling him slowly off to sleep.

The same patch of mattress is still warm and bowl-shaped when Alex wakes, but Scoff is gone. The brush past of fur still itches his cheek. As he raises himself up and gazes around, a head bobs up from the foot of the bed, the pink mouth falling open, showing off his one lonely canine. But something plainly isn't right. Scoff begins to meow. Not his usual gruff, discordant call, but a train of timid, infantine, almost pleading little cries. He makes an effort to stand, only for his hind legs to give way and throw him off balance. Alex levers himself round in the bed. With equal determination, Scoff tries again to get up and meet him halfway. But again the legs fail. This time he topples sideways and to Alex's dismay starts to pee.

All the time something is screaming through Alex's mind. This isn't how it's supposed to go. Scoff isn't meant to die here, not like this.

Scoff has dropped to his stomach now, chin on the bedspread, front paws splayed to the sides, his hind quarters forming an M as his back sinks between the two wasted femurs; tiny, tiny snatched breaths that hardly disturb the fur, too fast to be counted. Just when it seems he will never stand again, he springs back to life, all four legs kicking out at the bedclothes and somehow bringing him to his feet. This, the voice in Alex's head tells him, has to be where Scoff takes himself off to his basket for his final, very private few moments. He watches, waits and prays. Has a brainstorm in Scoff's head put an enemy in among the folds

of the bedding? His neck cranes forward, his big green eyes grow wider, like two glass marbles, the blacks showing huge and oval. Then he is gagging, retching, shaking violently and emptying himself from the rear, finally collapsing into the blankets, a spent force. The eyes glaze over with pupils still dilated, a spittled tongue draping itself over the single tooth between parted black lips.

Alex stares in stunned horror. This is the death he's seen coming from the moment he first laid eyes on Scoff, but violently and horribly rewritten. He'd also foreseen Daniel's reaction. Now that too needs revising. In his current fragile state, finding Scoff like this won't just break Daniel's heart, it will totally unravel him.

But maybe everything can be cleaned up. Maybe Scoff can be laid in his basket and things put back the way they were meant to be. The glassy eyes stare out at Alex, cynically awaiting a decision. Alex eases himself from the bed, careful not to soil the bedclothes further by disturbing the body. He heads for the chair; it'll give him somewhere to put the items he needs. In the kitchen, he uses his teeth to pull an old cloth from the towel rail. Out in the bathroom he drops the cloth into the toilet pan and fishes it back out with the rubber cap of one crutch. With the same rubber cap he then harpoons a spare toilet roll and brings it to his lap. In the bedroom again, by bringing the chair alongside the bed, it is just possible to reach Scoff's tail, lifting his back end as he drags to avoid further staining of the bedspread, then taking the limp corpse onto his knees. He dabs, wipes and rubs as best he can. And he closes the gaping eyes and mouth and rearranges the skewed limbs – re-sculpting the body to match his mental picture.

Back in the kitchen, he immediately meets with a problem: laying Scoff properly to rest will mean getting down on the floor. Getting himself out of the chair will require both hands. Scoff lies curled up in his lap. The only option seems to be to drop him over the side – like a piece of rubbish into a bin; like a soiled garment into a washtub. So far, Alex has managed to keep a check on his emotions, but the thought of doing that is almost too much. Swallowing the sound rising in his throat, he carefully positions his chair, looks away and lets go.

By sheer good fortune Scoff lands more or less correctly. Down on his knees, a slight repositioning of the head and tail, a little plumping up of the blanket, and really there is nothing more Alex can do. All his efforts are now needed for the mess in his room. Tissues and cloth at the ready, he grimly sets off to finish the job. For the first time he spots a second stain on the sheets where Scoff had been sleeping beside him. The poor creature must have been woken by his own incontinence and struggled to get away, only to make it as far as the foot of the bed. Having cleaned up where possible, Alex tosses the soiled rags and tissues

under the bed. He breathes out. There is no longer reason to withhold his emotions. Not only is this death a tragedy; it is a catalyst, an escape valve for all the bewilderment he's been locking up since his whole nightmare began. The pain is breaking through, like a drill about to strike oil; when it comes the outpouring will be unstoppable. He's on the verge of howling the house down when something cuts him short.

“Oh Jesus, Alex, have you puked up, or something?”

Daniel stands at the doorway with arms folded. At first the words don't register, until, looking down, Alex clocks the stained sheets and blankets and sees in a flash what is coming – but witnessed again through Daniel's eyes: himself sat there on the bed, being screamed at to talk, being yanked forward and all but head-butted in the face. Feeling Daniel's self-restraint kick in, just enough to pull him back from the brink; letting go, falling to his knees and crawling away, no better on his feet than Alex himself, heading straight for Scoff's basket.

And it all happens exactly that way. Not immediately; Gulnaz's arrival and, thank God, her blazing row with Daniel and her narrow escape from the mug he hurls after her are not foreseen. But from there, every detail. Step by ugly step. Until everything at last becomes quiet and Alex is returned once more to his own head. Through the doorway he sees Daniel down on the floor, cradling Scoff's lifeless body. He hobbles over, gazes down in pity and musters his one ineffectual word of condolence.

* * *

Though the necessary preparations seem to drag on for days, at least with Daniel slipping ever further into his own private hell the covert operation can become bolder; gathering things, testing strategies, practising moves. Securing provisions proves to be straightforward enough. He discovers in the fridge a plastic container of mashed potato and swede; purpose-made for the stealing. And there's bottled water too. Dressing himself is quite unthinkable, but in the light of their first venture outdoors they'd established a code whereby a shiver with the shoulders signalled a need for more layers. Of course to ask for these in the flat would be to raise suspicion. But after one of their trips he'd been left for over an hour to swelter in his coat and scarf. If he's lucky, perhaps he can engineer this again: get back to the flat, cause a bit of a distraction, quickly take himself off to his room and slip fully dressed into bed.

Daniel is spending more and more time out on the streets, vanishing into the night and rolling back, half-dead, around midnight. While it alarms and upsets him, Alex knows this will be his opening. The signs are easy enough to read: the pouring of the extra large drink, supercharged from the bottle in the kitchen drawer; their brief circuit of the block together, then the order for him to stay out of trouble while Daniel slips out again alone.

Four thirty... five... watching Daniel plough through his daily grind like he's wading through sludge. And then it happens: the tumbler pulled from the filthy dishwasher, whisky down from the cupboard, the dregs of the bottle half-filling the glass. Alex's skin becomes sticky with anticipation – as if the drink were entering his own bloodstream. Opening the drawer by the sink now and out with the medicine bottle and pipette. Into the scotch, a quick swirl round and down it goes. At any moment, the command will be given to go through to the bedroom to be dressed.

Alex waits.

And he waits. Why tonight of all nights is Daniel savouring his drink like some connoisseur?

And he waits; Daniel staring through the kitchen window, lost in thought.

And he waits. Finally, Daniel is talking.

“It's starting to rain. I don't think we'll be going out tonight.”

A surge of desperation hits Alex's frayed nerves. He forces the chair up to the sink, pushing Daniel aside, and strains his neck upwards to look through the bars at the angry evening sky, doing all he can to signal that he's fine with it; that they should go regardless. A hand falls upon his shoulder.

“I said no, Alex.”

The kind of no that puts an end to matters. Already Daniel is back at the drinks cupboard, this time emptying the last of the vodka into his glass. His spirits also tumbling, Alex swivels from the window and wheels himself back towards his room.

“Okay, come on then. I need to go to the off-licence. You might as well come too.”

At first, only his jacket and jeans go on over the pyjamas. But the shiver code delivers well: coat, hat and gloves, a thick rug across his knees and a scarf knotted snugly around his neck. By the time they move out into the hallway to collect their shoes Alex is almost fainting from the heat. Hitting the chilled night air is genuine relief. He's beginning to see himself at the church, rations consumed, stretching out on a pew beneath blankets and waiting out the night for someone to come.

Daniel is bound to go out later, despite what he said. It wouldn't be the first time he'd declared an intention to give the backstreets a miss, only to disappear off without warning. Even if he stays in, with the fresh stocks of alcohol they're now off to buy he'll be out of his skull within a couple of hours. From Sedgefield Court to the top of Cooper's Hill is about a quarter of a mile. The hill begins gently, steepens sharply for a time and then levels out again towards the church. As the journey begins, Alex tries to imagine propelling himself up it, and

is forced to admit that really he can't. Even Daniel is struggling now, pausing for breath every few paces. Before their trip to Devon he'd whisked this chair up to those shops in a flash. Now, the self-neglect is really starting to tell. The promise of a full drinks cupboard is maybe the only thing keeping him going.

When they do make it to the general store, being parked in sight of the church spire just across the street is sheer torture, almost a vindictive act. He prays that Daniel will forget all about him and set off absent-mindedly for home alone. But they're back on the street within minutes, and Sedgefield Court is approaching all too quickly. Whatever substance Daniel has taken, it needs to kick in properly before they reach the flat. In that weird, affected state he would be far less likely to remember to remove the extra clothing. Suddenly inspired, Alex throws the long end of the scarf over the side and lets it tangle in among the spokes of the wheel. They say some famous person or other was killed this way. Immediately it yanks tight around his neck and thrusts him down into his seat. For a moment, he fears Daniel won't understand the problem before he chokes. Lights begin to flash at the edges of his vision; the arteries in his neck throb violently; the roadway turns black – he's to be the scarf strangler's second victim. But fortunately Daniel does see – he gives out a startled yelp, slams on the brakes, scoots around to the front and begins tearing wildly at the scarf. Unable to free it, he pulls his brother from the chair onto the cold ground against the wheel and unzips his coat in order to work the knot around his throat. Enough slack is achieved to partially restore Alex's blood supply, but the bitter cold jabbing at his exposed neck only substitutes one pain for another. For over twenty minutes Daniel battles on, the drug steadily taking hold and sending him completely to pieces. When at last the knot comes free, he is in too much of a frenzy to think of anything beyond getting home, too much in a sweat to notice Alex's violent shivering. For the last leg of the journey, with the scarf flapping angrily behind the chair like a wind sock, his other garments stuffed into its rear pouch, Alex is left to face the blistering wind in nothing but a jacket and jeans. By the time they're through the door, Daniel is on fire and Alex frozen through to the marrow.

The heat of the flat has never felt more welcoming. Suddenly the need for warmth and bed outweighs all else. He doesn't care now if Daniel strips him of his other clothes, so long as those sheets and blankets take their place. Daniel looms over him, reaching for his jacket, then hesitating, swaying on his feet and closing his eyes. When he reopens them and tries to refocus, steadying himself against the back of the chair, his hands change course, their original task forgotten. They snatch instead at the carrier bag on Alex's lap and begin pulling out the bottles. It helps bring Alex to his senses. This is his moment to get into bed and wait for

Daniel to forget about him completely.

Ten minutes later, he hears first the front door and then the outer entrance door slam shut.

So, now for the difficult part. He just needs a moment longer. Five minutes to let the solitude calm him. Another ten to ease the pain in his throat, fifteen more to gather his strength and let body heat thaw out his limbs. The pillow embraces him. It cradles his bruised neck; it caresses his hair like a motherly hand. He could be back home, slotted into his bunk, gazing over at a crowded dockland of model ships, buffeted by the wind and swayed by the rhythms of the sea. The wooden slats above shield him like a cabin roof. Framed by the bedposts, the silhouette of a figure, leaning across from the side, grows larger and closer. He closes his eyes for his mother's kiss, opens them again when it doesn't land and finds himself staring up at the brutish face of a large fat man. The child's arms refuse to defend him; the little legs won't kick out. A suffocating weight pins him to the mattress. A smell of lavender water. It's his own desperation for air that finally winds him out of sleep.

The image of that man hangs in the air a second longer; a moment's premonition or a brief window onto a forgotten memory. Before Alex can decide which, it has gone. All the same, he's in a panic now. How long has he been out? How much time has he wasted? And with no idea how long Daniel's drinking binge will last. Alex almost tumbles out of bed in his urgency to reach the wheelchair. Getting into it takes far too long. Trying to remember the details of his plan, he pushes on through to the kitchen, reaches into the fridge and knocks the Tupperware box out into his lap. He sees the water bottle too, but realises now that its screw cap is impossible. Hopefully there'll be water in the church. The scarf and coat are still irretrievably wedged deep down inside the wheelchair's back pocket, but the blanket is there on the stool by the table. It will have to do. He'll need the crutches too. He tracks them down to the wall by the front door and lays them across his knees, using the blanket to help keep them in place. Thanks to the new handles, the front door can be opened with a single downwards push. And to lock it after him is simply to let it slam. As he reaches out, he sees Daniel returning home to an empty flat, his outburst of fury giving way to an avalanche of fear and panic. The stab of guilt stops his hand, but only for a moment. Daniel will thank him in the long run; when they find him at the church, when they work out who he is, and when the authorities finally come to their rescue. Out in the corridor, he swings the chair around and forces the fingers of his left hand through the letterbox. With the other hand he drives the chair backwards in an arc, the movement just sufficient to bring the door shut with a tell-tale click. The point of no return.

Now he must tackle the outer door, the one he's never really had a chance to research. But an obstacle far greater than any door meets him as he rounds the corner. In those wasted minutes that he'd slept, three bikes have been secured to the stair rails, the outer one stacked at an angle, front wheel turned arrogantly into what space remains. Someone could maybe push past on foot, but it's unthinkable for him to collapse the chair and erect it again on the far side. He remembers Daniel, lashing out at those bikes on the day he first brought him here. Their revenge, to make him their captive in return for all those kickings.

With no way forwards or back, he can do nothing but wait. The cyclists are unlikely to come for their bikes before morning. Another resident might pass through and move them aside for him. Or perhaps Daniel will arrive first, give him a bollocking and place him under house arrest, putting paid to all hopes of any future escape. Alex listens for sounds from the street. For now, there is nothing. Muffled noises from behind paper-thin walls filter down from above. After a wait of ten or fifteen minutes, he hears a door closing, laughter growing louder on an upper landing and the clip-clop of high heels on the stairs, joined shortly after by a foretaste of cigarette smoke. As the meaty legs of two teenage girls appear through the rails, backsides cling-wrapped in Lycra, he calls out from the shadows. Both nearly jump out of their skirts; one gives a little squeal. The taller one gawks for a second when she turns and sees him with arm outstretched towards the bikes, before covering her mouth to stifle a giggle. The other at once seizes her elbow and pulls her away.

He watches them go, hopes fading with the clack of their footsteps. Time is too precious to sit waiting for other help. Daniel could walk through that door at any moment. Maybe the gap is not so impossible. If he were to turn the handlebar and straighten the wheel he might just squeeze past. He lines the chair up against the far wall and edges forward, rough breeze-block chafing the skin from his right knuckles. The chair's protruding footrest just clears the bike's pedal, but in no way is going to make it past the front wheel, or his shoulder clear the handlebars. A nervous check of the entrance door – still nothing. Steadying the chair, he leans forward to push against the bike's handgrip with his left hand. A tremor has begun travelling his arm from the shoulder. Slowly the front fork turns and straightens, allowing a small advance. But to move now means releasing the handlebars; without both hands his chair will simply career into the spokes. The tremor worsens; it becomes a shaking that rocks the whole bike. Hastily he lets go, leaving the hand to hang helplessly just millimetres away, and miraculously the straightened wheel stays. He nudges forward, even an air current enough now to tip the balance. The front of the chair creeps ahead of the bike. He checks on the clearance behind. It is still good.

A slammed door somewhere upstairs makes him jump.

His shoulder catches the tip of the brake lever, drawing it back; the handlebars swing round and lock horns with the chair. When he tries to reverse the two simply knit tighter together; moving forward only drags the bike with him, in turn disturbing the one to which it has been chained. He tries furiously to think. Get down on the floor, turn himself around, untangle the parts and push the chair back while supporting the bicycle with his shoulder. Secure the bike and start over. A tall order for an invalid. But it is all he can try. He's already down on all fours when the sound he most dreads booms out across the hallway; the slam of the front door behind him. One set of footsteps, definitely male. It has to be Daniel. He's come this close to an escape, and all for nothing.

But the cry of 'Alex!' never comes; the footsteps continue in silence – almost silence – just a growl, deep and menacing, then a hiss through pursed lips and a strangled yelp. "Shut it, Hess," orders the voice – not Daniel's – a rough Midlands voice. Alex twists around.

"What you lookin' at? Fuckin' spaz, I seen you 'ere before. Should let the dog on you, finish you off." Reined in behind the salivating Rottweiler, a tattoo-plastered skinhead pins him with a withering stare.

"First the Pakis, then the Polacks, now we gotta put up wiv a fuckin' spaz. They'll 'ave the fuckin' fudge-packers in 'ere before we know it."

He snarls, and spits something solid onto the floor.

No attempt to help Alex out before stomping upstairs, not so much as a word about his predicament, but at least the thug hasn't ordered his dog to rip him apart. Alex should probably thank him: seeing those bared yellow teeth and drooling jowls has given him just the adrenaline boost he needs to start tangling again with the bikes. Little by little, the retreat is made, the squeal of steel against steel and rubber against concrete ricocheting up through three floors, until only the bike's rear wheel and the chair's footrest need separating. His back alone now holds the bike from falling. It's only when the chair finally comes free, when he pushes it safely back from the stairs, that he realises something has caught in his jacket – his sudden movement yanking the bike's frame. The second bike holds it for an instant; Alex freezes and sucks on his lip, then that bike too begins to topple, in turn unbalancing the third. The three have been padlocked together concertina fashion: first bike to the railings around its rear frame, the second to the first by its front fork, the third to the second again at the rear. Before he quite knows it, Alex is being buried under a cascade of tumbling metal parts. He shuts his eyes and waits for the pain.

The clatter rings on through the lobby long after the movement has stopped.

Something sharp is left digging into his shoulder, something else squashing his ankle, but his hands at least can reach out without disturbing the bikes further. Pressing on his forearms, he slowly pulls forward, pausing at each move for the heap above him to resettle. It takes all his strength to dig himself out, the thing against his shoulder insisting on signing its name all down his back as he does so. But at last he is free. The chair too is free. The pair of them are back at the starting line.

And with the carnage of bicycles still denying them freedom.

It's quite pointless to think of trying again. Short of sitting it out till he can hand himself in, there remains only one other option: if truly set on escape he must tackle that marathon hill-climb on crutches. He's looking at five times the effort, five times as long to reach safety, five times the risk of failure, and no way to take blankets or food supplies. It would make for a tough night. Is it really so important to get away? The answer seems less certain now. Things might work themselves out eventually. If he could just get Daniel off the booze. If he could get into that drawer and dispose of that medicine bottle. If there were some way he could make Gulnaz come back and put things right. Would she ever come? Would he really want her to? Could he bear to see her getting hurt, really hurt next time – as Daniel sets off on another of his psychotic rants? She had missed being struck by that mug only by seconds. And Alex himself had come within a hair's breadth of a beating.

And a dread he can't put his finger on – of the fat man smelling of lavender water.

It's enough to draw Alex to his feet. He places the food box on the seat, covers the chair as best he can with the blanket, and wedges it beneath the stairwell out of sight. He picks his way carefully past the malevolent bicycles, battles for a while with the front door, and finally steps out into the stinging night air.

Since their earlier escapade, Cooper's Hill has plunged from wintry to arctic. The winds have swung north-westerly, icy air spiralling down from the hilltop, pushing hard against his efforts to climb. Within seconds his lungs are gasping for oxygen. He's regressed to a total novice again on crutches – forget swing-through crutch gait; it's all he can do to work one stick at a time, one limb at a time. At this speed it'll take forever. A pain barrier is fast approaching that even Malik Abdelgadir would struggle to pull him through.

But neither the hill nor the cold prove in the end to be his prime enemy. In fact the two partially cancel each other out. The physical exertion soon has him in a sweat. There's no danger of freezing, provided he keeps on going. Even in the church there is every chance of finding a blanket, maybe candles for extra warmth. But at the edge of the night sky a new enemy is gathering for attack. Rain. If water gets through his clothes to the skin he can forget

about ever getting warm again. Rain would spell deep trouble, possibly the end.

It begins with a few spits, then a fine spray carried on the wind, and then all hell breaking loose. Someone over the road starts running for cover. Two guys coming his way grab at the hoods of their cagoules; a woman's umbrella is hastily erected and immediately abandoned as the gusts flip it inside out. It flaps on the pavement like an injured bat. Before long, the gutters are gurgling, storm drains drowning and pavements flooding. The puddles soon reach to his ankles. Through the blizzard he can just make out the bus shelter. Sooner or later a bus must arrive. Only one stop to the top of the hill. Can he force out the words Saint Bartholomew? Not necessary; just 'Church' would do. Abdelgadir again, his vocal workout: forcing the long vowel to prise open his jaw. 'Chhhhh-uuuuur-chhhh.'

The shelter does keep out the rain, and to some extent the wind, but offers few other home comforts; no seating, no lighting, and no list of bus times – not that Alex has a watch. The pavements are emptying of people, the streets being abandoned to the mercy of cars.

He waits for maybe an hour without seeing a single bus in either direction. He's realised in any case that he has no money for a bus. Perhaps he'll have more luck hitching. The road is getting busier; it's probably pub-chucking-out time. The cars rev hard to make it up the hill through the wet and the wind, their lights briefly sweeping the scene but choosing to see nothing. Gradually their numbers begin to dwindle again. When at last two lads in a Mini do spot him, slowing the car down on its approach, one sticks his head out of the window, tells him he's missed the last bus because 'It's Sunday, mate,' laughs, shows him a finger and chucks a bottle. Alex turns in time to see it smash in the far corner of the shelter. The car speeds off, carefully targeting the largest puddle it can find and spraying his back with filthy water.

If they're right, then it's over. Actually, even if they're wrong. The moment it stops raining he will go home.

When he finally hauls himself in through the gateway to the flats, the whole of Sedgefield Court is in darkness. No streetlights now, only a vestigial glow of town sky remains. It must be well after midnight. Nobody is going to thank him for ringing the bell at this hour. More to the point, nobody is going to answer. He might just find his way round the back to Daniel's bedroom – something that's sure to go down well. He can just picture the scene. Another wretched night of boozing, Daniel having drifted home and blacked out the instant he crashed onto his bed, probably fully clothed. He may not even have made it that far, perhaps only to the settee, or just the floor – wherever his head first landed. Then, dragged from deep, drunken sleep by Alex's rap on the window, he'd stagger across the room,

probably swearing like a trooper, maybe taking up some kind of blunt instrument. His pinprick eyes would peer menacingly into the inky blackness, at first seeing nothing, then clocking Alex lurking in the shadows. And after that? Juggling various scenarios as the sticks feel their way down the side passage, Alex almost misses the sound of the front door. He turns around in time to see a figure heading across the forecourt and out onto the street. There is no time to attract attention. But what had he actually heard? The door opening, then footsteps. No sound of it closing again. It was a small chance, but worth the trouble of a look.

A rare moment of good luck: the visitor had been either too careless or in too much of a hurry to worry about security. Alex is in.

More amazing still, his passage is clear. The third bike has been taken and the two others repositioned; enough room left now to go through and collect the wheelchair. The two remaining bikes face him head on, challenging him to make another escape, antlers poised to impale him once more. But Alex is way past all that. He can now barely stand, can hardly keep his eyes open, and can no longer feel his arms. He'll take whatever punishment Daniel deems fit and then collapse into bed.

At the turn in the corridor he stops. For the front door of the flat to be ajar like this bodes something other than good fortune. Daniel's paranoia would never let him forget to close his own door. The flat has no intruder alarm but one is already jangling loud and clear through Alex's head. He crosses nervously into the hall to listen. An inner voice screams at him to turn back; that scent of lavender in the air again. But all is still, and he stays. The little light over the cooker hob is the only light on in the flat. As quietly as his crutches will allow, he edges forward into the kitchen. The door to the sitting room is also half open. The light picks out Daniel's ankles poking out from behind, shoes and socks still on his feet. Tonight for Daniel is a floor night. Pitiful.

Only now can Alex really be sure he's got away with it. If Daniel hadn't even had the presence of mind to shut the door then he certainly wouldn't have thought to check in on his brother before falling unconscious. It gives him all the time he needs to get out of these muddy clothes and slip into bed. He's learned how to remove his own jacket, by standing with his back to the door and hooking the handle under the waist, then drawing down the string Daniel had tied to the zip and pulling forwards, allowing the garment to be stripped from his arms. His shoes won't be a problem; they slip easily on and off. And his trousers too are loose enough to step out of, once the fly is undone and he's jiggled about for a while. Tonight, it will all be ten times harder than usual; the wet garments hug tight to his body and

he hasn't an ounce of strength left in him. But Alex doesn't care; he's home, he's safe and he has all the time he needs.

Pulling off the jacket opens up the tear inflicted by the bike. And the only way to prise off his soaked trousers is to drag himself painfully along the floor on his backside. The trousers too are ripped across one leg. Later he must cover his tracks. But for now, none of that really matters. It's enough that he can now sleep. Enough just to have made it back. If need be, he'll try the same escape tomorrow, and again the next day – every day until his luck changes, or until he runs out of clothes.

* * *

All of a sudden, rough hands are all over him; tearing away the bedclothes and trying to roll him at the shoulder. After a reflex scrambling for blankets, he awakes to a face close-up, the same blubbery, round face he'd seen before in his half-sleeping, but beetroot now with rage: gone the next moment, as his own face is engulfed in the pillow. Those rough hands crawl around his body, fingers prying and pulling. At last Alex finds his voice. Even through the stuffing it squeals out a piercing cry of protest.

"It's okay, it's okay. It's me!" he hears a voice shouting back. A sharp intake of breath follows, and deflates into a gasp.

And suddenly Alex is the one looking down at the figure on the bed. How could he have forgotten this moment? Waking from the blow to the face and staggering into this room, gripped by the dread of finding his twin trapped beneath that monstrous brute. Seeing him lying there, horribly raped, discovering the blood, mistaking the streaks of mud for something so much worse. And the love for his brother that came with that dread, surpassing any love he'd ever known; love that would have driven him willingly to kill or be killed. That love was the same selfless love he's hearing now, and the same dread, bursting inconsolably from Daniel's lips.

"No, no, no," he cries out, the clarity dawning white-hot that Daniel must be made to understand. "It's all a mistake. I haven't been raped!"

But the words hit the air as nothing but gibberish. He struggles to free himself from the tangle of sheets and sit, and show it with his hands. But a second audience isn't granted. The phone next door is already being torn from its cradle. A chain reaction is getting underway, the future being set in stone. People are about to get hurt. It doesn't matter that Daniel's words down the phone are totally incoherent; from the sheer desperation in the voice Alex knows that Gulnaz will immediately set out without question. For God's sake let him rise from the bed and make it all stop. He knows only too well what will happen when she arrives.

His mind has played it over and over a thousand times; he'd simply misunderstood where it fitted. Now he must stand ready to witness the unforgiveable act of violence against her, helplessly to bellow and howl and block his ears to the poor woman's screams.

* * *

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Strapped into the back, the taxi purring down empty wet streets, Alex does what he can to shut out the scenes he's just witnessed. He tries not to see the worktop swept clean and the plate rack knocked flying with a single swipe of an arm, a drawer torn from its runners and hurled to the ground in an explosion of cutlery. But the deafening din of it all wells up between the strokes of the wipers; the banished images coalesce once more behind rain trails at his window. Gulnaz sits beside him, tense and unyielding. He doesn't dare look at her face.

The taxi takes them out of town, to a grand avenue lined with trees, and pulls into the driveway ahead of the brightly lit porch of an imposing house. The cabbie unloads the chair and helps him out; Gulnaz lets herself in through the door. This place is as far removed from Daniel's flat as one could possibly imagine, everything so palatial and tranquil. He's an earthquake victim pulled from the debris and taken up to paradise. Within minutes, Gulnaz has him stripped and cleaned, into fresh pyjamas and tucked up in a bed laid with satin sheets. But none of it touches him, none of the luxuries, none of her tenderness. Nothing connects.

Words are now writing themselves across a gossamer veil of sleep; voices, blowing in softly from the street, or being conjured purely from imagination. A cloaking, deeper sleep follows, and then Gulnaz is back, dressing him and taking him through to an enormous kitchen. He sits at the table, watching a hundred muscles working her face as she toils. They distort her mouth and constrict her breathing. There's a rage burning beneath that calm exterior, yet she barely says a word. Until now, he's been carefully avoiding her eyes, but when at last she sits down he allows himself to meet her gaze, and reaches a finger towards the angry swelling on her forehead.

"No, no, Alex, that's not... I, got that at the care home," she says, pulling back. In a more considered voice she adds, "Don't misunderstand me. Nobody there was out to hurt me. It was just me being careless. You've no need to worry; it's a perfectly safe place to stay."

But even Gulnaz can't engineer a smile to make the story stick. Her failure to convince only stresses her further. She is back on her feet, the detached professional again, insisting that this is the best arrangement for everyone. "You should think of it more as a hostel than a hospital," she lectures him. "And it'll only be for a short time. I'll be there to look after you."

On a sudden impulse she takes his hand. "Please believe me, Alex, I'm sorry; I truly, truly am. God only knows what's been going on since I last visited you. I had no idea he could behave like that."

Again Alex hears the echo of blows behind closed doors, and knows exactly what Daniel is capable of.

“I should never have let it come to this. I know Daniel meant well when he first took you in – we wouldn’t have released you to him otherwise. Please believe me when I say that.” The words set her busying around the stove. “He just... Well, clearly he just couldn’t cope. I warned him. I should have stopped it sooner. These terrible things that have happened to you – that gave you those cuts on your back, the marks on your neck; the mud on your clothes; this man from the pub; Daniel’s outburst...” She brings a hand to her face as if to silence herself, but lays the palm over her left eye.

She’s starting to cry. She hides it well, but the little quiver in her voice before the swallowed words is enough. Alex only wishes he could say something to comfort her. Forcing back her shoulders, she turns and presents the table with a plate of scrambled eggs. Just the one. Nothing for herself.

The eggs stick in his throat. They put him in mind of oral feeds. He thinks of saline drips, feeding tubes and gloved fingers that delve into forbidden areas. The irony. He had indeed been raped. Only, not by Daniel’s uninvited caller, but by her very own colleagues. And here is Gulnaz, wanting him back in institutional care. Then again, he’d wanted it too – it was why he’d tried to escape. And the escape had been to blame for Daniel’s misunderstanding, which in turn had brought Gulnaz running...

It all sets his mind in a spin. He picks at the edges of the plate until Gulnaz takes it away. Already she’s apologising for the things she’s just said about his brother, suggesting the impossible – that they try to put what happened in the night behind them. She finishes up in the kitchen, returning it to its pristine state, jots something down on a pad to their unnamed host, puts her hands together and suggests they get going. After that, everything moves at great speed. She wheels him out onto the front drive, through the gates, past poplar trees and privet hedges, on towards a park on the corner and across the road to an imposing, red-bricked building. Two square pillars mark its gateway. ‘Newlyn House’ the plaque says. ‘Residential and Short-Stay Care Home’. The receptionist at the door is waving them in. She smiles at Alex as though she knows him. Maybe he knows her too. They’re navigating awkward corners, trundling along wood-panelled passageways and uneven flooring, and pulling up before a plain white door.

“I think you should try to get some rest,” Gulnaz suggests, raising him from the chair. “I have to attend to a few other residents for a while, but I’ll keep dropping by. I’ll take you round later and introduce you to people.” She closes the door as she leaves.

Alex sits motionless, his head dizzied by all the activity, his brain too full to take in the room. It takes a firm rap on the door to force a way through the inner noise. Expecting Gulnaz again, he looks round, but is met by a squat, middle-aged man with thinning hair and a paunch. His excuse for the intrusion is curt and to the point.

“Alex George? I’ve come to give you a tour of the facilities.”

Alex shrinks back on the pillow. He doesn’t give a shit about facilities. He wants only to stay put until Gulnaz is free and then just sit alone with her for the remainder of the day. But the carer is already advancing with his chair at the ready, as though no isn’t an option. Alex turns away and reaches for his crutches. He’ll give the man a run for his money at least.

Grumbling about the other jobs on his list, the man walks him back the way he’d been brought. “Residents’ lounge,” he announces, as though it were a station platform. Alex sees tables laid with food, balloons and tinsel hung from the ceiling, poppers and crackers. He hears music and laughter, the dull clunk of plastic glasses, sees swirling gowns. He drops his eyes and looks again and finds another world entirely. Empty, bleak and unloved. A room without colour. A room without joy.

Their next stop is the dining room, Alex half expecting Gulnaz to be there at every turn, but knowing deep down that she won’t be.

“Supper is at five-thirty. We’ll come for you at five.”

More corridors and they are back at his door. The carer points out his nearest toilet and gives him a quick rundown of the fire drill, then takes him inside. Suddenly Alex is facing another stint of solitude, another block of time with only his own mind as obsessive companion. More pointless thinking, taking him round and round the houses. The flat, for example, what is Daniel doing at this moment? Would he be able to receive a message putting him straight about the rape? Or does Alex let him stew in that delusion as punishment for what he’s done to Gulnaz? Do they even connect at this distance? It’s hard to say – the image of a ransacked kitchen is unchanged from before. The eyes through which he studies the scene stay fixed upon a single point. More a caught memory than a live feed; a snapshot outside of time. But then Alex too has lost all sense of time. This new room has no clock. Maybe it’s deliberate. Here, it seems they are not to be encouraged to count the minutes and the hours. Or even the days. Here, time is not to be carved up that way, only into units of food, toileting, medicine, sleep – and death. Here, he must learn to play by the rules and simply wait. And make the most of the stillness...

...Because supper, when it eventually arrives, proves to be a whirlwind of chaos. By the end of the meal a hundred things have been dropped, thrown or broken. And still everyone

somehow gets fed. Everyone gets cleaned up. Everyone gets led away.

No sign of Gulnaz all evening.

And then it is night.

She's abandoned him to the madhouse. The bed is hard and slightly damp. And creaks when he rolls over. Which he does for most of the night.

Woken by daylight, at first Alex can't place his whereabouts – a cobweb of netting, framed by faded brown curtains tied back with string. Where is this place? His attention wanders from the window to the loud, floral wallpaper. As a child he'd known a carpet like this. His eyes are pulled to the corners, where the migrainous shapes dissolve into mould stains, paper peeling from its edges. A wardrobe with ill-fitting doors, a solitary table and hard wooden chair, and the bed he lies in. It's something like Daniel's flat, and yet it isn't. He smells damp and stale fabric, disinfectant and incontinence. They turn his thoughts to the hospital.

One by one, the faces from the day before are etched into the dust-filled sunlight: the smiling woman at reception, the terse and balding orderly, the rabble of dysfunctional diners, until it has all fallen into place. The only character still missing from the crowd is Gulnaz. She finally makes her appearance as the room's own smells begin mixing with hints of cooked breakfast. At first glance, Gulnaz looks to be her old self; smiling, cheerful, seemingly revived by rest. Only when she comes closer does he see the magic she's had to work with foundation and powder to lift her complexion, to smooth out the exhaustion lines and to conceal the spreading bruise over her eye. Her one effort to cover her absence is a brief apology for having been called away, and a hope that Stanley had taken good care of him while she was gone.

She has with her some of Alex's clothes from the flat. It alarms him that she'd risked returning so soon, but nothing is said of the matter; she leaves them on the little table, helps him dress and strolls patiently at his side as he shuffles his way towards the dining room. Breakfast is the same mayhem he'd witnessed at supper. Finding him a vacant seat at the end of one of the long tables, Gulnaz makes a point of introducing him to his immediate neighbours.

"Everyone, this is Alex. Alex will be staying with us for a little while. I want you all to make him feel welcome."

The man opposite grunts, sets down his spoon and tries to raise himself from the chair before conceding defeat.

"Non sum qualis eram," he wheezes. "More's the bloody pity."

"This is Professor Bagshot," Gulnaz says. Alex can't help but smile. The pompous

Latin, the baggy face and vocal cords shot through – the man could not have been better named. The professor gawks at him through tiny spectacles, his forehead puckering into a frown. “To pepromenon phygein adynaton!” he declares. It sounds like a warning.

Gulnaz moves on hastily. “And this is Amelia. Amelia’s great-granddaughter is coming to visit this weekend for the very first time. We’re going to make her especially welcome, aren’t we Amelia?”

“I’m ninety-seven,” the old woman roars gleefully through her porridge. Her gummy mouth reminds Alex of Scoff’s yawns.

He’s been conscious throughout of the intense gaze of the third member of the group. Before Gulnaz can speak her name the woman’s hand stops her. “And I am Margaret Shenton-Stevens,” she announces, rising rake-like and radiant from her seat; a princess in the skin of an old witch. The hand she extends for Alex to kiss might have come straight from a museum of natural history but for the gaudy fake diamond on one finger.

“On Friday, we’re having a party for Margaret’s birthday.” Gulnaz says. “Twenty-one again, Margaret?”

“Don’t be childish, dear. Anyway, that would be telling,” she purrs. The hand is withdrawn as she returns to her seat. And then it is as if these exchanges had never been. The group’s attention drifts back to their food, all efforts focused on reacquainting fingers with utensils, their faces resetting as though each sits alone in some cold, loveless prison.

With breakfast drawing to a close, the carers begin lining themselves up into ranks, the vanguard gathering dishes, the second wave herding residents out through the main doors, and the third sweeping the tables with damp cloths, cleaning sprays and plastic caddies. When their turn comes, Alex and his group are goaded towards the lounge.

The room, deserted when he’d last seen it, has now come alive with activity. In one corner, a withered old man is being helped into a high-backed wing chair, a newspaper slotted in between his fingers. Even from the far side of the room the headlines of frustration are readable across his brow. With those claw-like hands, he has little hope of ever turning the pages. His buckled frame suggest he might never even rise again from that chair. Alex’s heart goes out to him a little; a fellow traveller whose active mind no doubt rages against his useless, broken body. On the other side of the room, an energetic old lady hurries pointlessly from one empty chair to another, chattering feverishly to an invisible friend – her body appears sound enough; it’s her mind that betrays her. The fear and confusion in her eyes says it all.

And then Alex sees, having so nearly missed altogether, another woman right before

him, knotted so tightly into a ball by arthritis that her shrunken frame is all but eaten up by the chair. Her gaze seems locked onto a jaw-dropping infinity, both mind and body long destroyed, yet the oblivion in her face suggesting she knows nothing of it.

Is hers the greatest torment? Or the least?

Bagshot, meanwhile, has parked himself down in front of the TV, his doting lady friend Amelia faithfully following suit. The Shenton-Stevens woman has already excused herself. Alex decides to stay. He's drawn by the snooker. And it's either this or be faced with his own room again.

As the snooker highlights hand over to horseracing, the room is suddenly overrun by swathes of green lame, flashes of cherry-red lipstick and cascades of fake golden curls. Transformed by her new outfit, Margaret Shenton-Stevens – like some faded Hollywood actress from the Golden Age – comes swishing across the floor towards them. The pancake she wears must have been trowelled into the cracks with a palette knife.

“Well, well, well, so you came back to me,” she coos at Alex, false lashes beating like butterfly wings. “I always knew you would.” He recoils slightly from the intoxication of her perfume. “You wicked boy; sweeping me off my feet at the ball like that. Don't think I don't know that you're stepping out with Miss Gulnaz.”

She sighs. “Of course I don't really blame you, my dear. You're not exactly the first young soldier whose head I've turned.”

Mad. Quite mad. But this is the kind of gibberish Alex guesses he'll need to get used to for a while. She spots the crutches beside him, raises her eyes to the heavens and then casts him a most pitying look. “Oh, dear boy, be brave now. Service to the King. They'll have you fighting fit in a few weeks.”

A twinge of affection towards this woman catches him unawares. “Oh, it's nothing, I... just slipped on the stairs,” he fibs to reassure her. Immediately his skin begins to flush. Had he really said that – *had* he? Or did he simply imagine it?

“Careless boy. Too busy eyeing the pretty girls to watch your step, I've no doubt.”

Christ, he really had spoken out loud. Not yet quite his true voice, the words were still slurred, but a real sentence, not just garbage or random fragments. It scares him even to try again in case nothing happens.

Gulnaz and another care worker appear at the door and march over, the Stevens woman's outfit making light work of their searches.

“Ah, there you are, Margaret,” Gulnaz says. Mrs Shenton-Stevens' eyes light up, as though seeing her for the first time.

“Miss Gulnaz! Are you better now, my dear? I hear you went home sick yesterday. Was it the professor? Did he upset you again?”

Bagshot swears quietly in what sounds like Greek.

“I’m fine, Margaret.” Gulnaz’s laugh is a little too enthusiastic to convince. “And no, it wasn’t the professor.”

Sick. Gulnaz had gone home sick. That’s why he’d not seen her all day yesterday. In his heart, Alex had known it all along.

“Harlot!! Whore!! In nomine diaboli. Mulier est hominis confusio!”

Bagshot again. Miraculously rejuvenated, he’s up on his feet, his little round face apoplectic with fury. He looks certain to strike the Stevens woman for her rudeness. His unbuttoned dress-shirt falls open as he lurches forward, unlinked cuffs dangling from the wrists. Amelia starts to squeal, duly summoning male nurse Stanley from the next room. Mrs Shenton-Stevens herself stands resolute. Bagshot reaches out, grabbing – not at her throat as Alex expects – but at the aerial cable behind the TV, his white-haired chest thwacking against the screen as he yanks the lead from its socket. Amelia is silent again, as transfixed by flickering snow as by hooves over flying turf.

“Give me that!” demands Stanley. Bagshot begins to howl and curse. He hugs the cable to his chest and sticks the metal plug in his mouth, antics that look set to incite a general riot. The running woman is clapping and dancing on the spot. Her invisible friend is probably doing likewise. The man in the high-backed wing chair starts shaking his newspaper. The curled up woman curls up all the tighter.

“Now that will do, Professor,” Gulnaz chides gently. Manoeuvring herself into the standoff, she carefully withdraws the aerial from Bagshot’s fingers and teases the wire from his teeth. “Why don’t we just put this back where it belongs?”

Everyone applauds. Insurrection has been thwarted. Bagshot is led away. A trail of classical obscenities follows him out.

Gulnaz looks around at Alex. “The professor doesn’t approve of women sports presenters,” she explains. Alex is quite shaken. He hadn’t expected such aggressive behaviour in a place like this. That bruise over her eye; maybe Gulnaz didn’t invent her story after all. Bagshot or some other nutcase could have taken a swipe at her while she was feeding or dressing them. Surely this can’t be allowed. Surely the home has a duty of care towards its staff as well as its residents.

“What are you doing dressed like that?” the other nurse hisses at Mrs Shenton-Stevens. “You were supposed to go straight back to your room after breakfast.”

Mrs Shenton-Stevens pouts and runs a hand through Alex's hair. "I was reacquainting myself with our young soldier here." Her scowl becomes the most wistful of smiles. "Oh, how we danced and danced at the ball. Danced until our feet could take no more."

"No, Margaret," Gulnaz says. "This isn't Daniel. This is Alex, his brother. And you shouldn't touch people without their permission."

The Stevens woman scoffs. "Don't be silly my dear, of course he is Daniel. Just look at his face, his exquisite hair. Can't you see that?"

"Listen to me, Margaret." Gulnaz speaks firmly but kindly. "They are twins. It was Daniel you met at the party, not Alex. Daniel is not staying here with us. Daniel has his own home."

"Oh, I know that. But you're quite wrong, Miss Gulnaz. You see, this *is* Daniel. The *other* Daniel. The Daniel from the other side."

The nurse grunts irritably. "Now stop all your nonsense and come with me. You know perfectly well it's time for your medication and visit to the bathroom."

Mrs Shenton-Stevens narrows her eyes tellingly at Alex and indicates his crutches. "Don't run away," she quips. With a quick preen to the curls and a shuffle in her bosom she gives the gathering a martyred look – it isn't easy being the object of everyone's desire – and turns her back. Gulnaz smiles after her, and the smile is still there when she takes Alex's arm and leads him from the lounge.

"Poor Margaret. I do feel sorry for her. Schizophrenia and dementia. Most of the time she's perfectly delightful, but she does get confused and can sometimes become upset and abusive. So don't be alarmed if and when she doesn't recognise you, or gets you mixed up with Daniel. I'll tell you her story, if you like." She giggles. "Looks like she's set her heart on telling you anyway. Come on. Let's go somewhere quiet."

She shows him into a more private space; a room perhaps where the staff themselves take their breaks. She sits him down and pulls up the armchair beside him, sinking into it like a deadweight.

"We're all on this cruise liner, you see – that's what she believes. It's her honeymoon, and every day she's waiting for her husband to turn up. The story goes that she'd once met this merchant seaman. They'd been head-over-heels in love and had decided to marry the moment he was back from his next voyage. He'd promised to show her the wonders of the world with a honeymoon cruise. Then came the war and one assignment became two, became ten and then twenty. Instead of being away just for a few weeks, it stretched on for months."

Her story stirs echoes of another. *'Daddy won't be home for Easter because he has to go to sea... Your dad won't be here for the holidays because he's away at sea...'*

"Then the letters stopped arriving. News came through of these terrible merchant shipping losses at the hands of the U-Boats. And his ship was on the list."

'Your father won't be coming home... Your father has been lost at sea.'

"So their life was not to be. Poor Mrs Shenton-Stevens – she probably never even married. She's probably just plain Miss Shenton, or Miss Stevens. But now she's trapped in this time bubble, forced to relive the past over and over. But it's not her real past. More like a recurring bad dream. Here she is, on this luxury liner." Gulnaz takes a moment to look around, as if in awe of the mind's powers of reinvention. "She's all dressed up for the party, but her darling, dashing young husband never comes. She's inconsolable. Sometimes she convinces herself that he's run off with another woman. Sometimes she believes he's been abducted by spies, or is terrified that he's got himself drunk and fallen overboard."

'We both know how cruel the sea can be. She nearly took us both. But your father, and the others, they weren't so lucky that day.'

"She might just sit and cry for hours, or become rebellious and flirtatious. And often she'll believe he's come to her – I think she thought Daniel might have been him when he helped out at the New Year's Eve Ball. Margaret took to him at once. She wouldn't let him dance with anyone else. Not even me! Of course it only made the next day all the more heart-breaking for her."

She has been telling him all this, Alex suspects, mostly as a polite warning not to go humouring the woman or encouraging her delusions.

* * *

The next time he catches up with Margaret Shenton-Stevens, some time after supper, she is back in a modest skirt and top, sitting alone by the window; her thin hands cupped in her lap, eyes staring out way beyond the back lawn. Without makeup, she looks sallow-faced, the deep-etched lines confessing not so much to old age but to that lifetime of denied happiness.

"Good evening, Daniel," she says, without redirecting her gaze.

"Mrs Shenton-Ste..."

"It's Margaret, dear boy. As well you know."

"Okay, Margaret. I'm sorry to disappoint you, but I'm really not who you think I am." Already his heart is pounding. Why this woman has the power to so totally liberate his tongue he can't fathom.

"Don't be absurd, my dear." She chooses to scrutinise him now, as intensely as on their

first meeting. “Why are you so afraid to accept who you are?”

The clouded grey of her eyes brings him out in a cold sweat. “But I’m not. It was my brother, my identical twin, you danced with on New Year’s Eve, not me. Only... I’ve been ill. Daniel tracked me down, looked after me – well, tried to. But it didn’t work out. That’s why they brought me here.”

Mrs Shenton-Stevens guffaws. “And where were you found? Do you remember how you got there? Do you remember anything of who you say you are?”

He tries to swallow, but his mouth has lost its saliva. “They found me at a...” He suddenly thinks better of talking about graveyards. “Well, no, not yet. But only because the doctors believe I’d taken something that...”

“Doctors! You can’t trust doctors! No, no, no, the only memories you’re ever going to have are of the things *he’s* seen and done, or has yet to see and do. Because his memories are your memories. Because he is you.”

Alex takes a step back. This woman is giving him the creeps.

“Sit down, my dear,” she insists. “You and I need to talk.”

His hands are shaking now, the sticks broadcasting the fact.

“And for heaven’s sake, get rid of those things. You won’t be needing any kind of crutch after our little chat.”

Why is Mrs Shenton-Stevens talking like this? Her behaviour doesn’t fit at all with Gulnaz’s portrait of her. She has a screw loose, no doubt about that, but this isn’t the wildly distraught, cuckolded victim that was painted for him. Her interrogation is disturbingly clear-headed, and for all her dementia, is somehow probing further beneath his skin than even Gulnaz has managed to do.

The deep facial lines rearrange themselves into a mischievous smile. “They all think I’m barmy, you know,” she chuckles. “They think I live in a fantasy world of gala balls and ocean cruises.”

“And you don’t?” he asks carefully, reaching for the chair next but one to hers. He has decided to stay with this for now. Her eyes, he notices, remain fixed and cold.

“Of course not. I know exactly what this place is. Care home. Nursing home. Old people’s home. Loony bin. Asylum. They invent many names.”

“So, what was all that ‘Young soldier’ stuff earlier, all that ‘Service to the King’?”

“Why, that was just for effect. One has to keep up the pretence, my dear.”

Alex frowns. “You want them to keep you here?”

“But of course! Don’t you see? It is the perfect cover. Where else could he and I be

together without raising an eyebrow? Anywhere else, and they'd lock me up!!"

"Together with who, your fiancée?"

"My husband, dear boy! And it's whom: together with whom, not who. Let's not forget our grammar." By leaning forward, she can just reach his knee with her fingertips. "You see, he kept his promise. He comes to me. When he's here, of course I want to dance. Of course I want to dress up. When he's here, I am the happiest woman alive.

"But alas, he cannot stay forever. It isn't allowed."

"He... goes back."

She nods.

"To the 'other side'. You said I was from the other side." A light-headedness hits him as he repeats the very words that compelled him to seek her out tonight. He feels oddly like a child, willingly surrendering to the hands of a loved and loving grandparent, a wise old mystic. "You're saying I'm dead, right? That I'm some kind of a ghost, come back to haunt myself."

Mrs Shenton-Stevens stares at him wide-eyed for a second and then begins to laugh, at first to herself and then more hysterically. "Dead? *Dead??* My darling boy, I danced with you. I touched you. I *kissed* you! Dead, you most certainly are not!"

And suddenly Alex is laughing too. He snuffles loudly. For a moment there, he'd been swept up into her make-believe world, petrified she would say yes, he was back from the dead, put here expressly to punish himself for a lifetime of wrongdoing. And in that state he might even have believed her. But this funny little woman has just managed to argue herself completely up in knots, showing her state of mind to be only marginally at odds with official medical opinion.

And yet, how indescribably comforting, the ease with which she can talk of such impossible things, as though they were as commonplace in Newlyn House as afternoon tea and a little tub of pills.

"And how else would you explain the birthmark?" she asks.

Alex freezes. "What?"

"The birthmark in your hair. Not even identical twins can share the same birthmarks."

The birthmark.

Oh Jesus, she's right. He'd seen it in Daniel's hair when they held each other on the cliff top. It was exactly like the mark he'd studied in the mirror. Only, its significance then had escaped him. He isn't sure if what she says about all twins is true, but he remembers something now. The birthmark had been the only way their school friends had ever been able to tell them apart. Only Daniel had had it.

The old lady studies his face. “I can see that in your heart you already know,” she says.

Cold logic demands that he protest further, but Mrs Shenton-Stevens is now slipping into a world of her own.

“You see, we’re blessed, my dear. Like my husband, you came back. He and I weren’t ready to say goodbye. And neither are you. We’ve both been given a second chance at love; a second chance to confront loss. I dare say someone very dear to your heart has been taken from you: this twin brother you pretend to be – a mother, a father, a sweetheart – a child of your own? I don’t know. I don’t want to know. But whoever you’ve lost, Daniel, now is your chance to reach out to them and make your peace.”

She leans forward again and waggles a spindly finger. “And for goodness sake, go and confess your love to Miss Gulnaz!”

Anyone else listening might already have laughed this deranged old maid out of court. But Alex doesn’t find her ludicrous in the slightest. Baffling, cryptic, enigmatic, yes, but not laughable.

“Now, I’m afraid all this has made me very tired, Daniel. I need my beauty sleep.”

She sinks back in the chair and closes her eyes, a slight smile pinned to her thin lips, a veil of serenity falling softly around her. She expects him to go now. But before he can take hold of the crutches, an impulse stays his hands, places them instead on the arms of the chair and gives the order to push. He feels himself rising easily, legs taking the full weight of standing. Unsteady at first, relearning the art of balance, in the same way his tongue had had to relocate itself, he ventures a foot forward, and then another. Just as she foretold it, for the first time since waking from the coma, Alex discovers he can walk unaided.

* * *

And join them together

Of course it made no sense what Mrs Shenton-Stevens had said, but Alex is struck nonetheless by the woman's willingness to embrace her own extraordinary reality. Might insanity be nothing scarier than that – accepting without question an inner truth that shows itself, regardless of how much it defies the accepted truths of a bigoted and small-minded world? He raises a hand from the bedspread towards the poorly patched bumps and cracks on the ceiling, allowing his fingers to outline the swelling over Gulnaz's eye. The hand sinks slowly again, down to the scald marks across his abdomen, his fingers walking a path up his body to his damaged cheekbone and from there to the birthmark on his scalp.

The signs, the *stigmata* of his own insanity.

He swings from the bed and drops down onto his newfound legs. They hold him securely and respond well to his command to pace the room. Margaret Shenton-Stevens had been wise enough on that score at least. And if there was anything else in that surreal encounter that rang true it was her closing message – for Alex to confront his ghosts and to act upon his feelings for Gulnaz.

* * *

It's strange how her words have affected him. He's thinking of Gulnaz every waking moment. When he's alone he longs to be near her. Whenever she's around he finds himself enthralled by her actions: the way she performs each and every degrading task without the slightest protest. The more he watches, the more in awe of her he becomes. Yes, at times she can become irritable, but those frustrations never once give in to rudeness. Her versatility astounds him even more than her energy. One moment tenderness, the next formidable strength; her long thin arms can become a gentle cradle or knotted rope. When her hair falls forward over her eyes she's forced to break off from work and tuck it back into place. He imagines the smell of that hair, the sensuousness of that thick black cascade against his face. Sometimes she ties it back out of the way – his chance to study her long neck, her delicate throat, the little hollows to either side softening into those slender shoulders. He aches to stroke her skin. If she catches him staring this way she becomes at once self-conscious and pleased. Her face lights up with a grin, then mocks itself with a look that seems to say, 'Just who in their right mind would work in a place like this?', before she's back with her coaxing and persuading and cleaning up sick and wheeling off to the toilets people who've left it too late to ask.

And incredibly, despite such a workload, she's always able to spend time with him.

Over afternoon tea, she draws up a chair and starts chatting about Margaret's party, suggesting ways he might like to help out. He's moved by her enthusiasm for the useless roles he'd be able to take on.

"It reminds me of New Year," she beams. "When Daniel just announced out of the blue that he was going to stay and muck in. He just rolled up his sleeves and got on with it. Everybody loved his waiter service, and the Karaoke he organised was brilliant."

To hear her saying these things, one wouldn't think this was the same individual from whom they'd just fled. Has she forgotten so soon? Or simply forgiven? But she mustn't forgive; not before Daniel has paid for his actions. Alex could scream at her, shake her to her senses. But if she knew he could speak she would only start interrogating him over his memory again; over his past and everything else. And what could he possibly say in reply that wouldn't have had him instantly sectioned?

And so he says nothing. He just sits and stares.

He does decide though, later that day, to let her know that he's now walking without crutches. Of course Gulnaz is overjoyed. Word of his recovery soon spreads throughout the care home. Others begin claiming they too have been miraculously healed; one woman falls and hurts herself. Someone calls him holy. Bagshot calls him a charlatan and something in Double Dutch that is probably much ruder. Alex is given a walking stick and strict instructions to go easy, build up slowly, take gentle afternoon walks. It's on one of these that Gulnaz almost collides with him in the corridor.

"Oh, Alex!" she smiles, "I was just coming for you. Not overdoing it, I hope. I came to tell you that everything's laid out ready; people will be arriving soon. We've put you on sandwich duty."

He'd known something wasn't right. With dinner less than an hour away the air should already be filled with the stench of over-stewed vegetables. All the familiar noises have been there – clanking of trays, the jangle of cutlery and clatter of dishes, but none of the usual bad smells. No fat frying, no boiled cabbage. But of course: Margaret's party. Their excuse to downgrade from a hot meal to a cold snack. Friday has crept up on him unnoticed.

"By the way, you have a letter." She pulls it from her tunic and flips it over. "I found it among Daniel's mail in his pigeonhole. From an M. J. Greenall?"

It takes him a moment to recognise the name and its significance. So, Uncle Martin had done as he'd promised, set down his account of his father's death. Margaret Shenton-Stevens' words again prophetic: *Whoever you've lost, Daniel, now is the time to reach out to them and make your peace.*"

“Would you like me to open it?” Gulnaz asks, her fingers playing inquisitively over the seal. Alex shakes his head and holds out his hand, clutching the letter between forearm and chest when she gives it over. He will share it when the time is right for her to find out he can speak. She sucks her lip in disappointment. “Oh, right. You can show me later, if you like.”

Only once the party gets underway, as Gulnaz becomes embroiled in a squabble between Bagshot and his latest target, does Alex feel it safe to sneak away to the toilets and read what Greenall has written.

* * *

The turbulent waters to which he returns are a world apart from those of the South Atlantic where he’s just spent the past half hour. His absence has not gone unnoticed. Though Gulnaz is still preoccupied, the care worker he’s supposed to be helping serve sandwiches spots him the moment he appears at the door and duly steers him back to his post.

Behind the piles of crab paste and queuing zombies, the party’s host is already flashing her ruby smile, fold upon fold of green lame fanning the room. In full flight now, ecstatic in her created reality, Margaret Shenton-Stevens soars through the air, her arms circling and beckoning in a ritual dance. ‘Finest foie gras! Beluga caviar! Burgundy snails! Italian white truffles! Moroccan black olives!’, all courtesy of her magnanimous husband and his heroic merchant fleet. Everyone is declared welcome to her reception, welcome to the feast. Alex thinks of his father’s ship, and of merchant seaman Stevens, both having carved their lone paths through unguarded waters as they waited like sitting ducks for Skyhawk and U-boat respectively. Where one life was sacrificed for probably no more than a few tons of grain, the other was forfeited for the pittance of a tactical manoeuvre. Greenall’s bombshell was that their ship had been deployed as a decoy for enemy fire, to draw attention away from the landing beaches. He stares at the woman. For all the heartbreak of not knowing the fate of her lover, Mrs Shenton-Stevens is at least spared the outrage against the faceless generals who assign such little value to men’s lives. How they dare sit in their bombproof bunkers thousands of miles from conflict, deciding impassively who should live and who should die, and whose families should bear the scars of grief and loss for generations to come.

Or take those like Greenall, whose body survived but whose heart died that day. Reading the confession in his letter had been another blow to the gut – a direct strike to the ship’s bow, ripping it open, fire and smoke engulfing the hangar where Greenall had been working; his instinct to survive shoving all else aside, and the price it would exact upon his conscience for the rest of his life. Hearing his shipmates calling out through the smoke, seeing them squirm in the flames, only to clamber in a frenzy over a carpet of writhing bodies

in his desperate bid to get out.

The sandwich queue has now backed up to the door. Many are helping themselves. The table is becoming a bombsite, a massacre. Alex can't help them. He's lost the use of his arms. With a hundred things to do and a hundred places to watch, the nurse beside him has yet to note his deterioration, only their failing battle to keep the servery afloat. Now, as a request for a clean plate is ignored for the third time, she rounds on him more than a little sharply.

"Are you going to help us here, Alex, or not?"

She becomes aware of his trembling hands. Someone else is called to take over. The nurse takes his arm.

"You've probably overdone it. You're probably just tired. I don't suppose you've had anything to eat anything yet, have you?"

A plate of pink paste and white bread and a glass of squash are hurriedly assembled, and before he knows it he has a side table all to himself. The thought of food only makes him want to vomit.

A thin voice asks him timidly, "Aren't you going to wish me a happy birthday, Daniel?"

Behind the table he sees Margaret standing, suddenly frail and frightened; no more the radiant birthday girl. Little beads of sweat are erupting through the crust of pancake; the folds in her skin deepen and shift. The beaming red smile is gone, her face left sad and lonely, utterly overwhelmed.

"Their ship was bombed," he mutters, without thinking.

"Oh, my poor husband!" Her eyes begin welling with tears. "I knew something terrible must have happened when he didn't come."

"No, Margaret. No, not your husband. I meant my father. Another ship had to tow them away. They read out a list of the dead and the missing. My dad was one of them. They sailed home to a hero's welcome. They didn't feel like heroes. They felt like broken men."

"Like broken men," her little mouth quivers. "Yes, I'm sure they did."

News of his exhaustion has reached Gulnaz and she's managed to prise herself free to join him. He suddenly finds her standing within earshot, open-jawed.

"You're speaking," she stammers.

The cat is out of the bag.

"Oh, yeah, a few words. Just since yesterday. I was going to tell you."

"But Alex, on top of your walking, that's marvellous! How...?"

"Look," he interrupts, "it's not a good time. I don't feel well. Please take me back to my room. I just need to rest."

“Yes, yes of course.”

It really isn't the moment to be faced with her jubilation, or her optimism, or her questions. She does her best to contain all three as she withdraws him from the party. When she says, “We'll talk all about it later,” it's a rain check as much for herself as it is for him. For the rest of the day, Alex confines himself to bed, turning the words in the letter over and over. Not the attack, not his uncle's impulse for self-preservation, but the core of the letter, the bombshell that really blew him away: how the blood of those men came to be stained on his father's hands.

But should he be lying here in judgement? When Greenall's words put him aboard that warship he can instantly feel his father's terror.

“So alone, our floating island, our highly disciplined, meticulously engineered ecosystem of man and machine – one half tooled up for life support, the other for meting out death. Along the horizon before us; a strip of land – once British – now an alien menace with a thousand watchful eyes; plotting our every move and plotting its reprisal. We knew attack would come as surely as nightfall would follow this dawn. Who of us would still be around to profit from its cloaking darkness? None of us daring to ask. Only praying. Sanity screaming from every quarter to head for safer waters, but nobody voicing it. Every gun turret, every porthole, every aerial, guard rail, walkway, every damn rivet and weld wanting only to be somewhere far away. But all silently complicit. One ship, two hundred men, no air cover, no hiding place, no escape. Just our orders to hold firm.”

Would Alex too have gone into meltdown when the shout came – “*Skyhawk!*”, as the panic spread, in the scrabble to find shelter, under the scream of a diving engine, with the ship's guns spitting fire into the smoke trail of the banking plane, could he have endured this any better than his father? Or would he too have lost his nerve, rampaged like a mad bull through the ship's hangar, screaming at his shipmates to join him in taking over the bridge and signalling surrender?

Greenall claims he'd tried to shut him up, that they'd argued, even exchanged blows. In the mayhem, the second call – “*Hit the deck!*” had apparently gone unheard. They blamed his father for that, the survivors, because no-one in the hangar was ready when the explosion hit them full in the face.

“Some of the crew died right there; some – myself among them – managed to battle blindly through fire out onto the decks. Your father was blown clean through a hole in the gaping hull. Whether he hit the freezing waters alive or dead nobody will ever know, but minutes later, Alex, I promise it would have made no difference.”

The letter goes on to mention an inquiry, set up to question the wisdom of putting

ships in such a vulnerable spot. But the top brass were in no mood to have their strategic decisions picked over and challenged. The inquiry was a whitewash. As a result, his father's insurrection never surfaced. Maybe others on board had behaved as badly. Maybe this was accepted as normal in the confusion and panic of battle. Other stories were breaking: stories more ghoulish, more capable of whipping up public passions – the fate of Sir Galahad and Sir Tristram, the awful disfigurement and immense courage of Simon Weston. Greenall and the others were forgotten, left to salvage their own meanings from the wreckage of their lives. It might have ended there. But when the story of Alex's fall broke in the local press, inevitably the journalists were keen to amplify the tragedy with back stories of his father's heroism and ultimate sacrifice. For one of the ships' crew, a junior rating who'd been attending the Lynx helicopter down in the hangar, reading those words must have been too much. He'd sent the paper a damning account of Petty Officer George's call to mutiny, exaggerated beyond belief. Perhaps it was his way of finding the closure they all sought. The paper promptly retracted their story and crucified their former hero. Their words left Rose George a completely broken woman. To spare Daniel from the inevitable bullying, Greenall had persuaded her to send him up north, to be with family for a while, until the story had faded from people's minds...

* * *

Gulnaz's excitement seems uncontainable. Even in the midst of ferrying, feeding or clearing she's attracting his attention from across the dining room, and when at last she has a moment, she hurries over and flops herself down at his table.

"We're so thrilled by the progress you've made in the last few days. I rang Jon Prentice last night and told him about you speaking again. He wants to come over and see you. He thinks that being here has unlocked something. He's suggesting we continue your speech therapy from next week."

Alex can see her choosing her next words with some care.

"We were wondering about counselling too. The things you were saying to Margaret about your father sounded very distressing. Was that something you've remembered? I was wondering how well you remember your father – and whether any other memories are starting to come back."

And so begins the grilling he'd feared would come with the return of his voice.

"No. No memories. It was all from that letter I got."

"Ah, yes. I was wondering about the letter. Jon said that Mr Greenall had also visited you in hospital. Who is he?"

"My uncle. He and Dad were in the Navy together."

“Your uncle Martin? Daniel has told me a little about him. He owns the garden centre where Daniel works, doesn’t he?”

“That’s what he told me. Here. I think you should read it.”

He pulls the envelope from his jacket and hands it over. She unfolds the pages and falls silent. He finds himself re-reading each paragraph in the shifting muscles of her face.

“Oh my god. My god! Daniel explained that your father had died in the Falklands but he never mentioned any of this.” Her anguish seems to go deeper than mere pity. Like it touches a raw nerve. “Do you think he even knew? Oh, those poor people.”

A hand moves up to her brow to take the weight of the words and tugs at a clutch of hair. Her other hand feels its way across the table and draws the water jug over. Then, as she sips, she slides the letter aside and stares straight ahead. Twice her lips part, only to close again. Then at last she says, “Try not to think too badly of your father. War can do terrible things to people. It doesn’t mean he wasn’t a good man.”

They’re just the words needed to crack open the shell. The tirade that follows is as much of a surprise to Alex as it is to Gulnaz. Language spews from his mouth, pre-empting the memories, maybe even defining them, but he’s never spoken with more certainty of the truth.

“Good?? He was a bastard! And I’m glad to know how he died. I prefer him this way, as a coward rather than a hero. The bugger used to hit me every time I brought shells home from the beach – smack me over the backs of my hands or the side of my head. Sometimes he made me run up and down, up and down the road because I was slower than my brother. Until I almost collapsed from exhaustion. And he called me horrible names because I didn’t like football.”

For the first time he’s really there. Not that smartened up cul-de-sac from a few weeks back with its topiaries and climbing plants and double glazing, but the scrubby little council estate full of clapped out cars and broken bottles, back and forth till his legs and lungs make him cry, till his head thumps and his eyes are blinded by stars.

“And he bullied my mother. He was a total prick...”

“Alex, please.” She rests a hand on his arm to stop him. “Your memory is coming back. Don’t rush into this. Have some water. We need to do this properly, with someone who can make it easier for you.”

“To think I used to admire that man. I respected him, I was proud of him. God, I wanted to *be* like him. Now he just disgusts me. I’m ashamed to be his son.”

She hands back the letter and strokes his shoulder.

“It’s okay. Look, I’ll soon be off duty. Let’s get some fresh air. Do you think you could manage a short walk in the park?”

A walk in the park.

History repeating itself.

The grey afternoon sky and winter chill have left Prince Albert Gardens all but deserted, just the odd dog walker brave enough to face the elements. With luck, Alex’s baggy coat and scarf will keep him warm long enough for the effort of walking to take over. Gulnaz is careful to keep to his speed. The path ahead sneaks around bushes, opening again, occasionally dividing. Down on the lawns by the lake, two children are laughing and throwing sticks to their dog, their doting parents watching from the bandstand.

“As children, I think we see our parents as infallible,” Gulnaz says. He might have thought she was referring to the idyllic scene below had they not talked earlier. “We assume they know everything. If they show any signs of weakness we become confused, angry. But it’s not their perfection that allows us to love them, it’s their... no, weakness isn’t really the right word... it’s their *vulnerability*. I think we don’t always realise that until we grow up.”

Alex’s eyes are torn from the bandstand to the tip of his walking stick making little graves in the earth.

“We can only love them if they love us first.”

“Yes, you’re right, but I bet your father did love you – and Daniel too. But to love is itself to become vulnerable. If someone doesn’t dare show their vulnerability then they can’t properly show their love. It doesn’t mean it isn’t there.”

Greenall had said his dad felt guilty over the way he’d treated them all. And there was the olive branch of the magic set. But it wasn’t enough. Forgetting himself, he takes her hand, the first time he’s initiated contact.

“I bet your parents loved you when you were a kid. You started to tell me about them a while ago, but I went and changed the subject.”

An answer is forming on her lips before a laugh carries it away.

“No, I told *Daniel* about my parents. Sounds like he’s been confiding in you over our little moments of intimacy!”

He frowns, convinced at first of the memory, but finding it, like so many others, steadily slipping into thin air. Fortunately, she doesn’t pursue the matter.

“We were rather a beleaguered family, which made us very close.”

He tries to focus again on her words.

“Beleaguered? What do you mean?”

“We always had to watch our backs. My father’s relatives were unhappy about him converting to Christianity and marrying an Armenian. When the revolution happened it became very difficult being a Christian. It had become such an extremist Muslim regime by then. It made my parents very nervous, so my upbringing was very strict and disciplined, but they always showed me a wealth of love.”

They’ve instinctively been making for the park bench. “Tell me how they died,” he says on impulse, as they lean against its back.

She frees her hand. Perhaps he was being a little too eager. “Oh, this is probably not the best moment... It was a long time ago...”

“Please, it’s important to me.” He can’t stop himself now.

There’s a slight rise in her hairline as the memories pull at her scalp.

“Well, there was the revolution and then the war. A lot of people lost their lives. But I was lucky and I’m here, and I’m safe. Away from it all.”

So that was why the letter had struck her so hard. That brutal account of conflict, the deaths. But he can’t understand this reluctance to spill the beans. Last time she’d have told him – if he’d only been sensitive enough to let her. He closes the gap again between them.

“You’ve no family left?”

“For a while I had my grandfather. We escaped together...” The word itself has escaped her lips before she can recapture it. “...Came to Britain, I mean. He’s been dead only two years.”

Perhaps Alex is stifling her. She places a hand on his forearm and says, “Shall we start heading back? I’m on again soon. We’re rather short staffed this afternoon.”

“For God’s sake. I don’t want to be the only one being ‘cared for’ all the time. I’m tired of everyone’s attention being on me. I want to share in your feelings for once.” He covers her hand with his. “I want to understand. Please, let me try.”

She gives in then. Caves in would be more accurate. Her body only just makes it round the bench before crumpling into a heap. Two very overworked and underloved hands smother her lovely, sad face and move with it from side to side.

“Sorry. People do ask me sometimes, out of politeness. I know they mean well. I tell them – I *used* to tell them. I’d be pouring my heart out and they would just go silent. Or change the subject. So now it’s me that does that.”

It could so easily be his own childhood she’s describing.

“I don’t blame them,” she says. “You can’t understand stuff like that if you’ve never experienced it. People here don’t know the first thing about religious wars, or torture, or

having their whole country pillaged by sick, power-crazy monsters. People who can turn men against their own families. Can you imagine that?”

He shakes his head.

Gulnaz laughs. “It’s just stuff you see on the news, isn’t it? It’s somewhere else. Something that only happens in far away foreign places where camels live and women carry great pots on their heads. I can’t compete with that. I can’t make it real for people just by telling it.”

The sudden temptation is to confide in her about everything. He needs her to trust him now. Maybe it’s time to start trusting a little himself.

“But it’s different for me, after the letter,” he persists. Okay, maybe he’ll never fully understand her story. But he doesn’t need it to be real. He only needs their emotions to be real. The rest will follow. Perhaps it’s the awkward way he steps forward, or the slight stumble in dropping down beside her, the steadying arm that accidentally lands in her lap, but something makes her take a chance.

“They came for my father less than a year after the revolution, when things were still in turmoil.” As the words begin, her mind seems to travel vast distances in space and time. “They took him away in the middle of the night. We were all terrified. I shall never forget that look he gave us as they marched him from the room. Like he was saying he didn’t care what dreadful things they might do to his body if they were going to separate him forever from the people he adored. And like he wanted to tell us not to worry, that his love would always stay with us.”

“Why did they take him? What had he done?”

Her delicate hands open in exasperation and nurse the sides of her face. “You didn’t need to have done anything. Kurds are an ethnic minority in Iran. They’re Muslim, but, well, separatist. They were seen as a threat. And when my father converted to Christianity and married my mother it just made him even more of a target. Mother believed that one of his own people had betrayed him. My grandfather insisted that wasn’t true. He said the government just wanted our assets. They’d accused us of spying for the Americans because father had worked... Ugh, it’s too complicated, Alex. Sorry, but I think we ought to go.”

Again dodging, this time with needless detail. “Where did they take him? Did you see him again?”

Gulnaz is up on her feet now, waiting on the path, but she steps back. “To a prison in Tehran.” She sits again and begins to explore the memory. “A revolutionary guard came to see us a week later. We thought he might have news, that it had all been a big mistake, but all

he did was taunt us. He said we were now a family of just two.”

“Jesus, what a bastard. What did your grandfather say?”

“He wasn’t there. They were after him too. He was already in hiding by then.”

The Falklands story had been hard enough to get his head around. All those years when their father was away at sea for months on end the twins had imagined him coasting majestically into foreign ports with his crew lined up in salute along the deck. They’d acted it out time and again: him adjusting his tie, positioning his beret and striding ceremoniously down the gangplank to be encircled by crowds of adoring natives. Or he was commanding a gunship engaged in glorious battle with Russians and Germans, blasting their little backsides back to where they belonged. And in all these weeks he’s known Gulnaz, he’s imagined her as a child of the desert, eating wondrous fruits and sweets and nuts under an endless sun, happy with her beautiful paintings and intricate carpets, maybe a Persian cat or two, everyone talking in strange, foreign tongues and smoking on hooker pipes. But what she is telling him now comes less from another country, more from another planet. Prisons, revolutions, government conspiracies, ethnic minorities, people in hiding? He has no frame of reference for any of it.

“And you never saw your father again?”

“No. Never any official word.”

“So he could be alive.”

She looks defeated. “There’s no way you can grieve when you don’t see the body. I mean, when do you stop hoping? When do you stop snatching glimpses in a crowded street? When will I hear a knock at the door without my heart leaping, convinced for a fraction of a second that he’s come home? Yes, he might be alive. Nearly thirty years in a place like Evin prison, I don’t know what would be left of him. Or maybe they shot him on the very first day.”

“And your mother?”

This time Gulnaz doesn’t hesitate to answer. “The war had begun by then and we’d moved down to Tehran in the hope of seeing my father.”

“The war?”

“We were at war with Iraq. They’d started bombing the cities every day. Not blanket bombing, but enough to put everyone in a panic. I remember we had the radio on the whole time because they broadcast the sirens. Otherwise, where we lived you couldn’t hear them. We were lucky to have a cellar. Many people didn’t. We would just sit down there in the dark and wait. To be honest, I was more afraid of the flying cockroaches than the planes in the

sky...”

In the same way that his own memories keep erupting into life, hers burst out at this point in a jangling of bells. For a moment they both sit wide-eyed, not quite believing that imagination has crossed over into reality. Instinct, reflex, training, whatever it is, a second later Gulnaz has shot up and assumed control. The care home’s fire alarm has gone off. There’s no drill scheduled for today. A genuine emergency. It’s everybody out... as fast as you can... nearest fire exit... no stopping for belongings... be sure to gather in the car park for a head count.

“We must get back at once,” she demands. “They don’t know we’re here. They might think we’re trapped inside.”

Chaos and confusion reign for the best part of an hour. And all because of an unsupervised frying pan – or a clogged toaster – or a sneaky drag on a cigarette in a non-smoking area, depending on who’s touting the opinion. Gulnaz could have walked with him to his room at the all-clear and continued her story. But she busies herself instead with other residents. Alex assumes that it’s deliberate.

In her absence, he does his best to imagine around the things she’d told him. A father in some infamous prison with nothing but a hard mattress and a bucket, being dragged out for interrogation and torture, thrown into solitary confinement. A grandfather skulking around in some cave on a mountainside with a pair of binoculars and an AK47 slung over his shoulder. A city in panic, houses rocked by explosions, people blown to pieces on the street or buried alive beneath chunks of concrete. But Gulnaz was right. None of this made her story any more real. This is stock media footage he’s calling up; Hollywood fictions one moment, news clips sterilised for easy consumption the next. No way to relate to the story, not being there, not breathing it with her. And yet the way she’d told it, just the look in her face, hadn’t it made Gulnaz herself so much more adorable?

Just like she had said; it was not strength that invited in love, but vulnerability.

* * *

No sign of that vulnerability the following morning when he catches sight of her at reception. Some power-dressed, self-righteous viper of a woman is there, banging on about her great-grandmother’s inappropriate care and the home’s exorbitant fees. He recognises her as Amelia’s visitor, the one who’d never once bothered to visit before in her life. Gulnaz remains wonderfully stolid, impeccably diplomatic, gradually calming the woman with a salve of empathic words without actually giving an inch. Perhaps it’s the man at her side who

inspires such confidence. Perhaps she is out to impress him. They make a formidable pair, Nurse Gulnaz Rahmani and Doctor Jonathan Prentice; the angry relative never really stands a chance. Soon she is vanquished and fading from view. There's laughter and sighs of relief. And then the name 'Alex'. It's Prentice who speaks it and Gulnaz who picks it up.

"Yes, just like that. One moment nothing – not a word since that time he'd said my name. The next thing, the floodgates are opening. He struggles a bit to form some words, but the transformation is beyond belief."

The doctor says something next that Alex misses.

"It's so wonderfully generous of you," she responds. "But are you quite sure?" A nod, a smile and a kiss to the cheek tells her he is. "Then I'll tell Alex at once."

She leads him to the door and Alex thinks he hears Prentice say, "See you tonight," but can't entirely be certain. He does his best to ignore the jealousy rising from the pit of his stomach.

At lunch, she tells Alex about Prentice's visit, confirming his plan to come midweek and test his readiness for speech therapy. She clearly wants to tell him something more, but not here. Maybe Prentice has proposed to her. Or maybe it's the rest of her unfinished story.

"I'll come by tonight when I finish," she says. "If that's okay."

Yes, he tells her, that is very okay.

* * *

Greenall's pages lie spread out across the table before him. It's surprising perhaps that his uncle had been prepared to commit such terrible words to paper. But it was vital having the account in writing in order to digest and reflect, and deal with such complex emotions. Maybe Uncle Martin had known that his story deserved the respect of this silent unfolding.

Make your peace with your ghosts, Margaret had told him. Has the letter allowed him to do that? When someone is taken unseen and never returned, it's all but impossible to accept. The way Gulnaz had spoken about the knock at the door or the face in the crowd, he knew so exactly what she meant. Greenall's confession closes the book on that chapter at least. But his father's sedition? Could he reconcile this with the devotion he'd heaped upon that monster, with all those punishments he'd endured? Well, oddly, yes, in a way, he can. Greenall's damning words may have turned his admiration into scorn, his respect into contempt, his pride into shame, but they've helped turn something else too: that vast tide separating father and son. Across those seas, Richard George had always seemed so untouchable. No paternal embrace when the tight-lipped officer left dock or when the bold hero sailed home, when the master of the house packed them off to bed or barked at them to

get up. But in knowing now that the man's granite-like face had shattered at least once, Alex finds himself newly empowered to step forward and reach out. He can look into that tyrant's face and for once see something of himself – the stare of a cowardly child. And he can say to that child, 'One day, father, perhaps I'll forgive you,' and feel the first infinitesimal stirrings of love.

At the sound of Gulnaz's distinctive tap on the door, he quickly gathers the pages together and calls her in. The smile he gives her is only half returned. Whatever it was that had been preying on her mind and keeping her away is still there.

"I'm sorry if I was insensitive earlier," she begins a little awkwardly, eyeing the papers. "Going on and on about my father like that. It was selfish of me when you'd just had the shock of that letter. I hope it wasn't too hurtful."

Whether she means hurtful to have read the letter or hurtful to have sat through her tale, he isn't quite sure. To be on the safe side, he just answers with, "Not really," and then realises it's the worst answer in either case.

She props herself against the edge of the table. "But I just wanted to say how much I appreciated you encouraging me the way you did. It's a long time since I've spoken about my childhood to anyone." Her eyes are regaining their sparkle. "You listened so sensitively. I felt very carried. It was painful of course, but a good pain, not a pain that should stay buried. I feel much lighter for it.

"You know... talking things through can be incredibly healing. Alex, if you're starting to remember things, bad things, you do know we're ready and willing to help, don't you?"

"Yes, I know. You told me. Your friend Prentice can't wait to get his hands on me."

She gently reproaches him. "I promise you, Alex, Jon Prentice only wants what's best for you. You've made such outstanding progress since arriving here; he's not about to put that at risk. Nobody's going to force you to remember things that are best left untouched. You'll remember only what and when you want to.

"He's a lovely man, you know. You'll like him a lot when you get to know him. Which you will. He has made an incredibly charitable offer – just to help you back onto your feet. They have a little self-contained annex to their house that was converted when Jon's mother was thinking of moving in."

"They?"

"Jon and his wife, Cathy. It was their house you slept in the night I took you from the flat. They want you to stay there, free of charge, to give you a temporary address while your records are sorted – database updated, National Insurance number issued; that kind of thing."

And his *wife* Cathy; the single word that spells automatic disqualification from the race for Gulnaz's affections. So, he and the fine doctor are to become housemates rather than rivals. A somewhat mixed blessing, but at least Gulnaz would be just minutes away. He can just picture them after her shift, taking another romantic stroll through the park. He decides to test her.

"I thought maybe since the fire alarm you'd been avoiding me."

She becomes defensive, "No! No, not really. I've been very tied up," then sighs. "Well, I suppose I have a bit. I was aware you might ask to hear the rest of my story. To be honest, I didn't know if I could handle it." She raises her eyes. "But of course those memories came bullying their way into my day anyway."

"Well, you said it yourself: talking it through helps. So, maybe you should."

"You really don't have to pretend to be interested."

"Guli, I'm not pretending. Tell me, please."

At the prospect of another extended monologue, she pushes herself off the table and lowers herself gently onto the edge of his bed, centres herself and wets her lips. It makes Alex want to kiss her.

"I was remembering school. At school we didn't need the radio because the sirens were only a few blocks away. When the bombers came over we didn't have shelters there, so they would take us all to a store room which had only one window."

Her mind again is in another world. "We were squashed together. None of us took it very seriously. Some of the older boys would brag about how their parents let them go up on the roofs and watch the bombings from there. But the teachers were very strict. They made us sit and recite passages from the Qur'an until the all clear came. That was the best sound in the world, the all clear."

This time, the memory is not attended by any rattling of bells. Her words hang there in the silence. He fills it by wheeling himself a little closer and leaning forward.

"That's really chilling. You must have been so brave."

A moment's struggle back to the memory and then, "The teachers tried to make it seem very matter of fact. They didn't tolerate fear – they said it played into the hands of the enemy. But I did see fear in my teacher's face that afternoon, when she came back into the classroom after someone had called her out, and when she said my name." Around her mouth, Alex can see the muscles contracting. "She told me to collect my things. A stranger was waiting for me in the corridor. He looked dirty and had a face like death. He terrified me more than the Iraqis. He spoke to me in a strong Kurdistan accent and said we had to go."

Gulnaz's house had been bombed. A direct hit. She doesn't recount the scene, only that her mother had been inside. They'd never let her see the ruins, not even the street. The stranger had skirted the area, driven her out of town and into the countryside to a place she didn't know. Her grandfather was there with a group of men; part of a cell that Gulnaz called Mujahidin. Alex has heard the name on the news. The remainder of her fantastic tale details her passage across mountains, through heart-stopping checkpoints, safely into Turkey, on to France and at last across the channel to England, where they'd fought for asylum and eventually won. Her story has transported her into a nightmare childhood and out the other side without stopping. She barely pauses for breath; her tears run unchecked down her face.

He moves closer and touches her arm. How easily he could take advantage of this moment – a woman opening up her heart, at her most vulnerable – but to do more than just hold her now would be a terrible abuse of her trust. So instead he just stays with her pain, listening and watching. Her story is now moving closer to home. She's saying things to which he can again begin to relate.

“My grandfather tried to bring me up the Kurdish way. I think he wanted to repair what he saw as the damage done by my parents. He was an intensely proud man. Proud of his country and proud of his god. I owe him my life. And I loved him dearly. I'm glad that I could care for him at the end. I'm glad I have his grave to visit each week. But my love for him could never equal the love I had for my parents.”

Only then does she snap out of her dream state. There's a shift in the focus of her eyes, from a horizon far away to a point in the centre of Alex's face. He expects her to say that now it's his turn to talk of the past. But instead she softly shakes her head and says, “It feels so strange telling you all this. Forgive me, but I can't help it. I keep seeing you as Daniel. It's so weird. You're now so completely like him in appearance – like he was when we first met. And yet you're so utterly different. Never in a million years would I have had the confidence to say any of these things to him. I wanted to, but he didn't have it in him to listen. I don't know he really cared that much. I don't blame him, but well, you know what he was like. Sometimes I wonder why I ever fell for him.” She laughs. “I so wish he'd been you, Alex.”

He sits on the bed and puts an arm around her, and after a minute she leans over and kisses his mouth. He's seeing her in a car park, cradling the hood of her parka; now he's in a car, Daniel's car, being pinned to his seat, in Daniel's bed, feeling her soft skin beneath his fingers. When their lips part, he's sure her eyes stare straight into his heart and he wonders who exactly she sees there.

“It's late,” she whispers. “You need to rest. Thank you. You don't know how much I

mean that. You've no idea how freeing this has been for me."

"And for me," he croaks back. She might so easily have stayed, her struggle is written all over her face. They could have justified it, a case to be made for a carer releasing the frustrations of a patient who for weeks had been trapped inside a frozen body. She'd have willingly agreed to sex. But he'd been the one to break off the kiss. Because first he has to tell her everything. If she isn't freaked out, if she can cope with the crossed wiring between his mind and Daniel's, with the curse of his second sight, and with all his crazy false memories, then perhaps something might come of this love. But until then it wouldn't be right.

At the door she turns. The bedside light puts half of her face into shadow. But it picks out her lips and the kiss she blows him.

"Goodnight, Daniel."

If she had a pin, she might wish to drop it to shatter the silence. If she had a hole, she might want to fall into it. "*Alex. Alex. Oh I'm so sorry!*"

If he were to tell her now she would think he was mocking her, so he simply smiles and returns the kiss.

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## To form a loop

Though storm clouds are already gathering, the new day dawns with stunning salmon-pink skies and brilliant sunshine; a fresh new start to herald a fresh new start. A day that sees Daniel choosing to dress, to eat the stale Cheerios that have fallen from the inner bag into the box, to refit and re-stock the kitchen drawers and to step out smiling into the crisp, mid-morning air. The end-game has been defined, the operation planned with the precision of a military campaign. Camouflage: the grey jacket with hood pulled well forward around the face. Weaponry: the serrated blade, whisky-cork tipped, dropped into an inside pocket. Supplies: into the corner shop for fresh provisions (self-service checkout; anonymity retained). Funds: the shop's ATM for a cash withdrawal. Transport: over to the bus stop, taking all precautions to remain invisible. It's lucky it's not colder, lucky because of that spur-of-the-moment decision to add his only winter coat to Alex's things.

Daniel boards the bus and heaves his heavy load along to the far end, clattering the carrier bags against the seats, drawing dangerous levels of attention. At the back of the bus he presses up to the window, making sure to keep his head turned at all times from the other passengers. The sooner they forget about him the better. The chances of Morris riding this route may be a million to one, but he'll have his web of debt collectors and henchman, and Daniel must trust nobody. From stop to stop, the bus leapfrogs along the streets. People get off and people get on; each is vetted, checked in and checked out. It was wise not to have taken the car – his full attention can be levelled at scouring the streets to ensure he's not been routed. More than once his body floods with adrenaline as Sumo look-alikes catch his eye. But they're false alarms, all of them.

And then an avenue of grand housing is sweeping aside the shoebox estates, and the trees of Prince Albert Gardens are standing tall on the corner. He sounds the bell, darting at the last moment through the bus's hissing middle doors. He has not been followed. His adversary, the nursing home, now eyeballs him menacingly from across the road. Too many darkened windows, too many steep-pitched roofs at too many angles, it threatens, it provokes and it ridicules, knowing that for the first time in too many days he must engage with another human being, and knowing just how much the thought terrifies him.

He needs time to ready himself, but he can't stay a standing target on the pavement. The park beckons, a refuge that'll give him time to attune body and mind. His feet plot a route through the undergrowth to the bench where he and Gulnaz had sat and talked. He lays down the bags, closes his eyes and draws a series of long, controlled breaths. A pre-battle ritual. He's a knight kneeling before the improvised cross of an inverted lance; he's a Maori

warrior performing the Haka; a GI Joe painting a woman's curves across an aircraft's fuselage.

'You told her on the day you were here that I was a hero,' the voice at his shoulder reminds him.

"No. That was later, on the phone." Daniel puts a hand to his ear.

'You championed my valour and bravery, the very qualities that will now captain you through this assignment. You must hold to your objectives: enter enemy waters, engage the opposing fleet and liberate the hostage. I'll make a serviceman of you yet; turn you into the hero that I once was.'

Well isn't that just what heroes do? Hadn't he said the very same to Gulnaz? They uphold liberty and justice by fighting pitched battles with enemies on foreign shores. The thought draws Daniel back through the cover of trees and into the open, placing him directly before the garrison he must now storm. And remember (he'd said this to her too), the most heroic of them all get killed.

He breaches the gates, makes a clean sweep of the car park and is safely through the door.

With all that he'd given that crowd on New Year's Eve – all that joy he'd brought to their tiny, miserable lives – would it not have been reasonable to expect a civilised welcome? He recognises the woman on the desk. They'd shared a dance that night, and a cracker, not to mention a midnight kiss. But today she reacts badly. She jumps at the sound of door slamming and gives him the coldest of looks. When he barks out his name and objective there's a further frosting over. He's told not to go through until she's checked.

'Your enemy has turned them all against you. If they don't let you see him, what are you going to do?'

"They'll let me see him. And Gulnaz is not my enemy."

'You've got the knife. You can force them to hand him over.'

A hot sweat erupts across Daniel's forehead.

"That won't be necessary."

'You haven't got the balls, boy. I've always said so.'

She's returning now. She wears an uneasy expression. Daniel tries to look composed.

"I'm afraid Mr George is at lunch just now. He's asked whether you might come back in a couple of hours."

The voice in his ear demands immediate offensive action, but the woman's naked insincerity invites an easier tactic.

Daniel sneers at her. “Oh, has he now? Actually Alex can’t speak. Didn’t you know? Are you going to let me see my own brother, or do I have to make trouble?”

The woman’s posturing collapses as her eyes fall. Probably she has never had to deal with anything like this before. People dump their relatives in care homes in order *not* to visit them. She’s more likely used to shaming visitors into staying on, into committing to their next visit, into taking *some* form of interest in those they’ve just ditched, than she is to turning away enthusiastic, helpful young men like him.

“Well, I suppose five minutes won’t hurt. Please take a seat for a moment.”

The woman leaves her post for a second time. To secure his beachhead, Daniel is instructed to make a quick reconnaissance of the lobby. Before he can complete it she’s back at her desk looking nervous. “If you’d like to come this way,” she says.

The first thing he logs as he follows her through is how large the residents’ lounge has become, cleared now of its sandwich tables and festive trimmings. But why are all these grotesque armchairs scattered about the place? Can they not at least be grouped to encourage conversation, or lined up ready for entertainment? Their wings are greyed with Brylcreem and peroxide, their arms scuffed bald, the filling teased out by the clench of so many desperate knuckles. All around, rickety old tables are strewn with torn magazines. The TV has no sound; its picture flickers, distorted and grainy. So this is the life that Gulnaz has chosen for his brother. The room smells of farts and unwashed fabric. Not fit for Alex at all. Not fit for a pig. The disgust and fury are seizing up his throat.

Beyond the lounge, a bare corridor leads past frosted windows that mask god knows what unspeakable horrors in the kitchen. The noise levels rise alarmingly as they advance on the canteen, like a sound barrier, a blockade built to deny them access. Cutlery clashes in medieval battle, crockery clatters like hooves over rock. Above it all resounds the racket of human torment – shouted obscenities, screams and cries, the drumming of fists. Even outbursts of song and laughter seem demonically possessed. On Daniel’s last visit, the New Year’s party had thinly disguised this din as a celebration. But there is nothing to be celebrated today. Along the three filthy wooden tables – the very tables he’d last seen spread with bright tablecloths and fresh sandwiches – he now sees only row upon row of emaciated bodies stooped over plates of inedible gruel.

“What’s this?” he growls beneath his breath, “Oliver bloody Twist? This is a just a piss-take.” He’s loath even to make a search of the tortured faces. When he does, it’s almost a relief to find that Alex is not among them. And he only recognises Gulnaz when she rises. As she turns, she narrowly escapes a clout round the ear from the inmate she’s attending. And

worse, as she walks towards the far door, the same madman throws something hard that catches her square between the shoulder blades. Incredibly, appallingly, she fails to react. Instead of having the thug dragged from the room and confined to quarters she simply continues on her way, taking the door and holding it open for someone on the other side. These people are savages, the lot of them. How can she tolerate working here? And how can he, Daniel, having witnessed this abuse, not enter the affray?

Emerging through the open door, he sees the ferrule end of a stick, then a right hand, and then, minus his chair and crutches, he sees his brother. Gulnaz follows behind. All three sets of eyes meet; Alex squares up to him in defiance, Gulnaz appears shocked and angry. She whispers something (did Alex say something in reply?), smooths down her tunic and makes her approach.

“Daniel. We weren’t expecting you.” Her voice is formal and tight-lipped. It’s less her behaviour that upsets him, more the food all down her uniform and the plum coloured bruise with the hairline cut over one eye.

“Am I supposed to make an appointment to see my own brother?” he says. He wants it to sound light, but the shaking betrays him.

“No, but there are approved visiting hours.”

He can’t keep this up much longer. “What, like a fucking prison, you mean? Christ, Gulnaz. Why the hell did you bring him here?”

She stiffens. “We must insist that foul language is not used whilst on these premises.”

“Yeah right,” he laughs, waving at the crowd. “So I’d noticed. Okay,” he puts a hand on her shoulder and feels it flinch. “Then let’s go and talk somewhere else. You can swear at me all you like then.”

“Don’t touch me,” she hisses. “Don’t you ever lay a finger on me again. Do you understand?”

“Okay, okay, sorry.” An observer might think from his hands that she’d pulled a gun on him. “Don’t do this to me, Guli. Please. I just want to see him again. I need to know he’s okay. I wanted to see you too.”

“Alex is fine. But he doesn’t wish to see you, not after what happened.”

Her obstinacy is provoking his anger again. “I’m not standing for this,” he warns her. “How can you bear to work here? This place is a fucking disgrace.”

They’ve been steadily retreating from the room throughout, Gulnaz regulating her volume as they go. She’s ready now to shout him down. “You don’t know the first thing about this place! Just because you helped out here for a few hours doesn’t suddenly make you

the expert. It's not party night every night in here, you know. Welcome to the real world."

The edge he's had is slipping, as the voice at his shoulder is quick to point out. "The plan of campaign isn't working, boy! You need to pull back and regroup." Daniel tries to block his ears without Gulnaz noticing. "Alright!"

Gulnaz stares at him in alarm. He clears his throat. "Alright, yes, I'm going. I'll make your damn appointment. But then I'm coming back." He steps away and waits for her to turn. Before she does, her face is softened for a moment by an impulse to speak.

"Daniel. The state of you. I..."

But that glimpse of a familiar face is all too brief. "No. Don't come, you'd be wasting your time. As I told you, it was only to be for a few days. Alex will be leaving here tomorrow. I was planning to write and let you know."

"Leaving!? Where?"

"Daniel, I have to go. I'll promise I'll send you the address."

This bolt from the blue leaves him totally disarmed. As she turns to resume her duties, he can only think of following her. He must see Alex one last time. Maybe it will determine the appropriate next move. The two of them are in conference again now (Alex really is talking!), but what follows is totally unexpected. As Alex stands, pushes away his chair and steps back unaided, he eyeballs Daniel intensely. The look is hostile to start with, but it transforms, yields, and softens into that same expression he'd worn on the cliffs and at Scoff's deathbed: his heart-melting look of pity.

Alex, who'd been raped, kidnapped and incarcerated in this bedlam, who'd once been abandoned on the cliffs to die, felt sorry for *Daniel*.

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But naturally Alex had felt pity. Having sat with his brother on that bus, walked with him in the park and inhaled the same air of delusion and fear, and knowing how powerless he is to stand between Daniel and impending tragedy, he is all but beside himself with pity.

"What made you so sure he was coming this morning?" Gulnaz asks. They are sitting alone together now that lunch is over, in the little staff room that has become their regular retreat.

"I'd just felt it," he replies, as simply as he can make it sound.

"You were very adamant you didn't wish to see him. You know, he really hadn't meant you any harm. I've had three phone calls from him in the last hour, asking after you. But I am concerned about him. You saw how wasted and ill he looked, and he sounded really peculiar on the phone."

Alex nods. “He’s not eating. He’s drinking like a fish, and has got hold of some kind of drug. Something in a medicine bottle he keeps spiking his alcohol with. It’s what’s made him so paranoid.”

She winces. “That doesn’t sound good at all. I should have spotted he was high on something when he came in.”

“I think the drugs is what the guy from the pub gate-crashed the flat about, probably demanding money.”

“The one that attacked you?” Gulnaz is becoming animated now.

“He beat Daniel up.”

“Ugh! I didn’t know that. It must have been terrifying.” For a moment, she seems unsure where to take this. She leans towards him, assuming her professional demeanour once more. “Alex, can you bear to tell me what actually happened that night?”

“I don’t know the details. The truth is, I wasn’t there.” He’s well aware of the spanner this throws into the works.

“But I don’t understand. You were in a dreadful state when I found you.”

“That was the night I tried to get away. I was worried for our safety. After the thing with the boiling water I just didn’t know what might be next. I couldn’t turn to you because you’d just had this big bust up over moving me to a home, and I reckoned you were out of there for good. So I decided to make it on my own. That’s how I got all muddy, and the scratches and the bruises. I was going to take sanctuary or something in the church. Stupid, I know. I thought they’d find me next morning, and the police would check the hospitals, word would get to you somehow and you’d come and make things right. But it was all too hard. I had to shift the bikes that were blocking my way out of the flat; it starting chucking it down. Cooper’s Hill was way too steep. So, in the end I gave up. When I got back, I saw Daniel on the floor, but that wasn’t unusual. I didn’t know that this drugs baron bloke had been there and knocked him unconscious. When Daniel came round he saw the state I was in and thought the guy had attacked me as well – you know... raped me.”

She puts her fist in her mouth. “What?? Oh dear God! So, does Daniel still think that? Bloody hell, no wonder he looked so terrible when he came here, and kept on insisting on seeing you. And kept phoning. Alex, he’s clearly desperate to know if you’re okay! He must be feeling incredibly responsible. And there’s me putting the phone down on him. He needs to know the truth before he does something truly awful to himself.”

She fumbles for her phone and starts dialling. Somehow, Alex just can’t see him picking up.

“No; no-one there.”

“This time of day, he’ll be there. He’s just avoiding the phone.”

“Then we must go to him.”

“No! I told you. It’s vital I don’t see him again, ever.”

“Don’t say that, Alex. It just needs time.” Gulnaz takes his hand.

“I’m sorry. I just can’t.” His tone now is more of regret than obstinacy.

“But come on, he’s your brother. Is it just because of this?” She touches the cut over her eye. “When people are desperate they throw things. When they have no other means of expression. Believe me, I’ve seen that enough here.”

“No. It’s not just that. It’s something I can’t really explain.”

But explain is the one thing he knows he has to do. And the time to do it is now.

“Look, what did you notice about me when I was first brought into hospital? I mean, when I was first examined properly?”

The sudden questioning takes her by surprise.

“What, you mean besides you obviously being unconscious and malnourished? Well, there was a cut on your forehead from where you struck the stone as you fell; your blood alcohol was high, but not dangerously. Your... Am I on the right track here? Why are we doing this? Aren’t we wasting time?”

“What else did they find?”

“Um, a hairline fracture.” She touches her cheek. “Probably from a blow of some kind.”

“Right! And you X-ray Daniel’s face and I promise you you’d see the exact same fracture, from the kicking he got that night.”

“Okay. Wow. But why does it mean you can’t...”

“What else did they discover when they examined me.” She returns a blank look. “Think, Gulnaz – like, when you bathed me.”

“You mean the scarring to your abdomen? You’ve remembered how you got it?”

“What kind of scars were they? What would cause scars like that?”

“Hot liquid. They were scald marks.”

“Exactly! And weren’t they identical – *identical* – to the ones that Daniel is going to be saddled with after his burns heal?”

She’s now more than taken aback; she’s gawping at him as though he’s just declared himself Pope.

“Possibly. There’s no way of knowing yet. He’s still got a long way to go. What are you

saying, Alex, that Daniel *deliberately* got himself beaten up, that he *deliberately* spilled boiling water down himself – just in order to be like you?”

“My birthmark, here, on my head. You must have seen Daniel’s. You were lovers. Margaret clocked it. It’s the same, isn’t it? And twins aren’t born with the same birthmarks, are they?”

“They... might show similar traits, if it was a difficult birth. Alex, what is all this about?”

Alex can’t hold himself back now. What he thought would be an impossible task proves instead to be an unstoppable torrent.

“Everything I’ve remembered, everything: they’re not my memories. They’re his. Or they’re not even memories, more like premonitions. I can picture the face of the man who attacked him, even though I’ve never seen him. I knew Daniel was about to scald himself because, seconds earlier, I felt it happen to myself. And us, battling our way out of the flat; I’d watched that scene a hundred times before it actually happened.”

Gulnaz gives a long, drawn out sigh, her face having moulded itself into a deep frown. Has she got any of this?

“I’m no expert here, Alex, so don’t be angry with me. It’s just my opinion. But I’m thinking, you wake up to find your whole memory wiped clean: you’re immediately desperate to find the missing pieces. You and Daniel: you’re so close – genetically identical – and so cooped up together in that flat; it’s no wonder you started to think the same way. But take these things you’ve said. You felt Daniel’s pain just before he scalded himself. But you were watching him; you could see what was about to happen and were powerless to stop it. That pain was empathic. And this man you say attacked Daniel, if you haven’t met him, how can you know the image is a true likeness? As for us getting you out of the flat, well, by the sound of it, you’d obviously seen that darker side to his character long before I did. I think I was denying it to myself; I should have been far more detached. I must share the blame for the consequences.”

No she isn’t getting it at all. Alex should have known it would be hopeless. How could he have expected her to understand when he doesn’t have a clue himself what any of it means? But he has to have one last try.

“Then imagine this: staring into someone’s face and recalling yourself having stared straight back. You perform an action, and realise you’ve seen that action already, but from where the other person is standing. They say something, and you remember the moment you chose those very words. You find yourself living in a constant state of *déjà vu*.”

This time she stays silent.

“I have all this stuff in my head, Gulnaz. Images, fragments, and yet I can’t remember a single thing about *me*, this person everyone is calling Alex.”

“But only last night you talked about your father...”

“Things before I was nine, maybe. But not the fall from the cliff...”

“That’s normal with trauma...”

“Or anything after: no teenage memories, no young adult ones, nothing leading up to the coma. Not even how I came to be at that cemetery. But I *do* remember Mum as a sick old woman, even though I was never there for her. And I remember being with you at New Year, us making out in the car, and sleeping together. We...”

“Alex, stop!” Gulnaz is now positively disturbed. She stands and sets herself directly between him and the table.

“We shouldn’t be doing this. You must allow yourself to receive professional help. You’ve had a knock to the head. You’ve been in a coma. You’ve had to deal with paralysis and loss of speech. It’s all messed with your mind. Maybe it has blessed you with second sight and the ability to read Daniel’s mind – maybe even mine; maybe it’s coincidence; or maybe you’re subconsciously making these things happen. It’s all the same. You’re not well and you need help. But if you can’t face seeing your brother again, then I respect that. But Daniel deserves to know what happened, that you weren’t... violated.”

“I did try that night, but back then I still couldn’t speak or move. I even tried sending a message telepathically.”

Gulnaz is up on her feet now. “I think traditional methods may be safer. Straight after work, I’ll cycle over and talk to him.”

“You mustn’t go there alone, not in his current state of mind. There’s no telling what he might do. It should be me that tells him.”

“But you said you couldn’t bear...”

“Forget that. We’ll go together.”

“I’m finished in an hour.” She checks her watch. “We can catch the three-fifteen bus.”

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The journey home is one slow court-martial. Failure to follow orders, disarray under pressure, weakness under enemy fire. Mission catastrophically aborted. Nobody steps forward to present counsel for the defence and the accused is never summoned. Once through the door, Daniel digs out the scotch from one of the carriers, pours himself a stiff measure and knocks it back. A few seconds after that, he unscrews the cough linctus bottle and fills the cap to the

brim. Since the loss of the pipette it's been impossible to measure the correct amount. Half a capful last time hadn't felt like enough. A whole capful certainly exceeds the prescribed dose. But these are exceptional circumstances. Down the hatch. Now all he can do is hope for this kangaroo court to adjourn. He has other matters to deal with. Alex is to be moved. Somewhere new. Somewhere that sounds alarmingly permanent.

On the off chance that she may be on a break, about ten minutes later he dials Gulnaz's mobile. Nothing there but a recorded voice. After another thirty minutes he tries again, this time leaving a plea for an address, a number, a name – anything to tell him where Alex is being taken. When he can bear it no longer he rings for a third time. This time Gulnaz picks up, but cuts him off again the moment he speaks her name. Was that Alex he'd heard with her? Did he catch a few words in the background? The night that she'd taken him away, had they slept together? Will he be with her again tonight? How could two people so genetically alike turn out so differently? Prentice told him their DNA was a perfect match. So how can Alex even now be winning the heart of a woman who refuses to give Daniel the time of day? What if he went to her place tonight and told her everything: his feelings for her, his certainty that he can still change? She might let him stay and have sex with him and agree to start over.

'Never! Never you for your brother. She needs someone strong, athletic, courageous, good in bed. She doesn't need some snivelling little coward...'

He kicks out at the table. "Stop! Just stop. I've had enough. Okay, I'm a coward. And I'm weak. A total disappointment to you. I don't need reminding. But god knows, Father, I've tried."

'You really think she'll ever have you back, after what you did to her?' The venomous words are spat hard into his face. Suddenly there's a woman screaming, an accusing finger pointing firstly at him and then towards the bedroom door. Something, an object, a fist, strikes her above the eye. She's running now, one hand covering her head, the other leading Alex through a barrage of crashing objects. 'Don't you ever lay a finger on me again.' she'd said to him. These are lies. Lies! It was those crazies in the home who'd given her that bruise. He'd turned over his own flat, yes, he can admit to that now, but never, never would he have hit Gulnaz.

If he doesn't drown out this voice it'll drive him insane. He staggers through to the lounge, turns on his CD player and racks up the volume. His father is now a physical presence in the room, over to his left by the wall, standing tall and proud behind a hapless child and a sorrowful woman. The Devonport photograph rests on the shelf by the window. Daniel refuses to look, their presence overpowers him, regresses him back to his childhood.

'In my pocket? They're my shells, Father. Yes Father, sorry Father. Please, Father – please don't...'

A silhouette towers over him with raised arm. Why does his mother sob? Why does she always stand aside and weep when he's being taught his lesson?

If only the drug would hurry up and slay this monster.

Oh, not good, the floor is giving way and swallowing him up. The verticals bow outwards and the ceiling sags like canvas. The sitting room is slithering sideways. But this craziness will soon stop, if he can just stay calm. From the chasms between his clawing fingers swarms of tiny black dots have begun to scurry up his arms. He can feel them too beneath his shirt, and now along his legs, stinging his ankles. An army of ants advances across the carpet, teaming from the wallpaper in their millions; a trail of them leading his eye back up the wall to Escher's Mobius strip. They scuttle at impossible speeds along that infinite pathway, at the same time escaping it and pouring like a plague from the picture frame. He knows that any moment now the ecstasy will overpower the madness and carry him away, but it's never been this bad before. Too large a dose this time. Whoa, way too large. Too heavy, too profound. Solid objects are melting into syrup, into free-flowing atoms. Where does his body begin and end? He's become the whole room. He is the walls expanding, splintering, coalescing, a giant turning kaleidoscope, replicating into four, five, six dimensions. What is this, Hawking's imagined universe at play? Principles of uncertainty; toroidal space? Well, it's no utopia in which to dance the celestial dance, this is the fucking apocalypse. This is to writhe in hell's fucking inferno. Perhaps he can reach the Brief History, search the unread chapters, and find some wormhole back to reality – or at least to the everyday delusion he's always believed was reality. But how to cross the floor without sinking into this churning swamp? There it is, the slim silver paperback floating on the shelf, its sentences slithering from the pages, words cascading over the books beneath and embedding themselves into the floor. He lunges for it, convinced that his hands will pass straight through. Vital not to look down, or to either side, or up at the ceiling: the room has become a quagmire of bubbling, living, all-consuming black. Black with letters, black with ants.

Every cell of his skin is burning now. The insects are burying themselves below the epidermis. They squirt their eggs into his bloodstream. They are furious with him. They blame him for their life sentence, spent traipsing round and round the same path, feeling the march of their comrades' feet on the reverse face of the twisting roadway, subconsciously knowing that their own feet have trodden there a thousand times, and will again. And again. And again. And because the ants blame him they devour him. Pulling at his clothes and skin,

baying like a wild dog, he stumbles his way to the bathroom, barricading himself inside, wedging a towel into the crack beneath the door. But the windowless room leaves him no escape. If the insects break through he has nowhere to run. They will pare his flesh to the bone. He gulps at the air till his lungs cry out. Hot water gushes from the tap into the basin – soap, scrubbing raw the skin of his hands. Splashing, soaking his face. Thank God, the world is coming to rest, solidifying. He can touch again. The mighty kaleidoscope is turning more slowly and the universe deflating once more to a manageable infinity. He is larger than the Earth, embracing the solar system, orbiting among the planets, circling with the galaxies, spinning around black holes, hoovering up supernovae to spawn another heavenful of stars in a few thousand, million, trillion years.

He is omnipotent.

Now he can see it all: cosmic space, subatomic space, time infinitesimal, time infinite, all just a matter of scale. His mind trawls every far corner, every last second of time, as he becomes as one with the whole, standing astride the universe. It all makes sense now. That's why Alex and he could be at once so alike and yet so unlike. Because the tiniest difference in their genetic code is a whole galaxy of new stars. The smallest divergence in their chemistry is the nuclear reaction to fuel a Red Giant. Even the tiniest advantage gifted to one twin over the other in the womb is a trigger to change the course of an entire solar system. Insignificant variables with universal consequences. All down to scale. Because the consequences appear unrelated to the cause – the connection is too microscopic for people to see – they are forced to believe in some mystical sleight of hand: God, destiny, coincidence. Now there – see there – a perfect example. Fate? Or God's fine work? In the mirror on the wall, does that not look exactly like Alex? All along he's been wearing Alex's jersey. He could be his twin to a tee. That's got to be the funniest thing. What would Gulnaz say if he turned up at her door dressed like this! Might even she be fooled? Fooled like the teachers were fooled when he and Alex were kids. Remember that? They had their classmates in stitches. Got him into such trouble when word of it got home. Hey, she'd fallen for Alex; maybe this is exactly how to win her back. Wouldn't that be fate? God? Chance? Others might say so. He'd argue it's just the unseen physics of the universe at play.

The Hawking falls from his grasp and bounces on the tiles, landing on its edge to form a badly pitched roof tent, its ridgepole a crease line in the spine where for years a thick bookmark has been sandwiched. The opened page, he discovers, marks the spot some way into chapter ten where he'd given up reading. But the words drawing his eye now are not those convoluted accounts of string theory that once put him in such knots, but words that

bring knots of a different kind: the writing on the bookmark – the text to ‘Marvello Mobius’s Manual of Magic’.

In a mixture of fascination and dread he drops to his knees and flips through the leaflet.

“You can dazzle your friends and astound your family with this easy-to-perform trick...” He reads it aloud, like an incantation, before glancing into the bathroom mirror. His reflection in the glass scowls back at him. ‘What the hell are you doing that for, Daniel? How can you, with me lying crippled out there on the rocks, pounded by the waves? Why don’t we tell our parents what really happened up there on the cliffs?’

His father stands behind, with an eye that commands Alex to continue. Alex leers out from the mirror. ‘My brother has a little confession to make, don’t you, Daniel?’

Daniel hastily drops his eyes again in search of his place on the page.

“...All you need is one of the strips of paper provided, and our Miracle glue stick. But don’t forget your magician’s wand and hat, or the magic won’t work!”

‘Up on the cliff, Daniel,’ Alex snarls, turning beetroot with rage. He points at the door. ‘Put your poor, bereaved mother out of her misery.’

Behind the obscure glass, her image swaying and swooning now, their mother begins to wail like never before. He wants desperately to silence her. “Mum, you know what happened. The boat – Alex thought it was Dad’s, he tried to get down to reach it.”

‘No! For once in your life, tell the truth!’ The figure in the mirror seems to rise in defiance, though Daniel himself makes no move. ‘Tell her why I had to run away, why all these years I could never come back.’

“Stop it! Stop it! You’re a bloody liar!”

His reflection advances towards him, skin like polished white stone, eyes like tiny black pearls; not hair, but fronds of seaweed clinging to his forehead, a row of shells between his drawn lips.

‘Tell them, Daniel. Tell them what you did to me.’

Their mother is turning now and uncovering her face. Somehow she must be protected. “Mum, don’t listen to him. He’s just in my head. He’s not real.”

But Alex remains undaunted. ‘Tell them about the argument,’ he shrieks back. ‘The magic set, whose was it?’

*It’s early morning, another room, another quarrel raging. Children’s acrimonious words are volleyed across a no-man’s land of Christmas paper, deafening them to a parent’s attempts at mediation.*

‘Whose was it, Daniel?!?’

*At the heart of the dispute: two parcels, each neatly wrapped, but missing their labels, and both ripped*

*open.*

“It was mine!” Daniel looks beseechingly towards his father. “My present from you, Dad. It was, wasn’t it? You left the parcels for us before you went away. There were no labels; they’d come off. Mum handed them out to us but said we could swap if they weren’t right. I got trainers! They were obviously meant for Alex. But Alex wouldn’t swap.”

He thrusts the sheet between his face and the mirror to close the matter, but a powerful hand rips it from him. ‘You idiot of a boy! You really think I would buy you some sissy magic set? Is that any way to make a man of you?’

At last, the long dreamed of counter-attack can begin. Snatching back the sheet from his father’s grasp, Daniel issues his next commandment. “Now give the ends a twist and glue them together. Ask a volunteer to draw a line along the strip and tell them to keep on going until they arrive back where they began.”

*Away they run, the two boys, beneath a tumbling grey sky, across the fairway between the flags, towards a hedging of ragged gorse.*

‘So tell them what you did.’ Alex is almost at his throat now. ‘You took me to the cliff edge.’ He turns back. “Father, Daniel said your boat was down there. He said you needed our help.’

Maybe if Daniel’s incantation is made loud enough this Judas voice will be drowned out. “But wait until they see what happens next! Be careful though, they’re going to need the Sorcerer’s Safety Scissors. Tell them to cut along the line they’ve just drawn...”

‘He pointed out the upturned boat, Father. He said he’d seen you struggling, right beneath the cliff. And then...’

A deathly hush. A heart’s missed beat. The agonising pause before the act of betrayal. Then Alex’s lips are moving again.

‘...He pushed me. He pushed me over the edge. Didn’t you, Daniel. *Didn’t you!?* You’d have me sent to my death for nothing but a stupid box of magic tricks.’

Daniel has stopped reading. The instructions fall unwittingly from his grasp. He stares in incredulous denial at the trio around him. His brother and father are like statues now. Out in the hallway, his mother has also fallen silent. Alex may have been the accuser, their father the witness, but it’s she who passes sentence, even through the frosted glass. Just with her eyes.

But for quite another crime. At last Daniel recognises the obstructions that have been hiding her and the shadows in which she stands, and knows where he must go to be with her. The insanity is passing. He’s ready now to purge himself of this den of phantoms. He climbs

slowly to his feet, unlocks the bathroom door, steps through to the lounge and snatches up the photograph on the window ledge. After taking one last look at his uninvited guests, he crushes the paper in his fist as an exorcism, knuckles squeezed so tight that they stand out stark red and white.

From the flat, he runs in a daze, cleansed by the driving rain that is falling. At the north entrance of the churchyard he stops and peers in through the gate. There she is, cut across by the wrought iron, shimmering through the downpour, standing on her own mound of earth staring sorrowfully at the gravestone that bears her name. In seeing her son, she hangs her head and turns away. He's through the gate now, and leaving the cobbled path.

“Mother?”

“Mum. Please.”

Reluctantly, she turns around.

“I know I should have come sooner. I should have come the moment I remembered the truth. I know I've done you a terrible wrong.” The icy water is draining the light from inside him. There is precious little time.

“I know you're not to blame for Alex's fall. I know I treated you badly for years. I know now how I made you suffer.” Each footfall towards her may crush the very blades of grass that Gulnaz had flattened that day she side-stepped the grave.

“Please. I need you to forgive me. And then this can end.”

Her pale, beautiful hands grip the sides of the stone behind her. The skin sinks softly into the wet lichen, her nails stained olive by moss. He wants to take them, to bring them to his lips. And then to pull her brittle little body closer and shelter her in his arms and nurse her back to health. He wants to see her face again, not just this leather that stretches over a skull. He wishes she could open her eyes and breathe again and jump from her sickbed and dress in her brightly coloured frock and make herself up and gaily whisk her two boys from the house, one in each hand, and laugh and wave as young men's heads are turned, as friends wish her well and ask after their father, or as strangers wolf-whistle from across the street. He wants her to take him to see the steam trains and buy ice-creams and lift the soot smuts from his eye with her wetted handkerchief. He wants to sit with her and help her glue photographs into an album, and bring her tea and cake and wipe the crumbs and spittle from her mouth. He wants to hold her hand and reassure her when she's retching for the twentieth time that day with nothing left to retch but yellow bile. He wants to beat with his fists at the doors of the hospital and scream at the doctors for not saving her. He wishes he could do more than put a hand on her shoulder when they sit on the bench in the hospital grounds and she begins

to cry, telling him she is so frightened. And he wants to say thank you when she looks into his eyes and tells him he's clever, and artistic, and sensitive, and that she'll always love him, no matter what, till the day she dies.

And he wishes that when that day came just one week later he'd known how to cry and to say goodbye and to tell her he loved her too.

So many things he wants and wishes for when he kneels before her, when he leans forward to bury his head in her lap and reaches out to embrace her, only to connect with cold, wet stone. The darkness envelopes him then. The darkness that is without form. A darkness with no memory, no passage of time. A darkness of no dimension. The darkness that none but God, fate, or the play of the universe can repeal.

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When Gulnaz returns she fails to notice his changed state, too preoccupied with reporting on the weather, helping him into his coat and finding him his walking stick. He follows her out, but leans the stick against the wall before closing the door. Like the crutches and the wheelchair, it has propped him up long enough.

The signal was lost just half an hour ago. Now, when he tries to connect, he meets only deathly silence. Before that, though the images were distorted and the sounds jumbled, he'd seen enough. Make your peace with your ghosts, Margaret had said. His father, his brother, his mother. And now another; the sad, sensitive, intelligent, inquisitive and thoughtful ghost that labours for hours over the smallest details of a model ship; spends days sifting through shells and indexing them by shape, size and colour; sits lonely and afraid up in a greengage tree. The ghost that was robbed of love by the murdering hands of war, by the jaws of a merciless sea and the claws of a ravaging cancer.

And the mad woman had said those other things that he hadn't believed. How could he? Or maybe he had, just for a moment, and the insanity of it was just too great to accept.

They're sitting side by side on the bus. He's studying the delicate hands on her lap. How perfect to slip his hands into hers and pretend they're just another couple, newlyweds en route to the airport for some sun-drenched honeymoon. How perfect, but how impossible. Those hands are not at rest. They fidget and fumble like hands under a drier. Her face is not turned fondly towards his, but pinned to the window, searching the rain-soaked streets for the sorry soul she's abandoned at his time of greatest need.

"Nearly there," she says anxiously, as they top Cooper's Hill. Without thinking, Alex sounds the bell. "We need to get off here. He's not at the flat."

The earlier downturn in the weather has past; no more rain, but the air has turned colder. The sky is needle-sharp and blue. They enter Old St. Bart's via the west gate, at the smarter end of the churchyard. But he knows they won't find Daniel up here. The grassy cobbles pave their way to the hollow.

"I think I should approach him alone," he croaks, and releases her hand.

"If you think it best," she says. "I'll be just over there." Gulnaz points to a gravestone, which Alex guesses must be that of her grandfather.

"Give me five minutes. Then you can come over."

She nods silently. And all at once his face is in her hair, his tears wetting her cheek, his arms crossing behind her, feeling her spine go weak. He then whispers something in her ear

that he's never said out loud to anyone. "I love you, okay? I really love you."

"Okay." The nervous little laugh she gives out sets them both in motion. He sees her dropping to her knees before the stone, kissing her own fingertips and laying them on its surface. For fear of changing his mind and calling her back, he turns quickly and continues down to the north gate. It feels as though he's made this approach many times, but never with a heart so heavy or a head so full. There is the Navy man, standing at the bus stop with bags at his feet, his wife hugging and kissing him, then watching him go, waving and crying, but the man returning no emotion as he stares out through the shrinking rear window. The eyes are not on his sons, nor on his wife, but somewhere at their backs, maybe the hills behind, maybe an ocean beyond.

And here comes the little boy, tearing back home along the coast road, his little legs running faster than they'd ever run for his father, churning over in his frightened little mind what to say, only to lose courage the moment he stumbles in through the door. Sitting breathlessly on the carpet and pushing all bad thoughts from his mind. Reaching over for the magic set, *his* magic set, and finding the trick in the book that at first he mistakes for a guide on how to make paper chains. And now Gulnaz, with her outstretched hand, the Mobius ring he'd fashioned for her resting in her palm as he explains its unique properties – a single twisted surface that bends full circle, runs back to back with itself and finally meets up with where it begins. The ants on the front feel the tread of the ants on the back, but really it's all one pathway. He is showing her the trick: Take a strip of paper; put a mark on one side; twist the two ends; join the two together to form a loop, and cut –

To a cat darting for cover, a robin taking to the air, as a trembling voice echoes through the trees. He looks up from beneath a magician's hat to see a woman's mortified face. How did he come to be here? He'd been in the church, waiting for the rain to stop, and had become lost in childhood thoughts; he was here to attend to his mother's grave. The stone is nearer now, a little way off the path, but there are tears of cold obscuring his view, an iciness needling its way deep beneath his coat. Or it might be more than just cold; the shivers seem to bode of a presence. Is someone covertly watching him? Or simply conducting a vigil of their own? The gravestone now slips into view, its pale curves thrown into relief by the hedgerows behind. But the front face is hidden by a bundle, about the size of a man, propped up against it. He steps from the path into the wet grass, quickens his pace and then stops, as his brain tries to make sense of what it sees.

Twenty yards behind, a woman before another gravestone studies him, her coat and headscarf cocooning and concealing her. Through cupped gloves, her breath billows into the

frosty air and, as if by sleight of hand, vanishes. It isn't the first time she has seen this man. Always he seems to cower beneath that mop of hair and shrink into that oversize coat. If ever there was a man in hiding from himself, she's thinking, this was the man.

But for now they are still strangers. She doesn't know that tonight they will talk until the early hours, that in a week's time they'll be a couple, that a week after that they will share a bed, and that a few weeks later, at this very spot, he will abandon her forever. She pulls a patterned handkerchief from her bag and dabs at her nose before setting off towards him. The gentle 'Merry Christmas' she ventures as she passes isn't meant to intrude upon his privacy, only to acknowledge the one other living soul in this resting place of the deceased. But he's either failed to hear it or has chosen not to answer.

He's clearly distracted, in a state of some distress, his attention focused on the graves by the hedgerow, darting off rapidly towards the shadows, leaving her words, for the moment at least, to fall upon dead soil.

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### **Author's note**

Every effort has been made to ensure that named geographical locations and historical facts are accurate, except where they relate uniquely to the fictitious characters in this book. The village of Thurlestone in Devon, for example, does have a school, a pub and a hotel with the same names and descriptions as found here, whereas Daniel's house and street are imagined. The beach, golf course and coast path are all as described. Alex's accident is fictitious, although I am told that casualties have been recorded in similar circumstances along those treacherous, overhanging cliffs.

The facts surrounding the Falklands crisis, including dates of sailing, the location of Devonport and the wider aspects of the military campaign, have also been checked. However, the specific frigate in which Petty Officer Richard George served and the story around it is fictitious.

The information about Iran is based on testimony and research. So many people have remained either missing or in prison since the revolution that it is impossible to know whether Gulnaz's story is true or not. I am assured however that it is entirely plausible.

Because it is never identified, the Midlands town at the centre of this novel, along with its garden centre, hospital, park and nursing home, should be assumed to be entirely fictitious.

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About the author



I am a writer and composer, working in the South West of England. To date I have written two novels, a TV script and several short stories. My music work comprises nearly sixty compositions for a wide range of media.

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