Failed Job Interviews of a Novelist

A Speculative Memoir

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Chapter One

In my twenties, I did things because they were cool. In my thirties, I did things to make money. By my forties, I did things to make my mark. Now, in my fifties, I want to do things that are meaningful.

Good luck with that, son.

This is a speculative memoir. Let's not get into definitions now. Hopefully, by the end of the book, you'll understand why this is not simply *a memoir*.

For a long time, its title was *Failed Job Interviews of a Novelist*. That clues you into what to expect. *Job Interviews of a Failed Novelist* would be equally accurate.

The anthropologist Mary Douglas defines pollution as "matter in the wrong place". This was my experience of job interviews. I was pollution. I had once belonged somewhere, I had been matter in the right place, but society changed fast. I could not update my sense of self quickly enough to keep up. Pollution is also matter in the wrong time.

The only way to survive a rapidly changing world is to change the self so that it continues to belong. If the world goes mad, you must too. Job interviews demand passion of the interviewee. It is not enough to be simply competent. Emotional derangement is an essential qualification.

The emotional tenor of this memoir is life-affirming desperation, a series of faintly hysterical confrontations between the contemporary male ego and a changing world. I call it a speculative memoir for many reasons, and hopefully, by the final chapter, all of them will be apparent.

The truth is that to belong, I had to be part of a future. The future is the second-to-last occupation of humanity. The past has been made redundant. We've let the past go. If you want to visit the past, head over to LinkedIn where the past is still open for business.

Every job interview was a window into the emerging speculative economy. Through them, I glimpsed what had to be done. Who I had to become. As I raised myself up, my friend Newton headed in the opposite direction.

A memoir should not be all me, me, me: this is Newton's story too. I should have published this earlier, while he was still alive, but this is also a story about men and what the fuck we are doing, and so maybe it's for the best that he is no longer around to read my account of him.

Let's start with me being fired. It's the financial crisis, the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century, and I'm a white man in his mid-thirties, with two children and a third on the way. I am working in the basement office of a media agency where the barred windows gazed up at the gutter of a Kentish Town side street.

Two men - Jonathan and White - come downstairs to fire me, and we move into the past tense.

On the way into the meeting, Jonathan took me aside and whispered, "Don't fuck yourself."

There were many ways in which I might fuck myself in this process. How I might remain unfucked, Jonathan did not say.

My job was… it doesn't matter. Let's call this agency This Content. Its real name was

equally as noncommittal so that it could pretend to be whatever a particular client required.

Jonathan Stoker lay his hands flat on the grey table. He did not look me in the eye. We had worked together in This Content for ten years. *Together* is the wrong word. Jonathan owned This Content so he never really worked in it like the rest of us: he merely occupied This Content. He gave me his advice - don't fuck yourself - and then he withdrew his gaze, glanced at the door, intent on the next thing. Our relationship had always been an expedient one. No promises, no contracts, just spoils to be shared right up to the moment at which there were no more spoils for me.

White stated their offer of the statutory minimum for redundancy. A small amount for ten years work. Thing is, they never gave me a contract. I've been off the books. Not really legal.

"This is not a negotiation," I said.

White repeated their offer, along with a condition: either I accept it now and leave or my whole team would be made redundant too and not reallocated onto other projects. Imitating Jonathan, White splayed his hands flat on the table, as if to say, this is a *fait accompli.*

*"*This is not a negotiation*,"* I repeated myself.

White thrived at This Content. His grandfather was a poet with a grand literary reputation. White had the opposite of literary pretensions: he believed in technocracy. He threw himself around the football pitches of Hackney Marshes every Wednesday and Sunday. His hair was a number two buzzcut. He was fit for purpose.

White hated me and I was unaccustomed to being hated. Affable, curly-haired, out-of-shape and out-of-time, I didn't understand why people couldn't just get along. White believed that everyone in This Content could just get along if only I fucked off and took my camaraderie with me.

I'd fantasised flouncing out of This Content many times. In my imagined exit interviews, I would invariably give White a piece of my mind, but when that moment arrived, I kept that piece for myself.

This is not a negotiation. Daydreams had unprepared me for this confrontation. Fiction walked face first into the plate glass window of reality. I had expected a negotiation, having rehearsed this or that rejoinder. But they had not come to negotiate, and I didn't realise that is the best opening position for a negotiation. I didn't want to stay there another hour. I was done and ready to begin my real life as an author. This Content were giving me what I had always wanted: my freedom. Free to stay at home with my family and finish my second novel. And thanks to Jonathan and White, I would be able to say to my family, it is not my fault, they did it to me. They fucked me. I did not fuck myself.

"What are your plans?" asked Jonathan, afterwards.

I had no plan, just some savings and daydreams.

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Remembering is also rewriting: the memories we return to most frequently are warped by previous narration. To write about the self is to be part-archaeologist and part-sculptor. Brush away the soil then remember what you will find there; a skeleton appears in the silt: the ankle, shin, hip, spine and skull of cause-and-effect.

#

The train passed through the soft green escarpment of the South Downs and onto Lewes, where I was renting a flat with my young family. The air had a sour yeasty tang from Harvey's brewery. Rooks nested in the tall trees opposite the station, an unruly parliament of inscrutable commentators and gowned legislators.

The cafe on the platform was run by Victor and Paul. In their blue aprons and white shirts, Victor cajoled Paul into a kind of double act, much to Paul's embarrassment. Victor

believed the hurrying faces of the commuters were in need of a “little cheer on these cheerless eventides”. The commuters knew each other by sight, as we travelled together to and from London every day, but we never spoke to one another because to do so would condemn us to ten or twenty years of small talk. Victor did our talking for us.

On the back shelf of the railway cafe, there was a volume of Victor’s poetry for sale. There was also a children’s book written by a commuter and a CD of blues covers by two commuters who worked in financial compliance titled “Woke Up This Morning and Caught Myself a Train”. My first novel had been published the previous year. It was like dropping a feather off the Grand Canyon. I arrived redundant at the station. I would no longer have to catch the early morning train to This Content, and so Victor never stocked my debut novel on his shelf of wingless commuter art.

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Beth’s pregnant belly swelled beneath her apron as she laid my dinner on the table. My son Alfred was in the highchair, gripping a red heat-sensitive plastic spoon in his chubby fist. My daughter Alice, six years old, talked about teachers and school. I sought out the face of my wife for a silent mood check: how was your day? Tough. Alfred is teething. Look at his cheeks. Look at the size of him, the lummox. She had to haul him downstairs, push him up the hills of Lewes in a buggy, nearly eight months pregnant and alone with two small children while I worked in London.

She winced as she put down the plates, a pain in her hip, the tendons loosening in preparation for the next birth. The bump sat low on her hips. Her due date was six weeks away.

“I met Cintha’s mother today,” said Beth. Cintha is one of the other parents with a child at Alice’s school. “Cintha’s mum is a midwife. She looked at me and said, ‘I hope you’ve packed your bag for the hospital’. Then she said, ‘next time I see you we must talk

about contraceptives.'"

For this period of rapid reproduction, we have fallen into traditional gender roles. There will be barely twelve months between child two and child three; by middle class standards, we're sexually incontinent. Did I take advantage of my wife's back-to-back pregnancies to manoeuvre her into this subservient role? Or was this dinner table a life raft swept along by biological and economic forces, a raft that we all cling to, sometimes going under, sometimes struggling back to the surface, keeping an eye on the whirlpool of the imminent birth.

"How was your day?" she asked.

"It's over," I replied.

I spared the family the details of my humiliation. I want to move on. Clean slate. Redundancy represented freedom for both of us. Now I will be home most days, and able to take on my share of the childcare. Cyril Connolly wrote that the pram in the hall is the enemy of a writer's promise. Soon I would have two prams in my hall.

But the prams were really an enemy of Beth's promise.

I decided to wait before trying to get another job in the media. Why waste my time scrabbling around for loose change on the deck of the Titanic when there is work to do here, raising these children, writing another novel. I have until my savings run out. Then, who knows how far I will fall or what I will resort to for money. Perhaps the new novel will save us.

A family is its rituals: some of these rituals are ancient - like the return of the provider to the family home - and some of them are newly minted. Beth removed the lid from a pot of Thai green curry. She had decided that - during her third pregnancy - she would never eat from the same continent on consecutive days, but she chose not to inform me of this fact, curious to see if I noticed; she quietly logs the fact that I do not. The evening passed

pleasantly in the way that family evenings do: teeth, story, bedtime, then TV, maybe wine, and sleep and no talk of what is coming.

My daughter Alice and I walked beside a bend in the River Ouse, idling away the hour before the lido opened. Alice is blonde-haired and blue-eyed. She was an only child for the first five years of her life, then her brother Alfred was born, and she became the older sibling. When she danced with him, she was puppet-master and he was a prop in a world of her imagining. Alice has what she will - as an adult - describe as *only child energy.*

Lewes seemed to Beth and me as the perfect place to raise children, with hill walks at the weekend and children's birthday parties in the woods, where I would whittle sticks along with the other parents. Lewes has a thing for wood. At Alice's school, a couple lobbied to put weaving on the curriculum (Fifteen years later, this same couple will be LinkedIn advocates for cryptocurrency and will travel the world giving talks about Web3 and NFTs before they vanished overnight).

There was a wooden toy shop at the end of the street. Because plastic is bad for the environment, and it is bad for children's minds. Plastic inculcates consumerism, and Lewes was above all that, back then.

When the lido opens, glances of mutual recognition pass between the parents of young families. This is the *Lewes look*. The *Lewes look* says, even though we are strangers, I recognise that you are wise, for you too came here to raise children in this vale of shared values. The *Lewes look* seems, on the surface, to be the opposite of the hunted refusal of eye contact among the regular commuters: but it is not.

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I went to London to meet some people about freelance work. There were drinks. One of them offered me a sofa to crash on. It was after ten. I hesitated on the tube platform, whether

to go with them on the Northern Line, or alone on the Victoria Line to catch the last train back to Lewes. It was tight. I'd left it late.

Five weeks away from Beth's due date.

Should I chance it?

Why would I chance it?

I arrived home at midnight. There was an odd atmosphere in the flat. Alice had wet the bed and was crying. This was unusual for her. I changed the bed, helped her out of her wet nightie and into a dry one. My infant son sat up against the wall of his crib, clapping his hands: and I thought, where is my wife?

Our bedroom was oddly warm. Beth was in the ensuite bath, naked and submerged.

"I've been in the bath for an hour," she said, sleepily. She tried to reach forward to top up the hot water. There was an unfocused air about her, a dreamy stupefaction. Thought and action were disconnected: normally, she would attend to the sound of her daughter crying or her son laughing at midnight.

"I had a contraction."

I helped her out of the bath. She looked back at the bathtub, as if she had left something behind.

"I think my waters broke."

"Should we go to the hospital?"

"No, I'm really tired. I'm just going to sleep it off and see how things are in the morning."

Slowly, she wrapped one wing and then the other wing of her dressing gown around herself and climbed, ungainly, on all fours onto the bed. She tried to settle down, find a spot where there was relief. But she couldn't get comfortable because she was not going into labour: she was already there.

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Midnight on a Thursday. Our families were hundreds of miles away and we didn't know anyone in Lewes. I couldn't drive her to the hospital because I had not learned to drive and didn't own a car. Yes, it would be better to wait until morning. Except her disconnected tone indicated that she was in the transition, the primitive back-of-the-cave state of mind that comes just prior to pushing the baby out. The baby could be here within the hour.

"Is your bag packed?" I asked. She shook her head. I opened a bag and put in underwear, jumpers, whatever, we're past the point of prudent preparation.

"We have to get you to the hospital."

"But I'm *tired*," she waved me away, as if I'd suggested a night out.

"We'll take the children with us."

"We can't. The hospital won't allow it."

We needed someone to take the children, but I didn't know anyone in Lewes, apart from the commuters, and they'd made it very clear that I was not even to talk to them. Then I thought: the other parents at Alice's school. Their numbers were pinned on the fridge. I called one after the other. Nobody picked up because it was midnight.

This is how easy it is to fuck everything up. Beth's aunt and uncle were due to arrive in two days to help us with the logistics of looking after two children while Beth gave birth. But they had not arrived. And we might have less than an hour until the birthing process hit a critical, life-determining phase. Will midwives come out to the house and help me deliver my own child? Not without warning. Why don't I know what to do? Why won't anyone answer my calls?

Somebody picked up. It was Cintha. Thank god for Cintha and her partner Karen. Yes, they will take our children. They have a car and can be here in fifteen minutes. Human kindness. Community. Good people. I sobbed with thanks because I'd never been saved like

this before. I'd never needed people like this before.

I dressed my children for going outside. Little shoes and coats, teddy bears and favourite books. At the same time, I called cab numbers until one picked up and agreed to take us to the hospital. Everyone fulfilled their promises in our choreographed exit. Karen took the children in her car. The cab arrived five minutes later, at twelve-thirty sharp. I asked Beth, can you walk down the stairs. She was doubtful. But she'd done this before; with the first child, she had to scuttle up a flight of stairs in-between contractions.

The cab driver called the hospital to warn them that we were coming in hot, but they didn't pick up, the switchboard was down. The cab bumped over the railway lines at Plumpton, and Beth cringed and gripped her bump to hold it in place. I kept calm, trying not to notice that Beth quietly slid down into the footwell so that she could raise her ankles on the back seat. I talked to the cab driver about how grateful I was that he was working late. I didn't talk to Beth because her mind was elsewhere, submerged, anchored to a weight sliding downward.

We made it to the hospital. All the travelling stalled the birth process. Husband and wife were escorted into a dark birthroom. The window was open to a red, swollen spring moon. We chatted in the bloodied moonlight.

There are birthrooms and deathrooms in our lives. What should we say, in the birthrooms, in the deathrooms. What needs to be said, in the birthrooms, in the deathrooms. What did I say, in my birthrooms, in my deathrooms? A new living human being was about to arrive into our family. But we could not talk about the future because that would embroil Beth in planning energy and she did not have the spare cognitive capacity to trace the cause and effect of our decisions into the future. Some of the branches on the decision tree were negative. We could not bear to think of anything negative, not with this great uncertainty pressing against her, forcing its way into our lives. We could not talk about the past either -

remember this or remember that - because the past was about to change. The birth of a third child would increase the importance of some memories and demote others. The story of us was shuffling its pack.

In the birthrooms, we must stay in the moment, be ever-present, and not slip away into the mosaic of anticipation and memory that is our inner lives. So, I talked about a party our friend Daniel was throwing, and Daniel's plans. Daniel lives the life of a wealthy artistic single man with lots of friends. Yes, Daniel is having a party, and he will need a venue, and some food, and he will have to think about cocktails and the music choice will be important too. All perfectly inconsequential. The birthroom doesn't need any more meaning placed upon it. Nothing I could say would fit the enormity of what was coming, the birth itself, the shaking intensity of the act followed by a constellation of possibilities.

In the birthroom, *just listen*.

Beth had a dark look in her eye. The wildness of the transition phase returned to her. A look of fear crossed her face. The midwife arrived, briskly upbeat, and lay a reassuring hand on Beth's wrist as she monitored the baby's heartbeat.

"Birth is a process," said the midwife. "You have to move with that process."

My wife nodded once, through the perspiration and the pain. At the time, I didn't hear this conversation because I was anxious, casting my mind forward into what might happen, and so I missed this crucial detail in what was really happening. Beth will later tell me that the midwife's emphasis upon *the process* inspired an epiphany that she will carry with her for the rest of her life. Although there were people in the birthroom who were trying to help her, she was fundamentally alone with her body and its process. Her wild stare saw that her death will be like this too: in the deathroom, there will be people trying to help her, who love her, but ultimately, she will pass through the stations of death alone. "Death is a process that the body goes through too," says Beth, much later, "learning about that process makes me less

afraid."

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Florence was born within the hour. The midwife said to Beth, "you are good at this. You should be a midwife." A confusing thing to say because Beth was entirely in the moment and interpreted it as a suggestion that she should do a shift as a midwife right there and then.

The NHS treated us to a cup of tea each. The midwife threaded a couple of stitches into my wife.

"How does that feel?" she asked.

"Silvery," replied Beth.

She drank her tea and lay back on the gurney. Florence was small and sticky like a baby bird. The afterbirth pains were intense, worse than the birth pangs.

"Didn't anyone tell you," said the midwife, "that the afterbirth pain gets worse the more children you have?" Beth's face said no, they never fucking told me. The midwife gave her some paracetamol and left.

The moon bled darkly, attended by wimpled clouds. All the lights were off in the birthroom.

"I want you to know," gasped Beth, her face in shadow, "right here and now, that I'm drawing a line under our family."

In the car park, I called my mother Sylvia to tell her the news. Even though it was the early hours of the morning, she was awake. The only grandparent who was. From her, I inherit my anxiety; the grind of speculation, the witchy belief that by naming future misfortune, we can ward it off. After talking to Sylvia, I left a message for Beth's parents. Her father was terminally ill. Her first family was splintering, falling apart, just as our new family acquired its final piece. I didn't stop to wonder what that meant. People need me to be happy, so I move quickly past the sad. The labour was over and done with, quick and

straightforward, (at least for me). I'm a father of three, I said quietly to myself. And I was so close to not coming home that night.

In the hospital car park, I breathed in the early morning air and got myself together. In the future, there would be other times in the car parks of hospitals, other calls to make, after long nights in the deathroom. But why worry about that right now. This is a beginning, after all.

Chapter Two

It was the location that made the prospect of working at the Serpentine Gallery so appealing. The walk from Victoria Station is fit for royalty: past Buckingham Palace and up the Mall and across Hyde Park. To take a daily constitution among the precincts of power! No more flailing around in the rainswept anonymity of Lewes High Street at two o'clock in the afternoon, head-down with the shame of being caught between Boots, WH Smith and Costa Coffee at a time when all the proper people are at work. At the Serpentine, I could swim in the lido after my commute and take lunch beside the Princess Diana memorial fountain.

The job interview was for a web editor. The salary was between eighteen and twenty-one thousand pounds a year for three days a week. I hadn't really thought about whether I could afford to take the job. Commuting by train would cost five hundred pounds a month. I don't know how much money I will have left after tax and national insurance. Less than I need, I know. But the job also came with cultural capital that I would accrue through proximity to the arts. And I will have two days a week free to write. My second novel was complete and with my agent. Soon it will go out to publishers. I think somewhere between five and ten grand would be an acceptable advance. I've been writing it one day a week for three years.

It was an unseasonably hot Monday afternoon in October. I walked around rehearsing my spiel and financial calculations, inadvertently working up a sweat. My agent is keen for me to get this job. The big executive jobs suck you dry, she counselled. This low-key role as a Web Editor will allow you to continue the work of a novelist in his prime. "They won't be averse to having a novelist working there," she counselled me, "don't be afraid to let them know who you know. They are starfuckers at the Serpentine."

This was my second interview for the position. I'd passed through the first airlock of underlings and been approved to occupy a slot in the calendars of Hans Ulrich Obrist and Julia Peyton Jones. They are busy with very big projects, one of which is the construction of a second gallery on the other side of the Serpentine River. Fortunately, their web site was crap, and I could see lots of things to talk about, not least the emergence of social media, which means they should be thinking beyond merely a web site and more about *a digital presence*.

Don't think of it as bullshit. It's more useful to think of it as a *speculative vocabulary*. When you are working on digital technology that is changing very quickly, in which software and applications can be rendered instantly redundant, then it's better to speak in a way that focuses on what *might* or *could* happen rather than what - in all likelihood - *will* happen. Insisting upon experience-based pragmatism makes you appear solid and tedious. If I could master the argot of speculation, then I would appear to be a suitable companion for power, and not a man who has taken to haggling with butchers. I'd been teaching myself the vocabulary of speculation by lurking on LinkedIn, reading various blogs of digital boosterism, and following the pronouncements of experts like Jeff Jarvis, Clay Shirky, and the talk coming out of O'Reilly Media's FooCamp.

Like Aschenbach in *Death in Venice*, I had also taken to altering my appearance with cosmetics so as not to appear too repulsive to the spirit of the age. On the night before the

interview, I went into the bathroom to perform a middle age rite of passage with the chestnut brown hair colouring of Just for Men. My temples were grey, frosted by a caress from death's fingertips: I put on the transparent plastic gloves to erase this death mark, smoothing the colouring into my hair until my colour was homogenous, like the hair of a middle-aged comedian on a panel show. At least I didn't go for the black colouring. Jet black hair on the stringy remnants of middle-aged man hair - I saw that look on the little one from Top Gear and he looked like the cat had been at him. I also dabbled with Beth's cosmetics, applying an astringent water to tighten the skin under my eyes. In a fit of self-consciousness, I stopped at a florist and bought a carnation to pin over the moth holes in my lapel.

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Hans Ulrich Obrist and Julia Peyton-Jones are curators, finely tuned aesthetes. They possess a keen visual judgement that - with my carnation and hair dye - I hoped to beguile.

Waiting in the gallery, I noticed the exhibition by Gustav Metzger. I will need to show knowledge of Metzger if I am to seem informed about the arts. The centrepiece of the exhibition was a blanket on the ground. Visitors were encouraged to climb under this yellow blanket to experience the art directly. I got on my hands and knees, fat in my wedding suit, and clambered under the blanket. Inch by inch, feeling around in the dark, I encountered a blown-up photograph of Jewish children scrubbing a pavement in Vienna in 1938. They too were on their hands and knees. The art made me feel a pin prick of humiliation. The artist presses a finger into that hole, dragging it apart. *This,* this art, Metzger's genius, is all that matters. Profound, visceral instances like this create meaning. I climbed out from under the blanket, sweating profusely, wedding suit dishevelled, high on the juiced meaning of the art.

Julia and Hans are ready for you now.

Hans Ulrich Obrist is a white Swiss man of about my age whose intellectual forehead and frameless glasses are a tabula rasa that he challenges others to fill. He is a questioner, and

I could already sense that his interest was provisional, judgmental and easily withdrawn. Julia Peyton-Jones is a white woman, older than me, and to all intents and purposes, the embodiment of *the arts*. The arts as something to be protected, defended, promoted. The arts as a career. Already I can hear myself answering the question, what do you do for a living, with the simple, oh I work in *the arts*. It's very interesting. Working in *the arts*.

As this was a job interview for a position in the arts, the interviewers have come equipped with quirks: Hans Ulrich Obrist takes out his notepad and begins sketching throughout the opening pleasantries. Perhaps he was capturing my answers in a mind-map. Or maybe he was rendering my vanities in pencil. At the end of the interview, I imagine Hans Ulrich Obrist revealing his portrait of my sweating desperate face and saying, I shall title this one, The Physical Impossibility of Giving This Man A Job in the Mind of Someone Employed.

Julia Peyton-Jones brought her dog into the interview. It was under the desk, near my feet.

"Do you mind if my dog sits in during the interview?" she asked.

"Is it for training purposes?" I wondered.

"He'll be no trouble," she said.

Because I have anticipated and prepared for - that is, fully imagined in advance - this interview, I enter a kind of fugue state in which everyday remarks become heavy with potential meanings. Do I mind if the dog sits in? He'll be no trouble. Is she talking about me or the dog? Am I troubling to them? People are different and strange. I can't get a handle on them.

In the week before the interview, I went to see the doctor. I had been experiencing feelings of uncertainty. I told the doctor that sometimes it feels like the earth is titling under my feet.

After examining me and declaring that my ear canals needed cleaning, he sent me from his office, adding “and make sure you take your things with you”.

He gestured at a pair of women’s shoes in a shoebox.

“Those shoes are not mine,” I said to the doctor.

“Well, they weren’t here when you came in,” he replied.

I thought that the shoes were a test. Perhaps a psychological test, to see if I could separate my sense of self from the exterior world: to know where things belong. *Matter in the wrong place*. I felt like I was in an adventure game where you pick up an umbrella only to find - three scenes later - that you need it to navigate through a plague of frogs falling from the sky.

Was it enough that I take the women’s shoes, as the doctor insisted, or was I to put them on?

I picked up the shoebox with the women’s shoes in it. They were large. Not my size, as they only make women’s shoes in my size at one particular shop in Birmingham.

I said to the doctor, “I don’t want to wear these shoes because the street outside is cobbled, and I will fall over if I am wearing heels. Especially as I have a blocked ear canal.”

This answer satisfied neither of us. His expression was of a man who hears people say a lot of odd shit and prefers not to dwell on it.

I left his office and handed the shoes to his receptionist so that they could be used again in whatever medical test I had just undergone.

In the interview with Hans and Julia, I speak with impassioned incoherence about Metzger’s blanket. Yet, from the diffident and awkward responses of my interviewers, I can see that passion is uncalled for. It will not be my role to respond to the art. Rather, I am here to fix the internet for them. To set up the internet in such a way that the professionals in the arts can communicate *their* passion. Also, Julia Peyton-Jones was not sure about my

advocacy of social media. Twitter and Vine are open to anyone. They have no exclusivity or specialness. Hans Ulrich Obrist spoke about a social network that somebody he knew had created that was designed solely for the artistic community. I had not heard of it, obviously.

"I'm not sure about Facebook either," said Julia Peyton-Jones. She traced a finger across her notes. "But I wonder if you could build something *like* Facebook for us."

"Build something *like* Facebook?"

How long could I sit in their back office pretending that I was building something like Facebook before I was found out? A year? Two years?

"Yes, I can build something like Facebook for you, and at the same time, perhaps I could knock up a car factory, and we could compete with BMW too."

Julia looked disappointed. They want to attract investment to their website. Part of my job would be to schmooze potential funding, after-hours. Though as soon as my schmoozing was mooted, it was partly withdrawn. I'm clearly not a schmoozer. My carnation was wilting and I could feel dog breath on my ankles.

I explained why something like Facebook could not be made just for the Serpentine. It is not the software, it is the network itself that is valuable, all those millions of users, offering up their lives on a minute-by-minute basis: whatever metrics of success a website uses to promote itself to its advertisers, those metrics are pitiful compared to Facebook. Journalism and publishing had been transformed by digital media - insofar as amputation, disembowelment and partial decapitation constitute transformation. Art was spared this transformation because it was predicated on authentic objects: the value of a work of art is unaffected by an age of digital reproduction.

Speculative vocabulary: how we speak of what is probable and what is possible. Not bullshitting *per se*.

In the event, the Serpentine Gallery would ring me up and offer me some work. This

call was made the following August, ten months after the interview.

"Are you still interested in the position?" they asked.

"Yes," I replied, "in fact, I've been pacing around the attic all spring and summer in my interview suit, waiting for your call."

By this point, my problems were more serious, primarily due to what followed immediately after that hot afternoon in the Serpentine.

I left the gallery and headed into Soho to meet my agent. Over dinner, she broke it to me that she would not submit my new novel to publishers. It was not good enough. My attempts to tighten the latest draft have not made any significant difference. In the current climate, she said, given the way things are, the state of the market at the moment, and how different this novel is from the science fiction you wrote previously, it wouldn't be the right thing to do, to put this in-front of publishers with your name attached, because I think you've got other ideas that will work better for you, bigger ideas, and that's what you should focus on, right now, in the current climate.

"But I am counting on the advance," I said. But *this is not a negotiation*. Not good enough. There are other things that I could do. Other ways of thinking. She knew that I could make a success of them, if I just gave it a try.

"I've ruined my family for this novel," I said.

You can sacrifice everything for a future and receive nothing in return. Cause and effect break apart, the skull comes loose from the vertebrae; in stories, the hero never gets what they want, only what they need; in life, we're lucky if we get that much.

Chapter Three

The job agent sent me an email. No, he was not called a *job agent*. That's not right. But I couldn't remember the name of his profession. Work Broker? Employment Interventionist? Redundancy Nurse? It was easy to lose track of the new terminology, in my domestic bubble. The metaphor of a bubble connotes floating pleasantness, weightlessly drifting above earthly cares. But a bubble is also precarious as, at any moment, it can pop, then down will fall Dad and Mum and babies and all.

I said to Beth, "It's not us in the bubble. It's them."

"Who?"

"The job agents."

"Who are the *job agents*?"

"The people I send my CV to. The people who want me to go for an interview at the Virtual Trolley Shopping Channel."

She knew that I didn't want to do it. But I had to earn some money.

I said, "I will definitely go to the interview."

"I'm not sure that you are shopping channel material."

"I know what goes on there. I know what they are up to. I watched it once. They sell

jewellery."

Beth was sceptical.

I showed her the job description emailed to me by the job agent. No, sorry, according to his email signature, he was a *creative consultant*.

She read out the criteria laid out by the creative consultant and squinted at me in turn to measure my qualities against it.

"Reach out to the audience through social media?"

"I can use Twitter."

"Balance real-time philosophy with revenue-critical promotion?"

"I think I know what that means. Let the users know you share their values but at the same time pump them for everything they've got."

"Recognise stretch opportunities as well as the low-hanging fruit."

She looked quizzically at me. The metaphor was new to her. She hadn't had a job for two years. *People are changing*. Part of the change involved going crazy with new metaphors.

"What are low-hanging fruit?" She considered the image. "Are they balls?"

"No, they are not balls. They are easy opportunities."

"Oh," she nodded, "that makes more sense."

#

Together we watched the Virtual Shopping Trolley channel and made a note of items for sale: an Executive Power Ring with a red gem set in an authentic chunk of Redwood tree; a deluxe Monopoly set with gold plated counters; an electrified vest that agitates belly fat. The presenters improvised their way through an hour of unflagging enthusiasm. This is the passion asked for in job specifications.

Ahead of the interview at the Virtual Shopping Trolley Channel, I had to squeeze in a

quick job interview at a digital agency called EMP. I was met in reception by Henry, who looked after me while my interviewer came off a call. In reception, there was a framed news article by the Sunday Times about EMP. The Sunday Times gives out an award for Best Companies to Work For and EMP had been nominated two years earlier. In the framed cutting, an unnamed journalist noted that, "EMP London is a highly competitive place, at least as far as jousting for the happiest person of the year award goes." You can hear every Oxbridge tutorial in that *jousting*, and in the compliance of the journalist to the regime. From my vantage point in reception, which was an area demarcated from the open plan office by some potted bamboo, the handful of remaining employees did not seem to be jousting to determine who was the happiest. Instead, there were the usual suspicious glances in my direction: who was the big middle-aged *guy* in his wedding suit? Figuring that I'm an accountant or a solicitor. In that kind of environment, suits were a bad sign.

During the interview, under my gentle probing, the interviewer revealed that their agency was struggling. I knew it: it was the listless way the designers were hanging around on the fire escape after finishing their cigarettes. These were people without deadlines. He confessed that their business was predicated on being one of Facebook's Preferred Developers and then Facebook turned off their access to that particular pipe as punishment for talking to their clients about some trials of Facebook software.

"We need to find a new business model fast," said the interviewer, crouching behind a large white elliptical desk. "You know about the future," he was reading from my CV, "what's the next big thing?"

"The imagination is the next big thing," I said.

The interviewer never bothered to get himself a chair. While I was talking, he tried sitting on the edge of the desk, but it was not stable, and so he settled for standing, staring at me.

When did I become so unlikeable? Matter in the wrong place. But it was not my fault that I was there. The vocabulary of the job agent and these agencies - all creative consultants and eye-catching content - fooled me into thinking that I might belong.

After the interview with EMP, I crossed London north to south to meet with the Virtual Trolley Shopping Channel. I'll spare you nearly all the details apart from one. The conversation went like this:

#

Interviewer: I see that you wrote a novel.

Me: Yes.

Interviewer: Anything I might have *read*?

Me: A difficult question to answer: if you read one novel a week, then I would put your chances of reading my novel as unlikely. But very few people read a novel a week. Especially if they are… (glances at job advert) … Head of Customer Experience at the Virtual Trolley Shopping Channel. Two or three books a year is the mean average.

[Scrutinises the interviewer's sour mask, professionally expressionless, so as to conceal their approval or disapproval at my responses, merely ticking boxes in the sheet laid out before them or, sometimes, drawing question marks in the boxes.]

…

Actually, thinking about it, I've got this all wrong. Scratch that. Let us start again.

…

Interviewer: I see that you wrote a novel.

Me: Yes.

Interviewer: Anything I might have *heard* of?

#

This revised criteria - from reading a novel to merely being aware of its existence - increases

the probability of recognition. Yes, if the questioner assiduously reads the review pages of the national press, and frequently visits an independent bookshop, there is a chance they may have caught a passing glimpse of my novel. But whether they would have committed its title to memory, so that upon meeting me three years later, they would be able to say, oh yes, you are the person who wrote that thing I heard about that time but never thought about again - that's unlikely. I could work out a more accurate probability but why do that to myself. Things are hard enough as it is and I don't attend to metrics of success nor do I assiduously calculate the metrics of failure.

Two small holes had appeared in the left lapel of my wedding suit. The moths had been at it, time's furry familiars, quietly dissolving and digesting my credibility.

#

Interviewer: I see that you wrote a novel.

Me: Yes.

Interviewer: Anything I might have heard of?

Me: Being aware of my novel would constitute an extremely rare quantum event, like this table spontaneously turning into meat.

#

No, I must resist facetiousness.

#

Interviewer: I see that you wrote a novel.

Me: Yes.

Interviewer: Anything I might have heard of?

Me: Maybe. It's called…

I always say the title of my novel with a hesitant muted cringe and a questioning uplift. Cringing, because by naming the novel, I am forcing the other person to confess to

their ignorance of it. This sends any conversation stumbling down a rocky scorched path.

Imagine a soul that has just passed through the gates of hell with the rest of the damned, and is about to embark upon the introductory tour of the inferno, but has to stop and use the facilities first, and then the soul loses the group, and finds itself off the beaten track, in some infrastructural area of hell, where trucks full of unspeakable things are reversing and beeping, and minor demons in visibility jackets are waiting for the lost soul to approach them so that they can shout, “this area of hell is off limits to you, you shouldn’t be back here”.

That’s what this conversation was like.

The interviewer did not recognise the title of my novel.

Their expression hardened at the implication that they were culturally ignorant: it was my fault for writing such an obscure book. Worse, I had implied that literary knowledge was obligatory for the bourgeois individual. Clearly, I did not get the memo that the role of literature in the constitution of the bourgeois subject had been displaced by elaborate rituals around food, fashion, and social media.

The interviewer adjusted their posture to shrug off the imagined burden of reading. I raised a questioning hand, as if to say, hang on a minute, I didn’t want to bring up the matter of my novel, you forced it with your question, *anything I might have heard of,* which - by the way - presumes that you are a cultural centre and the value of all things is measured by their proximity to you, whereas in fact there is no centre anymore, that is the theme of the age, the fucking *mega-trend*, the wave that erodes the middle class as it crashes upon them over and again. Economically and culturally, there is no fixed vantage point where you get to stand and say what belongs and what does not - and nothing dates us more than our misguided belief that we constitute some kind of norm. Even I know this, and I’m a big middle-aged man in a moth-nibbled wedding suit trying desperately to squeeze into the specifications of a job I revile.

Interviewer: I've never heard of it.

Me: It's nothing, I wouldn't worry about it.

Interviewer: I wasn't. Do you think that your passion for novels and your passion for virtual shopping trollies is compatible?

Me: Must we bring passion into this?

Interviewer: [surprised look]

Me: But you're not passionate about your job, are you?

Interviewer: [defensive look]

Me: The original meaning of passion is suffering. That is why it is called the Passion of the Christ. It's not that Christ was particularly enthused by crucifixion. It just hurt. So don't ask me to be passionate about the job. Just ask me to perform it in a timely and competent manner.

Interviewer: Passion gives you an edge.

Me: But the presence of the word betrays its absence as a quality. You don't see adverts for surgeons saying, must be passionate about the sanctity of life, because it's a given, isn't it? Wanted: brain surgeon, must be willing to give one hundred and ten per cent to the Hippocratic oath.

I placed the wide span of my palms on the table.

Me: I offer a steady hand. Reliable. A dogged practitioner of futile labour. Isn't that enough for you?

#

As I left the offices of the Virtual Trolley Shopping Channel, the presenters on screen were selling leather-bound editions of the complete works of Immanuel Kant. One of the presenters was saying, as I stepped into the revolving door, "And of course it was Kant who observed that 'recalling the past occurs only with the intention of making it possible to

foresee the future.'" Then I was inside the momentum of the door, as it ushered me out onto the street. It was a short walk to Victoria Station. Just before the ticket gates, there was an outlet for Lush, the soap company, and next door there was a cheese shop. This combination of perfume and cheese, of oppressive artificiality mixed with mouldy corruption, tasted like a passion for Virtual Shopping Trollies.

Boarding the train, I took off my suit jacket, folded it and stowed it overhead. Commuting had made the carriage interior with its moulded plastic seat backs and coarse aquamarine striped seat coverings more familiar to me than my bed. My mind has been here so frequently it used a few sensory impressions to knock up a mental model of the carriage. Commuters spend their hours in mental models of trains. They left the real carriage behind long ago. The past, as the presenters at the Virtual Shopping Trolley were saying in their allusion to Kant, is the furniture of the present and the basis upon which we anticipate what is about to happen.

As far as the brain is concerned, remembering the past and anticipating the future come from the same place. I think of this in every job interview when they ask the following question:

Interviewer: Where do you see yourself in five years?

Me: [Hesitates because the question forces me to look down upon myself as if from the vantage point of a narrator: it forces my point of view into a disembodied state, imaginatively reconstructing some hypothetical future in some hypothetical place.]

Me: Er…ahh…. [Thinks: Five years is a long time, a lot could happen, much of which would not be under my control. Then there is the question of probability: given my current trajectory, the most likely outcome for me in five years is driving an Uber, and that's not the right answer either.]

Me: Your question is archaic.

Interviewer: What do you mean?

Me: Asking me where I see myself in five years is ridiculous. The time span of five years presumes a culture that is stable and predictable. The technology that makes *this* job possible wasn't available five years ago. Given the speed of technological change and the disruption it is causing to society, anyone making five-year plans is deluded. It recalls Soviet agricultural and industrial planning policy and assumes the kind of career advancement that was the norm in lifelong employment. That norm is over. Then there is the assumption that I will answer the question by taking stock of my current material possessions - a rented flat, a second hand Toyota, my old wedding suit - and upgrade them according to the salary increments I could plausibly earn over five years, imagining a bigger flat, a newer second hand Toyota, and a suit unscathed by moths. It makes no mention of me having children or having to care for elderly parents: it presumes I will pursue a masculine agenda with solely materialistic aspirations.

Interviewer: [gathers papers].

Me: What you are asking is this: where do I daydream myself in five years? How do I fantasise all of this turning out for me, over a five-year period? I don't know. If I daydreamed myself working here in five years that would be wrong, wouldn't it? Somebody who daydreamed about this job would be far too desperate and needy for you to employ.

Chapter Four

On Commercial Road, the noon light filtered through traffic fumes and charcoal smoke from ockabasi grills. I gathered my thoughts ahead of my interview beside the windows of sole traders, specialists in import and export. I had none. My mind was as blank as the slender mannequins in saris, with their bolts of livid silk.

The agency was called Trend Report, and it occupied a floor of a Georgian house. Its proximity to the rag trade spoke of its origins in the fashion industry. Trend Report claimed to discover and track the mega trends that would shape culture over the next decade. It sold these futures to its corporate clients. How they identified these trends and determined what is instrumental in shaping the world and what is merely irrelevant was unclear to me.

I was wearing my wedding suit, a tailored single-breasted brown suit with a golden thread and a sky-blue lining, made to my specifications by Mr Eddie, a theatrical tailor in Soho. I was too fat and poor to buy new clothes.

I waited for my appointment in the busted armchairs in reception. Feeling conspicuous. Being conspicuous. I was met by Langland, a white man of modest proportions. His hair and beard were trim; he wore a black t-shirt with a round neck.

Langland's sibilants were as gentle and exacting as his handshake. He had been

working at Trend Report for a while. Although he was not the visionary pictured on the About Us part of the website, his telling silences let me know that, if the agency were a Mercedes, he would be the engine, whereas the founder was - these days - a mere hood ornament.

The interview overlooked the glass garden room of an architect-designed extension to the property. The house was owned and inhabited by the founder. The entire agency was - in effect - run out of their dining room.

Langland had been pulled from another meeting for this interview. He was very busy. Trend Report had ambitions to sell trends beyond the fashion sector. But before we could begin, we needed Tiffany. Tiffany was busier than everyone. Clients, explained Langland, a conference call, a major pitch. The usual.

We sat in the big empty meeting room. I wanted to ask him: how does your agency predict the future? What is your secret sauce, your proprietorial knowledge, that tells you what is about to happen. It was probably not the kind of information they would share in a job interview. But it was the only question worth asking: could you induct me in the secrets of prophecy.

As I took out my notes for the interview, Langland asked, “How do you spend your spare time?”

“I write.”

“What do you write?”

“I published a science fiction novel. It’s one of my credentials for working in futures.”

“I write too,” he said gently.

“Fiction?”

“I have a blog.’

"What's it about?"

"Manbags."

He put his manbag on the table.

"This is a drill nylon file case by Jack Spade."

He opened up the black bag to reveal a concertina of striped lining. His fingertips dwelled on the clasps.

"Women's handbags are very meaningful," I ventured. "Some women like to be prepared for any eventuality. Their handbags are survival packs for probable futures: elastoplasts and deodorants, condoms and tampons, mascara and paperback books."

Langland was not an easy man for me to read, but I could tell from his silence that what women do with their handbags was not of interest to him. He was interested in *manbags*, which are as distinct from handbags as scrotums are from wombs.

"There are some great messenger bags coming out of Tokyo at the moment," he said.

I could not build on this observation. Langland's conviction that he had a right to speak seriously about manbags, entirely without concern that it might seem trivial, was new to me. If I was to find a place for myself in the future, I would have to let go of my sense of entitlement in deciding what was normal and what was not. Langland's sensorial pleasure in the manbag, the pictures he took of it and posted on his blog, was part of the megatrend of the *artisanal delusionary*.

Tiffany arrived holding my CV in one hand and a coffee in the other, a busyness that signified business. First impressions are crucial in job interviews. From her expression, I saw that she was unimpressed. Everyone was quietly furious to meet me because I was so obviously a waste of their time.

Tiffany was a white woman with brown shoulder-length hair and a severe fringe. She was wearing a round-neck top with a shimmering camouflage pattern and purple slacks that

tapered toward two-tone brogues.

Without any preamble, Tiffany asked me, “What is your process?”

“What do you mean?”

“What is your *process*?” Her eyes widened with faint exasperation at having to repeat this simple word.

“It depends on what I’m doing,” I looked at Langland to back me up. “If I’m making a bacon sandwich, I use one type of process involving bacon and bread. When I wrote a novel, I used a different process. Not that I would necessarily think of novel-writing as a process.”

Bacon sandwiches! Novels! What is that stink within my shirt: oh, ’tis the reek of the twentieth century on the turn!

She wanted to know what my process was at work. I cursed myself: don’t you want this job? Don’t you want to go home to your family and say, stop worrying everyone, it’s going to be fine. Daddy’s got a job again.

I described the process at This Content. It was a tedious answer involving taking a brief from the client and then repeating one of the three creative tricks that have worked for me in the past. Not the right answer at all.

“What is your *process*?”

For Tiffany, the process encompassed everything she did. It was how she approached relationships and projects alike, it was how she decided which restaurant to eat at, and how she met the needs of a client. Her process was a continuous way of being that did not distinguish between job and not-job.

I described the process I used in writing my novel.

“A novel begins with a figure in the imagination that is incomplete, two things are connected and are in need of a third, and that undoneness is a pain, like nostalgia. Creating a

place or setting where that figure belongs brings the figure into focus…"

This description of my writing process dwindled away because Tiffany had raised her palm while she scanned through my CV, looking for something, anything to salvage this portion of her time. She expected, she required a different answer to this one, if I was to get the job. No, I was not going to get the job. I saw that.

Failed job interviews were a chance for me to get a lot of shit off my chest.

"My process begins with dreamt things, imaginary things, and then I dramatize them. I put the fantasy on a stage constructed out of memories of space and time so that the reader can immerse themselves in it. I move between planning and improvisation, so it's more of an oscillation than a process. You can't plan out where every word goes before you write it. If you could, then the plan would be the novel. The novel is like a scientific experiment; it is a reasoned working through of a hypothesis. At the same time, you have to let the unconscious have its say and be open to the wilful strangeness as it works through you. Rationality is just one arrow in the writer's quiver."

"Excuse me?"

"I was saying that being reasonable, planning ahead, is just one approach."

"You said, *quiver*?"

"It's the word for what an archer keeps his arrows in. Sometimes you reach behind yourself -" I mimed this action, reaching into an imaginary quiver - "and pull out an arrow of… desire."

"And how would you apply *that* process to your work at this agency?"

"I'd take out an arrow of hardworkingness?"

Langland chipped in, wanting a piece of my humiliation.

"What are your metrics of success?"

"In novel writing?"

"In novel writing or in the making of bacon sandwiches, whichever you prefer."

"When I wrote a novel, I learned a lot about what a novel is. Only when I finished and sent it off to my agent did I realise where I went wrong."

"What about sales?" he asked, in a voice as soft and precisely stitched as the interior of a man bag.

"Sales are not a good metric because however low you think your sales are going to be, they are always lower. I suppose what I'm saying is that I don't have any metrics of success - or just *success* - other than a growing apprehension that the imagination is the best way for me to get to the reality of who I am and what is happening to us all."

"You don't have a clear process, nor do you have a way of measuring what you do. In real terms, then, you don't do anything."

"But I can show you the outcome."

"The outcome?"

"Sorry, the novel."

Tiffany made a face: the last thing on God's unholy earth she wanted to see was my bloody novel.

She said, "At this company we are interested in process and quantifiable trends. All our trendspotting produces a return on our client's investment. Can you calculate the return to investment on your novel?"

"The return to me? To write a novel, one must first purge oneself of the hope that time invested might correlate with money earned."

"How much did writing cost you, then?"

"A year or so of unpaid labour with no guarantee of publication."

"I admire your dedication," she said, in a flat tone.

"What is *your* process?" I asked, because I was determined to find out exactly how

they predicted the future at Trend Report, and I was angry because the conversation had not gone the way I imagined it would.

They ignored my question. There would be a time allotted to my questions at the end of the interview.

Anger is a petty and stupid attitude to adopt in a job interview. I wanted to say: what about you? What are *you* doing that is so wonderful? Is your process for predicting trends magic? I mean, do you gather influencers and fashion bloggers in a room, disembowel them, and dance around with their entrails around your neck like a Hawaiian Lei. And anyway, your fashion clients are not passively waiting for a trend, they are imposing trends upon consumers. The origins of advertising lie in the desire of producers to manage demand, driving it up during times of surplus, creating need for high margin products.

"In your CV, you describe working with brands at This Content. Can you talk about a product that you were passionate about?" asked Langland.

"Philadelphia Chocolate Cream Cheese," I barked back. God knows why. From their expressions, I could see that they were not the target audience for Philadelphia Chocolate Cream Cheese.

"When I first came across Philadelphia Chocolate Cream Cheese, the concept of it made me sick," I said. "It seemed conceptually incoherent: when you have a dessert at a restaurant, it's chocolate *or* cheese. Their flavours work against one another. The sweetness of chocolate exposes the vinous reality of cheese. There is chocolate cheesecake, I suppose that must have inspired it. I stood on the supermarket aisle next to palettes of Philadelphia Chocolate Cream Cheese trying to understand my own revulsion toward this product: I'd just done some work for a consultant called Newton. He taught me the idea of *choc-erotics*: how chocolate advertising dramatizes, at a subconscious level, female masturbation with its attendant pleasure and guilt. Do you remember the Cadbury's advert in which a gorilla drums

along to Phil Collins' *In the Air Tonight*? That is a perfect example: the drum solo is an obvious alibi for clitoral masturbation. The problem, semiotically speaking, is that putting cheese into the same category as chocolate sexualises it. What this means for Philadelphia Chocolate Cream Cheese is that it unconsciously creates a new food category of sex cheese, and sex cheese is... It's not…"

"Not the kind of thing we like to talk about in job interviews?" wondered Langland.

We all turned over a page in our materials. Tiffany returned to talking through their process at the agency. She did not share the proprietorial method they use for predicting the future - I suspect it involves expenses-paid trips to Tokyo and New York and some kind of diagram with quadrants or perhaps a wheel of fortune in which neologisms are plotted on the spokes, terms like nu-austerity, the personalised self, the new new *new* normal. She was prepared to talk through the process I would use for my work imagining trends and writing about them on their website, if I were to be offered the position.

"Every day we use the matrix to plot which trend content we will upload into the content buckets," she said, "and then we use the matrix to cycle through the content in terms that are optimised according to social metrics and Google Analytics."

"Content buckets?"

Langland pointed out, "They are not real buckets."

"Do you think your staff might be more motivated if you used a less pejorative metaphor than 'content bucket'?"

"It is an industry standard term," he replied.

I wasn't aware this industry had standards.

#

The *client*, Tiffany mouthed at Langland, as she left. I looked back into the open plan office. Various people in headphones, alone before their screens, tip-tapping. Could be anywhere,

doing anything.

I tried to lighten the mood.

“I suppose I could call my book ‘a content manbag’. But they are more like compressed time. When I see someone flick through the pages, I just think of all the days I spent at my desk writing.”

“Days you weren’t being paid,” said Langland, smiling to himself.

Our interview had confirmed his suspicions about me. But isn’t that true of almost all our interactions with other people. They confirm what we believe. Conversations are mostly two or more people justifying opinions they have already formed.

Langland asked me, “What else do you do? For money?”

“I don’t have any side hustle at the moment.”

“I give talks,” he said.

He cued up YouTube on his laptop. We looked at a few muted frames of Langland wearing a throat mike pacing some stage. Not a TED talk. Not even TED X. But some second cousin of TED. A PHIL talk. A SIMON talk.

Langland watched himself on the screen. “Most people just scrape the content of their talk off blogs, you know, and sort of paste it together in PowerPoint.”

He leant into the laptop, watching himself as if he had never seen himself before. It was time for me to go.

Then I was on the hot street again with its concrete vapours and post-interview recriminations: I shouldn’t have worn my wedding suit again.

Chapter Five

The interview was north of Oxford Street, in an area recently christened “Noho”, according to London Free, London’s Freest Newspaper. As every London bore knows, Soho was named after a hunting cry. Noho was a term coined - that is, devised and paid for - by Christian and Nicholas Candy to promote an apartment building on the site of Middlesex Hospital. It was a cry too. A cry for money. But this cultural engineering on behalf of property developers doesn’t stick. Noho doesn’t take. It’s too negative. Shall we go to Noho? No, let’s not go to Noho. “Noho” was an exclamation of alarm at finding yourself with people who use the word “Noho”.

The locals prefer to call it Fitzrovia, a term redolent of its bohemian and artistic past. Dylan Thomas drinking here, Virginia Woolf writing there.

My job interview in Fitzrovia was with a television channel. The television channel was called HNW, which stands for High Net Worth individuals. Ahead of the interview, I called my friend James for advice, as he had finally found work after a year of redundancy.

“People have changed,” he said.

“What do you mean?”

“You’ll see.”

The address was an Edwardian mansion block where numerous companies rented offices. I was met in reception by Benford, a white man in his mid-forties, with strong black eyebrows and Hugh Grant's first haircut. Turned out that I used to work with some people that Benford went to Cambridge with; ascending the staircase, I updated him on their whereabouts, their successes and - reminding myself of the rivalrous nature of the high bourgeois male - their failures.

The offices of HNW were empty. Benford was the only person there. The last man working. Or the first man. We moved past the empty desks in the open plan area, all plumbed in for computers and phones that had not arrived or had just been taken away. In his office, there was a whiteboard for planning on which Benford had written some dates and the odd word. There were a lot of question marks on the planning board.

HNW was directed by a Russian woman called Nataliya. As a pre-interview test, Benford sent me some of their programmes to watch, for which I wrote listings. The programme was a video interview with the designer Robert Cavalli. There was also a film about a vintage car race along the Monaco circuit.

On being asked about the thrill of racing these multi-million-pound investment vehicles, the driver Rene Ligonnet says, "You risk your life and that is beautiful. The point is not to get killed."

"What did you think of our programmes?" asked Benford.

"They were odd," I replied.

"In what way?"

"You shot them in high definition."

"Nataliya says that high definition is HNW."

"Roberto Cavalli is nearly seventy years old, and he's spent a lot of that time in the sun, smoking cigars. You didn't put any make-up on him, so in high definition, he looks like

a sentient manbag. Also, you can hear background noise on the soundtrack. At one point, the gardener starts mowing the lawn and no-one pauses the interview. Has anyone actually watched any of these programmes in their entirety?"

Anyone? There was just Benford and his whiteboard of sketchy planning. His office reminded me of the offices in 1970s sitcoms like Reggie Perrin, in which middle class work was signified by a large desk with an intercom to their secretary and, in the background, a declining red line graph. Benford didn't seem to have a secretary. It dawned on me that I might be auditioning to become his secretary. I needed to get out of there. Time for the awkward question.

"How does the channel make money?" I asked.

He winced.

"Natalyia is our connection to our investor," he said. "Our investor wanted to call the channel World of Luxury. Because luxury is global."

"There used to be a furniture store outside Warrington called World of Luxury."

Benford did not react. His whole persona was non-committal. He described himself as a serial media entrepreneur, which gave me no sense of his expertise or his beliefs. I got him talking about his house in Oxfordshire. A farmhouse that he was renovating with his wife and spaniel. It was all that he was really interested in. The Daily Telegraph were coming around to photograph it. He had made his money selling a company in the last boom. Now he was a consultant helping Natalyia "redefine the luxury media space".

He doesn't care about the work. People *have* changed. The work - the content - is epiphenomenal: it's the channel or the digital platform where the value and status resides. But for the people who work in the media - well, it was like working in publishing because you're really, really into paper.

I had been worried that he was going to ask me about my interest in luxury products:

Swiss watches and super yachts, handbags with hand-stitched crocodile skin and palladium hardware, time-honoured craftspeople labouring sixty hours to blahdiblah. Specifically, I was worried that I was going to be called upon to demonstrate my *passion* for luxury. All the job specs demand passion. Yet no-one interviewing me had any trace of it. The propaganda for *passion* spoke to its absence.

"Would you like to come down to the edit suite with me?" asked Benford. "We could watch more of the programmes together and see what should be done with them."

He was lonely, here in this big empty office. Russian money was pouring into private schools and the upper tiers of the legal profession. It was renovating west London, digging out its basements, knocking together terraced houses. Here it made a TV channel out of expensively filmed puff pieces. No-one ever intentionally watched any of HNW TV, not even the people who made it. It was not television for watching. B-roll footage of beautiful men and women getting out of limousines. Helicopter shots of hotels. Infinity pools in the penthouses of luxury developments. Ambient content, propaganda. Something on a screen in the background as you walk through an airport.

I could write the words needed to get the job. But I couldn't say them out loud. In writing, I can play a role. In person, I cannot. *Not yet*. I talked a little bit about what HNW could do in terms of putting their videos on YouTube and how they could improve the search rankings of their website, all quite newfangled stuff to Benford. He suggested lunch. Some Italian cafe in Fitzrovia. I made my apologies and left.

Back in Fitzrovia, my heart was cold. *People have changed*. A TV company without employees or viewers. Capital working away on its own logic. A website in which all the links were dead, and the copy had been translated by bot. Luxury is the same the world over: offshore and humourless, whispering the word "passion" over and again with a headful of Xanax.

My heart was cold and the street was hot and I was sweating in my wedding suit. All these job interviews were for new positions, speculative jobs, augurs of what was to come: the colonisation of the future and extraction of wealth from tomorrow.

Chapter Six

The cab takes the rough freeway onto the Queensboro Bridge. Through the passenger window, I glimpse the distant towers of the Bronx. My first time in New York confirms my expectations of New York; the water towers on top of apartment buildings, familiar from the backgrounds of 1970s Marvel comics, have a focused intensity, like the face of a friend in a crowd of strangers.

I am in New York to meet an old friend called Newton. I've been doing some work for him. At this point in my life, with three young children and no steady income, I take all and any work. We have arranged to meet in a hotel lobby on the Upper West Side, off Broadway. He asked me to travel to New York to help him deliver what, over the preceding month, we've come to call The Bot Talk. The client is a tech start-up called Augur.

Newton arrives a couple of hours late, texting me on his approach. He emerges painfully from a cab, tall with a freshly-tied chestnut top knot, wraparound shades, a retro t-shirt, unexercised in black jeans. He has an international reputation as an imaginator for global corporations. I would be happy with a tenth of his earnings.

"Alright matey," he says, soft-spoken. Behind his shades, he winces at the hot stone

light of Manhattan, feeling uncertainly at his top knot, checking that it is securely tied, lest the vessel of himself fall open in the street. Over a twenty-year career, he has charged his soul out to clients at fifteen hundred pounds a day, and now that soul has been returned to him warped and unfamiliar.

Why did we not travel together on the same flight? He is vague about the details. After checking in, he insists we take a cab south to Katz's delicatessen for salt beef on rye. The restaurant is decorated by photographs of Jewish American entertainers.

The waiter brings over the sandwiches. Newton watches me take a bite. The wraparound shades do not come off.

"It's good?"

I nod, munch, and nod again.

"Thanks for travelling all this way, matey."

"No problem." He is paying me two thousand pounds for my contribution to The Bot Talk, along with one hundred dollars a day *per diem*. He hands me two days' worth of *per diem* over the table in Katz's. Newton likes a bookies' wad: what he would describe, in the language of the imaginator, as a *residual code* of masculinity.

Newton waves his fork at my tweed jacket which my mother bought for me as a birthday present.

"You can't wear that to The Bot Talk," he says. "It'll freak them out." He glances out of the window, as if anticipating another guest. "Augur's offices are in New Jersey. You must be strictly smart casual."

My vintage outfit also consists of a collarless shirt and a pair of high-waisted trousers with braces. The material is hard-wearing cotton drill, the kind of shirt worn by railroad workers in the nineteenth century. I bought it in my hometown of Lewes from a company that supplies costume dramas, thinking it would make me look practical, durable and thus

employable.

I ask him if we should go over The Bot Talk now. Or rehearse it after lunch. He waves away this suggestion.

“What do you fancy for dinner tonight?” he asks, pinching my fries.

“Something light.”

He makes a face. He has very particular food requirements, and they do not include something light.

“I grew tired of travelling with women who just wanted to eat salad and fruit. They would tell me not to eat this, and not to take that. This weekend,” he says, nipping at another fry, “you are my enabler.”

Newton had experimented with having employees - the women he mentioned. But the cash flow was impossible, and he had never managed people before. He declared bankruptcy and went back to being a lone corporate gunslinger.

Outside Katz’s, I feel anxious. Before the trip, I spent all my time working on The Bot Talk and never thought about the minute-by-minute reality of being in New York.

“I have no idea where I am,” I say.

“You don’t need to know where you are,” says Newton. “Just hail a cab and tell it where you want to go.”

We go to Times Square just so that I can be disappointed by it. Gentrification is the same all over. I could turn left at Times Square and find myself walking down Regent Street, or walk through a bar in Brooklyn and find myself in the gents in a Hackney pub. After my free-range walks across the South Downs, Central Park is preposterously disappointing.

Newton declares that it is time for him to get back to the hotel. We are to work separately on The Bot Talk. During my research, I read a transcript in which bots and humans conversed. You could not tell which was which: not because the bots were so advanced;

rather, the transcripts were evidence that humanity is levelling down to make itself apprehensible to machines.

I decide to walk my thoughts around. You would think that, when looking for a new beginning in life, meeting a man called Newton in New York would fit the bill. But I have been so bound up in domestic routine that this trip makes me feel that I am neglecting urgent duties. My family.

When I left Lewes for New York, we'd just spent the last of our money on cloth so that Beth could make heavy curtains to keep out the cold. The landlords refused to replace the thin blinds. Winter was coming and we couldn't afford to put the central heating on. If Newton had not paid my *per diem* in cash, I would have wired the money home.

Chapter Seven

Newton had asked me to come up with my part of The Bot Talk. It was my first paid work for a long time, so I worked on the question night and day. Augur wants to make bots that are more believable. Bots that inspire the user's suspension of disbelief. I have struggled to summarise my research and conclusions across six PowerPoint slides.

Standing shoeless in The Gap changing rooms, I get my first look at my new uniform of smart casual black, purchased with Newton's *per diem*. Instead of my vintage high-waisted trousers and plaid shirt, I have modelled myself upon Julien Sorel, the hero of Stendhal's novel *The Red and The Black*. I have made the novel the key text in my part of The Bot Talk.

Julien Sorel is of lowly peasant stock. The reader first encounters him sitting high in the rafters of a barn, neat and lean, reading a book while his larger roughly hewn brothers labour below. The black of the title is partly a reference to the black suit that learned Julien wears as tutor to the children of the local mayor, hence my black polo-neck. In the novel, Julien advances through a succession of different roles, ascending society. The black uniform of the tutor becomes the black garments of the priest, then the black garb of the advisor to power. His advancement is driven as much by his fear of returning to a bare life without capital as it is by ambition. This insight has since been verified by cognitive psychology: the

brain has an exaggerated fear of loss, and this drives our behaviour more than the anticipation of possible gains.

Black is also the colour of Julien's hatred and resentment of the middle and upper classes. His journey through high society demonstrates to him how far short it falls of its own ideals. Black is the colour of his judgement, his state of mind, as he sacrifices his virtues in the name of ambition. Becoming part of what you hate is the price of social advancement. When he suffers reverses, he succumbs to the extreme self-disparagement of the "black imagination".

The characters in Red and the Black are depicted imagining what is about to happen in their lives. Their psychologies alternate between anticipation and reflection. This rhythm of selfhood could be imitated by bots. In the surveillance economy, bots are rudimentary replicas trying to pass as humans. In the future, they might be used for something other than deception. I imagine bots that speak the truth. Could they even play the vital moral role formerly assumed by literary characters? Bots that dramatize our possible selves. Bots to inspire. Bots to lead.

Newton is charging Augur thirty thousand dollars for The Bot Talk. I am nervous about my facet of it. They may expect more bang for their buck than lit crit.

I reassure myself with the thought that Newton is the one they are paying for: a star turn from the corporate imaginator.

I send Newton a text: How is the Bot Talk going?

He replies: I've finally developed a working model of all human experience, power, emotion and personal life. I'll show it to you over dinner.

#

In preparation for another meal with Newton, I hit the hotel pool. Throwing myself through the warm water, skin tacky with humid chlorinated air, I swim to strip away the layers of

smug assumption and become purposeful and useful in this new culture. Ten, twenty laps are not enough.

Swimming requires concentration to synchronise arm and hand, leg and foot, inhalation and exhalation. Consciousness comes and goes in slogans. *Failed career. Not a negotiation*. Thirty, forty laps are not enough. My old self is redundant. I must shape a new one. If I am fitter, I might fit in more easily.

Perhaps, like other men my age, I will train for a triathlon. Death will have to pull on some hooded black Lycra to catch me.

Fifty laps. Gasping at the edge of the pool, I think, what is required of a man these days? I've performed variations on maleness throughout my life and for the first time, I wonder if there might be freedoms from the old masculine ways, not only for me but for Beth and the children too.

I catch my breath and lick the plastic lenses of the googles to prevent them fogging up. What use is a father without money? What do I offer? Protection, constancy, faithfulness, book knowledge, a lift in my old car, some home-cooking and sympathetic counsel. But I am barely a provider, and this has forced Beth into the hyper-domesticity of being the seamstress, baker, primary carer, and cook of the majority of the meals. Austerity presses down upon her ambition most of all.

Enough of what I give to the family. What do I take away? What price is being extracted for my presence? What about Beth's dreams, her possible selves, her place in the world?

Almost naked in the water, I realise that I possess something that I have always overlooked: the ability to fit among more powerful men and turn the gears of their ambitions. These are the last days of male privilege. I owe it to my family to exploit that privilege before it expires.

#

Steak for two at Benjamin's Steakhouse. The waiter lifts the cloth on an armoury of knives. The steak is a fissured land mass. Like Katz's, there is a masculine theatre to this place, a low-lit hideaway for executives on the run from their cardiologists.

In the fashionable gloom, Newton takes off his shades. His eyes are dark and wet, like treacherous tarmac. He speaks softly, with playful gestures, as if his hands are naked sock puppets.

"Food," says Newton, "is how we commune with ourselves. Putting food in your mouth," he adds, wanding forked steak in small airy circles, "is a way of reminding yourself: here I am."

"I walked over the Brooklyn Bridge so that I could figure out where I am," I reply.

"That is orientating yourself in respect to the exterior world," says Newton, popping a piece of tender steak into his mouth. He barely chews it before swallowing. "I am talking about orientating yourself in your own male body. The world is decentred and fragmented. White men used to sit at the centre of the culture and assert their presence to determine what is right and proper. But the centre has moved. Which is fine. We are expected to sideline our own desires. Our last remaining experience of presence is eating."

He forks up another chunk of steak, contemplating the layering of the flesh. But he wants to watch me eat too and share in this ritual. Mentor me in the NY metonymy.

"Do you want to discuss the Bot Talk?" I ask.

He abrades his fingertips against one another, relishing the brown velvet of the atmosphere. "I'm talking about Derrida's critique of the foundations of Western metaphysics as being based on a sense of presence: I think therefore I am. *Cogito ergo sum*. The Bot Talk is not here and now. It is not present. Do you I mind if I offer you some advice?"

"I'm not reading Derrida."

"No, I don't think you should. You have an instinctive grasp of culture that becomes muddied and complicated the more you attempt theoretical analysis. So, you should already know what I'm about to say to you."

I sit back, welcoming his critique of me.

"I know the kind of place Lewes is," says Newton. "*Organic*. It is not a counterculture; it is reactionary and founded upon the ethical superiority of self-denial. Rudolph Hess was an enthusiastic supporter of bio-dynamic farming as well as a homeopath and naturist. You should leave Lewes because it contains the seeds of a nascent fascism. Do you still own that little flat in Hackney?"

"I've got Lewes under control."

"Your trousers have not been in fashion since 1922, *matey-boy*," says Newton. "You have been too quick to cast off the track suit of your working-class materialism to change into Lewes tweed. These things you've become obsessed with - organic food, camping, the great outdoors, hiking - belong to the bourgeois culture of the past. I worry that you are sacrificing your family on the altar of truths that are degraded, impoverished, grown stale."

"I bought a smart casual outfit for tomorrow. All black."

Newton looks confused.

"Tomorrow?"

"The big presentation. Our Bot Talk."

"I know *that*," he says, testily. "I'm not interested in tomorrow. Tomorrow we're all fucked. Be present now."

The presence of dark wood. Varnished surfaces. The glint of light in the steak knives and the white tablecloth provide a familiar stage for the ritual of the meat. Steak is normal. White men are normal. Therefore, white men eating steak is the very centre of culture. Our differences vanish in the glare of how others perceive us. The headlights of our narcissism

are on full beam.

These restaurants have been here a long time. White-gloved waiters bring us meat for our bodies, more meat than I can digest, until I am sickened by its presence. The buttery, oily blood pools in the corner of the white dish, redspotting the white tablecloth. Newton watches me carefully. He is over six foot tall in his Converse, so what does he need curly-haired me for? Not a bodyguard but more of a mindguard, a blocker of psychic assault. A familiar. Newton is in trouble on many fronts, I can tell that from his evasions, from the absences in his discourse.

He is in trouble with his wife. Things are not OK at home. His observation about food being his only experience of presence suggest that he is laying the groundwork in our conversation for him to confess sexual indiscretion. He is wondering if I will be a complicit witness. One of the boys. His beta wingman. Or am I too much of a puritanical father for that, appalled at what he is doing to his family's future. He has a daughter. An only child. He wanted another but his wife had seen enough. Separate bedrooms: how petit bourgeois!

In a mid-life crisis, a man must first deceive himself before he can start lying to others.

Newton says, "Do you want to see what I got up to while you were orientating yourself?"

He shows me a picture on his phone. It is an image of his desk at home, totally trashed, the drawers open, the keyboard overturned, wires yanked out.

Shock upon my face.

He checks his phone.

"Not that," he says. He swipes away the image. Now he is showing me a picture of himself in wraparound shades karate-chopping Elmo in Times Square. The giant muppet has a counterstrike prepared.

"This *matey-lad* is the final slide in The Bot Talk."

"You fighting Elmo?"

"*Duelling* Elmo. This image expresses our relationship with imaginary beings."

"How did you get Elmo to fight you?"

"I paid him. In Times Square, people dress up as Elmo or Woody, or the Statue of Liberty and tourists have their picture taken with them. They live on tips."

"Run it by me again. How does this connect to the Bot Talk?"

"It's the missing piece. I need to be *inside* the Bot Talk. I'm tired of erasing my subjectivity. What these people need to learn is that technology is inflected by culture. There is no such thing as a neutral technological platform. The medium is the fucking message, and PowerPoint is a horrible medium."

"Is the Bot Talk about not giving presentations?"

"Of course not. No-one would pay thirty kay for that. All I'm saying is that there should be a slide that winks at our awareness of our cultural bias. By making ourselves present in the materials…"

"By punching Elmo."

"…by *duelling* Elmo, we're also exploring how imaginary characters can manifest themselves in the real world with physical consequences. Directly pertinent to Augur's business in bots."

I say to Newton, "Just because you're making sense, it doesn't mean that you're not crazy."

There is no stopping him. His gander is up. "The future is a racket, first and foremost. People will pretend to have invented artificial intelligence long before they actually invent it, that is the logic of capitalism. The most sophisticated bots will secretly be augmented by human labour. We will think we are interacting with intelligent bots but in fact…"

"The bots will be minimum wage employees inside digital avatars!"

"Yes! Our hopes and fears will be nudged by minimum wagers pretending to be bots, just like the man I paid in Times Square was pretending to be Elmo. The deceit will ramp up…" his hands flick around his head, bursting flashbulbs of cognitive dissonance.

We can't eat all the steak. Newton asks the waiters to wrap it up for us to take back to the hotel. In the cab, he stares silently at his phone. Back in the hotel, we go up to his room to work on the Bot Talk. I have a couple of beers in a bag. His room is a shocking mess. Clothes flung around, half eaten bags of chips and Haribo wrappers, stuff spilt on the floor, that big animal smell: it's as if he has been deliberately messing up the room. What has he been up to in here? He doesn't want to work now, anyway. I think more clearly after midnight, he says. Besides he assures me that there is almost nothing left to do on the Bot Talk.

Discharged for the evening, I go alone to a comedy club where I sit in the front row in my tweed jacket and offer myself up as a figure of fun, to make things easy for the comedians. They call me the professor. I order beers two at a time, until I'm smiling so much that I can't feel my face.

Chapter Eight

In my dream, Newton floats in the ether like a Godbaby. I'm passing through his realm on my way to an important appointment elsewhere. "Crawl into the palm of my hand," he says, "and I will transport you to where you want to go. But be wary of my pinkie finger," he wiggles it to show me, "it shoots lightning."

#

EM Forster, in the *Aspects of the Novel*, distinguishes between round and flat characters. Flat characters don't change. They are fixed, like Elmo. A round character like Julien Sorel changes. He is an individual, cut loose from the labouring classes, redefining himself as he discovers more of society.

In Stendhal's time, the novel offered models of possible behaviour to its readers. On Julien embarking upon an affair with Madame de Renal, the author-narrator writes, "The novels would have outlined for them the roles they had to play and given them a model to imitate; and sooner or later Julien would have been forced by his vanity to follow this model, albeit without pleasure and perhaps with overt reluctance."

Sorel is a round character. What would a round bot be like? We can conceive of a bot with ambition: for example, a bot incentivised to attract positive comments, or a bot

incentivised to hold our attention in a conversation. A round bot would be one that changes in response to its environment of users and other bots.

Julien Sorel is not a typical striver, longing after material gain. He is an idealist, aspiring toward imaginary models derived from his adoration of Napoleon and his study of Rousseau. In the same way, a bot could be programmed with the ideal of nationalism: recognising the symbols and stories of national identity, rewarding those who use them, attacking those who disparage them.

Goethe had a different scheme for characters than round and flat. He wrote of puppets and natures. Puppets are fictional characters (and people) who dance on the strings of others. Natures are unpredictable and creatively alive. To imbue a bot with a nature, we would have to give that bot an imagination. A bot that can imagine a time and place that does not yet exist and would strive to attain it.

We can create puppet bots to perform fixed roles within our society: cashiers, customer service, receptionist and so on. They will be believable primarily because the humans in those roles have already internalised the passivity of employees in a technocracy. They have stayed on script and followed the flow diagrams of conversation. The culture of metrics changes the human into something that can be more easily represented and replicated algorithmically. We will meet software somewhere in the middle, as it becomes more human and we become less. But this degradation is a passing phase. The big prize is in understanding and replicating the human imagination and its striving toward that which does not exist.

My rehearsal for the Bot Talk complete, I check my appearance in the mirror of the hotel bedroom. Black converse, black jeans, black round-neck pullover from the Gap. This is how I will disguise myself. This is how I will make myself useful.

#

I meet Newton in the lobby. He is wearing his wraparound shades. The car is waiting to take us to New Jersey. What is not apparent in the fashionable low lighting of the lobby becomes clear once we revolve through the door and out onto the street: the red marks on Newton's forehead where he has been rubbing at his skin, stress eczema between his fingers and his wrist. He re-ties his top knot. We both have our laptops. We wait in the intense rectangles of sun laid out on the sidewalk. The driver comes around and opens the door for us, and we climb in.

"New Jersey, yeah?" says Newton.

The driver shows us our destination on the satnav. The air con is engaged; the car pulls out.

"I don't want you to worry," says Newton, "because I've taken care of it."

"Worry?"

"I didn't finish the Bot Talk," he says. "Strictly speaking, I never started it."

I'm numb with shock.

"You lost it?" I ask.

"I planned to do it last night. That's how I work. Seat of the pants, you know. But it got to four in the morning and I just didn't seem to have done it."

"We should cancel the meeting."

"No," he says. "If we cancel the meeting, I won't get paid. And if I don't get paid, you won't get paid either. Don't worry, matey-lad, I've sorted it."

"Are you getting someone to send a presentation over to us? Did you email your underlings to prep something, taking advantage of the time difference?"

"No, I emailed the client at dawn and told them that I'd spilt chocolate milk on my laptop, and the Bot Talk is lost."

This revelation shocks me to the soles of my feet.

"Oh god." *This is not a negotiation*. *This is not a negotiation*. "Oh no."

To say that I was relying on the fee for this trip is an understatement. My family has been living on its fumes. Even Alfred, my two-year-old toddler, knows that after New York, there will be chocolate treats and buns for all. Beth bought the material to make new curtains for our cold rented flat because I assured her that I was coming home with two thousand pounds. It's been so long since I've been a provider. This is my first ever business trip, a sign that I might be able to get back into the game of paid employment. In the car, I curse my stupidity: if Newton was doing OK, he wouldn't have brought me with him. Like an AA man, my very presence is a sign that the wheels have come off.

There is no time for recrimination. I have to manage Newton, get him through the Bot Talk even if there is no Bot Talk to give.

Newton notices my distress. Peering over the top of his shades, he says, "You don't think they'll buy the chocolate milk excuse?"

"I don't think they'll pay thirty kay for it, no."

From the satnav, I can see that it is a twenty-minute drive along the Henry Hudson Parkway, past Harlem and Washington Heights, then across the George Washington Bridge. I remember my insight from the swimming pool, the last days of masculine privilege. Use it or lose it.

"First of all, never mention the chocolate milk again," I say. "Just act like you never sent that email. If they ask about it, treat it like a joke and pretend it never happened."

Of course he didn't do the presentation. His dishevelled hotel room, the shades, the picture of his ruined desk… Newton has had enough of this version of his life. He wants to go down in flames, but he can't set the fire himself: rather, he will force others to light the match for him.

"You can still talk," I say.

"Of course," he says. "You're making a big deal out of this. It's just some PowerPoint. It's the ideas they are paying for."

"So, we tell the client that I'm a journalist. I'll take notes of everything you say, and their response, and then we'll make a presentation afterwards that is a synthesis of the two points of view."

"That's good," he says, gazing out of the passenger window, watching the Manhattan recede and the river speed by. "Let's do that."

"Do you know what you are going to say?"

He won't rehearse. It will either come to him in the moment or not at all.

"I thought I'd start by taking out my phone and showing them a picture of me punching Elmo," he says.

#

Augur has sublet an office in Englewood but has not troubled to colonise it with corporate logos, if indeed they have one. There are clusters of young people working on their laptops, headphones on: the lid of these laptops are the only personalised spaces, covered with cool stickers and transparencies. The little camera lenses are obscured with torn scraps of yellow post-it notes. The people working here are ethnically diverse. The hierarchy is flat.

Newton's contact is a Dutch know-it-all called Jan who mentions the chocolate milk email immediately, and we laugh, though we don't say anything, and offer no clarification or explanation. *Barrel through.* Jan does not work for Augur, rather he works for one of their investors who has brought Newton in to see if we can come up with ideas that will help the tech company bring a product to market. Jan has budgeted thirty grand for Newton: he doesn't want us to look like idiots because that would reflect badly upon him. Equally, he knows that if we are absurdly unprepared, he will have to cut his losses, and there is a chance he will do that publicly in front of the others. I have no doubt that Jan will confront us for our

ineptitude.

More people file into the meeting room, talking among themselves, not troubling to make any introductions. I resist my instinct to focus on the big men, precisely the kind of mistake that would mark me out as an asshole. I can't figure out who is important and who is merely here to bulk out the meeting.

Newton explains that this big presentation is going to be a bit different from the usual. We will send through the deck later. This presentation is to be more of a collaboration. I scan the assembled faces for their response. The breaking of protocol is interesting, mainly for the frisson of possible humiliation.

"There is a process to collaboration," I say, performatively rational in sober black, "and that's what I'm going to follow. The process."

While I'm introducing myself, my presentation on literary characters and bots appears on the screen. A young British Asian man, mid-twenties, in a t-shirt that says simply "Adversary", holds up his hand, stopping me from speaking. This is Sumit.

"Are we going to wait for Suleyman?" Sumit asks the room.

There is uncertainty in the meeting as to the whereabouts and activities of Suleyman, and some embarrassment. Has Suleyman deigned the big presentation to be unworthy of his attention, and left the others to waste their time on the social nicety of listening to the old men brought in by the investors? The room grows tense considering Suleyman's absence. In a flat hierarchy, status is always in play. Attending this meeting might be a mark of low status, like drinking alcohol at the company cook-out or failing to flunk out of college to launch a humanitarian tech start-up.

Sumit, observing with some amusement how the meeting fails to come to a consensus on this issue, waves me on.

I talk about my idea that characters in a novel and artificial intelligence are both ways

of modelling probable selves. Jan sits up, as if interested, but he is really trying to gauge the interest of the others. Sumit opens up his own laptop and begins typing. One by one, I lose eye contract with the other people: each of which, to me, is a co-ordinate on the axes of race and gender that is new to me. Rather than accept another brutal lesson in the redundancy of my centrementality, I flight-test a new persona. Subject to diverse expressions of scepticism, indifference, the odd tolerant smile, I sense that the less I speak, the better I will communicate: my mistake has been to talk and write excessively, to place too much of myself in front of other people. The more present I am, the more I remind my audience of the arrogant assumptions of that presence. What is really required of me is the partial absence of listening.

As I am talking, I am cutting out whole paragraphs of prepared speech. Like the ouroboros, I am eating my own words prior to utterance. I leave gaps so that the young technologists can project their competence into my work.

Through the window I see a man approach. He stops before entering the meeting room and considers my silhouette against the glare of my slides. Like Sumit, he is British Asian: whereas Sumit is compact, round at the edges, with the controlled body language and structured mind of an expensive education, Suleyman is wilder. He is wearing a suede jacket like a cape, his arms not in the sleeves, compensating for the narrow shoulders of his super-lean frame. A lightly curated mop of healthy black hair - somewhere between a Byronic abundance and a quiff - untucked white shirt, white trainers with no socks. The room holds its breath in anticipation of his arrival. He is stopped in his progress toward the meeting by another employee - a young white man who imparts his message with fanboy gush. Suleyman is deeply relaxed in the face of this ardour. Thus, he is diverted from us. Suleyman walks away to attend to whatever the fanboy has drawn his attention to.

Chapter Nine

First task, upon returning home, was to put up the new curtains. As this was a rented property, we did not have old curtains, merely blinds in draughty sash windows that provided no insulation. We couldn't do another heating bill like that one. "Frugality with standards," Beth insisted, taking pains.

I climbed up onto the chair with the curtain in my hands. Pins between her lips, Beth muttered, "left a bit, up a bit". At the same time, she was hemming a dress for Florence. Beth returned to the sewing machine and the overlocker. While I was away, Beth tried to sell her cushions and children's dresses at the local market. In Austerity Lewes, everyone had a handicraft side-hustle. Beth sold some handmade silk knickers to a woman who had taken up the can-can as a form of exercise. It turned out that she couldn't-couldn't can-can, not without wee-weeing her knickers, which she tried to return to Beth, arguing that knickers should be able to stand up to such a punishing first outing.

On the next trestle table, there was another mother from the school, and she was hawking nettle pesto. She must have convinced herself that it was a surefire winner. Think of the profit margin on nettles! Her children acted as salespeople, explained Beth, and you

could hear, in their pleading offers, their incredulity that no-one was buying mum's nettle pesto. Their father was the controlling type. Long after the other stall holders had called it a day, the mother from school remained there, with her children running around in the night, trying to sell nettle pesto to the few remaining people. It started raining. Why did they not pack up and go home? Was he really that bad? The dye in her hair had grown out, revealing fierce grey roots. Her expression was fixed as she noted the resistance of the world to her scheme.

I finished hook-and-eyeing the curtains on the rail. Beth put her sewing aside. She experimented with flicking the curtains closed and open, cutting the family off from the world then returning us to it. I climbed down off the chair and put my arm around her. We shared the achievement of the new curtains, and the comforting view of the sloping tiled roofs, bowed plaster walls and little front doors of the town's tightly packed workers' cottages.

Chapter Ten

The children were crying at one another. There was porridge trodden into the carpet. and the red leather sofa had been disembowelled: Alfred had picked at a rip in the covering until the leather came loose like a flap of skin, extruding the stuffing. Purchased when I still had a job, the red leather sofa had been vomited and urinated upon by each child in turn, so that the leather grew tacky, its every crevasse soiled and oiled with matter, the frame broken from the impact of a thousand toddler leaps: my red leather sofa was the embodiment of the bourgeois subject fallen upon hard times.

Every day, the toddlers pulled the books from the bookshelves, as if sensing that books were the source of our troubles. It could get you down, I think - this rented flat, these draughty sash windows. But I'm lucky because here are the naughty curls on Florence's head and Alfred kneads the fat of my cheeks between his knuckleless fists and presses his forehead against mine, while Alice has questions to ask, things she wants to know. Beth is laughing, saying, when life gives you lemons then you make lemonade, and when life pisses on your chips then you just have to eat pissy chips.

The South Downs circle the town. The chalk escarpment protected us from the truth. Autumn was settling in. A season of change, the leaves stripped vindictively from the trees.

Just because I feel fine walking Alice to school down the high cobbled walls of a twittern, one of Lewes' ancient arterial footpaths, doesn't mean that, on the walk back, I won't feel cored by despair. With uphill strides, I brood about what did not come pass.

How could I have been so wrong?

My boss took me aside and said,

There's nothing down for you, son.

That school you went to? The wrong school.

That degree you took? The wrong degree

From the wrong university.

Your parents? Wrong.

Your wife? Obviously wrong.

Your children? Going to the wrong school.

So I've decided to pay you less,

And I want you to reapply for your job,

And all the other jobs

You do around here.

The family carries me forward. I will give myself over to them until the money runs out, next week, and then… then, I don't know.

As a leaving present from her job, Beth had been given a stunt kite by her workmates, along with a card saying, "Go fly your kite". At her suggestion, Alice and I took the kite out. On a Monday afternoon, we walked up the steep cobbled road toward the golf course, and from there, onto the soft green swells of the Downs. The Downs have an aura: sunlight reflected by chalky soil.

When he first moved to Sussex, Rudyard Kipling wrote of "our blunt, bow-headed, whale-backed Downs." He noticed the way that the cloud shadows *skim* over the land. That the Downs are, paradoxically, "half-wild and wholly tame*"*. We moved to Sussex on a whim, because our family was expanding. I had a well-paid job at This Content. We did not sell our flat in Hackney but rented it to a friend and used that money to rent a place in Lewes for six months. But then we had two more children, and I was forced out of that well-paid job, and we lost track of what the hell we were doing.

Alice ran with the kite in her hands then threw it up into the air. After three or four attempts, the wind pressed a shoulder into the body of the kite, shoving it upward so that the line tightened, and I used that tension to haul the kite from the horizontal to the vertical.

Kipling's half-wildness is, I think, not a property of the Downs but rather a state of mind induced by their *timefeel*. When the misty sea fret unfurls through the long grass, the acoustics shift. A sheep sounds like it is grazing in your ear. You become aware of your own breathing and slip out of time's groove. When am I? How did I become this? *Why am I me*?

Alice and I talked about the clouds, the shapes they make.

"Look! There is a cloud in the shape of an oak tree!"

Her face scrunched sourly. If clouds can imitate objects from our world, think of the implications.

She said, "Clouds must have eyes, so that they can see what is below and copy it."

#

We over-romanticise the imagination of children. In her groundbreaking work on the creative mind, Margaret Boden details an experiment that shows how the imagination improves with maturity: ask a child to explore ways of drawing a man, and a ten-year old might magnify the head, add more limbs, insert a hole where the face should be, or give him the hind quarters of a horse or the torso of a wasp. These creative strategies are *heuristics*, that is, they are

learned cognitive short cuts. Splicing the animal with the human is a creative heuristic practised assiduously in the art and myths of ancient cultures, depicting birdmen, centaurs, snake women, and so on. Boden points out that this ability to apply various heuristics or strategies in creativity expands the number of dimensions in our conceptual space. This is why a ten-year-old child can generate a wider and more interesting range of creations than a four-year-old child. You need to know something of how the world works before you can reinvent it.

Humans did not always possess imagination. Its arrival in the hominid mind is marked by the Lion Man of Hohlenstein-Stadel, a figure carved from mammoth ivory dating from forty-five thousand years ago. Half man, half lion, it is the first depiction of something that does not exist. Once homo sapiens made the cognitive leap of *imagining*, they displaced the Neanderthal and established themselves across the world as the only human species.

This cognitive leap is a pattern-seeking, pattern-making circuit, a mad connector that hammers together all manner of material to erect the lop-sided structures that are my first thoughts about the world. I have learned not to act on these thoughts.

When an environment changes rapidly, many animals, lacking our imagination, fail to adapt and die off. The imagination helped homo sapiens adapt to swift environmental change because it allowed some among the early humans to create a story about another place that might be more hospitable and then these prophets inspired the great migration of people out of Africa.

#

Beth compares caring for three small children to the business riddle of the fox, the chicken and the sack of grain. The fox is Alice. The fox cannot be left alone with the chicken that is Alfred, because it will vex him. The chicken that is Alfred cannot be left alone with the sack of grain that is Florence, because the chicken has big chubby hands that like to prod and poke

and - yes - vex. You can leave the fox and the sack of grain together. But the chicken always travels alone.

Opening the front door with one hand, holding onto the double buggy with the other, Beth sent Alfred up the stairs first, clambering in his onesie, then she followed after while Alice and Florence waited on the pavement; once in the flat, the chicken was secured in a side room and she returned to let the fox enter, then brought up the sack of grain herself, then returned to drag the double buggy noisily over the doorstep and into the house.

#

What are we going to do about money?

Newton eventually responded to my urgent queries about payment.

“I have six figures coming in, and six figures of debt,” he said. “I will eventually have more money than I owe but right now I’m stealing from my daughter’s piggybank to buy fags.”

He was courting an executive from Coca-Cola. The man had a *galactic nebula ego,* exactly the kind of executive who liked to lock intellectual horns with Newton, either to dominate him or to use him. Augur will pay up soon enough, he assured me, but he can’t advance me just yet, not unless Coca-Cola signs up. In the background I heard a woman shouting, his wife, I think. There was a scuffling sound as Newton retreated to the tighter acoustics of the bathroom.

“I have thrown down the gauntlet to my wife,” he hissed. His voice changed. He was chewing something, maybe a Haribo. “I’ve challenged her to speak reasonably to me for five minutes.” He held the phone to the door so that I could hear her banging and shouting in his study. The sound of an expensive Anglepoise lamp being pushed off a long designer desk and a carbon gravel bike being yanked off the wall. “She blames me for everything,” he said. “Don’t make my mistakes. Don’t follow me into the middle class. It’s a performance of

suffering, utterly devoid of pleasure. What I would give for a full English Breakfast in a motorway cafe, or a bunk-up in the bogs of the British Legion. She insisted that I spend two thousand pounds on a cooker hood. When she is asleep, I whisper my sins into it."

#

First thing in the morning it's time for double nappy and chips: kneeling on the carpet, changing Alfred and Florence, folding up the sodden filthy nappies and depositing them in the nappy bin. As I wiped the milky shit from the shallow grooves in my son's scrotum, I conducted imaginary conversations with Russell Brand, instructing him in the correct way to perform domestic chores. At the end of the day, I watched consecutive episodes of Entourage, an HBO show about young men succeeding in Hollywood in which the dramatic stakes are pleasingly low: will Turtle launch his new vodka brand, will Vince's new film be the highest-grossing ever or will his arthouse project ensure him critical acclaim? These were my imaginary male friends. We smile for the attention of the camera, the adoration of women, the pride of our parents, the respect of our peers. Boys and their dreams. Alfred climbs up a stone pillar, barely two years old, and looks at me for approval, I clap him, and his smile is complete.

I rang my mother every Sunday to tell her the ins and outs of our lives. What I didn't say is this: Mum, we're really struggling, I think I've messed up our lives. I don't know what to do anymore, there is no way out.

#

After first frost, we drove to the Long Man of Wilmington to pick sloe berries. Fruit picking was a cheap way to spend a Sunday. Technically, we're actually enriching ourselves. From this haul of sloes, Beth will make sloe gin that we will hand out for Christmas presents.

I spotted the sloe bush on a previous trip to gather blackberries. The bushes lie at the feet of the Long Man, a great figure carved out of the chalk. Each child was allocated a

Tupperware box, and they were engrossed by fruit picking, competing with one another to bring in bounty for the family. For Alice, who was aware that money is an issue, this act goes some way to making everything alright.

My parents never shared their money worries with their children. After losing my job, I was not so disciplined. It's the uncertainty of freelance income. Unpaid invoices circled overhead, keeping track of them - running a kind of financial air traffic control system - takes up a significant cognitive load. Shepherding three small children while trying to coax an invoice down onto the runway forced my cognitive load to buffer, and it was all I could do not to fall over.

Buying nappies in the supermarket again - thirty quid a week, *shit costs* - I noticed the old man at the end of the check-out, dressed in his supermarket uniform, offering to bag people's groceries for them.

"Do you see that man?" I said to Alice. "When you're older, I'll be that man. You'll come back from university to visit your parents, and you will have to wait for me to finish my shift packing other people's bags."

She never forgets this cruel aside. It marks her, and she reminds me of it eight years later during her summer break from Cambridge.

#

I taught Alice about maths.

"Maths is very powerful. Maths is what man used to send a rocket to the moon. Scientists had to calculate… the word *calculate* means to add up or take away, to do sums… scientists had to do sums to decide what path the rocket should take from the Earth through space and to the moon. It's very complicated."

I used my fists to demonstrate the movement of the spheres.

"The Earth is spinning in space, orbiting the sun. The moon is spinning in space and

orbiting the Earth."

I ran out of hands to demonstrate the orbits of three heavenly bodies.

"To make sure the rocket reached the moon the scientists had to do a difficult sum. Imagine if you are on a carousel sitting upon a horse and you have to shoot an arrow through the eye of a teddy bear that is riding another carousel over there, spinning in the opposite direction to yours."

Alice's expression was one of wary scrutiny. I abandoned my analogy.

"Maths is very important and powerful," I said. "It can take a rocket to the moon."

"Yes," she knew this. "I understand."

I'm gratified that our conversation has increased her knowledge of the universe.

"The scientists need maths," she announced, "so that they can say 10,9,8,7,6,5,4,3,2, 1,… lift off!"

#

When I'm paid three hundred quid for that editing job, I'll get the car taxed.

Do we need the car?

I have to keep the car on the road for when I need to travel to work.

We could apply for family tax credit.

I know, I'm keeping track of that. But if I get the gig with the Germans, that will change our earnings and then I'll have to pay the government back. We can't build up liabilities.

I cancelled my credit card.

Good, that's a smart thing to do.

"We'll have to cut our cloth accordingly," said Beth, gesturing at her sewing machine and overlocker, making little dresses for Florence.

She bit off a length of cotton, saying, "I need to buy more material".

I got fifty quid in cash from that gig I did with Will. It's on the mantelpiece.

We can give the sloe gin for Christmas presents.

There is a stall at the market selling five pheasants for a tenner. We could make pheasant pickle and give that to people too.

You mean, *I* could make it. Has Newton paid you yet?

No.

It's a lot of money.

A couple of grand. Yes.

Can you push him?

He's not in a good place at the moment. If I push, I don't know how he will react.

What about Christmas presents for the children?

Do you think the little ones will notice if we give Christmas a miss?

We'll notice. You'll have to get something.

#

Sunday at the car boot sale in the car park beside the river, browsing the bric-a-brac laid out on trestle tables. I bought some old Magic the Gathering cards for Alice, a toy car for Alfred, and a teddy bear for Florence. The bear was also a puppet, if I put my thumb in its left arm and my forefinger into the right, I could hug her. Five quid for the lot. I considered using car boot bear as a stocking filler. But, no, Beth was right. I would have to do better than this for Christmas.

#

The storm hit when I was on my way back from getting the sewing machine repaired by an old guy in Eastbourne. I pulled off the road at Birling Gap and parked the car at the cliff edge. The wind pressed its great invisible body against the car door like it was trying to save me from myself. I forced the door open and stumbled toward the cliff edge. The sea is black.

What am I doing here? What is this feeling in my soul? I shouldn't have stopped the car. I shouldn't have got out. What is happening to me.

#

Beth was alone in the flat. It used to be a candle factory. The children were asleep, and she was sewing by the curved window using the old hand-cranked sewing machine. It heated up with the motion of the crank and gave off the scent of its previous owner, a ghost of hair oil and tobacco smoke. There was a black and white photograph of the Birling Gap coastline hung on the wall. The burning wick of the candle reflected in the glass frame. She looked out over the roofs of the town, and it seemed different. Snow funnelled and hunted through the air like a school of sprats. The weathervane turned this way and that. The hairs on the back of her neck prickled. Suddenly she felt uncertain but also intensely present, as if something was pressing heavily upon the moment. The mechanical motion of the sewing machine, the needle rising and falling, falling and rising, unstitching, going backward. She is always here, working into the night to support her family. The candlelight is reflected in the glass frame of the black and white coastline of Birling Gap, and its light is her mind, moving through an image of the past.

#

The sea is remorselessly the sea, always shifting, never letting you forget it.

The first time you are on a fishing boat, far out from the coastline, the remorselessness of the sea is exhausting. It's all you can think about, trying to keep track of every wave. If you fall into the sea, your skin prickles painfully with the cold. Swimming, you expect your body to acclimatise to the water, but sometimes it doesn't, and the pain stays with you.

The moon shone against the crumbling chalk cliff of Birling Gap. The cottages were abandoned to erosion. The waves boomed vindictively against the beach, like men smashing

up toys. I used to live smug inside my imagining of the future, like a seed within a pod, thinking that I was the centre of all things. As if it was inevitable that I would get what I deserve. I deserve nothing. This version of me is not working. I must change, find a way to belong in the future.

The future is like the sea: turbulent, treacherous, incessant.

I got back into the car; the wind shoved the car door shut. I reversed away from the cliff, turned around and drove home. Ahead, snowflakes darted into the headlights. The rear-view mirror was black and empty.

Chapter Eleven

I called my mother to tell her that we were moving back to London. She concealed her disappointment.

"You have such a nice life in Lewes," she said.

"We're broke, Mum. Beth has already got a job interview at a library."

"Have you thought about selling the place in London?"

"I can't get a mortgage. There is not enough equity to buy somewhere new."

"Will you fit back in the flat?"

"I will turn my old study into a bedroom. The children will have to share."

"If it's what you need to do," she said. My mother was a supportive and steady influence. Talking to her was always a pleasure.

"And Mum, I need to borrow some money to pay the movers."

#

To reorientate myself in Hackney, I eavesdropped on the young and their rent chat about housemates and landlords, when they are moving out and when they are moving in. Every Sunday, I'd see them in their backpacks trudging from sofa to spare mattress, loading pot

plants and bin bags into an Uber.

Perhaps I only overheard talk of rent because that was the aspect of their conversation with which I was familiar. The rest of their conversations seemed to be conducted in autocorrect: I'm going to a sparkly safari, said one voice: it's an app that lets you know what it is like inside my head, said another.

We inhabit a model of the world rather than the world itself, and the more I think about existing within a model - I imagine a glass box around my self upon which sensory images are projected - the more I became aware of glitches in that model.

Returning to Hackney after five years away, much had changed, and so I was updating my internal model of the borough as I moved around the streets and among the people. Eavesdropping was one source of new information. But it glitches, and these glitches reminded me of the seminal test known as sine-wave speech that first showed me the corners and edges of my model of the world.

The sine-wave speech test takes a recording of a phrase and strips it of the cues we use for understanding. The first time you hear a phrase spoken in this artificially degraded form, it is an unintelligible R2-D2-style succession of static and beeps. In the next stage of the test, you listen to the plain English of the phrase that has not undergone sine wave degradation. Your model of the world learns the phrase. In the final stage, you listen again to the R2-D2 version of the phrase. Now, hovering within the bleeps and distortion, you will actually hear the phrase being spoken - even though it has been processed out of the recording. It's an uncanny moment, to hear something and yet know, rationally, that it is not there, merely being supplied by your mental model. To undergo this test is to understand viscerally that your sensory perception is an interpretive experience between the past and the present.

Our perceptions are informed by our expectations: this provable fact gives rise to a

theory of mind named the Bayesian brain, after the English statistician and Presbyterian minister Thomas Bayes. In 1763, Bayes published a theory on how we make rational inferences by combining observation with prior knowledge. In the Bayesian brain, sensory signals rise up and are evaluated by developed knowledge about what is and isn't likely. Prediction is fundamental to hearing and seeing. The brain is structured to evaluate probabilities, boosting signals it expects to receive, or filtering out the familiar so that surprising novelties punch out of the environment. In this way, our imagination creates our lived experience.

Hence ghosts. Or voices from a burning bush. A ghost is our perceptual systems contextualising ambiguous sensory evidence according to our internal model of the environment: so if your worldview includes spirits, you may interpret ambiguous sensory information - an odd rattle, a strange light - as a ghost, and actually perceive it in the same way that I can hear lucid English phrases in the mechanical noise of sine wave speech.

There is a growing body of thought that mental illness is caused by this imaginative function projecting its expectations upon the actual. There is so much noise here. Hackney is a roar of ambiguous sensory signals that stressed minds interpret according to their own private worlds.

Overheard: a young man on the pedestrian crossing on Richmond Road. He was on a call to a girlfriend or boyfriend. "Why can't we just talk about the fun stuff?" he said into his phone, exasperated. In the early days of their relationship, they used to have such a laugh. But his partner wanted to discuss their future together, and that involved the logistics of labour and capital: *five times our joint earnings and what can your parents lend us*?

On Saturday morning, estate agents squire young people and their parents around

Hackney, popping in and out of one-bedroom flats in Victorian conversions and new developments. The women from Foxtons wear tight black skirts, eyebrow topiary and something bold from the perfume counter at Selfridges. The arseless men from Keatons are assembled from a kit of fitted shirts and Gieves and Hawkes suits. After a viewing, the young people take their parents out to a gastropub to audition for roles as young couple in Hackney.

The collective imagination, at this time, was bent toward property. The dream of gentrification condensed on Broadway Market, off London Fields. There is a pub on the corner called The Cat and Mutton where I used to watch the football on a billowing screen. The soft furnishings had been stripped out so that gastropub conversations reflected harshly from the bare brick walls and floorboards. The grocers and fishmongers run by a man called Spirit had been replaced by a curator of vintage objects, whose wares included a Betamax video recorder displayed next to the complete collection of Inspector Morse on VHS. Through the window, I watched a young couple walk admiringly around the centrepiece item: a paint-spattered stepladder. The handwritten card described it as *a genuine stepladder used by East End artisan painters and decorators*. The stepladder was priced at a hundred and twenty pounds. The couple moved on to inspect coils of *genuine rope from a 1950s school gymnasium* retailing at forty pounds. Literally, money for old rope.

Saturday is market day. Food stalls intermingle with lifestyle business stalls selling high margin, low waste goods, like artisan chopping boards. The fruit and veg stall jumped on the property bandwagon. Alongside expensive aubergines and onions, the grocer sold moss-infested logs that he called “unicorn gardens”. These unicorn gardens retailed at three price points: a first-time buyer unicorn garden was thirty quid, there was a mid-range unicorn garden at sixty quid (ideal if you are starting a family) and, for the modern executive, there were luxury penthouse unicorn gardens for ninety quid.

The step ladder, the gym rope, and the mossy logs - all of these objects used to belong

somewhere - in the back of a van or in a school or on a woodland floor. That belonging imbues them with an aura of authenticity. Young people arriving in Hackney on a flume of borrowed capital purchased these objects in the hope that this aura of belonging would magically transfer to their new surroundings. This transference materialises the capital invested in the property, making what was once weightless and at risk appear safe and solid.

In Hackney, *people had changed*. The new arrivals were part of a performance called Living My Best Hackney Life. There was a selfie-consciousness to the way they waited at traffic lights, or drank in bars, or ordered their coffee. The coffee shop on Wilton Way was also a local radio station, where a DJ played vinyl records to prevent outbreaks of conversation. On the next table, two new arrivals - a heterosexual couple, early twenties, in new vintage clothes from the 90s - were nursing coffees and playing chess. Idly, I spied on their game. They kept looking up the rules of chess on their phones, even as they played. For quarter of an hour, I watched them play with the chess pieces in a way that is not chess. They performed chess but could not play it. Were they even *drinking* their coffee?

In the shop next door, thanks to Instagram, the queue for grilled cheese sandwiches went around the block. Under railway arches, where once I scuttled in fear of a mugging, there were ASOS photoshoots, models taking turns to lean against the rusted bonnet of an abandoned car.

In the fish shop, I watched a customer shovel ice over the lobsters. “They are suffering,” she said, “I just want them to feel less pain.” As if by icing the lobsters, she could anaesthetize her own scuttling pincered thoughts. The fishmonger and I shared a glance, and he left her to it.

We’re going wrong from the outside in and then from the inside out. A feedback loop of wrong. Social media supercharges the mad connector. We are all doing our own research. We’re all compiling our dossiers on the conspiracy. *Wrong* might be the wrong word. There

is no right or wrong in this Potemkin village of late-stage capitalism. The technology accentuates autistic traits: micro-taxonomies of emotions and desires. Spoon some more ice on the lobsters, feel that cooling touch on your forehead. It's not helping.

In the shop window, my reflection was changing. More scalp than hair. With weight loss came cheekbones. I wonder what other surprises the skull has in store for me. A friend accused me of *having had work done*. That made my skull laugh. I bought a black wardrobe for my black clothes. Wearing black made it appear that I belong. On Broadway Market, I put on the same mask as everybody else.

#

Beth started her part-time job at the Highbury Library. The library was a new development on a busy crossroads.

She was issued with a walkie-talkie and spent her first day receiving reports of a customer with his penis out. She ran up and down the three storeys of the library, co-ordinating the security guards, looking for this errant cock. Eventually, the customer was found masturbating under a table in Quick Picks.

Austerity meant cutbacks in social services. The vulnerable were innocent bystanders in a battle to transfer wealth from the public to the private domain. People couldn't get a doctor's appointment, mental health treatment or reliable advice on housing and their benefits. Raw and lost in the labyrinth, they came to the library for help and shelter. There were a thousand visitors a day to the Highbury Library. Beth spent an afternoon helping a woman search the internet: the woman would not use a keyboard, nor would she look at a screen, so Beth had to print out all the search results and web pages. Beth invigilated safe places for children to do their homework, which are vital as few of Hackney's children have a quiet place at home. A fight broke out between a boy and a girl, and Beth identified the boy's school uniform by CCTV and called in the disciplinary officer from the local school. The

officer viewed the video and said that the boy had been excluded from school months ago but many of the excluded children still wear their school uniforms for want of other clothes.

Beth bought herself a bike on a work scheme. In Cambridge Heath, you could get your highlights done for thirty quid if you didn't mind the work being done by a trainee. Five foot tall, her hair replenished with blonde after the darkenings of childbirth and tucked under a sensible helmet, Beth fastened her high-vis jacket and cycled steadily through the stations of her job, from library to meeting to training course and home again. Within a year, she was the manager of the Highbury Library.

So many people from every walk of life passed through its doors. According to the census, the borough of Hackney is thirty-six per cent White and White British, twenty-three per cent Black and Black British, eleven per cent Black African, and ten per cent Asian and Asian British. A host of nationalities are grouped under the category of White Other, from eastern Europeans to Gypsy and Irish travellers. The library must respect and reconcile these cultural differences. Consensus has to be created in behaviours as diverse as queueing, the volume of your speaking voice, or whether women should be allowed to read.

Everyday racism and prejudice lurk in the background, from white middle class parents worried about the proximity of noisy black boys to British African women complaining about the attitude of Black Caribbean men. There are always mutterings of antisemitism from those who have succumbed to conspiracy. A Romanian former police officer offered his services to Beth because he could "identify a gypsy from the way they walk".

Beth presided over a series of failed job interviews for library assistants. Many candidates come a cropper when questioned about diversity.

Beth: What kind of events would you put on to celebrate diversity?

Candidate: We could throw tomatoes like Spanish people!

Beth: Ah, OK. And what should we do for Black History Month?

Candidate: Everyone should dance like black people!

People always have their opinions about the failings of others. But kindness and consideration can hold the day. The library is a haven for learning and belonging, and so it must be defended. This may involve, for example, citing a legal statute concerning malodorous hygiene to some of the homeless men, but if they get cleaned up, they are as welcome as anyone. The real threat comes from the cynicism of the powerful. There were constant rumours of a *restructure* to keep the staff fearful. Across the rest of the country, the libraries were disappearing, as cutbacks forced councils to monetise their property. Capital wants its rent. The councils are wholesaler purchasers of services and so can drive a hard collective bargain with capital: the ultimate goal is to break the councils up so that individuals are forced to deal with service providers. Individuals lack bargaining power, and so capital will be able to extract even more rent.

#

I wandered around Shoreditch, thinking about my old job and literature. Jobs and novels are sinking ships. Every novel is hopelessly partial, limited by the author's cultural and cognitive bias. It is not a form of knowledge recognised by governments or corporations. They want totalising visions. Cast aside by power, literature is a consolation prize for the dispossessed. In publishing and libraries, the books are incidental. Authors and librarians are really working in mental health.

Everyone is dissatisfied with jobs, employers and employees alike. Power's grand aspirations cannot be achieved through the medium of jobs. Grand visions for global business, handed over to project managers, procurement officers, bid writers, marketing executives, social media content creators, became abstract banalities full of dirty words like community, sustainability, aspirational, creative.

Now the corporate imaginary is beyond jobs, it roams a future where people are optional. The corporate imaginary must always remain in a superposition of infinite potential. The people employed in potential will be the final employees.

It was easy to think like this in Shoreditch with its cat cafes and cactus emporiums. The wholesale handbag retailers had become nightclubs; the laundrettes were restaurants with the washing machines and dryers still installed. The speculative capital zone was more instrumental and influential than any number of ex-industrial Northern towns: your Blackburns and your Burys, your Rotherhams and your Rochdales were redundant, towns that had failed one job interview after the next, their empty high streets haunted by the ghosts of labour.

I sent Newton a message. He called me back immediately. At least, I think he intended to call me. His air of distraction suggested that he was engaged in three or four conversations simultaneously. I imagined him standing in the bookies, a phone in each hand and connected to his headset: or was I listening to the tight echoing acoustics of a bathroom. He had called me so that I could eavesdrop upon him talking to himself. He did not speak directly and clearly into the microphone: his voice blew over it in a mistral of indignation, words slurring into one another, speaking too fast for me to comprehend: we only hear what we expect to hear. I heard muttered congratulations - “there is a lot of money in futures,” he whispered, and yes - I was sure he was talking to me. Then, someone or something made him angry, and perhaps it was me: “I consider this theft of my client to be a betrayal of our friendship,” he shouted. “You are dead to me!”

He didn’t cut off the call, so I listened as he spoke to somebody else, though I never heard them respond.

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Chapter Twelve

When Alice was two years old, she underwent an operation to remove a tiny hole in her throat, a stray sinus that leaked clear mucus. Hard to spot, at first, among the folds of fat baby neck.

We took her into Whitechapel hospital and waited on the ward until a nurse told us that the surgeon was ready, the operating theatre prepped. We took the lift down to the hospital basement, then walked anxiously along a cold corridor with a sunny mural painted on its pitted breeze block.

Our family was a unit of three, always Alice walking between us, hand in hand in hand. In her child's paintings, Alice painted herself as the same size as her parents, a sign either of a healthy ego or a fantastical worldview.

Only one parent was allowed into the operating theatre. Beth held Alice's hand as the anaesthetist placed a mask over our daughter's face. Watching her child lose consciousness seemed like a dress rehearsal for a graver ceremony. Beth left the operating theatre with tears in her eyes, waving away the bad thoughts. No, it's fine, it's going to be fine.

We returned to the ward and waited beside the empty bed for news of the operation. I

read the first chapter of a history of the London underground over and again, the sentences did not stick, such was my anxiety. The operation was only meant to last an hour. After an hour and a half, a nurse appeared with further forms for us to sign. It was more complicated than they had anticipated. The sinus was knotted around the tonsils. They would like to remove the tonsils and needed our permission. We signed away these bits of her body and returned to our books. We did not speak much. Neither speculation nor reflection in the waiting room. Whenever I re-read a line, it seemed to rewind the clock.

After two and a half hours of waiting, we took the elevator to the underground theatre. There was a nurse with Alice in his arms in the corridor. Alice had a drain in her neck and a drip in her arm and was trying to pull them out while fighting off the attempts of the nurse to restrain her. The first time I went under a general anaesthetic, I came out of it fighting too. Alice was wild-eyed and it took her a moment to recognise us and remember that she was a little human being and not a scared, confused animal.

The operation left a silver scar on her neck. How easily the world can get to you through your children. Long after her operation, Alice developed a nervous cough, like she was trying to clear her throat of an idea. It came on at certain times. Her cough interrupted us at dinner. Each cough a struggling bark to dislodge something that was not there. An apprehension. She was due to begin swimming classes at school. Alice could not swim very well due to her difficulty with the breathing. I had tried to teach her on numerous occasions. She would walk all the way around the edge of the pool, insisting that it was “my own way of swimming”. I too struggle to acknowledge my failings. Now we had to face up to the fact that her way of swimming was not swimming at all.

We went to the local pool. I helped her swim widths, my hand under her body, trying to keep her straight in the water. She would swim a few strokes and then remember her cough. She hated her face in the water. The not-breathing. Perhaps it brought the operation

back to her. Or was it something more obvious: that her father's anxiety was stuck in the back of her throat.

After a visit to our rented flat, the other girls at school left her in no doubt of our social inferiority. In my childhood, hierarchies were organised according to who was fast or hard, smart or fit: in Lewes playgrounds, the children ranked themselves according to house prices.

To get out of the flat, we went camping a lot. Camping is a great distraction. Life in a tent is one problem after another: where to go, how to get there, what to pack, how to stay warm, how to cook food, where to wash up. A simple task like cooking breakfast for five people over an open fire can - with sufficient ambition - occupy the same amount of planning energy as the writing of a chapter.

Our last camping trip as a family was in Yorkshire. The night fell quick and early. I sat alone beside the campfire drinking beer, while inside, the children and Beth played cards and tried to stay warm. Alice started coughing again. I moved out of earshot, through the gloomy tangle of bare hawthorn, and into the woods. The moss on the roots was slippery with frost. Every cough was a reminder that although we were on holiday, deep down things were going wrong. Don't forget, said the cough, don't forget who I think you are. Alone with my beer bottle, checking on the state of the moon, I also knew that her cough might not be a form of communication - that I might be over-interpreting an involuntary response. The meaning-making, the plotting of the novelist, ravelled its threads around the family, tying them in knots of my own invention.

My need to write is the source of all their problems. There is no future in my writing, but I can't live without it.

#

Fountains Abbey is an impressive monastic ruin with an eighteenth-century garden. On a

brisk morning in February, we walked among the ruins of the abbey, its hollow arches framing the landscape. My children hid in the once-sacred spaces, shouting to make echoes in the cloisters and the chapels, playing hide and seek. All I could think about was: are my children safe now? How about now? And *now*? I lost track of them and looped around the ruins trying to find them. Where are they? What has happened to them. Oh, here they are. Wait. Beth has only two of them. Where is Florence?

I start to run.

There she is.

Beth saw me slowing up my run, trying to appear that I was relaxed. She diverted the children away from me. It was fruitless to talk me down. I would have to deal with my anxiety myself.

There was a chapel on the grounds of the abbey, with a graveyard. The headstones were closely spaced in their ranks like the worn teeth of an old gear. Those the dead wished to be remembered by were also dead. Beloved husband and father, *at rest at last*.

The chapel was cool with a damp stony odour. Notes of candle wax and dusty tapestry. I sat on an empty pew. A statue of Christ on the cross with the spear in his side and his pale averted face. He cannot bear to look ahead, cannot face what is coming, in the ever-present of his suffering.

The airy ceiling, the heavy stone pillars, the iconography: the chapel stood for permanence. The space was designed to alleviate the anxiety of the congregation. My agitation about my family, the overwhelming apprehension of threat, the insistent uncertainty that at any moment our lives could be struck by cataclysm - these feelings are the eternal experience of the human condition. Adam and Eve, cast out of Eden, stumble into the bare and forbidding land beyond its walls, full of apprehension. Outside of paradise, humanity experiences agonising uncertainty for hour after unremitting hour. There is no uncertainty in

paradise as everything is in its place, imagined by God. Paradise is system of total belonging.

In Richard Kearney's book The Wake of the Imagination, he identifies the primary meanings of the term *imagination*. To imagine is also "the construction and/or use of material forms and figures such as paintings, statues, photographs etc to represent real things in some 'unreal' way"; it is "the fictional projection of non-existent things as in dreams or literary narratives" and it is "the capacity of human consciousness to become fascinated by illusions, confusing what is real with what is unreal."

Kearney identifies the making of a likeness as being typical of the premodern imagination. In the Old Testament, God says that man was created "in our image, after our likeness". The ability to conjure likenesses is an act of the imagination, to "evoke absent objects which exist elsewhere, without confusing these absent objects with things present here and now." Our likeness evokes God but cannot be confused with Him.

So: created in His own image and likeness. Why not merely *likeness*? What does the term "image" represent here? The serpent tempts Eve with the promise that the fruit will impart foresight - your eyes shall be open - and moral knowledge - you shall be like God knowing good and evil. The apple gives us the ability to imagine a future that will arise out of human creation - with its attendant hubris, the sin of pride and presumption. The Torah, Kearney reminds us, means God's way, literally the direction of God. Depart from that way, and the path is forked. The cloven hoof and forked tongue of the serpent are identified with temptation and evil because they physically materialise possible futures. Evil is not knowing which way to turn. Crossroads are cursed places.

In Kearney's *God Who May Be*, he writes that, "God is revealed to us, not as a positive fact, but as a possibility, something remembered and reached for but never entirely present." God is never here and now and can only be apprehended in the anticipatory and retrospective acts of the imagination. In Kearney's cosmology, God is a possibility, not a

fact.

I left the church and saw Beth and Alice sitting together on a stone wall, while Alfred and Florence ran around one another on the grass. I walked over to rejoin my family.

#

In Howarth, the car park attendant said I could park all day for ten pounds, or I could pay five pounds and take one of his novels. He was one of those writers who come to it after retirement. His novels were laid out on a trestle table under a transparent tarp. Historical fiction, of course, lurid imaginings of the Romans. Self-published hardbacks. He suggested I pick one up and read it.

I didn't want to touch his novels.

"So, it's a tenner without a book. Or a fiver with a book?"

He explained about the importance of building an audience. There was a lot of this loose talk going around on social media, giving away free books, the digital model, building *reach*. It disgraced us all.

"I'm an author too," I said. I couldn't help myself.

"Anything I might have heard of?"

I was tempted to twit the man. Pretend I was the new Catherine Cookson. As if I was any better than him. At least he had the decency to wait until retirement before frittering away his time and money on the dream of the novel.

"Historical fiction is not my thing," I said.

"You can still park here for a fiver. Special deal, one author to another."

Then, I noticed that next to the line of hardbacks there was a cardboard box of old paperbacks. One quid each. I sorted through them.

"My wife's having a clear-out. These are her old university books."

Penguin classics: Fielding's *Joseph Andrews*, Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, Stendhal's

The Red and the Black. I turned the Stendhal over, read the first page, and it had a haze about it, the rising heat of meaning. This novel again. Coming back to me. I handed him a fiver and counted out an extra three quid for the classics. I wished him luck with his own books though I did not mean it: quite the opposite, he should stop publishing his books immediately.

I have to stop writing books too. What I need to do, in order to give myself a future, is to find an economically valuable outlet for the novelistic act of speculation and narrative.

We walked across the car park and into Howarth. The town is the epicentre of the Bronte industry. The local pub sells cocktails based on the personalities of each sister and a particularly potent one called The Bramwell. Novels built this place. The world cries out for reimagining. If we don't let writers do it, somebody else will.

Flicking through Stendhal, I note how frequently the word *imagination* occurs in the translation. The principal characters of the novel - Julien Sorel, Madame De Renal, Madame De La Mole - are known to the reader through Stendhal's rendering of their imaginings. The psychologies of the characters are depicted in rhythms of anticipation and reflection, desires for the future and attempts to make meaning out of the past.

Julien Sorel is the young protagonist, a peasant boy with an intellectual facility that helps his rise through society. Julien is ambitious. The reader shares Julien's speculations as to how he will fare in his striving to escape poverty and secure a position and some capital for himself. The novel trains the reader to consider the probabilities within their own futures, while at the same time, offering vicarious pleasures in judging the choices of other people.

When one way is closed, you look for portents of another. My failed job interviews were an ending through which I glimpsed the territory of the future. In imitation of Julien, I must eschew the novel while retaining its ambitious mode of modelling behaviour and thinking speculatively.

The alternative was to set up a trestle table next to the self-published author in a car

park, the two of us button-holing passers-by, pushing each other out of the way to force our bloody books upon people who were too busy with the fictions of their own lives to bother with ours.

#

The Augur finance person finally called to say they've figured out what was wrong with my invoices. It turned out that they have been paying me all along; or, at least, they thought they had. The company's original contract was with Newton, and although they updated the terms on which I worked with them, they had not changed the payment details on their system. For the last six months, they had been paying my fees directly to Newton. He, of course, did not mention any of this to me. We had not spoken since his message that - as far as he is concerned - I am dead to him.

"It's your mistake," I said to the finance person. "You have to pay me now and then try to claw the money back from him." No, that is not how it works. The invoice indicated that Newton and I were part of the same enterprise. I had to go to Newton and ask him for the money that he had been mistakenly paid on my behalf. They were not authorised to pay me twice. And if I were intent upon legal action, then Augur would have no choice other than to sever all contact with me until the matter is resolved.

I took the train to Peckham, to Newton's family home. There were indications of his troubles on the driveway. His Audi had dents and scoring down the side. I remembered the picture of his trashed desk he had inadvertently shown me on his phone while we were in New York. If he was the one who had smashed up his stuff, why take a picture of it?

I rang the bell and waited on a quiet street. A blurred silhouette through the glass, and then Newton opened the door, unshaven and jowly, in pyjama bottoms and a band t-shirt. In the happy years of his marriage, he channelled his addictive energy into cycling and work, and his tall body retained some of the strength earned in marathon rides in the Scottish

highlands. Vice had been hard at work upon his face: he peered down at me through swollen eyelids.

"I know you weren't expecting me," I said, and he relaxed: for a second he thought he had made an appointment and then forgotten it.

"I was wondering if we could go for a coffee. Are you busy?"

He looked back into the house, placed his hand on his topknot, and rotated it.

"I was just…er…. No, I'm not. Come in, I'll be a minute."

His top knot reminded me of the knot I tie in the bin bags before I throw them to the rats. Newton goes upstairs, leaving me to the mood of the house.

The hallway was lined with wall-to-ceiling storage units. The kitchen and the front room had been knocked into one large room. There was a kitchen island, an industrial cooker hood, and patio doors that opened onto the long garden that descended in stages to the park. On the counter, there was a half-eaten bowl of Cheerios opposite a laptop. The cleaner came around once a day. The totems of his identity - the signed Coppola script, the carbon fibre gravel bike, the original prop robot from Silent Running - had been gathered from around the house and allocated a corner, in readiness for his departure.

"We can work until midday," said Newton. "And then I have to take a call."

He looked at his laptop, and then at me. "Are you going to take notes?"

"I'm not here to work," I said. "I'm here for a chat."

"What makes you think I'm available for a chat?" His lop-sided smile, once saturnine and sardonic, had grown corrupt from over-use.

"We can talk about work, if you want. If you have a project you want to run by me, I'm happy to do that. Over coffee. My treat."

"We'll have to get the car out of the drive," he said.

"I'm sure we can find somewhere on foot."

"I don't walk anymore. I was mugged, just on the corner. They took my phone. My fault, I suppose. I was just standing there holding it."

"We'll take the car then."

He sat down. "I don't drive anymore. I only cycle."

"I'll drive," I say.

#

I adjusted the seat, the steering wheel and mirrors of Newton's car before reversing tentatively out of the drive and cruising down the wide quiet avenues. Not the kind of place you'd expect to be mugged. There didn't seem to be much in the way of trouble. Unless he had brought the trouble there, summoning it by app.

I pulled up outside the cafe and went to parallel park.

"Are you mad?" he says, looking back at the parking space. "You'll never make it."

You could park a limousine in that space. He made a fuss about my parking, like he'd never seen such a display of masculine ability. It's not easy for me to see through flattery. His compliments lit me up, blinding me to his manipulation.

In the cafe, I went to wave away the menus. But Newton still regarded me as his enabler. He'd have bacon and a bagel. Just coffee for me.

"My marriage is over," said Newton. "I'm moving out this week. To Pimlico."

He opened his wallet and showed me a picture of the woman he was moving in with. Says her name, though I don't catch it. Julia? Iona? The picture was gone again before I could get a good look at it. Then he was talking about how amazing it was that even though Iulia was originally from Romania and twenty-five years old, they shared so many of the same interests: she liked gravel bikes. She was a big Zizek fan.

"You'd like her," he said. "I told her about you. She's a big reader. She'd love to meet you."

He picked up the menu, turned it around a few times and put it down.

“In fact, maybe I shouldn’t introduce you two.”

The photograph of Iulia was middle distance, on a piece of paper. Like he’d printed it off the internet. I should have pressed him on the details, weasel out what was really going on. But I was only there to get my money, and I didn’t want to endanger that.

“Are you happy?” I asked. What a coercive question that was. Newton’s natural good looks had warped and cracked, like untreated wooden furniture left outside for the winter: the fact that his hair retained its dark mahogany sheen only highlighted the parchment of his cheeks, the cored-out nostrils, the discoloration gathered close to his gums, pink and black like the mouth of a dog. His fingers were swollen, indicating some organ malfunction.

“I think I’m going to be very happy with Iulia.”

“Are you ready to move out?”

Turned out that he had made no preparations. His life was in disarray. I offered him solutions, a mistake I make with all my middle-aged male friends. I think I’m being helpful, pointing out the flaws in their strategy. The moment I suggest here’s what you can do, they stop listening. I look into their eyes, and I glimpse a tiny neon outline of a man sizzling in their optic nerve, doing the opposite of being organised, whether that is getting drunk at the cricket, idly playing golf or letting another prostitute into their hotel room.

Newton didn’t want my help. He changed the subject.

“Augur keep hassling me,” said Newton. “It’s the contract. We can’t agree terms.”

On his phone, Newton called up the contract between his agency and Augur, sent to him before New York. He had annotated the PDF. I took the phone from him and read through his notes. It looked like they’ve been typed in the dark with fat thumbs; they were riddled with spelling mistakes and upper-case thoughts.

I could see, from the replies, that Augur finance had been batting away Newton’s

demands for the last six months, intermittently giving in to his tirades and transferring more of my money to his account.

"But you haven't been doing any work for Augur!" I said.

He tucked his chin in his chest to patronise me.

"Matey-boy, don't you remember New York?"

"That was last year. I'm the one who still does stuff for them. They've been paying you my money."

If he remembered sending me the message that I am dead to him, he showed no sign. Perhaps, like his email to Augur about spilling chocolate milk on his laptop, he had learned to ignore the things he said, to continue cashing the checks regardless.

"Are you saying I owe you money?"

"You owe me ten thousand pounds," I opened up my laptop to begin showing him the invoices and all the rest. He waved it away.

"I'll check my bank. If Augur have been sending me your money, then I'll return it to you obviously."

I was shocked that he was so accommodating. Good: I hadn't considered how far I was prepared to push it.

I said, "I was worried you might have spent the money already."

Newton took out a packet of Silk Cut. Smoking again. Do I want one? For old times' sake?

We went outside for cigarettes.

"You've come on a good day. I had a big win this week."

"A new client?"

"An accumulator. Iulia picks winners. You'd really like her."

How was he paying for it all? A new place, a new girlfriend, while at the same time

keeping his wife and child in the big house. I couldn't see how he could still be earning.

"You can pay me in instalments, if that is easier," I said.

He lit my cigarette. I regretted smoking it when I was next swimming my lengths.

"I owe the Inland Revenue four hundred thousand pounds," he exhaled. "But they'll let me off because I used to pay a lot of tax. They have a scheme for people like me. I'm allowed to declare insolvency just the once and then restart under a different company."

I'd never heard of such a scheme.

"They know that small businesses now and again come a cropper," he insisted. "Rather than fuck you over for the rest of your life, you have one get-out-of-jail-free card. This year, I'm playing mine."

After the bacon bagel, we riffed in the way we used to when we first met, in our twenties, when politics, culture, and the economy where a game that we were winning.

Chapter Thirteen

The weather was weird. Rain did not so much fall as explode onto the road. Springs gurgled up between paving stones. Gritty with traffic fumes, the rain stripped the paint from the front of the house. The overflow from the guttering raked over the concrete moulding of the lintel and doorway. Ten doors down, after another tropical rain dump, the face of a house slumped alarmingly. The window frames became parallelograms and popped from the brickwork. The council sent a team to perform emergency triage. They erected a buttress of scaffolding built up from the bus lane.

The house had been abandoned. The owner died a few months back. He used to keep an old Morris Reliant in his front yard rusting on cinderblocks. Did he gaze upon it from an armchair, thinking, one day I'll get the Reliant up and running, and then they'll be sorry?

The unfulfilled ambitions of the dead wash into the earth along with the salt and sulphur of their bodies. New London bricks are fired from this clay.

A new tenant moved into the flat above ours. The tenants were being gentrified, changing from students to young professionals to reality television celebrities and influencers. On a Sunday afternoon, a black Range Rover pulled up outside the house. Three

brothers, Dubliners, in fitted shirts and padded Barbours, with the tidy muscularity of lightweight boxers, shifted crates and clothing bags into the house and up the stairs. One of the items was a tiny throne, too small even for a child.

These were the possessions of Finesse Taylor. Finesse had four hundred thousand followers on Instagram. She was a fashion model, influencer, DJ, and opinionist - later in life, she would become the face of middle-class motherhood and advertise cleaning products. Finesse was not her birth name. It was her nickname at the Catholic girls' school, a slang term for stealing, and her most popular YouTube video at this time was a confession of *finessing* thongs from Victoria Secrets and selling them to the girls in the dorm.

Finesse arrived late afternoon by Uber. A white woman with straight blonde hair and a marketable exercise regime, her accentuated lips framed a wide mouth that suited selfies and modelling fast-moving consumer goods. Beth searched up Finesse Taylor on Google images. Here is a promotion she did for Costa coffee, playing the blonde alongside an unnamed brunette; if there was another woman in the advert, it would be her responsibility to be ethnically diverse. The two women clutch their handbags high to signify that they are going on a shopping spree. Finesse is holding her mobile out at arm's length to take a picture of them both, and their mouths are wide open to signify they are ravenous for shopping and happy to celebrate the performance of it. People have always re-enacted images from mass culture. Consider the lost affectations of smoking, how Hollywood trained us in the art of the meaningful exhalation. Social media inaugurates a profusion of new gestures that people perform in public that are meaningful only to a remote audience: this disconnect imparts an uncanny air to social spaces.

Beth scrolled through Finesse's Instagram feed. Finesse adopted different facial expressions and poses for her selfies. Make-up is the calligraphy of this language of the face. The facial expressions may be goofy or self-effacing but the ritual of applying make-up is

deadly serious. In the same way that a believer lights a candle in a church, adding their private meaning to a blazing public display, so too these moments of self-communion are offered up to the great doomscroll in the sky.

One midnight, the face of Finesse appeared at our downstairs window, like a ghost from a gothic novel. She had come from the Light Entertainment and Soap Opera Awards. Tiara skewed, make-up illegible, her golden wraparound dress flapping like a windsock, she wanted our help with the security gate.

"There are rats out here!" she cried.

Beth went to the front door. The night bus pushed out thick rainwater surf that broke over the yard wall. The rats lived beneath this wall, on the border between our house and next door, making a nest in our messy front yard. The two women stood on the step and gazed at the sludgy rainwater flowing down the pavement, fearing that a rat would paddle by in a yoghurt-pot.

Depending on the vigour of the bin men and the Hackney mistral, there are two, three, sometimes four bins in the yard, each overflowing and open to the rats. Years earlier, in an attempt to prettify the yard, I cleared it of weeds, pinned sheeting over the soil, laid down sacks of Essex gold gravel and smoothed it with a rake. But time has undone this work. The sheeting rotted away so that weeds pushed through and the gravel was drawn down rat holes and expelled in a spoil heap in the neighbours' yard. Mess attracts more mess. Passers-by chucked their chicken takeaway boxes and empty cans into the open bins, and there was a man whose mental illness drew him to our recycling. He made more mess than a fox. Every week I chased this wretch from the yard. Once, I put the frighteners on him by slamming aside the gate and hollering at him, but he fell to his knees, a man of about my age, and cried, in a piteous and high-pitched voice, "Don't hurt me, Daddy!"

Beth locked the gate, and fetched a towel for Finesse, who was dripping with rain in

the hallway.

"My agent said I had to come to Hackney for my career," she said, a catch of disbelief in a throaty Dublin accent.

Finesse was estranged from her husband, a famous member of an Irish boyband (while, in London, you are never more than four feet from a rat, in Dublin, you are never more than six feet away from a former member of a boyband). She has come to make a career for herself among the hipsters in London's trendy Shoreditch and Hackney. Finesse won one minor reality television show and so her agent was waiting for a slot to open on one of the bigger ones. Rumours link her with various reality television bachelors.

Finesse and I struck up a nodding acquaintance because I am home during the day and so take in the many packages that arrive for her: boutique bags of underwear, luxury sportswear, devices to tone stomachs and tighten smiles. On Saturdays, a pug dog arrived by Uber for a photoshoot. Most leases forbid tenants from keeping pets, so the influencers have to rent them.

On Finesse's Instagram stream, the pug sat on its tiny throne.

Beth and I watch the pug and its handler get back into their Uber.

"You think all the influencers rent out the same pug?"

"The pug won't work with just anyone. It has terms and conditions."

"It demands the tiny throne."

"It won't work with amateurs."

"On the contrary: it *only* works with amateurs."

Beth sighed, and flicked through the great streaming.

"Is this what people like?" she asked. Stops the stream, points to an image of Finesse doing a deadlift. "*This*?*"* Stops at an image of Finesse wearing a thick croissant-shaped headband. "Or *this*?*"*

#

The day after the storm, there were two dead rats floating in a foot of bin juice. I fetched the gloves. Alice watched me impassively from the window. In the panic of drowning, one rat bit the head off the other. There were little baggies of pug shit in the bin, and these were torn open in the fight, so that, when I lifted the headless rat out, for my daughter's amusement, its fur was caked in shit. She took a picture of me and the rat with her Mum's phone and posts it on Beth's Facebook along with the caption:

Is this what people like?

After cleaning out the bins, I shovelled gravel into the rat holes. It doesn't stop them for long.

#

A call from Beth

"Can you come and meet me at the library," she said. "There are men lurking outside and I don't feel safe."

The men were known to the police. A bald-headed pair, fat necked, who, on their visit to the library, didn't like being told what do to by a little woman. One of the men was carrying a tent in a bag, the other had a rucksack with a couple of sleeping bags attached to the back. Beth asked them to leave the library because they were drinking vodka from the bottle and making lewd suggestions to her staff.

They threatened her, saying, "we know you, we'll see you again". The usual security guard was on holiday and his temporary replacement refused to ask the men to move away from the library. It's a free country, he quivered, they can lurk where they want.

The bus dropped me outside the Highbury Library. There was no sign of suspicious characters on the concourse. Beth apologised for calling me, says she was being silly. But the encounter has shaken her. I hold her.

How can I protect my family in this city when even the library is a source of conflict. The children will grow up here. They will need some freedom. I must put dead zones in my imagination, stop thinking about what might or could happen and concentrate on the most probable events, or else I will drive myself and my family mad.

#

When we got home, Beth made me go first into the front yard to scare away the rats. I stomped around the path, waving my arms. The gravel rippled as sleek dun bodies passed under it. Eyes shut, Beth bolted to the gate.

#

Our flat consists of three bedrooms over the ground floor and basement of a Victorian terraced house. Alice's bedroom was dug out of the coal cellar and lies underneath the kitchen. All night Alice listened to claws skittering in the crawl space above her ceiling. Mice, not rats. If there is a rat in the house, I will have to leave, pledged Beth. I put out snapping mouse traps and glue traps.

I caught a mouse in a glue trap. Glue traps do not kill mice, only immobilise them. The coup de grace and realise that I have to kill it myself. I took the glue trap out to the garden and decide to finish the mouse off with the spade. Instead of crushing it, I will use the sharp end of the spade to chop it in half.

This is a mistake.

I had a semi-severed live mouse and a glue trap stuck to the spade. I swung the spade around trying to flick them off it.

Is this what people like?

In desperation, I tried to scrape the mess away in the soil.

Another mistake.

I had a semi-severed live mouse, a glue trap and a lot of soil stuck to my spade. I

looked around for help.

Alice watched all of this from the kitchen window. That's the thing with being Dad. The buck stops with you: no-one is coming to save you from your own stupidity.

I bit back the temptation to punt the whole mess, spade and all, over the garden fence and into the no-man's land beside the railway.

#

"We need a cat," said Beth. "It's the only way."

"On the condition that the cat is not added to my task list," I said.

"Getting a cat will clear space on your task list," she replied, "because you won't have to do your stuff with the glue traps and the headless rats."

Through a source at the library, Beth acquired a ginger tom kitten. The children named the cat Bronx, after a men's clothing shop on Mare Street, but I preferred to call the animal Cathead. After a couple of days of kittening about, Cathead fell sick with the cat flu. It's a dud cat. Buyer beware. If only I could call an Uber to take it away and bring us another one.

The children went to school. Beth cycled to the library. I was left with the suffering little animal. So much for not being added to my task list. I needed to keep Cathead warm, so I set him down on the flat white surface of the router, which was hot from the data streaming into the house. Cathead curled his body into a ginger ampersand. I covered him with a blanket knitted by my grandmother in anticipation of my birth. On the hour, I administered water by pipette. Cathead's eyes were gummy; its fur raggedy sick. Tentatively, I stroked it; with the back of my index finger, I rubbed the velveteen of its ears. I've never owned a cat before. I don't know how they work. If the poor sod doesn't make it, then I will bury it in the back garden with the mice and the glue traps, sparing it the indignity of the bins.

The router contains a hard drive that backs up all the family data. The activation of

neodymium magnets makes the drive spin. Cathead's eyelids flickered in time to this action.

#

I was in the supermarket Iceland on Mare Street, shopping for dry cat food and cereal. The two products are similar in texture and function. The difference is the box.

Finesse, the influencer who lives in the flat upstairs, was stood beside the fruit and vegetable display, loading up her basket with avocados. I hardly recognised her. She was wearing a hoodie and sweatpants. Without make-up, she had striking acne, odd for a twenty-seven-year-old woman. Finesse was struggling with her skin, though none of this struggle was evident from the images she posted on Instagram. She acquired a new pose, with her fingertips delicately placed upon her cheek: initially, I interpreted this gesture - lips open, touching her face tentatively - as suggestive of a beautiful fragility. Then I realised that her fingertips were artfully placed over the most pronounced acne. If she recognised me from under her hood, she gave no sign, and continued posting to her Instagram: hashtag gangster, hashtag hardbody, hashtag nervous wreck.

#

My mother called to tell me that she has terminal cancer. I knew that she was going in for tests. In the morning, they told her that the tests had come back all clear and she was going to be fine. In the afternoon, they called back and said there had been a mistake, and the tumour was inoperable. She was given a year to live. I had seen her just the previous month. Thinking back over the little clues she dropped and the concerns she voiced, I realised that mortality was on her mind.

"I haven't made any ripples," said my mother. We were at my brother's big house for dinner. "Your father had his work, your brother is an important executive and travels the world, your sister is a midwife, and you have published a novel. What have I ever done?" she

said.

"Raised three children?"

This pained her.

"I could have done more," she said.

My mother stayed at home *just in case*. She sent her children to a particular primary school not because of its teaching excellence but because the pavements were wider, and so there was less chance that we would be pushed into the road. She had been head girl at school, took a good job as a secretary but gave it up the day she got married and fell pregnant. She never worked again. Only now, as an anxious parent myself, do I realise why: she always wanted to be home when we got back from school *just in case*. She had to know that we were safe. It's perfectly possible to go through twenty years of your children's schooling and feel anxiety each and every day that they might suddenly need you, and you might not be there for them.

My mother would lie awake at night worrying about what might happen to us all. But in a crisis, she was calm and always knew what to do. She knew the birthrooms and the deathrooms. The youngest of five children, she was the one who nursed her mother and elder sister when they were dying.

"You've been kind," I told her. "You taught us all about kindness."

It was not enough. She has seen her children wrestling with the world and realised that she too could have been part of something greater than the domestic realm, waiting all day for something to happen. This conversation was the first and only sign of doubt she ever expressed about her choice. The fact that she only said it once does not make it an aberration.

#

Hackney in November, when the nights arrive as suddenly as bad news. In the gloom, the sensory information becomes more ambiguous, and so our minds fill in the gaps with fear

and trembling.

Midnight, I sat under the mulberry tree in my garden. We planted this tree when Alice was born. While we were away in Lewes, it reached maturity and began to fruit. The tree throws out an astonishing array of branches, platters of leaves, and as many berries as there is punctuation in a novel. The birds fly in, feed, and fly away.

On the rickety wooden bench under the mulberry tree, engrossed in my thoughts, I left the door open from my bedroom to the garden. Cathead followed me into the night, sniffing at the unfamiliar air, placing its paws tentatively upon the cold grass. It sidled up to my ankle. Despite my best intentions, the cat and I have bonded.

What do you see? I asked the cat. Do you feel the night the same way I do?

Cats patrol perimeters between spaces, intensely territorial, marking the transition between the middle of a story and its end. The Ancient Egyptians depicted cats as threshold guardians. Just as sitting under the mulberry tree makes it possible for me to think in a particular way, I wonder if cats go to specific boundary points in order to experience certain thoughts. The thoughts of a cat are not inside the cathead, rather they are exteriorised in their environment in the form of scent trails and scratch marking, a rudimentary form of script. They pace the text of the night, reading what other cats have written, confirming their suspicions.

#

Both Florence and Alice had a weakness for words. They improvised strange stories together in their basement bedrooms, speaking in goblin voices. Alfred is often the butt of their humour. A middle son, he is sociable and biddable where they are prickly and competitive. The girls called him *the egg* because he was such a round and simple baby. Alice cut out a photograph of his baby face, stuck it to a fake egg from the play kitchen, then slid it into the kitchen egg box for me to discover. Over my homemade fritters, the girls communicated in

egg-based puns and allusions that went over Alfred's round head.

They get their love of words from my mother. When I was a child, I would watch my mother read, lying on the sofa, devouring four hardback novels a week from the library, before getting up to go to the kitchen to bake: she would gather rhubarb from the garden for rhubarb pies, and always add a coconut cake to fill the children up, thick and moist, with dark delicious corners where the syrup gathered. My mother stayed home. She sacrificed her world for us *just in case*.

I could have done *more*!

Emily Dickinson wrote a poem on the back of a recipe for coconut cake. References to food and drink recur throughout her poetry, often in relationship to self-denial.

"The Banquet of Abstemiousness

Defaces that of Wine."

Only a fraction of Dickinson's poetry was published in her lifetime. She is the patron saint of thwarted female creativity.

#

In Ancient Egypt, cats patrolled the boundary between the living and the dead.

Ancient Egyptian Priest: Pharaoh! I've got some good news and some bad news.

Pharaoh: What is the good news?

Ancient Egyptian Priest: I've found a way of communicating with the dead!

Pharaoh: And the bad news?

Ancient Egyptian Priest: It uses the medium of cats.

#

Walking Alice to school, I noticed something odd about her complexion. It seemed darker

than usual. At the traffic lights, waiting for the signal to turn green, I saw that there was a reddish-brown streak across her forehead. She had been applying blusher all over her face again. I knew better than to raise this with her. She was self-conscious about being so pale, so white, even for a white girl. Her mouth was a taut rectangle, teeth-clenched, her eyes intensely present.

On the weekends, she took to wearing monochrome outfits, black leggings, black t-shirt, just like her father.

This anxiety that you feel, I wanted to say to her, is passed down through generations. It is your legacy. Handed down to me from my mother, handed down to her by her parents, who were poor and starving in the depression, and bombed out in the war.

The red standing man becomes a green walking man. We cross the street.

I picked up Cathead and warmed it next to my belly.

You could be one of those talking cats, I said to Cathead.

If I was, it replied, I would talk only to you.

That worried me.

Don’t worry, said the cat. We have a special connection.

I stroked its little head. It reached out with a paw.

The shaman blew catnip into my eyes, said Cathead, and I went walkabout to the borderlands where you appeared and guided me onto the warm white box that saved my life.

You are my spirit animal, continued the cat. The question is: what do you represent?

What is a man for?

I don’t know.

You are my totem, my guide, insisted Cathead, you must know your own meaning.

With my thumbs under its armpits, I lifted the kitten up and inspected its eyes. They were hugely dilated and hungry for the night.

Chapter Fourteen

Christmas is coming. Budget cuts in the library service mean that there is no money available for decorations. Beth decides to make a life-size effigy of The Grinch to cheer up the children's area. From the hardware shop, she buys rolls of chicken wire, a pair of long-nosed pliers and buckets to mix papier mache. She pops into the cheap material shop on the Narrow Way to buy yards of livid green fur. The head, she decides, will be a balloon wrapped in bandages to which she can attach a mask ordered from eBay.

Beth gets our Alfred to lie on the unfurled chicken wire so that she can bend it around his limbs. Washing up, I keep a fretful eye on the kitchen window, which functions as a cat-flap: Cathead has not yet returned from its wandering of the gardens and the railway land beyond. Cathead has become a source of anxiety for me. I try to train the cat by making a trilling noise whenever it is feeding time. Gradually, Cathead learns that I will serve fresh cat food regardless of what time it comes home, as I am pathetically relieved to see it. Standing on a chair in the garden, I make increasingly desperate trilling noises. Cathead can hear, in my tentative calls, that I am summoning it indoors for my own benefit. I want all my family inside and safe from the city and its dire possibilities, imaginings of which come to me with a

detail and urgency.

Through my nightly searches for Cathead, I try to understand how it sees this territory. A series of back gardens run the length of the terrace and there is no way onto the busy road out front. Beyond the tall spears of the security fence, there is an edgeland of overgrown trees and bushes that belongs to the railway and the station. One morning, standing on the platform, I became aware of a commotion among my fellow commuters: they were pointing at Cathead, who was sat on the opposite platform among the people waiting for their train. They checked their phones and Cathead licked its paws. The commuters found the sight of Cathead on the platform amusing. I did not. The train pulled in, the passengers got on, and when it pulled away again, Cathead was still sat there. Then, to my horror, the animal hopped off the platform and onto the railway line, scampered over (the line is electrified by overhead wires rather than by a third rail), and mounted the platform next to me. This was a disaster. It meant that Cathead was not confined but could go anywhere. What happens if Cathead gets on a train to Richmond? Or - more likely - wanders out of the station and onto the road.

My family are aware of the complex anxiety I have around Cathead and its daily movements. My imagination, no longer engaged in writing novels, has turned upon our daily life, projecting potential threats that need to be forestalled.

#

My brother calls to tell me that our mother has taken a turn for the worse. I drive through the dark winter afternoon to Liverpool, and find her at home in bed, my father pacing and anxious.

“She’s not right,” he says.

“Did you call an ambulance?” I say.

“Yes, but we told them that it’s not an emergency, that they should come when they

get a moment."

"Dad, it's Christmas party season. They'll be picking drunks up in town. Mum is an emergency."

"I know, but your mother said not to fuss."

"She is not the best judge of her needs right now. Call the ambulance. Tell them it's an emergency."

#

In the accident and emergency ward at Aintree Hospital, the Jeremy Kyle show is playing on the overhead TV. People are fighting on stage, their hate stirred, seasoned and brought to the boil. On the plastic moulded seats, we nurse our injuries, some of which are self-inflicted: perhaps the duty nurse puts Jeremy Kyle on as if to say, this is what you are all doing to yourselves.

My mother is taken immediately to one of the acute beds. Emergency triage. The doctor on duty diagnoses kidney failure: it turns out that she is still taking pills to treat her water retention, from back when she was obese, even though the cancer long since dispensed with her fat. This oversight in her prescription has brought her to the precipice of death. As the nurse hooks her up to a drip and fluid supply, the doctor says that he's going to try to restart her kidneys but it's touch and go. My father can't listen to the bad news anymore, and goes into the car park, then gets coffee. I lose track of him.

It's just me and my mother.

"Am I dying?" she asks me.

"I don't know," I say, taking her hand. I don't know if this is the right time to say goodbye, under the strung-out light of an emergency ward. I sit quietly with her. My father does not come back. After an hour or so, the doctor returns to give us the good news: my mother's kidneys have restarted. I'm to ensure she never takes her diuretics again. We've

been saved. A reprieve. A few more weeks of delicious life.

As we contemplate her reprieve, a policeman arrives to talk to the man in the next bed, who crashed his motorbike. The copper, in his waterproofs and high-vis, rocks on his boots with amused distraction as a doctor asks the injured man what year it is. Then he asks the injured man to wiggle his toes.

"Well, son," adds the policeman, "you've definitely lost your membership to the Tufty Club."

The injured man whimpers, he doesn't know what the policeman is saying to him. Are these questions part of the cognitive test?

"You must know the Tufty Club," says the policeman. "Tufty was a squirrel playing with a beach ball, and the beach ball went into the road, and a bread van ran over it, and it went splat. Tufty would've gone splat too if he'd run after it. If you don't know the Tufty Club, then your head must be in bits."

The injured man whimpers that he doesn't know what is happening. The policeman, having offered his counsel, saunters off across the ward.

I lean over to my Mum, and say, "I'm confident that you will pass the Tufty Club test."

We are both laughing about this when my Dad returns, with a haunted expression on his face, having marshalled his resources to face the deathroom. Our laughter shocks him. It's OK, Dad, you can come in and relax. Death has been postponed for another day; this is just another room. I leave them together and go out into the car park to call my sister. Ambulances come and go, and the Christmas lights in the hospital reception blink with the steady rhythm of a heart monitor.

#

On the twelfth day of Christmas, my true love sent to me money worries. When I ask Alice

what she wants for Christmas, she grimaces: all she wants is for me to be less anxious about money.

Shopping reduces Alice to tears. She wants things, of course she does. In the store, she is assailed by the gaze of the other girls and by the diffident expression of the sales assistant. I interpret their expression as boredom, but Alice reads it as contempt. I want her to have the things that she wants. But she knows that I can't afford them, so she tries to take responsibility for my feelings too, by pretending she doesn't want anything in the shop, while I push her to buy stuff, having given up my afternoon to take her on this shopping trip.

Neither of us want to be in Westfield on a Saturday afternoon, yet here we both are, in the queue at Forever 21. People have changed. The shops are all run by teenagers now. It's minimum wage as far as the eye can see. Not a grown-up in sight. Forever 21 is Lord of the Flies in a crop top. Employee of the Month is a pig's head on a stick. Alice holds her arm protectively over her stomach: precocious and body conscious at thirteen years old.

I gaze with horror into mesh crates of scrunchies and plastic beaded necklaces. Shipping containers in their thousands are unloaded at Dover and put onto trains that run all night behind my house, rattling with the weight of this high-margin unplanned-purchase dreck. Hiding in undergrowth beside the railway line, Cathead flattens his ears as the freight train clanks over the points. The containers are taken off the train at the loading warehouse and put onto the lorries that drive back into London toward Westfield, along the arterial route that passes by the front of my house. A road partially blocked by scaffolding that props up a dead man's house, creating more traffic, the particulates from the exhausts getting into our lungs and brains, making us cough, making it hard to think straight. Florence develops asthma and I have to get up in the middle of the night to administer her Ventolin, all of this so that we can reach over in the queue at Forever 21 and add a scrunchy to our basket, wear it once or twice, and then, in a couple of months, when the rats and the man who thinks I am his

Daddy have gone through my bins, and discarded the rubbish that doesn't interest him all over the front yard, and I'm out there wearing my thick gloves, gathering it up again, I will find that scrunchy soiled by the juice from a cider can leftover from one of Finesse's parties, and then I will place that scrunchy in a recycling bag, so that it can be collected the next day by the council, shipped over to the refuse centre, put with all the other scrunchies and loaded back onto a container, hauled back over the railway line around the back of my house, watched by Cathead from its roost in the mulberry tree, the shining mirror of its irises like the mirror Stendhal imagines the novelist carrying through the world, reflecting upon reality, not creating anything, but merely choosing how and when to place the mirror so that it reflects the telling scenes, and the container reaches Dover, where it's unloaded onto a container ship and taken back to China so that the scrunchy can be recycled into next season's scrunchies or dumped into the sea, where it will moulder for a geological age in a scrunchy mound the size of a volcano.

"Are you alright Dad?" asks Alice. She takes the scrunchy from her basket and puts it back into the retail bin. "You're sweating."

"I don't like Westfield."

"Me neither." She takes the dungarees she wanted out of her basket too. "I can take these back. I don't need them." We have gone through four clothing stores, and she has tried on a dozen different items. There is no fucking way that I am leaving without the dungarees.

"It's fine, you look nice in that outfit. We'll get it."

#

Work begins on the derelict house further down the street. Builders deconstruct the front of the house so that the scaffolding can be removed from the road. Traffic resumes in the bus lane. The front of the house is replaced with tarpaulin. One day, riding the 242 bus, I gaze down from the upper deck and see, behind the tarpaulin, the supporting walls, roof beams and

exposed foundations of the house. The builders are arguing with the foreman. Through the open window, I hear snatches of what the men are complaining about: it's the rats. The excavation has exposed a massive nest of rats. In the night, the work sends dun bodies fleeing down the street, hopping over adjoining walls, scampering between bins and making gutter runs so that bicyclists weave around them. The rats commute all the way to the bins around the back of Iceland and back again.

The rats find a way into every house in the terrace, scratching under the floorboards and behind the skirting boards. Beth, who swore that she would never live in a house with rats, can barely look at me. She shows me where the rats get into the back of the food cupboards: the evidence of gnawed pasta spirals; a trail of rice grains.

As long as the rats confine themselves to the spaces behind our walls and under the floorboards, Cathead cannot catch them.

I get a note from Finesse pushed under our door.

What are you going to do about the rats?

Rats are highly intelligent and avoid any novel objects in their environment: you have to habituate them to an object before you can bait it with poison.

Finesse's selfies take a turn for the worse. Her skin comes out in a rash with the stress and the toxicity of her life in Hackney. In the front yard, clearing up another overturned bin, I find empty her Marlboro packets, her empty Prosecco bottles. She has been self-medicating. The hardbody selfies are replaced by bleary late night party images, her face caught in unflattering recovery mode.

Hungover, and filled with recrimination, Finesse posts a *no make-up* selfie: straggles of blonde hair; dark divots of sleeplessness beneath her eyes; her skin rippled and raised as if she has tiny rats running through her subcutaneous fat; eyebrows still on point.

Disturbed by the presence of rats, Beth's work on The Grinch takes on a nightmarish

turn. The chicken wire frame is covered with patches of sticky tape, discoloured from being left out in the rain. The balloon head lies severed in one corner of the bedroom. The Grinch mask she ordered from eBay arrives and it is a hideous goblin face more suited to Halloween than Christmas.

The headless body of the Grinch is propped up next to my side of the bed.

"I foresee no problem in leaving this in our bedroom overnight," I say.

"It's for the festive display."

"Nothing says Christmas like a headless, rain-stained effigy."

She waves away my complaint.

"It will be fine once it's covered in green fur."

#

Another call from my brother. It's Mum. We think this is it. I drive to Liverpool and go direct to her bedroom. Her death bed has been loaned to us for the weekend by the NHS. The mattress contained air pockets that inflate and deflate according to a mechanical pattern, shifting her body so that she did not develop sores. In the room, the slow, even inhalations and exhalations of this equipment contrasted her ragged breathing. I did not want her to leave accompanied only by this machine. The silence needed a human voice.

There are these rooms in our lives, birthrooms and deathrooms, where all the meaning concentrates: every word and gesture braced under this load, the dust in the air hovering in suggestive configurations, the shadows heavy with allegory.

Birth is about helping the impetus of bodies. When Beth gave birth to Florence, my words were inconsequential peristaltic ripples to help life find its way through the tunnel and out into the light.

Travelling in the opposite direction, from the light into the dark tunnel, is to pass from knowledge into obscurity. Dying people, according to an ancient logic, need words to guide

them through the dark unknown. The Egyptian Book of the Dead, the Tibetan Bardo Thodol, the Roman Catholic Viaticum or Last Rites. Ritual prayers.

In the deathroom, I read the poems of Emily Dickinson to my mother. There was a slim cheap Wordsworth Edition of the poems that she had borrowed, twenty years earlier, from my undergraduate books. In these poems, she had found solace after a week in the deathroom, nursing her own mother.

She was fading in and out of consciousness. After a year of terminal illness, she found herself, on a Wednesday, in the deathroom. I drove fast from London to Liverpool to be there. You hurry to a death bed, and then you must be patient, day after day, as the body passes through the layers that separate life from death. Like birth, death has its stages and death has its rhythms.

The last cogent thing she asked of me was, “Am I dying?”

It was still Wednesday, I didn’t know for sure. I wish I had said, yes, yes this is it. Instead, for the second time, I said, “I don’t know.”

I sat with her through Thursday and Friday, taking turns with my brother and sister. The wheezing and gasping of the air pockets in her mattress. I did not want her to leave the world to the sound of machines.

Emily Dickinson is the patron saint of thwarted female creativity. She was an accomplished cook and drafted her poems on kitchen paper. Her poem The Things That Can Never Come Back, are Several was first written on the back of a friend’s recipe for coconut cake. My mother would bake a coconut cake every Sunday, frugal yet substantial. Food and books, this is what we have loved, Sylvia and I, this is what we have talked about since I stopped being her child and became her adult son. Emily Dickinson writes of the banquet of abstemiousness, desire’s perfect Goal, finding luxury in her refusal to eat so much as a crumb from God. My mother was not abstemious. Her cancer, with foul irony, took away her

appetite: the last thing I made for her, that she ate with any pleasure, was mushroom soup. After that, it was vitamin enriched drinks from the NHS.

I wish that, in addition to poetry, I could have offered Sylvia spoonfuls from the meals that bound us together. Nurse the dying with memories of food and drink as meaningful to us as any poem.

I read her poetry because I wanted her to hear the voice of love, as she withdrew from life. There are rooms we all must go into, containing birth beds and death beds, not merely to enter but to remain throughout, and sometimes we go to be with the people we love, and sometimes we are the ones lying there, with love at our bedside.

#

A single claw taps on my scalp, a sensation like a magnetic coil being activated. Cathead sits on the bedside table, rubbing its small ginger cheeks against the Anglepoise reading lamp. The effigy of the Grinch - the decapitated mummified outline of my son - stands against the back bedroom doors, leftover from Christmas, backlit by the security lights of the railway station.

Wake up, says the cat, we've got work to do.

I get out of bed and open the doors to the garden. Cathead shivers, then tail up, it walks outside, looking back at me, indicating that I am to follow. I pull on a t-shirt and jeans. Barefoot, I walk over cold stone and wet grass. Cathead vanishes into the bushes to perform ablutions. I wait on the bench under the mulberry tree.

An enormous yellow moon has risen over the house, riming the spears of the security fence with a buttery light. Cathead approaches with high steps through the silver grass, leaps lightly up onto the bench, and walks behind me, then climbs up the branches of the mulberry tree, pausing to claw at it, ears flat with concentration as it scratches out its sentence. This is a writing tree: all the neighbourhood cats have added their marks to its pages.

I've been up for hours, Cathead says. You've been ignoring me.

Sleeping, not ignoring.

Well, now I've gone and eaten all your friends.

The rats?

No, the humans, the people you talk to, on that thing you have.

The internet.

Yes, that's it. I've eaten the internet again.

In the living room, the router wires have been cut, the power chargers for the phones and laptops also. Thin white wires, like mouse tails, severed with a claw swipe.

Don't ignore me, says Cathead. That's not part of our deal. Communication is vital.

What do you want from me?

Three black cats with green eyes sit at crucial points in my territory. They are stopping me from making my rounds. I need to visit all my thinking places.

Cathead leaps up to the back fence post. I hitch up the wooden panel between the concrete posts, and crawl through a bramble ditch to the raised earth bank of the railway land. As a boy, I spent much of my free time playing in boggy strips of edgelands beside railway lines and motorway junctions. This overgrown section is about twenty metres wide but runs for a mile or so to the west where it ends in a large vent and access hatch for the Eurotunnel line that runs deep under the terraced houses. Cathead, with its cautious slow-slow-quick tread, leads me to the corrugated roof of next door's shed where, silhouetted in the yellow moonlight, sits a green-eyed cat.

Who does it belong to? I ask.

Belong?

Like, who is their owner?

Is that how you see our relationship?

I stumble through winter-stunned brambles and plastic bags of weeds that I chucked over the fence a decade or so earlier. I should have put my shoes on.

I throw a stone at the shed roof, hoping to startle the green-eyed cat. The stone rebounds noisily but the green-eyed cat merely leans forward to lick a paw.

We should try the other way, says Cathead.

That way is blocked by the metal security fence.

I'll show you how to fit through the bars.

There is a section where Cathead has dug out the soil beneath the fence, and though it looks only deep enough for a small ginger cat to crawl through, somehow, I can fold my body through the space. The earth is cold on my lips. On my belly, I shuffle forward, expecting with every inch to feel the bars of the fence scrape against my back.

There, says Cathead, you are not as big as you think you are.

The quivering white tip at the end of its tail leads me, crawling, cursing, through the thorny overgrowth. The moon hums and glitches like a badly wired amplifier. We clamber through a bank of ivy to come within reach of the train platform. A black cat strolls along the platform then stops, opposite us. The magnetic field of the power lines seems to be emanating from its green eyes.

"Shoo!" I say.

It is indifferent to my gesture.

Cathead moans with frustration.

You must let me through!

The green-eyed black cat does not respond.

I'm getting cold and sore at being out so late.

What is so important that we must do this now?

She wants to see you.

Who?

Cathead says, I speak with the dead.

Am I dead?

Don't be an idiot. If you were dead, you wouldn't get so much email.

There is one thing that always scares away Cathead. The threat of being picked up, cuddled and taken indoors. Instead of threatening the green-eyed cat, I walk toward it with open arms, making comforting trilling noises. Cats have a keen eye for insincerity. Affronted by my attempts at affection, the green-eyed cat walks steadily along the platform, so that Cathead can cross its path.

This way, says Cathead.

We follow the platform westward for a hundred yards or so.

Who are we looking for? I ask.

One of your dead has not passed on. She remains in-between. It is easy for the dead to get lost. They need a mark to navigate by, a book of spells to help them on their way.

Cathead turns back into the overgrowth. The brambles and bare branches form a tunnel entrance. The atmosphere is concentrated by the walls. I am afraid.

The Ancient Egyptians used the potency of their hieroglyphs, inscribed on tombs, to nourish and sustain the dead in the afterlife. Defiling the hieroglyphs of their names would remove their connection to the Books of the Dead; denied access to that wisdom, the souls of the dead would wither and become dormant, like trees in winter.

We pass through the tunnel and into the living room of my mother's house. In the days following her death, my mother was in my dreams. She was confused about what had happened to her. I would explain to her that she had died. No, no, she would say, I just went away. I'm better now. The sensations of her - the sound of her voice, the bulk of her back when we hugged - were so real, I would wake bereft.

She is very pale, as thin as she was when she died, with the wig she wore to cover hair loss, and the new clothes my sister bought her because nothing in her old wardrobe fitted her anymore.

Mum, I say.

She won't look me in the eye.

I've been away, she says, on a sewing course. She sighs, agitating her fingers, sore from arthritis. Something about this place is bothering her.

I want to have the size of the living room reduced, she says. People don't visit much anymore.

Oh, the sound of her voice again, the feeling of her in my arms.

The bedroom at dawn. The back door is open to the garden. The Tannoy announces the first train.

"Her death has changed you," says Beth.

That weekend in the deathroom, reading Emily Dickinson to my mother.

"Her death marked me."

"You came back even more anxious."

"Hackney doesn't help. It's rational to be anxious here."

"We don't even try to talk you down anymore. We just let you get on with it."

"It will pass."

"Yes, it will."

#

A rat is in the house. The life of a rat is fraught with traps and predators. Its survival intelligence is honed to the point that it quivers in time, two seconds ahead of humans. You

can't capture an animal that lives in the future. You can't shoot a rat. You can't stab a rat. You can only hear a rat as it passes by, claws skittering. Listen to the crunching gnawing of the rat as it bites through the struts that hold everything together.

The fallen face of the house down the street. The old man lived there as the rats pulled down his life around him.

I am doing the washing up, then feel water in the toe-end of my socks. There is a leak from the cupboard beneath the sink. The waste pipe from the sink overflow has been ripped open. Something has bitten right through the plastic. A rat! Beth put all the food in containers and so the rats have resorted to this kind of desperate measure.

The plumber arrives to fix the overflow pipe.

"How did you manage to break this?" he asks, expecting some tale of domestic incompetence.

"A rat bit through it," I say.

He blanches.

"I can't… I won't… a rat?"

"You are not afraid of a rat, are you?"

What kind of plumber is afraid of rats?

I return to the kitchen with the small ginger body of Cathead under my arm.

"I will stand here with this little cat while you work. I promise you that if the rat shows its snout, Cathead will have it."

Cathead throws me a look, as if to say, *I am ready.*

Finesse's *no make-up* selfie goes viral. It inspires her to strip away the inessentials from her life. In the upstairs flat, banging and dragging ensue, as Finesse gathers up her inessentials. Every day, these past months, I have signed for inessentials for Finesse Taylor.

Boxes of every shape and size, sent to her in the hope she might feature them on her Instagram stream, have arrived at our shared property: perfume samples, luxury slippers, dog coats, lingerie, healing quartz, fancy boutique bags tied with black ribbons and stuffed with black tissue paper.

Away with all this stuff! Rid me of my superfluity! Strip me back to my essential self!

By noon, the yard is full of her inessentials. Finesse is in thrall to the zeal of self-purification, and so is incapable of sorting general refuse from recycling. The man who goes through our bins cannot believe his luck. I find him among the boutique bags and long boxes containing wands of feminist empowerment: he is rubbing his hands together, this diminutive mentally ill man with a child's voice, dancing among the drek of high-net-worth individuals with low, worthless tastes.

When he sees me at the gate, he says, "Aww, no, *Daddy*."

But I wave him on. Help yourself. By the grace of my fucking hand. He toddles off with an armful of tissue-wrapped boutique dreck. There is more to come. Finesse only takes a break from divesting herself of freebies when an Addison Lee car arrives to take her to an appearance on Loose Women, where her viral Instagram post has bagged her a slot talking about anxiety and self-care.

There is a lesson in this for us all. When you hit rock bottom, take selfies.

Is this what people like? Yes, it is.

I close the front door and return to my flat. In the hallway, through the half open kitchen door, I see Cathead poised on the edge of the sink. I am about to speak, but Cathead flashes me such a meaningful look, I hear its voice in my head ordering me, *Stop, don't move*. Not a muscle. Not a hair. There is a dun shape on the kitchen floor, something large and quivering, two seconds ahead of me in the far present. The rat.

Cathead springs down from the sink, claws forward. Cathead is a small cat, and this is

a big rat and so the first blow must be struck with all the momentum and power Cathead can muster. There is a thud. The rat's blur sharpens as it is trapped in the agony of the near present, screaming as Cathead bites through the nerve cluster in the back of its neck, a scream to warn the others: Death from above!

Cathead normally plays with its kills. The mice it makes run up and down the stairs while I'm watching football. The mice it drops into the children's Lego box, as if to say, have a go on this. But it's not playing with the rat. This is murder, swift and efficient.

Cathead stands over the dead body of the rat, looks up at me.

What should I do with this?

"Take it outside," I say.

The body of the rat droops at either end of Cathead's mouth like a roll of carpet.

#

What are you going to do about the rats? Finesse was right. Something must be done. I need to make the yard rat-proof to prevent any further incursions. They can dig through the gravel. I need to block their tunnels with something they cannot chew through. Chicken wire. The Grinch is made from chicken wire. Christmas came and went. My mother's funeral meant Beth ran out of time to finish the Grinch. Waste not, want not. With the headless effigy under my arm, I go out into the front yard.

The slow school traffic has become the speeding cars of another grimy winter night. Silted pools of rain gather on the paving stones. To get to the rat tunnels, I must clear away more piles of Finesse's inessentials. In the rain, the flimsy paper bags of the luxury purveyors of erotic garments come apart, spilling their evidence of Finesse's distress around my feet: an empty packet of Marlboro cigarettes, into which the lipsticked filters have been placed; the unimportant sections of Sunday tabloids, the ones that did not feature photographs of her; press releases stained with turmeric and vegetables where they have been used to mop up a

spilt takeaway; and a single, perfectly preserved, silk and lace lingerie body.

Hood up, I set to work on the Grinch, digging my fingers through the bandages and papier mache of its chest and wrenching its ribs aside, as if about to perform a heart massage. I get purchase on the severed edges of bandages and begin to pull them away from the chicken wire frame of its body. I turn the Grinch over, plant my knee in its back, so that its limbs jerk up. I work with Dad anger, a stuffing, forcing, pushing energy; once Dad anger sets to work on a task, it will not stop until that task has been entirely fucked up. I work with whatever is to hand. There is no money for new tools. There is no time to plan. Rat holes must be filled in *now*. I'll improvise. *How hard can it be?* Every disaster begins with that rhetorical question, from my attempt to fit a new toilet seat to the Vietnam War. I unwrap a cross-section of the Grinch's torso. At least I have wire cutters. I'm not completely unprepared. And a shovel. I'm positively organised. I shovel aside the gravel and lay chicken wire over the rat hole. By dismembering the Grinch, I should be able to get the whole area secured. But the first piece that came away was the easy one. The Grinch puts up resistance. I go to work on him with the long-nosed pliers, pulling aside one coiled wire after another. His left arm unwraps into a nice rectangle of wire that I fit tight up against the wall. This is going to work, but I'll need to clear more space. In my haste, I tip over a bin and now more of Finesse's inessentials are blowing around the yard, and her private waste too: Tampax applicators, cotton pads stained by an evening's blusher, empty tubes of acne cream. I scoop them up in the lingerie, and of course, this is when Finesse returns from her appearance on Loose Women, flush with the adrenalin of live mainstream media. The gate clangs open, she is on the phone to somebody, her agent or manager - *yeah, it went really well and Colleen was so nice to me* - but her attention is drawn to the hooded man in the yard, who is holding her underwear in one hand, and some kind of child sculpture in the other. He bark-laughs, shakes the child sculpture at her, and shouts, "This is what I'm doing about the rats!"

She recognises him as the man from downstairs, who is always messing around with the bins, and she doesn't do bins, especially not now, as her manager is already talking about leveraging her appearance on Loose Women into a regular slot, which will mean moving on from this shabby flat with its shouting neighbours, and heading West, where the stars live, her people, not these civilians.

Chapter Fifteen

Today I learned a new word: the *precariat*. The class of people making a living in the emerging economy of precarious employment.

The OED defines *precarious* as liable to failure or catastrophe, insecure, perilous. The archaic meaning of precarious is to be dependent on another's will and is derived from the Latin *precarius* - obtained by begging - related to *prex* meaning prayer.

Newton promised to pay what he owed me, but he has not. If only somebody would settle one of my invoices.

The kitchen window is open, and it is gone midnight. Cathead is not back yet. I hate this. The one thing I ask is that everyone is safe. I go out into the garden with the torch, stand on the garden chairs, and trill with increasing desperation, flashing the torch methodically around the neighbouring gardens and into the denuded winter trees of the railway land. A missing cat is a hole in the family that lets in fear.

I lift a fence panel and crawl up the bank of rubble to the main security fence between my property and the railway line. I can't crawl through it or climb over it. What was I

thinking? I return to the garden, walk through the house and then down the street, still carrying my torch. Cathead might have got stuck somewhere along the railway line. There is an abandoned parking lot at the end of the terrace. It used to be a tyre repair place. I once got a tyre plugged there for a tenner. I shine the torch across its weed strewn concrete. No Cathead. The station is still open. I ask the guard if they will let me through. I'm looking for my cat, I say. A little orange cat. Yes, she knows the cat. Comes here every morning. Have you seen it today? She's not seen it. I walk along the eastbound platform so that I can shine the torch under the lip of the westbound platform. No Cathead. I cross the bridge and use it as a vantage point to look into the neighbouring gardens. If only Cathead would wear a bell. If only I had ordered those night vision goggles on Amazon.

I stalk the eastbound platform, shining the torch into the nettles, evergreens and vines. The last train comes and goes. At the end of the platform, a sign warns customers from going any further. If I went beyond the platform, then I could loop back through the overgrown land between the security fence and my back garden. I call for Cathead with a trilling sound, vibrating my tongue against the top of my palate. The torch glints off the discs of tissue in a pair of eyes. Is that Cathead? Or another cat. One of the green-eyed black cats? Or a fox? I trill again, scour the bushes, but there is nothing there now. On the opposite platform, the guard beckons at me: they are closing the station. I return home and sit on the bench under the mulberry tree, hoping that my presence will play on Cathead's natural curiosity and draw it out.

If Beth is disturbed by this behaviour, she shows no sign, and sleeps soundly, exhausted by her day in the tensions of the Highbury Library. As manager, a calm and reasonable demeanour is always required of her, not only toward the customers of the library, but also to her staff. The building is five years old, bundled in as a precondition for the new build flats and it is already falling apart. Her first duty in the morning is to empty the bucket

that catches the drips from the leaking roof. The private contractors charge six hundred pounds for that service. Eight hundred pounds to change a light bulb. Private sector monopolies gouging public services. The library spends more money on toilet paper than it does on books. The toilet paper keeps falling short, she says to a library assistant. Customers keep stuffing entire toilet rolls into the bowl. She orders an enormous toilet roll the size of a tractor tyre to prevent this. The staff refuses to change this toilet roll, claiming that its size constitutes a health and safety risk.

I couldn't have done this job when I was younger, says Beth to a library assistant, I was far too cocky.

It feels intentional, this humbling of us both, a hazing ritual as we enter middle age. She used to take pride in her diligence. Now she wonders if being good at your job is the refuge of a loser. I hate it when she calls herself a loser. She's only said it two or three times. Our parlous situation, stumbling through the month on a part-time librarian's salary, is starting to look like the rest of our lives.

The security guard Clinton calls her "the Little Manager". When customers complain to him, he tells them to look for the Little Manager as she runs up and down the stairs with her walkie talkie and can of WD40 to loosen the locks of the toilets. There is a lift, but she doesn't like to use it because in this job, you must keep moving, you don't want to offer a stationary target. A teenage girl complains that she has dropped her new iPhone in the gap between the lift door and the lift shaft. When is Beth going to retrieve it for her? At the same time, another customer is in the process of filing a complaint with Beth that an old man sexually abused her in the lift. "The lift only travels for seven seconds," says Beth. "What did he do in that time?" "Oh everything, *everything*," wails the old woman, who has form in making these kinds of complaints.

Beth was late home again because as she was leaving, she was confronted in the

lobby by the mother of the teenage girl, demanding they retrieve the iPhone. “That phone cost a thousand pounds,” said the mother. Calling out a lift engineer is equally expensive, and that will take a chunk of the toilet roll budget, and you don’t want to see the library without toilet roll. She explained to the mother that teenagers are always dropping their phones into the lift shaft and when there are at least five phones down there, then she will call the engineer to retrieve them.

Weeks pass in the Highbury Library without talk of books.

During closing, Clinton refuses to check the janitorial cupboard because he saw a mouse in there, and he will not be touched by vermin.

“Are you sure it was a mouse?” she asks.

“Yes,” says Clinton. “It was very small. About the size of a grape. It was running around the floor and then it flew up in the air.”

“Maybe it was a bee?”

Clinton is also a member of the precariat. The usual security guard is off sick with stress. Clinton has been supplied by an agency. The Deliveroo riders take to gathering in the lobby of the library and chatting between deliveries. Clinton knows a couple of them and joins in their chat. Word spreads among the precariat that there is a warm place they can go to on a cold winter’s evening, for the library stays open until eight pm. A rank of scooters park outside. This situation lasts for a week until there is a fight between the Deliveroo and the Uber Eats people, and Beth instructs Clinton to throw them all out, which he does with great reluctance. I can’t have fighting in the library, she explains. But there is always fighting in the library, he says. Why do one group of people get to fight while another does not. The delivery people are not using the library, they are just sitting in reception, she replies. What about the people who just come in to use the toilet? They are not fighting over the toilet, she replies. Some are, he says. He has a point. Only last week a woman wet herself while

waiting for the toilet to become vacant, crying and screaming and apologising as the urine spilled from her and onto the floor. Eventually a young man emerged from the toilet, staring at his phone, obviously engrossed and none the wiser to the trouble caused by his prolonged engagement.

On Friday, the girl with the lost phone and her mother return, threatening to call the police unless Beth goes down into the elevator shaft and retrieves the device. It's a safety issue, explains the mother, my child is at risk if she doesn't have her phone. Beth, wearing her most reasonable face, reiterates her explanation that they will only have to wait one more week. Then, Clinton, aggrieved at having to cast out the precariat, leans into the conversation and says to the complainant, "You are a bad mother!"

This puts the cat among the pigeons. The complaint is escalated, no matter how reasonable and helpful Beth's manner. Her boss at the council calls and tells Beth they must get the phone out immediately. Clinton's contract is not renewed.

So, this is why Beth does not stir when I'm out in the garden past midnight looking for Cathead. Worrying about the cat, looking for the cat, finding the cat. I love parading through the house late at night with Cathead in my arms, saying, look at what I've found. It gives me a sense of achievement.

#

Newton asks if he can pay me an instalment of the Augur money with cash out of his winnings. We arrange to meet in the lobby of a hotel in Soho, but when I arrive, he texts me to say that he is anxious about travelling on the underground with two thousand pounds in cash, so can I meet him at his place? Ionia is making lunch.

The flat is in Pimlico, not far from Tate Britain, on the second floor of a white stucco house with columns. Not the kind of place you would expect to encounter a man on his uppers. Ionia buzzes me in. Inside it is not as grand as it appears from the street. The kitchen

has that sour and insidious smell of bin that inhabitants grow immured to, but which guests notice immediately. My own house smells of cat, children, and cooking, a distinctive brew that Alice is so self-conscious about, she will not bring friends home. I say hello to Ionia, surprised to see that she actually exists and is not a figment of Newton's imagination.

She is a white woman wearing a singlet vest and shorts and strappy sandals. The shorts are too big for her, and she is not wearing a belt so there is a thumb's gap between her belly and the slumping waistband. Her hair is copper-dyed and she watches me carefully, trying to figure out what kind of man I am.

Ionia opens the bread bin, takes out two pieces of sliced white bread.

"Sandwich?" she asks.

She opens the fridge, one shoulder slumped as she considers its contents, then removes a deli pack of pastrami and a jar of mustard.

"Is Newton here?" I ask.

"He's gone out. To get your money."

She lays the slices of bread out. Only two.

"Are you eating too?" I ask.

"Not hungry," she says.

There is a half-eaten bowl of cheerios on the counter. A milk-stained spoon flung to one side. Beyond the kitchen, the living room is furnished with a rental sofa, and rental art and rental chairs. He has moved out of the family home yet few of his possessions are here. The living space is anonymous apart from a triptych of three photographs, each of which shows a desk that has been trashed, the drawers emptied out, bicycles yanked off the wall and flung onto the floor. I recognise the photographs as being from the same set as the one he showed me in New York. He has framed the end of his marriage and put it on show.

Ionia opens a cupboard and takes out a jar of pickles. The rest of the cupboard is

stuffed with packets of Haribo.

She unscrews the lid and - between thumb and forefinger - removes a stubby length of green pickle and holds it up for me.

“Pickle?” she asks.

“How long will Newton be?”

She glances meaningfully toward the bedroom; the door is ajar. She lays the pickle down next to the pastrami. I point into the bedroom, and mouth silently to her, *Newton*? She nods and pulls her fists up to her chin, imitating a child hiding beneath the covers.

Newton does not read novels. This is why his mid-life crisis has taken on such a cliched form. I imagine his meeting Ionia in a pub off the Elephant and Castle, during a pensioners’ special: doubles for the price of singles and strippers all afternoon. The other women are huddled together in their lingerie in the wings while Ionia strips to Katy Perry and rugby highlights on the Sky Sports Channel. A woman comes around with a pint glass during the show, and the old men pay their quid. Afterwards, Newton goes out back with her for a lap-dance, pays her with paper money. As she is finishing, she breaks the rule about no physical contact, abrading her ass against his thigh, letting him know there is - on the other side of the menu - a whole range of specials. Is that how it happened? While strippers danced on the octagonal baize stage, the old men sat at the lip of the stage, underlit ruined faces, pallbearers of the libido. They study the form of the strippers, in the same way - with their rolled-up copies of the Racing Post and a bookies pencil - that they follow the gee-gees. One old patron even brings in his oxygen cylinder, determined to spend his last year of life in this pub, watching one diffidently splayed labia after another. Why be original in your damnation when you can get on your hands and knees and crawl around in the stinking cliches.

I consider going into the bedroom and hauling Newton out of his hiding place and demanding my money. That would tell Ionia what type of man I am. Then I would be a

recognisable type to her. But Newton is psychological frail, I don't know how he might react to confrontation. This situation is dangerous. I don't know the extent of Newton's paranoia or the stripe of his peccadillo. One thing is for certain: no aspect of my life would be improved by participating in this grim theatre.

"I'm sorry," I say to Ionia. "I can't stay for lunch." I want to say to her: leave this man, get out of this flat. I wonder what Newton has promised her, and how he will fail to meet those promises.

What type of man am I? The one who says sorry, and leaves without doing anything to help.

#

The nasty customers, the ones who threatened Beth, show up again in the Highbury Library. They are not browsing the books. They are not here for coding club. They ask for her by name: *Beth*. A supervisor reports it on their walkie-talkie.

Beth calls me. "They used your name too," she says, shocked. I jump on a bus.

The two men are enjoying the disruption they bring to the reception area of the Highbury Library. Clinton, the security guard, is tense. He is not being paid enough for this shit. From behind his security counter, he fiddles with his walkie-talkie, insisting that he will call the police. The other customers, browsing Quick Picks and the DVD shelves, look on. One of them is filming it. Beth is at the top of the staircase, with her lanyard necklace, walkie-talkie and dungaree dress. One of the nasty men spots her; he has a sad, fallen face whereas his friend has an urgent grin. They are like the two-sides of a Janus mask, separated, and strapped upon burly, bald bodies. A bilious smell of strong cider fills the reception, along with the sour odour of cigarette smoke.

"We demand to see the manager," says the grinning Janus.

"We have business with her," adds the sad Janus. "Beth!" he drags her name around

reception, waving his arms at the staircase, as if to rustle my wife out of her hiding place in the upper storeys. When I walk into the library, the two men presume I will slip discretely by. They don't expect me to stop and get involved.

They are looking for a woman, I am a man, they don't immediately register that I am her husband. I am not scared. Beth will have called the police. The Highbury Library is on a crossroads where civil disorder is a constant: scooters mount the pavement to snatch iPhones from the hands of dawdling hipsters; street drinkers lie in a face-down flop surrounded by concerned tourists, somebody is always kicking off in a bar. In Hackney, you are never more than six feet from a rat, ten feet from an estate agent, twenty feet from an influencer, thirty feet from an ASOS photo shoot, forty feet from an unmarked police car.

"Who told you my name?" I ask.

"You are a bad man," says mournful Janus. His grimace reveals his missing molars.

"What have I done?"

"You're a thief," says grinning Janus, keen to demonstrate to others that my villainy is self-evident. He rubs the ripples of bulldog skin at the back of his number one crop, using the friction to work himself up.

"I don't know what you are talking about," I say. "How do you know me?"

Mournful Janus taps his heavy nose with a thick index finger.

"We see you two. We know what you are doing." How sad we make him.

"You are seen," adds Leering Janus.

The policemen arrive, four coppers in stab vests, strangely little men. Beth directs them to arrest the Janus couple, who put up no protest, even though the policemen only come up to chin-height. They shrug, crouch and offer their wrists for handcuffs.

"What should we do with them?" a policeman asks Beth.

"What can be done with them?" she asks.

“We can charge them for threatening behaviour. Which means paperwork and then they’ll be out again in no time, or we can take somewhere far away and drop them off.”

“Which is most effective?”

“Far away. They don’t like it. Most likely, we’ll pick them up again for travelling on a train without a ticket.”

“Far away it is.”

I want to interrogate the Janus brutes. But they are led from the library by two policemen. The other police stay behind to take statements. Beth hands over CCTV footage. The police van pulls slowly out into the traffic, taking with it any hopes I might have had of finding out what these men wanted from us. I am promised a follow-up visit from a detective, but in such a way that makes me realise that no visit will be made.

#

Cathead wakes me.

Where is everybody? asks Cathead.

I am alone in the bed. Beth has taken the children away for a few days to get a break from me.

Where the living fuck have you been? I shout at Cathead. I like swearing at Cathead a little too much. Such a small cat, I must resist the urge to bully it. Cathead flinches at my language, and steps quietly off the bed.

No, no, don’t go, I didn’t mean it, I plead, running ahead of the cat to close the kitchen window, trapping it in the house. Because I can’t believe that Cathead has returned after two days away. I had given Cathead up for dead and in my obsession to find it, the family took the opportunity to slip away. I send a picture of the returned Cathead to Beth; even though it’s the middle of the night, she won’t mind.

What happened while I was away? asks Cathead. Where did everybody go? Did you

eat them?

They are on holiday. I stayed home to write.

You know what they say. When the cat's away…

What are you suggesting?

I go down to the railway line, pick up a couple of mice, bring them back to our place…

The only thing that gave me hope that you were still alive were the dead mice I found in the garden.

Pete told me he saw you messing around with my mice.

Pete?

Pete the Squirrel. I mean, there's so much more to Pete than the fact that he is a squirrel, but that's what everyone calls him: Pete the Squirrel.

I wasn't messing around with the mice. I was mowing the lawn, and they got caught in the blades.

Pete told me about that. Said the sight of you on your hands and knees picking mouse bits off the bushes was the highpoint of his week. I told Pete that it's cruel to laugh. That you're clearly going through some issues now.

That's true.

I heard you crying out for me. No cat is going to come running to that. You sound like a crack up.

Why do you ignore me?

The sirens are bad enough. Sirens going all day and all night in Hackney like the place is screaming its head off.

You must be hungry. Let me get you some cat food.

The moment Cathead understands that I am going to the kitchen, it runs ahead of me

and stands on the chair that I sit on, at the head of the dining table, abrading its cheeks and hind quarters against the back of the chair in a Möbius strip motion, signalling that it wants to eat. I put out a dish of wet food and dry food.

I'm so happy that you're back, I say. Don't stay away for so long.

Cathead pauses eating, muttering, I caught your rats, I'm a free cat now.

I'm not trying to limit your freedom. I'm just concerned for your safety.

It was the black cats. The ones with the green eyes. They took turns to block my way back home.

I think I saw one of them on the railway land.

They are not like me. They look like three cats, but they are one mind, gazing out through three pairs of green eyes.

They scare you.

They want to stop me from doing my rounds. My territory is my work. If I don't explore it, mark it, write it, then the territory collapses into raw unformed stuff. Then I will have to start all over.

#

I get an offer to do some teaching at the University of Essex. It's not much money, but it could be the start of a new career. I text Beth the good news.

The university is on the outskirts of Colchester, sixty miles east of Hackney. I buy myself a second-hand bike, figuring I'll recover the expenditure over time from not having to pay for buses and such like. I get up at six in the morning, dress in my hiking gear, and cycle out into the dark and driving rain. The plan is to ride to Stratford, catch an off-peak train to Wivenhoe, then cycle to campus. That's twenty quid saved right there. Ten such journeys on the bike will recoup my expenditure. I cycle around the back of Hackney Empire, where the stagehands often gather for a cigarette and a moan, then across the garden square of the town

hall, the steps strewn with yesterday's confetti. The rain on the paving gives off the odour of a half-washed body. My internal model of Hackney contains older iterations of this square. The theatre bar was once a pub called the Samuel Pepys where the squatters from the streets around London Fields would drink, all white dreadlocks and damp odours. The body memory of bike riding returns to me, deeply scored pathways from boyhood. I'm riding through Hackney as it is now, this very morning, the rain stinging my face and my fingertips numb in the cold, racing along the cycle path that crosses Richmond Road, passing under the railway bridge that used to have one of those blue lights that made it hard for junkies to find a vein, and then speeding alongside London Fields. I remember the mugger who tried it on with me at two in the morning, and I said to him, there must be easier targets around here than me. Racing past the playground where a body in a suitcase was found. The last murder before gentrification.

Riding my bike, I am aware of the speed of my decision making; that is, how I anticipate the trajectories of these pedestrians and adjust my path so that I skirt around them and through bollards and back out onto the main path again with a minimal sacrifice of speed: I see the shape of the movement in the moment before I make that movement. The brain runs algorithms to solve spatial navigation problems like cycling through a town square. Place cells within the hippocampus activate whenever we consider different trajectories. These trajectories are proto stories. Narrative begins with the journey. The brain mechanisms we use to move safely and efficiently through space are hijacked by our imagining of safe and efficient movements through time.

The back tyre skids over wet cobbles, time slows so that the boy in me has time to adjust his balance and not make the mistake of overcorrecting. The survival instinct illuminates obstacles, identifies potential threats, shows me the way and then I am within that way. Anticipation puts a finger to the lips of memory: shush, now we must concentrate. The

ride happens within a learned illusion of integration. The brain knows which trajectories to calculate within the environment.

The old trees are bare and dormant. Calculations about energy usage have occurred within them and the entire workforce of leaves has been let go. A tree demonstrates intelligence without consciousness. Intelligence may thrive without consciousness much as capitalism thrives without democracy.

Swing out of London Fields, past Alice's primary school, and across Mare Street. I may have lived in Hackney on and off for twenty years, but I've never ridden it before. I pedal faster. I don't know how to take it easy. The boy in me demands to be tested, whereas the man errs on the side of caution. They are not so much an angel and a devil on each shoulder as competing probabilities, the algorithms of life, pushing the organism to explore the environment so that it may form more accurate predictions of threats and opportunities within that environment.

The gate into Victoria Park is half-open, barely the breadth of the handlebars. I narrow myself so I do not have to slow down and then follow the racing line on the wide boulevard of the park, passing dawn runners in high visibility vests, cycling past wrought iron gates and a duck pond and a cafe, the Victoriana of the East.

At the eastern edge of the park, the route drops down to the tow path and the canal. The canal path connects to the converted warehouses of Hackney Wick, and from there, I cycle through the Olympic Park, with its totems from a lost age of public and corporate partnerships. Blairite shared vision statements. Before corporate capitalism learned that it could thrive without people. There are systems and processes within capital that can sustain it without us.

People are redundant, like the leaves on a winter tree. *We're letting you go. All of you.*

Swooping through the designated recreation zones of the Olympic Park and down its

elevated walkways, I pass under a bridge and then through a low housing estate, reaching the pedestrian bridge that crosses the train line at Stratford. I take off my helmet, feel the rain on my hot scalp, and wheel the bike up the bridge. Seven in the morning, and the night lights of the city are still on. The man ahead of me, walking up the steps, is a window-cleaner who brings his own bucket to work. Then, through the handrail, gazing into the under-shadow of the bridge, I see a small camp of guy ropes attached to a cross-hatched wire fence, and an office chair gone rogue. Someone has pitched a small tent on the rough concrete beneath the bridge. The flysheet flaps open, the zip is busted. Sleeping within it are two men who look uncannily alike in their sleeping bags. They are both in their early forties, balding, stocky, their heavily lined jowls compressed by woolly beanies. They sleep as close as lovers.

I recognise them: the two Janus-faced men who threatened Beth at the library. They carried a tent. The police dropped them at the city limits and left them to make their own way back. This is as far as they got.

I dwell on the bridge, gazing down upon them, really staring and intruding on their privacy. Wondering if they are lovers as well as fellow drunks, like an Eastern European version of Jean Genet's tough erotic outcasts. I dearly want to photograph the two men; I want to take their image without their consent. I want to represent them, make them see what they have made of themselves.

The men are spooning through their clothes. Is it love or just a sharing of body heat. I lean down through the railings. The man who is the outer spoon, his lips are moving, he is talking in his sleep or murmuring sweet nothings. I'm eavesdropping on a prayer, a whisper into the dawn. Please Lord, give me what I need and do not take what I have, *this man in my arms*.

They are so peaceful that I almost forget that they threatened my wife. It occurs to me that they are sleeping here, lying in wait for me. Because I am taking an earlier train than

they expected or, more likely, they got drunk and slept in, they are asleep when they had planned to confront me here, on this isolated railway bridge on the edge of the estate and put the frighteners on me.

I walk down the steps and slip under the bridge, hook my foot around the office chair, and scoot it beneath me so that I am sitting opposite their sleeping bodies. The front of the tent flaps opens in the dawn wind. The light is grey, indistinct, making everything that goes on here under the bridge secret and unaccountable. I reach into the tent and gently extract a backpack, all the while keeping my eyes fixed upon their sleeping bodies. They are dead drunk, used to sleeping while civilians step over them. The backpack contains dirty laundry, some paper plates, prescription medicine, and a family-sized pack of Haribo Sour Chews. I stop searching it when I find a calling card for a prostitute. It is the same photograph that Newton showed me of Iulia. They must have visited Newton first. Whatever they want with me and Beth is connected to Newton, it must be. I slip away, hurry back over the railway bridge, and throw their bag over the railings so that it lands near the track.

#

I have a train to catch. On the platform, I listen to the programmed warnings informing commuters to report any suspicious items or behaviour. See it, say it, sort it - repeated in a loop every minute or so. No-one likes it. No-one wants it. The law demands it. The machine needs it. The office windows of cyborg skyscrapers light up as they calculate distant futures.

I spend the journey reading Stendhal, and then the train arrives at Wivenhoe. I carry my bike off the train, freewheel along a narrow stony path between unkempt bushes and nettles, down through a few yards of tunnel beneath the railway line, rising to follow the river. In the morning, the river runs low and thick between harrowed muddy banks, exposing the cracked ribs and spine of a rowing boat. It feels good to be free of London, free of the

future, to cycle along an unchanged mile of the past. The river path opens out into the understory of infrastructure beneath the university. The rain comes and goes again.

Chapter Sixteen

#

It was three in the afternoon, and I was lying in bed, taking a nap, when my phone rang. I answered it immediately. It was Newton.

"What are you doing?" his voice had a deranged authority, like a lion-tamer commanding a dachshund. I tried to calm him down. He still owed me money that I had not given up hope of retrieving.

"I'm in bed."

"Can you be in London Bridge in an hour?"

"I don't know."

"I'll pay you a thousand pounds."

I would do anything legal for a thousand pounds.

"What do you need me to do?"

"I'm meant to be giving a presentation to a yoghurt."

"What?"

"Yoghurt company. Yoghurt people."

"Are you OK?"

"No!"

Newton cried out with an involuntary yip. After it passed, he sobbed.

I heard another yip building in his body. Something in him was out of sync, and this glitch built up until his body underwent a violent self-correction. Each yip was an attempt at a factory reset of his heart.

"You should go to the hospital," I said.

"The paramedics were here at dawn. Those fuckers. There is nothing physically wrong with me."

While we were talking, I was getting out of bed, pulling on my trousers, searching Google Maps for public transport links.

He said, "I need you to deliver my presentation to the yoghurters."

"Can't you rearrange it?"

"I did. This is the rearranged meeting."

"I'll need the money in cash," I said. "Today."

He groaned.

"You're always on about money. I'm desperate. I need your help."

"*Today*."

He sighed and whimpered. He was exhausted. Five minutes had passed since the start of the call. I'd need to get a move on if I was to make London Bridge by four. Public transport would take too long. I'd have to blow the family protein budget on a cab. I ran out onto the main road, hopped on a bus that took me to Dalston Junction. It was heavy-browed with traffic and afternoon pedestrians. Some faces pinched with secret fears, and others obliviously young. Mopeds butted their way in-between buses. A white woman in a floral dress on a cycle with a basket - hair in the wind, like she was taking the Famous Five on an

adventure - pedalled past a stalled BMW with smoked black glass and a sound system that shook the shop windows. Overhead, a massive MacBook billboard on the corner was a symbol of our shared faith.

Newton was still on the line, trying to figure out how to send the presentation to me.

"Just attach it to an email," I said.

"I can't."

"Use an upload site. Put it in the cloud."

"I'm going to send a dispatch rider with it. He'll meet you outside their office."

"Can you verbally brief me?"

I flagged down a black cab, told the cab driver the address of the yoghurters' office near London Bridge. The cab inched back out into the traffic.

"It's the jet lag," explained Newton. "Los Angeles was brutal. I thought that if I could only stay awake long enough then– "

"Brief me about the presentation."

"Oh right. It's so simple, even…. even you could do it."

Three-thirty. Roadwork traffic lights with a long delay. I was anxious to be on time, but I should really have been thinking about what was going to happen once I was in the room.

"Tell me the plan," I said.

"Yoghurt is disgusting. It's curdled milk."

"And?"

"It's like a vaccine. A little dose of the virus to inoculate you against a more serious illness. I've imagined tiny pots of yoghurt that are like elixirs or magic pills that you chug to save you. Smallness is important. Smallness is a big thing."

"Go on."

"Yoghurt is conceptually problematic because it's part-food, part-medicine. That's why we need to put it into pots. To constrain its protean nature. Pots like pill boxes. It's like medicine. You take yoghurt for your gut, not for what it feels like in your mouth. Do you understand?"

"I think so. Is all this going to be in the presentation?"

"You know that I don't like to use a script. We must walk the tightrope, matey-boy, and feel those Thanatos thrills. It's the only way to stay alive."

I jotted down notes as he spoke: food as medicine, the elixir, holy water sipped from a Holy Grail. In Ancient Greek, the word for magician - *mageiros* - was the same as the word for cook, butcher or priest. The priest as the one who cooks up a God from wafer and wine. The white purity of yoghurt. The purging of sin and a return to innocence. There has always been a religiosity to yoghurters, a zeal. Yoghurt as serum. We walk along the supermarket aisles, irrationally bargaining between permission and penance: how many tiny yoghurts must I chug to absolve me of a yard of Jaffa Cakes? Experiments have demonstrated the direct influence of gut bacteria upon consciousness. Gut instinct. The seat of appetite. The gut knows what it wants. We think our greed is a secret, we never confess our gluttonies, ignoring the fact that they are written all over our fat faces.

"Middle class yoghurts," barked Newton. "We give tiny fruit yoghurts to babies to inculcate in them the bourgeois virtue of controlled appetite. A single serving of sugary medicine within a tiny plastic pot. That's your *bougie* life right there. My ex used to feed my daughter rice cakes! Cream cheese on a Ryvita resolves the paradox of permission and penance in one snack!"

His teeth chattered, and he yipped convulsively, like he was being slapped around the face to rouse him, but it only served to spin the merry-go-round of his thoughts faster and faster. What he was saying was precisely what they were paying for: corporate imaginings. It

was the delivery that was wrong. It needed a straight face, a sober, performative rationalism, prophecies enunciated by a bureaucrat.

"It's all about containers! Tubes of Pringles! Tins of Quality Street! Pots of yoghurt! Only when the container is empty do you know that you've had enough. That's why people have such problems with drugs. There is no standardised container. So how are you meant to know when to stop?"

The cab crossed London Bridge. The Thames was a slow green tongue. I was excited to be doing this. *Thanatos thrills.* This was a shift in the power dynamic. Newton needed me. He was nearly at rock bottom. Maybe, at the eleventh hour in our relationship, we could strike up a bargain in which I acted as his emissary on Planet Earth, dispensing his corporate imaginings to his clients, making myself the acceptable face of his deranged capitalism. A thousand pounds for one hour of my time. I would take on more and more of his business, until I became so rich that I too could afford to blow up my life.

"Are you sure the yoghurters won't think that I am bullshitting?"

"They always think you are bullshitting. Are you bullshitting?"

"No. I believe what you are saying."

"Because it's true."

"Yes."

"I can't even remember what I just said to you."

"I took notes. I can read them back to you."

"No. I don't return to my own vomit. The real bullshitters are the people who sell certainty. Truth rests in ambivalence." He let out a juddering cry, as if he was being shaken by the shoulders.

"Are you sure the paramedics said you were okay?"

He didn't answer me. His breath came in exhausted moans. The cab pulled up outside

the office, and there - as promised - was a dispatch rider dismounting from their moped and removing a satchel from their carry-bag. A laptop, I presumed, loaded with the presentation prepared by Newton's people. I hoped they remembered to charge it. I signed for the package, crouched down, and opened the satchel. It contained a long flat box. I opened it. Instead of a laptop, there was a carefully arranged tableau of craft materials: two packets of Das air-drying modelling clay in terracotta and white, six tubs of Play-Doh, and sheets of plasticine in many colours.

"Did you get the Play-Doh?" asked Newton.

"Yes," I said.

"Do you know how to operate it?"

"I think so. But I don't understand what the Play-Doh has to do with yoghurt."

It was four o'clock. I was walking toward the office. The notes I took during the cab ride did not - in any obvious way - correlate to the modelling clay.

"Maybe I should just go with what we agreed."

"No," insisted Newton. "You must use the clay. They are paying for a presentation. They are not paying for a chat."

There would be no PowerPoint. Instead, I was to use the modelling clay to illustrate and demonstrate his ideas.

Through the revolving door, and over to reception to sign in. Then I noticed, on the register, Newton's name.

On the low grey upholstered sofa, Newton was sat in his wraparound shades, head back, phone in hand, like he had just received bad news. The receptionist looked terrified.

"I know him," I said.

She looked relieved.

"He seems unwell."

“He is.”

“I don’t think I can let him into the building.”

“It’s fine. I’ll speak with him.”

“Shall I tell them that you are ready to go up?”

“Give me two minutes,” I said, smiling my way through another patrician performance.

I walked over to Newton. His top knot was a house plant that had let itself go. His new jowls glistened with sweat, and he was keeping his heart in place with the heel of his palm. He was wearing a shirt under a black fleece with bits of hair and fluff all over it, and black suit trousers with a dirty sheen on the thighs. His shirt collar curled up at the tips like a pretentious moustache, and he reeked of cigarettes. On the seat next to him, there was a shoebox. He moved it onto his lap so that I could sit down.

“I just can’t do it anymore,” he said. “I’m falling apart.”

“We just need to get through this presentation,” I replied.

“This is not a cry for help,” he said. “It’s simply a cry. I am beyond help.”

“There is a cafe across the street. Why don’t you wait for me there.”

Slowly, he removed his hand from his heart, showing me its tremor.

“I’m not sure I can make it,” he said. “The sunlight will give me a heart attack.”

“Remember what the paramedics said. You’re fine. It’s just anxiety.”

“It’s not just anxiety, though, is it?”

“Explain to me what I’m meant to do with the Play-Doh.”

He sighed.

“Make them a model of the class structure.”

He removed the wraparound shades and wiped tears from his eyes. I looked away. He put the shades back on.

"The yoghurters are thinking about using a VW van in their advertising. The hippie van, a signifier of organic, soft bohemian dreams. Bare foot kiddies and a bell tent. The fundamental paradox of bourgeois identity is the *desire for* yet *fear of* freedom and individuality. *Bougies* think of themselves as creatures of limitless polymorphous potential, but they crumble into dust like air-dried Das if exposed to chaotic reality for any longer than three days. That's why Glastonbury is so important to them. Anything more than a long weekend of freedom and they will go mad. The middle classes are only free when they're safely contained within their little pots."

Newton reaches over and takes out a pot of Play-Doh. "They live inside an ideological vacuum-sealed pot."

"I think I understand."

"The Play-Doh represents the lower middle class. The Das is the upper middle class. The sheets of plasticine are the proletariat. Obviously."

He reached inside his suit-jacket and took out a fizzing sour Haribo in the shape of child's dummy. He sucked on it contemplatively. I took the pot of Play-Doh from him, put it back in the box, and slid it into the satchel. The elevator pinged. A yoghurter had arrived to take me upstairs to the meeting room.

Newton, sensing my hesitation, slid open the shoebox. It held two stacks of fifty-pound notes.

"Don't fail me," he said. "Explain the interrelationship between yoghurt and social control. Make them understand the true meaning of their little yoghurt pots."

In the tension of his mouth, and the panic in his eyes, I sensed another yip approaching. He let out a cry and started hiccupping with panic. With both hands, he gripped the edge of the seat.

I coughed to cover up his racket then left him to his suffering.

On my way into the meeting, I excused myself, went to the bathroom, and dumped the package full of Play-Doh into the bin.

#

The meeting was in a tastefully dark and low-ceilinged room. The yoghurters sent only one representative. Gone are the days in which Newton could command the attention of the C-suite. I introduced myself as Newton's deputy and presented a version of Newton's ideas. The client took some notes. She was a white woman in early middle-age, and susceptible to my patrician act. I left assured that there would be a follow-up meeting and that Newton's invoice would be settled.

Newton and his shoebox of cash were not waiting for me in reception. Nor was he in the cafe across the road. I tried his phone. No answer. Even if he picked up, he never offered anything as definitive as an answer. I expected nothing more.

I drifted on a bus along the wide unfamiliar avenues south of the river and arrived at his flat in Pimlico. I rang the bell. Nothing connected to him anymore. I climbed over the fence, into the yard, where there were communal wheelie-bins. They were crammed with Newton's possessions. His DVDs and expensive bike parts were strewn across the yard: a Tarkovsky boxset, fancy peddles, a Lycra vest with racing stripes. I hitched myself up onto the side of the bin. There was a triptych of framed photographs dumped there: the images Newton took of his desk after his wife trashed it, magnified and framed, the marital breakdown as a work of art.

And then Newton called me on the phone.

"Come and meet me," he said.

I climbed back over the fence and walked along the mews of privilege to the garden of Tate Britain, where Newton was sat waiting for me. With his shoebox, moulting fleece and dirty black trousers, he looked like a homeless person. Then I realised: he was a homeless

person. The sight of my approach made him wince with a vestige of guilt. He still had the yips, juddering suddenly out of his seat, his throat convulsing as if grabbed at by an invisible hand.

I decide to confront him about the two Janus-faced men, the evidence that they knew Ionia, the Haribo in their bag.

"Why did you send those men after me?"

He knew exactly what I was talking about and made no pretence of ignorance. He was beyond lying.

"I didn't. I must have been slagging you off to them, and they misinterpreted me. They are very literal men, not given to figurative speech at all."

"What have I done to upset you?"

"You asked me for money."

"Money you owe me."

"I don't keep track. And you stole my client from me. What were they called?"

"Augur. I didn't steal them."

"They are still paying me, though. I guess the last laugh is on them."

"It's my money they are sending to you. You promised to return it to me."

"I haven't slept for three days," he said. "Every time I start to nod off, I wake up with a start, and now my body is jerking me awake every couple of minutes. I am being tormented."

"Ask your doctor for sedative."

"She refused. Said I would have to go to the hospital. Will you come to A&E with me?"

I reached for the shoebox. "OK. But first, pay me what you owe me."

"Why would I do that?"

I sank to my knees, head in my hands.

“I don’t know, Newton. It’s what you promised!”

“Why do you believe my promises?” Newton pulled at his face. “Look at me. I’m broken.”

“I know.”

“So why are you always on at me to help you?”

We both looked at the shoebox of cash.

“No,” he said.

“You said, a thousand pounds if I got out of bed and did your presentation for you.”

“Did you explain the Play-Doh class system to them?”

“Yes. I explained that the middle class only experience freedom as anticipation, as something they are prevented from attaining, and need to be sealed up in the ideological vacuum of their little pots. That is what you wanted me to say, isn’t it?”

“There or thereabouts. What did the yoghurters make of it?”

“They liked it.”

“They always like it. And then they ignore it. I have spent my life imagining for corporations and all I have to show for it is a slightly bigger pot.”

He took out a Silk Cut, and handed me one.

“I’m out of the pot now.”

“What are you going to do?”

“Aren’t you listening? I’m Play-Doh out of the pot. Play-Doh doesn’t do anything. It is contingent. It is shaped by others. Or it’s just left there, a mess.”

“The yoghurters said they will settle your invoice.”

“It never fucking ends, no matter how hard I try to make it stop.”

“Would it help to talk about your problems?”

Newton raised a hand, signalling a pause in conversation. In the throes of a yip, he looked like a bellringer was pulling on his spine.

“I have four therapists,” he gasped, after the yip. “Including a soviet woman with a doctorate in brain particle theory. I hardly think your domesticated empathy is going to make a dent.”

The cigarette was a taster of his toxicity.

When I worked at This Content, I admired Newton as somebody who had monetised his imagination to an astonishing degree. He was richer and cleverer than me, so I was happy to be the beta to his alpha. Yet, somewhere along the line, it all unravelled for him: once he had the big house and the family, he returned to his first love, the creation of meaning, and realised that his own work was - for all its florid imaginings and grand theories - disposable. The corporate imaginary is the twenty-first century equivalent of the flattery of the court, the rhetoric and art that prettifies the brutal reality of power. It has no other meaning than that.

I crouched before Newton, and said to him, “You have to give me the shoebox.”

“It’s all I have left.”

“The yoghurters will pay you. I made that possible. If you don’t pay me then I will never help you again. And you are going to need all the help you can get.”

“If I pay you, then I have no power over you, and I will never see you again.”

Pigeons landed around us, recognising us as bench-dwellers, itinerants, and good for a few scraps. I extinguished the cigarette by smearing the lit end against the path, and then I flicked the filter at the birds: fuck you guys.

“Give me the money, Newton. Do this one decent thing.”

“Did you *really* make the class structure out of Play-Doh?”

I wanted to say, Do you know why you’re obsessed with Play-Doh? Because the world used to feel malleable to you. We were putty in your hands. You made a world of your

own imagining. Now you are encountering resistance, and instead of adapting who you are, re-educating yourself in the new culture, you've doubled-down on the land of do-as-you-please. I wanted to tell him the truth, that I had dumped the Play-Doh in the bin because I knew that it was absurd, and that I had a job to do, to perform sober rationality to the yoghurters, and persuade them that Newton's imaginings were worth paying for. But he did not deserve my honesty or my pity.

"Yes, I *really* did."

He smiled, satisfied that he has created something meaningful. I reached over and took the shoebox of money, and he put up what I interpreted as only token resistance.

Chapter Seventeen

This was my final contact with Newton. A month later I was offered a permanent part-time academic job teaching creative writing at the University of Essex. I have since enjoyed twelve years of steady employment and even spent three years as head of department. It was my memory of that trip to New York, unemployed and struggling to find my way back into society, that made me take on the role of head. The world no longer has any need for men like me. Becoming head was a last-ditch attempt to secure middle-management experience that will help me apply for whatever jobs will arise in the new fascism: Head of Approved Literature, or Political Theatre and Propaganda Film Studies or Lecturer in Destructive Writing.

Augur was eventually bought by a big tech company, and their bot was subsumed into a large language model product. Three of my science fiction novels were included in the data set of the one hundred and eighty thousand books used to train it. In the future, one of the trillion operations of the Augur AI will decide the moment and manner of my death. I like to think it will draw upon my fiction buried deep in its neural net as it does so.

The mourners at Newton's funeral preferred to remember him as the man he was, rather than the man he became. The man he succumbed to becoming. I went among them

trying to piece together the story of his last days. A couple of musicians from his postgraduate jazz-funk band, in black suits and shades that could easily double up as stage costume, filled me in on the terminal gossip. Newton moved out of the family home and into a declining series of rentals before dying suddenly one weekend. A housemate found the body. In his wallet there was a betting slip (a decent win on an accumulator that he would never cash in) and a napkin from a steak restaurant on which he had scrawled the gnomic phrase, “Presence? Absence.”

At the grave, his ex-wife grimaced and looked away as if embarrassed at what he had become.

#

I give a speech to all the new students. I want them to understand why their courses in the humanities matter.

“Humanity is the only species that makes meaning,” I saw. “Consciousness is more widely distributed through the cosmos than we ever suspected. Awareness might exist even in inanimate matter. But meaning is indigenous to us. When we go out in the universe, we will introduce it to meaning.

“Humanities are the study of meaning, how to create it, how to recognise it, how to understand it. Without the humanities, life is without meaning. We can live without meaning in the same way that we can live without gravity, but over time - in the absence of meaning - we will cease to be human and will become something else.”

#

Last week my Aunt Irene died in her early eighties. She was my father’s sister and had no other family. An avid church goer all her life, she had no partner, no children. I remember when she worked at Burton’s biscuit factory and she would give us bags of misshaped wagon wheels every time we visited. Myself and my siblings. My own children never met her, but

they received cards from her at Christmas, twenty pound for each child on their birthday. Generous. She called them the *grandchildren*. Her mother, a deeply problematic figure in my father's life - a long story that I get wrong every time I tell it - used to give us five pounds when we saw her. A princely sum in the 70s and 80s. But she had given my father up for adoption when he was born, had refused to allow him to live with her, so that he was raised by his grandmother. When she died, he had to be persuaded to go to her funeral. Irene's twenty-pound notes - an upgrade from her mother's fivers - are slipped into cards that never match the actual age of the child. Peppa Pig cards sent to fourteen-year-old girls.

My dad sends me forty pounds on my birthday. I send him presents. Mostly he would prefer the forty quid back.

I never thought much about Irene while she was alive. Now she is dead, and I am on my way to her funeral, these tokens of transactional love break my heart.

It breaks my heart because there could have been a different kind of relationship with these people - sorry, I mean, *my family*. Growing up, I thought of my family as the default, the norm by which all deviation is measured. I was raised in this pinched transactional model of human relationships.

I will give a short reading at Irene's funeral. I am the executor of her will. Half of her estate goes to my father, the other half to be divided three ways between myself and my siblings. I've already done the sums. A terraced house on the outskirts of Blackpool. Eighty, ninety kay, at best.

There is only one book in her house. The Bible. For culture, there are some Michael Bublé CDs. It's the same terraced house she grew up in. The same carpets and furnishings. Nothing is new, and the old stuff is malodorous with time, the terraced house contiguous with her suffering body. When her mother had dementia, Irene was her carer. Her mother grew violent and deranged and tried to throw Irene out of the bedroom window, and Irene feared

for them both.

Gathering Irene's clothes, preparing them for donation to charity, my father opens her handbag and finds a purse containing eight hundred pounds in cash. She must have withdrawn all her remaining savings to take the money into hospital with her. As if her body knew it was dying and it wanted to take the money into the afterlife (I do not imagine heaven but intricate underworlds and the half-remembered green hills of dreamscapes).

My Dad counts out the notes.

"We'll put this behind the bar at the wake," he says.

I can't imagine the congregation getting through eight hundred quid of sherry, but what else to do with this meagre collection of notes. I could use it to keep slipping twenty quid notes into the birthday and Christmas cards of my children. I didn't know Irene very well. I don't know what her life meant. I run my finger along the edge of the gathered notes like they are the rough pages of a short manuscript, or a single book of the Bible. This money was a different kind of currency to Irene. It was not to be spent; it was to be kept deep inside. This money was unspent love.

Oh, it breaks my heart, this living room with green lady painting and holiday snaps from forty years ago. A deathroom.

One of my notebooks, carefully inscribed by fountain pen, got caught in the rain. The ink ran. All my tightly packed observations, quotations - scraps of some anticipated but never achieved whole - were lost before meaning could be made from them. Irene's death is a wiped notebook. Unmade while still in progress. I don't know what to make of her, of any of these deaths.

Irene's post has piled up. I will have to close her bank accounts and for that I will need the account number and sort code. I open her bank statement and read the figures.

No, that can't be right.

Eighty-seven thousand pounds in her current account. I open another. Here is another eighty-three thousand pounds in an ISA. Another investment form. Fifteen thousand pounds. Seventy thousand pounds. So much money. Fucking loads of it. She couldn't have earned all of that on the biscuit assembly line at Burtons.

My father is shocked. She never told him. He never knew. Of course not. Perhaps this is his mother's money, transferred to Irene, years before she died. The money kept close. Kept in the house, in the handbag. Women's hidden power. We'll never know where it came from.

Oh god, my family. What is this inheritance, tenners for the grandchildren, so many tenners. But of course, they weren't her grandchildren, but they were the closest she had to earthly inheritors. They never knew her. But they will know her money and its hoarded thwarted power.

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At the funeral service I read from Corinthians 48:58.

Death, where is thy sting. Irene had planned her funeral meticulously. I was to read from the King James Version. The service is in a church in Blackpool not far from Irene's terraced house. Her neighbours stand in the front yard to acknowledge the hearse. "Rough diamonds," my brother-in-law calls them. In the back yard, a gate leads into next door's garden. They have a shed with a Blackpool FC flag. The yard is as I remember it from some lost summer's day, playing on my hands and knees as a seven-year-old boy, burning ants under a magnifying glass.

Irene took over the house when her mother became sick, and cared for her in the upstairs bedroom, even as the stroke and the vascular dementia made her kick and scream at her daughter. Ethel could be brutal and was invariably cold and harsh. She told my father that she tried to have him aborted. He and Irene never lived together, he was raised outside the

family home. His elder sister Nora was cast out too and never seen again. The lodger, genial Jim, shared a bed with Ethel for thirty years but when he had a stroke, Ethel would not let the ambulance drop him back at the house. “He is only the lodger,” she said to the ambulance driver. “We won’t care for him.”

My father asks the neighbours to go around the house and take anything they can use. Denuded, in one way, but also improved by the removal of the clutter of an elderly and confirmed spinster. What remains: posters of Daniel O’Donnell on her bedroom wall. A brown baby doll tucked up in a blanket on the ottoman. Weight watcher diaries abandoned after two pages. Her twenties and early thirties were blighted by a thyroid condition. For most of my childhood she was the big sleepy woman dozing off on the armchair. Then, one day, the condition was treated and she got a page boy haircut and became a vigorous out and about church goer in her late thirties with the heart of a thirteen-year-old girl.

There is a framed photograph of Irene on an easel next to the coffin: smiling, haircut short and androgynous, with those downy dusted cheeks I remember from goodbye kisses as a child. The congregation all have broken bodies. The vicar, in her eulogy, says that her church is a place where suffering is welcome. These are her sufferers. And for one day, I am too.

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As I read the passage Irene chose for her funeral, obscure liturgical lines about resurrection of the flesh, I register the faces of the sufferers, the people who really knew her. Missing teeth. Walking sticks. Dementia dozing. Fragile hands, careful steps, thin skin. Post-Brexit dentistry. Looking forward to a nice spread at the wake and a massive slice of sponge cake. Are they reconciled to their lot, to their suffering? They want something more but not for themselves. For their children and grandchildren. For their suffering to not be in vain. Their suffering is a form of a belonging.

They know my father from the stories Irene told about him. How well he did in life. Chief superintendent. How well we have all done.

The vicar puts aside her walking sticks and takes the lectern. A water flask next to her feet. She reflects upon the same passage from Corinthians but quotes from a modern translation: the more colloquial the language, the less sense it makes, this mystery of how the flesh returns from the corruption of the grave. Better to leave those mysteries enfolded within the incantatory lines of King James Version rather than to attempt to explain and persuade. I am moved by her welcoming mysticism. A church can be a force for good so long as it is powerless.

All the Northern crematoriums are identical. I must have been to five or six by now. Uncle Bill. Auntie Brenda. Auntie Jean. Both of my wife's parents. My mother. The secular music. I chose Satie for my father-in-law. I can't remember which songs we chose for my mother.

My family go up in puffs of smoke from a municipal chimney.

My mother's ashes are still in a shoebox somewhere around the house. My father won't let us cast them into a mountain stream in the Lake District. After he dies, he wants to be commingled with her. They were married at nineteen. Cast out by his mother he had nowhere else to go.

Irene never married, though in the eulogy, the curate mentions a fiancé who died young. News to me. News to my father too. "Brain tumour," says one of Irene's friends. I don't believe it. I'm not sure they believe it either. But the lie - if it is a lie - explains Irene's situation, makes it easier for her to belong: the suffering of a doomed young love, *matter in the right place*. Irene was raised by a mother who hated men, taught her not to trust them, instructed her in how to get and keep money because money represented freedom from men.

I take Irene's Bible from the drop-leaf dining room table. A gift from Ethel and Nora

on her eleventh birthday. Then Nora was cast out. I never met her and Irene would not hear her spoken about. I flick through to the passage she chose for my reading: Corinthians. I'd forgotten how patriarchal Christianity is. God is the ideal father, perfect in all the ways that her own absent father was not. I only met him once. Frank. My father initiated contact late in life, around the same age that I am now - fifty-one. Imagine only meeting your father when you are fifty-one. Conversely, imagine meeting your son for the first time and they are a fifty-one-year-old retired policeman. I wonder if Frank asked about Nora. I wonder if Frank asked about Irene who, at that time, was just taking over the house and caring for Ethel. Irene did not want to hear a word said about Frank either. Her face was turned against him. There was no forgiveness for what he had done. Leaving Ethel while she was pregnant with my father for another woman.

The carpets have that smell of stifling solitude, idiosyncratic, particular to Irene and her mother, but also symptomatic of old age in general. A galley kitchen and a parlour where I once played beneath The Painted Lady. Only a handful of memories remain of a roast lamb dinner with gravy made from granules - gravy is the foundation of working-class culinary appreciation - a jumper for my birthday with a long polo neck that made me cry with disappointment, and always a five-pound note as compensation for my performance as a grandchild.

O grave, where is thy victory?

On the drive to and from the crematorium, the traffic is terrible. It contributes to the sense of dysfunction, of a nation state in abandoned disrepair, mouldy carpets, rotting window frames, untreated diabetes.

The sufferers wait for the family to return before unwrapping the buffet. I wish they had started without us. But the tradition is that the family eat first and these traditions remain fiercely vital. I drink a coke and eat a sausage roll. I praise the sponge cake and ask to take

some home with me for the grandchildren.

I talk to the women who knew Irene. Who helped her with cleaning and chores. She was outspoken, apparently. Knew her own mind. They loved her and she loved them. The congregation was her family. It's good to meet them and be consoled that her life knew friendship and community. That her life was entirely directed toward the church, and so she had no need of domestic comforts and status. There was more to her than a rundown terraced house. On two sticks, Irene undertook a sponsored walk to raise money for health workers during the pandemic. There was a photograph of her in the local paper. A last hurrah. Or her first one.

The next day, my father and I drive to Lytham St Annes for a meeting with the solicitor about Irene's will. There are only local brands on the high street. Globalisation is not interested in this place. An electronics store, vaping shops, cafes decorated with rhinestone kitsch.

The solicitor shares her office with a colleague. My father takes out the post that has arrived at Irene's house since she died. Bank statements, financial statements. "I'm sorry, Matthew," the last words Irene said to me, "but I can't send the kids much money this Christmas. Times are hard." "It's alright Auntie Irene. I understand. Just a card would be great."

We hand over the financial statements. The solicitor does a sum. At the time of death Irene was worth north of three hundred thousand pounds. Inheritance is a kind of resurrection. The money is a secular spirit that will fill the sails of the grandchildren as they set out on their journey into life. A journey she never took for herself, a journey she saved for others.

ENDS