

Try to Learn to Let What is Unfair Teach You: An Investigation into Metafiction, Self-

Consciousness and Morality

&

'A Diamond Geeza is a Girl's Best Friend'

A Collection of Short Stories, Vignettes and Snapshots

A thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

in English and Creative Writing

by

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Abstract

A Diamond Geeza is a Girl's Best Friend is a collection of short stories and vignettes that demonstrates predominantly working-class men, trapped within a toxic, patriarchal sphere and explores themes such as power, reclamation of honour and the changing cultural landscape of Great Britain. The main story from the creative folder, 'Author of His Own Doom' chronicles, through the first-person narrative, how the protagonist attempts to rise above his surroundings and baser instincts and works towards discovering his identity and self-respect.

The accompanying critical study contributes to the knowledge of metafictional writing. The creative process contributes by acknowledging the existence of a limiting and often degrading space for working class men and the ways in which they may seek a redress.

This study refutes the assumption that metafiction is elitist or passé and is instead a powerful social tool to understand both cultural perimeters and the self, demonstrating the value of building a narrative for men who may feel that they have little or no voice.

The sources that support this research include creative and critical texts, as follows: Evelyn Waugh's *A Handful of Dust*, Martin Amis's *Money*, and Davis Foster Wallace's *Brief Interviews With Hideous Men*; David Lodge's *The Art of Metafiction*, Robert Scholes' *Fabulation and Metafiction*, Patricia Waugh's *Metafiction The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction*, William H. Gass's *Fiction and the Figures of Life*, Zadie Smith's *White Teeth*, Dan Ariely's *Predictably Irrational*, Mary K. Holland's *A Companion to David Foster Wallace Studies* and Jonathon Greenberg's *Was Anyone Hurt: The End of Satire in A Handful of Dust*.

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Introduction

This thesis deliberates various constituent parallels between three key literary texts – *A Handful of Dust* (1934) by Evelyn Waugh, *Money* (1984) by Martin Amis and *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* (1999) by David Foster Wallace and considers how these works shaped and inspired my own ideas and thought processes. I will address my own endeavour in conjunction with the aforementioned writers and throughout the thesis, evaluate both motive and underlying intent. Analysing my particular style of writing leads me to the conclusion that it is best described as sitting within the metafictional canon and through this particular genre, I seek to de-familiarize everyday events and common themes within British culture, through an exploration of the absurd, surreal and grotesque. By drawing upon the referenced methodology of Waugh, Amis and Foster Wallace, which I will discuss in chapter four, I intend to establish key ideas for both personal and cultural change and this theorem will be tested throughout the project.

The creative writing portfolio opens with the metafictional novelette, ‘Author of His Own Doom’ referenced henceforth as ‘Author’ which is set in North London during the latter era of Cool Britannia. This particular generation is explored through the perspective of Bokka Gunne, an oxymoronic articulate thug, who is handicapped through a socially ingrained toxic masculinity. This is followed by four short stories: a connected offshoot of ‘Author’ titled ‘Ali Dunne and the Victorian Lamp Post’ which is a fairy tale for adults, set on a council estate where the protagonists too, are impaired by their culture, ‘I Feed My Children Road Kill’: an autobiographical memoir and cautionary tale about recreational drug abuse in Amsterdam, ‘The Scales of Justpiss’ investigates the harrowing effects of autism

and finally 'The Cloak of Nessus': a stand-alone piece which is imbued with Middle English imagery focussing on mental breakdown. A further four vignettes, primarily emphasising the darker underbelly and absurdities within British culture will complete the creative folder.

The reading public can draw from a great range of literary genres: realism, dystopian, science fiction, satire, magical realism, the epistolary novel, alternate history and stream of consciousness et al, which all strive and compete for literary sanctification, there being no singular privileged language of fiction. Through this cornucopia of literature, we are hugely privileged to enjoy unparalleled opportunities of learning and gratification but most importantly, perhaps, to develop our intellects and emotional responses. In a Guardian interview in 1998, Martin Amis stated that, 'Literature is the great garden that is always there and is open to everyone 24 hours a day.' Why then, choose to explore a single element; that of metafiction? What exactly is metafiction? In its simplest essence, according to David Lodge, 'Metafiction is fiction about fiction: novels and stories that call attention to their fictional status and their own compositional procedures.' (206)

A primary emphasis of the thesis is that my own brand of metafiction should be purposefully controlled and somewhat ethically inclined, though upon occasion it will be pertinent to galvanise the writing with an altogether more odious and execrable affectation in order to explore the inner depths of the human psyche. Amis, at the time of writing *Money: A Suicide Note* in 1984, was already on his way to becoming a luminary of the literary world and teased the audience with ¹metafictional, dry humour:

Oh yeah, and a *writer* lives round my way too. A guy in a pub pointed him out to me, and I've since seen him hanging out in Family Fun, the space-game parlour, and toting his blue laundry bag to the whirlomat. I don't think they can pay writers that much, do you?...He stops and stares at me. His face is cramped and incredulous-also

¹ It seems that Kingsley Amis (ranked ninth on a list of the 50 greatest British writers since 1945 by The Times) was hardly an aficionado of his son's diversification: "I can point out the exact place where he stopped and sent the book twirling through the air; that's where the character named Martin Amis comes in. 'Breaking the rules, bugging about with the reader, drawing attention to himself...'"

knowing, with a smirk of conclusion in his bent smile. He gives me the creeps. *'Know me again would you?'* I once shouted across the street, and gave him a V- sign and a warning fist. He stood his ground, and stared. This writer's name, they tell me, is *Martin Amis*. Never heard of him. Do *you* know his stuff at all? (71)

Another of my primary intentions is to explore both the symmetry between layered authorial intent and pre-defined interactions between author, reader and texts. Each of the modus operandi of the aforementioned writers will be analysed in terms of style, articulation and perhaps most importantly, potential inference by their utilising particular nuances of language. In executing this methodology, my overriding focus will be: 'Can a contribution to the knowledge of metafictional writing and its effectiveness to elicit a sincere communication, prioritising authentic expression, be achieved?' If metafiction can be labelled a form of authorial sincerity, with a purpose to inculcate value and meaning then 'The New Sincerity' makes bold claims along similar lines:

In popular usage, the contemporary turn to sincerity tends to be regarded as a sturdy affirmation of non-ironic values, as a renewed taking of responsibility for the meaning of one's words, as a post-postmodern embrace of the "single entendre principles" invoked by Wallace in an essay now regularly cited as an early manifesto for the New Sincerity movement. (8)

Additionally, a primary focus will be upon the creative process by acknowledging and exploring the increasing cultural complexities and impact of mass media leading us to an investigation and to bridge questions that metafiction sets out to address: can metafiction act as a guide; a teaching apparatus that enables the reader to question their scruples

including political and cultural motivations?² Woods, in *How Fiction Works* makes an interesting case for general fiction having an ethical benefit upon the readership: In 2006, the municipal president of Neza, a tough area of two million people on the eastern edge of Mexico City, decided that the members of his police force needed to become 'better citizens.' He decided that they should be given a reading list, on which could be found *Don Quixote*, Juan Rulfo's novella *Pedro Paramo*, Octavia Paz's essay on Mexican culture, 'The Labyrinth of Solitude', Garcia Marquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, and works by Carlos Fuentes, Antoine de Saint-Exupery, Agatha Christie and Edgar Allen Poe.

Neza's chief of police Jorge Amador believes that reading fiction will enrich his officers in at least three ways. First by allowing them to acquire a wider vocabulary... Next, by granting officers the opportunity to acquire experience by proxy. 'A police officer must be worldly, and books enrich people's experience indirectly.' Finally, Amador claims, there is an ethical benefit. 'Risking your life to save other people's lives and property requires deep convictions. Literature can enhance those deep convictions by allowing readers to discover lives lived with similar commitment. We hope that contact with literature will make our police officers more committed to the values they have pledged to defend... One does not have to be morally prescriptive as the Mexican police chief to feel that he has taxonomized three aspects of the experience of reading fiction: language; the world; the extension of our sympathies towards other selves.'

With this in mind, we can only marvel at the opportunities presented through metafiction as a tool for societal change and enrichment. (pp 128, 129)

Metafictional writing, when contemplated through a wide lens, could potentially lead to a reformation and even redemption of the self through the empowerment of the consciousness; the cultural heritage gleaned from my formative years within the Black Country fortuitously provides a rich depth of material from which to draw. The people of

² The idea of writing as a form of resistance towards the establishment is hardly new. Just as Dickens critiqued nineteenth century society through satire, so Waugh, Wallace and Amis exemplify a similar ideological discourse. Authors of depth and nuanced capabilities must challenge the cornucopia of television channels and 24/7 news programmes now classified as the norm. A motivating question being: are we losing our humanity by attempting to anesthetize our convictions by what is termed escapism?

this particular area, in the very epicentre of England³ maintain a unique vernacular which is often difficult for outsiders to comprehend. Black Country jocoseness is almost tenebrous, enthused with notable shades of Gallows Humour and an attempt to capture this unique quintessence has been incorporated, most especially within 'Author', 'The Scales of Justpiss', and 'Ali Dunn and the Victorian Lamp Post.' I have drawn upon my previous career experiences in London, primarily within the theatre and TV industries, in which I explore my heritage and my ongoing, protean identity. Starting out as a working-class male from the 'wrong end of the tracks' to scraping into university, then a decade spent working in the theatre followed by a two-decade long career as an English and drama teacher, the notion of creating a volume of work based upon a progressive self-improvement and advancement through a series of harrowing experiences resonated acutely within me. This autobiographical line of inquiry will be more fully explored within 'Author' in which I seek to rationalise the foibles and struggles of my own working-class heritage predominantly through the experiences of Bokka Gunne. In demonstrating the relationship between my own creative enterprise and that of Waugh, Wallace and Amis, this thesis seeks to undertake an academic investigation of underlying principals gleaned through snapshots of their selected works; these principals will both underpin and be utilised within my own creative folder.

Metafiction— in other words, *beyond* or *over* fiction, attempts to assault or transcend the laws of fiction. By doing so, it embraces the twenty first century human condition, concatenates the plethora of contemporary anxieties and therefore allows the ego's caliginous paraphernalia to be drawn from the subconscious and be liberated. As a writer, one becomes a foreigner; a writer is a person who is living on the other side of the frontier;

³ Known colloquially throughout the Western Middle Lands as *Yam Yams*.

as a student of writing, if you are going to try and impersonate, then it follows that one should impersonate from the best. From these texts, I have identified techniques, approaches and artistry that will be utilised within the creative folder. As a member of the teaching profession, it goes without saying that I wish to create debate: to offer alternate viewpoints to the status quo and to both challenge and stretch minds. From the world of social media, it appears that many today are interested in creating a persona and leaving a legacy; I am looking to my three core texts as examples of thought and personal philosophy, arguably labelled as 'mentor texts' which might instil in the reader the desire to look at the world around them and their own attitudes in a fresher, more inclusive light. 'Ali Dunn' is indeed a mentor text; based on a well-known tale from the *Arabian Nights* which in itself, according to Tiffin's theory on fairy tales partly metafictional:

In their deliberate problematization of reality they thus further demonstrate some aspects of metafictional writing.' (4)

John Fowles' metafictional manifesto from chapter thirteen famously demonstrates the breaking of reality within *The French Lieutenant's Woman*:

I do not know. This story I am telling is all imagination. These characters I create never existed outside my own mind. If I have pretended until now to know my characters' minds and innermost thoughts, it is because I am writing in (just as I have assumed some of the vocabulary and 'voice' of) a convention universally accepted at the time of my story: that the novelist stands next to God. He may not know all, yet he pretends that he does. But I live in the age of Alain Robbe-Grillet and Roland Barthes; if this is a novel, it cannot be a novel in the modern sense of the word.' (85)

This is followed two pages on with:

There is no interfering power or legislature within metafiction; both author and reader are free to choose or refuse and thus an unpredictable disclosure can be easily rendered within the mechanics of writing. The inherent danger of course, is that the art can disintegrate if it fails to cooperate with the intelligence and

imagination of its consumers: 'Fiction is woven into all...I find this new reality (or unreality) more valid. (87)

As evidenced, a character who both is and is not real, enters the world of the fiction to discuss the role of the author and to demonstrate his authority over the fate of the protagonists through a metafictional maxim. From this, we contemplate that literature, and moreover metafiction, seeks to discover insight in the very darkest corners of the human psyche: by confronting and acknowledging what we ourselves seek to suppress, justify or vindicate. Once acknowledged, we can therefore begin a journey of a redemptive, healing process. I will argue that metafiction can be a primary source for personal and thereafter social change and can empower the reader in a dynamic and compelling manner. The power of metafiction to promote a social realist agenda has been underestimated by some critics; William Boyd refers to such accusations of insularity yet Fowles has been criticised in so much for:

It is the critics, not Fowles, who claim that a text which displays an awareness of the fiction-making process cannot at the same time be concerned with matters outside the fictional universe. (5)

In *Notes on Metafiction*, Angel and Landa have claimed that 'Metafiction challenges many assumptions of criticism: that the work is silent about itself and waits for the critic to interpret it.' The overriding intention of my research is an analysis of authorial subliminal ethics, stance and long view on society: through a literary appraisal of character motivation and to a lesser extent, societal foibles, while avoiding the asymmetrical author-reader association. This modus operandi will be utilised most especially within 'Author', 'Frying Tonight', 'The Cloak of Nessus' and 'I Feed My Children Roadkill' and it is my desire that the material serves not only to entertain, but becomes a conversation; the primary aim of which

makes the reader feel less alone within the contemporary world as proposed by Gladstone,

Hoberek and Worden within *The New Sincerity*:

Wallace proposed that literature, by respecting rather than disregarding the preferences of its audience, could return to a situation in which “the reader feels like someone is talking to him rather than striking a number of poses.” (200)

Chapter One: Common Themes Within Identity Writing, Refuting the Accusation that Metafiction is Passé or Irrelevant

Four whole days of this gave Ruby all the encouragement she needed to employ her skills as a fledgling sign writer. She deftly nailed it, still dripping, next to the front door in that unique and quaintest of Ye Olde English git orf my landism:

POLITE NOTICE

DO NOT PARK IN FRONT OF THE BASTARD DRIVE

Within forty minutes, someone had a builder's skip delivered straight across the front with the phone number sanded off. (117)

Despite the role, in my view, of metafictional writers being able to formulate philosophical and political constructs, they cannot help leaving themselves open to the charge of patronising or lecturing the reader through the use of metafictional cliché. It is therefore, pertinent to amalgamate a range of approaches including the surreal and absurd in order to counter attack this premise. Some critics have levelled the accusation that a scrupulous reading can reveal a complex structure as fiction-within-fiction, or story-within-story as being a literary faux pas; of being unnecessarily over-complicated and thus attempting to draw attention to itself: which is, in itself, a turn off for any prospective reader. Hongbin Dai Xiyung Liu cites Murial Spark as guilty of an over jealous artificiality which is counterproductive:

Spark extends the theme, namely the relation between reality and fiction, so severely that the artificiality of the fiction is apparent in *Loitering with Intent*. By highlighting the fragile relation of reality to fiction, Spark in some way challenges the

convention of mimesis, which argues that life precedes art and is imitated by it.
(123)

It is therefore vital to begin researching what I term 'metafictional dynamism' and its use of deliberate artificiality and plausibility for a canny authenticity through three primary questions:

- 1) What are the virtues of realism versus metafiction?
- 2) In terms of authorial intent, will the readership relate better to the invisible or visible author?
- 3) How can a writer attempt to rationalise and then propose viable solutions?
- 4) Has metafiction met its critical point? What fresh concepts, if any, can be introduced?

In order to quantify a further elucidation of metafiction and simultaneously align an aspect of the autobiographical component of the thesis found in chapter three, we understand through William Boyd's definition that metatheatres or metaplays, like metafiction, stand in opposition to both realism and illusionism:

Metaplays clearly indicate that the characters are the playwright's invention. The truth of such plays not from existing characters and situations but from "the presentation of the reality of the imagination. (5)

Similar parallels are drawn from non-realistic theatre as according to John Willet in his book *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic*, the audience are discouraged to suspend their disbelief; rather they are forced to think introspectively about events occurring on stage and why junctures unfold in certain ways:

We need a type of theatre which not only releases the feelings, insights and impulses possible within the particular historical field of human relations in which the action takes place, but employs and encourages those thoughts and feelings which help transform the field itself. (190)

This is evident within 'Author' when the narrator pauses to reflect: on his motivations and what drives his ego, and in doing so, breaks the fourth wall and begins an earnest confession with the reader in an unguarded moment:

We are born alone, live alone, die alone. We crawl into the world of loneliness, and then shuffle, and then stumble, and then walk. And then.. And what do we equip ourselves with in order to quantify our humanity? Which weapons or armour serve us best to attain that placement within that ancient race: that of a Man? (167)

The desire is, that the readership will benefit in terms of a reframed and heightened self-awareness of what in actual fact motivates, empowers and drives principles both inwardly, personally and then outwardly culturally. It is my ardent hope that the material can be absorbed in the manner that the writer intends, but obviously this has the potential to fall short, especially with prose of an experimental ilk. As Robert Scholes attests in *Fabulation and Metafiction*:

The ideas that govern fiction assert themselves more powerfully in direct proportion to the length of a fictional work. Metafiction then, tends towards brevity because it attempts, among other things, to assault or transcend the laws of fiction-an undertaking which can only be achieved from within fictional form (164)

And as Wallace deftly observed in *Conversations With David Foster Wallace*:

Postmodern irony and cynicism's became an end in itself, a measure of hip sophistication and literary savvy. Few artists dare to try to talk about ways of working toward redeeming what's wrong, because they'll look sentimental and naive to all the weary ironists. (67)

A personal challenge that I clearly recognise is that of falling into that deadly writer's sin of being patronising; the metafictionalist is so close to and allied to his characters that this can be potentially challenging. Sophisticated readers already know that writing is indeed art and thus they are willing to suspend disbelief; the difficulty arises when such readers are aware of the plethora of the writer's tricks. With this in mind, the perspective that I am

advancing, is that my writing seeks not only to satirise but to inconspicuously cultivate and enlighten through the use of dark humour and judicious street values, which hopefully, will resonate with as many as possible. Certain characters within these cautionary tales eventually attain redemption, but punishment and self-inflicted turmoil are closely fused within the vernacular of others, which hopefully may imprint upon the reader through a series of benign exhortations. The ubiquitous code or intent within the subtext should be afforded merely as an invitation; a recommendation as personal choice is indubitably a given and quite undeniably, authorial dictatorship and sermonising is literary suicide.

We have the power to construct our collective destiny and ultimate morality, irrespective of societal, cultural and media pressures: the pragmatic starting point through the metafictional process can be a very effective reawakening or self-confrontation. Globally, language and its function are constantly changing and under revision within groups and sub-groups and this can be cat-nip to the modern writer. Metafiction then, is contained within the everyday so therefore has much to offer in terms of reality, allegory and morality. And according to Edmund Smyth in *Postmodernism and Contemporary Fiction*: 'The liberating feature of radical textuality is the extent to which such texts make us confront the ways in which we make sense of the world and how we organize our knowledge of reality.' (11)

An additional source of this investigation is an acknowledgment that a cultural and political reformation is perhaps now overdue and while metafiction can be an incomparable tool for inner contemplation, it should be duly noted that some of the narrative semblance will be lacking in finesse and definition and may not appeal to certain adherents of traditional literature. It is challenging to know how to avoid hyperbole when passionate about one's vocation; writing satirical metafiction can easily lead to antagonism and this will give further rise to the idea that its anti-realist stance will not always benefit the wider

cohort. Again, as the work is primarily of an experimental nature, this is a gamble that I am willing to take as discussed in the following concentrated areas of research:

- i. Fundamentally, we must acknowledge that typical metafiction, with its off-kilter ideas and the experimental allusions may be precarious from the outset. Some of the work may well engage one cohort but alienate another – obviously problematic for any writer who wants their work to be appreciated by as wide a cohort as possible.
- ii. This exploration will emphasise cultural assumptions of what it means to be British in the 21st century United Kingdom and will seek to discover how ideas can be utilised to demonstrate and challenge class constructs, social repression and ultimately a breaking away, leading to alternative or heightened thought processes.

Metafiction dynamically pursues disparate approaches to human beings reflecting, constructing and mediating their own unique experiences of the world, patently tangible within *Money* and Foster Wallace's *Brief Interviews With Hideous Men*. A range of societal ills and issues are, and have naturally always been evident and anti-government demonstrations, so called 'Virtue Signalling,' 'Cancel Culture' and the changing face of the class system have all contributed to further divisive lines within contemporary Britain and is breeding the beginning of a dangerous mistrust in any semblance of authority. Pertinent questions arise of how we might embrace opportunities to return to our commonality and the metafictionalist embraces such times to offer his own resolutions, imperatives and directives.

The seven base elements of the traditional story are: character, plot, setting, point of view, style, theme and literary devices. Simply to run counter to these accepted novelistic conventions is not a defining feature; thus, the formal exploration of the metafictional purpose helps us to achieve the beginning of a germ of an understanding of the relationship between metafiction and contemporary culture. Patricia Waugh, in *Metafiction the theory and practice of self-conscious fiction* states that,

The Metafictionalist is highly conscious of a basic dilemma: if he or she sets out to 'represent' the world, he or she realizes fairly soon that the world, as such, cannot be represented. (3)

Reality as such, it can be argued, is the very antithesis of fiction and by acknowledging this, the audience appreciates that they are being courted, even manipulated to a degree and this becomes the agreed protocol between author and reader. Through the metafictional conceit, the reader is freed to embark upon a unique journey and given the appropriate foundations, is sufficiently empowered to take on board the plethora of authorial intent: all indubitably lurking within the sub-text to assail the senses, expectations and pre-programmed rationale. Both message and meaning are conveyed by illustrating the disparity between fiction and reality and by inviting the reader into an active participation: the author of metafiction navigates the tale with the audience, often as equals and not subordinates, and together, can more readily engage with more complicated, problematic issues and will do so on equal terms and with honest self-examination on the part of the writer. A humility pervades throughout the writing if the writer is self-critical, taking onboard intent and teaching methodology if he adheres to these protocols. This part of metafictional writing brings in a freshness and openness which I

believe is a captivating method of addressing tricky issues and concerns. As Hutcheson suggests,

The ontological independence of the fictional world depends, not on “truth,” but rather on the notion of validity or motivation, on both that dynamic logic and that formal coherence within the text.’ (91)

Hutcheson further expands on the theme:

Modern metafiction is largely what shall be referred to here as a mimesis of process; but it grows out of that interest in consciousness *as well* as the objects of consciousness that constitutes the “psychological realism” of Woolf, Gide, Svevo, and Proust... (91)

I contend that the author of metafiction navigates the tale with the audience, often as equals and not subordinates, towards an agreed set of values, often intrinsically moralistic.

Christopher Booker states in *The Seven Basic Plots Why We Tell Stories* concerning the

Icarus narrative:

Blinded by the limitations of ego-consciousness to the sustaining framework of the laws of nature, out of harmony with the totality of which he is a part, Icarus recklessly flies up too near the sun, his wings fall off, and he plunges back into the sea of unconsciousness and death. In every sense, he is ‘the boy hero who cannot grow up. (330)

Metafiction deftly circumnavigates these seven intrinsic elements listed above and by doing so, not only eloquently initiates a reveal of the human condition, but excels and revels in utilising transdisciplinary themes and intertextuality. It strives to reinvent literary form to include iconic ideas and themes such as degradation, banality and ruined dreams: arguably the traditional preserve of the ‘working classes’ and the immigrant underclass. Tony Williams’ *nutcase* is a novel set on a Sheffield housing estate which utilises the Icelandic sagas as its metafictional structure in representing disenfranchised and violent lives on the

edges of society. This is keenly felt by Aidan when he finds himself on the sharp end of a brutal existence:

Aidan was pacing about the flat, with Sally barring the door the door telling if he went out there he'd get killed. But the Finlays didn't like the look of all those Somalians who had nothing to lose and had probably seen a fuck sight worse in that civil war of theirs. (40)

The tone of Williams' novel is often brutal and darkly grim to reflect the character's own thoughts and the unbending and rancid culture in which he has been brought up. The lifestyles that the novel engages, albeit with dark humour, gives us a glimpse into broken Britain, where there is a toxic inevitability about the lives of the people from the council estate.

My thesis visualisation, is to create a body of work that can elicit a potency and validity contained within the intended metafictional distortion, in as much as it explains the pressure of lacking status, the ever-burgeoning economics of capitalism and the struggle for self-realisation within the spiritual confinement and intrinsic archetype of the stories.

'Frying Tonight' is set within the Black Country, 'Author of His Own Doom' in London, 'The Cloak of Nessus' in the countryside of Middle England and 'I Feed My Children Road Kill' in Amsterdam and I hope to demonstrate that the language of fiction spills over and merges with the instabilities of the real, contemporary world. I concur with Christopher Butler that,

Metafiction flaunts and exaggerates and thus exposes the foundations of this instability: the fact that novels are constructed through a continuous assimilation of everyday historical forms of communication. (5)

It is also my considered belief that literary fiction can never accommodate, imitate or represent the real world but continuing to develop metafictional discourses which construct the alternate literary world is a primary objective of this thesis. Some themes fuse the

fantastical and grotesque; others are more formal and bordering on the perceived romantic ideal as per the Waughvian model, but most engender the metafictional parameters of the loneliness and desolation so conspicuous within the post-modern era. In this sense, the orthodoxies of social realism will be challenged, so that consequently, as Scholes suggests, reality and truth can begin again by recognising that, 'The only legitimate way to approach "intention" in a literary work is through a highly discriminated sense of genre.' (164)

Certain traditional conventions of plotting and style within the vignettes have been discarded in terms of lack of plot and outcome but to abandon these entirely would be both futile and imprudent. For example, 'A Return to Kansas', 'Frying Tonight' and 'Freedom' are atypical in that they have no definite endings and it is incumbent upon the reader to fill in the ellipsis of perceived authorial intent. 'Ant Mansion' is purposefully written with a comedy slant but with a palpable subtext for the reader to surmise; other works follow certain traditional parameters such as 'The Scales of Justice' and 'The Cloak of Nessus.'

An illumination of the subconscious to produce a more valid experience through an honest admission of thoughts, allows the reader to more readily engage with the characters and ideas, therefore allowing gateways for self-discovery for the reader. As Shaw opines in

The Short Story a Critical Introduction:

Individual responses to the dislocations which characterize the modern writer's situation vary widely, but two main tendencies are discernible, corresponding to alternate strategies and different notions of the artist's possibilities. On the one hand, the short-storywriter may conceive his task to be the charting of a reality which is essentially alien and baffling, while on the other, he may believe that it is the artist's job to confront and challenge the 'irreality' of modern existence by positioning alternative worlds-realms of order which perhaps exist only in fantasy but which nonetheless express defiance of the way actual life squanders ideals. (229)

Through utilising and extracting authorial intent from the texts of *Money, A Handful of Dust, Brief Interviews With Hideous Men* my short story collection for this thesis A

Diamond Geeza is a Girl's Best Friend all yield an accessible moral blue print for those encased within the modern underclass. Biressi, in *Class and Contemporary British Culture* considers:

...we understand social class as being formed through material conditions and economic (in) securities and as being shaped by early disadvantage or natal privilege and the uneven distribution of life chances and opportunities which these conditions create. (8)

And concludes with:

...growing up in families whose parents' elementary education and manual or 'unskilled' jobs would help categorise them as socio-economically working-class. For many working-class people of our parents' generation, whose lives were interrupted by world war and whose career paths were stymied by their own and other peoples' social expectations, significant social advancement would have seemed fairly implausible, whereas by the 1980s a more fluid, more meritocratic society appeared to be emergent. (8)

Some moral values, generally within metafiction are prevalent on the surface: the character of Ossifer Khan within 'Author' illustrates how very few working-class students are afforded the opportunity to attend drama school.⁴ Other values are less prevalent but themes and ideas will be deliberately made ambiguous so as to break with the tradition of the omniscient narrator. Obviously, there can be no guarantee of excellence within the fields of creativity, especially within the realms of the experimental or metafictional genre which can be apt to misinterpretation and breaking with tradition can be problematic; the author levels with the reader rather than taking on the role of the oracle, disseminating sagacity.

⁵The metafictionalist aims for elements of transcendence – where considerations

⁴ Many working-class students are denied places at drama schools simply because they lack the fiscal means; in turn, this creates a shift within the entertainment industry with a knock-on effect of affecting cultural aspirations and ultimately tastes, political affinities and outcomes. In order to create a healthier equilibrium, we must recognise the emergence and near dominance of the middle-class voice through the plethora of former Etonians, Harrovians and ex grammar school students within the entertainment industry. Today's viewing is a far cry from the kitchen sink dramas and gritty films of the fifties and sixties where the rise of the working-class hero was so prevalent – Sean Connery, Terence Stamp, Richard Burton and Michael Caine being prime examples of working-class boys making good, and thus not only levelling the field but opening doors for others to follow suit. Arguably, tastes and mores are cyclical and perhaps, due to the austerity programme and its collective impact upon the nation, has given rise to a nostalgic public; looking backwards to a grander or quintessentially better off time as a means of assuagement and escapism.

⁵ We live in sensitive times and have never been under greater pressure to mind what we say and even think. Both the possibilities and punishments for causing offence through social media have become enormous. We are quicker than ever to jump to conclusions; spoiling for an online fight which means that debate has become a toxic mixture of high emotion and talented manipulatives. Perhaps on social media and increasingly within politics, the aim is to annihilate not just an argument but the person making it – bordering on an extreme fundamentalism of an emotions-led culture.

inexplicable, chime within the subconscious, to sidestep normality and recalibrate what we have been trained to think, feel and believe.

Due in part, to the rise in social media and the resultant empowerment of the social media and 'Vocalisation of the Masses,' through TikTok, Facebook and Twitter, metafiction opens doors and allows the 21st century readership to become more of an active participant and confidant of the writer. This not only acts as a self-conscious reveal of authorship but is a constant reminder for the reader entering an axiom: they are at all times, enjoying a work of fiction yet they should not suspend belief as demanded by most literature, theatre and film. Hence, the aim is for the audience to remain aware that the story is a construct – a fabrication all are invited to share in, which can often prove to be a complex or even radical journey.

A daunting aspect of contemporary culture is that we seem to be so accepting of the form of news and entertainment as part of the status quo. Part of the investigation is a comparison of our own accepted normality; themes which Amis explored in *Money* and themes from Orwell's *1984* are used extensively throughout the novel. Within *1984*'s Oceania, the airwaves are bombarded with 24 hours news channels that will resort to lowest common denominator stratagems to ensure coverage is omnipresent and to retain our attention as per modern day social networks. ⁶ Published in 1949, it was not so much prophetic but, ironically, a governmental blueprint for a darkly achievable future if we were not conscientious enough as a social collective to halt the downward spiral. There are many parallels of our modern society and Orwell's vision of spiritual human squalor where most of the world population had become victims of perpetual emotional bombardment,

⁶ The well-known twin techniques for inciting fear and compassion fatigue are repetition and making the irregular appear regular. After a distressing, must-read litany of varied ways in which citizens have forfeited their liberties, we cling to the hope that ultimately, we are not powerless, that we can resist the impulse to be afraid and thus continue to augment a brighter consciousness. Indubitably we morph into and become what we think about most: by sowing mistrust, by the stripping of privacy, and in many cases dignity, we are thus disrobed of our humanity.

omnipresent government and thought manipulation: 'If you can *feel* that staying human is worthwhile, even when it can't have any result whatever, you've beaten them' (147)

In *1984*, large tracts of the population had become desensitised to human suffering and misery, in part, due to the omnipresent media coverage of war and ongoing, global violence. Orwell did not anticipate the full reach of digital technology but he was precise in envisaging a future where people had the ability to use language for dissent. The protagonist Winston Smith, an oxymoronic name suggestive of the entwined parallels of heroism and ordinariness sums up perhaps what should be our war cry of the oppressed of the age. So too, within the modern vernacular, the public has become inundated with shows, programming and stories that masquerade as news but in reality, border on entertainment. As Orwell foretold in *1984*, 'Don't you see that the whole aim of Newspeak is to narrow the range of thought? In the end we shall make thoughtcrime literally impossible, because there will be no words in which to express it.' (67)

"Nothing is gained by teaching a parrot a new word," Orwell wrote in 1946. "What is needed is the right to print what one believes to be true, without having to fear bullying or blackmail from any side." Simultaneously, angry talk shows are increasingly popular, where a cantankerous host belittles and even rides roughshod over his guests to ensure that their opinions are not heard. This ensures that the viewing public are manipulated into a toxic rage and therefore are little better than the advocacy of the coliseum baying for the blood of gladiators, slaves and convicts. This stratagem has even culminated in tragedy: guests and even a presenter has ended up taking their own lives due to the indignities heaped upon them. Poignantly, one of the victim's co-stars asked people to be 'a little bit nicer, a little bit

kinder,' after the inquest.⁷ The result is that we are living within a new regime: just as the coliseum was created to inflame tensions and create divisions through the use of bloodthirsty entertainment, thus delectating criticism or scrutiny of the ruling party, a combination of the beginning of a hard nationalism and a system where truth is becoming increasingly unstable. Totalitarian propaganda unifies control over all information, until reality is what the Party says it is. The Newspeak in *1984* was to impoverish language so that politically incorrect thoughts were no longer possible. In our own time, a similar, self-inflicted own-goal from the very people who seek freedom and through and within, there is now far too much information from too many sources; resulting in a plague of fragmentation and division—not through an excess of authority but its disappearance, which leaves ordinary people to work out ideals for themselves, at the mercy of their own prejudices and delusions, stoked by a media whose main concern is their market share, at whatever cost. Orwell again foretold that 'Power is in tearing human minds to pieces and putting them together again in new shapes of your own choosing.'

1984 is a deeply grim portrayal of an individual struggling to hold on to what is real and valuable and Orwell presents the vision with characteristic style and aplomb. The horror of what awaits society energises the readership into sitting up and taking notice and likewise, as a rhetorical strategy, metafiction (such as the collapse of the writer's ego in Wallace's 'Octet' or the authorial and depreciating self-portrait in Amis's *Money*) creates a levelling effect between writer and audience. Rather than a distant and perhaps judgemental figure, the author of metafiction is implicated in the world they create,

⁷ The media has targeted minds for decades through their violent programming, and sensational coverage of their own version of distorted truth. As a result of prolonged sensationalist exposure, symptoms include behavioural changes—becoming easily startled, a reduced ability to remain objective, exhaustion and anxiety; emotional changes – numbness, depression, with the all-pervading decreased sense of purpose and belonging are now becoming normality, but juxtaposed through the power of commercials to sooth us, and to remind us that we are all safe, adding to the overall moral irresponsibility. In a world of 24/7 rolling news and social media updates, it can be easy to get drawn into speculation and hype which re-programmes the mind towards the availability heuristic.

perhaps inviting a sense of personal accountability over self-righteousness. In *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*, Wallace turns the playful tricks and language games of metafiction to such important subjects as misogyny, mental health crises, loneliness, toxic masculinity and prejudice. My argument throughout this thesis is that metafiction may be one of our most important authorial techniques in treating difficult issues with nuance and responsibility, allowing the reader to do likewise.

Regarding part of the research question, it is challenging to know how to rationalise and propose viable solutions; being a reformer is problematic — part of the craft is utilising an amalgamation of varied sources from literature as it will indubitably enhance the reader's interest if they are familiar with a wide range of texts. This may well open up a charge of elitism however it is a necessary prerequisite in order to comprehend certain types of metafiction. This, ostensibly, may well alienate readers unfamiliar with key works alluded to and the inherent concepts within. In order to comprehend the deeper significance of *Money*, for example, a working knowledge of *1984*, and *Animal Farm* is desirable in order to appreciate the levity and premise of the author's underlying cognizance through his mordant investigation of the modern dystopian elements, discussed in chapter three. An analysis of human behaviour and inherent modern fears through an appreciation and understanding of the metafictional process may entail a substantial *Modus Operandi*: humour, irrationality, realistic or conversely fantastical circumstances which may often appear primarily as inconsequential or meaningless, if not underscored by key moments of authorial intrusion. Metafiction, being a self-conscious and self-aware narrative is therefore an ideological form and is oftentimes used to reassert an ethical complex that lies between the author, the reader, text and world.

I do not wish to suggest that other forms of writing and techniques of narrative fiction are somehow lacking in authenticity, rather that metafiction can readily operate as a short-cut to personal insight and a full account of psychological complexity, allowing for contradiction and confusion in the presentation of the self as well as other characters. This manipulation, I would argue, is somewhat liberating; examples of this are when the author levels with the reader concerning meeting his tutor for a coffee after completing a creative writing course in 'Ali Dunn and the Victorian Lamp post', when Bokka, the social misfit in 'Author' admits to tainting his relationship with his mother-in-law by vexing attempts to appear agreeable and through the heavy use of footnotes within 'I Feed My Children Roadkill.' While the story is largely autobiographical, the footnotes clearly indicate a confrontation of sociological and psychological concepts of behaviour and mental processes, thus breaking the realism through authorial intrusion and the impression left is a mixture of intimacy and detachment. We are close to the narrator and the metafictional devices allow us to share his self-transcendence yet he seems distant, being locked in his own vortex of anxieties. The above all aim is to equip him with an everyman voice rather than an individual one.

Author, is styled a restorative metafiction towards an affirmation of ethics within Bokka's world of lies and subterfuge being essential to survival. The final segment of 'Author' is deeply intertextual, evoking Charles' broken relationship with Julia at the end of *Brideshead Revisited* in so far that Bokka finally begins to be self-reflective, leading to an enhanced personal responsibility, and whilst grief-stricken, concludes that by letting the love of his life go, she will attain greater success without him. He breaks the fourth wall when sharing his dejection with the readership; keen that they will not follow his example.

As Levine states within *Metafiction as Genre Fiction*:

Depending on who you ask, metafiction either sounded the death-knell of literature or is the latest innovation in an ever-changing field. (63)

Everyone is sanctioned to follow their own personal code but fictional values can help us become more complicit. Both with and through the text are: thoughtfulness, self-questioning, sapience, compassion, respect, the will to understand other people rather than stereotype or dismiss them. It is then that an acknowledgement begins: to translate anxiety and fear into coherence, empathy and clarity.

Chapter Two – The Underlying Ethics of Evelyn Waugh Through the Use of Satire.

Producing literature that empowers investigation of moral scruples or contributes to an enhanced understanding of an individual's or society's motivations, especially for working men, increases the boundaries of knowledge of what can potentially motivate societal change and reformation presents a serious challenge. As writers, Evelyn Waugh, Martin Amis and David Foster Wallace may seem removed from the blue-collar experience, which is a theme within this thesis, but there are some interesting examples of working-class rhetoric and masculine moulding within their writing and this will be examined in due course. If they themselves are removed from the social group explored in my own creative work, their characters, narratives and situations still prove relevant. All sons of literary men, Waugh began writing in the late nineteen twenties and created a succession of ignoble and odious characters who stood symbolically for modernity and savagery and continue to reverberate within the public consciousness more than fifty years after his death. Waugh's characters within *A Handful of Dust* are indifferent to moral values: just as the inherited home is fake Gothic, so Tony's rules of conduct are based on a conventional but unreliable moral code. Waugh focussed primarily on the lives of the aristocracy, but deftly uses the unashamedly working-class stable manager Ben, with his requisite gritty bluntness to emphasise that Tony is as responsible as Brenda for the collapse of his world; Ben's laughter at the death of Peppermint the mule from alcohol poisoning can be understood as a rejection of Tony's reflexive sentimentality and Tony's son John accepts Ben as the authority figure and guide. Ben's laughter is only one of many instances in the novel that bring to the fore a case of suffering only to undercut or move past the ostensible sympathy the situation

appears to elicit. John is far readier to listen to, and accept his version of events, rather than his father's. Tony is the last representative of an aristocratic way of life: refined and sentimental, whereas it is Ben, the gruff working-class WW1 veteran, who arguably sees life more accurately, if more brutally. It is the Bens of the contemporary age, who will survive.

Amis' character of John Self in the 1984 novel *Money: A Suicide Note* is widely considered a masterful commentary on the consumer world of the eighties with the novel offering a jagged assessment of early Thatcherism and its impact upon the British working classes. Through a series of metafictional constructs, the protagonist senses the weight of future retribution for his life of excess, avarice and ferocious selfishness, often through hilarious tales of the working-class man on the make within the ubiquitous environments of pub life, porn shops, horse racing and loan sharks. While metafictional unreality continues to shape and define the methods of accessing wealth and power in the novel, the narrative registers a harder edge, a much more solid dimension of experience, arising from the depths of working-class disenfranchisement. The characterisation of the working class that we discover in *Money* is one that results from social disarticulation and as Self himself suggests, when referring to former opportunities when he came of age:

In my day, if you wanted, you could just drop out. You can't drop out any more. Money has seen to that. There's nowhere to go. You cannot hide out from money. You just cannot hide out from money anymore. (153)

I posit that *Money*, re-read in the wake of the financial crises and the exploitation of labour, widening income inequality, rampant aspiration out of step with an indignity to the average existence, ensures its relevance and resonance and as Dean states within *Metafiction and the Post war Novel: Foes, Ghosts, and Faces in the Water*:

Show how metafictional writing can invent ways of adjudicating the cultural debates they enter. (3)

Tragically, Wallace struggled with and eventually succumbed to mental illness but this itself helped to define a predilection for a peculiar metafictional disposition and through it showed the struggle of man within the contemporary vortex, using often enough, street-slang which fits well with the struggles of the working-class man. Wallace seemed to be highlighting an underclass in *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*; and what is often not spoken about enough in Britain is that there is an underclass. Those of us who grew up as part of the benefits system because of our parents' lack of job opportunities, due in part to a lack of formal educational qualifications or the closing of factories and heavy industry in the early eighties, acknowledge this wholeheartedly. Educational status, job, where you live ... all these things mattered to Wallace, but what matters most in these unstable times is the key question of: if you lose your main source of earned income, are you three months or less away from destitution? If the answer is yes, you are a member of the 21st-century working class. If the answer is no, because you have savings, assets or other resources to fall back upon, you are middle class. He remains widely known, especially in America, for his ground-breaking metafiction, beginning in the late eighties and a vital component of the writing exemplified and articulated the defining anxieties and attitudes of his generation, namely honesty, authority and narcissism.

Waugh, Amis and Wallace, though vastly different in styles, are equally powerful in their message: whilst examining man's lusts, avarice and unceasing ambition, they remind us through their moral precocity that we should be destined perhaps, for a much greater commonality and are falling short of the ideal. By focusing upon the absurd and the surreal

within the everyday, humdrum and banal, the trio seek to provide opportunities of reformation through their grotesque caricatures, still so pertinent and relevant within our own divisive times. This thesis seeks to enhance understanding of their methodologies and to utilise these underlying protocols within my own writing.

When studying subliminal ethics within literature – a manner of inculcating a moral sense of responsibility and a reawakening of values, Waugh's *A Handful of Dust* is a superbly absorbing example through its amalgamation of satire, horror and tragedy; all inextricably linked through many of his later novels. Modernism has always been at war with sentimentalism and in the late twenties, Waugh pointedly rejected the novel's traditional ethical obligations and embraced satire, assuming a moral stance where he deftly created streamlined people: one-dimensional, shallow and selfish, to suggest the ever-quickenning pace of life and the amorality of the age. The satiric and the modern are amalgamated through the tale of the aristocrat Tony Last, his very name suggestive of the termination of the family line, in part, triggered through his adherence to outmoded uprightness and a sentimental attachment to the crumbling aesthetic of his neo-Gothic country house:

'One has a duty towards one's employees, and towards the place too. It's a definite part of English life which would be a serious loss if...' Then Tony stopped short in his speech and looked at the bed. Brenda had turned on her face and only the top of her head appeared above the sheets.

'Oh God,' she said into the pillow. 'What have I done?'

'I say, am I being pompous again?' (18)

A prerequisite of the novel's underlying ethos is inherent immediately within the very opening line and Waugh constructs a carefully designed dialogue exchange which intimates subliminally to the reader that these deeply ugly traits, propounded by Mrs Beaver's crisp articulation, may well be lurking within ourselves:

‘Was anyone hurt?’ ‘No one I am thankful to say,’ said Mrs Beaver, ‘except two housemaids who lost their heads and jumped through a glass roof into the paved court. They were in no danger. The fire never reached the bedrooms, I am afraid. Still, they are bound to need doing up, everything black with smoke and drenched in water and luckily, they had that old-fashioned sort of extinguisher that ruins *everything*. One really cannot complain. The chief rooms were completely gutted and everything was insured.’ (1)

Echoing Dickens⁸ in the naming of his thoroughly modern and vampire-like Mrs Beaver⁹ she voices mediocre commiseration for the victims of the blaze but her reaction is immediately revealed as tenuous. The wounded, or perhaps even decollated housemaids are merely an afterthought; Mrs Beaver implicitly dismisses their fates as thoroughly deserved since their injuries resulted from foolish panic as she casually remarks that, ‘They were in no danger...’ She is indifferent to their suffering and we never discover their actual fates; the reader is left to speculate as to whether or not ‘was anyone was hurt?’ Mrs Beaver’s initial concern with human suffering is later revealed to be mere conversational reflex; a response to a query in which she delicately treads the path of informal family banter and idle curiosity which is quickly forgotten when advising her son of the nutritional value of her morning yoghurt. Like Self in *Money*, written exactly fifty years later, she coldly symbolises the progressively modern: vulgar, debased morality and ruthless selfishness which she exhibits through a calculated and impersonal shrewdness and deft exploitation of others. Interestingly, Waugh is too subtle to censure Mrs Beaver’s sadism towards the injured housemaids and this arouses little, if any empathy. Within ‘Was Anyone Hurt? The End of Satire in A Handful of Dust,’ Greenberg demonstrates Mrs Beaver’s underlying character traits:

How indifferent is Mrs Beaver to the maids’ suffering? Cold-hearted enough to dismiss their decapitation? And even when we learn that they “lost their heads” in

⁸ Arthur Waugh, author, literary critic and publisher was also an expert on Dickens. Evelyn sat through many tedious hours as a child, on the receiving end of his father’s public readings.

⁹ In this case utilising the thoroughly modern principal of capitalising extensively through the exaggerated bill submitted to the insurance company.

only a figurative sense, we never discover the women's ultimate fates. Did they survive? How badly were they injured? *Was anyone hurt?* (354)

This leaves the residual question of the women's fate unaddressed; instead, we are expected to find amusement in Mrs Beaver's avarice and the moral shabbiness in masking her business sensibilities through a finely-honed acumen. Only afterwards, a dawning realisation begins to ferment of how certain people may respond when others are hurt and our own meagre responses to the fates of the innocents is brought under scrutiny. In 1946, when answering questions from American readers, Waugh concluded that his work was aimed at, '... inconsistency and hypocrisy. It exposes polite cruelty and folly by exaggerating them. It seeks to produce shame.' Bearing these literary protocols in mind and with regards to my own work, a snapshot tale within the main story, is what might be termed a literary version of the Droste effect within art.¹⁰ An example of this is culled from 'Author' where Johnny Spike is unabashedly envious of the protagonist's lottery win and the readership is drawn into the unfolding perceived great fortune. We are then confronted with moral questions: how would the audience react, being the recipient of a huge lottery win? Would they seek any form of revenge or redress upon family or friends, given an instant injection of instantaneous opulence? Would immediate and unimaginable wealth fundamentally change their own relationships and if so, how? Through a misguided family practical joke gone terribly wrong, Spike deftly condemns himself and his lover/sister-in-law to public ruin. Taking the directive from Waugh, Amis and Wallace, my authorial intent is to populate my stories with hideous, damaged characters and thus provide the reader with a skewed, darkly amusing mandate, which hopefully will be used to reflect upon the readers' personal motivations and underlying principles:

¹⁰ Where an image contains a smaller version of itself serving as a snapshot of what the entire plot alludes to.

He sat there stupefied and tried to take it all in. They were all looking at him; even the waiters were craning their necks over at the little party which had been thumped into an abrupt silence.

Telling them all straight was the best thing to do, definitely the best thing to do. Big deep breath: sharp and to the point to avoid suffering was the way now. The brand-new, all-star winner; just like his mum always used to say, ever since childhood... (119)

Waugh ultimately leaves Tony as a prisoner in the middle of the Brazilian rainforest reading

Dickens every day to a deranged psychopath at the end of *A Handful of Dust*. Within

'Author' the brief story, as told to Bokka by Aunty Rubella, ends in complete humiliation and

the reader is left to mediate on Johnny Spike's ultimate doom and complete the ellipsis of

what ultimately happens to him for themselves:

After an eon, Aunty Rubella cleared her throat and ruminated in the voice that could strip paint off walls.

'While- you- were- away, in the toilet, I got your misses to go inside your inside jacket pocket and get a hold of your wallet. We took your numbers out and copied them all down. I didn't think that you would take it so seriously, it's like, not even lottery night. So, you haven't won anything...it's just... erm, a joke.' (121)

Humiliation cuts deeper than embarrassment, is deeply traumatic and fundamentally

involves abasement of pride and dignity with a loss of status and standing.¹¹ As Gass writes,

The author of any popular serial knows, as Dickens did, that to the degree he makes his world real to his readers, to that degree they will acknowledge his authorship; hold him responsible; and beg him to make the world good, although evil seems present in it; beg him to bring all to a materially glorious close, in clouds and halleluiahs. (19)

Evelyn Waugh's grandson, Alexander Waugh in *Fathers and Sons* contends how

Evelyn railed against the afore mentioned romantic nostalgia from the onset of his writing

career and illustrated this by utilising an example from his grandfather's 1927

autobiography of Dante Gabriel Rossetti. According to Alexander, grandfather Waugh set

¹¹ People being humiliated are usually left voiceless; the post-modern writer must therefore adroitly explore the mob mentality of social media and ask: if we enjoy the theatrical spectacle of the degradation of others and take pleasure from it, then our own conscience and moral compass must surely be overdue a realignment.

out his stall on the very first page as a representative of a bright new generation unafraid to pillory his elders:

No doubt the old-fashioned biography will return, and, with the years, we shall once more learn to assist with our fathers' decorum at the lying-in state of four great men... Meanwhile we must keep our tongue in our cheek, must we not, for fear it should loll out and reveal the idiot? (197)

Beginning on page one of the 1934 novel *A Handful of Dust*, it is eminently clear that the inherent tribalism, culminating in the final chapters within the Brazilian rainforest, is a harsh portrayal of the inherently modern, hailing the beginning of a decade which would politically remap the world through the rise of fascism and ushering in the second great war of the century. Both mother and son are representative of the new world and are wholly vulturine through seeking advantage of any financial transactions or ascendancy within the societal echelons. Beaver, the son, at the beginning of the novel, is viewed askance by the smart London set for being somewhat of a joke figure but is invited to society events merely for his availability and making up numbers:

(Most of Beaver's invitations came to him at the last moment...One of his few recent quarrels with his mother had occurred when he left a luncheon party of hers in this way.) (9)

Likewise, the archetype of the mummy's boy being cosseted by a morally questionable parent, to the detriment of the wider society is also highlighted in *The Cloak of Nessus* where Phensic's mother meekly attempts to inculcate a balance of ideals within him:

'You have inherited a... *flutter* from your father's side. Don't look like that and *please* don't think that I am in any way displeased with you. You are after all, a polite and conscientious young man, but I fear that the local folk, as well meaning as they are, may cause your pretty head to swell out of all alignment, should you choose to let their kindly aimed words unduly penetrate into your heart.' (231)

A plethora of social events, central to the plot of *A Handful of Dust* are fomented by Mrs Beaver throughout the novel to reap a clandestine financial reward: the promise of work in refurbishing Daisy's restaurant, the commissions taken from the charlatan palm-reader with every new introduction. Even when a guest at Tony's ancestral home and is a prime instrument in setting up of Brenda's marital betrayal, Mrs Beaver lays the groundwork throughout the church service and seeks to turn the pleasant, drawing room banter towards her own gain:

'Any time you are buying cuttings or seeds do get them through me. I've made quite a little business out of it, perhaps you didn't know...'
'You must talk to my head man about it.'
'Well to tell you the truth I have-this morning while you were in church. He seems quite to understand.' (81)

Mrs Beaver advises her son to send a telegram to confirm his visit to Hetton rather than telephoning which 'gives them less time to make excuses' and shortly after his arrival, Beaver is shown over the entire house at Tony's insistence which takes two hours.

The opening paragraphs within 'The Cloak of Nessus' similarly attempt to mirror Waugh's literary style with an infusion of quintessential English imagery in order to render the audience into a false sense of comfort and Middle-Class security. 'The Cloak of Nessus' is set in a sleepy English village and the quaint village church references are enthused with a Merrie England verve; just below the peaceful subterfuge, however, lies Phensic's duplicity, which is subtly addressed through slightly risqué jocularities at the advent of the church service. The vicar's gentle nod to Kipling's poetry as a shared pleasure itself underlines that religiosity and social gatherings can assist in making the world more intelligible and discernible in terms of human values and endeavours. The markedly reduced congregation and Phensic's lewd thoughts reveal declining religious and moral values, prevalent within

the forthcoming secularization at the advent of the new century. The approaching modern era extols reason, science and so-called universal human rights but seems to refute responsibility and social accountability, as demonstrated through Phensic's carnal interest of Miss Jarvis outside the church when attempting to gain an unrestricted view of her posterior:

Just prior to the service, Miss Jarvis, (no relation to the vicar) had been compelled to stoop down on the gravel path in order to retrieve her glove. Before Phensic's uncomprehending gaze, Miss Jarvis, or at any rate, a part of Miss Jarvis, began to set momentous trains of thoughts thundering through his mind: never, ever, had he seen buttocks of such gargantuan apportionment in his entire life. Their spreading ever wider, as she groped downwards towards the terra firma to retrieve said article, had rendered him almost catatonic within eight seconds. He felt certain at that very moment that if any more of the brobdingnagian pear continued to surge through the natural boundaries of the dress, the climatic finale would indubitably render an eclipse and a dark shroud of such cataclysmic proportions would surely follow to envelop the earth and render the animal kingdom silent, and laying waste to great tracts of orchards, harvests and general crops over the forth-coming months. (233)

Phensic then convinces himself that he alone, is the recipient of a rare and profitable gift: that of being able to interfere telepathically with the thought processes of those nearby. It is quickly revealed that he does not intend it for the benefit of others, but wholly for his own gratification and social advancement. Later on, he attempts to use his newly discovered powers on The Major when attempting to convince him to sell his beautiful home:

Phensic blinked twice. 'Major Brockhurst, Jimmy: I might just have a proposition for you. Please refill the teapot, and use an extra spoonful of that delicious leaf for each cup. You are going to have to make yourself a somewhat stronger drink for what I have to impart.' (247)

Phensic's slightly naïve suggestion towards a stronger drink again nods to a more innocent time but the reader is jerked abruptly back when he comes straight to the point with regards to his desires:

'So let's not beat about the bush now. It's cards on the table time: what is it that you want?'

Phensic leaned forward slightly and fixed Jimmy with a very confident gaze. He waved the palm of his hand from left to right and replied simply, 'All of this.' (248)

The doctor later shatters the nostalgic illusion when he reveals the odious reality regarding Phensic's semblance and mannerisms and as per Waugh, there is a subtle nod to the tragicomic. Phensic has laboured under the misapprehension that a form of extra sensory perception is part of his inner nucleus and this has empowered his thought processes; the nadir is that he is in actual fact suffering from a form of coprolalia as he shrieks lewd thoughts out loud which disturb and shock everyone within earshot. Authorial cruelty regarding Phensic and the ignominy that he eventually faces, parallels Tony Last when he finally realises with abject horror that he is a prisoner in the middle of the jungle, constrained indefinitely to read from iconic Victorian literature which previously formed a part of the wellspring of his dreams, fantasises and moral values. Likewise, Phensic's comfortable Merrie England world is obliterated when he is in a semi-conscious state at the hospital and overhears the cavalier doctor:

'So, this is the local village idiot who shouts out loud whatever is on or underneath his mind for the entire world to hear?' (253)

Any remaining visions of the idyllic Middle England world is further annihilated upon learning Phensic's deeply unsettling psychosis in the nurse's words:

'Yes: he makes lewd comments about people and doesn't even know that he's doing it. It's as if the veil between his thoughts and the world has been removed. He's

woken up a couple of times and spoken out loud about my black stockings, the size of Matron's bottom and other unmentionable stuff.' (253)

Waugh implicitly suggests modernity through disillusionment, displacement and utter loneliness; especially in the assiduous pursuance of wealth and status. Mrs Beaver's flats ironically come into existence by literally 'breaking up family homes' which portray a veneer of respectability up to the first flight of marble stairs but quickly change to the threadbare carpet which had been left behind by the previous occupants and is indicative both of her miserliness and the razor-thin veneer of her outward respectability. The rapacious Mrs Beaver, with her usual perspicacity offers a plethora of impedimenta to Brenda to install within the tiny love nest:

Mrs Beaver tried to sell her a set of needlework pictures for the walls, but these she refused, also an electric bed-warmer, a miniature weighing machine for the bathroom, a Frigidaire, an antique grandfather clock, a backgammon set of looking-glass and synthetic ivory, a set of prettily bound French eighteenth-century poets, a massage apparatus, and a wireless set... (56)

The wordplay behind the cool, understated surface of the prose further suggests her propensity of acting utterly selfishly with impunity as Mrs Beaver, literally and figuratively, will 'look about for another suitable house to split up.'

Phensic's greed to own minutia and hoard it all away, stems from an unknown psychosis which is also symbolic of the degradation of the new dawning age: the need to collect and then hoard away. In doing so, items lose their intended value of being shared and enjoyed but then gain in financial terms due to their perceived rarity. His continued plotting demonstrates a retrogressive mind:

His eye greedily travelled to the front door, mottled by time, over again to the rough-hewn oak window frames before realising one immutable fact: he was unashamedly, deeply, in love. And he meant to have it. (241)

His speech patterns and laboured eloquence suddenly transform in an attempt to pull rank over the Major who has worked very hard his entire life, in order to better himself; this again, is a nod to the fourth-coming dark culture of the impending twentieth century.

Phensic's plan is to ensure that the Major is more susceptible and open to later negotiation:

'How did you come by this magnificent house? It must be one of, if not the very best in the district. There are bigger up on Sherborne Grove but this has genuine panache; a certain élan unsurpassed in the locale.' (242)

The Major leaves to make tea and Phensic's eyes travel around the room: 'His eyes fell upon the chess set with the cracked squares and elegantly carved chess-pieces which shone in the firelight.' The scene parallels Mrs Beaver in her shop as she speaks to a customer on the phone expertly flitting between gossip and business while discussing John's love life with a married woman who has by now gained a new élan by bedding another man's wife: 'And Beaver for the first time in his life, found himself a person of interest and, almost, of consequence.' Mrs Beaver's cavalier attitude towards her subordinates is echoed in the set moves and hierarchies of the chess pieces: 'I'll have the chess-men done up and sent round to you this afternoon. Thank you so much.' (58) Likewise, Brenda's disengaged chatter with Tony in the bedroom over breakfast is an amalgamation of nightmarish grotesquery and social gossip:

'Reggie's been making another speech...There's such an extraordinary picture of Babe and Jock...a woman in America has had twins by two different husbands. Would you have thought that possible?...Two more chaps in gas ovens...a little girl has been strangled in a cemetery with a bootlace...that play we went to about a farm is coming off.' (17)

In all these cases, sexual innuendo, suicide and child murder remains a mild disruption on the surface, troubling the reader briefly but remaining infused with the comic-ironic tone that permeates the work. Likewise, Tony's sentimental affection when he and his young son John Andrew walk to church, John shares the story he has heard from the stable manager Ben. A mule named Peppermint had drunk his company's rum ration in the First World War and subsequently died. Afterwards, Tony says, 'very sad' but John responds: 'Well I thought it was sad too, but it isn't. Ben said it made him laugh fit to bust his pants.' (31) Ben gleans comedy from the war story, where Tony finds pathos so a hierarchy of ideals begins to simmer within the boy's mind: the cruel and offhand reaction thus supersedes the traditional, sympathetic one and the reader is left to ponder once more on the contemporary age.¹²

John's acceptance of Ben as the authority figure and moral compass on how to respond to given situations is not only indicative of Tony's parental neglect and a failure to instil in his son the values and mores of the aristocracy, but the outmoded nature of those very values is crucially examined. Greenberg confirms in 'Was Anyone Hurt?' regarding Tony's parental neglect is: '... a failure to instil in his son the values of his social class-but also the outmoded nature of those very values.' (352)

'The Cloak of Nessus' on the surface, is instilled with a similar romantic imagery; Phensic's later, ruthless determination in gaining the cottage, in order to sell it on for a huge profit, however leads the reader to ponder the forthcoming age of consumerism and the pursuance of materialism at any cost. An obedience to a social code is undermined and

¹² Much as we might celebrate the passing of the old order here in contemporary Britain, resonant with hereditary titles and chattels, unearned wealth and land rights, Waugh suggested, back in 1934, that what will actually replace this is not the longed-for meritocracy but mere selfishness, avarice and a fresh zeitgeist of feeling little or nothing towards others.

eroded; Waugh, ever the modernist and anti-sentimentalist imbues his characters with multiple moral failures, just as the character of Phensic is conveyed with an unhealthy OCD mind-set, stalking and rapacity. The character's flaws and idiosyncrasies are insignificant when compared to the lead up to *A Handful of Dust's* most disturbing instance of a troublesome reaction to a terrible shock – when John Andrew is killed in a riding accident and his mother's reaction. Brenda at first thinks that her lover has died but on learning that it is her son, she betrays her true feelings through her reaction to his death: 'John ... John Andrew ... I ... oh, thank God...' With the news of the death on its way to Brenda, Tony says to Mrs Rattery, 'with Brenda, John always came first... naturally' and 'she's seen so little of John lately. She's been in London such a lot. I'm afraid that's going to hurt her.' Waugh prepares the reader in a particular way, with important consequences for the reader's sympathies when we hear that Brenda has 'been worrying all day thinking Beaver's had an accident' which in some part, allows her blood-curdling remark. That she bursts into tears is itself prepared for and thus the impact sharpened further; that Brenda feels relief and thanks God upon receiving the news that her son has died rather than her lover clearly reveals her depravity and nauseates the reader but this is somewhat diluted again with the deft shift to the hustler-clairvoyant busy taking money from the group of women. All of her clients receive exactly the same account regarding their destinies (she presses upon her clients not to share what they hear as it will 'spoil' the outcome) by reading the soles of their feet, which given Waugh's penchant for symbolism, may well represent how the characters fates are intertwined by walking over everyone.

As in the Dickensian mode of names echoing inherent character traits, Waugh regals us with the felicitous name of Polly Cockpurse, the social climber whose smartness is graced by neither elegance or dignity. She perhaps acts as the parameter for John Beaver to

emulate and her surname is obviously suggestive of promiscuous behaviour in order to advance her social status.

After Tony's marriage has irrevocably collapsed, he meets an explorer, Dr Messinger, and joins him on an expedition in search of a supposed lost city, deep in the Amazon rainforest. When it becomes apparent that there is little chance of Beaver gaining from the divorce, he immediately loses interest in Brenda. Mrs Beaver, in her imitable and brutal manner instantaneously extricates herself and her son from the situation, irrespective of Brenda being left sans a home, husband or income by hastily arranging for both of them to take a trip abroad.

'So you really are going to America?'
'I must. Mother has taken the tickets.'
'Nothing I've said to-night makes any difference?' (91)

Glimpses of restorative justice are few but at the end of the novel when the spurious news of Tony's death reaches friends and notably his cousins back in England, the heirs to Hetton thwart Mrs. Beaver's monetary ambitions by rejecting her plans in the offer of arranging the contractors to having the chapel redecorated as a chantry. She commends herself as one of Tony's oldest friends in her attempt gain more fiscal advantage: 'She wrote to me as soon as the news of Tony's death was published.' (220)

Similar to the fate of being friendless and loveless, being meted out to Brenda, Phensic suffers abject humiliation and the reader observes a similar shade of authorial justice at the end of 'The Cloak of Nessus.' Phensic realises that he has no special powers whatsoever; it was all a contrivance of his perfervid imagination. He finally comprehends that the people of the village accepted his behaviour due to his family standing within the community and the fact that they were a source of revenue for so many within the village.

Grotesquely, within *A Handful of Dust* and 'The Cloak of Nessus' the characters refuse to be shocked, disoriented, embarrassed or involved, as when Phensic knocks the cottage door one final time to discover that his plans have come to nothing. He simply states 'Oh,' when informed that the marriage has given The Major a new lease of life and Miss Jarvis suggests that he has decades of life ahead of him.

Waugh's early novels were short and arguably, alternate modernists would have written *A Handful of Dust* more amply and with less of the extreme economy of the narrative voice. One unsettling technique Waugh deploys in terms of economy is to exclude passages of dialogue which, in retrospect, the reader knows must have taken place and which carry crucial plot developments. When Beaver returns to his mother after his initial visit to Tony and Brenda's stately home, Hetton and casually informs her that Brenda has hinted at a potential clandestine relationship by having 'talked of taking a flat in London,' the reader almost feels cheated in having to learn this through a virtual throwaway line. The same effect is achieved on New Year's Eve when, after Tony goes home early from a party both John and Tony's wife are left to begin their courtship, an inevitability of that particular set: 'Beaver and Brenda returned together in the back of a car.' The next morning Brenda tells Tony of her plan to spend less time at home in the countryside and instead, begin attending lectures in London, which must have been hatched during those clandestine meetings. In terms of patterns, once we understand that Brenda, in kissing, rubs against Tony's cheek in 'a way she had' it becomes almost a matter of cogent but cynical necessity that within thirty pages she will kiss Beaver and rub against his cheek, in 'the way she had.' The quiet shift from *a* to *the* subliminally underlines the betrayal. Brenda's way of kissing is described as 'like a cat' and later, Jenny proposes curling up in front of Tony 'like a cat,'

when attempting to seduce him in a pre-conceived collusion, thus assuaging Brenda's trifling guilt. Jenny has a 'sharp red tongue' and interestingly, is the only character from the aristocratic set who is heard speaking 'sharply' when on the receiving end of John Andrew's continued questions at Hetton. She is observed running her tongue over her lips after eating buttered crumpets; the sharp red tongue and the predatory sexual appetite are Dracula-like and this prepares us for the vampire-bats in the Amazon, among the savages. It is also noteworthy that the corresponding London story is reiterated as the bats feed upon Dr Messinger, just prior to his death from drowning, thus leaving Tony alone to his horrendous fate. Tony's surname Last signals extinction and the romantic ideals that he embraces so dearly; his son's death seals this and his ancestral home quickly passes on to his cousins who use the grounds to breed mink in order to begin restoring the ancestral home.

Mrs Beaver and the irony of her creeping shadow continues to the very final page: she has been present from beginning to end, ubiquitous in exploiting the personal disasters of Tony's life as well as the circumstances of his death so that the circular structure of the novel can be clearly seen through her omnipresence. She has foreshadowed many of the events, beginning with her appraisal of Brenda and Tony's marriage- 'I should say it was time she began to get bored' and made the observation that that she thought Brenda and the upwardly mobile Jock would marry, and this, as with many of her cynical predictions, comes true.¹³

¹³ Although there is little authorial description in the novel, Waugh's portrayal of Mrs. Beaver's behaviour and dialogue is successful in not only realistically presenting her as a character type but in offering perceptive comment on aspects of modernity and the social mores of the age that we today can wholly appreciate.

To encapsulate: the narrative economy in *A Handful of Dust* is evident in the novel's opening question: John Beaver's 'Was anyone hurt?' The answer is 'no one' and is further echoed thirty pages later when, this time, Beaver is the object of the enquiry. Brenda's sister asks her 'Who's been to stay?' and Brenda replies: 'No one. We had a friend of Tony's called Mr Beaver last weekend.' The audience is invited to compare the brutal indifference of their responses and this is something Waugh was peerless in satirising: a decadent modernity inhabited by vulgar people and arguably, this writing style has been highly influential upon post-modernist writing to this day. Waugh was not a metafictional writer; he was a satirist who liked to expose foolish and reprehensible behaviour. His writing style has been highly influential upon comedy writing to this day as he was primarily satirical who liked to expose foolish and reprehensible behaviour. In the very first page of *Decline and Fall*, published in 1927, he mocked Oxford University's Bullingdon Club whose attendance has come back to haunt two out of three of our last prime ministers. He is famed for portraying shallow people who live life on the surface, this being a timeless subject that is renewed every few decades and *A Handful of Dust* is a perfectly balanced novel of tragicomedy of a man who spirals ever downwards due to his wife's infidelity, based primarily on Waugh's bitter personal experience. The satire and comedy within this novel are very much in keeping with our own, divided times and while not metafictional per se, Waugh continues to speak to a post-modern audience as evidenced by Decoste in his essay (AND YOU GET FAR TOO MUCH PUBLICITY ALREADY WHOEVER YOU ARE)": Gossip, Celebrity, and Modernist Authorship in Evelyn Waugh's Vile Bodies:

Such narratorial self-effacement enacts that impersonal aesthetic endorsed by the very modernists Waugh's more intrusive narrator forces us to consider. This execution of modernist authorship, which increasingly allows the novel to condemn Chatterbox textuality and the world it sustains, proceeds by three dominant techniques: the novel's striking reliance on dialogue, its swift, uninflected narration

of event, and its deployment of disturbing juxtapositions, which compel the reader to decode the truth rather than depend on knowing reportage. (2)

Decoste further states that Waugh's journalistic writing, evidenced in *Vile Bodies* was twinned with modernism in terms of distancing himself through surface appearance:

If *Vile Bodies* advertises, in its form and substance, its gossipy scoop on the Bright Young People, its object seems to be thereby to win an audience for precisely the kind of text the world of the novel has no room for. Its dual narration, then, not only allows its modernist aesthetic to become a bestseller but also enables Waugh to distance himself from the Bright Young People and to make that critique of their world already noted. Moreover... his modernism of externals, akin to the tabloids' obsession with surface appearance, proves a uniquely deft instrument for capturing and dissecting the deadening world of modern celebrity culture. (3)

An unvarnished, vulgar reality of celebrity culture evidences 'the deadening world' within 'Ali Dunn' when the triplets, excited by a potential windfall, share their ingrained and self-demonising values, demonstrating the skewed consumerism of a socially conditioned underclass in terms of instant recognition and therefore, gratification:

'Take us to the museum thingey, where we shall get paid in full for all of our treasure. It's time that we started our new life of being really rich and respected by the local massive and beyond,' stated Ali matter of factly.
'I'm going to buy a speedboat,' beamed Caitlin.
'I'm going to buy a bright white Land Rover,' chortled Ali.
'I'm going to buy a shed and lock you pair inside,' murmured Bennie. (289)

Chapter Three: Martin Amis and *Money*: Underlying Themes Visualised Through the Profane and Hideous

Harry Hartless: a moniker suggestive of tyranny. Or even ruthlessness? A hypothesis suggests that people tend to gravitate towards areas of employment that fit their wholly incongruous names. Or do names help to cleave our ultimate destinies and fates?¹⁴ Baton-like, it was passed in 1921 from father to son, then onto me, the grandson at the tail end of the summer of love in the sixties. Inheriting the family name with *the third* attached, inevitably, I was asked intermittently over the years if I would ever bestow the name upon my own offspring. The deft response was always firmly in the negative: I would never consider crippling my son and heir with that noisome, social disability as the name marked me out as inalterably anomalous from the moment I shuffled, head down, through the primary school gates. Perhaps unsurprisingly, it has been a long-held personal interest how a name may potentially shape the character or personality of the recipient but it now appears that we have at last, encountered an age that actually celebrates peculiar names.¹⁵ The Kardashians have in some small part no doubt, been emboldened thanks to their parents' canny choices of bestowing those now famous alliterative monikers. But *Harry Hartless*? As a metafiction writer in the making, seeking to produce an array of idiosyncratic characters and for poetical justice no doubt, all my characters therefore are destined to share a similar fate – that of being contrastive through Nominative Determinism.¹⁶

¹⁴ I believe this marked me out as infelicitous, the name being hardly contemporary - more like a sixteenth century pirate. Or as a long-misplaced girlfriend once succinctly informed me a few weeks into our courtship: 'When I first heard your name, I thought you were going to be a right bastard!'

¹⁵ Charisma Carpenter, Gage Golightly, Greer Grammer, Blaze Berdahl and January Jones – all kosher names that help define empowerment.

¹⁶ The hypothesis that people tend to gravitate towards areas of work that fit or support their names.

With regards to the metafictional purpose, the straightforward and common literary device of utilising strangely unfamiliar names serves as a comedic jarring note, simultaneously calling into question the believability of the characters and lightly scoffing at them, thus raising them into being more indelible and kaleidoscopic. The metafictional expectation is that a character with a strange name should always live up to their uniqueness; the expectation is to be a little off kilter and to act in a manner that seldom represents the status quo. The overuse of alliterative names within 'Author' empowers accessibility due to the word-sound overlap, just as in advertising when the message components of price, brand and quality alliterate and thus make them fasten more easily into the mind.¹⁷ Metafictional authors are free to make their own rules of course so a penchant for fantastical names – the more bizarre the better, was always mandatory and an important component of my writing. Simultaneously, alongside the bizarre names and character traits, the metafictionalist creates a venue in which politically incorrect language gains a modicum of acceptability is through the use of humour: the darker, the better. Political satire often uses otherwise damaging rhetoric as a means to expose the absurdity of certain arguments and attitudes and it's considered acceptable so long as the caricatured villain spouting the vitriol is played for laughs.

John Self, the narrator in *Money*, is privilege incarnate, compounded by his bullying tactics, media position, and above all, being financially secure. Amis employs jet-black humour through an anti-realist mode of narrative stance and his bizarrely named characters: Selina Street who is eminently streetwise, Spunk Davis – a name intentionally unfortunate and Lorne Guyland – a pronunciation of 'Long Island' in an exaggerated New

¹⁷ Word-sound overlap presented through alliteration facilitates positive judgments and influences the reader's relationship towards the characters. Have the Kardashians played their part in this?

York accent. The name Winston Smith in Orwell's *1984* proffers a world-famous name, synonymous with conjuring ideas of a heroic leadership in a time of world war, simultaneously the surname being bland and every day, suggests that so called ordinary people are capable of effecting great change when they rise against the system. Self, embodies the ultimate Eighties Thatcherite ideology of individualism, uber-capitalism and personal survival at any cost and immediately alerts the reader to these character traits. The very name is indicative of and points to his inevitable downfall while John, the perfect name for invoking the bland anonymity of the everyman is indicative of the searching for an identity within the sprawling metropolises of two of the world's preeminent megacities.

The contemporary state of both the United States and the United Kingdom is explored through Self; he is obviously in turn, a metaphor for moral decrepitude and the continuous stifling cultural influence of the New World upon the entire Western Hemisphere which, knotweed like, might grow and stragulate the rest of the global 'community.'

Amis anticipates the twenty first century fascination with celebrity culture: that fame and social recognition are mainstays of the new theology and to have none, to be ordinary, is almost akin to deprivation. The novel is a strong contender for an underlying vision of post-cultural modernity: a grotesque and twisted mandate of being a subject of interest through social roles and salary and the power of finance with its ethos of hedonism, market-driven capitalism and vanity; in other words, of the self ahead of any notion of community. Material accumulation is the gateway to honour and prestige; greed is the prerequisite that dictates that Self can achieve anything that he desires within the hallowed temple of television. He is now on the very cusp of clawing his way to the very top of the pyramid: he has been invited to produce a Hollywood movie. Where the human ego is unleashed

through power, money and rapacity, Amis audits a range of moral and social deficiencies in eighties Britain and America: misogyny, alcohol, drug abuse and the baneful effects of pornography and sex work. One of the ultimate objectives of *Money* is the need for the introspective; an inward-looking study with involves coming to terms with personal weaknesses and foibles and elevating the agglomeration. As of late 2021 and irrespective of political views, there is no escaping the deeply uncomfortable sense that the world seems increasingly divided, along with the constant threat of global war, environmental destruction, declining resources and the extinction of species being omnipresent. Daily reminders of old and new enemies seek to decrease our empathy towards other races and cultures; even with a lack of interest in politics, digesting news broadcasts is likely to increase the general population's unease and despondency. Many today feel politically disenfranchised, with little say in the decisions being made that will directly affect them with the result that an increased rioting, destruction of public and private property and a creeping mob mentality is seeping out of social media and into the public arena through newspaper articles.

In attempting the enormity of a redress through literature it must be acknowledged that not everyone will understand, or attempt to comprehend metafiction. Amis has been accused of popularising the very thing that he uniformly condemned by readers who merely focus on a snapshot of his work. Wallace too, may be perceived as deeply offensive but in order to comprehend the underlying message of seeking a healing and thereafter, a redemption, we must put our trust in the authors. This case in point has been an issue within my own writing: is this a reasonable expectation to make of any reader? Clearly, metafiction can be challenging, and the test here is how to address issues of readerliness with this foremost in our minds.

Amis uses the now familiar metafictional technique of writing himself into *Money* as the weedy and slightly ridiculous author on the make. It is constantly implied that the Martin Amis within *Money* constantly demonstrates his aloofness from the world of actual money, in order to provide a source of referential authority which more or less guarantees the allegorical allusions to *Animal Farm* being foregrounded within the novel.

As with *Money*, the title 'Author of His Own Doom' is an instant reveal: clichéd and uninspired but it is conceded later that social conditioning has played its part in shaping the protagonists and that merely to point the finger and judge is to miss the point entirely. Bokka mirrors Self in providing financially for the plethora of Dickensian low company that he keeps. Amis, like Dickens, is an insistent moral writer, utilising satire within the metafictional realm with a nobility of cause: to illuminate injustice, hypocrisy and corruption of the age in the hope that we might acknowledge and set about improving it. The story however, echoes the Victorian theme-of-England in its clinical need to recalibrate the moral decay within contemporary society. Dickens, the cultural reformer empowered his readership to elicit social change; Amis recognises that accepting and valuing a dystopic, morally bankrupt system while simultaneously assuming it is a playboy's paradise, renders society close to an abyss of subjugation to the self. Likewise, within 'Author,' Bokka discovers the true verisimilitude of his society when the claimed lottery win brings forth a grim realisation that although he has been a highly regarded member of the council estate culture for decades, he is now regarded askance and even a rank outsider:

It got so embarrassing that it was actually Ruby Roo herself, my partner in grime, his own niece who had to tell him-firmly but politely to sling it. He duly informed the masses that we had become snotty and hoity-toity so the house started enjoying the same treatment as the car: egged windows, graffiti, upside down flower pots. I looked

out one morning and the fuckers had dug up the privet hedge and had it away in the night. (117)

It may be extremely difficult to acknowledge how others truly perceive us and perhaps we have reached the stage that we simply do not care as much anymore. As a social collective in the early twenty first century, I would argue that we are moving towards a resolute defiance in being judged, either by peers or insofar as we find it increasingly difficult to touch the cap to authority. As C.S. Lewis in his book 'The Abolition of Man' wrote:

Each generation exercises power over its successors: and each, in so far as it modifies the environment bequeathed to it and rebels against tradition, resists and limits the power of its predecessors. This modifies the picture which is sometimes painted of a progressive emancipation from tradition and a progressive control of natural processes resulting in a continual increase of human power. (29)

Amis has by design, steadily and cleverly drawn the readership into a rank and seedy world and has somewhat lobotomised us in how we should regard more than half of the population. Like many modernists, he has infused people, objects and events with significance and layered meaning. Incidents throughout the story, simultaneously wrench us out of our numbness and complacency to Self's narrative on the everyday abuse of women through sex clubs and pornography – to what is an indescribable ruthless humiliation and degradation of our fellow beings. The pages are generously laced throughout with perverts and misogynists who we readily visualise as cannibals and head-hunters: the backward, Stone Age types who make us feel infinitely better about our own condition:

'Me, I lolloped and leapt for my life at the other end, 200 pounds of yob genes, booze, snout and fast food, ten years older, charred and coked on heavy fuel, with no more to offer than my block drive and backhand chip.' (12)

The reader continues to be drawn into this seedy world – a questionable moral sty, through Self's offbeat but friendly camaraderie in which we snicker at the laddish humour

when suddenly, a young woman confronts and chastises Self in the porn emporium while he is utterly engrossed, devouring the degenerative material porcine like, almost oblivious to his surroundings.

My future stepmother has a pair on her, no doubt about it. She could even cut the mustard in one of the magazines specifically featuring chicks with big tits. I replaced Debonair and picked up *Lovedolls*. Take it from me, they don't come much dirtier than *Lovedolls*, not in England, not legally... I looked up, in alarm, bewilderment, in terror. A plump, pretty girl, with a sensible scarf, two badges on the lapel of her corduroy overcoat, her face and stance vibrant, unflinching, exalted...
'Why aren't you ashamed of yourself?'
'But I am,' I said.
'Look at that. Look.'...
'It's disgusting, *isn't* it.'
'Yes.'
'How can you *look* at these things?'
'I've no idea.' (pp 158 ,159)

A breaking of the natural rhythm and realism and levelling with the reader here is evident: Self's openly admitted shame suggests lucidly that he doesn't like what he's reduced himself to; he is in fact, full of self-loathing. The pornography gives him the same feelings as his staple diet of junk-food, strong drink and drug binges but even with his limited self-awareness as a character, Amis still gives Self a sense of shame as someone 'addicted to the 20th century.' Amis adroitly and subliminally creates a world which from the outside looks appalling but demonstrates how by subtle degrees, it is so easy to be drawn into a shadier, darker actuality and the humour actually anaesthetises our initial reluctance to engage and respond to Self. Alkodimi and Omar stress in 'The Female Body in Martin Amis' *Money: A Satiric Portrait*' that:

Accordingly, pornography is seen as the mainstream industry in contemporary society. John Self, the narrator-protagonist, confirms this sex- money relation when he says, "I don't know how to define pornography—but money is in the picture somewhere. There has to be money involved" (291). In this novel, Amis frequently stresses the sex-money relation to establish the absurdity of the situation where pornography is not merely an art but a highly profitable industry for capitalists. (422)

The suggestion is clear: human morals and decency will continue to descend rapidly – just as the main thematic ideals suggest within *1984* and *Animal Farm* predict, and within our own age, we can readily be miniaturized into actual thought criminals and proles: an interesting reversal where the despotic tyranny is now in abundance through our own base and selfish desires. There is a deeper resonance within the opportunity for Self to embrace a moral awakening however: the desire to encounter people that many believe are morally inferior to us is part of our human psyche.¹⁸

In 'Author, the characters feast upon each other; it is a world where the innocents such as Alisha will be forever ravaged by her peers: she is too caring, too sincere to 'ejaculate her mark upon life's fabric.' Likewise, through reptilian and predatory behaviour, the characters within the story demonstrate their animalistic qualities.

'If you have any money left I shall be needing some of it, irrespective of pecuniary difficulties. Quite a bit really. My solicitor will be writing to you in due course.'
'I thought you were above all of that money malarkey? I might be bankrupt soon.'
'You're already morally bankrupt. Consider it knob head tax.' (165)

Amis uses the pig analogy hilariously both as a nod to the *Animal Farm* dystopia and also to their intrinsic selfishness and cannibalistic ruthlessness:

I checked out these pigs when I was on a farm making a commercial for a new kind of pork-character rissole. I almost walked off the set when I realised what I'd have to be working with. You should see these hairy-jawed throwbacks, these turd look alikes, honking and chomping at the trough. To eat your girlfriend's tale when she isn't looking – that counts as good behaviour, that counts as old-world courtesy, by the standards of the sty. (205)

¹⁸ Like Tony Montana in *Scarface*, we need to believe that there are people worse than us; they must exist so we can point the finger and judge. Williams states in *Blame and Responsibility*: 'Finally, we might observe how such personalised attribution insulates the finger-pointer against the possibility that he might, in those or other circumstances, have performed such a deed.'

Bokka has become manipulative and self-obsessed with the estate's patriarchal society and the story abounds with themes which explore the struggle of the working-class male and the power of conflict between the genders and class. He is not simply another yob from the wrong side of the tracks railing against the system; he has been virtually forgotten due to his background and social standing. He is culturally and socially invisible until the claimed lottery win but this has the reverse effect of what he longs for: it exacerbates his loneliness and subsequently leads him to receiving a plethora of unwanted attention from the local residents and in-laws, all of whom seek to take fiscal advantage of him. Utilising his newly found distress, an attempt is made to reinvent himself and create a fresh self-identity while continuing to forge disastrous relationships with women and the 'wrong' type of men. This newly-minted infamy heightens the feeling of being morally and culturally askance and he begins to encounter further solitude. He feels that there is no way out of the spiralling decay so he continues in his thrill-seeking, base desire of pursuing the opposite sex. He rages against women – despite being close to his mother and her earlier death leaves him bereft and utterly bewildered. He is deeply hurt at losing her and reels from the loss.

Ironically, as in Waugh's *Decline and Fall*, his redemption comes through a short prison stint; compounded by a young man raised by his grandmother who offers a way through the detritus and whose own example of a carefree attitude finally offers hope of a newly formed lease of an alternate lifestyle. Through Bokka's alienation, we see a representation of an anarchic individualism; a randomness self-formed to avoid any form of social control or authority. He is the microcosm of a failed system and a product of parental failures at home: a father made redundant and then conspicuous by his desertion of his family, then an over-bearing mother who inculcates him with a strong sense of his rights but of little responsibility. This reverberates throughout Bokka's adult life and ultimately brings

heartbreak to both himself and sexual partners who are emotionally connected to him. As per the Dickensian tradition of using self-alluding character names, there are blatant metafictional examples of bizarrely named characters which seek to echo and amplify their diabolical traits. 'Bokka' suggests something that doesn't quite fit; the name marks him out for its harsh, guttural tone suggestive of an echo in a dark alleyway which reverberates in a jarring, onomatopoeic manner but does not hold sufficient means to penetrate. Gunne obviously alludes to a weapon which suggests danger to society and ultimately, potential menace to those in close proximity. He is filled with self-loathing and fear and constantly struggles with what it means to be a man in a post-industrial society: a council estate society where boxers and fathers seem increasingly irrelevant as life revolves around the pub and trying to earn a living through the obligatory ducking and diving.

Bokka is always returning; he seems doomed to return like a phantom and live a half-life: destined to repeat events until he finally manages to get things right. He must return to the pubs and nightclubs to avail himself of Alisha and desperately tries to win her attention by telling tall tales. It is this return that is associated with his decision to become the very enemy of his own soul and to begin the transformation of becoming a socially enforced misogynist: with Ruby he was merely continuing the cycle of selfishness as observed when he abruptly side-lined their relationship when something better came along:

A bit like me and Ruby in fact, bless her fake tits. But that was just before I had to let her go; to pave the way for the next love in my life-the one and only Alisha Avaloff.
(125)

Despite speaking of love, Bokka spitefully calculates how to exact revenge upon her mother and to break Alisha down, in order to more readily control her. When she finally marries, his plan is that she will need to rely upon him totally and he can therefore control her

thoroughly. It is hinted at that he may have borrowed this psychological technique, in part, from the hoi polio of the locale when they learned of the new car through the lottery windfall:

But it all went from the survival of the fittest to the survival of the thickest: the first day it was parked up, right about the time of the masculine hour, it got egged twice. Eighteen hours later, both doors on the kerb side were keyed down to the metal. On day three, all four tyres had been worked on with a Stanley Knife. Ruby Roo gamely attempted her infamous positivism and pointed out that at least they were only flat at the bottom. (116)

Bokka's return through the pawnshop door to violently assault the assistant when he hears him laughing mockingly – and the inevitable incarceration allows events to unfold and he transcends his situation and begins to grasp something beyond the moral abyss. Paradoxically, the Katana sword (the symbol of almost pornographic violence but also a 'clean' death) becomes a cogent symbol of redemptive force. The heirloom, gifted by his long-absent father, finally connects Bokka to the masculine line of his family. The men before him were warriors; soldiers in World War One and Two whom Bokka reveres for their outstanding contribution to King and Country. Bokka has the opportunity to escape, but returns to exact justice through his grandfather's weapon of honour. By utilising the sword as the conduit of change, Bokka, in his own mind, transforms: from a rough and ready disconnected street pugilist who formerly stepped onto the street and into the ring alone, is alternatively raised to the nobility of the Japanese warrior class and simultaneously to his own heritage by proxy: one who is connected to a history and a tradition and whose actions are guided by a strict code of conduct in which honour and courage were of eminent importance. This symbolism, corresponds to a popular contemporary icon of a bygone masculine age: symbolic of a discipline and education that cannot be contradicted in its obvious dignity, honour and hard-won skills. According to Bokka, this is the long-awaited

redemptive opportunity of attaining masculinity which the culture around him has stripped away. He attempts to make sense of what he has done to the duty solicitor:

'I actually stepped back when I saw the blood coming out; his pig-screams brought me to my senses. I'd had to go and deal some jewellery at one of those pawn shop chains; the ones that give you pennies for your stuff which has cost hundreds. I'd left a few gold bracelets there a few weeks back and had intended to pick them back up. But time went by and I couldn't get hold of the dollars quickly enough. When I finally made it back in, the guy behind the counter was smirking his head off.

He said to me, 'We really did you mate. They're worth thousands and you let them go for a hundred and fifty quid. A quick trip to the West End with these and I can live it large for a good two months.'

Well I saw red and nudded him in the face across the counter but he was much tastier than I had anticipated. He got back up and had a right go back.' (145)

Amis references porn shops being a blight upon the consciousness; aligned to a similar premise, 'Author' suggests that Pawn Shops share a similarly deep reprehensibility. The reader is invited to perceive Bokka's inner mind, and we can finally begin to understand him at a deeper cultural level. Hollywood like, he uses the appropriate weapon of honour and vengeance against the ultimate capitalist who grows rich from the misery and desecration of others and this underlines the theme of skewed redemption within the story.

The evolving dialogue between Bokka and Ossifer humanizes their violently opposed partnership; the improbable juxtaposition of their earnest dialogue and the violence between the two is the stylistic twist that will hopefully allow the audience to find humour in the bleak surroundings. 'Author' unmasks the macho myth by making it laughable and dethrones the power trip glorified by standard violence. Bokka reacts like a teenager when again, he assaults his erstwhile friend, in a place that begins their ultimate springboard to redemption: the library. Like children of over-indulgent parents, they have no idea how to

clean up the mess that they have just created: their absurd dialogue unexpectedly

transforms the meaning of the modern understand of the cliché of violence:

Ossifer handed over a bundle of dog-eared comic books and indicated deftly that I should hide them somewhere.

'Cheers then. These should come in handy.'

'I nicked some for meself from off dem floor after our rumble. I tink de other boys picked up most of de mess after we'd been in der. I is going to start afresh; read dem every night in dem cell. Me read dat de pain of regret is far greater than de pain of discipline. Ow is tings wid yew?'

I looked at him hard and straitened my back.

'It's hard to say Oss: I'm wifeless, jobless, loveless.' He looked at me to see if I was joking; decided that I was and beamed over his happy gappy grin once more. (183)

Bokka initially views Ossifer askance; he judges him on his lack of camaraderie and rough edges but eventually begins to comprehend something of a warmer manner below the surface: the personality that refuses to surrender or be broken by the system. Bokka has his personal battle scars but he is imbued by Ossifer with optimism who maintains, Wilkins Micawber like, that something better will eventually turn up. Only at the end does a solitary word used by the gaoler hint that he may have converted into an alternate faith and the reader themselves must fill in the ellipsis. As a consequence of metafiction's undermining of the conventional basis of existence, the reader may revise their own ideas regarding the philosophical status of what is assumed to be reality. The meanings and values of Bokka's world have been designed to leave the reader in doubt of its validity so as to be challenged regarding their own values. The construction of a potential alternate conclusion is presented at the very end of the story when the officer addresses Bokka as 'Ahmed.' This is written to leave the reader in a quandary: is it simply that Bokka seems to be more spiritually nourished under the auspices of the Muslim inmates and the warder is being sarcastic in his own, kindly, inimitable manner? Alternatively, Bokka may well have actually accepted the protocols of a different faith in order to reimagine his life again, starting with a clean slate.

This is intended to galvanise audience opinion and they will bring their own experiences and dynamics to personally conclude whether or not Bokka has made a glorious step into a redemptive middle age or has been misguided into darker and an altogether more dangerous enclave. It is common place for the individual in most traditional stories to happen upon an encounter that disrupts something or someone but Bokka happens upon himself: his own attitude and cultural mannerisms are taken to task and by slaying the dragon (in this case, his ego) Bokka connects with the age-old mythology of beginning again, having found redemption and is now free to start afresh as a newly informed and developing man. At any rate, unlike other heroes, he does not receive the news that he is special and has a purpose to play: in truth, he is actually rather bland in literary terms but he needs to pay his debt to society by acknowledging and embracing change and thus he discovers a new balance and peace while simultaneously disconnecting from his baser inclinations, forcing himself to be less irrational and abusive. When he recounts his own life as a story, he reorders it to make more sense and as an unreliable narrator¹⁹ he fictionalises what really was. Events are reshuffled in order to serve his conscience but it is Ruby, without judgement, informs him that she knew all along how he really acquired the windfall:

The Acid glow of the neon green light cast its sickly fingers across the room and I waited. There was indeed more.

‘That neighbour died by the way-the one that asked you to clean out her garage.’

I shrugged a pretence of not understanding.

‘The one that told you that you could have whatever was inside. In lieu of cash payment?’

‘Oh. So... you knew about that?’

‘Those two Broughs and the Vincent underneath all the garbage you found in there-close to one hundred and twenty thousand quid according to the Christie’s catalogue. Classic bikes like that are now fetching a premium.’

I looked at my shoes and sighed. She knew all along. And still, she stuck around. (166)

¹⁹ As we all are. In actuality, Bokka discovered three highly collectible motorcycles in his neighbour’s garage and unjustly took them as payment for work undertaken. He concocted a story of a lottery win as undoubtedly it would have been generally perceived as ‘soiled money’ by his associates and would have won him little, if any respect.

The fact that Bokka holds Ruby in high esteem but continues to use her, when necessary, suggests that he has little empathy towards women and this becomes a jarring note. He is however interested in behaviour and is always trying to see through it; to an essential order behind it: the quality, the principal – the heart of the matter. He is reaching through form and behaviour to reach an ultimate behaviour, some true truth. ‘Author’ seeks to tell a simple, chronological string of events in a life of a roguish individual and the emphasis is proclaimed in the title itself, just as in *Money* and then developed. These very titles cut out fabrication and address the issues of contemporary culture head on, after which they are free to create an authentic reality. This type of metafiction is formed to express our new situation and a further consequence is the capture of daily consciousness and the consequent creation of an imagined sensibility or re-order: the dullness of life being replaced by a richness that can allow a moral engagement with the issues raised. As Gass demonstrates in *Fiction and the Figures of Life*:

A dedicated storyteller, though-a true lie-minded man-will serve his history best, and guarantee its popularity, not by imitating nature, since nature’s no source of verisimilitude, but by following as closely as he can our simplest, most direct and unaffected forms of daily talk, for we report real things, things which intrigue and worry us, and such resembling gossip in a book allows us to believe in figures and events we cannot see, shall never touch, with an assurance of safety which sets our passions free. (32)

Bokka’s ‘daily talk’ within the Hipster café suggests that connecting with another like-minded being, dropping all pretence and actually listening to another’s point of view, indubitably paves the way for a verifiable truth to enter our lives:

During the connection, I had failed to note that she had Alisha’s manner down to a T, what with the posture, glinting brown eyes, dark hair and a smile that could stop a stampede. So that was that: the dreams returned in earnest, thrubbing their rhythmic chant to that ancient and terrible god while putting paid to any chance of peace in my newly turned corner. So here we go again: back to watching dolls explode. (134)

In *Money* and 'Author' the fictional first-person narrators are the characters and they offer information about the fictional quality to the reader. Like John Fowles in *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, who shares his thoughts with the reader in a deliberate act of breaking reality, the narrator Bokka, informs us that he is narrating; he himself is author both within and of the fiction. His technique of giving his own identity being inside the whole fiction is one of the most important aspects of metafiction: of breaking the fourth wall and encouraging the reader that this is simply a construct and a means of sharing ideology and a plethora of ideas. But herein lies the next issue: I am merely standing on the shoulders of giants and search avidly to advance an original metafictional response of my own. In *White Teeth*, Smith's humour was celebrated and marketed on the fact that it was generous and big-hearted and the diagrams throughout the text are included obviously for hyperbolic comedic effect but also act as a deliberate jarring note: they scream artificiality and are wholly out of sorts with the articulate and highly developed language. I have utilised this principal in 'Author' alongside using the Foster Wallace style of footnotes to add context and to engage the reader in an alternate style of communication which implores that the text not be taken too seriously.

Alisha Avaloff's fraught relationship with Bokka prevents her from eating a balanced diet; the emphasis on the very narrow range of food she consumes stands in clear contrast to his healthy appetite. Despite her solid, upper middle-class upbringing, she exists solely on instant meals, heated in the microwave which she usually consumes alone. Bokka contemptibly taunts her, 'With all of these new chefs on TV, couldn't you embrace the all-new Britishness and cook something nice for a change?' Eating frozen pizza not only blurs the boundaries between child and grownup, but also introduces a male characteristic – by

refusing to take on a traditional female role in the kitchen, she retaliates against Bokka's expectations but he erodes even the relationship between food and happiness, and the use of food as a symbol of the diversity of identities. The narrative focuses on Alisha's denial of food and it is intended that the audience are left reeling as to the effects of how Bokka's behaviour is impacting upon his new wife. That he is left staring into an empty fridge is her way of representing a veiled counter strike against Bokka and against the traditional association of domesticity and femininity. Cooking is a way to preserve the richness and variety of local and traditional culture and is critical to establishing, maintaining and handing on cultural practices and social identity. Alisha has very few choices left as she is effectively being stifled by Bokka's toxic masculinity and therefore avoids cooking in an attempt to find some form of redress, however small. Bokka – aggressive and working class, is partly defined by what he eats and drinks. Bars and cafes play a critical role in his attempt to improve his social standing as the importance attached to the local eating place which function as a headquarters inhabited by friends, as opposed to family, reflects the growing liberation from the domestic sphere and traditional family roles.

His self-imposed, shifting identity is indicated when he visits the Hipster Café and despite finding the food bland, he nevertheless attempts to find a fresh start when chatting with the waitress about the writer David Foster Wallace. Ruby portrays eating as an expression of female independence and agency in opposition to gender norms, challenging the cultural expectation of being trim and she begins to put on weight through comfort eating. Paradoxically she enjoys jogging and attending the gym as she rejects the idea of a traditional female partner by imposing her rules upon Bokka, all be it in a dignified and thoughtful manner.

Bokka's social experience manifests a degree of social freedom that the 60's counter-culture wanted to see in mainstream society but pointedly, there is only a single reference to recreational drug use when he is offered a smoke in the prison cell:

A skinny joint is being duly proffered. I'm taken aback but still on the qui vive. This kind of business- the calling the truce business isn't at all within our agreed status quo, but maybe he's right: it's just better to forgive and forget after all. (104)

This is symbolic of Bokka as an emergent property of the society he inhabits; in his society, youthful gender bending and sexual freedom have become expressions of aggressive, anti-social behaviour: a society so pre-occupied with hedonistic pleasure that it seems to have become numb to what is acceptable or even admirable. These conditions create a population that is largely oblivious to much of its own issues: one of the main problems of male working-class sub-cultures, as personified through Bokka, Hardly and Ossifer – who seem to satisfy their desire for pleasure through the brutal domination of others. Poverty may make it harder to conceive decent and honest life-choices but it is incumbent to note that the terrible daily leverage that is ingrained within Bokka and his cell mates can't be absolved because of their class. They are all afforded a moral choice and with this comes moral responsibility and thus, regardless of whether Bokka and his associates are poor or live within a culture which encourages them to brutalise others, they have the freedom to choose otherwise. Bokka and all of the young men within 'Author' need to be held responsible for acts of violence and the often gender-specific brutalisation they can refrain from doing. Given the requisite circumstance, we are all capable of great injustices, thus adding to the ever-widening burden upon society. Booker asserts that,

1984 stands as an eloquent plea that we remember the past and learn from it, that we in modern England and America not forget (and therefore repeat) the excesses of dictators like Hitler and Stalin in our attempts to defend our democratic way of life. (88)

Through 'Author' we understand that given the requisite circumstances, we are all responsible for physiological violence and how this can lead to an inhumane sadism in the way it is predicated in causing females extreme forms of psychological pain. No woman is ever physically assaulted within the story; the text deals with this by illustrating in a variety of physiological different ways, how the more inhumane tendencies of our species are very much a product of our surroundings and learned attitudes and Bokka finally realises this at the behest of Ossifer when they finally reach out to each other:

I looked at Ossifer for the first time with something approaching affection and put my hand on his shoulder and squeezed gently. He glanced back, frowned, then with near perfect diction: 'In valuing only how to argue, we forget how to talk.' He looked sheepish and in a lower tone, that was barely audible whispered, 'Anyways: there's only one person that can drag you down in life.'
'And that's yourself,' I replied, nodding towards the floor. 'I guess I just wanted to stay young forever. Maybe it's time for the change.' (184)

After his prison release, there is a contrived effort on the part of Alisha's mother to further reduce Bokka's identity as a man attempting to reconnect. His return to Dalston and the empty house in which Romani Rooker has purged all traces of her daughter's presence is symbolised through the reconfiguration of the furniture throughout the house. She has effectively purified the environment in an effort to fully remove not just Alisha's existence but her very memory; thus, ruthlessly relaying to Bokka that he is now wholly destitute – as if that part of his life never even happened. Mrs Rooker also triumphantly poses the paradoxical question that a Buddhist monk shares with a novice in order to develop his nature: 'When one can do nothing, what can one do?' The rational mind cannot answer this Zen koan; she has in actuality, informed Bokka that he has been reduced, eunuch like, to a man with no recourse to atone for his past. She inverts the Buddhist doctrine to compound

his failed relationship and uses it as a rhetorical question to further reduce him as a man – not to empower him, as a Zen Master would intend.

Ossifer may be a street philosopher with a cogent understanding of inner-city life but Alisha Avaloff is the only truly decent character within the entire narrative: she is abused and oppressed by everyone that she encounters including her own mother, however, like Ossifer, she constantly holds out for something better and clings tightly to her morality and values. Despite being brutalised, she never allows anyone or anything to fundamentally change her character traits. Despite previously having suitors from her own social sphere being recommended for her, the mother viscosly fans the prospective relationship flames when Alisha meets the postman Harry Hartless: ironically through Bokka's incessant letter writing and providing the literal and figurative meaning of the title. The postman in the tale, being the key deliverer of the message is possibly the most flawed of them all: an uncouth, naïve scrounger who blatantly lies about his wife's demise in order to gain fiscal advantage:

After the house and car assaults, the choleric mail started, marching ark like, apace with the plethora of begging letters. One of them, sans stamp, one of the most amiable in my opinion, has been included, verbatim for your perusal:

Dearest Mr Gunne

Let me be among the very furst to congratulate yew on your ginourmous win. I do too spend my muney on the lotto week in week out and have never won nuffink, not a brass farthing. Please be so kind as to and over sum of your winnings to help bury mi wife and kids who all died two hours ago of consumption. I do live down the road and am just like yew if you please so pop by tomorrow with the loot. Maybe 400 thousand grand would be just enuff to get me thru this orrible time but please feel free to spare more if you like.

If a kid answers the door it is not mine, I have borrowed 4 off my sister to plug this terrible whole left wivvin. I am on suiside watch so mek sure you do the right thing by me.

Cheers then

Harry Hartless

Number 54 Norman Tebbit Crescent (just off the Southgate Road)

After 3 is good for me as im busy being sad every day (123)

So, have I at last discovered a metafictional motif of my own? If the implied author of the story happens to be devoid of any form of emotional intelligence and is barely literate then surely, we ought to be suspicious of his opinions and judgements; to entertain the possibility that maybe he's wrong about the other characters. This could be metafiction as deeply unflattering self-portrait, or it could be a critique of the inherent arrogance of writing characters only to mock them for their shortcomings temporarily disregarding our own. If nothing else there is a *humility* to metafiction in the writer's I'm studying here which I hoped to replicate through my own experimental efforts. One strategy has been to focus upon the settings and architecture within the stories in order to paint a more detailed urbanity, reflective of the characters' emotions and creating word-pictures. Shaw in *The Short Story, A*

Critical Introduction remarks:

Although few short stories, especially in the modern period, depend entirely-or even largely-on a vividly realized setting for their impact, the short-storywriter can make locale play a significant part in his story by a variety of means; these range from straightforward descriptions of landscapes, architecture and geographical position, to oblique evocations of place through dialogue and action. In some cases, setting may be the first element to present itself to the reader's imagination and the last to leave his memory. (150)

The locale within 'Author' through the use of pathetic fallacy, is depicted as grim and squalid, reflecting the human feelings:

The weather is always miserable round our end. Even the rats, the foxes, the ravens and the squirrels have congestive heart disorder from all of the junk food detritus left out everywhere. I even saw a rat dining out on another rat one evening when meandering my way home from the Salty Dog and Lamppost. (164)

Alternatively, we are left with the horrifying thought with what if every man out there is now tyrannical, barbarous and cruel? As we are left to ponder Alisha's future with Harry Hartless, we stifle a shudder but hope, as in Bokka's case that it may lead to a valedictory

experience for all concerned:

So, it looks, after all, that you can reach out towards someone who has done you terrible wrong then you are well on your way to becoming a human being. And I do forgive you Alisha; for what you have done to me: the way you made me love you, the way you made me feel from the very beginning of all this. I truly wish you all the fortune and luck in the world. You're going to need it with that postman. (182)

After Bokka has served a portion of his sentence, the epoch phase of his longed-for redemption begins. The Katana sword was originally purchased by his grandfather in Lincolnshire at a flea market. It is there, the place of his childhood happiness, that Bokka plans to return after selling up and leaving North London, as in his mind at least, he can now return to the Fens. He has earned the masculine right to do so – the places that he remembers so fondly and has finally connected to his paternal line, now rightfully a member of the warrior class, he can begin again, afresh, showing the aspirational side of the working class. Through the recurring theme of pugilism, we are left to consider that no one off the council estate can be as strong as Anthony Joshua or as rich as Tyson Fury; all however, can be like Ossifer, Bokka or Alisha: by trying to survive – by getting up after life continues to knock them down, raising their collective fists and slugging on, regardless.

Chapter Four – Analysis of subliminal accords within *Interviews With Hideous Men* and how key metafictional directives may trigger the beginning of a realignment

Despite my father having foregone education at the age of fourteen, there were several bookcases wedged full of classics in our family home, indicative of his love for reading and self-advancement. This plethora of reading material inculcated a love of literature within me from an early age and whilst I recall the most contemporary being Orwell's *1984* (written in 1948) the vast majority were classics authored by the likes of Robert Louis Stephenson, Willke Collins, Waugh, Bram Stoker, Dickens, Gibbon and Shakespeare. At almost fifty years old, I remained a self-confessed stalwart of the 'Old School' but this predilection morphed radically during the Master's degree at the University of Birmingham with my initiation into post modernism, namely through the short story collection, *Brief Interviews With Hideous Men* by the American author David Foster Wallace. In response to his neoteric branch of metafiction, I had an opportunity to delineate my own potential dynamism as a fledgling writer and Wallace resonated very deeply. This proved to be a spring-board into alternate avenues of material such as Martin Amis, Zadie Smith and Jose Saramago among others: all metafiction writers noted for their epigrammatic analysis of contemporary culture. Interestingly, during the MA, Wallace divided opinion considerably: many of the students found him irrelevant, even elitist, and thus inconsequential. Personally, I found him to be thoroughly inventive, accessible, capricious, and above all redemptive. His metafictional construction not only redirected my literary interests but provided an enhanced approbation of Waugh's novels and I was then able to re-read Waugh in a more enlightened context. Metafiction therefore, has proved a healthy liberation from the classical heritage of

my own childhood but notwithstanding, I have amalgamated various themes within my own vignettes and stories in order to link to the longer established doctrine. Wholly captivated, my freshly-minted introduction to metafiction led me into undertaking the PhD and in the summer of 2019, I augmented the research by travelling to the Harry Ransom Center — an archive library within the University of Texas where I was given liberal access to the collections of Waugh and Wallace²⁰ including handwritten notes and drafts, notebooks, magazine interviews, letters, postcards and filed copies of emails. Obviously, this was a unique opportunity to further discern writing methodology and all hyperbole aside, entering the collection rooms was somewhat akin to a religious experience: waves of nostalgia and something approaching awe descended upon me, the very moment the voluminous files were trolleyed out. So, what exactly was I hoping to achieve other than coming vis a vis with my heroes? Personal aggrandisement? Or to simply defer a long-held enthusiasm dating back to the eighties where I first began to study Waugh as a writer who could inculcate a moral code through his particular brand of satire? From the view of this thesis, primarily I needed to know if I had any kind of synergy with these literary giants and if so, would I be able to draw from their creativity in some way, shape or form? Waugh, Wallace and Amis, all sons of literary men had received world-class educations. My secondary school was the lowest ranking school in the borough and was eventually closed and my father worked in a steel mill so my background is markedly different. Waugh often referred to the working classes as the 'Lower Orders' so our politics for one, are remarkably disparate, but I have changed enormously in the four years that I have been preparing this thesis — I now take a much broader view of society and sincerely hope that my views and aspirations have widened and deepened.

²⁰ A fortuitous coincidence which saved a huge amount of time.

What did I discover? This thesis has been a unique learning journey but remains caged within my background; part of creativity means a simultaneous understanding of one's heritage while being able to break free from it and this ultimately leads to fiction which enables the readership to traverse class barriers and understand varied conceptual inferences. To "break free" meaning to comment on one's own heritage and background as objectively as possible, now being in a position of distance, class and aspirational accomplishment. If we can do this with *ourselves*- or at least try to- then we can bring the same even-handed attitude to others. At the time of beginning the thesis, a key issue in my life was a concern for my girls' futures; namely how they would traverse adolescence and be heedful of potential toxic masculinity and misogyny that they would indubitably encounter. As a teacher, and a fledgling writer of metafiction, I believe it incumbent to be a role model; just as doctors take the Hippocratic Oath, so teachers must acknowledge their obligation in nurturing and developing the minds of our future leaders and therefore should try to live by, and execute values which benefit society as evidenced through the genie within Ali Dunn and the Victorian Lamppost. As Tiffin demonstrates in *Marvellous Geometry: Narrative and Metafiction in Modern Fairy Tale*:

Fairy tale is concerned not so much with personality as with the fact of the quest, and, with it, the illustration of moral absolutes. (15)

In 'Ali Dunn' I wanted to experiment with this idea of the moral absolutes traditionally associated with fairy tales and offer something more ambivalent. *Interviews With Hideous Men* inspired me to write 'Author of His Own Doom' for them primarily: as a premonitory tale but in a darkly humorous way, demonstrating how certain individuals can be thoroughly deceitful and can act in varied, nefarious ways and the writing proved both cathartic and self-revelatory. Further questions were raised in Texas after reading a number of

manuscripts — primarily regarding the nature of the metafictional narrative and whether it is an effective step highlighting the politics of identity and the collective mind-set thus behaves according to banal and predictable patterns. Well written metafiction can be imbued with honesty; it is symbolic of the cultural process of human needs and desires, including self-fulfilment and self-worth can also reveal readers' underlying motivations and therefore potentially, suggests a reconciliation through both subliminal and observable mandates. Christensen argues that,

Metafiction is regarded as fiction whose primary concern is to express the novelist's vision of experience by exploring the process of its own making. This definition indicates that only those works are considered metafiction where the novelist has a message to convey and is not merely displaying his technical brilliance. (11)

Of notable personal interest within the Waugh collection, was a hand-written 1927 *Decline and Fall* manuscript and a body of both professional and personal correspondence between Wallace and his literary agent Bonnie Nadell.²¹ Attempting to analyse and comprehend published work is one thing; original, unedited text is another. But finally, in the unadulterated emails and letters was the evidence I had been searching in order to substantiate my thesis claims: the correspondence offered theories on the role of literature as a tool for societal and cultural change.

Gleaned from a magazine interview from the nineties, Wallace stated that he once had a teacher he liked who used to say, 'Good fiction's job was to comfort the disturbed and disturb the comfortable.' Through reading the copious amounts of printed emails and type-written correspondence, it became evident that he was savvy and pellucid in his observational processes; it was also obvious that he thought that cynicism was cool.

²¹ It was however, alarming to note that one's emails may end up within the public domain after one's demise. For me, this felt rather intrusive.

Wallace's approach was not to suppress irony and cynicism but to embrace and effectively mobilise them as demonstrated within *The Pale King*:

The next suitable person you're in light conversation with, you stop suddenly in the middle of the conversation and look at the person closely and say, "What's wrong?" You say it in a concerned way. He'll say, "What do you mean?" You say, "Something's wrong. I can tell. What is it?" And he'll look stunned and say, "How did you know?" He doesn't realize something's always wrong, with everybody. Often more than one thing. He doesn't know everybody's always going around all the time with something wrong and believing they're exerting great willpower and control to keep other people, for whom they think nothing's ever wrong, from seeing it. (19)

With regards to Foster Wallace's particular brand of metafiction, my research focussed primarily upon *Brief Interviews With Hideous Men*: a collection of vignettes and snapshots which aggressively explore the tendentious politics of modern-day relationships. Wallace creates a series of post-modern voices: immense male narcissists who uniformly nauseate the readership through admissions of appalling behaviour who then go further to compound the offenses by demanding identification and empathy in an almost puerile self-belief. Very few of these characters are given identities, and thus project like generic types rather than distinct individuals. Zadie Smith summed up Wallace's precocious talents succinctly in her essay 'In Memoriam on David Foster Wallace,'

When I taught *Brief Interviews* to college kids I made them read it alongside Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling*. The two books seem like cousins to me. Both find black comedy in hideous men who feel themselves post-love, post-faith, post-everything. (2)

Conversely, 'The Devil is a Busy Man' presents a one-page snapshot of amusing surrealism and cynicism surrounding the disposal of superfluous household goods: the protagonist's father finds it difficult to dole out his surplus household items, even when offered free of charge but when a bargain price is levied, people become injected with an impassioned zeal and drive long distances to purchase the items:

Then oftentimes folks called up the first day the *Trading Post* run the notice and up and come out from town and even would haul in from further out in some other little towns that got the *Trading Post* and pull up spraying gravel and scarce even look at the item and press on daddy to take the 5 or \$10 right away before any other folks could take it... (59)

In this story, giving has become impossible: the father figure can't give away an old tiller, even free so he charges a few dollars in order for someone to find value in it then they will come to collect. This snapshot tale resonated with me by prompting a memory of my father from when we lived on the council estate, back in the nineteen seventies. Being a passionate collector of automobilia and having a generous disposition, he occasionally offered spare car and motorcycle parts free of charge to whoever could utilise them but oftentimes the items would sit inside the workshop, collecting dust. When he conjured a bargain price out of the air, the parts were snapped up immediately. Wallace's humour and insight stuck a chord: hyper articulate, self-mocking, ironical, and above all, almost pathologically self-aware — it was something that I instantly understood: that shock of recognition, of a fleeting age of warm fellowship and sharing, possibly a common feeling for those of us born in the 1960s and brought up to reuse and restore rather than cast off and buy new.

Another metafictional concept is that many of Wallace's stories abound with footnotes— these empower ironic self-reference to the point where they perhaps defeat the very purpose of the stories as they become saturated with the authorial voice: indubitably the point, but the majority are ingeniously funny and conceal surprising insights into various quirks and self-deceptions of consumer society. An example of this is illustrated through the absurdities in which genders will view each other askance as seen in *ADULT WORLD* (1):

What precipitated the young wife's sudden blinding epiphany was her abandonment of mentation in favour of concrete and frantic action. * (151)

The footnote follows with:

* (In this, her epiphany accorded fully with the Western tradition, in which insight is the product of lived experience rather than mere thought.)

The overuse of footnotes illicit a jarring affect and from a metafictional viewpoint, break fresh ground as a further nuance regarding the articulation of ideas (I have utilised footnotes quite extensively in 'I Feed My Children Roadkill') but *Brief Interviews* is imbued with energy, black as night humour and conceptual rigor: an art form that seems to reach out to individuals with a keen eye for subtext and allegorical allusion and presented in a modern, satirical vernacular where bridges to other forms of literature are traversed and multifarious avenues of possibilities abound. For these reasons, this modus operandi resonated within me: both as a working-class male and as a fledgling writer, establishing my own voice.

In one excruciating tale, the hideous man lovingly names his malformed arm 'The asset' because of its ability to cynically manipulate the sensitivities of women in bars and to evoke pity. His underlying motivation is of course to generate a sexual liaison; he even boasts of the additional leverage that this handicap has afforded him but remains seemingly unfazed, regarding the cumbrous psychological damage that he is inflicting. This short story shares the same name of the book's title and features a narrator who is not just unquestionably ignorant but who, according to Holland in *Mediated Immediacy in Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*, Wallace:

...explores the degree to which men's sexual desire for women taints and often prevents any attempts by men to extend empathy, or anything like their "true" selves, to women because of the fraught interplay between language, desire, and power. (108)

Despite a sense of mordant humour demonstrated throughout, the overall discourse is a tragic one, indicating a lapse of self-dignity and empathy:

And I'll start hanging back with this one or that one, and after a while the first stage is I'll start in to telling them how I got the name Johnny One-Arm and about the arm. That's a stage of the thing. Of getting some pussy using the Asset. (70)

Although the narrator hasn't used threats against any of the women, he has objectified and exploited them by utilising a tactic of vulnerability as a weapon of seduction; he exposes himself as subverting the feelings of those with susceptible inclinations and perversely, utilising their own sensitivity and decency against them. In an era of toxic cynicism regarding Britain's ongoing debates of institutionalised racism and widespread misogyny, it is simple to access the toxicity of these minds laid bare: indeed, the tone and subtext become more pertinent over time and are especially germane in the post MeToo era, the need for recalibration and the long-awaited equilibrium.

Wallace delights in leftfield observation and exhibits a wry sense of humour which is a vital avenue both in and towards satirizing these offensive viewpoints. His portraits are capacious thumbnail sketches: his men are deeply misogynistic; his women are systematic victims but the portraits are intrinsically acerbic. The commentary is firmly upon the modern: that of the narcissistic and the vainglorious and the entire volume abounds with stupefying portraits of 'hideous men,' who reveal through a series of interviews (though they are lacking in self-awareness) that they are indeed, vile misogynists and miscreants, oxymoronically designed both to repulse and acquaint. In capacious terms, these vignettes are feminist although naming them such is almost reductive, since the men from *Interviews With Hideous Men* are keenly aware not only of the controversial nature of the subject matter, but of the problematic nature of the narrative's very existence. Holland states:

Many of them consist of men manipulating a woman, their interviewer, into doing their sexual and/or emotional bidding, and/or further forgiving them for their objectifying behavior, underscoring the structural and thematic challenge Wallace proposes to confront. For these men, irony—in its modernist meaning of saying the opposite of what one means in order to express a separate truth, or, to put it another way, lying with purpose—*works*, in bitter, nasty ways. (117)

As in *Money*, we may rightly consider whether it is inappropriate to sensationalize such misogyny, even if the overall message critiques societal gender roles but these stories written from the perspective of damaged men powerfully succeed, despite the subject matter being indefensible, horrendous and deeply uncomfortable. For reasons of clarity, insight and of paramount importance, self-awareness, the material demands readers to be conflicted, disturbed and even mortified. From these sound-bites, we note then that Wallace is essentially a moral writer just as Amis claimed of himself, 'I have strong moral views, and they are very much directed at things like money and acquisition. I think money is the central deformity in life, as Saul Bellow says, it's one of the evils that has cheerfully survived identification as an evil.' (104)

Indubitably, 'Brief Interviews' will be deeply offensive to those who have ever been used or manipulated by another human being; by focusing upon the absurd and the surreal within our coexistence however, Wallace, as Waugh and Amis provide opportunities to reform and self-purify through the calculated initial trauma then self-identification then hopefully by inner reflection and self-hypothesis. Wallace's darkly arresting prose eloquently demonstrated an ability to be able to create and occupy spaces within his own community and far beyond. This galvanising effect is indicative of unique material which has inspired me to utilise the ethical considerations of Waugh's moralistic satire whilst undertaking post-modern research into twenty first century writing and disciplines. We must address the fact that there is an inherent danger of deeply offensive material through

the effect of extreme satire as the writer may very well get the balance wrong. Clearly, as a problem-solving issue for the metafictionalist and for my own writing, I am undertaking a number of risks. As part of the decision-making process, I looked deeply into re-writing parts of 'Author' in the Amis style of intentional crudeness but found it very difficult in attempting to second-guess the reader's responses. Foster Wallace is a writer who both confirms and illustrates this challenge through his originality and dark sense of humour. Borrell-Porter, Costa-Font and Julia Philip explore themes of raising daughters decreases the father's likelihood to hold traditional values through the neoteric *The Mighty Girl Effect* and there springs a number of underlying questions: what can men change about themselves to show a greater solidarity with women? The authors set out to find whether:

Using a British nationally representative longitudinal survey spanning two decades, we examine whether rearing daughters changes parental attitudes towards gender norms, and more specifically, attitudes towards the traditional male breadwinner norm in which it is the husband's role to work and the wife's role to stay at home. (1)

They further confirm their hypothesis by highlighting:

The social category *traditional man*, for example, prescribes that individuals identifying as such are the breadwinners of the household, and therefore, their economic activity ought to take place outside the household. Consistently, if an individual's actions (e.g., contributing significantly to household work at home) would conflict with the prescribed behavior of a traditional gender role, this would yield disutility. Conversely, the social category *traditional woman* is associated with home labor, and a woman's actions conflicting with that role conflict with her social identity, and produce disutility. However, the adoption of different gender roles is still largely to be understood, and this paper attempts to contribute to such endeavor. (3)

Suicide as a Sort of Present relates the story of a woman filled with a deep self-loathing due to her belief that she is a failure and sums up the cry of our age: where the objective seems to be that an ordinary life is no longer valued. Wallace's subtext suggests that we are judged on earning power and job titles, looks and style and ever-increasing

material accumulation is now the gateway to the power and acknowledgement that we all crave. The possibilities for humiliation are so much greater if we are not successful or have not done something extraordinary. The physiological sincerity within the piece is profound and Wallace had enough insight into his own despair to conversely understand that it was very close to the heart of his psyche and the prosperity and freedom into which he was born. Kelly writes in his paper *David Foster Wallace and New Sincerity Aesthetics*:

Wallace's fiction consistently dramatises the negative consequences of paranoid reading—how it leads to the kind of solipsistic loop Sedgwick identifies—alongside the difficulties that attend any move to reparative reading. Indeed, it is particularly the way reparative reading can be mobilized and exploited by white males that is the central focus of *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*. Throughout this collection, the hideous men being interviewed have an overtly paranoid relation to their own behaviour, interrogating what they have done in the past and are likely, on that basis, to continue doing in the future. (9)

In the Western Hemisphere, the desire to commit suicide is often a consequence, not of impotence, but of power. Suicide is a privilege and entitlement breeds despair and rage:

The point is that, from an early age as she could recall, this mother-to-be loathed herself. She viewed everything in life with apprehension, as if every occasion or opportunity were some sort of dreadfully important exam for which she had been too lazy or stupid to prepare properly.' (241)

The footnote to this is: 'Her parents, by the way, did not beat her or ever even really discipline her, nor did they pressure her.' Most will lead an ordinary life and this is no longer good enough. An ordinary life is now humiliating so we now feel so inadequate it may cause us to suffer from an epidemic of suicidal thoughts where tragically, many are taking this through to a horrific conclusion. Likewise, through 'Author' I have hoped to articulate why many working men may encounter physiological trauma such deep rage; of being so defensive and feeling misunderstood much of the time when faced with news that they

cannot comprehend or what can make them feel pressurised when their freedoms are already under threat. *The Mighty Girl Effect* is referenced in the prison scene where Bokka is informed that his former partner is expecting a daughter and how it may civilise and humanise him further:

‘So you ready for round two?’ She looked through her heavily blued eyelids and massacred lashes that you could sweep the floor with.
‘Round one was the knockout round.’
‘I’m pregnant,’ she said flatly. ‘And I really pray that it’s a daughter. Maybe she will do you some good. They say that girls have a softening effect on bozzos.’ So, it looks like there might be another round or two, to go.’ (165)

My short story collection ‘A Diamond Geeza is a Girl’s Best Friend’ and commonalities throughout, resonate with the idea that ordinary working men may re-write their own experiences and despite inherited personal flaws and political oppression may advance their experiences and life trajectories. One of the conclusions drawn from *The Mighty Girl effect* is:

Understanding the formation of gender role attitudes is key to tackling a major part the origin of gender related inequalities. Against the backdrop that attitudes start to form early in life, we show that gender role attitudes among men are modified by the parenting of daughters. Indeed, parenting daughters increases the likelihood of adopting less traditional gender norms. Specifically, we find that this effect is driven by fathers with children who are at least of school age. The findings are robust to a number of alternative specifications and robustness checks. For mothers, we find that the association between having daughters and gender role attitudes is not robust. (13)

We are left with pertinent questions of what can we personally do to address the culture of toxic masculinity and male fragility? How do we begin examining ourselves in a compensatory light and realigning ourselves to becoming consummate beings? How can we be our best selves? Well-constructed metafiction, can affect a reader on a number of levels and thus, hopefully the readership should be able to

recognise inherent themes within their own lives and take meaningful lessons from them. Hering states in *Consider David Foster Wallace* that:

...Wallace often made it abundantly clear that it could not simply be a question of contemporary literature's returning to the precise kind of sincerity he saw as informing Dostoevsky's fiction. In one of his last interviews, he claimed that while terms like "moral" and "ethical" concepts that have to do, like sincerity, primarily with not being false to others might be apt for describing the era of Dostoevsky or the European Romantics, these terms have become thorny and problematic for those born in the age of television. (134)

We desire meaningful, heroic adventures; Bokka was never on the ubiquitous hero's journey in the traditional manner— yet he has earned the right to begin to feel more wholesome through the redemptive process that he has eventually embraced. His victories in life were previously based around financial success, pugilism and women but eventually we perceive that Bokka was never quite as ordinary as he initially appeared. He had an inner strength and the conviction to re-invent himself into a more reflective human being who wishes to adapt after acknowledging some, if not all, of his shortcomings. The traits that traditional masculinity is made up of – stoicism, assertiveness and strength are all laudable and a requirement in society to keep it healthy and functioning and he begins to finally understand that there are certain times and places for these.

Impacting upon a reader is the aim of any writer and metafiction can effectively deconstruct then unravel the post-modern dystopia, in part, by avoiding being censorious.

As the martinamisweb.com outlines the connections between Self and Smith:

In the mass-mediated commodity culture Self has temporarily thrived in, advertising and film have engendered a similar effect. Like Winston Smith, the doomed hero of 1984, Self spends most of his narrative discovering that he is trapped—not by a totalitarian state, but in the prison of a debased private culture. "I sometimes think I am controlled by someone," Self says late in his narrative. "But he's not from out there. He's from in here." Near the end of 1984, Winston Smith is led away to "Room 101," where he is threatened with torture and loses his last shreds of freedom and dignity. It is no accident that Self's expensive New York hotel room, arranged for him

by Fielding, has the same number.

Metafictional writing as a form of reflection is a central theme within my project; this particular style foregrounds self-consciousness whereas Irvine Welsh's *Trainspotting*, narrated in the first-person, stream-of-consciousness style in a combination of Scots dialect and standard English, presents instances of toxic masculinity and ruined dreams in a way that almost glorifies the nihilistic horror. Bokka's ongoing self-transformation echoes Renton's attempts at redemption from a murky and seedy character towards a more socially palatable existence. In *Trainspotting*, Renton's partners in both crime and addiction surrender themselves entirely to their habit but following a close encounter with the local magistrate and a near fatal overdose, Renton reinvents himself as a socially responsible and career-minded man. He heads to London where he finds work as an Estate Agent while his friends continue their downward trajectory in Edinburgh. They eventually follow Renton to London and in a final effort to get rich quick, the four remaining friends embark upon a drug deal and the sixteen thousand pounds proceeds are subsequently stolen by Renton who announces his intention once again to reinvent himself as a disciplined subject, transplanted to a new, upwardly mobile and socially acceptable tribe.

In *Neoliberal-Spotting: Reading the Socioeconomic Symptoms of Trainspotting (1996) and T2: Trainspotting (2017)*, Brian Michael Goss opines:

In Renton's famous opening rant in *Trainspotting*, he sardonically narrates successful modern life as the consumerist mission to "[. . .] Choose a fucking big television, choose washing machines, cars [. . .]," among other mass-customized ephemera. Renton's monologue is built around the motif of choosing (he uses the word 18 times) and chimes with neoliberal tenants. (164)

Goss also states that:

Renton's soliloquy at the end of *Trainspotting* echoes the film's opening— albeit, with added cynicism in having “made it,” with a rucksack of stolen money slung over his shoulder. Cascades of consumption are imminent in Renton's rap: I'm gonna' be just like you. [. . .] The washing machine, the car, the compact disc and electric tin opener, good health, low cholesterol, dental insurance, mortgage, starter home, leisure wear, luggage, three piece suite, DIY, game shows, junk food, children, walks in the park, nine to five, good at golf, washing the car, choice of sweaters, family Christmas, indexed pension, tax exemption [. . .] (164)

Renton, Bokka, Alex in 'I Feed My Children Roadkill' and Alex from *A Clockwork Orange* all exist within a society that manifests a degree of social choices, drug use and sexual freedom that espouses much of what the 60's counter-culture wished to see incorporated into the mainstream. In 'Author', recreational drug use is commonplace within the prison system but is not referenced anywhere else within the text, suggesting, albeit subliminally, that such vices are a crutch; a prop to offer solace and chemically induced happiness to those who cannot rely wholly upon their own strength of character to navigate life. Conversely, within 'I feed My Children Roadkill' there is a bitter message of harsh consequences: that ungoverned drug use can lead to a total mental collapse.

We note lucidly that Bokka is an emergent property of the society he inhabits: sexual freedom, uber-masculinity and jealousy of success have become expressions of aggressive, anti-social behaviour. This is a society that almost eroticises male-on-female psychological aggression (Bokka, Harry, the theatre director and Johnny Spike) with little, if any, critical reflection. Poverty may make it harder to make good choices but it is a society so pre-occupied with hedonistic pleasure that it seems to have become numb to what should be considered acceptable. Naturally, when we consider the scenes of brutality and dark humour grounded in such deplorable human motives, it is easy to think the stories may even endorse horrendous violence and misogyny. Because the texts are mesmerising, we feel we have to absolve the characters of this charge in an easy, simplistic way so naturally, we accept a safe reading of the stories that absolves it of its dangerous exploration of these uneasy connections. We accept verbatim, the words of the creators but within metafiction, the writer challenges even his own thought processes and motivations and thus, the readership are invited to evaluate their own principals and moral philosophy. These stories

show us how we are all capable of being monsters and they show how our most monstrous incarnations have human qualities that are desirable too.

Whilst examining man's lusts, frailties and unceasing acrimony, Waugh, Amis and Wallace remind through their moral precocity that we are made for a much greater commonality and are undoubtedly falling far short of the ideal. By focusing upon the absurd and the surreal within the everyday, humdrum and banal, these writers seek to provide opportunities to reform and purify through varied and grotesque caricatures of modernity.²² Bokka was not made for greatness nor doomed to tragedy; he was created to reflect us all in our requisite need to recognise our inherent flaws, acknowledge these traits, however painful or challenging that may be, then moderate our behaviour in order to impact positively upon society and thus ensure that it becomes a better place for others to inhabit.

²² One of the targets of modern irony is the supposed self-improvement through consumerism and the happiness associated through financial gain: advertising that creates consumer needs from people's insecurities about their bodies is perhaps just as problematic as misogyny.

Chapter Five - Conclusion

i. Metafiction and the Art of Reformation

The aim of the dissertation was to fuse academic investigation with creative writing practice in an attempt to add perspective and an awareness of metafiction being a unique engine for societal change.

I focussed on the following areas of research:

- 1) The utilisation of metafiction as an embodiment of societal learning, partly through the use of toxic and damaged characters.
- 2) Interpret then utilise selected literary values of Evelyn Waugh, Martin Amis and David Foster Wallace in order to incorporate ethical considerations and sub textual references within the range of my own metafiction texts. What are the virtues of realism verses metafiction?
- 3) In terms of subliminal reference, would the readership relate better to the invisible or visible author?
- 4) How can the writer avoid sermonising, when attempting to rationalise and convey a meaningful proposition?

I confirmed that metafiction can fundamentally highlight issues and dilemmas pertaining to the post-modern dystopia and demonstrated that this particular mode of literature can impact immeasurably upon the psyche of the readership in terms of self-reflection and awareness while confronting personal preconceptions.

Metafiction and its use in highlighting the contemporary human condition has been a major theme in this study. Toxic masculinity and misogyny are discussed candidly throughout *Author*, including the idea of redemption in which the protagonist slowly acknowledges and identifies society's foibles and his own innate weaknesses. *Money: A Suicide Note* may not automatically sit within the genre of metafiction; it does however, contain a plethora of metafictional devices and is viewed widely as a remarkable contribution to the literary world.²³

Evelyn Waugh specialised in walking a tightrope regarding his appraisal of civilisation and savagery: suggesting that the demarcation lines had already become blurred within the early nineteen thirties. What then for the post-modern era ninety years on? Is it fair to assume (speaking as a teacher with over twenty years' experience) that we now inhabit an age in which many are concerned with challenging any form of perceived judgement, interference or moral intrusion? An age where people take offense over the most trivial of matters; where we must at all costs, avoid giving offense? This may in part perhaps, spring from being in thrall to celebrity culture where individuals are encouraged to leave behind a legacy thus placing enormous pressure on the younger generation to 'succeed' as discussed in chapter four and throughout 'Author.' Therefore, the implementation of subliminal morality and ethics — is not only vital but there is an empirical need for empathy and connecting in a very gentle context. The subtle use of irony can be lost so we must utilise other forms of literature in order to convey deeper understanding.

What have I found? What has come out deepened? What has been clarified?
Through this discussion, a recalibration has taken place: of the fundamental need to re-

²³ It is placed within the top one hundred novels between 1923 and 2005 day according to *Time Magazine*.

evaluate my own ideals and morality but also to present an undertone of shared values, due in part, to modern audiences being perhaps disinclined to accept moralising shibboleths.

This line of inquiry was further explored in the deconstruction of *Money, A Handful of Dust, Brief Interviews With Hideous Men* and 'Author of His Own Doom' in which I sought to represent the concerns of my own grass roots genealogy and how this plays a role in determining and defining certain working class men as discussed in chapter two. The practice of generating this thesis, both academic and creative, can be perceived as a critical examination of certain politics behind representations of working-class masculinity utilising a demonstration of a need to break free and rise: in so far that there is an incorporation of ethical considerations through the grotesque and absurd within the fictions. All creative structure is obviously apt to interpretation and the reader will use their own personal experience and ideology to contemplate and cross reference.

The metafictional response to the problem of how to represent impermanence and a sense of chaos imitates the experience of living within the contemporary world but leaves us bewildered in how we comprehend, then tackle the enormity of societal breakdown and we are presently facing unprecedented times which our children and the newly emerging generation are being submitted and baton like, forced to inherit.

Writing 'Author' was an experiment and therefore a challenge: the characters are intentionally left under-developed, suggestive of lacking social and emotional development while some of the humour is deliberately written to fall flat as insecure people often embarrass themselves when seeking recognition and this was phrased to be as brutally true to life as possible. This further added to serve the metafictional element of Wallace's theory evidenced from *Conversations with David Wallace*:

If what's always distinguished bad writing--flat characters, a narrative world that's clichéd and not recognizably human, etc..is also a description of today's world, then bad writing becomes an ingenious mimesis of a bad world. (23)

Robinson, in the scholarly journal *Pulp, Parody, Repetition and the Cut-Up Renaissance*, addresses an adjacent line of thought with regards to Stewart Home, in so far that 'bad writing' can galvanise understanding in relation to a metafictional take of the contemporary world:

Home comments that "there's no success like failure" (Home 1997c: 59), his stated intention is "to write bad books as far as literary criticism goes since what I aim to do is go way beyond literature" (Home 2005b: 60). (P203)

Robinson then expounds, further addressing the relationship between author and reader, relating Home's view on literary appropriation:

Yet Home's mixing, referencing and re-presentation presents a theoretical conundrum. One could perceive them as a means of reflecting typical postmodern values of depthlessness. Home has stated that through his appropriation, his work reveals the myth of "originality" in a typically postmodern manner, explaining that "the only way to move forward with fiction, is to accept the developments of modernism and post-modernism and run with that." (P212)²⁴

Holland, on *Brief Interviews With Hideous Men* relates that:

Most essentially, the book continues his rejection of postmodernism's unproductive irony in favor of a return to sincerity through metafiction. But to this concern about irony, *Brief Interviews* adds an unflinching critique of narcissism as an impediment to empathy and sincerity, most often as wielded by men in solipsistic "relationship" with women. (107)

Studying Wallace's writing was vital to me as an author of metafiction with working class origins. Prior to beginning the thesis, I understood that my writing would draw inspiration from the variegated characters that I had befriended in my formative years and through the

²⁴ In future studies, this is a writer whose work I will be engaging with.

inquiry, I have realised that the topic is far broader than first anticipated. I noted early on that my preferred reading material was almost always authored by men; the culture that I hailed from in the Black Country was Androcentric so further investigation into feminist writing may have perhaps added a balance or deepened my research. I considered Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* as the third novel to research as opposed to *Brief Interviews*; this may have been more pertinent in the sense that all three authors would have been British and a greater equilibrium between male and female authorship could have been generated but as it was Wallace who impacted so greatly and altered my direction as both reader and author, I thought it pertinent to stay focussed upon his work.

By mirroring society through the collection of vignettes *A Diamond Geeza is a Girl's best Friend* — so named as it reinterprets the well-known misogynistic cliché this implies a deeper subtext which hopefully now bears a meaningful relevance to my intrinsic motivations. The aspiration was to directly impact upon the readership by inculcating a sense of rejuvenation and alignment; it would however, be deeply patronising to suggest that the reader is in need of an epiphany being foisted upon them. As emphasised in chapter two however, due to the alteration of communal thinking, we need at least to recognise the reality of the post-modern world and be able to rise above the banal and formidable towards a greater and more collective consciousness. Therefore, the fictions are imbued throughout with loathsome characters, mirroring a dark and unforgiving post-modern world which the readership is encouraged to reflect upon.

The research within this study has had a deep impact on my creative process and personal growth: it has not only inspired me to create work focusing on the area of toxic masculinity but it has also enabled the development of my created male characters giving me a deeper understanding of their significance and resonance within the narrative of

metafictional writing. Any bias exhibited towards metafictional writers in terms of being elitist or highbrow, has encouraged me to be audacious with my fiction, and not to be reticent when producing scenes that narrate every part of a character's life, from relationship trials and tribulations to mental breakdown and ultimately clarity of vision and the long-needed epiphany. *A Diamond Geeza is a Girl's Best Friend* is written for as wide as an audience as possible but if it is working men who relate to the lives of the characters, it means that they will recognise the men find themselves thrust into, the societal pressures they face, and the part that gender expectation has to play. This has helped establish my authorial intent and voice.

ii: My Brand of Metafiction as a Progressive Form of Reformation Utilising Subliminal

Accords

As discussed with Doctors Luke Kennard and Elsa Braekkan Payne, work of an experimental ilk shoulders the potential to miss the mark; the project did indeed lead into uncharted territory and I had little idea how the work would eventually culminate. The writing took shape from personal experience, feelings and observations rather than any technical cognizance and it is essential to note that a certain amount of discomfort while contemplating the material is obligatory if I am to move forward. Change is always a little uncomfortable but inevitable for a healthy, forward-looking society and always begins with the individual.

A major source of this investigation was an awareness that metafiction can be utilised to modulate the identity and ideals of the readership through the use of subliminal interactions. Just as advertising and music contain hidden messages (as included in 'Author' where the magician explains to Bokka how advertising subverts the will of the consumers and music plays a part in manipulating conscious choice) questions inevitably arise and forces certain cohorts of the readership to confront themselves and their own behaviour. The readership is urged to consider: do they feel true belonging within their society and what happens when they look at inherited cultural norms from an alternate perspective? Initially, what can be a rather harrowing but ultimately significant venture is embarked upon in terms of the deconstructive and healing; therefore, the art of telling the truth eloquently is more easily interpreted through metafictional realms. Through demonstrating the differences between the real and the sublime and exploring themes of being a British working-class male in the twenty first century, I have begun to reference the political and community imbalance that exists within British culture. Ruby Roo attempts to reach out one final time to Bokka in prison and he coldly snubs her; afterwards she chooses to live by herself as W.G. Hamley's view that single women have learned to 'Prefer their own company to the society of the vulgar, ill-tempered or illiterate.' (17)

Works of metafiction underscored by subliminal ethics should be accepted as political works of art and both *Money* and *Brief Interviews With Hideous Men* should be duly noted for their far-reaching effects. Wallace is a worthy inheritor of both Waugh (who had satirised the aristocracy so brilliantly seventy years earlier) and Amis who had underscored the eighties with his discernment of phobia, anxiety, compulsion and mania. The metafictionist may create a world for their characters that mirror society and as such, seek redemption through

the microscopic gaze into the Western underbelly.

Literature has long been considered *the* major boon for mankind; one of the world's preeminent apparatus and bequests, elevating humanities' ranking and ensuring elevates mans' authority, magnanimity and the onus of responsibility as vicegerent and was developed to alleviate suffering; to guide, empower and imbue a higher understanding of both the empirical and history itself. Indeed, the very reason that literature existed, was in Plato's view to provide moral guidance and elevation and as Plato opined, 'Books give a soul to the universe, wings to the mind, flight to the imagination, and life to everything.'

Waugh acknowledged the aura of religion as a guiding light being gradually stripped from the world by secularism, Amis tackled consumerism of the late twentieth century and Wallace later completed the ellipsis left by Waugh for our post-modern age insofar as morality and ethics can be amalgamated within our collective DNA by utilising the unwritten precondition that the reader will be left to draw their own conclusions and perhaps act upon them accordingly. Being a moralising philosopher within the realms of metafiction must be avoided but if UK culture is to recuperate and find a commonality of purpose, we need a deeper frame of reference for what is valuable and reputable. Perhaps in these confusing times we simply require nostalgia and escapism to weather the political storms but if we undervalue the future, we have little moral grasp of how our actions may affect those around us and subsequent generations. My notion of the need for subliminal ethics is important as people are encouraged to succeed and continue to drive forward in a never-ending effort to break away from the pack. Advertisers have long used undercurrents of persuasion to sell products and a code of ethics can be gently administered in our times to bring us back to centre. What I hope to have illustrated in this portfolio and critical thesis

is that metafiction, far from the exclusionary and elitist pastime of literary aesthetes and elevated experimental writers speaking only to one another, is actually the first method we might turn to – for its self-awareness, its honesty to its reader and, ultimately, its humility – when we seek to console the maligned or provoke the comfortable.

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Author of *His Own Doom*

a modern novelette

Breakfast time already. And under Battleship Grey skies, it's hard for anyone to feel chipper about anything for more than a few pinging minutes. Purpose is one of the main pre-requisites to happiness, yes? But in *here*? Anything you do or try or feel is akin to rearranging deckchairs on the Titanic.

Goldie's *Inner-City Life* is dribbling feebly out of the ramshackle plastic box which is trying its best to pass itself off as a radio and Lawrence Ossifer- one half of the duo known throughout C Block as Lawrence and Hardly (competent) has decided to reach out once again and touch me, where no one else can quite reach. Once again, he is advancing his own brand of fakelore: meandering tales of how all the pigeons of this divided nation actually belong to her majesty and why golf is an anachronism of something. Being all of nineteen, I don't expect too much from him in terms of insight. All I want, all I *need* right now, is to wrench the subject onto something, anything else, as my ears are beginning to bubble and squeak. Luckily, he has a chin installed by Everest Windows, so he can't cause too much stress.

I'm Bokka Gunne, the eldest of four. And yes, I know what you're thinking, before you have even think it. Do *you* by any chance, have a peculiar name? Maybe try it out for a while; just to see how the hoi polloi react. Move away, out of your comfort and zone; somewhere new then make up a fresh, bizarre name for yourself. Why not go the whole hog and change it legally by deed poll if you really want to feel that 'Other?' I was with a girl at school called Terry Dacktill. And a lad up the road in Islington was named Richard Head by his insightful parents. Yep; try to imagine that over your morning wake up juice. So maybe

Bokka Gunne isn't quite so... With a name like this, you really have to ejaculate your mark over life's fabric: that's kind of what the career lady back at college told me anyway.

But fast forward a few years to my thirty third name day and my wholly original moniker, and uber-revolutionary style is being cramped and crinkled by this darkly-comedic pair who are now my nearest but certainly not dearest. Every single interaction is a bull fight, a Jamaican game of dominoes: best avoided unless you happen to be the proverbial dog's objects. They really should stop being so flaky and learn how to twirl a little more.

Lucifer, as he was immediately christened by some of the more imaginative lags upon disembarkation, hasn't really taken to me in a fluffy, kitten-stroking kind of way. Putting it mildly, we haven't seen eye to eye as yet; but what we have agreed upon, is a great deal of nose to nose. Oh, there have been fist fights, knee fights, elbow fights, head butt fights, glowering and glaring, staring and swearing fights, cash on delivery, IOU and compound interest fights. I have, you will doubtlessly be pleased to hear, managed to hold my own in each and every one of these pugilistic remunerations, mainly due to a long gone, semi-professional boxing father who took me under his wing for three whole years, beginning on my tenth birthday, before suddenly doing one with the shameless blond who used to be the secretary of the gym. While Pops was there, he schooled me in sparring, hooks, counters and dodging and weaving with the result that I could face down many a bad boy with consummate ease. A life of crime is exciting but the downside is that nothing else afterwards comes near; the search for a substitute high will always be long in the making. It's really useful, being useful, and in here you are at least granted something of a choice:

Be the butcher. Or be the meat.

But it's the sheer aggro that comes along; primarily due, when you aren't in with the in-crowd. Lucifer maintains several dyed in the wool amigo-type friendships so it's best not to stick it to him more than is humanely necessary. Also, he has managed to carve his name acrostically, in flaming letters, into the lore of the prison very quickly by:

Larging it good and proper due to a well-respected crime
Utilising the system and milking, milking, milking
Casually fits right in: he is street with a capital S
Irascible and contemptuous towards authority
Fully connected with the prison aristocracy
Entreats one and all to partake in his gambling systems
Rowdy and pedantry when his human rights are tickled up

I have to watch my back. And front, and sides-both of them, and I've only been in here for two weeks. Chisident Brampton, the place is called by the by. If you're ever passing this way, please pop by and bring me whatever you can. Maybe a...

**Fortnum and Mason fruit cake,
Bottle of 84 Chateau Margau,
Leather-bound set of Dickens**

Actually, I'm not being at all serious; I read about them in *Country Life* in the mother in law's front room a few months back and thought they sounded pretty good-what decent people must have on their to-do list to make themselves feel, well, you know.

Lucifer is several floors short of a piss-stained tower block but never misses an opportunity to formulate distress. His friendlier than usual, morning acknowledgment sharks over: eyebrows raised, cracked grin straining through the cracked skin and this raises my defences like a greased drawbridge during a Middle Ages siege. I await, coiled like a spring, getting ready to pour the burning oil over the walls and to kick away those smouldering ladders.

'Me juss eard from 'Ardly 'ere dat iss your birfday. Me know wha iss like to be lock up on dem special hocassion. So less call it a truce for the nex twenty-four 'our! Juss like dem

German an' Hinglan bway in dem trenches on Christmas day when dey played de footie match togedder, seen?'

A skinny joint is being duly proffered. I'm taken aback but still on the qui vive. This kind of business- the calling the truce business isn't within our agreed status quo at all. But maybe he's right: it's just better to forgive and forget after all. That gnarly scholar, the one in the cell below, in his impromptu lecture said that it's just as haram to bare a grudge as it is to neck a bacon sarnie- so there you go.

Here I am, suppressing a biting prejudice, but on the very cusp of lighting up the reefer anyway. Ossifer the Bangladeshi/Jamaican tool: the two cultures sat wide-eyed, rigidly upright upon the front seats and mashed together in the inevitable head-on collision with no deployment of airbags or even seat-belts to impede the forthcoming crunchy. Eventually the Jamaican side shrilly clawed its way out of the twisted wreckage and triumphed in its Frankensteinian radioactive glow, to delight in the destruction of the locale and far beyond.

He duly observes my reluctance but his single shoulder shrug and gappy grin make their presence felt. The two front teeth missing, no doubt kicked out by a publicly spirited champion in the heat of battle take me back briefly to our neighbour back in Dalston, sans teeth, sans eyes, sans everything. Ossifer slips off his bunk and looks me straight in the icy blues. Hardly contributes a match and I hesitantly light up and take a couple of quick puffs. An attempt to return Ossifer's shining new-felt kindness in a reciprocal gesture of humanity and kinship is gently rebuffed.

'Naa man: iss *your* birthday giff-it's *all* for yous. You henjoy dat an mek it last a while, seen? Don't forget to inale reeeeeally deeply ya 'ere? All a dem troubles will soon be crawlin' away off yer back.'

I blink my bewildered appreciation and offer a toke to Hardly. He begins to reach out with short, podgy fingers but Ossifer almost imperceptibly sucks his teeth so it is deftly returned untouched, sans emotion, sans words. The inner guard is well and truly standing to Para attention now and that feeble, inner voice of reasonable doubt, that voice muffled by the heavy blanket of potential camaraderie is now cat wailing in the alley under a strawberry moon.

‘What’s inside this thing? Tell me right now or...’

My eyes drop south half a degree: his wispy moustache has vanished; the upper lip is as clean as polished glass. The vapid Cheshire Pussy grin breaks out while his bony shoulders begin to heave in silent mirth. I squint over at Hardly with a feeble invocation for restorative justice but he blandly delivers the non-sequitur,

‘He who lives longest sees most’

Is he referring to himself? Or perhaps my own thoroughly undeserved jail term? Or is he alluding to the fact that Ossifer has been on the sharp end of not so much an upbringing but a jagged wrenching up? Or did he just read this in the *Daily Mirror* over a steaming plastic mug of weak tea?

After they leave for a little yardy exercise, I slide down onto the floor with my head viced between my hands. The shock, that shock like a dull blow upon an unhealed bruise has finally hit me and the pellucid dogma tells me that without a shadow of a doubt:

The headmaster has hopped it.

The pilot has passed out.

The breakdown truck has broken down.

.....

Night-time. Ossifer has finally fizzed down a rung and I actually find myself vaguely interested in his gabble for once. This guy gnaws away at my very inwards and the will to exist withers via the constant stream of clichés that pour like a fountain from his gummy mouth. ‘Life’s a bitch and then you marry one, women are just like hurricanes...’ But not now, so much.

Hardly told me on the very first day that the prison is only a stone’s throw away from where he was nabbed rioting on the night when virtually the whole of London went up like it was September 1666. He was filmed by umpteen cameras, from many trajectories, happily lobbing half enders through some choice Pawn Shop window before his co-conspirators reduced it all to a smouldering pile of twisted rafters. After that, his brief couldn’t muscle up much of a defence, but at least he’s still within earshot of his own neighbourhood. I have been quiet for half an hour with the blanket over my face and they both think I have slunk away to the Land of Nod.

‘What did you *really* do, to end up here then Oss? No crap now mate.’

‘Is dat moron asleep?’

Moron??? I’m an oxymoron pal...

Hardly gently implores him on. His guard momentarily slips along with the Patois; not exactly RP but only very slightly off-piste. Yet he is strangely reluctant to answer and goes around the houses a while.

To misquote Oscar Wilde: those that can, do; those that can't, talk bollocks. So, to fill in the ellipsis, Hardly begins counting up friends now defunct due to existential excesses of varied proportions:

Two from imbibing too much distilled beverage

Two from having too much cancer

Three from having too many skips and lampposts hitting them when enjoying the company of their motor cycles

One from having too much water in the lungs after attempting to swim a canal whilst wearing a crash helmet

One from having too great a quantity of paracetamol in his blood after being informed that he would never gain the upper hand of Parkinson's

Three from having too much sharpened steel deftly inserted into their stomachs, ribs and a jugular by obliging assailants

These now defunct beings seem to galvanize Ossifer and he cuts through to the very veritas. After another long pause he states simply, 'I never knew how much I loved my sister until she had gone. She was a library book.'

'Huh?'

'Only here on loan. Had to be returned.'

'Oh.'

I very nearly get up and hug the twat. Instead, like the man wot I am, I just gulp a couple of times and wait for a little more to come seeping out of the enzymatic cracks.

Lawrence Ossifer-Khan had it twisted and snapped off from an early age. A pickled father, a drug addicted mother; he was farmed out to granny and it was under her tutelage that the strangely old-fashioned way of speaking was embedded, then honed later, much later. A good-looking kid with large, hazel eyes but these were guarded; like a hunted animal and this offered him a semblance of pained innocence under the tough exterior which drove the girls into ecstasies at the local comp. That and the inherited speech marked him out in the drama teacher's eyes for something just a little different from the inevitable loan sharks, pubs, clubs and dole.

Off he went to a prestigious, London drama school aged sixteen after a few of the comp staff pooled ideas and resources. One sent off the form on his behalf without him even knowing; another paid the audition fees, one the train fare and hotel while another coached him post school every Monday and Wednesday for three months. He walked the audition and the drama school tutors were ecstatic to have him there: a genuine bit of drum kit from the wrong side of the tracks but on the right side of potential. Got the starring roles for two years in all of the plays. The strange thing was that his peers didn't mind much; they seemed pleased for him-that a guy from such a stunted background should be so smooched over by luck and fate. One of the actor-tutors paid half of his fees, the rest came from half a dozen of the parents of his fellow student mates.

To a man, one and all told him that he had talent by the bucket load. Looks too; and a voice. For the first time in his entire life, he began to feel that he could be a somebody... of probable value and possible consequence. Like he had some kind of destiny to fulfil.

But then hubris- his second cousin, twice removed, cut him down in his very prime. That pretty face began to froth psoriasis in the middle of the third year and irony taught Lawrence that the more he worried about it, the more infected it became. And so, the coffee could be smelled but was not for tasting. He took part in the final production, in a much diminished than usual role, but the skin now, was so enraged, that the invited casting directors and agents all passed him over.

That onion skin had thrown 22 in a game of 21.

He phoned back home for advice but all he got from his father was that he had a face perfect for radio. The shovels had done their duty for granny a while back so she was of no more use. All that was left was to hit the London streets but the bells were strangely silent. The one friend who stayed loyal to him post drama school tried everything to help out but just got loads of grief in return. His triumphant parting shot to her departing back in Leicester Square, was sneered in an off the cuff, emotionally crippled and utterly perplexed manner:

‘At least I can turn on the waterworks when out begging.’

Out on the street, he began to age in Gulag years. One particularly biting day he asked someone for spare change and they chirruped *sorry mate* and without thinking he spat back,

NO!! YOU'RE NOT!

He saw the look of anguish on that face and momentarily it was like a thin sliver of recognition. He felt kind of average about himself, if only for a fleeting few seconds. He rehearsed in the mirror of the gent's lavatory just off Soho Square:

NO- YOU'RE NOT, *NO...YOUR'E NOT*, **NO, YOU'RE NOT...**

All delivered in various tones ranging from self-pity through to anxiety and culminating in the very next day, in the oldest rebellion of them all, which is how he got launched into Chiseldent like a stunt man fired out of a circus cannon.

And so, the moment has finally arrived and banged the door off its hinges; the decks have been cleared and the planks have been sanded and tarred ready to hoist on the fresh cargo. I leap out of the bottom bunk and stare at him for what seems to be the seven ages. My lopsided but genuine nod of empathy drifts over and he catches it and glances shyly downwards. Finally, the spark of connection begins to slowly ignite. He calls back out and asks about my own story and quite obviously, ruminating on the past, is far less lonely than the present.

And well now Oss. That is a very interesting question...

.....

It's the height of Cool Britannia and MPs, footballers and the hoi polios have never felt quite so empowered, so proud to be British, since D-Day.

What do you get, by the by, if you take away, remove, *annihilate* the 'D' from the UK? *A whole raft of conspiracy theories and countless books and TV docs, that's what.*

And what if you take the 'D' from a well-known actor's name, now too, sadly gone and sorely missed? Ewar Woowoo. Sounds just like a police siren. Ewar Woowoo, Ewar Woowoo.

Those sirens had heralded the smarmy grin guy Tony and his party back into power after God-Knows-How-Long and the New Age of rights for slights was being ushered in on

the back of his premiership. Made absolutely no difference to me: my walls were still magnolia the day after; the week after the curtains were still lemon with orange squares. If a new government is really genuine about changing the lie of the land, then why don't they send round some subordinates and redecorate your house or respray your motor for you? That at least would be a genuine effort on their part; folks would see and feel the change in their lives and then have something tangible to be grateful for.

The principal phase in this saga began with a side door of a theatre rigging room. It was here where I found Tyrell Yelling my co-worker and general stabilising force gawking in a catatonic haze at the smoking TV screen. Tyrell was fresh out of a pay for it yourself modelling assignment and was happily downing his second bowl of porridge and trying to rid himself of the early morning chill that had seeped into his bones. Just as the last scoop of oats got finished, the TV burped and dutifully began its sustained and acrid bombardment once again. No matter how many times the fruit machine announcement reeled off the cherries and water melons did the news sink in. Not since war had been declared on Germany, had London been so utterly bereft of effervescence and fizz. Work mates waltzed into our workroom; colleagues collared us in the corridors, but still the words refused to spout stale.

Lady Di... had Lady Died...

Really, like proper dead. She wasn't coming back, not like Elvis or Jim Morrison. All and sundry; *everyone* that I knew, went off to Shuggleworth's Basement to raise a glass in her honour after the show had finished that evening. What did I do? The only thing any half decent bloke could do: attempt to scrape out of life's greasy saucepan any last vestibules of positivism, by hot-footing it round to Zalina Mifferton's newsagent emporium on the corner

of Dean and Frith Street the very next morning, with a sixth-sense blueprint clambering its way out of my throbbin' noggin, that's what.

Normality, then Lady Di, then *ba-bang*. In the raw, jarring blink of a trapped eyelash, I found myself meditating the back of my ride's head: obligatory pocked, condom skin scratched pink through the second-hand heat of a summer, now forever misplaced. To one side, a courier on a belching ex-police BMW snaked too close, clipped the wing-mirror, then began to berate my driver. Mr Motorbike was not to be placated; he ended up drumming the roof with a gloved fist which jarred the nerves but not the mood, for they were as unshakeable as gelignite.

My driver tutted away the hyena threats but then the expected tautology began almost immediately: his phobias regarding pylons, Vim, weal's disease and little blokes. Prevailingly: amorous little blokes. Randy, gagging for anything, minute little blokes happened to be his pre-eminent phobia. He wondered if little fellas tended to be more randy due to the hormones having less distance to travel and therefore were more concentrated in their form.

My return serve made it 30-15: it glanced off all four corners of the funky cab and the iron faced umpire nodded in grave satisfaction. In that half nanosecond, the silence could be rolled around the tongue, gargled against the soft palate and spat ringing into a silver bucket. His wisdom lines deepened into uncomprehending ridges in the rear-view mirror; he spun around fully readjusted, coiled and ready for the counter strike.

'You 'ave *got* to be kiddin' me.'

'Nope.' I patted my inside jacket pocket.

'Mark my words pal: don't you tell a single, solitary living soul, you 'ear me? It's like murder, see? You tell just one person, just one and *everyone* will know. Your 'ole life will be mush: don't say zilch to no one.'

'Point taken, but there's a girl.'

His dancing eyes morphed into dark concrete slits in the proverbial underground car park.

'You told 'er yet?'

'She's been hanging around for a while now. I kind of like her so she should get something out of this.'

'Listen to me Boysey: time erodes gratitude more quickly than it erodes beauty. Be real careful pal. Before you know it, she will 'ave squeezed every last drop and be off with the next naïve muppet.' And on it went.

'Eighteen years.'

'Huh? What's that?'

'You asked me how long I've been a cabby. Eighteen years.'

'Oh.'

It rocked back and forth for the full twenty-two minutes of the journey: from Dalston to the very epicentre of Knightsbridge with my head drooping like a wet crow who has just dropped his lunch into the river.

I sat back and breathed. Having spent two hours staring at the piece of paper that morning, reading it, re-reading it, my jeepers- peepers were on red alert. Placing the paper carefully upright on the glass table top and blinking, dancing a rumba of anxiety, turning away then quickly looking back again. Then doubly making sure by noting the time, date and details of the phone call one week previously.

'Yes, that is correct sir. You mean that? Yes, there can be no doubt. Take good care of it, bring it in and it will all be sorted out in four to five days. You mean you want me to come in person? Yes, sir that will be most helpful. But everything seems to be in order. Ask for Mr Zalzala when you enter through the left side entrance, right next to the revolving doors. Thank you for your help, I really appreciate it. That's why we are here sir. You have a Good Day now.'

'Thanks for the advice and thanks for the ride,' I squirmed. 'Here's the fare and have a drink on me.'

I wished I'd had the élan to hand over a teabag. When my confidence has become a satellite, orbiting the rings of Saturn, perhaps then.

He looked mournful and his blood-hound eyes glistened.

'Not much of a tip is it pal? Four quid?'

He burst out laughing and banged the side of the door with an open palm.

'See what I mean? You be careful now: especially of women.'

The taxi trundled wearily away then suddenly farted into the wild dog-pack traffic, snaking around a tiny guy who had fallen spread-eagled in the middle of the asphalt.

Perhaps he had been thinking too much: about the ladies, their fashions, their shapes, their smells, instead of looking where he was going.

There's a really tasty statue near to the main offices and I cricked my neck to appraise a fellow man of worth.

'I'll be joining you up there soon buddy,' I thought as I made my way up the glistening steps with pounding heart.

My lottery numbers had come in, when things had just started to loosen up around mid-September. They were all systematically based around the date that Lady Di had

checked out: her birthdate, Charlie's age, associated hotel and street numbers in Paris, that kind of stuff. I always figured that there must have been a kind of cosmic significance around that event; as if she had left an aura or a residue of next-level opportunity and I was there to suckle off it like Romulus and Remus right from the very outset.

.....

Before you begin filling your imaginations with gaudy imagery of the Bahamas, yachts, and beautiful women nibbling olives out of dry Martinis with pristine white teeth, then let me just derail your choo-choo with a strategically placed brick across the tracks and send it screaming down the embankment. The bundle that came and twerked itself onto my lap after sliding up and down the greasy chrome pole, finally amounted to ninety-three thousand, seven hundred and forty-two quid, after the cut. A decent enough sum to crowbar the smile off your love competitor's face but not enough to completely remap an existence. A half decent motor, shift the remainder of the mortgage, a couple of warm holidays perhaps, but once the remaining has been earmarked for our continuing future educations-upon the advice of the counsellor man who visited me early, one lark-filled morning to avoid prying eyes, then it's pretty much all done and dusted.

Perhaps you may be thinking that it's a tidy sum to set up in a nice little business venture? Get yourself started in a Spanish bar and knock back with being your own best customer, happily ending your days with your liver being buried separately from your body and accorded full military honours?

My cousin Babba Spoik suggested that I invest in him: get hold of a used car lot, fill it with auction motors, then happy days. Someone else mentioned making a record then living off the residual interest. Another considered it deep-fried wisdom to buy a couple of open

fields, fill them to the brim with pig barns and play heavy rock to the trough-snufflers all-day long. Apparently, they all pulsate with adrenaline and scoff whatever is slopped in front of them with even more gusto when wired into the likes of Deep Purple and Ozzy Osbourne. The weight gets shovelled on and profits go into orbit. I wondered on it a while: guaranteed income, and quite a lot of it. But all I would be at the end of the day would be a pig farmer.

The inherited ex-council two up, two down was duly paid off, drive remodelled, the kerb dropped and bingo: that long-awaited new car. It just had to be better than Ruby's, that's all. Hers was so old that it had left school and signed on.

Mine was nothing too flash: a very slightly second-hand Hermaganous Dyslexus four by four which was a special import from Japan and came in at about 4K under the brand-new price. I thought about a Cheetah, an Osprey, a Delinquent Dangler but was glad to get hold of the Hermie. A lovely green metallic paint job, alloy wheels and a chunky roof rack for touring around and seeing the sights. But it all went very quickly from the survival of the fittest to the survival of the thickest. The first day it was parked up, right about the time of the masculine hour, it got egged twice. Eighteen hours later, both doors on the kerb side were keyed down to the metal. On day three, all four tyres had been worked on with a Stanley Knife. Ruby Roo gamely attempted her infamous positivism and pointed out that at least they were only flat at the bottom. Then the good folk of the locale and beyond started to Double Park across the drive at all hours, just to incontinence us. Four whole days of this gave Ruby all the encouragement she needed to employ her skills as a fledgling sign writer. She deftly nailed it, still dripping, next to the front door in that unique and quaintest of Ye Olde English, git orf my land ism:

POLITE NOTICE

DO NOT PARK IN FRONT OF THE BASTARD DRIVE

Within forty minutes, someone had a builder's skip delivered straight across the front with the phone number sanded off. The day after, Radu began turning up every evening in his homemade car, bang on seven o'clock. You could set your fake Rolex by him, honest. In he would droop- complete with a flask of tea and obligatory half pack of Asda Rich Tea and would slump down on the sofa staring at the shagged out, shag pile carpet. I used to pretend to read so that he would take the hint and go and do one. But then after a while he forced to start glancing over at him: to see what it was that he actually *wanted*. Ten minutes later he would burst into uncontrollable tears: almost every night this went on for- coming on for around an entire month it was. It got so embarrassing that it was actually Ruby herself, my partner in crime, his own niece who had to tell him- firmly but politely to sling it. He gamely informed the masses that we had become ever so hoity-toity and unreachable and the house started enjoying the same treatment as the car: egged windows, profanity-laden graffiti, upside down flowerpots. I looked out one morning and the fuckers had dug up the privet hedge and had it away in the night.

Ruby's aunty Rubella took the win in her stride and seemed genuinely pleased for us. According to her, one of the nephews never stopped drooling on about my bit of luck and

was slowly grinding everyone down into kitty litter. She wanted to shut him up but good and was looking for a novel way. Then Fate herself took a couple of hands...

Rubella's husband Raul had won a little gratuity of several hundred on the gee-gees so he took her, the mother-in-law, Rubella's niece Raquel and husband and this annoying nephew called Johnny Spike and his misses: all of them were invited up the road to Old Street, to a bistro. Apparently, Johnny had been drinking a bit more than usual due to the pressures of not working and the wife going on for no good reason. He'd visited the bathroom half way through the meal because he needed it sure, but also just to breathe a little and clear his head.

Sucking it all up for the sake of appearances and meandering back through the saloon type door like a leathery cowboy of the Old West he sulkily returned and slid back down the wine-red upholstery.

One and all were chattering happily away and then out of the blue, Aunty Rubella handed over this folded piece of paper in her nicotine-stained fingers and stated in her 40 a day wheeze that the lottery had just been announced on the TV behind the counter and she'd written down the numbers for him. It was fairly well known that he had been buying a lot more tickets since Big Bokka had won a wheelbarrow full of dollars so she wished him a little luck as she knew he needed it.

Spikey jibbed the crumpled note off her, unfolded it and slowly, ever so slowly, his back started to straighten like a Gurkha on parade. The Hammer Horror House heartbeat thudded deeply in his ears while beads of moisture, like rows of abacus beads, started to break out in happy unison, one by one. With large, shining eyes he passed the paper to his wife and asked her in a dry monotone to read it out loud: slowly and lucidly as he whisked out and checked his usual line of numbers. She dutifully obliged with:

2, 3, 17, 28, 33, 40 and 41

They were all branded into memory anyway like the serial numbers on a prize bull, but this was the pinch to ensure that he wasn't dreaming it all. Spikey had duly noted that Auntie Rubella had proffered the folded-up paper with something resembling a slightly amused, lop-sided quarter smile which he understood to be sarcasm- maybe at his spending his wife's money on the weekly tickets, drink and three-legged nags. Then his mind veered to a higher plane; his wife confirmed that they were indeed the same numbers; the very ones that he played each and every week based on special dates from his life: cousin's birthdays, number of times he'd been laid, number of brawls that had been fought and won and the number of lives that Rocky the Pitbull seemed to have when Johnny was a kid. Finally, finally, after the years of dreaming and wishing, the greatest feeling of power started surging like soap through his veins and he was trembling with a glowing deliciousness mixed in with an intoxicated demi-panic.

He sat there stupefied and tried to take it all in. They were all looking at him; even the waiters were craning their necks over at the little party which had been thumped into an abrupt silence.

Telling them all straight was the best thing to do, definitely the best thing to do. Big deep breath: sharp and to the point to avoid suffering was the way now. The brand-new, all-star winner; just like his mum always used to say, ever since childhood...

'There's something waiting for you just around that corner Johnny Boy. I know my sisters say that I can't see the woods for the trees behind my back but you're definitely that little bit different from the rest of them on this estate. One day, Johnny. You wait and see,

mark my words lad, they will all look up to you. One day. I'm not saying it will be tomorrow or the day after. It might take a while yet. But you will come into your own...'

He began wiping his forehead with the table napkin and cleared his throat. Then stating matter-of-factly, in a pellucid and meticulous way so that they would all understand: the truth would set them all free after all, so Chamberlin like, holding the paper aloft between thumb and forefinger he began in earnest.

'Look folks, there's something that you all really need to know.'

His words flowed eloquently, like never before. He could feel the transition beginning already; it must be fate; it *had* to be fate. A much-misaligned lady! He sucked in a good, long breath.

'Raquel and me have been having an affair for the last eighteen months. Sorry Andy and sorry Susie but we never intended it...it just happened. The like, chemistry has always been there and we have no power over such matters, anyway.'

He shuffled slightly but then the confidence started to pony kick back in again, almost immediately.

'Please don't look like that because I now have the power to make things right. Despite the fact that I think that the whole lot of you are all a bunch of God-awful dicks, I'm actually not a vindictive man. So here goes: I've just won the lottery-every single one of my numbers match up, and me and Raquel are going to leave together now and we hope that everyone can understand and get on with their lives *and so try not to bare a grudge*. Yes, you are hearing me correctly, I shall compensate the injured parties to the tune of maybe a really nice new car each to ease the blow and maybe a holiday chucked in too- to make sure there are no hard feelings. Suzy: you can *have* the flat; I will add in the remaining equity that's owed so you can be mortgage-free, just like Big Bokka did with his.

I know it's come as a shock but remember we can work it out with a little oil for the cogs. Because there's been a triple roll-over and the jackpot must be in the twenty plus million by now. So, trust me; I have the oil, I have the grease, I have the Teflon coated machinery.'

He looked over at Aunty Rubella and sighed, baffled by his own eloquence and wondered whether he should deliver a little something about throwing in some extra her way for a face-lift but thought well maybe not, but man, it was like *really* tempting.

And they all looked stunned as you would expect and gawked over at him like a bunch of B Tech kids during an introductory class on the early works of Chaucer. The deliciousness of raw power hit home and he pondered on the forthcoming evening when the few friends that he had (there will be more on the way, for sure) gathered down the pub and he would casually let them know that their loyalty and friendship would be rewarded. Like a Celtic king of old, he would summon the elect few to the snug and in that hallowed place, they would be given titles, bounty and recognition. Rewards for all of the chosen few, the happy few, the band of drinking brothers who had kept the faith and stood by him, through thin and thick. He badly needed to pee again but this was the long-awaited epiphany and you don't stroll out on one of those.

After an eon, Aunty Rubella cleared her throat and ruminated in the voice that could strip paint off walls.

'While- you- were- away, in the toilet, I got your misses to go inside your inside jacket pocket and get hold of your wallet. We took your numbers out and then copied them all down. I didn't think that you would take it so seriously, it's like, not even lottery night. So, you haven't won anything. It's just a joke.'

He sat there unblinking at them all, and again, he detected the slightest twitch of a smile on Aunty Rubella's lips. Johnny's head remained resolutely fixed in place but his eyes swivelled over to his wife like U-boat periscopes in the icy North Atlantic. She looked like she was dead and had begun to decompose. Raquel was quite clearly on the edge of death and her husband Andy looked as if he was right on the verge of making Johnny die.

And so, he sat there rigidly upright: desperately trying to think of a response; something, *anything* that would explain his utter brilliance and unparalleled sense of humour; something that would explain that the joke's all on them and they would all burst out laughing, collectively hammer the tables at his razor wit and drink a glorious toast to his health. But even the world's premier master of quick- repartee couldn't claw anything back from that one. So, he sat there with dry lips stuck to his chipped and nicotine-stained teeth in a hideous, frozen leer, like a rabbit caught in the beam of the farmer's searchlight, listening intently to the oily click of the hammers being set.

.....

After the house and car assaults, the choleric mail started, marching ark like, apace with the plethora of begging letters. One of them, sans stamp, probably one of the most amiable in my opinion, has been included, verbatim for your perusal:

Dearest Mr Gunne...

Let me be among the very furst to congratulate yew on your ginourmous win. I do too spend my muney on the lotto week in week out and have never won nuffink, not a brass farthing. Please be so kind as to share sum of your winnings wiv me to help bury mi wife and kids who all died two hours ago of consumption. I do live down the road and am

just like yew if you please so pop by tomorrow with the loot. Maybe 400 thousand grand would be just enuff to get me thru this horrible time but please feel free to spare more if you would like.

If a kid answers the door it is not mine, I have borrowed 4 off my sister to plug this terrible whole left wivvin. I am on suiside watch so mek sure you do the right thing by me.

Cheers then

Harry Hartless

Number 54 Norman Tebbit Crescent (just off the Southgate Road)

After 3 is good for me as im busy being really sad every day

Sitting in the snug of the Disabled Hedgehog, slurping at the brackish beer, it suddenly struck me: with a name like that, the guy really needed a little something extra in his life. Ten quid was duly dropped off; I got one of the local scalies to pop it by for half a lager twist and a bag of cheesy Whottsits.

The night after, Harry was playing pool with one of his jarring mates in the hall-there was no missing him: gangling, lanky, answering to the name of H and a sing-song voice which was strangely anachronistic. He was losing crumpled greens fast: the black was potted three times prematurely and his language would have made a sailor blush bright purple. A top-heavy, peroxide-blond munching on crisps grimaced over and the salt tsunamied off her sneering lips:

'Oh, you are sooo eloquent.'

'Did you just call me a CUNT?'

'No. God NO. I just said that you were erm ... eloquent.'

'Oh. Well. That's alright then.'

Back home later that night, a booming reverberation of siege-like bangs almost caused the front door to rocket-launch off its hinges. Ruby screeched off the sofa with the agility of Cat Woman and lurched down the hallway armed to her bleached teeth with a cricket bat, to be welcomed by a roll of fully ablaze magazine on the outside front door-mat. Being the dutiful little soldier that she was, her left size five powered southwards, Jackie Chan style, to extinguish the blue and purple flames-only to comprehend too late that it had been filled to the brim with a double dose of dog diarrhoea. Sole and heel deftly met the gaudy flames, which caused an iridescent tsunami of arse-puke to wash its way into the front hall and straight up her fishnets before rippling down the radiator and mottling the mirror. I surveyed the shimmering carnage, lit a cigarette, then told her to leave it dripping, with the front door wide open-as a symbol of our unified commitment of unbreakable unification: to show that we would never take their crap; not off nobody, ever.

At her whispered suggestion, I took off and brisked around unsteadily for a couple of hours, muttering questions here and there but all I got for my size elevens were a brace of steaming tramps, dressed in their rank garb, cherry nose to cherry nose roaring at each other in their primitive dialects, species, culture or even planet, unknown. One male, one barely female, they were tanked up and raring to go on the cobbles of Dalston Market, in a Dickensian twilight of imperatives and directives:

'Faack You.'

'Fack *You*.'

'Faaack You.'

'Faaaack *Yoou*.'

'Faaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaack Yeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeew.'

On it went in an East-West cacophony of loathing; it must have been a good eight minutes before I left them to it. Neither wavered or altered their symmetry of purple prose under the dimming lights for even a nano-second but this scene really stood out. I really wish for the life of me that I could use it here intelligently: to add value or interest to this story. You know: to demonstrate my panache and empower my own Belle Époque. I suppose that I will have to contend with the edifying principal that it was the perfect example of the era-defining symbiosis of male and female joining elegantly together in one outstandingly, balanced equilibrium. A bit like me and Ruby in fact, bless her fake tits.

All of this happened just before I had to side-line her though; to pave the way for the next love in my life. The one, the only, Alisha Avaloff.

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A while back, London's inner neighbourhoods were units of cultural diversity and hot spots of chic and interest: Hampstead for its intellectuals, Islington: media folk, Camden Bohemians, Notting Hill: The Golden Set and Sloane Square for the It Girls. Now every single one of the inhabitants is just ... rich. The dollarage used to push you upwards, high into the sky, Babel-like, closer to the angels. Back then, skyscrapers, revolving restaurants, penthouses were all the rage but money now shlorps you down into the very core: basement living, iceberg dwellers, clawing out foundations and the flinty return of the Cave-dwelling men.

After subtle cross-examining various members of the inner and outer circles, I ascertained that this here Alisha frequented *The Tyrannosaurs Rex* with a couple of friends most Fridays. Following her at a measured distance, my heart misplaced a beat upon gazing upon her visage gliding through the crowded bar. I placed myself and an erstwhile acquaintance across her potential trajectory: Tyrell had been carefully selected for the dread purpose and was playing his part to perfection: a little shorter, a little heavier and not quite as pulchritudinous.

Around six jittering strides away, I casually sauntered, glanced over the dominion and stated matter of factly that the consideration was for outright purchase and turning it the entire shebang into a Mexican restaurant. Her laugh sounded so fake it could have been bought for a song from the back of a Transit van in Camberwell. She glided towards the dance floor and I staggered back, crushing with resentment and bitter fury. Her raven black hair swished to the beat of the music, in time with my own pounding heart and it increased the libido of want, of hope.

Many is the way to flip a tail when a shining head is required and those universal levellers – ageing, infirmity, the ambivalent love of children, all sting away at the consciousness of the self. But none hit the bulls-eye or smart quite so much as that bitterest of pills,



Female Rejection

To pass the time and in a semi-precious attempt to appear nonchalant, I got chatting to a guy at a side table who claimed to be a magician in the making. I watched his mediocre card tricks for a while and ever so casually dropped into the merry conversation that how great it would be to conjure up a woman's love- ha, ha! And Nick Carnage, the brand-new chum in law, looked over with slightly inclined head, leaned in closer and stated in lightly-oiled tones:

'My friend, there's only one sure way to make a woman interested: that's not to show too much interest in *her*! Be careful not to be off; act as though she's pretty cool and that you kind of like her, but don't act overly keen. But be a mirror at the same time.

'Huh?'

Allow me to share with you a little something; two little somethings in fact. There's a psychological trick that springs to mind in situations that warrant the ensnarement of all things female.

Firstly, did you know that when German music is played in the wine section of the supermarket, more German wine is sold? And if they want to shift more of the French plonk onto consumers, they flip on the French music? They get inside our heads, and use their little

tricks, in order to get what they want. Obviously in this particular case, it's to part you from your hard-earned money, and to shift their stocks that are taking up too much floor space.

This is just one, of a huge array of the eternal signifiers of so-called happiness. You go in, free as a lark, you make your choice as a consumer and you return home happy. But you've been played like the proverbial Hillbilly banjo; they have chewed you up and spat you back out, laughing all the way to the bank. With this knowledge, it follows therefore, that you must get inside a woman's head-and mess with that-to get exactly what you want. Oh yes, my friend: there are ways...

Secondly, there's an experiment that was meted out on a group of American students which is a little more sophisticated but you can utilise the underlying factors for your own purposes. Let me explain. A bottle of Pepsi was placed upon a table in a public area with the famous label in full view. The phycologists took another identical bottle of Pepsi and decanted that into a bottle with a different, made-up label; one they had asked the art department to design so it looked wholly professional. Then, they duly informed the participating cohort that this brand-new drink – not even in the shops yet- was guaranteed to be totally delicious and it was being produced to challenge the authority of the contemporary market leader, Pepsi.

They went on to explain that the new drink manufacture was conducting a trial in order to establish what the general public thought of their new product and the company would be delighted to hear the honest feedback. Participants and passers-by were then invited to initially taste the Pepsi, followed almost immediately by taking a few sips of the 'new brand' soft drink with the fake label. What do you suppose the results were?

'Erm...'

More than 90% of the cohort believed in their heart of hearts that the first, well-known brand of the Pepsi tasted better than the 'new' one on the market! The public claimed that the new kid on the block was very tasty; delicious even, but it didn't quite cut it alongside the well-established Pepsi Cola drink.

And here's the rub- why do they think that was? Why is it, do you think, that people tasted the same product, took one sip after the other, of exactly the same drink, in quick succession and then chose the branded item as their flavour of choice?

'Well...'

The answer is of course, familiarity: That comfort-zone, bean-bag feeling of being safe and secure with what you already understand and value. On the whole, people would rather stick with something that is familiar; something that they are used to, rather than upend the proverbial apple cart and try out something new. To switch brands takes a decision, and most will stick with the familiar, to feel safe within their comfort zone, because not thinking feels nice.

It's kind of similar with Nike trainers: People will automatically go for Nike time and again because of that famous flash-which is obviously a representation of a tick printed down both sides of the footwear. These ticks reinforce a key memory; the memory of doing well at school and that obviously resonates happy and positive thoughts. Feeling valued, evoking those moments of comfort and safety are what helps to shift a product and that helps to make Nike the acknowledged leader in the field.

And so, you must model yourself a leader in the field too: the field of women. They are to be grown into what you want, then harvested and hand-picked: but only by the select, elite few, like us. You must remember all of this as you plan out your strategy. Seem familiar: be something that she's used to; listen carefully to what she likes or doesn't like. Discover

what her interests and hobbies are then go along with that; at the very least try to mirror and reflect parts of her personality. You catching all of this? That's part one. Then my friend, she will be well on her way to becoming yours; to do with her as you see fit. But remember Mark Twain...

'What's that?'

You want all of the answers? Do a little research yourself-it will be fun. And it will broaden the mind.'

As I exited the building, *she* was chatting lightly to a friend in the wide corridor with the deep red carpet. Impulsively I wanted to rush over and gush over: to tell her a thousand times of her loveliness, her grace, her voluptuousness; of how badly I needed her in my life.

But. The conjurer's words came floating back, dove-like onto a gloved hand so my nose found its way into the open Filofax as I continued down the stairs. Every frame fibre was willing me to turn around and gaze upon her but instead a residue of an enigmatic smile emerged; as if I was enjoying my own private joke and none could be admitted to the secret other than my own good self. I quickly grabbed hold of the coat from the cloakroom and slid it round my quaking shoulders-on loan from Hector who worked at the men's tailoring outfits and then a presence like a phantom appeared just behind. There she was, bemused, eyes twinkling.

'You're that whack job from earlier, aren't you?'

.....

Back in those early days when it was all beginning to form, the legislative belonged solely to her. Alisha called the shots and they echoed acutely around the shooting range of my ticker. Half a dozen dates under the belt, she would call up in that absent-minded way (if

it wasn't to cancel) and show up, way further from the time agreed. She would regularly bring a friend along and they would flash away like fairground Goldfish in plastic bags. She spoke an additional three languages to English: Hindi, Arabic and Swedish. I actually spoke an additional four myself, if you must know: Neanderthal, Zebra Neigh, Tom Cat, Walrus Bark.

Upon meeting her mother on the off-chance with Alisha, in the West End one evening, she quickly melted away like lady candy floss, back into the crowd and she wished a cursory merry Christmas without so much as a backward glance. I didn't see her for six long weeks after that; I was trying to play it cool, play the long game, the long wait.

Continually, she haunted my thoughts and dreams. It got so numbing, that I stood in front of some railings at the edge of a block of flats with two trains of thought pumping through my temples: thought one telling me to jump and finish it all and Thought Two told me that I was so undeserving of any peace, that it was my fate to suffer. So, I stepped back and went home and decided it was now time to purge her ghost that drifted around in circles at the crossroads of my mind. I thought her phantom had been laid to rest so I lived free, in erudite, blissful contentment, for a short while, at least. With reverberating mind sans Alisha, I hit the gentrified café on the corner of Chiswick High Road and treated myself to one of their soya brunches with a smattering of Pumpnickel toast.

Simplistic mathematics for the upwardly mobile with a few quid to invest: post modernity plus atmosphere equals more than likely consequence. Accumulate, then add the principal materials of poverty, misery and a soulless existence, blitz them through a cultural meat-grinder and regurgitate into a grand finale: Posh-Tac. I tried the filtered oxygen of a new arena and plotted and planned an alternate future. You too, should feel the pulsating tremor with your own finger tips: forge ahead and secure worn out, defunct artefacts from

a bygone age, then percolate them through the mind's ether of a progressive artist, package and deliver to the downwardly minimalistic classes and if the area is deemed noteworthy or on the rise, your fate will fly and it's easy to fathom Hipster Cafés:

Harmonised, decaying brickwork and crumbling mortar abounds

It's perplexing trying to differentiate between clientele and staff

Perfect grooming is evidenced upon all serving staff

Seventies milk bottles used as candle holders

The customers drink herbal tea and lattes from jam jars

Elegant platters of food come served on galvanized dustbin lids

Rusting apparatus, suggestive of a bygone, virtuous age abounds throughout

The owner will go the extra mile and pay more for festering examples of what he deems the appropriate paraphilia: it combines both lauded patina and must-have archaism and therefore is vastly more attractive and desirable in comparison to the shiny and the new. This begs the inevitable question with regards to the tatt of yore, repurposed: are we as a species moving backwards, forwards or sideways with this decadent display of inverted materialism by utilising the flotsam and jetsam from our parents' and grandparents' generations?

I reclined on the fruit box-cum-seat and read my glossy mag underneath the angle-iron and beach-procured wood table lamp, whilst swallowing a grim satisfaction for the new and free era. Perhaps *this* would be the kind of gaff that would be worth investing in. I could call it *The Caff Gaff* and call my employees the *Caff Gaff Staff*.

Geeta Geetcha, according to her lapel badge was the long-necked waitress and she deftly served me my animal-free, calorie-free, taste-free brunch. She wafted around in a cavalcade of deliciousness which reminded me of the porn that my friends and I had found in the carrier bag that fateful, pre-pubescent day in the murky scrubland behind the middle school, one late August afternoon.

Obviously, a student of sorts, she had a book secreted inside her bib pocket. I enquired to the content: a short story by this American geeza, David Foster Wallace entitled *The Devil Is a Busy Man* was the short piece in line to be scored. The author extrapolates on how his long-suffering father offered accumulated garage detritus upon expedient occasion for free: no price, zero, gratis but the hoi polis was generally suspicious and took an aeon to call by and take away the goods-and only then after dark mutterings and frenzied questioning. The author's pop caught on quickly: Americans usually do. There on after, he improvised prices on the spot when posting the ads: five dollars for an Old Harrow With Some Teeth A Little Rusted, or ten dollars for a JCPenny Sleepersofa, whatever the hell they are. People then tripped over themselves to wrench away aforementioned gund as it was all levelled at such preposterous bargain prices. They would appear like genies: beaming with delight with their arms around their wives in the truck as they shuffled off back to their little towns with the bargain basement goods sliding around in the load bed.

I asked Geeta with perfect sincerity: how or where did that Beelzebub bloke fit into this particular small-town trading scenario? I know he's an asshole, but you can't blame him for folks being hard-wired to be cautious regarding business deals, now surely? Her initial opinion was how Old Nick should play a part in these shenanigans was really open to interpretation; the reader had to fill in the ellipsis left by the indubitably bright but mystifying author for themselves.

I had her attention and wasn't even playing her: she was happily buzzing away with a desirable rhetoric, but then a grinning horror settled upon my shoulder and began to rock back and forth. During the connection, I had failed to note that she had Alisha's manner down to a T, what with the posture, glinting brown eyes, dark hair and a smile that could stop a stampede. So that was that: the dreams returned in earnest, thrubbing their rhythmic chant to that ancient and terrible god while putting paid to any chance of peace in my newly turned corner. So here we go again: back to watching dolls explode.

Returning to the Rex after a tremor period, I smiled that long-practised, enigmatic and mysterious lop-sided grin the Sphinx would have given its right nostril for. After chatting with her amiably for a couple of minutes:

'I have to attend to something quite urgently. Excuse me.'

'What? At 1.00 in the morning?'

'Go and enjoy yourself. Maybe I'll see you around sometime.'

Nodding briefly to her; the rising euphoria threatened to eloquently disagree with that cool countenance. After a long ponder, the decision was made not to return the week after as I wanted the little fish to wriggle some more. Thoughts were permeated with the idea of the sharks trying to gobble her up but the conjurer seemed to know his game and so the next strategy was played out. The second week finally arrived and I tripped in late at the venue; she was in the darkened part of the bar-that dazzlingly long, coal black hair demarcated her from the rest of the ancient rabble. I put myself in her direct eyeline and exhibited at a fruit machine, attempting to offer the impression that I was taking from it, rather than it from me.

A light hand suddenly rested upon my forearm; it was her: radiating that dazzling smile intermingled with a sprinkle of anxiety drifting around somewhere in the corners. Saying that her friend has gone off with a guy and left her and she needs someone trustworthy to take her to the cab stand and would I be so kind? Would I indeed, that is the question. Again, the fireworks flowed within but soberer wordlings trickled out.

‘Sure. I’ll even see you home myself if you like but maybe later as there is someone that I have to see first.’

She enquired. And this brought the first genuine smile to my face in rather a while.

Later on, I found her perched awkwardly on the edge of her seat, next to talky man, looking mildly frustrated, but keeping it polite. She glanced up and immediately snatched her bag and the guy gawked over; even more open mouthed, utterly crestfallen as his investment had failed to pay the appropriate dividends.

After a couple of months, the guard began to drop but her panties remained firmly up. She shared that the family nickname for her was Botto. She claimed to share her mother’s sense of humour and so the day finally came to actually meet mommy-dearest in the strictly personal sense of flowers, choccies and polite drawing room convo: all obviously carefully pre-planned and designed to ingratiate and impress. Having heard on good authority that Alisha’s mother was always ready, willing and able to set the room alight with her skilful impersonations and mimicry, I too decided to create the right tone by demonstrating my aptness for appreciative humour- by uproariously banging on the table top, with the flat of my hand, around eight seconds after she had begun to speak. But, as it turns out, she had been speaking in her normal voice.

Ms Rooker laid out neatly regarding the axioms of Alisha’s former suitors and how they had been handpicked: far from the madding crowd of Cock Wombles, Dry Deserters

and Shylocking Destitutes. But then she was a QC and no doubt expected something slightly better than what her daughter had wriggled back to their Hampstead Mews. It was nibbled at, albeit subliminally, that I was not to be Alisha's man and perhaps that fate-filled meeting gave sordid birth to all the other days that were to follow.

.....

I had submarined upon the Alisha countenance: as if bubbling up from the deep and with that pitiful lungful of air, desperation and hope melded into one. There was a terrible rage to have her: at any cost. Friends and acquaintances were hounded; the same questions that have irked both the very finest and dullest of minds from the lightning strikes and New Fire to The Age of Sex Robots, and lab grown meat. The question that fixes slaves against masters and wrenches kings into ruination:



What can one do? To make a woman fall in love??

Like the kid who took his finger out of the dyke, the bewildering array of answers tumbled out of the cracked and collective consciousness. All was stored up, nothing was

rejected, all squirrelled away to widen the vision, deepen the understanding of the wide, wide universe in order to hook that little fish and reel her in to the keep net.

To help consolidate the new understanding, and to placate Mrs Romani Rooker, I took Alisha out to some really smart joints, but not too regularly as it stung Mr Wallet something awful. The movies in Leicester Square, restaurants nearby to Kensington, to general places of interest: where they shot a TV series based on Middle England- just to show her how cultured I really was. I bought her the good stuff, made sure that each date was different from the last but all the while I'm following *The Instructions* as I was now firm friends with that colossus that bestrides the feminine world; the rock that stands proud against the hordes of Barbarians who smash themselves senseless in the everlasting process of trying to wrestle and subjugate love. I saw him a month later; in the same club, exhibiting a disappearing coin trick to a couple of girls. Afterwards,

'Now's the time to up the game: don't throw any compliments her way. Act a little distracted at times. Talk knowledgeably and then go quiet upon occasion too; become an enigma. Think on this: a guy walks into a bar and stares at all the women with his tongue hanging out. Result? No one is interested in him-any more than they would, being offered a bucket of free air.He's obviously low-value and women hate that. The same guy, walks into a different bar later on and pays no one the slightest bit of attention: will the result be the same? Of course not. Add a little spice; a bit of mystery to yourself. And they will come flocking.'

The magician leans forward and winks.

'Mr Twain is waiting for you inside the third toilet cubicle from the right downstairs.'

'You what? I'm not a woofter you know.'

'Red, Magic Marker pen, in large opaque letters.'

He laughs as I leap up and stride towards the men's room. There's the obligatory kid with pupils the size of small planets, slumped against the urinal shivering violently and being consoled by a girl of barely fifteen. I step over Druggy Boy's legs and peer over the nicotine-stained paintwork...

**In order to covet a thing
it is only necessary,
to make that thing...
difficult to obtain...**

Sure enough, after a couple more months of cunning magician deliciousness, it moves up a gear.

'I can't quite figure you out. You... don't have another girl somewhere, do you?'

'What makes you say a thing like that?'

'Oh. Just.'

Then, a month on, with full beaming smile, her eyes alight with pleasure, came the immortal, 'What are you thinking about?'

I shrugged.

'I guess a woman shouldn't ask that kind of the thing. The answer might be a motorbike or something.'

I smiled mysteriously.

Slowly but surely, she started to succumb and the deliciousness of ownership began to filter through like finely granulated sugar through a sieve.

Returning home to meals, freshly prepared by her and dropped off by the family driver: fresh and piping hot and a gift of money here and there as tales of business deals,

and paying off solicitors, and investments were causing a butterfly wing effect in faraway forests.

Around the nine-month mark, her friend Sarah Strange made an entrance into her convoy convo. Sarah who was getting married, and Juicy Lucy now engaged and Swedish Anna has been blissfully married for the past two years and now expecting twins. She drops it, oh so casually and in that off-hand manner. Thanks to the finely-tuned magician wave length I know exactly what her coding was. Me? I genuinely laughed out loud the way she did the first night in the club. For the very first time, she got flustered and asked over and over, what's so funny and terrier like she won't loosen her grip and I simply repeated,

...nothing'sfunnynothing'sfunnynothing'sfunny...

And now, finally, after all of that investment, she is starting to exhibit fine, porcelain china doll cracks. She asks again and again what is soooo amusing and she breaks down and sobs and says the kind of stuff that kings and tramps and cavemen and Martians from the outer rim really, really love to hear.

Two weeks later, I began slowly dropping the subtleties of pretence. My Man-Pad was done up really nicely now as her mother had the tungsten and sent plenty Alisha's way with a good lot finding its way into my mittens. I wasn't blind to the fact that she had been strongly warning her daughter off so after a ponder or two, I thought the best way to retaliate was to begin, serial killer like, sending parts of her daughter back home in neat little packages: tears to start with, then confidence, then dignity.

Things then began in earnest: like I was going out for the evening and promise to be back and meet her at her place by ten but it's more like one. Being moody and nonchalant is par for the course but that's small fry amateur stuff, deliberately not taking her calls when

I'm at work or out with my crony circle and feigning innocence when she asks for clarification.

The Premiership League began when a pair of earrings were inadvertently left in the container next to the passenger seat. She panicked, wide-eyed imploring along the lines of, 'Are you seeing someone else? How could you do such a thing?' This offered a kind of sky-diving buzz and like tossing a dog a cursory bone, the general reassurance in a non-committal type of manner that you gave one of the girls a lift home one evening from work and they must belong to her, left her in a bewildered mollification of sorts. Every time she hurt sprung in her eyes or the sobbing over the phone while I flicked channels, injected a Gestapo like power and only added a value to the rising contempt for her self-inflicted lack of self-worth.

Remember the late nineties? Hallowed antiquity, way before Facebook, Face Time, Snapchat, et al. Where people had to actually speak to each other for real, face to face and communication was an art. That newly found power on the wedding night set the timber of the union. Back in the ninety-eight, my brand-new Alisha bride, tightly wrapped up like a spray of carnations, gazing up shyly with her doe-like eyes. The previous year and a half had emboldened curiosity and desire up to the penultimate; now that she was finally mine, the lion hunger was satiated.

On her big day, the parents, sisters and cousins finally departed the house and we were finally nailed apart. Her mother's parting auditory gift rang out like a peel of cracked bells:

A plastic flower on which a butterfly has landed



Expensive leather trudded away, well-engineered motors purred like cats and the ellipsis came marching into the room and plonked itself down between us. It wriggled its ripe hips, lit a Cuban cigar and inhaled deeply, eyeing us with a jejune air of expectation.

Alisha's bright, wide smile was oxymoronic: this was the Anti-Christ, Anti-matter and Anti-Climax all slopped into one Heaney metallic bucket and it too, scraped like mad to be free. She glanced over longingly with her lips ever so slightly parted but to my mind this looked stagey and pre-planned. The only thing was to up and cremate a toasted cheese sandwich.

Upon return, alongside the look on her face, a grim satisfaction settled in and only packed its bags and left the day the prison sentence began. She had begun to move her gear in a good three weeks prior to the marriage day and began filling the cupboards with her fancy coffee and the extra freezer with TV meals. These became a staple for her and I asked after a few weeks whether or not with all of these new chefs on TV, couldn't she embrace the all-new Britishness and cook something nice for a change? I had been slipping around Ruby's gaff for steaks, lasagne and slow cooked rice dishes so I wasn't too out of sorts with the fact that Alisha was putting me through a famine. But still.

Night called out and the bed sighed and beckoned its long, slender finger. It giggled in a nervous manner and I slid lithely between the crisp black sheets. Alisha hesitated before

gliding in beside and spooning away surely enough. Her body stiffened into a plank upon collecting,

'Goodnight, don't let the bed-bugs bite,'

but in a sing-song, friendly kind of manner way that threw her sideways as the afternoon nap is wont to do when the moon wrenches the tides back into place. Out went the lamp. And my self-satisfied grin, invisible to all but the guardian angel sitting on the ceiling, winced, laid down the pen and put his hands into the pockets of his long gown.

Things started to go up hill after that but the long and short of it was that the power and the glory began to grow ever more lustful; right up until the fateful day the police arrived; the paper trail left from giving that guy a back-hander in the shop near to the Beckton Alps brought them to the door and I breathed a silent sigh of shame and prepared for the next ominous chapter.

.....

Perhaps it is thus: all is written, all pre-planned and we are indeed merely players, acting out our pre-written scripts backing into the limelight when Time is willing to glimpse down on us from the upper circle. We take our positions, whether centre-stage, in the wings or sat in the auditorium, listening to the director, and we watch and clench and then hold for either the applause or cat-calls.

Once, on a 38 bus chungling from the West End
Stony faced sardines, watching the concrete corral go by
Remnants of a once lionised empire, world renowned
Up close it was an oxymoronic canvas of coruscation and flake

Two crow women perched deftly, and began a mighty and eloquent argument
Which beheld, and reviled and transfixed and frightened
But no one suggested a ceasefire.

Swept off like dried leaves by the conductor at the next stop, sneering and jeering
We slid upwards, gallant and smuggler and rolled our eyes
As if to say... *some people!*
The acre of ice between us: cracking and thawing under the ennobled new sun

Until one shrieked out, "My purse has gone!"

And then another. And then another.

And like dominoes we toppled and clicked and then swore that we wouldn't be taken
On that ride again.

That was a poem called *The Ride* that I had written previously; the one that the solicitor crowbarred out of me when I first got into the soup. In order to avoid prematurely potting the black, potential felons in waiting, need to indicate a sense of remorse, to comprehend the just disapproval of society and so begin again, free as the wind, with freshly laundered consciences. And that poem delivered for me in a big way: Missie Solicitor said that it was indicative of a keen understanding of the grandiose acknowledgement of comprehending the difference between right and wrong, between stealing from the blameless and the sanctimonious felicity of the righteous. Uh huh. She reckoned she could shove it to the judge and he would most likely suspend the sentence, and the beak did just

that. But the second-time round, I knew for sure that it would take more than a poem: maybe a song and dance routine; perhaps bursting out of a huge cake and singing happy birthday, may just about cut it.

The expensive brief that Alisha's mother had procured, waltzed primly through the door and generated neat, efficient, noises. Those coolly indifferent eyes smouldered with the look; the rare one, the Châteaux Margot 57 reserved for the real knuckle-dragging wasters like me. Her voice was educated, patient, but she stated rather too coolly for my liking:

'I've done just about all I can and if you don't give me something, anything, to try and help in digging you out of this salmagundi mare's nest, then no ifs, no buts, they are going to nail you to the wall for this. GBH is the charge, and you're staring point blank at a seven if *you're lucky.*'

Two hours quailed by on their rounded bellies: handcuffed, eunuch like opposite this steaming policeman as he scrawled his copious notes into a shining black book. They were in no rush; the whistle had blown and the match was well and truly over with no extra time to play: 1 to the flatfoots, 0 to me and relegation to the lower divisions was looming imminently. The cuffs had started to rasp; the tram lined skin felt itchy but there was really no need as I was now as meek as Mary's.

Cleverly, they sent a younger bobby to juice up the essence with some freeze-dried coffee and the obligatory ciggie: this indeed placated further so they now felt that the time had arrived for the pellucid explanation. If a synopsis or insight would have cut it with a liberal physiatrist and lead onto the inevitable sentence being reduced then I was well up

for it. And so, after he had left, my gaze finally met hers. The iron stripes over the cracked windows reminded me that I wasn't going anywhere in a hurry so my mind looped back a few years and I tried to give her what she wanted. The fact that she was pretty loosened me up, and then all of the bile started to belch out like raw sewage from a fractured pipe.

'Probably the main reason that I did *that*, was because...'

Her grimace beckoned me on; it was the best hour of therapy that I'd ever had and it opened up into something fresh.

'I actually stepped back when I saw the blood coming out; his pig-screams brought me to my senses. I'd had to go and deal some jewellery at one of those pawn shop chains; the ones that give you pennies for your stuff which has cost hundreds. I'd left a few gold bracelets there a few weeks back and had intended to pick them back up. But time went by and I couldn't get hold of the dollars quickly enough. When I finally made it back in, the guy behind the counter was smirking his head off.

He said to me, 'We really did you mate. They're worth thousands and you let them go for a hundred and fifty quid. A quick trip to the West End with these and I can live it large for a good two months.'

Well, I saw red and nudded him in the face across the counter but he was much tastier than I had anticipated. He got back up and had a splendid go back: swinging wildly in quick succession and a couple got close to connecting as well. I tickled him up a little more then began heading for the door. He got up again and started laughing; in this slow, hectoring fashion that really set my teeth on edge so I went back to the counter. It was then that I remembered it: the answer to my prayers- the Katana in my sports bag that I had taken in to

get an evaluation. Not that I could ever part with that. Anyway, I grabbed it out of the bag and banged him round the head a few times before he lost consciousness; probably more through fear, than anything else.'

'Thank God you never actually unsheathed the thing; you'd be facing a murder charge.'

'He started gurgling after a while and that's when I legged it.'

'Where's the sword-they need it for evidence.'

'Like I said: it's a family heirloom. I've hidden it somewhere safe.'

'You need to cooperate; tell me where the sword is.'

She tapped her pen on the table.

'Listen,' I mumbled. 'You know when you come across an ex-boxer and your senses are accosted by the broken nose/cauliflower ears/swollen eyes, et al? And you look hard to fathom the subtext and you see that once upon a time there might have been an underlying element of attractiveness, but that's all now gone: had its bags forcibly packed and moved out onto the street by the bailiffs?'

'I think you're being a little too self-critical here,' she sighed. 'And looks aren't everything, you know.'

'No. But they damn well help. They open lots of doors and its easy then just to breeze on through and help yourself from the finger buffet. It's kind of sad when you've been the centre of attention for so long and then you suddenly become the proverbial nobody; no

one wants anything off you, not even the time. You become a non- entity, like an ant on a dark stone on a black, cloudless night.'

The burly policeman on my right leans in a little closer than is comfortable and attempts assimilation. But his Scouse accent puts paid to that immediately.

'I read something the other day like, in the newspaper; about John Lennon and a letter; a 1969 letter explaining why he was returning his MBE. It was found tucked inside a record sleeve among assorted flotsam and jetsam at a car-boot sale in the back of beyond. Before this, it was in a dusty old attic before finally seeing the light of day and has lately been valued at up to £60,000 should it ever come up for auction. It is believed to be a first draft, cast aside, probably due to the signature being smudged. In the letter, Lennon stated that he was returning the MBE because of ensconced political objections: British support for the States being in Vietnam, the massacre at My Lai and because the Plastic Ono Band song, Cold Turkey, was sliding down the charts.'

I grimaced but he understood this to be indicative of interest and continued.

'So the journey of this letter – from bona-fide political stance by one of the world's most preeminent and controversial musicians, to ending up on a trestle table, huddling next to a worn out dart board and a pulpy Monopoly game is quite ironic don't you think?

I'm sure that Lennon would have appreciated the irony. It's a salient lesson to us all that however important we think we are, or however important we think our actions are, it all ends up at an actual or figurative car-boot sale in the end.'

I stared blankly back at him. The solicitor stared blankly back at him.

Then her eyes swivelled over to me once again before she was called away. She returned three minutes later.

'That was your wife's mother on the phone. She has had an idea...'

'Going back eighteen months, just when the rot had begun to set in, I got pretty cuckoo for a while. Mom had just died after a long struggle. Folks say not to live in the past but thinking back to when I was a boy kind of focuses my thoughts. It makes a little more sense of the now; like you can trace that line through the decades and it fits together like train tracks.'

'Go on.'

'Back in the day my mum was pretty well known within the local district for having a really big heart and never ever being able to turn away a kitten or cat. Sure enough, the word got around, and anyone who got bored or couldn't be bothered to look after their little feline friend would come moping round our door and regal mum with eloquent tales of how they had stumbled across this poor abandoned stray, and just look at her big, pretty, eyes and what are we going to do with it? Most likely we will have to take her to the vets and have her put to sleep and *what a terrible waste* then mum's arms would shoot out simultaneously like the prongs of a fork lift truck, grab hold of the bewildered creature and wrestle it, kicking and clawing its way through our front door. And that's how we ended up with thirteen Heinz 57 moggies of assorted colours, shapes and sizes.

Dad's friend from his army days owned quite a bit of land out by the Lincolnshire Fens that we were welcome to camp on any time so we'd trundle off in our decrepit Ford Escort estate, towing a caravan held together with angle iron and tape with a baker's dozen of

raging wild cats squeezed into every available nook and cranny. This was mainly due to not a single *one* of our neighbours or relatives ever agreeing to look after these things. After about an hour into the journey they would all simultaneously feel a disturbance in the Cat Force and respond with the inevitable Moggy Mathematics, the most basic of course, being:

BEMUSEMENT+AGITATION+SPITE=REVENGE ON EVERY BASTARD

and set up this blood curdling, ululative yowling reminiscent of the cyclopic monomaniac, out of Poe. Right on cue, like the Royal Harmonics they would all simultaneously electrify into one: like a conductor had harrumphed then proceeded to direct their chorus but the one day the nearby planets must have aligned and thought,

..Enough..

and the Police pulled us over to see what all the God-awful racket was going on inside the car, took one glance apiece inside and stony faced, without a solitary word, waved us on through the outskirts of Melton Mowbray and on the way up to North Kyme.

For some unknown reason, there was a solitary older dude in the village; maybe he was looking to invest in combine harvesters or chicken coops. He approached mum and tentatively asked from a few feet away whether he could trouble her for a brief moment.

‘Oi ave this ere cat at ome. But e no wants to eat.’

‘What do you feed him?’

'Cheese. Mainly. But he always say no.'

'Oh, he won't eat cheese. Try cat meat.'

'Cat meat? No, no, no. That is too cruel.'

'I beg your pardon?'

'I can no feed my cat on other cats. This is not good advice at all. You people are bad.'

'No, cat food is made from horses...'

One the last day of the break my mother did her usual trick of herding them into the car by vigorously clicking on a large pair of scissors. The metallic onomatopoeia indicated to the widely scattered hoard that it was dinner time as the scissors were used to cut the meat into small chunks. I was given the job of counting each cat, ark like into the car and when I reached number twelve, I paused and looked up at mum.

'There's one missing.'

At that very moment dad appeared and stated gruffly that we would have to return home sans Sooty, because that morning he had sauntered into the bowels of a combine harvester for a cat-nap and the farmer had turned on the whirling machinery to mow the corn and Sooty hadn't made it. The older guy looked over at all us and shook his head mournfully.

I stood there for ages: dumbfounded with this vision of Sooty being spat out of the thresher funnel into a threadlike stream of pinkie red and then walked off around the corner of a farm building and never laughed so hard in my entire life until I started coughing

and hacking up something awful. Then a warm hand gently squeezed my shoulder and it was mum saying something like, 'Dear sweet sensitive boy, don't worry, the cat wouldn't have felt anything as it would have been all over very quickly and we will get another one just like Sooty and you can even name him yourself.'

I just looked at her with tears rolling down my cheeks and she took me and hugged me really tight and I stood there shaking and convulsing away in her arms. Dad winked at me, chuckled for a while then when we returned to Dalston, he presented me with something that had belonged to Gramps who had picked it up shortly after 1918. Dad called it Rudis; I thought it rude to ask. But I stored it away in a cupboard and brought it out every few months to polish, to make sure that it was always in good order.'

The solicitor blinked a couple of times.

'Maybe it's time you spoke to your wife?'

'Hello Alisha; it's me. The solicitor thought it might be a good idea to start opening up about stuff. You feeling alright?'

'Uh huh. You sound different.'

Therein followed a pause of Pinteresquian magnitude that could have been analysed and reimagined for weeks at various soirees throughout Chelsea, Chiswick and Chatsworth.

'Alisha: I think I know where my agitation might come from. It was inherited; it's been passed down through the generations like dyslexia or autism. Dystopian novels and films

seem to be all the rage but folks don't realise that we are actually living already in that kind of society. We have games-Roman games to take our minds away from what's really happening. Look at our TV, films, music, sports and now this internet on computers. To keep us what? Entertained? Compliant? We all now quickly becoming nodding dogs on the rear parcel shelf. We think we are enlightened but we are really and truly in the dark ages.'

'Why are you telling me this.'

'Thought it would help. You do not truly know a thing until you fight it; you don't know someone until you fight them.'

'That's what our marriage is ... a fight.'

'No. That's not what I'm saying. I'm fighting the system, fighting myself; to try and figure out what's going on... inside my head.'

I returned to the table with a peculiar feeling: she had put the phone down gently on me for the first time in knowing her and I was uncomfortably numb. The solicitor looked over and stated baldly that she would do everything in her power to get me off.

But the trial was merciless and swift. Before I knew it, I had collected:

Odious... vile... dangerous individual...

Guilty As Charged

reverberating around my carcass and found myself being dragged down into a holding cell after blinking over at Alisha who was half slid down a bench at the back of the court. And there was a really curious look that had round-housed its way onto her face: I'd expected some hysterics quite frankly but not this: an inner light had quietly and without regret, died.

A manacled man will never fully purpose the threat that he poses, even as he's raging against his chains. On the council estate, the unspoken rule is that you're bred to fight for your freedom, you're trained to endure and fight and suppress empathy. How else do you find your way in a world that cannot be mastered? How do you live a life in which all of us must politically surrender and suppress our thoughts and interpretations? Too many men are blunt instruments and because of poor training, they're simply not fit for purpose.

We are indeed, as Mr Chuck Palahniuk states, a generation raised by women: long absent fathers, men leaving the teaching, doctoring, policing, social working professions, dodging all responsibility but leaving one thing tangible and long-lasting behind.

Thomas Friedman came along and proposed the golden arches theory of conflict prevention which held that,

No two countries that both have McDonald's have ever fought a war against each other since they each got their Ronnie Donnie's.

He didn't mean that McDonald's ends all war; its arrival in a nation symbolised the glorious transition to capitalism, free trade and peace. Maybe all dangerous men should be forced to work in the fast-food industry for a while then.

.....

One of the dullest screws in the whole shebang meandered into the cell this morning and gargled an erstwhile tale. Hardly and I were easing back like walruses on a beach and in he came, keys jouncing and grinning sardonically:

'For a laugh at one Christmas office party when I was eighteen or nineteen, I got up on the table and sung *Peggy Sue* and afterwards, everyone said how much they liked it and how much I sounded like Buddy Holly so the new year started really well for me. And a girl who was really good with makeup and hair- who did make up for brides and who was a friend of my mate came around to my mother's flat and did me up with the cheek bones and hair and colouring and everything else and we took photos. And her cousin who was in some BBC department made me up a costume with a pale blue suit and brothel creepers and drainpipe trousers and it really looked the business and we took more photos.

I went along to one of those look- a- like companies; the ones that employ you if you look like famous people. I went there in person after sending in lots of photos and did this kind of audition. I chatted to them for a while then I was asked to leave the room and they all got together after a while and then they called me back in and they hired me on the spot. There and then. And so, I went from making 800 pounds a month in a factory to 1200 a week doing Buddy Holly impressions and opening supermarkets and singing at birthdays

and events like the Goodwood Festival and that's where I met Marilyn Monroe. But after three weeks she ran off with this Elvis look alike.'

There's a guy a few cells down nicknamed Wind Farm: he received five years for assaulting half a theatre audience and got his life front to back for a start. Throughout history, people have attempted to self-improve through aspirational values, improved social housing, thugs singing hymns. But now it seems that some of the upwardly mobile attempt to reimagine themselves as downwardly immovable.

Wind Farm is an Oxbridge educated fella, hailing from a long line of barristers. He docked onto the lower orders after accepting a small part playing a drug dealer in a straight to video movie, which was financed by a mate of his. Six lines of puerile dialogue spectacularly diversified his middling to upper rank and file DNA; after researching the role around the estates of Bow he fell hard for all the jazz and panazz and decided to ingratiate his way into the primeval soup before taking his head for a wobble.

The way the story goes is that he went to *the* drama school; PRADA or something then cosseted himself into hideous debt due to his family scudding their parochial obligations. Post-graduation and during his first professional theatre gig, he was in such a penurious configuration that he could only afford to live off beans on toast and doo-doo water until the first pay cheque arrived. Morning, noon and night; every single day for three weeks he grazed on beans on toast, beans on toast, beans on toast and this indubitably began to pot-boil an adverse reaction upon his digestive state of play.

There was a scene where his character Periwinkle, entered stage left in the middle of act one and had to reach down to lift up a Ming vase to show to a prospective antique dealer. On the opening night, the very second his slender fingers alighted upon the vase, an enormous fart tore through the auditorium- much to the devastation of the cast and crew. The evening after, momentum continued at exactly the same time and all was confusion for what seemed an eternity. The box office suddenly became overwhelmed with a healthy stream of punters so obviously the news had broken far and wide too. This went on for about a week and with each performance, the audience grew wilder in their appreciation until Wind Farm completely lost it, came yowling off stage and began throwing wild biffs and boffs at anyone within pummelling distance. Someone should have pointed out that if he fancied himself as a streetfighter, he should have stayed on Sesame Street. He did however manage to knock off a few spectacles, two hearing aids and a wig before the ushers swooped and tied him to a chair with some fly rope and a lady's scarf. Then the authorities gave him thirty-six months with,

'The better the home, the more shameful the offence,' ringing in his tender ears.

Naturally, he and Ossifer have struck up a memorable alliance; the congruity of the performance arts genetic code obviously binds them tightly. Wind Farm is well away from his lofty beginnings in here but at least the prison food has re-mapped his digestion and he is now an important part of his beloved cannibal hoi polloi. His family moved outwards and onwards without leaving a forwarding address and it's a bit of a shame; he's not a bad sort at all.

He breezed into our cell yesterday, plopped himself in the middle of the floor and pondered in his clipped Mockney negative concord:

'If I never had anything before, then surely in here, I at least have the power to change my body through gruelling work outs and therefore end the sentence with something tangible. If that is a given, I can therefore change my character. If I can change my character, I can change my will. If I can change my will then I can change my earnestness. If I can change my earnestness then I can change my desires. If I can change my desires, I can surely change my inner self and become whole once more.' Pretty deep from someone who breaks wind and faces simultaneously; albeit those who are too frail to return the favour.

Hardly Breathing seems to be rather enchanted with Wind Farm too; it's as though Windie's purple education has somehow empowered his immediate superiors into a heightened grandiose eloquence. This has inevitably led to a little soul-searching and admittance of past shenanigans from various quarters.

Hardly, for the first time in our acquaintance, shared one night and told us part of the reason as to why his particular brand of fate landed him on the inside. He speaks in a curious sing-song poetical voice where the end of each sentence has an upward inflection followed by grinning at everyone and awaiting a response. This gives an oxymoronic resonance of a soulful innocence interposed with a rather irritating zest to his delivery; as if he alone is the intended recipient of his own monologue.

'The halcyon days of the glorious summer: when the doorway to adulthood squeaked open on its complaining, rusty hinges. Our little gang of six strolled purposefully and confidently through: into the Promised Land of independence and grown-up adventure which was now ours for the taking. Not for us the Orwellian nightmare of Thought Police, Big Brother or the Ministry of Love: we were busy scrimping and saving through a cornucopia of odd jobs such as newspaper rounds, selling horse manure, digging gardens for old ladies and collecting scrap iron to weigh in at the yard.

That June, when we left school, started work or college and discovered young damsels with their proffered gifts. This was the summer of love for our generation and it continued to reverberate for long afterwards. Above all, we were introduced to the brave new world of manliness and the inexorable link between freedom and Italian motor scooters. The Lambretta or Vespa were the scissors- the vital component for cutting the apron strings and riding purposefully off in a haze of blue smoke into the sunset. This was the be all and end all to many of us young but impoverished lads who toiled away in Iron Maggie's Kingdom to the sound of scrape and clang.

Like the Knights Templar, the group bestrode their shining steeds with Chadwick being the acknowledged leader of the pack. He was a couple of years older than us and lived three streets away; the proud owner of a sky-blue Wildcat Lambretta scooter which shone and glimmered in the meridian sun. Pushing and pulling, we crowded around, utterly entranced, mute with shock but with burning passion to own the like ourselves.

Around ten years previously, Mum had opened an account in my name and started the marble rolling with five blue pounds. At her firm behest, I had dutifully ambled down there twice a year clutching notes, cheques and postal orders that kindly aunts, older cousins and gran sent my way to entrust them to the post office's care.

A decade flashed a fickle fin and the merry month of May saw me form part of a shuffling queue for ten sudoriferous minutes before withdrawing the entire accumulated hoard. I felt like the proverbial pirate king; my own personal treasure trove had reached the giddy heights of 130 crisp pound notes: which more importantly equated freedom and enchantment- the local schoolgirls loved their two wheeled heroes and manhood beckoned a clunky finger. The game, as they say, was well and truly afoot.

At that time, a complete but tatty motor scooter could be picked up for around 40 pounds and a decent and solid runner for around 100. With these considerations, I mentally put a sum of 80 to one side for a bike as I also needed sundries such as a helmet, gloves and some Double Dutch called insurance.

A lad from school informed me of a Vespa for sale within my price range so a friend's dad was pressed into service as he worked for Truman Black Eagle Brewery and had a large work's van at his disposal. We got there before the allotted time and the mouldy tarpaulin sheet crumpled back like a conjurer slowly revealing his finale to an enraptured audience. The rear hub was smashed, the engine didn't run and worst of all were the panels: the front leg shields and side bubbles were covered in gaudy hand-painted dragons wheezing contemptuous fire. But love is blind, love at first sight blinder still, so with the hard-saved

cash smouldering a hole in my pocket the deal was quickly sealed after a couple of cursory questions. It was far too much for such a pulsating mess but then as now, the heart ruled the head and I became the proud and very grown-up owner of my very own ticket to freedom:

**I was now Icarus incarnate and would fly high and touch the very edge of the
Celestial Sphere on my Iron Pegasus.**

Hoisted up on the stand in my father's junk-strewn back yard in front of an admiring white lip-sticked and pink eye-shadowed gaggle of girls, my friends spun the engine over with vigorous application of the kick starter for two entire days, never once checking anything-not one, single, oscillating part.

On day three, Dougie the Mod dutifully turned up, took a quick glance at our sweating brows then at the scooter and duly pulled out this round black plastic oddity called a carburettor choke which enriched the mixture and ensured a fresh charge of petrol was delivered into the cylinder.

It roared into life first kick but the throttle was jammed on: it bellowed like a wounded satyr with a breath of blue smog but I stood there transfixed, unblinking and welcoming the new sun into my life. After a good two minutes, it had been noted that the heap had vibrated round half the yard on the remains of the rear hub leaving a permanent tramline reminder in the concrete- much to the crowd's amusement.

As I was only fifteen at the time the scooter was pressed into service upon the open fields opposite the house where several gypsy horses calmly grazed on breakfast, brunch and dinner. After fixing it up with a new hub paid for with grannie's help, the scooter never missed a beat all summer and we soon wore a track around the perimeter of the field- inadvertently creating a lush equidistant island for the horses that nonchalantly champed the perpetual green, green grass.

Boys being boys, the obvious next step duly presented itself. The fateful came when we agreed that the next phase of the adventure should unfold: a trip out on the open road but sans licence, tax or insurance. Big Bragger was quickly enlisted to be the rider as a man of experience and so we set off, me as pillion, one bright Sunday morning in early August with a mind to tour the villages of Kent. The fields, trees, flowers and cottages blurred past as we happily buzzed down the steep hill. Simultaneously, we sprang bolt-upright in an attempt to look kosher: slowly moving towards us on the opposite side of the road, its vulture like fluorescent stripes burning our retinas: a stalwart of Big Brother came thumping along to his Thought Police tune.

After a couple of expedient detours off the main road we began to chortle with relief and continued to meander towards some farmland. But then a cacophony of shock, awe and horror thrilled though our ears: the perversely deep and lusty throb of the large BMW motorcycle engine acrimoniously purred behind us like a giant beast of prey. It had scented our fear and was ready and waiting to pick our bones clean and white.

As soon as the cop dismounted, Bragger decided to do one, so off we screamed towards the open countryside. We tried vainly to outrun the pulsating terror and sped through a farm sending chickens and ducks flying in the air and two sheep dogs giving a deliciously happy pursuit. We entered a blind bend too quickly and screamed into a tree square on: our world turned upside down but never the less a quiet calm descended as I gazed upwards towards the beauty of the sky: a rich azure hue with the odd wisp of cloud. This was abruptly shattered by a powerfully built man with Gestapo Aurora, hands on hips, standing over both of us. He never blinked and within an hour, the Pegasus was impounded at the police station, its wings melted and abased and fallen into the eternal sea,

Never to be seen again

The court date duly arrived and both my parents were incandescent with rage. Their son had outraged their natural dignity and sense of decorum and the 12-month ban, hefty fine and the threat of six months in prison did little to assuage their deportment.

It wrenched the fatuous grin off my face- there for Brandoesque effect as the Wham girls had decided to enliven the court proceedings with loud cat calls and general inferences: accusations of me being a self-abuser and hailing from dubious parentage. Their hurled obscenities were reciprocated with compound interest so the judge gave me a week for contempt. And so began my criminal career...

Later that month around 7-8 of our larger group set off to a seaside rally with George Michael's finest and I was left alone at the side of the road watching forlornly as they

screached away. Friendless, girl less and loveless, I began the long trek home by Shanks' pony. Up until that point I had never felt so wretched or despondent but phoenix like, I would eventually rise from the ashes. But that, as they say, is another story.'

.....

There we were, the day after another good salad dressing down: dutifully filing away Reader's Digests, Encyclopaedia Britannica, Carpentry Journals, Gardener's Worlds when Dan Yal the burly screw popped his head round the door and told me that a young woman was waiting for me upstairs in the visiting area. Apparently, they had telephoned through to announce her arrival but someone, somehow, had misplaced the necessary message. I hot-footed it all the way, on the double with high expectations of Alisha waiting in the room, shyly looking up, all forgiveness, sweet tears and a brand-new start: willing, waiting, wanting and able. But it was only Ruby.

We simpered at each other for a while before she launched into her tale of woe. Or was it war? She'd parked her clapped out Aggro Albatross in front of some rickety wooden gates the other evening when buying her daily four pack of GutWrench Lager and a wrap of Fry Frikkers from the newsagent. All that, and she still goes for her nightly jog and daily gym sessions.

The weather is always miserable round our end. Even the rats, the foxes, the ravens and the squirrels have congestive heart disorder from all of the junk food detritus left out everywhere. I even saw a rat dining out on another rat one evening when meandering my

way home from the Salty Dog and Lamppost. So, on the gates in large whitewash were the words,

NO PARKING AT ANY TIME. GATES IN CONSTANT USE.

The dusty guy was waiting for her when she came out of the shop, with an air of practised, iridescent rage.

‘Oi. Can’t you read?’

‘Yes, I read. What you like me read? Your fortune?’

‘Right- across- the- flippin’- gates. Read the nice fat words painted across the front, right there.’

‘Those words, right there? They say... *screw you bitch.*’

‘What? Whoa, no, pal. It’s you that’s the bitch ...you... bitch.’

‘Sorry. My reading not quite so good. I’m a forrengy see?

Eng-leesh not mommy tongue. Despite being librarian-lady, this difficult for me. Let me try again, if you don’t mind, please. It states quite lucidly... that you are the offspring of a thousand fathers and everyone round here knows it.’

‘Get the hell out of here and don’t make me come after you,’ he jiggered after her.

But she swore that he was losing the battle to stifle a grin.

‘You ready for round two?’ She looked through her heavily blued eyelids and massacred lashes that you could sweep the floor with.

‘Round one was the knockout round.’

'I'm pregnant,' she said flatly. 'And I really pray that it's a daughter. Maybe she will do you some good. They say that girls have a softening effect on bozzos. So, it looks like there might be another round or two, to go.'

'This is what you get for messing about,' I retorted.

The high colour disintegrated and her tongue froze like a baby seal's, stuck fast to the salted ice, awaiting the hunter's return.

'If I wasn't such a lady I'd punch you straight in the mouth,' she carped. But then she did anyway: punched me straight in the trap; so hard, that my lips instantaneously whisked up to the size of a puffer fish. The screws, the other wives, hangers on, and Fagin Children in the room all found it wildly amusing which helped placate me.

'I um va vurst berson vat I kno,' I dribbled by way of explanation.

'You're by far the worse person *the world* has ever known,' she shot back. 'I shit better than what your mother gave birth to.'

People who have been raised by a querulous, dominant or volatile parent are usually afraid of conflict in later life. Seems that she's finally warming up, under my tutelage. Still, she didn't storm out of the reception area or leave me with the obligatory bottle of water tipped over my boiling head. Maybe I underestimated her.

She sighed. A heartfelt one that threw her shoulders down three degrees from their resting place.

'If you have any money left over, I shall be needing some of it, irrespective of pecuniary difficulties. Quite a bit really. My solicitor will be writing to you in due course.'

'I thought you were above all of that money malarkey? I might be bankrupt soon.'

'You're already morally bankrupt. Consider it knob head tax.'

The Acid glow of the neon green light cast its sickly fingers across the room and I waited. There was, indeed more.

‘That neighbour died by the way-the one that asked you to clean out her garage.’

I shrugged a pretence of not understanding.

‘The one that told you that you could have whatever was inside. In lieu of a cash payment?’

‘Oh. So... you knew about that?’

‘Those two Broughs and the Vincent underneath all the garbage you found in there-close to one hundred and twenty thousand quid according to the Christie’s catalogue. Classic bikes like that are fetching a premium these days.’

I looked down at the table and sighed. She knew all along. And still, she stuck around.

She cast a quick glance at my prison clothes which hung down loosely like an old man’s jowls.

‘Still borrowing your gear then, I see. I’ve actually moved up in the world, just for once: there’s this new thing called eBay now. I’ve got my eye on some gear:’

**One card bearing the words: “To Oscar Wilde posing somdomite”
A letter written to the captain of the Marie Celeste by one of the crew**

An eye witness account from the first officer’s mate on the Titanic one minute before it struck ice

And off she clomped. Once again, I watched those ever-widening hips, exacerbated by that ferocious appetite of hers sway right out of it.

I was escorted back to my cell which wasn’t the worst place to be; the worst place in the world was my own conscience and associated personal history, no doubt a one-way ticket to a splintered mind. You attract what you are. But then everyone, eventually, gets

everything they want. Everyone wants to know their destiny...until they know their destiny. A teenage char wallah at the side of the dusty bazaar in Lahore may be catapulted into glory. The lottery winner may die of hyperthermia within a few short months. Kids bolted into the late part of the century with their eczematic eyelids and lips, alopecia, nut, fish, fruit, sense allergies: they all get what they want too.

Ossifer saw the look on my face and remarked off the cuff, 'De tought as buzzed fly-like: 'Ow many guys have treated their women folk with disdain, off handedness, spite and viciousness merely because they will not stretch their consciences over to our intentions?'

When thwarted we are infinitely resentful and the bile brims over the cauldron as the witch sisters cackle and gloat. The Mechanics of Sexual Madness continue to grind and whirl to arouse the phantasm of love and pain. But why should the low and the poor not comprehend the earthly principals as much as the high and mighty and wise and powerful whom we covert but simultaneously despise? We are born alone, live alone, die alone. We crawl into the world of loneliness, and then shuffle, and then stumble, and then walk. A mind cornered into insanity. And what do we equip ourselves with in order to quantify our humanity? Which weapons or armour serve us best to attain the placement within that ancient race: that of a Man?'

.....

'*What's the matter? You is quiet dis marnin'*. Is the trute finally borin' its way into dat noggin a yours?'

'What truth? Pass me the Larkin Anthology...the dark green one.'

'I've 'eard the way you talk to dat woman a yours on de phone. Da biggest coward of a man, is to awaken de love of a woman wivout da intention of lovin' 'er back.'

I stare blankly back before deciding to launch at him. The space is restricted so I can't quite get the momentum into my wild swings. He must have been working out with some other bad boys; he moved it on from standard pugilism and took it to the floor with his forearm locked across my windpipe.

'Is you listenin?'

'No.'

'I said is you listenin?'

'Yes. Gettoffme.Ican'tbreath.'

He cautiously kept his arm in place but loosened slightly so at least I could sigh out a little easier.

'If you insist on always on reachin' for dem cream all you gonna get is 'igher cholesterol.'

'What?'

'You can nevva, evva get everything you want, no matter ow 'ard you try. Decide what's important in your life an' then focus on dat an' only dat. If I was you, I'd get to it right now, start writin' letter after letter, postcard after postcard an' beg 'er back man. Thass what I would do. But you 'ain't me and I 'aint you.'

We were working, if you could call it that, jarringly side by side, in the prison library of all places. They had me down as someone who could run clerical stuff along semi righteous lines due to my nominal sixth form pedagogy and I had asked Ossifer to be my assistant (I had become so acclimatised to his attacks that they now barely registered, so we had finally nailed it quits) but when the two of us were unleashed upon the library however, things got slightly out of hand. Perhaps it was unwise on the part of the authorities to entrust us with the tungsten and wolfram; unwise, in a similar way, of asking Macdonald's to look after your pet cow, when you go off on holiday for a few weeks.

As crimes go it wasn't the most heinous but Chiseldent Brampton's principal warder, Phil Height made it his mission to nab whoever was perpetrating the shenanigans and he quickly brought the perpetrators to shame. Fuming at the selection, we decided on a guerrilla protest by systematically sneaking out five books at a time and then doctoring the covers and dust jackets. We even put together a science article with an old typewriter to infuriate the lags further:

Genome Breakthrough: Replication Particle Discovered Within Methylation DNA

By Barty Screw, staff writer | April 15,

Scientists have created a revolutionary process wherein repressive protein DNA can now be harvested, synthesized through a variable particulation process and then recoded. There on after, the primary subject can be rematerialized back into their former existence once again. The technique to extract the properties from the DNA signatures has provided a significant contribution to the analysis of LIGO data and the breakthrough will dramatically empower our understanding in innumerable fields of research.

'The DNA can be modified and repressor proteins enhanced to block the transposon cells restructure and then re-engineered thus rendering the recipient with all of their former brain activity and physical appearance as if they were at thirty. The subject will remain at that age thus ensuring a continuous and healthy work ethic and thus a vibrant application to their continued research or career,' said study co-author Professor Messer, a molecular scientist at the University of Tipton.

The first batch of exemplar material was configured by Professor Messer in front of TV cameras and the world press on the weekend of February 17th this year where the subject's ribs, humerus, ulna and radius were placed upon on the medical table wherein he explained the procedural methodology and what this breakthrough could potentially herald. He claimed, 'This is indubitably the greatest breakthrough in the history of science eclipsing even penicillin, anti-biotics and birth control.'

Many however, are criticising the move as yet another example of man transgressing his mandate, which could lead to unfathomable and far-reaching consequences. A member of the English department at the University who wishes to remain anonymous was quoted as saying, 'We have only to reference our rich heritage of literature to understand man's eminent need to coexist with nature and not to dominate it. Shelley's *Frankenstein* created an enormous impact upon publication and continues to reverberate to this very day. Indeed, its resonance continues to be amplified, especially as a social critique, in our post-modern, uber-scientific age and serves as a warning on what may befall humanity if we are ignorant to the potential catastrophic repercussions of our incessant meddling in the fabric of nature. Frankenstein is a perfect vehicle for lending itself as a deeply intertextual piece, utilising *Paradise Lost* and *Genesis*; it is now a hugely powerful cultural icon and for profound and far-reaching reasons. Even people yet to read the novel will be familiar with the title and the main themes of man as creator rather than created and the horrific consequences thus wrought upon society when individuals are left to their own devices. Continuous and unchallenged laboratory experiments give rise to the charge that we are dabbling in areas hitherto unexplored and thus the ever-present fear that events may spiral out of control. Shelly's work is preeminent in serving as a warning to us: if we meddle too deeply in nature's tender equilibrium, what then shall the inevitable consequences for us as a race?'

Professor Messer was keen to point out that the science department, in their entirety, bar none, did not give a flying fuck about *anything* that the English department had to offer on the matter, or indeed, on any other. He stated in something approaching a dry monotone that with the dean's approval, they were now fully committed to the reanimation of selected historical figures through decoding and sequencing. Names such as Einstein, Aristotle, Da Vinci and Benny Hill were touched upon and he later stated that, 'the English Department should content themselves with the metaphysical poets, the Fin De Siècle and the Bronte chicks, should their consciences be troubled.'

After a cup of tea and a cigarette, the professor went on to expand his vision, 'We as a race could benefit hugely from their (*insert name of regenerated individual*) continued research and ideas. Once again, we can put the Great back into Britain and the entire world can benefit immensely from ongoing research into astrophysics, nuclear chemistry, biological engineering... the list is endless. Just imagine if we sat Einstein and Galileo in the same room for a good mind-mapping session. We would spend the next thirty years trying to figure out what the hell they were going on about and the government grants flooding our way could become a veritable tsunami.'

Rumour has it that the Feminist Men's Marital Aid Group have put in a request to bring back Henry the Eighth in order to interrogate him regarding his questionable attitudes towards spouses and women in general but the department at Tipton pointed out that they

are keen to regenerate rather more formidable historical figures rather than “Romanticised Merrie England reprobates,” sic.

When pressed, Professor Messer stated that potentially, anything was possible but requests in writing to the Regenerate Foundation will be only considered if the application is regarded to be of significant cultural interest or opens up doors of investigation within the sciences.

‘On a personal note, I would be mortified if someone took it upon themselves to resurrect my mother-in-law. It took me the best part of thirty years to rid myself of the grizzled old buzzard and get her into the ground. When the shovels started, I considered it an end to the matter and I certainly don’t want her back in the house, slagging me off to my wife all over again. So, I do understand that certain etiquettes and principals should be adhered to,’ the professor admitted later in the bar.

He emphasised the fact that the world’s foremost minds from hallowed antiquity could be reanimated in helping to overcome the current world problems such as the banking conundrum, the seeking of alternate renewable fuels and the faint possibility of leaving the European Union. “Advances in molecular analysis will form the rudiments of an enhanced moral fabric within society and we aim to make a fairer and more equitable system. Or we can have a bit of fun and go and resurrect some major dicks from history and fry the fuckers all over again.”

Look out for more exciting news in the coming weeks where we run a competition to see how best to deal with resurrecting a few notable bastards. The winner gets to regenerate a character of their choice and chill out with him or her for a few days prior to the department taking them back and harvesting their organs to keep anyone within the education system working for a good few more years.

After a fruitless initial investigation, Height eventually caught us in an elaborate sting operation that resulted in fines for the 72 dustjackets that we had defaced, and loss of privileges for what we had added to the science journals. The crimes stemmed from our unhappiness at the books on offer but that cut no ice with Height. We would sneak the books back on to the shelves and then wait; hidden behind the cupboards, for someone to pick them up so we could observe the reaction: most usually, a confused roaring. Someone higher up must have had a sense of humour as amazingly, we were given jobs in the library on the strict understanding that we were never, ever to deface government property again and somehow, we managed to keep our dynamic duo word-word. Ossifer couldn’t help

himself and had one last little dig at the establishment by making something up on the photocopier and wallpapering the prison boards and doors with,

British Politeness

What a Brit says	What a Brit actually means	What a non-Brit understands
I hear you	I disagree	He accepts my point of view
With the greatest respect	You are a head banger	He is listening to me
That's not bad	That's OK	That's crap
That is a very brave proposal	You are fucking insane	He thinks I have courage
Quite good	Really cack	Quite good
I would suggest	Do it again	Think about the idea
I was a bit disappointed that	I may kill you if you don't try harder	It doesn't really matter
Very interesting	That is as clear as mud	He is impressed
I'll bear it in mind	I've forgotten all that you have said already	He will probably do it
I'm sure it's my fault	It's entirely your fault	Why does he think it was his fault?

Ossifer told me a story about one of his former mates who was faced with a dilemma one day with regards to a lady: an older, wiser theatre director, who had been around the block a few times, but was now down on his luck related something along the lines of:

'So consider: you're sitting down to your solitary, stodgy breakfast late in the morning and the doorbell goes ringadiningading and you meander over to the front door with the cigarette about to burn down between your fingers and there's a posh looking missive in the postman's hand that you have to sign for and you think *oh shit I have a debt to pay and the assholes have finally tracked me down* and you think what the hell do I do now? I don't have the extra folding and say that you tear it open with your heart banging away like a freight train and it's from some high-ranking solicitors who are representing some chick you dated three or four years ago for like ten minutes. And you think oh man, she thinks you stole her mother's Ming vase or Faberge egg or some misdemeanour and she's getting her team of jackals to tear you limb from limb and why oh why did I ever get tied in with all of that? And you start to grip the creamy white paper really hard but when the words stop blurring. And what it's saying is basically, to encapsulate a rather long and dull tale: she has inherited a skip load of money as her dad owned three pharmaceutical companies but has now shuffled off this mortal coil. She has always been like totally nuts about you, has always carried a candle and she would love it if you two could get back together again. She is now in a position to make your relationship work out just right and to make things more interesting. But... there's a but. She was a total, minting head banger and that's why you dumped her in the first place. But... she is offering a stipend of a grand a month, a great big house to live in rent free (with her of course) and you can go out to work or not; the choice is yours, to have a career or whatever. But the catch is that you only get the bag of sand at

the end of each month if you treat her right and in a respectable manner because last time you broke her heart into a thousand pieces because you treated her worse than doggie doo-doo and she has to be more careful these days and protect herself. What the hell would you do?

And you start thinking really hard about it all. Like will this make me like some kind of man-whore who only goes with chicks for money? What would your long-dead parents think? What would you tell your friends when you start rolling up in new clothes, driving a bling car and getting tanned from all of those funky holidays? Would they call you some sort of gimp on a lead to be at the beck and call of some deranged hell-cat who really doesn't deserve a guy anyway with her constant barrage of questions, declarations of oh so public love and man, those shoes, oh those shoes, that she used to walk around in. You know the type that your granny used to wear but this one here is thirty-two for Christ's sake. Man, you're getting steamed just thinking about her again and it's like almost three years since you last squinted at her. But you could be set up for life: no more bullshit at work, no more orders...

You contact the solicitors out of a niggling curiosity and arrange to meet up with her at their offices but she's waiting outside already. And she's still got those style of shoes on despite all of the newly acquired mullah. Those shoes which would make your insides turn to ice, would make your gums stick to your teeth when you force a smile. How you implored her (bullied?) not to wear them but she had to have them due to fallen arches and they reminded you of those women in World War Two seeing off their men at the train station—all of them wearing these head bangingly, nasty, vile, puerile bastard shoes. It used to make you think that yes, you'd go off and fight the Hun too rather than have to hang about with her all day looking down at the clog-hoppers. She looks over and smiles shyly up at you

because she was always quite small and then you saunter over to her and, well: *what the hell would you do?*'

After hearing that one, I sat down there and then and wrote a letter; the first really important letter that would reconfigure my destiny and win Alisha back once and for all. I made the declaration of co-dependence there and then: to get out of here and then she will be treated with the respect she deserves. Every day from now on, I will love, cherish and support her through any configuration that comes along. I am the putty in her hands and now: purged of all ego, self, and anger, I will be hers and hers alone. Marriage is supposed to be civilising; that's why it's called a civil partnership. To be civil to each other and to chisel off the sharp corners, to sandpaper the irregularities is and always has been, the name of the game.

Plenty of girls in my life were driven crazy and went on hollering for all the world to hear. And there were those who would make excuse after excuse and stand up for my inadequacies and behaviour to the detriment of their own being, their own sanity, their own flesh and blood. Which ones are the best for you? It depends on what you want from life.

A guy who visits the market was fishing at a lumpy pond and some baby ducklings hatched nearby and began following him. He was forced to take them home in the back of his van and so he got stuck in and dug the pond out in the back yard and everything. They wouldn't do a damn thing without his say-so and he even took to running round and round a field flapping his arms so they could all learn how to fly. If I only I could be so... accommodating.

My very first letter to Alisha, short on apology but long on excuse went thus:

Ever since I can remember, I have been made to feel like a bit of a weirdo. Maybe that's the reason for misplacing my temper so quickly. Almost everyone, from starting primary school way back when it seemed that most took an unhealthy delight in informing me of being that little bit different. Class mates, teachers, those two special friends that I had: Kandy Kong and Lou Ease, extended family. Even old vicar Jarvis who used to take the lower forms for religious instruction once a week in the oak panelled refectory was fond of telling me that I was a square peg in a round hole. So perhaps life marked me out from the start.

Jarvis, replete with bulbous cherry nose and flakes of skin swirling like a blizzard from his threadbare scalp; the watery blue eyes would swivel around the classroom and land on me with a triumphant splash just prior to the inevitable. He seemed to enjoy informing me in front of the entire class about my odd ways, the strangeness that clung to me like a fried onion smell or the way I managed to act that little bit differently to everybody else.

The old vicar would then invariably warm to his next theme: he would yowl uncontrollably in front of the deeply uncomfortable ten-year olds as he shared guilty tales from his distant childhood: evoking the time when he hurled a craggy rock at a woodpigeon was a particularly noisome theme. There it was: innocently pecking away at the daffodils, minding its own business and the next moment, its head had been smashed to smithereens and the headless body flapping around the garden banging into the runner bean frame and then into the empty clay pots strewn at juddering intervals around the garden. Its corpse was to stay there for days, his guilt building rhythmically in time with its putrefaction until it was dragged away by next door's cat before being regurgitated in the lane, just behind the apple trees.

Between muffled sobs he would admit to breaking into the vestry at dusk on his fourteenth birthday and stealing the communion wine, eventually being found as tipsy as a lord by the enraged priest who then proceeded to beat him around the cranium and shoulders with a bag of sprouts. Jarvis, who would yawp hysterically and spit out purple phlegm and call upon the Lord for forgiveness while the class would droop in stunned silence hoping fervently that someone would come and drag him away and maybe nail him down inside a coffin. Even he would tell me that I was somewhat strange and odd. And that old reverend was without a shadow of a doubt, a complete, utter, stark-raving numpty.

Perhaps it was inevitable then, that after so many people kept informing me of my odd peculiarities that the penny would finally drop and that I would come to realize that yes, if I was to sit down and really think hard about it, I was indeed, just ever so slightly, that teensy weensy little bit different from the rest of my class-mates and other so called normal children.

I had heard it all before. Instead of looking directly into the eyes of the religious history teacher and nodding every so often to show that I was listening, I remember shuffling slightly on this particular morning and casually dipping an eye out onto the playing field.

The terraced houses that adjoined the bottom of the rugby pitch had been purchased a decade before by some travelling families. They had a particular penchant for their way of life as they continued with the business of collecting scrap metal and had a dazzling array of mongrels of a Heinz 57 variety to guard their wares. These dogs had in turn mated freely with one another over the years and they would roam the streets in huge packs which the locals attempted to avoid at all costs. Two of them were now outside the classroom window in my direct line of vision and one mounted the other as was their usual habit. This did not particularly strike me as anything unusual as all of the children had noticed the comings and

goings of the gypsy dogs for as long as they could remember. But on this particular day something strange must have been in the air. I was able to practice my addition as one by one more dogs joined in the melee and at the end there were thirty dogs in a perfect circle all engaged in the act of fornication. I casually stood up and stated that everyone should look out of the window as there was something unusual going on.

A stunned silence permeated the room followed by utter rancour and hilarity which seemed to swell and surge as tick followed tock. Jarvis threw himself into the melee and peered out of the window before swooning and covering his brow with the palm of his hand, as if guarding his eyes from an overzealous sun.

'So, it is Bokka Gunne. Not only are you half-baked and a weirdo to boot, but you encourage the viewings of doggie porn. Write out one hundred times: I shall not be complicit in any more deranged perversions and I shall not drag my class mates down into the gutter alongside me.'

As you can imagine Alisha, this caused uproar in class and the news spread like wildfire. For ages, I was known as Doggie-Snoggy Bokk Bokk so I enrolled at my dad's boxing gym in order to learn the noble craft and return a few favours. The school bully wanted to share his enlightened view one day-he was eyeing me from across the playground and the next thing was that I...

I waited three weeks for a reply and got three whole lines in reciprocation for my pained efforts - a line a week. I won't bother to reproduce it all here but it was along the lines of,

thanks for the letter, hope that you're eating well...

You have, no doubt, come across the old saying *Absence Makes the Heart Grow Fonder*? Well not in her case it didn't. So, I upped the ante and started writing a letter a day, then two. I poured my heart and soul out and told her what I had been through and how I was determined to change.

Women are really clever you know. Apparently, Ann of Cleves was not quite as dull as she looked. She was on the ship, floating over from Germany, coming over to see our Henry. She fell violently in love with a courtier but this obviously meant certain death. What to do? She wore drab clothes and stained her face-Henry was displeased and sent her away again. She returned to her lover and sung in his arms in the orchard.

In that brief letter, Alisha also said that telephone conversations were now too much to bear so writing was now my only form of communication. In my next letter, I swallowed even more pride and asked about her mother and it got me thinking to the first time I was invited back to the family home and how she was a QC and she must know some of those higher up, string-pulling people. And hadn't her solicitor mentioned something about *an idea*?

And so, too quickly, it came to the last, soiled and second hand words which were the last that were exchanged between Alisha and me. It was her mother-the chief of all chrematists- whose only goal is to accumulate wealth; the nabob who thinks nobody is good enough for her daughter who wrote back to me after I sweated it out for three months without one phone call, without one single reply, after sending out perhaps thirty or seventy letters. She had informed me in her clipped tones in a one-off call that a lawyer from the home office was coming to see me. He duly arrived: burley, larger than life and to my mind, looked far more like a pugilist, than a man of letters. He read some of Mrs Rooker's words

and those of others, he duly recounted, verbatim as he put it. After the customary pleasantness, he deftly got down to business and handed me a letter:

Mr Gunne (so it went)

You have to be arrogant, selfish, and have a bullying personality to get ahead within the world that you have chosen to inhabit. You must always shine, and at the same time, block others from shining brighter. You must appear to have a strong personality against all others and show no weakness. Always be loud and witty. You must always pretend to admire those whom have status, and be complimentary to them. It's not just what you know, or how good you are at something that gets you ahead. People who succeed are takers. Anything a so-called successful person does for anybody is calculated to bring back greater returns. They are not faithful people, they are selfish. Not everybody can have, or endure those qualities; they are traded for a lonely life. You constantly deal with similar people as yourself. You will throw friends and love out the window due to your selfish character, but you will be recognized as a successful person. After that (in your older age after success is achieved) you will attempt to soften up to gain the world that you missed. I've watched it happen, and I see it happen on a regular basis. You are not my daughter's inspiration.

Thank you with regards to your copious letter writing. You will be pleased to know that you have caused a rippling effect to take place. Alisha's very own postman - Harry Hartless (yes-we found it so amusing) began conversing with her, one Saturday morning a while back when he innocently remarked upon the fact that she was presently receiving rather more mail than her usual quota.

He enquired as to whether she had taken up a correspondence with a pen pal as per the golden times of yore. The handwriting was consistently similar along with the same postal code so he assumed that was the reason. Well of course she was too embarrassed to mention that her husband is currently residing within the penal system and is attempting to purge his guilt through a cornucopia of mail. So as a diversionary tactic she announced that it was a long-lost cousin who was attempting a reconciliation prior to meeting up and they were reforming a correspondence. Would you believe that, he too, went through a similar predicament with a cousin who left for the Orkney Islands? And this actually served as a precursor to them uniting once again so Mr Hartless thought it all rather splendid that they had shared a little similar experience through fate's hand.

To cut a rather wonderful and multi-layered story short, I began inviting him for a spot of brunch, after he had finished his morning rounds and they have struck up-shall we call it *a special understanding*? They have discovered that they share a great many interests and so we hope that you will join us in wishing them all the best for what is looking more likely than not: an enjoined future.

I slowly lowered the letter and tried to think of a response that would sound non-committal, unsullied; perhaps displaying a modicum of emotional intelligence. None came. He twiddled his thick thumbs and waited.

‘With regards to the contents, I have in my briefcase all of the necessary paperwork to sign in order to release Ms Avaloff from any further obligation.’ He handed me the paper, his eyes never once leaving mine.

‘You will note that her signature is already present in triplicate-just sign below her name wherever you see a cross. I’m sure everything will work out for the best. You don’t particularly like being in here, do you?’

‘I will read the rest of the letter if you don’t mind,’ I muttered tartly. The words swam into view and the elegant hand appeared lucidly once again,

By the time that you read this, Alisha will have removed all of her belongings from your home plus any furniture and ornaments that she paid for. But please consider at least that upon your return you can enjoy the airy space and the minimalism; it will seem strange at first but *out with the old, in with the new* is a motto that I have long adhered to and it has served me well.

As a parting gift, we brought in a specialist to harmonise the environment: her deep understanding of Feng Shui will empower you to reconnect with your surroundings and to encompass a little Yin and Yang.

Anyway, life is for living and we wish you all the very best. I would suggest a study of Wu Xing be the primary focus of your new enlightenment.

Yours Respectfully

Romani Rooker

My mate Paul told me that to help a novice develop the requisite Buddha nature, a monk will pose a paradoxical question:

When one can do nothing, what can one do?

The rational mind can't answer these Zen koans. I tossed the letter back over and folded my arms. 'What it amounts to, is no more Alisha then?'

'It would be... unwise to try and make any contact with her, from now, Mr Gunne. Please try to move on; it would be best for all parties concerned.'

He rose to go and proffered a meaty hand. 'You are of course, free to ignore this advice. But if I, were you, I would take whatever money you have left and begin again, afresh. I hear that there are good opportunities, well away from The Smoke for people of your particular... skill set. Have a good day now.'

So, it looks, after all, that if you can reach out towards someone who has done you terrible wrong then you are well on your way to becoming a human being. And I do forgive you Alisha; for what you have done to me: the way you made me love you, the way you made me feel from the very beginning of all this. I truly wish you all the fortune and luck in the world. You're gonna need it with that postman.

.....

Ossifer handed over a bundle of dog-eared comic books and indicated deftly that I should hide them somewhere.

'Cheers then. These should come in handy.'

'I nicked some for meself, off dem floor after our rumble. I tink de other boys picked up most of de mess after we'd been in der. I is going to start afresh; read dem every night in dem cell. Me read dat de pain of regret is far greater than de pain of discipline. Ow is tings wid yew?'

I looked at him hard and straitened my back.

'It's kind of hard to say Oss. I'm wifeless, jobless, loveless.' He looked at me to see if I was joking; decided that I was and beamed over that gappy grin once more.

'Word is dat you is gettin' out in tree days too. You kept dat one quiet man. Wa appen?'

I glanced out of a barred window and pondered on how the thrushes, magpies and ravens of London were now making nests out of hypodermic needles and imitating car alarms. Even they have to be Gangsta with a capital G in order to survive. Ossifer would have been delighted to hear that. My mouth flopped open to share. Instead, I looked away towards the books and boxes and folders. My mind was finally beginning to clear and showed precious sign of the neglect long heaped upon it. If London's fauna can weather the turbulence, and change it up a gear, then maybe I can too.

I may well start that business abroad that I thought about way back when; abroad, in this case, being the Lincolnshire Broads; the place of so many happy memories of newly mown wheat and fertiliser permeating the air. The Tooth Fairy now leaves your money through PayPal; maybe it's about time that I recognised the sand in the oyster and came up from the depths to take a lungful of the new air, and begin that long promised, long overdue reconstruction.

The builders of the old Dalston estate never knew how their efforts would take on an altogether different meaning, many decades on: within our lives, our hopes, our dreams, our desires. And so, I shall return to the empty little house, my desolate home where all

effort was extinguished, all plots brought to nothing: that demi-paradise of Alisha now forever lost and gone. Quomodo sedet sola civitas: Vanity of vanities. All is vanity.

I looked at Ossifer for the first time with something approaching affection and put my hand on his bony shoulder and squeezed gently. He glanced back, frowned, then with near perfect diction: 'In valuing only how to argue, we forget how to talk.' He looked sheepish and in a lower tone, that was barely audible whispered, 'Anyways: there's only one person that can drag you down in life.'

'And that's yourself,' I replied, nodding towards the floor. 'I guess I just wanted to stay young forever. Maybe it's time for the change.'

I placed the remaining books on the shelves carefully and held a battered copy of *Decline and Fall* by some olden time geezer between thumb and finger before secreting it into my bag before walking thoughtfully up the stairs where Phil Ip the chief warder was pacing around on the top landing and whistling an old tune from the seventies. He scrutinised me carefully and rubbed his moustache carefully with his baton.

'You're looking unusually chirpy this morning Ahmed.'

A Return to Kansas

A revered polymath, once let it be known that he had something rather purposeful to impart. Receptacles of learning such as colleges and universities and think-tanks would indubitably and hugely benefit from his most defining capabilities in his copacetic industry and connoisseur-aesthete type of *stuff* so they all went and booked him pronto.

He therefore undertook a whirlwind peregrination of mini-lectures and delivered his ideals to an amalgamated gaggle of individuals, all at the cusp of their respective and glittering careers; all were thus garnered for what would prove to be the ultimate piece de resistance and distillation of their lives. Each and every single one, with no exception, had to pay one hundred thousand in cash, no cheques, no IOUs, no empty promises. All for the honour and egalitarian privilege of learning in just 30 minutes, what it had taken him thirty *years* to acquire.

At the stated time and place he would impart the wisdom, the help, the support, the secrets, and cosmic justice of such calibre that would irrevocably and monumentally change their thinking: forever and ever and ever. It would, so the polymath proclaimed, be a once in a lifetime opportunity and would never happen again.

He was known far and wide: for starting businesses, for buying businesses, for making businesses grow and for chopping up businesses and turning them into smaller businesses. All of these had born fruit; every single one had flourished, and had twirled like ivy. But all present had to sign a disclaimer that once the information was within their keeping, he had no further obligation to help them, support them or communicate with them, in any shape way or form. And the multitude cracked forth like ripe seeds from a pod and beseeched,

entreated, importuned, crowd funded, petitioned, negotiated, threatened their families, stole from grandparents; did whatever they could because, because, because, because, because...

When the palpitating hoard arrived early, the polymath breathed in their bright, eager faces and smiled benignly. Both a solicitor, two secretaries and a security guard had been employed at considerable expense to stand soldier-like just inside the front doors of the large, cold empty warehouse; admitting only those with the correctly proffered mazumah. The secretaries counted it out, everyone signed legal contracts and the doorman frisked each and every one for reasons of security and one by one took in their assorted paraphernalia and placed it securely in a large locked cupboard.

The polymath carefully settled his designer-water bottle, leaned forward on an old, creaky wooden chair and silkily informed them in a crisp and studied humility that he had been lucky in life; had done exceptionally well in fact. The smiles broadened, the feet shuffled slightly and collective tingles of anticipation reverberated down many collective spines. He had a good moniker, property, artworks, exotic cars with unpronounceable names, a villa somewhere with an equally unpronounceable name. He did however wish to impart that he was utterly sick and tired of work: that was a given-finished/end of/finale. Each morning was akin to trekking up Everest or fighting in a bear-pit. He simply could not go on any longer. However: if he was to set himself up in the manner of which his trophy wife had grown accustomed (guffaws) then he must work for another ten years and that prospect will undoubtedly kill him. So why has he gathered these wonderfully adroit, ambitious, purposeful folks together? In short, so that he can divulge the rudiments, the secrets; so, they can plunge into the chasms depths and inner workings of his fabled craft

and it will set them all up for the very top. Again, the knowledge that took him thirty years to acquire will take them all of five *minutes* to understand and around twenty-five to digest.

The catch? Yes indeed, there is always a catch is there not! They must each pay him one hundred thousand pounds and then he will divulge. They all knew this because they have all just paid. At the door. And the money will take care of him and his wife for a long time so thanks for that. More grins, more stifled laughter, more perspiration on foreheads, more shuffling of feet. But: they will undoubtedly earn this sum back within a few short years that will disappear in a soundless eye-blink: guaranteed if they follow *to the letter* what he is about to impart. A great wave of a murmuring arose at this with some whispered perplexity regarding his sanity/cruel con-trick/pyramid schemata/devilry but with glistening eyes and trembling hearts the gathered implored for more. All their cash had been paid up front, it had been counted and checked, each and everyone in the room was reverberating like a tuning-fork.

There was a polite knock at the door and the burly security guard let in the final attendee, apologising profusely for his tardiness but stating that there was no avoiding it; he had to leave his mother at the hospital and well, he's here now and has the pulchritudinous guy shared the wondrous self-knowledge yet? Their collective frowns and grimaces informed him deftly of what he needed to hear.

And the polymath contemplated and paused for a brief moment. A silent drum-roll that only the chosen few could hear, buzzed about and around, and he handed a creamy envelope to the nearest person and deftly took a step back. And the lucky individual looked at it with trembling hands and there was a garrulous silence and another one exhaled and stared unblinkingly, before attempting to snatch it out of his hand. Then another one leaned in crab-like and just managed to get her long, slender, jewelled fingers on it. And then

someone else shoved her hard from behind and she knocked into someone else and they went tumbling to the floor. Right then, another guy forced his way through and began to wrestle with the lady who had wrenched the envelope off the carpet and someone else took off a shoe and smashed it over the head of the next fella who had by now slapped another woman hard around the face and then bitten her fingers to loosen her grip and taken it for himself. And this went on for a while: with hands and feet and elbows and knees and then after a short while some long finger nails and a chair and a thumb and heads and more teeth, then another shoe but this time, with a stiletto fixed to it.

The authorities were eventually called and ark like they were led out by ambulance people and police people and security people until there was but one man left standing. He was bleeding heavily and had a puffed up, toad eye and a couple of missing teeth but was deemed by the services after a short interview not to be in such a bad manner as to warrant immediate medical attention but he was advised to attend later on for a few cursory stitches. And he staggered over to the polymath who was standing, watching him askance. And the man foamed through ridiculous lips and calmly stated, 'So what was in that envelope man?' and the polymath put his hands in his pockets, and leaned forward and grimaced.

Frying Tonight

You find yourself walking down an unusually quiet, Elm-lined Road as you are house-sitting for a pal who is abroad and he doesn't want a bunch of gnarly squatters moving in and carving up the place into wildly dilapidated tatters. You agree to his proposal immediately as four month's rent is due on your own shady gaff and this opportunity will depth-charge you below the landlord's radar for a while and allow you to pontificate your way out.

As it is around hungry time you think it best to go to one of the fabled eateries of the locale: not just any regular fish and chip emporium but one of those fancy ones where they fry everything in sunflower oil, the menu is written up on a chalk board in a ménage of gaudy colours and the chips are lightly battered and thick like a brick layer's fingers. So, after queuing for an indecent time and gasping aloud at the prices you come out of the shop clutching your warm trophy to your chest and there is an old dude in a tiny adjoining office, sitting right up against the window, hunched over the accounts or cooking his books.

And as you pause and look over at him his face illuminates with happiness and he fixes you with the most ingratiating smile. And you stand there dumbfounded and think: is this geriatric bean-counter smirking over here at me because he's bored and wants a break from the endless columns of numbers? Or is he thinking: 'Look at this poor clown who is so obviously in need of a good wholesome meal?' Or is it because he is ruminating: 'Ha! Yet another sucker just added to my vast chip empire and I'm sitting here like Shylock, counting out my mountains of mullah and it's because of peasants like you who eat chips all day long that I'm flying so high and keep on eating, man!'

Well, you stand and squint at him for a short while and fancy that it is indeed, the third scenario so you tear open the soggy paper bag to reveal a portion of your steaming

repast, place it firmly onto the glass pane and begin to slide it slowly around to form your letters of militant deviancy. You smile back because of your calligraphic eloquence and due to the fact that the writing is inverted so on Beany Counter's side you intend for it to greasily state:

Rally the Freedom-Loving Peoples of the World!

You begin the words and simultaneously look deep into his eyes and stand there, trembling in anticipation, and waiting for the inevitable reciprocation but all you manage is the *Rally* because already, Beany Counter slowly pulls his glasses away from his fevered brow and his look, well; you can determine it, *exactly*.

Beany Counter's furrowed brow is telling you that:

'I've been all over and done the lot and seen things you will *never* see and you are a total nonce.'

But underneath all of this, his eyes indicate a volcanic rage that states eloquently:

'You diseased low life. How dare you degrade my window; my window that took two hundred and thirty-five thousand chipped Maris Piper potatoes cooked at 190 degrees centigrade for eight minutes at a time to pay for,'

And you suppose that his ego pulsates over because he creaks upright and hobbles out of a side door and begins his white hot, chip fat, pursuit.

You play along and start to jog slowly away, turning back and guffawing at Beany as he is really decrepit and while you're not as young as you used to be, you can still put on a

bit of a spurt when needs must. Weaving through mums with their kids, men with their dogs, joggers, schoolgirls in straw hats, street sweepers, pizza delivery boys and large businessmen on their tiny mobile phones, right there and then, your entire left leg cramps up on you and you have to drag it with one hand and hop with the other one and man, it is maddening to keep going and like *really* painful.

You grab onto some iron railings at the beginning of the park then Beany catches up and stumbles onto you and you feel more beaten up by his breath than anything else. He can't even manage to speak but he just about grabs your jacket with his palsy hands and is blowing and coughing and gawking something awful down at the paving slabs and occasionally leering up at your face with his blood-shot eyes. You are trying to hold up one leg up in the air and continue to furiously rub the back of the calf muscle and using your other arm to prop yourself up on Beany but apart from a chocolate and fawn Siamese cat on a long pink lead, no-one is paying the pair of you any attention whatsoever.

And the pain slowly subsides and Beany eventually gets his breath back and you both stand there gasping and blinking at each other and then once more he beams up at you: the same bright white smile that floated over from the office window and he turns around and hobbles back to his numbers, columns and his increasingly vast chip empire.

And later that evening you phone your friend while watching his TV, sitting on his couch, drinking and eating up his fridge supplies and asking what was all that about and he mumbles something about he who lives longest sees most but you hang up and just carry on watching the film because it's so very good.

Ant Mansion

After some general pontificating, Superman decided it was best to go to a downtown tavern and drown away just a few of his many sorrows. He downed a lot of mead and after a time, Superman looked up, noisily smacked his lips but then to his utter astonishment, noticed that a nose had walked inside the premises: no face, just a long, red nose, complete with nostrils and a smattering of wiry hair. Superman watched carefully as it sauntered over to the bar and proclaimed loftily in a nasal twang, 'Pint of your frothiest ale please bartender!'

The guy behind the counter looked over at the nose with barely concealed contempt then with a sneer, uttered, 'Under no circumstances am I serving you. Get out of here!'

The nose got rather sniffy and enquired generally about the bartender's lack of respect and courtesy and as to why he wasn't able to enjoy any refreshment.

The barman leaned forward and growled, 'Well take a good look at yourself: you're off your face.'

Several double rums later and Superman noticed that a brain had wobbled into the bar. Not a head, just a brain. It took in the surroundings, moved unsteadily towards the counter and stated rather too loftily, 'A double serving of your reddest Bordeaux please barman!'

The guy looked over at the brain with withering contempt and said, 'Under no circumstances am I serving you. Get on out of it! Go on, geetcha!'

The brain looked baffled and then proceeded to probe the marital status of the bartender's parentage. 'So why won't you serve me one lousy little drink?' the brain demanded.

The barman leaned forward and whispered through gritted teeth, 'Well look at the fucking state of you: you're out of your head.'

Superman blinked and decided to sip the juice of crushed elderflowers for a while to see if matters improved.

A large black crow then teetered into the bar and said, 'A flagon of your finest port please landlord!'

The landlord looked at the bird with poisonous contempt, wiped his beefy hands down his apron and said 'Under no circumstances am I serving you. Get out of my bar this instant, damn you!'

The bird got into a flap and asked why on earth the bar steward would want to turn down such a reliable source of revenue.

The barman leaned forward and said, 'Well look at the state of you: you're out of your tree.'

After that Superman decided that it was perhaps time to go somewhere else and sleep it off a while.

Meanwhile, it was the end of the long, hot, glorious summer and just nudging gently into Autumn. The town remained parched and folks were doing a roaring trade in shifting quenching drinks and face flannels. What would have sold most were those little hand-held fans that a dude schooled in the arts of placebo invented once upon a while- but this was September 1666 so it was not to be.

The farmers were scraping their ploughs and making their sterile furrows in the cracked earth and attempting to raise a crop or two. Among others, the bakers weren't doing such a great trade either therefore Archibald the sweaty apprentice was feeling listless. He began flicking through his Geoffrey Chaucer book instead of attending to the hot cross buns; that's how the bakery caught fire. Up it went like a straw bale and the entire municipality all looked on stupefied and wondered what the hell they were going to do now as the fire had quickly begun to spread and fire-engines had yet to be invented.

'Only one way out of this,' they collectively opined after rushing this way and that like frightened roosters for a good while.

Meanwhile, Superman was smacking his lips in his faraway place of little interest where no-one could bother him and was trying out various ways of styling that big black curl on his forehead.

Cries of 'Fire! Fire!' meandered on the wind and reached his ears, so what was Superman to do? He came hurtling out of the place and in a millisecond, clocked the effects of the drought, noted that the horse-troughs were near empty and figured that the wells had long run dry. So he bent down on all fours, drank up the entire Thames in seven long gulps, screeched over the flaming buildings, hovered and then pissed down onto the city for a good twenty-five minutes until every single one of the flames and wild fire had been extinguished.

The townsfolk came snaking out of the city limits and fields and river banks and started grumbling about the smell of piss. And they noted the empty river bed. All of the fishing and boating opportunities were now up in smoke, to coin a phrase, for the year. The leaseholder of the section of river for ice-skating and his employees started grumbling that

there would be no ice skating that winter and they wouldn't be able to enjoy recreation of that ilk anymore or at least for a couple of years, until the river had filled up again.

So of course, Superman got super angry and he started cursing down at them. This made the town-folk rear up like a collective New Forest wild hog and they came at Superman with blacksmith tools and shovels and assorted paraphernalia of all shapes and sizes. But the only thing they could dent was his pride. After a while he stopped beating them up and knocking them out because it had all become rather dull.

He flew around in circles for a while and plonked himself on top of some high mountain. It was probably Everest, but hadn't been named that yet, and he ruminated about things for a while all over again. And he thought on and finally concluded that a name-change might probably be in order.

Freedom

We were burning down the freeway like a guided missile and the sun was out large and melting the very eyeballs out of my head through the windscreen. I asked my supererogatory friend to pull over onto the hard shoulder which you weren't supposed to do but this was a real emergency and he said OK, yes, alright then, if that's what you need.

For some reason, the sun visor had been ripped away long ago and my head was numb and pounding away so I asked my pal who was a bit older and a bit cleverer than me if he had any sunglasses to loan out and he said nooo.

I asked him if he had the missing sun visor stashed anywhere in the car, maybe in the trunk or tucked away in a side pocket and he said nooo.

I asked him if there was anything in the car that I could use to cover my face and henceforward shield my eyes from the hostile, belligerent glare of the afternoon sun and he said nooo. But he did say that his sister was at the tail end of moving out of her apartment and he had been helping her to shift her stuff and one of the extra suitcases was maybe sedentary in the back. So why don't we have a rummage around inside and see what's in there? Maybe there's a silky scarf to wrap around your head or something like and him being slightly older and wiser than me, I looked over and I said erm...

He went through her gear and then pulled out a pair of frilly red and black knickers and totally straight faced he told me to wrap them around my face and I wouldn't get any sun in my eyes. And he was looking at me and I was looking at him and his face wasn't changing: not one bit of it. So, I wrapped the frilly things around my face and went to sleep because I didn't want to be having any more conversation just right then.

And after a while I woke up as he was rocking me by the shoulder and I grunted and tried to peel the pants off my face but they were tightly knotted around my ears like a rioter's mask and took a bit of getting off. I blinked the sunshine out of my eyes and saw him, right there. A traffic policeman leaning into the window my side and asking:

Is there any reason sir, that you were doing 90 instead of 70?

'Well,' my friend began very calmly with the ubiquitous sorry officer you know how it is when you are trying to get to the West End on time because we are a couple of actors in a show and we can't be late as it will let everyone down and it will be wholly unprofessional being late and it will spoil the play kind of stuff.

And this seemed to placate the policeman and he started asking questions about have you ever met, or worked with, or known anyone famous and *really?* That is so interesting sir. So, what are they really like? And are they normal like you and me? And all that kind of stuff.

All the while his face was turned toward my friend the driver but his eyes kept swivelling over at me but his expression didn't change. And I was praying to God but he couldn't be bothered. And I started praying to fate and she had other fish to fry. And I started begging the policeman and imploring him-by using telekinesis and hypnotism and ESP and mind over matter to convince him to ask me:

Why, oh why, have you got a pair of women's red and black (and let's face it: rather quite kinky) knickers wrapped round your face in the fast lane of the motorway at ninety miles an hour???

And please ask me so I can give myself a chance to explain what all this is about. But he wouldn't or couldn't or was just thinking WTF and when he did eventually shoot off on his Police-bike to chase someone else, I looked at my friend and attempted to frame an eloquent grimace: to imply that I had a keen sense of humour and that I was mature enough to be in on the joke. But his expression didn't change and he didn't even utter a word. We drove off to where we were going and we got there in the nick of time. And to this very day, my friend has never ever mentioned it. But then he is a bit older and smarter than me.

I Feed My Children Roadkill

It felt like the summer of love all over again. Not since the August of 67 when Flower Power and Free Love were under full swing had things been so relaxed and chilled. If you closed your eyes, you could float off the ground like a soap bubble and drift off into the ether of the new, enlightened consciousness. It was with this heady cocktail of feelings that various people were perched canary like among the glittering expanse of glass tables, chairs and flashing neon lights, and momentarily suppressed their cachinnations for a glimpse down onto the gaudy street scene below.

A well-built man in his mid-twenties was zigzagging his way through the convivial hoi polloi, carefully avoiding eye contact with every living being. He aroused their interest due to his wailing like a trapped animal, twisted out of shape and awaiting its fate. Far above, and comfortably aloof, they wondered aloud over their drinks and smokes, if he was going to be alright but no one quite managed to bridge the querulous gap by actually asking him.

The well-built man-Alexander Thompson had been in town for two days and two nights. His cousin Lawrence Cartlidge was getting married and five close acquaintances had decided to launch him spectacularly out of bachelordom by ensuring that he would draw neither a sober breath nor conceive a lucid thought during the long weekend's festivities.

Lawrence was from a solid background and had found exactly the right kind of girl to marry: pretty, intelligent, hard-working but not overly ambitious. The type of girl in fact, that any man's parents would have been delighted to welcome into their home and call 'daughter.'

Alex had been haunting the pubs and clubs back home with Lawrence for the last four years or so and enjoyed a warm closeness but did not quite match his panache. Although Alex was educated to degree level and had lucid plans for the future, to his irritation, Lawrence was nicknamed *Midas* by their small circle of friends as everything he touched seemed to turn to gold. With Alex, things weren't quite there yet; a misty ellipsis seemed to vapour-trail his efforts and dreams. In his infrequent gloomy moments, paradoxically it was his auntie's well-meant clichés that kept him from darker thoughts: 'Always shoot at the moon Alex; you may just hit a few of those stars.' It was good to know that somebody, even if it was *Lawrence's mother*, believed in him.

Although Alex had been brought up to live by the moral code of *What's sent out, always returns*, he consistently felt short-changed; that somehow life was retaining a few cards in that fate pack of hers. Despite his innate benevolence and healthy ambition, he felt somewhat betrayed and was waiting for the time that opportunity came finally knocking.

Earlier on that afternoon, he had sat ruminating over his life through a haze of blue dope smoke in a quiet backstreet cafe in Amsterdam. After meditating over the various scrawled imperatives and directives on the back wall, left by many an obdurate traveller, one stood out from the profane and banal:

*If you're crossing the Atlantic in a boat and you drop your keys over the side, forget about them man: they're gone.*²⁵

²⁵ This is related verbatim from the back wall of an Amsterdam café from the nineties. Deep philosophy indeed for Generation X, Z and millennials.

Alex sighed. Easy to say, or scrawl on a wall in a sodden stupor. A clammy transition had begun prickling its way into his psyche around six months ago; the slow realisation of his general mediocrity and lack of progress had gradually morphed into the beginnings of a bitterness that he found increasingly difficult to shake off.

After that day at work, when his boss had given him a written warning, he had sat ruminating alone with the 'phone off the hook. He sulkily flicked through the red top paper and the ad at the bottom of page thirteen had literally leapt off the page. He went along that very night to check it all out: a class in a spit and sawdust gym run by an ex-Mossad agent. In clipped tones, the assembled hoard was duly informed of how to utilise Krav Maga: an uber-violent form of street-fighting that was guaranteed to leave a shattering impression upon any bellicose assailant, idiotic enough to push their luck. That kind of thing appealed to Alex: deft, impersonal and to his way of thinking, guaranteed acclaim and recognition.

It had felt good for a while, with the realisation that he now possessed something that all cultures and backgrounds pay homage. Alex considered that in the right circumstances, charm could be dispensed with, manners could be forsworn. A chap didn't need amusing or diverting conversation or the right accent; if circumstance provided the requisite need for the arousal of raw power and energy, then people would start flocking around like park pigeons, cooing their adoration. Metamorphosis had indeed arrived swiftly within a short eight months in fact. The steel in both his muscles and his gaze spoke eloquently; the now lingering female attention and male glances of recognition had been the little nod of acknowledgment that at last, he was finally on his way.

Alex had met a guy in the class who had introduced him to something else; something to ease the aches and pains of training, to take the sharp edges off the headaches. Despite

his parents' rigorously orthodox upbringing, he managed by degrees to overcome this innate prejudice and became a rigorous adherent in seeking out new experiences and illumination. It helped his dreams to take shape and focused the mind, especially when the humdrum life/work experience began to grate.

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In Alex's view, the logical step in launching their friend was surely a visit to the 'Dam and the rest of the invitees had been quick to acknowledge that it was indeed, the superlative adieu to their comrade in arms. They had toured cafes, languished in amusement arcades and percolated through the cobbled streets, high on self-approval and enchantment. Neon signs, cold, frigid chrome railings and the assorted paraphernalia spoke to them of new frontiers to be conquered, fresh entitlements to be savoured. After leaving the third bar, Alex and Lawrence simultaneously leaned on a metal barrier at the top of the canal lock and gazed upwards. The impression was that the sky had been washed clean: a vivid Pacific Blue lay behind the rows of the uniform buildings; all rigidly perpendicular, like rows of sentries guarding and protecting the status quo of the city and her ancient values.

The rest of the group had gone off to a strip joint which Lawrence had thought uncouth due to his forthcoming nuptials. Alex too, had ruminated that it would bode ill regarding his anticipated future-aura should the attendance of such a place become common knowledge back home. Besides, there were plenty of bodies that he could look at for free, so why waste money on those poor wretches who had been lured with false promises then turned methodically into human waxworks? Lawrence and Alex had chatted for a while then sauntered off to a low dive and settled down to smoke a version of skunk that after genetic modification, rendered the user catatonic within seven minutes.

After laughing like drains for a good while, an enormous gorilla of a man had strutted over, pressing his cherry jowls almost into Alex's face. He was complaining loudly that Alex had been eyeballing his lady, and he was suggesting they take a walk outside. The training automatically kicked in: Alex slid deftly off his stool and put his hands up in a consolatory gesture innocently demonstrating to all in the room that it was all a terrible misunderstanding, that he wanted no part in any altercation. He slowly began to circle into position, never once taking his gaze from his assailant. But all the time with hands raised innocently, with a bemused look of hurt innocence peppered lightly over his face.

The gorilla stood there like the Colossus of Rhodes; breathing hard with iron fists clenched and chin contemptuously hoisted. Alex had been drilled in the gym almost religiously: by throwing a punch and simultaneously stepping forward, the full bodyweight could be utilised alongside the move and thus cause insurmountable damage. He took a half-step and Alex thrust forward like a rattlesnake: straight into the fully exposed Adam's apple. He had rehearsed this particular manoeuvre perhaps four thousand times on the heavy bag in the gym and as foretold, a sickening crack resonated through the room. As the ex-Israeli agent had stated, sure enough, the big guy began making tortured, choking noises like a chicken being strangled in an abattoir. The entire bar slammed into silence; even the befuddled sot at the fruit machine spewing forth a silvery river of coin was distracted from his windfall. Owl-like, panic-stricken eyes froze upon Alex from every angle.

Purple faced, floundering like a gasping cod on slippery planks, the gorilla finally crumpled onto his side. Alex enjoyed the performance hugely: this was his Macbeth and could have so easily been Lear. Gloucester was right there and all in the bar were fools. For a spot of improvisation and his chef d'oeuvre, Alex turned to the ape's girl, winked and

beckoned to Lawrence to follow him outside and onto the damp pavement with its flotsam, jetsam and feculence.

‘Bloody hell mate; this is supposed to be a stag do. I don’t want to end up in a cell; not on your account anyway.’

They simultaneously turned around when they heard the onomatopoeic clippity clip upon the asphalt. It was the gorilla’s lady.

Alex glanced down at her hands expecting broken glass, poised and ready to be thrust straight into his smirking face. But no; she was radiant and tentatively offering a fluttering token. He took the phone number, kissed it and sighed.²⁶

‘Maybe sometime soon eh love?’ He nodded towards Lawrence. ‘He’s getting married next week and I promised his fiancée that he would be well taken care of. And after all, your word is your bond, no?’

Her eyes twinkled at the thought of a man who was so obviously tough yet tender and loyal towards his family; exactly as Alex had intended her to feel.

‘I don’t believe this. How is it possible to climb out of a steaming barrel of shit smelling of roses?’ Lawrence murmured as they ambled down the cobblestone path that ran the length of the porn-shops.

Alex had always found Lawrence easy company-even when they had been kids, but he had to finally admit it: he was stingingly jealous of his all-round success, in almost every sphere of his life. It had been Lawrence who had ‘phoned and informed him of his news of the fourth-coming nuptials; out of the blue, just like that, as per the usual.

‘Here we go again,’ Alex had thought. ‘Yet another step ahead in the great game.’

²⁶ I once witnessed a very similar incident on a Friday night outside the Saracen’s Head in Dudley.

He had however, experienced a genuine stirring of happiness with the high heeled girl coming onto him and he pondered as to why. It was, he thought, the most public transferral of allegiance possible and it had been Lawrence, above anyone else, who had been there to witness it...

They found a small café-bar and cheerfully slumped down onto the blanketed sofa, again to work their way through the flaky greenery, wrapped up tightly within cellophane. A pungent, sickly aroma arose from the bundle; a few pasty-faced youths leered over and a couple of girls started giggling. After around twenty minutes, Alex rose to visit the bathroom as the bottles of cold lager had begun to take their toll. As he threaded his way carefully through the throng, a sudden spark of unease flickered deeply inside him. But instead of dismissing it, he focussed hard and immediately it split into a roaring blue flame of panic. He shut his eyes tightly and attempted to rationalise by taking a couple more faltering steps towards the bathroom where the abundant tap water would no doubt bring him to his senses. But instead, a burning cold seized his mind and the deeply burbling voices began to multiply in quick succession. The sweat emanating from every pore told him that he was in deep trouble.²⁷ He focussed the small sliver of his lucid mind on getting back to Lawrence: carefully weaving his way back, he knew that to look upon on any strange face would lead to a mental collapse, fuelled by the ever-rising panic.

Alex screwed his eyes shut and aimed his words in a general direction of where he thought his cousin was sitting.

‘Lawrence! Lawrence! I have to get out of here,’ he cried.

²⁷ This scene is constructed in exactly the same manner as what happened to me in Amsterdam after smoking super strong skunk. I am hugely troubled by the legalisation of cannabis as it can so easily splinter young minds. It took around two years for the panic attacks to subside (they were triggered on top of buildings or ski lifts) and sanity slowly returned after marrying a woman whose subsequent devotion, kindness and love rendered me more or less straight again. I fully comprehend that not everyone will be so enormously lucky.

Lawrence dutifully stood up and meandered after Alex. The crispness of the air had the opposite effect of what Alex had hoped for: a dull roaring began to permeate his eardrums and it began to escalate in volume. He began to walk quickly as if to try to flick away the terrible, primal drubbing, deep within his mind. All the while Lawrence was calling to him and guffawing in his befuddled state from behind.

'Hey Alex! What's wrong man? Can you slow down a bit? I can't keep up. Has that guy you battered, returned with some backup? What's happening?'

Alex instinctively felt that if he did not do something about the situation quickly then he would end up with a completely ruined mind. It had already begun to splinter and Lawrence's incessant giggling and ignorance of his situation only served to fuel the obscene paranoia and black panic that were simultaneously crushing him down like a shrieking quicksand.

Various people were now beginning to take note. Sweat poured down his face and he constantly flicked the hot salty fluid out of his eyes with his forefingers. Uncontrollable, white panic now smashed its way through his closed eyes and ever folding mind. There and then, quite coolly and rationally he started to arrange a way out. He literally could not face any more of the pulsating, blinding fear enveloping him so he made the decision: anything to escape the dreadful, whirling maelstrom.

A distant voice, the weakened voice of reason whispered to him through the sweating terror,

'Your mother needs you. She is back at home awaiting your return. You are her life, Alex.'

'I don't give a shit. Screw her,' he actually hissed the words out through clenched teeth.

'What about your friends? What will they do without you?'

*'They can find new friends; one less won't hurt them any.'*²⁸

Visions of electro-shock treatments, straight-jackets and padded cells flashed before his streaming eyes as he pounded away down never-ending, cobbled streets. He had been running now for around twenty minutes and was utterly drenched in sweat. Alex ran his fingers across the tops of iron railings, crouching down to finger the damp leaves; anything to recapture normality and to reconnect. But nothing made the slightest difference.

The voice of reason had now been vanquished and the blinding, crushing terror had taken full control of his mind. He turned a corner after a short row of restaurants and at last, there in front of him like the key to the Gates of Paradise, stood the answer: a tall, empty block of crumbling flats.

The metal security doors had been wrenched apart at the base and he slid through and began to ascend the steps at break-neck speed. Lawrence caught up and had long stopped chortling; the situation had wrenched him back to a sharp sobriety and he yanked violently at Alex's jacket.

'Hey! What are you doing? Hey! Have you lost your fucking mind? Get away from that edge!'

Alex turned to him, his face deathly pale. His teeth were chattering uncontrollably and his veined eyes popped with terror.

He burst into tears and nodded vigorously.

²⁸ During my paranoid episode, I was looking for a high place to leap from; to rid myself of the black terror that had by now fully enveloped me. A voice, deep down was pleading; telling me that I had to return to my mother's house in England, and that it may probably literally kill her to know that her son had taken his own life. But the feelings were so abnormal, so powerful that all I wanted in those moments was to end it all, irrespective of the incalculable pain it would have caused others. Later, I regarded this as a self-inflicted and therefore a deserved wound: the ubiquitous council estate male seeking machismo and obliteration through alcohol and drugs so I didn't go to see a councillor. Personal pride got in the way and with professional help, my mental health may have returned much more quickly.

‘Please, I have to, I have to.’ He jibbered like a little girl, lost on a school trip in a strange city.

He pressed himself against the railing, breathed in deeply and blinked down at the concrete floor far below: it spoke of warmth, comfort and solace. As he slung a leg over the cold metal rail, Lawrence shot forward, wrapped his arm across Alex’s neck in a choke-hold and wrestled him backwards. Alex was trapped in the foetal position on the balcony floor; Lawrence refused to let go despite Alex’s desperate struggle and screaming out like a banshee at the top of his lungs. The warmth of Lawrence on top of him and the honeyed feeling of being enveloped under a living, caring body brought back childhood memories of his affectionate mother and her many cats; her smiling face swam into his thoughts. Slowly, very slowly, the thoughts, those wonderful thoughts, began to banish the black terror until it melted gently away and was absorbed like moisture into the hot night. ²⁹

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Alex returned to England a brand-new man. He had been given a second chance and the cards were finally his for the taking. He had come so very close to death and this, oxymoronicly had been the long-awaited epiphany which had empowered his release. He switched jobs and started to put in more hours at work. He joined an up-market gym and changed his diet. Following the promotion at work, he took out a hefty loan and bought that fabled, BMW in lieu of a lesser company car, which immediately brought him to the

²⁹ I started, finally to calm down, when I curled into a ball and began thinking of my mother. The throbbing began to ease until finally, around ten minutes later, I sat on the floor crying with relief and happiness that the monsters of my mind had finally released me. My reluctance to talk about my mental health and proud insistence on trying to function normally meant the cycle of anger and frustration fuelled by aggressive confrontation and self-doubt became worse.

attention of a brace of visiting salesmen in the carpark at the tail end of another busy afternoon.

‘Hey Alex! You look as though you have your finger on the pulse. Fancy coming away for the weekend for a little recreational activity?’

‘Sorry lads, but the only thing to float my boat these days involves sports, yoga and meditation. My body is a temple if you’ll forgive the cliché. Sorry if that sounds rather dull but it is what it is,’ he grinned.

‘Uh-huh, that’s what we thought. We go to this spa sanctuary once a month and it would suit you down to the ground. There’s a spare comp going; my sister manages it. We can grab a mountain bike apiece then move up to the lodge for a weekend, get some canoeing in followed by a little Tai Chi. The organic food and juice bar are blinding: whaddya say man?’³⁰

And so that was how Alex got to meet Christine and they hit it off immediately. She esteemed him for his professional demeanour, shining manners and polished morality and within eight months, they had bought a small, dilapidated cottage together and on their combined wages, soon had it refurbished to a fabled magazine standard.

Two daughters followed each other in rapid succession and Alex would stupefy his wife with his kindness and attention to detail regarding their upbringing. The reciprocal love of a devoted partner and children, alongside the new healthy lifestyle boosted his confidence to unprecedented levels. He felt utterly placated that life had finally worked out.

³⁰ I was surprised that eventually, when I swallowed my pride, that this newfound ability to share what was troubling me, that in actual fact, my friends and colleagues were perfectly supportive, rather than dismissive, about my problems and I should have approached them much sooner.

A potential client had asked especially for him to present a business plan and he was only too glad to oblige. Each new deal he put his company's way earned a decent bonus. At this rate, he had every intention of moving the family out of the cottage and into something more spacious within a couple of years. It had even been hinted at by the top brass that he could begin working from home if that suited his book; they esteemed him that much.

He rose early for the morning jog through the bluebell woods and returned home forty minutes later for a shower and shave. He kissed his wife goodbye and casually glanced over at the wall calendar: *Saturday, September 21st*. A cold shudder reverberated down his spine.

He slid into the car and pressed the starter. It had been exactly five years to the day since that God-awful paranoia attack in Amsterdam. He hadn't seen Lawrence since that episode; he had been too ashamed to attend the wedding as at some point his motor-mouthed cousin would have inevitably let the cat out of the bag regarding the suicide attempt. Besides; Alex's life had gone stratospheric; his social circles these days had widened and soared beyond all recognition. Lawrence was the past; Alex was the now *and* the future. That tangy equilibrium had finally been honed to perfection and the chips had fallen as they were wont. ³¹

He glanced at the dashboard clock: 8.15AM which meant that he should reach his destination by around midday allowing for traffic. The BMW crunched purposefully off the gravel driveway, past the chocolate box wooden fence and he glimpsed into the rear-view mirror one final time. In the two seconds that he saw his wife and daughters, they appeared completely still: as if stitched into some bizarre tableaux being presented by an

³¹ After I met my wife, she kicked me into shape (to coin a phrase) and recalibrated my thought processes. I became a teacher of English and Drama, had a wonderful family, travelled the world and have made many amazing friends along the way. All because someone believed in me.

experimental drama company. Shaking his head and smiling at the trick of the early morning light, he headed down the potholed B road until he reached the motorway.

He slid The Grateful Dead's album into the CD player and sunk back into the soft leather, smiling casually at the thought of his return home that evening when his family would rush out of the cottage to greet him. They always disentangled themselves from whatever they were doing to welcome him every evening in the same manner. It wasn't simply that he returned regularly with gifts; he was a good husband and father; he knew that. He had been lucky in life and wanted to reciprocate a little of what he had been given. If his kids could grow up safe and happy then the uncertainty, greyness and pain that he had faced down the years would have been all worth it. He would work hard to ensure that they avoided the pitfalls that had befallen him.

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He calculated from habit that he had been driving for around two hours and flicked an eye over at the dashboard clock: 8.15AM. He tutted at the thought of last week's expensive service at the garage- he would have something to say about that when he returned home. He turned the music down and craned his neck in order to search out for directions to the left of the hard-shoulder.

Perspiration sprung out of his body as he gawked at the sign: Junction Four: the exact point where he had joined the motorway two hours ago. He flicked his wrist out: 8.15AM, the heavy, Oris dutifully informed him. He started to take sharp, controlled breaths: in through his nose and slowly out of his mouth in an effort to smother the rising panic.

The traffic either side seemed to slow; there must have been a jam up ahead so he began to press firmly on the brake. The cars either side appeared to be moving in slow

motion and he glanced at his speedometer: seventy miles per hour. He tore his gaze from the needle and saw that the trees and grass were all swaying very slowly in fits and starts as if he was in the middle of an old silent movie, jerking backwards and forwards one grainy frame at a time. To the left, a stream was trickling down the hill in super-slow motion. The occupants of the cars either side gawked over at him with lifeless, black eyes; a young child, deathly white slowly shook its head from side to side with its mouth agape-black and empty of teeth.

Alex began to babble incoherently and gripped the steering wheel while frantically speaking out loud, to try to reach some semblance of reality.

'Get a grip for God's sake. You're just overly tired. You've been working too hard; just calm down and breathe. Calm down and breathe for God's sake, breathe.'

A bird swooped across the sky, a few feet in front of the windscreen. As it glided by in super-slow motion, the head jerkily turned and stared at him, unblinking. It opened its beak and vampire-like fangs protruded like daggers. He screamed out and cut right across the lane, careering up the embankment, the rear wheels whipping grass and soil high into the air in their frantic bid to purchase grip in the soft verge.

He swore out loud that he would book himself into a psychiatrist that very day. Obviously, he was in the hurricane's eye of some horrendous mental breakdown. He repeated to himself over and over again: just hold things together until he could get back to the family home. They would take care of him. The loving embraces of family would bring him back to his senses, like what had happened in The Dam when he had felt the warm embrace from his friend Lawrence. He would call the doctor out and take the next month off work, just to be sure.

‘Just hold on for a few more minutes; four or five and you will be home.’ He actually began to sing the words in order to lighten his pounding temples which felt fit to burst.

On its own accord, the car’s engine cut out at the bottom of the drive. He half rolled, half fell out of the door, his inner mind thronging with a dreadful wailing: a ménage of voices-young and old, crippled, tortured, accusatory and incessant.

His wife and two daughters came running out of the house. They all wore light yellow dresses and his wife had her blond hair plaited tightly. They laughed out loud as they ran...straight into the arms of another man approaching them from behind the boxed hedge. He began to throw the girls up in the air and they were shrieking with laughter. Christine was beaming with delight and was gently running her fingers up and down the nape of his thickly corded neck and he glanced back at her suggestively. Alex was too stupefied to make a sound. He attempted to move towards the family group but was frozen solid, his body seemingly bolted in place.

A very tall, very thin figure slowly approached with a hatefully vitriolic countenance. If Alex had been able to move, he felt sure that he would have collapsed in a foaming wreck at the sight. The thing’s face was deathly white; indeed, it looked as if it was rotting from the inside out and it was dressed in the black cap and robes of a medieval judge. In its right hand was an ancient, leather-bound book the size of a family bible.

‘All of this belonged to you,’ the gnarled finger jerked towards the happy throng. ‘All of this was ready and waiting...for *you*. You should have stayed the course; you should have believed. All of this was yours for the taking. It was *written*.’³²

³² One of the most awful thoughts of my adult life struck me just prior to writing this story: what if I was to suddenly wake up and find that the last two decades have all been a dream, a phantasm, an aura of what might have been? What if I had actually died in Amsterdam and the thought processes of what was meant to be had somehow become imprinted within the ether of my ongoing consciousness or soul? My wife has often remarked that we were fated to be together. The wholly unique manner in which we met-she from an entirely different culture to that of my own, in her opinion was already mapped out, the fateful chance of our meeting was no coincidence at all. And what would have happened to my soul if I had found a spot to jump from, on that darkest of dark nights?

The words belched forth through the decaying, black teeth with a withering ferocity. The stench of the thing's breath, oh the stench: like charnel houses but worse, much worse. Its eyes smoked with a hatred from far beyond this world and the trance was finally broken. Alex took palsy steps towards the thing with his arms outstretched; his very soul pleading, begging, imploring that this was all just an unimaginable, steaming black-nightmare from which he would soon awake. But with each faltering step the bright day grew blacker and blacker and simultaneously colder and colder.

After seven steps, he was back in Amsterdam. The incessant screaming and cries of anguish inside his head had been replaced by a dreadful metallic humming. The thing's bony white hand gestured to the left and Alex stumbled heavily towards its invocation. To his unimaginable horror he saw the crushing enormity of the scene before him: Lawrence was on his knees in front of a derelict block of flats with the wrenched open metal doors, screaming at the top of his lungs for help. He was literally tearing his long, dark hair out in bloody clumps and they fluttered around him like red cobwebs.

There in front of the doors, lay his pulverised and grotesquely twisted, steaming carcass: offal and blood splashed out around him, dribbling through the pavement cracks and collecting in sticky pools. The thing opened the smoking book and began to slowly write; the primal scream within Alex now lodged deeply within his burning throat as the image in front faded into a fierce crackling and burning of intense black.

.....

Just beyond, the gaudy neon lights of cafes, restaurants and nightclubs radiated iridescent across the peaceful canal network. Each and every room was alive with music and the buzz of people: all backgrounds, all cultures, all shapes, all sizes; enjoying themselves

and each other beyond all abandon. The old city sighed contentedly and readied her painted smile; always willing, always able, only too pleased to heartily welcome her very latest guests.³³

³³ This story could have been written without footnotes and no doubt, worked much better as a realistic piece. The metafictional footnotes, I feel, create a jarring quality but for the sake of this thesis, they will remain.

The Golden Scales of Justpiss

'EB One Ken Knob-ee, EB One Ken Knob-ee: do you copy? You anywhere near Paddington Cop Shop on the off chance?'

'This is EB One. Affirmative... I mean yeah, I'm just outside Regent's Park so maybe around three minutes away. And can you try to get my code name right just for once? That joke's not funny. Why would you like to know where I am anyway?'

'Go to the front desk and ask for PC Kerr. You need to pick up a small package-a brown, padded A4 envelope, then bring it back to base pronto. A client is here waiting for it. So just to confirm... yeah... just a second... the officer's first name is ...Wayne.'

'Alright then: I'll get right onto it, I suppose.'

.....

Five minutes later, the worn-out suspension units groaned under the violent assault, as Ernie bounced over the high kerb, revved the engine twice then switched off the ignition. He hoisted the bike onto its centre stand and loped into the brightly lit reception area.

He dutifully removed his crash helmet, wiped the grit from the corners of his eyes with a dab of his forefinger and stood awkwardly upright, gazing expectantly at the desk sergeant.

'Good morning sir. How may I be of assistance?'

'Yes, it is a good morning: I'm here to pick up a parcel from a Wayne Kerr.'

The sergeant eyed him coolly, swivelled round and shouted through to the various offices located in the back.

‘Does anybody know if we have a PC Wanker with us here today?’

Ernie’s mouth twitched open. He gulped, then sprinted full pelt out of the building and back to the safety of the street. He stood beside the bike with quivering hands and clicked open the channel on the radio.

‘Bastaaards!’ he screamed at the very top of his voice.

But all he could hear in return, was loud, riotous laughter buzzing its way through the plastic intercom.

.....

Ernie Bimble had been a motorcycle messenger for almost a year at a down- at- heel King’s Cross office adjacent a brothel. Initially, he thought it was wonderful to get paid for doing something that he loved to do anyway: riding around on motorbikes, weaving in and out of the traffic: the wind in his face, the freedom of the open road. Only the veneer very quickly began to wear thin as the sleet and snow left him as cold as charity and the summer, exacerbated by traffic fumes and global warming had almost baked him to a crisp. And as his Aunty Margret had stated one evening in her clipped tones: once your hobby becomes a job then it is no longer a hobby.

He did not enjoy popularity in the office. Maybe it was due to his short, bulky stature and rather long, raggedy beard that created a certain impish residue. Perhaps it was that he fixated on stuff that other people deemed every day and mundane. Or it may have been that he was simply out of kilter with the oxygen of his work associates. Whenever Ernie entered the office, he seldom received little more than the occasional grunt. Maybe, he

thought to himself, he wasn't brilliantly witty like Alex or streetwise like Will or knowledgeable about all aspects of football like Big Al. Whatever it was, he felt that he was the piece that didn't quite fit the jigsaw. The cracks started to widen into deepening ruts after only a few short weeks and this added to his growing confusion and general lack of self-worth.

To add further to his troubles, during the previous three Friday mornings, there had also been a recurring incident which had unnerved him in the extreme. On the way to the office at precisely 8.23, an oncoming black Mongdurex car with a 20-registration plate had come screeching into his lane, resplendent with horn blaring, wipers swishing and fiery headlamps burning his retinas. At the last possible millisecond when Ernie's terror had reached its zenith, the driver would flick the steering wheel to the left and deftly avoid a collision and this left Ernie quaking like a small child sans parent at the fairground. But worse was to come. The driver would then perform a handbrake U-turn, gun the engine to maximum revs, then overtake him before aggressively slamming on the brakes causing Ernie to screech his bike to a lightning halt.

It was the type of car that was pure luxury through and through and every available extra, spoke of too much bling, capaz and oomph. And it was so with the windscreen washers: they were just too powerful for their own good. Upon a flick of the stalk, a turquoise broth would hit the windscreen and the extra-large nip of corrosive moonshine would tsunami over the roof and brutally stab Ernie in both eyes with icy fingers. This crop-spraying merriment seemed to galvanise the occupants into hysterical revelry within their steel chariot but as they were all rather burley judging by the width of their collective shoulders, Ernie thought it unwise to enquire further into their unique brand of jocoseness.

After discussing these unwanted morning ablutions with one of the few people in the office that actually gave him a fractional time of day, the story had spread like Californian Wildfire. Upon his return from circumnavigating the North Circular later that afternoon, he experienced a warm glow that he had not encountered in months; not since his mother had procured Notch, the long-haired hamster in fact.

Phil Squint, Mel Wust, Georgie Glance, Ewan H and Brickey Shrapnel crowded around him at the festering sofa where he was attempting to thaw out over a weak mug of tea.

‘The cheek of it mate,’ Phil thundered, his eyes alive with tension. ‘It’s a diabolical liberty; to do something of such crass stupidity to a knight of the road!’

‘He might have killed you Boysie. As if the life of a noble courier ‘aint dangerous enough already?! What if you was shrieking along at the ton twenty and your vision got interfered with? What then? You might come a cropper and eaten gravel for breakfast, lunch and dinner, that’s what,’ rumbled Georgie.

Mel snaked his way into the conversation and stated the facts lucidly through featherweight lips. ‘This driver’s clearly a menace. We have to fink of somefing to send him scurrying back into his dark little place. Our good name of *Knight Riders* has to radiate eternal, so we all ‘ave to agree that we’re in this togevvver, OK? We ‘ave to make fings right.’ He banged on the table and a murmur of approval meandered around the grubby walls in a show of solidarity. Ernie winced slightly. He didn’t like impromptu stinging noises but what was of paramount importance at this moment was the fact that he was surrounded by, and being spoken to, by *five people*.

Ewan nodded his agreement but it was Brickey, after pondering the situation for a few moments, who knew what was really required.

‘Ernie: whatever may be said about this ‘ere situation, there’s one immutable truth goin’ down: these ‘ere geezers are, without a shadow of a doubt... *takin’ the piss*. So, it only stands to reason that it should be you who returns it back. Right back.’

‘How’s that? I’ve never taken the piss. I don’t even know *how* to take the piss.’

‘You know that old Ford Fanny out back that Big Boss’s wife wrapped around a lamp post a month back? E told me e’s going to break it for parts. E got it back from the insurance for a song but you know what e’s like, the old skinflint. Anyway, Ephrahim Griper, the head mechanic can remove the windscreen cleaning paraphernalia and screw it all in to the front of your bike’s fairing for you. The part that *we* need; the most important part is the plastic reservoir used for the water and screen wash mix. But ere’s the cunning part, see? We all take turns to piss inside of it. Then, when you see the car drivin’ arch terrorist All Summer Bin Largin’ and the rest of his Al Skid-Aida crew next time, you turns the tables on the lot of ‘em and give ‘em a taste of their own medicine...’

‘Turn the tables? What tables? Er... what?’

‘It’s simplicity itself, mate. Spray ‘is car, ‘is windows, ‘is doors, ‘im and ‘is occupants with 100% unadulterated, glimmering piss. It’s quid pro quo; that’s what it is. Try and get ‘im to wind down ‘is window so that you can drown them all and especially the upholstery. The inside of their car will reek like a fuckin’ cowshed for weeks.’ The others nodded with a gravitas hitherto unnoticed by Ernie. These people were actually alright; they were aligning with him, raising him into their ranks, ready for the forthcoming war. He looked at them all again and nodded slowly. He, Ernie Bimble was King Leonidas, the office crew, his Ephors and the daily work grind was the Agoge which had trained him scrupulously for one long year: especially for this extraordinary task:

The Battle of Thermopylae of the Post-Modern King's Cross Age was now at hand.

He was moved. So much in fact, that he shuffled round the small room, pumping their hands while looking down at the floor. The new, enlightened Ernie smiled from one side of his mouth: here was an opportunity to be acknowledged and be respected even, by the group. He could become one of them and gain honour and prestige. All he had to do was give the piss.

.....

The next Thursday evening duly arrived and everyone stayed late after work. Ephraim found a window in his busy schedule to rig up the windscreen system under the watchful eyes of the assembled hoard which included a number of the scantily dressed women from across the way. Each and every one of the *Knight Riders* in turn, took the reservoir to the bathroom and decanted what they were able. Even Nicky Tocker, the hoighty toighty office controller topped it all off to the very brim with her own Earl Grey inspired foamy brew.

Ephraim took the warm container, careful to avoid spilling the precious cargo and screwed it firmly onto the inside of the bike's fairing, utilising an array of aircraft quality bracketry. Every single staff member formed a large semicircle and looked Ernie full in the eyes. He stood with ram rod straight back, frigidly awaiting his battle orders.

'See these 'ere chrome nozzles on the top of yer fairing? I've bored them out with a drill so the holes are bigger. These are fuelled from the plastic tubing which is plumbed into this small, electric motor now sitting on top of the handlebars. Once you press the red button 'ere, two long powerful streams of the blended nectar will shoot out of the left side

of the bike like golden waterfalls. The trajectory and angles have been carefully worked out so make sure that you are sitting directly on the driver's side of the car. 'Ammer on 'is roof like a bleedin' maniac, give 'em all the middle finger, swear, shout: do whatever you can to get their attention, then fire off the full cartridge. It's wired so that you only have to hit the button once and the entire contents of the reservoir will empty in two gigantic squirts. It will probably take a good thirty seconds to empty, so again: *make sure that you position the bike accordingly*-to get the jets of piss straight inside his motor.'

Ernie's countenance was obdurate. He stroked his fringe to one side and nodded briefly before Nicky stepped forward holding the king of all courier radios. Her Essex accent was clear and unhurried.

'You can borrow this Bizzazz Sputnik 4 just for the occasion: it's the Mercedes C Class of courier-communication. No fuzz, no buzz and no interference; just a crystal-clear line and it costs five hundred quid a pop so take good care of it. Keep us all up to date as we all need to hear first-hand how you make those bitches suffer.'

Mel stepped forward and nodded. 'Give us a running commentary; everyone will be in the office by 8.15 tomorrow sharp, to listen in to your tale of justice.' He raised a forefinger and nodded slowly. 'Or *Justpiss* as it shall be known forever more.'

The assembled hoard nodded gravely. Ashley Weld cleared his throat and held his Starbucks Cappuccino 45 degrees aloft, like a Nazi salute. 'To Ernie. And the Scales of Justpiss.'

Echoes of 'ere, ere,' resonated around the yard while the strangely dressed ladies nodded in a contemplative manner. Ernie found his spirit soaring to its very zenith and he was ridiculously pleased. He finally had a captive audience and wanted to surf the crest of this wave for eternity and a day.

'History is repeating itself. Like my grandfather before me, I shall ride eternal. My road exploits will live on and all future people shall hear of what pisses... er, passes tomorrow.'

'Tell us about your grandfather,' retorted Phil Tool who popped in occasionally to unblock the Jacuzzi and service the photo-copier of the building over the way. 'I'd like to hear everything about him.' He looked around the animated faces gathered in a semi-circle. 'I'm sure the others would too.'

Ernie took a long breath and gabbled slightly as it was one of his favourite stories. He had only ever shared this with his mother but she always looked rather cross eyed whenever he started to share the tale. Here at last, were people who appreciated the value of a true urban adventurer. And there were lots of them gathered around to boot. Finally, Ernie was beginning to find his true place.

'My grandfather once told me of a story from back in the mid-eighties. He used to get up early in the morning to do shift work at the local steel mill and would scoot off bright and early on his Suzuki GT 500, in order to set the machinery and empty the incoming skips of their contents ready for smelting. In order to knock a good five minutes off the ride, he would meander through this council estate at the top end of Mill Hill and while its streets were narrow and bendy, they were better time wise than going around the long one-way system with its junctions and lights.

One of the hazards presented by this particular estate was the fact that various packs of dogs meandered in and out of the dustbins looking for a quick breakfast and there was one particular hound who ruled the roost and would take every opportunity to prove himself the rock solid, numero uno, mutt-tastic warrior dog. He and his cronies would skulk behind a dwarf wall with trembling anticipation each morning and whenever my

grandfather would rumble into view, the Alpha would come hurtling into the road and try to tear my grandfather's ankles into mincemeat.

Back then, the riders weren't so bothered about looking good like nowadays, so the clothes and riding gear were more sensible and practical. The ex-Para boots that my grandfather wore offered excellent protection against the mutt's fangs but it was still dangerous trying to weave around the pack-especially on a damp or frosty morning. So, one evening, grandfather hatched a diabolical plan to counter the daily attack and redress the situation: to reign supreme once more as man has done for the past ten thousand years.

He took the half a house brick which had been used to prop open the cellar door and stuck it under an elastic rope, secured to his petrol tank. Behold: right on cue, the rabid wolf hound streaked out from behind the bins followed in quick succession by its crazed subordinates.

Whether by blind luck, dextrous skill or the hound was due some canine hubris type of payback, we shall never know. But grandfather slowly took his right hand off the throttle which stuck on slightly due to the cable being frayed and with the half ender clasped tightly between his fingers, his arm swung back in a full 360 arc before letting the missile fly at lightning speed towards the general direction of the pack. The half brick whizzed through the air at around forty miles per hour, bounced once off the shining tarmac: hurtling straight into the side of the mutt's ear. It dropped like a dead bird and all of the other dogs piled into it- like...like a domino topple. The number one dog sprang up after around ten seconds of its vegetative state and went yowling up the road in the other direction closely followed by the pack.'

Ernie's story was completed. He was panting slightly and his eyes shone out, cat-like when caught in the proverbial headlamps. Everyone around him was very quiet but then

began nodding and murmuring at once. 'You too will have your own story to tell; perhaps to share with your own children one day; just like your grandfather, *you* will have payback on the dogs. But car driving dogs this time round. Don't forget to pull over tomorrow, and speak slowly and clearly into the radio so that we don't miss anything. We shall all have front row seats at ringside. Oh my. I almost forgot in the excitement: if you manage to accomplish this, we have an extra, special surprise waiting for you. All the lads and lasses have clubbed their bonuses together to get you a night on the tiles.'

'I... I don't understand,' stammered Ernie. 'You want me to sit on the roof?'

'Look up at main doors of Purple Reign: that's Patricia. She aint cheap. She don't speak much English. But she can suck start a Harley Davidson and she will be all yours tomorrow evening. Have her, on all of us.'

Ernie looked skywards, in the direction of the opposite building. With disbelieving eyes, he saw the titanic form of the brothel's incomparably gorgeous, number one gal: the one and only Trish the Dish, perched at the top of the metal fire-escape platform. Both hands were placed upon her ample hips and the heaving chest thrust forward seemed to cause a partial eclipse of the sun. Ernie's uncomprehending gaze travelled south once again, froze solid upon her thigh high leather boots, then slowly travelled north to her pink stockings and suspenders, peeking over the tops. He blushed deeply enough to match the colour of her lipstick before glancing quickly away. He began to giggle in short, controlled bursts.

'She's.. she's going to be all mine?' he stammered.

'Oh yes, she's for you. But only if you manage to conquer all of those pricks who stand in your way to glory. Don't forget to check in at the exact moment so we can all marvel at your battle cry and roars of hellish vengeance.'

.....

Ernie hardly slept a wink that night. He lay frigidly upon his mattress, rehearsing again and again what he would do, what he would say, and how he would look in the eyes of the bystanders at the moment of glory.

He scrambled off the bed at 7.15 and spent the next half hour in high expectation. Two cups of tea and a Danish turned his bowels to jelly. Once he had cleaned up, he looked into the mirror and slicked his hair to one side. 'Ernie never retreats. Ernie never surrenders,' he repeated quickly to himself.

From the hook on the back of the bedroom door hung his battle armour: the one-piece leather jacket and trousers which had always been rather too long for him. The bright yellow bib shone out as he pulled it over his jacket, lit up by a sliver of golden sunshine slyly peeking through the curtain. He saw nature's sign and understood: everything was going to be alright. Finally, the large, ungainly boots were wrenched up over his two pairs of socks and he looked once more at his own reflection and nodded. He then said out loud:

'Ernie Bimble.

Ernie- Kick Ass..

Ernie- Leonide Ass...

KING Leonidas!

Outside, he brushed the congealed rainwater off the bike's seat with a gloved hand, prodded the starter button and the decade old Gondrex-Inferma chuffed reluctantly into

life. He walked around the newly fitted contraption so expertly fitted by Ephraim but was careful as a president to avoid inadvertently pressing that red button. It contained only one, one pure adrenalin shot and that was all for the depraved Persian hoard in their souped-up tin chariot.

By the time he had reached the T Junction at the top of the road, the engine had warmed sufficiently to knock off the choke and the engine revs lowered to a softer pud-pud.

The digital clock taped onto the fairing dutifully informed him:

8.03

He set off with a gentle spurt: not too fast, not too slow, but at the same speed as every other morning so that the paths would simultaneously cross with his reviled enemies.

The traffic was a tad lighter that morning so he decided to pull into a layby to kill a moment or two. He watched a few Lorries trundle past and wondered what kind of cargo they were carrying and where they were all heading. It was now:

8.17

He clicked the interface button of the radio and spluttered the words.

'Base: this is EB 1. EB1. I say again. Base, do you copy?'

'Loud and clear mate,' came the immediate reply. What is your current position EB 1, over?'

'I'm primed and ready to rock. Ooooh... here we go, here we go: they have just appeared on the radar- just up the road. I can see their car waiting at the lights. They are

setting off... getting nearer. OK: they're coming at me now. *Stand by, stand by, PREPARE FOR GLORY!*

The headlamps threw their gaudy light, the wipers began twerking their primeval dance and the car seemed to leap into the air like an enraged beast as it gawked across the carriageway: slap-bang into Ernie's path. He felt no fear; only a heightened sense of things, an utter surety in himself. This was his destiny, the beginning of the brave new world where he would finally begin to write his own stories. Trish the Dish would be his Spartan queen and together, they would make sweet, sweet music together.

As predicted and with military precision, the car flicked out of the way at the last possible second. The driver pulled on the handbrake performing an expert 180-degree arc before screeching past in the outside lane and then pulling back in and piling on the brakes. Ernie felt calm and relaxed despite braking as hard as he could. He filtered slowly around the car as instructed and peered menacingly inside.

'Base One; I'm at the side of their motor. All four of them are staring at me. I'm now banging on the roof-they all look really annoyed. Both side windows are coming down... they are shouting rude things at me... wait for it... almost there... I'm hitting the red button ... NOOOOOOOW!!!'

Two elephantine fountains of carefully blended nectar came splurging out of the nozzles. The jets of liquid were so wide that the sunshine ignited little rainbows that danced and chuckled within their golden depths. It took 27 long seconds before the plastic tank emptied: full blast, and with perfect precision ... straight into Ernie's uncomprehending face.

He sat there with his eyes screwed shut but just managed not to be sick. He wiped the stinging liquid out of his eyes, the bottom of his beard dripped pure gold and collected in

small pools in the recesses of his jacket. Gagging like a drunk on a Friday night after a bad curry, he jittered off the bike and clicked on the radio button.

'You... you bastaaaaaards!!!' he screamed at the very top of his voice.

But all he could hear in return, was loud, riotous laughter buzzing its way out of the plastic intercom.³⁴

³⁴ Back in the early eighties, I read a very similar story in a cheap motorcycle magazine which has served as the base inspiration here. So, unashamedly, it has been brought back to life almost 40 years later. I would like to apologise to the author for lifting the main idea but let's call this intertextuality. But there is plenty here that is my own too.

The Cloak of Nessus

A light breeze meandered throughout the quince orchards; wispy clouds twinkled their shadows over meadows and barley fields. The elms were now beginning to bud in the avenue leading up to the 18th century Gothic church; everything green felt shy that year, for it had been a bitter winter.

It was the first Sunday of May 1899 and she huskily announced her arrival in the tiny village of Pensgornford by streaming diamond-like shafts through the heavily leaded eighteenth-century windows. The rays had a two-fold effect: warming the tintured rosewood with a gaudy combination of green, gold and blue and simultaneously lightening the hearts and spirits of the congregation and taking them far away from their daily realities.

Phensic Vains, sat uncomfortably in the large pitch-pine pew donated by his grandfather almost sixty years previously. He had been a regular church-goer since boyhood and was known far and wide for his unfailing charity and generosity of spirit: particularly whenever the collection plate was passed deftly through the aisles. Many had been the time that he had donated a generous sum in areas diverse and wide: a christening, a funeral bill, a bride or two honoured with a down payment for her forthcoming nuptials and for this character trait, he was accorded the appropriate degree of reverence. Indeed; he drew admiring glances and nods of recognition whenever he took a brisk stroll throughout the locale.

It was shared in awed whispers behind doors, in the local metal-workshops and out on the back lanes that Phensic was that rare and gentle type: the quintessential Englishman who never took offence, understood the fallacy of the human condition and embraced it wholeheartedly. Above all, he was polite the point of other-worldliness. This is what he liked to

imagine about himself at any rate and he had ample time to engage the fantasy. Many a happy afternoon had been passed, pleasantly ruminating about his good name snowballing ever forward. His mother had sketched out the beginning of an idea on the evening of his nineteenth birthday in order to elucidate upon these qualities that others, had thus far, failed to grasp.

‘You have inherited a... shall we call it a *flutter* from your father’s side. Don’t look like that and *please* don’t think that I am in any way displeased with you. You are after all, a polite and conscientious young man for the most part. I fear that the local folk, as well meaning as they are, may cause your pretty head to swell out of all alignment, should you choose to let their kindly aimed words unduly penetrate your heart. This, I feel, must be avoided at all costs. Please accept this as a part of your name-day gift from me to you. Have a read in your own time and then come and open the rest of your presents.’

She smiled at him and rubbed his hair affectionately before leaving the room. Phensic ran the silver knife down the outer edge of the monogrammed envelope and read his mother’s words, her neat school girlish handwriting inspired by no less than three governesses:

What the good People Hear

What Phensic actually means

I hear what you say

I disagree and do not want to discuss it

With the greatest respect

You are an idiot

That is a very brave proposal

You are insane

Quite good

A bit disappointing

Very interesting

That is clearly nonsense

I'll bear it in mind

I've forgotten it already

I'm sure it's my fault

It's your fault

It had always amused him greatly to think that people were unable to decipher his *true* thoughts and intentions. It was slightly unnerving too, that his mother had seen right through him like the proverbial shop window, but there again, which mother on earth didn't have that particular ability?

.....

Vicar Jarvis smiled warmly over his congregation and rubbed his hands together in joyful glee.

'I had wished to begin, just prior to the beginning of our service, with a rendition from that most poignant of metrical composition *The Rhyme of the Three Captains* by the wordsmith Kipling. But then I ruminated a while and thought to myself, why bother reading his poetry? He never finds the time to read any of mine.'

Acknowledging the polite ripple of muffled appreciation, he reverently turned the creamy pages and began his elucidation in earnest. Phensic's thoughts this particular morning

however, were turned to matters other than The Book of Proverbs. The old vicar began to eloquently expound to the happy congregation in his rich ecclesiastical tones:

Rejoice not when thine enemy falleth, and let not thine heart be glad when he stumbleth: Lest the LORD see it, and it displease him, and he turn away his wrath from him.

Just prior to the service, Miss Jarvis, (no relation to the vicar) had been compelled to stoop down on the gravel path in order to retrieve her glove. Before Phensic's uncomprehending gaze, Miss Jarvis, or at any rate, a part of Miss Jarvis, began to set momentous trains of thoughts thundering through his mind: never, ever, had he seen buttocks of such gargantuan apportionment in his entire life. Their spreading ever wider, as she groped downwards towards the terra firma to retrieve said article, had rendered him almost catatonic within eight seconds.

He felt certain at that very moment that if any more of the brobdingnagian pear continued to surge through the natural boundaries of the dress, the climatic finale would indubitably render an eclipse and a dark shroud of such cataclysmic proportions would surely follow to envelop the atmosphere and render the animal kingdom silent, laying waste to great tracts of orchards, harvests and general crops over the fourth-coming months.

Happily, there was no such disaster. The threat of desecration passed quickly enough but nature herself had been so shaken that she had left an Aurora Borealis sibilating through Phensic's imagination. It was while fixating his oscillating inner mind's eye on the hulking mass for those fevered seconds-in the very midst of the sermon- that Phensic suddenly noticed to his considerable alarm that the vicar had faltered in his impeccable delivery.

Jarvis hesitated, coughed once and then continued to read as before but with slightly watery eyes, that shifted nervously from the church rafters to the back of the great brass eagle. This left a second residue in Phensic's mind; the like of which he had never previously encountered and during the next few moments, this morphed, step by step, into a pulsating intrigue:

Was the old vicar so pure of thought and deed that he had encompassed a tremor in the religious force due to the fetid thoughts that rent the air?

Was Phensic so utterly immoral that he had set in motion a whiff of corruption that had momentarily caused the man of God to flounder in his wholesome delivery?

Or was it just *coincidence*?

Whatever it had been, Phensic fixated on the matter for the rest of the service and the entirety of the next day. After ruminating for well into the evening, he decided upon a litmus test: he, Phensic Vains the third, would once again conceive his powerfully erroneous thoughts during the very next Sunday service and would mark carefully the effect wrought upon Old Jarvis' rendering of The Book.

The entire week was spent preparing for the solitary micro-second and at the moment in question-just prior to sweeping through the archway and into church, Phensic carefully chose the correct spot. In order to empower his mind's eye, he placed himself, at a good distance, but in a manner, that would enable his gaze to register unhindered by any impediment to his vision. This was no easy task but his chosen trajectory was eminently perfect: he had set himself apart from the crowd and was busy tying a shoelace whilst leaning against the thick

elm adjacent to the doorway. As Miss Jarvis hove into view, he gazed intently at her most ample asset. His eyes studied it hard as it ricocheted in various directions, akin to two small boys engaged in a wrestling match beneath a cotton sheet. He dutifully followed on, filling his mind with the mare-like image and began to steel his mind as he sat down. The pew, polished by six decades of dedicated worship felt hard and unyielding but stoically he waited for 11.22AM exactly: the time that he had decided to test out his remarkable new theory.

Vicar Jarvis began with his beautifully modulated tones, his sonorous voice demonstrating his rich experience as he rose to his theme:

When I was a child, I talked like a child; I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child.

When I became a man, I put...

At 11.21 precisely, Phensic fixed his mind's eye upon the quivering Gluteus Maximus. The images began to slowly fill the willing void and a light bead of perspiration appeared, dew-like upon his corrugated brow.

One moment later, the old vicar had floundered at that very point in his otherwise flawless rendition from Corinthians. Phensic leaned back, mollified. All of this now, was slowly beginning to make perfect sense. He would use these newly-found powers wisely to attain the recognition and greatness that he had longed for his entire life.

Meandering through the woodland at the back of the church, Phensic wondered long and hard on how indeed, he could properly benefit from this newly-found artistry. Without a shadow of a doubt, it was a rare gift. But the use, the very way in which he could attack at will, using his very thoughts and the appropriate manner to elicit the correct response, perplexed him deeply.

That he possessed the power to rent asunder a religious delivery was now pellucid in his mind. If it was a truly functioning form of ESP then perhaps it could be honed to control the minds, thoughts and actions of others in a more ambitious format? He decided to utilise the unique efficacy once again but further afield so as to not arouse suspicion: the next village four miles down the old cart track would serve to ensure that the newly minted mind-set could be used in spheres of influence other than religiosity. He knew the place well and took daily walks there; always observant and keen to speak to the inhabitants of their lives and dreams.

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The small brass bell over the rusticated doorway tinkled its satisfaction and Phensic duly noted the owner's small Jack Russell terrier gazing up at him from the threadbare pouf, its unblinking eyes, alongside the slightly tilted head spoke eloquently of affection and trust. Phensic reciprocated the ardent look and filled his mind with the now easily selected image of the hulking derrière. The bell tinkled its gay tune once again; immediately the dog leaped up and rushed out of the doorway left ajar by the now retired but thoroughly perplexed Major Brockhurst.

'Damned strange animal that. Usually just sits there gawking benignly at all and sundry. What do you think must have startled the damned thing? Perhaps there's a jinni around here, eh?' he chuckled.

It was obviously a rhetorical question but Phensic's mind went into overdrive on a different matter: that kindly but lined face spoke faintly of someone from the distant past. The pale brown eyes the colour of toffee, the tweed coat trailing to the floor. Phensic

scrunched his eyes up and began to rub his temples. Then the memory came flooding back: he was the brother of Mrs Edgehill, his powerfully built primary school teacher, back in the halcyon days of his childhood. Captain Jimmy as he was then, had dropped in occasionally to help out with the odd school-play or summer fayre. He made scenery and props and helped out with the general maintenance at the school but always seemed brutally abrupt to the point of vulgarity. It had been whispered among the children that one day he had simply disappeared; had gone off to war and many years later had returned an altogether different man.

At St Marks, the Church of England primary school, twenty summers past, the young Phensic had noticed one of two things at a particular Harvest Festival. The first being that few of the other children wanted to play with him. Those that did seem to enjoy his company tolerably well but most stayed well away, out of reach. His young mind begrudgingly understood this-they were not being spiteful or cliquy; they merely wanted to be elsewhere and he used to swallow hard and accept it albeit with a leaden heart.

The second thing was that Phensic had learned at that festival was that when little girls started weeping, he found it incredibly exciting. He became fixated by their sobs and tears and wanted nothing more than to go rushing over and console them, to take care of them and be their life-long protector. A strange tingling sensation began rising in his stomach when the tears began flowing but he knew even then, that these thoughts must not be shared. With anybody, not ever.

It had been Mrs Edgehill herself who had caught him out that day-red handed as he was now in the habit of making the girls cry so that he could be privy to their torment and thus satiated in the primeval sense.

‘Ensure that you come to the main reception area at 3.15; when all of the other children have left.’

‘My mother will be waiting at the gate; she will want to know where I am,’ he shivered trying desperately to avoid the teacher’s eyes.

‘I know that you walk home alone Phensic; I cycle past you almost every afternoon on the way home so don’t come that one,’ she hissed.

The headmistress Mrs DeWitt was in her office interviewing a parent and in the adjacent room he could see Mrs Edgehill sitting behind the heavy oak desk making notes. He arrived early and sat outside with trembling legs, filled with trepidation and a longing to be home: safe and sound beside the log fire that the servant was compelled to light daily, in readiness for his return.

‘Get in here, Phensic!’

The voice shot through the heavy oak door and he sprung upright.

He walked slowly into the room, never once blinking. The titanic form of the teacher seemed to swell ever more and she looked over the top of her spectacles at him. She grimaced as if biting down on a sensitive tooth.

‘You’re fattist, she boomed.

‘Er, no, Mrs Edgehill. You’re the fattest.’

‘You enjoy bullying fat girls. You enjoy making people feel inferior, simply by virtue of whatever nature has gifted them in terms of girth or size. I’ve been following you with my eye. Every break time you gravitate towards Veronica and Bonny and try your level best to upset them. And why may I ask? Just because nature has gifted you a slender frame does not make you superior in any way to people of a more, shall we say... buxom stature. It is a form of tyranny. Is that what you are? A little Napoleon Bonaparte sent to make the lives of the slightly more rotund an utter misery?’

Her chins quivered as she spat the words out. He remained blinking at the ground, burning with shame but the crystal thought occurred: how wrong could she be? How utterly

wide of the mark, despite being an adult and a trained teacher was it possible to get? He absolutely *loved* fat girls and to make them quiver with emotion made him feel like his blood had turned to warm treacle as it coursed slowly through his veins.

Mrs Edgehill had let him go with a stark warning: cease intimidating those of a healthier nature or involve his mother within the dreadful shenanigans and perhaps even begin looking for another school altogether.

‘After all, bearing the name of a fattist bully-boy with you will not lead to an entirely happy ending,’ was her parting shot through the door.

This incident had seared itself into Phensic’s memory. Even at eight years old he had witnessed how people could be so utterly wide of the mark with their opinions and this had begun the building blocks of a lazy confidence in the years to follow.

He pondered now, standing in the shop, on whether it had all been down to jealousy: the fact that around that time, his father had inherited the family jewellery business upon the death of Phensic’s grandfather. With a great deal of industry, it had expanded year on year until they were in the enviable position of being the main suppliers to almost the entire network of lower-order jewellers within the West Midlands conurbation. That had all been before the slump of course; before Phensic’s mother had adroitly managed to save a few sundries when the bank foreclosed on the debt. By judicious application of the law, the family had managed to retain a small cottage in Phensic’s name in the village besides the manor house up in Suppery Fenton where he still lived with his mother. The factory was now gone but the family fortune as it were, remained largely intact, although it was spread thinly between stocks, shares and a couple of small farms.

From a safe distance, he began to follow the tall figure now replete with newspaper and a freshly baked loaf safely tucked away in his leather satchel.

‘Major Brockhurst: could you spare a moment? I wanted to have a quick word.’

The Major shuffled round and looked him unfalteringly in the eye.

‘Yes? What is it, young man?’ he asked kindly.

He would be a tougher nut to crack as he had the air of man who was used to, and expected discipline. If his mind could be muddled by the ESP then Phensic knew that he was really onto a sure-fire winner. Phensic looked straight back and began to replay the now familiar images throughout his mind. Suddenly, the Major leaned on his walking stick and chuckled to himself, thus breaking Phensic’s earnest concentration.

‘What’s that? I didn’t quite catch what you said, panted Phensic. He leaned in, filled with expectation. ‘So, *you’re* Phensic Veins. Why don’t you come and join me for a pot of tea and a scone or two, now? You look absolutely famished,’ he smiled kindly. Nobody in living memory had ever known Phensic to be anything less than charm incorporated and his freshly-hewn magic seemed to be working once again. ‘I’d be delighted. Please lead the way.’

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Phensic revelled in his ubiquitous approach to life: conscientious, an observance of filial piety and the rigid application of stout manners. Indeed, he liked nothing more than to maintain a rule-bound, indefectible lifestyle, adhering closely to positive social conventions such as smiling politely, shaking hands whenever possible and asking permission to quit an ensemble when things became a little too arduous. He regarded himself and his immediate family as devoted, reliable, efficient, and productive. If others did not quite achieve these lofty standards, he would be disconsolate but too polite to give voice to the contrary.

Major Brockhurst was just as agreeable as Phensic had been led to believe. They shared polite small talk as he led him up a narrow country path flanked either side by hyacinth, Gilly flowers and Laburnum. Outside the front gate was a chocolate and fawn Siamese cat sprawled on its back, boxing at the midges that fluttered above her. The major opened the creaking gate carefully so as not to disturb Tabitha's pugilistic exploits and Phensic dutifully followed on. His eyes widened at the house's aspect: the Cotswold stone gently illuminated by the sun, various flower boxes and the wheat reed thatch set tightly on top of the eaves filled him to the very brim with an ecstasy of longing and desire.

His eye greedily travelled to the front door, mottled by time, over again to the rough-hewn oak window frames before the dawning realisation of one immutable fact: he was unashamedly, deeply, in love. And he made up his mind there and then: he meant to have it. He had heard of the rare occasions when people could fall instantly into a quintessence of intoxication and now it had finally happened to him- but with a building. But it wasn't just a building. It was a rock-solid investment. Phensic had eavesdropped at the door when his mother had invited three council members around for supper one night, a few months back. He had heard at the keyhole that a road widening scheme was being introduced in the Major's village and that the government would be putting on a compulsory purchase order for half of the houses in the locale. This would mean that fortunes could be made by the house owners: the longer they held out, the higher the financial offers would go up. The council members had implored Phensic's mother to begin buying up land as it would sell for a premium five years down the road. But she had been strangely disagreeable.

The Major politely beckoned him into the flagstone hallway where they simultaneously removed their footwear; Phensic rubbed his hands down his corduroy trousers and swallowed dryly. He dutifully followed into the kitchen where a single log hissed and crackled in the fireplace, radiating comfort and homeliness.

‘How did you come by this magnificent house? It must be one of, if not the very best in the district. There are bigger up on Sherborne Grove but this has genuine panache; a certain élan unsurpassed in the locale.’

The Major’s countenance brightened visibly and he nodded slightly.

‘That’s very kind of you to say so. Wait until you see the rest; then make up your mind, eh? It came up in an auction over two decades ago and was completely dilapidated. The cellar was more like a ship dock; almost four feet of water from the years of rain dripping through the holes in the thatch. That alone was a fortnight’s toil to clear out; had to do it by hand too, walking down there day after day with a pail, then trudge up the stairs and heave it all into the duck pond, out front. All in, it took the best part of seven years to restore the whole shebang back to its former glory.

‘I made the bookcases and restored the banisters myself. It took a number of trips over to France for the farmhouse furniture and Louis XV chairs and commodes. But it turned out rather nicely in the end- even if I say so myself. I’m pleased that you like it anyhow.’

The Major excused himself and a few moments later placed the pot and China cups on a silver tray and beckoned Phensic into the rear drawing room of the house.

‘I’m just popping outside to bring in some more logs; put your feet up; make yourself at home. Oh: and please call me Jimmy. Major is far too formal.’

He ambled out and Phensic sat upright on the walnut arm bench, fingering the leaves of the nearest aspidistra plant. The dark green leaves felt waxy to the touch and the smooth delicacy ran contrary to his own feelings: never in his life had he encountered such a burning desire to own something. He felt a deeply Sicilian, passionate reverberation surge through his system: the fierce longing to own the house and all of its contents- the epiphany had finally arrived, had knocked on his door and was waiting impatiently for an acknowledgement. His

eyes fell upon the chess set with the cracked squares and elegantly carved chess-pieces which shone in the firelight.

Upon his return with the full log basket, the Major noted Phensic's curious look.

Phensic nodded to himself as if in a daze. It struck him that the suspect images might be able to find their mark again and reduce resistance. It was obvious that the Major was deeply in love with his home so Phensic screwed up his eyes and wafted over powerful thoughts of the house becoming his, in order to weaken the Major's resolve. 'Er, would you like to give me a tour of the old place, then?' he offered casually.

Jimmy looked at Phensic a little cross eyed but thumbed a gesture to follow: down the hallway and into the middle of the first parlour, their footsteps echoing perfectly in time with each other across the polished oak floorboards as both strode purposefully forward.

A mahogany desk was the focal-point of the heavy colonial-style environment and Phensic thought that he would actually faint with happiness. Deep bookcases lined the walls and contained an array of ancient leather-bound books the size of large encyclopaedias as well as ancient scrolls of papaya crammed tightly between the shelves. Propped in a corner next to the billowing muslin curtains was an old Martini-Henry rifle that looked as if it had seen some action back in the halcyon days of preemptory peace.

The Major was standing with his hands clasped behind his back and from his demeanour, Phensic realised that he had something to impart. He took out a heavy gold pocket watch attached to a length of chain and fidgeted with it.

Phensic could see the tension in the thickly corded neck but remained silent; the suspense was almost too unbearable to endure but a tiny voice inside whispered that he must not speak first; to allow the Major to break the silence would open up endless possibilities.

Major Brockhurst glanced at him thoughtfully. 'That old rifle there Phensic: let me tell you a thing that happened to me when I was around your age. I was in the thick of battle

and suddenly found myself down to my very last bullet. Two enemy soldiers came hurtling towards me on the battlefield; trumpeting like bull elephants and I had to think quickly or it was going to be mincemeat time. I hurled my bayonet into the earth, took careful aim and shot at it-straight in the middle of the edged steel. The bullet split in two, pinged off either side and killed both of 'em, stone dead.'

Phensic glanced over with a puzzled look. He had never known the Major to make any kind of light hearted comment in the old days back at school. He forced a grin that strained its way slowly upwards.

Rich oil paintings hung between the high mahogany bookcases. One particular picture caught Phensic's roving eye: it was of a slender young woman with dark curly hair and piercing green eyes. Her blouse was bright white and she wore a long red waistcoat obviously fashioned for hunting. There was a peculiar expression of radiating happiness yet subtle defiance written across her face which made it hard to fathom what she was actually thinking-Leonardo himself would have been justifiably gratified.

'Golly: what a handsome young woman; she looks just like a Greek goddess,' Phensic thought but to his abject horror he realised that he had actually stated the words *out loud*. He rotated to see the Major's reaction as it was obviously impolitic to state forthright opinions regarding matters of the heart with anyone not closer than your brother or as near as can be.

Phensic's dry lips parted; he was terrified that he had undone all of the morning's work in an instant. He shot the Major a glance, fully expecting dismissal but without doubt, pride flashed a sudden fin across the brown eyes. He nodded painfully and lowered himself into a leather wing chair then began to wistfully flick the globe. Faster and faster, the countries of the world spun round in a blur then morphed into a solid mass of gaudy colour.

He beckoned Phensic over to join him before carefully placing a heavy leather folder upon the mahogany desk and sighing deeply. Phensic dutifully sat down and at the Major's

invitation started leafing through the pictures: some weathered photographs, occasionally some in miniature oils. All related to the same subject: the young woman in the painting.

‘You must find me a strange old cove huh? Thirty years I haven’t seen this girl but I still can’t go a couple of hours without her wheedling some way into my thoughts. I suppose the good folk round here must find me a trifle obdurate; a little distant. The truth is that I’m often deep in thought and the subject is usually her.’

‘What happened? Why didn’t you marry your sweetheart and live happily ever after?’

‘Oh, the usual cliché: I was too reckless, and too mad for adventure when I was younger. I upped and chipped leaving her all alone. I only have one regret in life...’ he sighed thrumming the cover of the folder with his forefinger. ‘Tout passé, tout lasse tout casse.’

Phensic struggled to contain himself: a terrible and savage throbbing to an ancient and terrible god encased his mind.

‘All roads lead to Rome,’ he thought through clenched teeth. ‘This golden moment must be played out for all its worth. Be reasonable; be calm and above all, try to remain slightly disinterested,’ he thought carefully to himself. For indeed, the pictures in front of him were all of a person that he was rather familiar with: the same heart-shaped face, the billowing dresses albeit of a different style, the long dark hair, now greying, knotted in a single plait. The painting was indubitably that of Ms Jarvis from when she was around one and twenty.

‘Wha, what was it, that initially arrested your interest in this lady?’

‘Simple really,’ chuckled the Major. ‘She had a wonderfully enquiring mind; rather similar to your own. She found everything fascinating and I never felt more alive than when I was with her.’

Jimmy carefully placed a heavy folder upon the mahogany desk and sighed once more. Phensic could hardly know how to contain himself: Ms Jarvis albeit painted over thirty

years ago stared back at him, willing him to take fate by the horns and wrestle it bellowing to the ground.

After a long pause, the Major once again broke the silence but it was not in his usual booming military style; his voice seemed to have lost most of its intensity.

‘She was the love of my life and I lost her over some youthful foolishness. Not a day goes by when I don’t think of her; ponder on her smile, her eyes. I came home quite rich from the wars and I could have given her a comfortable life...’

Phensic nodded slightly and waited for the old man to continue.

‘I often wonder where she is now; she remains ubiquitous within my memory. I would give anything to simply know what became of her.’

Phensic attempted to fight the shrill ululations rising within. He mustn’t give the game away; here was a ripe fruit just waiting to be plucked and it was his for the taking-if only he could play this out correctly.

‘You would give *anything*? Could I perhaps get that... in writing?’

The Major, while firm in mind, looked in rickety health and to Phensic’s eyes didn’t have more than four or five years left to him. The Major then went on to explain that he spent precious little time in the local area and had been looking for cures for his ailing health in the clinics of Zurich and Paris for a number of months and spent the rest of the time in Bruges where the air was cleaner.

‘To get out of my personal Golgotha and if by some miracle you could bring her to me then yes; I would give you anything that you desired. I would be grateful *in perpetuum* and you would enjoy unparalleled levels of sponsorship and generosity. But this is of course, all academic; let’s finish up here and have a stroll around the Roman gardens.’

Phensic blinked twice. ‘Major Brockhurst, Jimmy: I might just have a proposition for you. Please refill the teapot, and use an extra spoonful of that delicious leaf for each cup. You are going to have to make yourself a somewhat stronger drink for what I have to impart.’

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The Major and Ms Jarvis sat opposite each other, ensconced within the window seat of the newly-converted cafe; he, gazing intently over the pristine Fairy Cake and tea cups, she, giggling and looking down at the Chintz table cloth and generally finding it all a slightly perplexing but an altogether gratifying experience.

Phensic had acted as intermediary. And by doing so, had potentially secured a happier and brighter future for himself into the bargain: it was the perfect ménage. He had discovered and harnessed an unfathomable power which had brought two long lost lovers together and had also gained fiscal reward through an act of philanthropy: ‘How’, he thought, ‘could it get any better than this?’

The newly scraped together couple had been happily married within a month. She had moved into the house bringing little in terms of possessions but an enormity of light, laughter and an altogether fresher outlook into the Major’s world.

Phensic had been invited to the house two weeks after the honeymoon and Mrs Brockhurst had been gently coaxed into spending an evening with her sister to allow a little man time to meander along its merry course.

The Major set down the tea tray and eyed Phensic through his badly-fitting monocle: an amalgamation of ready humour fortified by the air of a man of the world. He knew this

was the kind of business which may potentially cost him dearly. And so, he began to grill Phensic as only a military man can.

‘Let’s not beat about the bush now. It’s cards on the table time: what is it that you want?’ Phensic leaned forward slightly and fixed Jimmy with a very confident gaze. He waved the palm of his hand from left to right and replied simply, ‘All of this.’

‘Ah-ha. Do you propose that I sign it over to you, lock, stock and barrel immediately? Might cause a few issues with the new lady of the house.’

Phensic smiled slowly. ‘I understand that now you’re married it wouldn’t be decent to make you homeless. It would in fact be callously wicked to expect you to vacate right now so here’s my proposal: you sell me the house, sign everything into my name but under the strict proviso that the title deeds remain with me until your death. You get to live here, with the money to spend how you wish and you could even buy a smaller property for Ms Jarvis, er, I mean Mrs Brockhurst to inherit and in doing so tie up all loose ends.’

Jimmy’s eye widened like a hare caught in the glare of a ravening cur and his eye glass dropped into his teacup with a splish.

‘How much are you offering?’

Phensic took a piece of paper from his briefcase and smoothed it out onto the table.

‘With the lawyer’s fees, the fact that you will be living rent free and my time waiting factored in, this is the figure that I had in mind.’

Jimmy took the paper and looked hard at the bottom figure.

‘But what you are proposing amounts to approximately a third of the current market value. And of course, this will rise over the next few years. Property developers have been scouting around recently and this village will no doubt, prove a very popular place to live in the not too distant future.’

‘It’s a fair offer in which you get to retain your house and keep your new wife comfortable.’

Jimmy looked at Phensic again with a slight glimmer forming in his eye.

‘Phensic old boy: you may very well have just introduced something remarkable into the world here-releasing the money potential of a property so that elderly folks such as myself without dependents could use the money freely before the final bye-bye.’

Jimmy was smiling like the Cheshire Cat and nodding slowly to himself.

‘Right you are: I’ll get my clairvoyant to go over it first thing. It could work out especially well for all of us concerned.’

For the first time in the proceedings, Phensic felt slightly insecure.

‘Why would you use a crystal gazer for? Wouldn’t a lawyer be more practical and more...ethically accurate regarding our agreement?’

‘Maggie Shandy has been looking into my affairs for the last fifteen years and has never let me down once.’

‘Yes. But did she have the clairvoyance to conjure your Miss Jarvis up for you?’

Phensic immediately regretted his glib statement: he wasn’t studying for a PhD in transcendental logic but could fathom that, like a poorly struck cricket ball, his remark had landed in completely the wrong place. He wondered whether to initiate the posterior vision to wrench the Jimmy back on track. Just then, Mrs Brockhurst humming lightly as she came through the front door put the matter, momentarily, to one side.

‘We weren’t expecting you to be back so soon my dear; I was going to pick you up myself.’

She blushed slightly and glanced at the two men. ‘My sister dined too well on cheesy crumpets and the evening was curtailed. I got myself a Hansom and came back of my own accord. I hope that this hasn’t inconvenienced you gentlemen.’

Mrs Brockhurst busied herself about the kitchen, scrubbing the copper saucepan furiously with a flannel to obliterate the decades old residue. She had been dropping eyes at the door before announcing her arrival and had heard the latter part of the conversation. She had felt a little affronted; as if she were part of a bargain being struck between two men—one an old, long forgotten lover and the other being, well: Phensic Vains.

Phensic excused himself and promised to return within three days. He felt slightly irritated that Jimmy had not comprehended the obvious professional etiquettes when it came to Mystic Mags. It was well known throughout the village that Jimmy had been under the spell of a soothsayer for many years: much to the chagrin of the local church folk and to the general amusement of the rest of the populace. This partnership had done little to dent Maggie's cause—she had in fact, extended her cliental as the Major sat on the boards of numerous committees and his influence spread far beyond the parish boundaries. In Phensic's mind, these people were best avoided and it was beyond the logic of the thing to even consider that they had something to offer within the world of professional men—let alone when it came to progressive business deals. He was worried that the entire enterprise would begin to unravel and it was with these feelings of trepidation that he happened by chance upon the Major by the lavender meadow just outside Snettersfield Park two days later.

'Ah Phensic. Good to see you, old boy. I know that you were slightly miffed the last time we met but do you want to know something? I'm only standing here talking to you now because of Maggie. I've been in three great battles in my life and lost a few friends in ways far too ghastly to mention. I consulted with her again and again over the years and that advice always kept me safe and sound. Anyway: the upshot is that the old girl has consulted and thinks we are onto a winner with this one; the papers will be signed and witnessed tomorrow so the cottage will become legally yours, two weeks, this Friday. That is, with the strict

proviso that Mrs Brockhurst and myself reside there until my death. Is that as you wished it to be?’

Phensic had never felt happier in his life. He had always been impetuous but now he ruminated that at seventy-five years old and in poor health, Jimmy would not be long for this world. Of course; it may be an unnerving jolt to Mrs Brockhurst but at the same time, she would enjoy the high life, even if it were only for a short while, then retire to a smaller place and live out the rest of her life swaddled in pleasant memories.

Phensic returned to his mothers’ house, turned the latch key, went inside and lay down to rest. After a long time, he spent an uneasy night with the same reoccurring dream from childhood. His mother had been calling to him, from some deep, dark hidden chamber. Phensic was yelling back; running from one place to another and desperately trying to reach out to her.

He awoke at sunrise in a cold sweat. To blot away the dreams, he ran a bath and happily splashed around while sending long jets of water against the windows and ceiling with a child’s squirt gun.

After his bath, Phensic wrapped himself in a heavy gown and walked briskly to the freshly laid log fire in his bedroom grate. He glanced over at the calendar which hung on the back of the door: he was looking forward to the news of his birthday party and he repeated the date, knowing that it would signify a new and happy beginning: the eve of his twenty fifth name day meant that the ball was now well and truly rolling and probably by next month he would be the proud new owner of the major’s cottage. All being well, he could finally begin to break away from the family shadow and start afresh, by himself. He imagined sitting in front of the fire, smoking a pipe, reading a good book, eating hot buttered crumpets. And better still, waiting for the day that the men in grey suits came knocking the front door, with a giddy amount of council money being proffered. He gazed upwards and small specks of

light began dancing in front of his eyes. He blinked twice and the room began to spin. Suddenly, he felt the nausea rising like a whirlpool, just before passing out on the rug with the dogs barking over him.

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He came slowly around and felt a pressure in his ears as if swimming up from deep water. He could hear muffled voices around him but could not find the strength to sit up straight or even make a sign that he was now awake.

Someone in the room must have seen his eyelids flicker as he felt a cold flannel upon his brow. This revived him enough to open his eyes fully but seemed frozen in place; he could not move a single muscle.

With a super human effort, he swallowed dryly and wrenched his head to one side where he sensed an outside warmth. His mother sat next to his bed looking pale and fraught. He managed to croak out a few muffled words.

‘Mother? Where am I?’

‘In the hospital son.’

‘Why?’

‘You’re sick.’

‘With what?’

‘You were born this way.’

‘What way?’

‘Do you remember your cousins who both died at the age of twenty-seven?’ You have what they have.’

‘What did they have?’

‘A rare condition that makes you leave the world early. I’m so very sorry my son.’

She rushed out of the room with her handkerchief pushed tightly to her mouth.

His head sunk back into the pillow. He could not move, but his mind was lucid and racing. All this time and he had never known. His mind focussed back over the last couple of decades: primary school, college, the church, The Major.

He heard the nurse return to the room with the doctor and quickly closed his eyes. He could hear the scribbling of pencils and then the doctor grunted.

‘So, this is the local village idiot who shouts out whatever is on, or more to the point, underneath his mind for the entire world to hear?’

‘Yes, that’s right doctor. The specialists told his mother when he was four years old that he wouldn’t live past thirty and part of the condition is that he is oblivious to what he says. One reason that people have put up with him for so long is that his family is so well respected: many people are in their employ too and need the provender. I guess that has something to do with folks keeping their mouths shut and nodding along with it all for so long.’

The doctor stared hard and tapped his pencil on the pad.

‘So, this man is delusional? That’s not so rare.’

‘He makes lewd comments about people and doesn’t even know that he’s doing it. It’s as if the veil between his thoughts and the world has been removed. He’s woken up a couple of times and spoken out loudly about my black stockings, the size of Matron’s bottom and other unmentionable stuff.’

‘He would have been burned as a witch a few years back for that.’

‘A good job that we live in more enlightened times then, eh? That’s something I suppose. He’s been like this since from he was around the age of thirteen, apparently. This area hasn’t had a lot of research unfortunately; it’s all rather next level, but we do what can, given the circumstances.’

Phensic opened his eyes and looked directly at the doctor and nurse.

‘How long do I have?’ he muttered through parched lips.

The doctor eyed him coolly and rubbed the side of his nose.

‘Difficult to say. But given the state of your heart, I would wrap up whatever business you have within the next two weeks.’

The nurse walked over and smiled weakly. ‘Try to see this as a blessing. At least you can get all of your business in order. Before... you know.’

After a few days Phensic made a remarkable recovery; the images floating through his mind were utilised to empower him ever upwards and onwards and the hospital authorities subsequently related to his mother that he had roughly a week to live.

He discharged himself and ambled over to see Jimmy the very next day.

Mrs Brockhurst opened the door and her eyes dropped immediately onto the Cotswold front step.

‘How is your husband? Last time I saw him he looked rather waxy.’

‘Marriage has done him a whole lot of good; he’s like a new man in fact. He’s around the back of the cottage clipping the box hedges. Doctors say he may have another fifteen years in him. Folks have remarked upon that a golden luminosity that has enveloped him of late.’

‘Oh.’

Phensic trudged up to the top of Barrow Hill panting slightly and leaned against the large metal cross that had been erected by his great grandfather. The summit lent a resplendent view of the three parishes; in the very middle of the oak lined drive immediately below nestled the little cottage that he had wanted so very much and had come so very close to getting.

He sat outside for the entire evening and wistfully stared upwards, craning his neck as the cloak of darkness began to slowly descend upon the hill. He eased back into the heather and placed a few blackberries in his mouth and began sucking out the juice. They tasted bitter-sweet and he thought of his mother, alone at home in her armchair with the obligatory bottle at her elbow, reflecting the firelight within its amber depths.

The shooting comets emitted their phosphorescent trails high above, alongside the colliding stars, violently emitting their blistering fountains of diamonds and uranium which cascaded in huge arcs of silvery fire. Phensic nodded to himself amongst the bracken and pondered gently on what might have been.

Ali Dunne and the Victorian Lamp Post
A Kind of Fairy Tale for Slightly Bigger Kids

Sometimes truth is far stranger than fiction...

A rather odd thing happened to three children a number of years back. This... *peculiarity* as we shall refer to it, was shared with me by an actual professor of English. You may have seen them on television-those oh so clever types with small, half-moon spectacles and long, sweeping, black gowns. They have learned entire libraries full of fascinating facts and interesting incidents on almost everything there is to know. Anyway, this professor and I had become quite pally-wally after I had signed up for his creative writing course at the local university. We both supported the same football team and I managed to get reasonable grades in his classes so I invited him out to get to know him on a slightly more personal level. So off we went one day for a coffee together to discuss ideas for books and stories and it was over my cappuccino and Snickers cake that he hit me with the biggest of booming bombshells ever: well, he didn't literally hit me; it's a way of saying that the professor shared something of such high importance, of such significance, that it shocked me to the very core. Anyway, after we had chatted between ourselves for a while, and after a great deal of him trying to persuade me that it was all perfectly true, I eventually, and I must say, *very reluctantly* agreed to go along and meet his two sisters. One is a doctor and the other a lawyer. They too, told me *exactly* the same story.

So why do I use that word... '*reluctantly*'?

Without wishing to sound crazy or cuckoo or anything, I spent a long time looking out for hidden cameras or recording equipment in both of his sister's houses. The story that my prof had told me was so bizarre, so crazy, so utterly unbelievable that when they went off to make tea, or bring in an extra plate of biscuits, I ever so quickly, looked both ways, like a young boy gingerly crossing a busy road, then got on my hands and knees and:

Took a serious look underneath the sofa

Peered for ages at the pictures- to see if there were hidden cameras placed behind them

And peeked curiously under the cushions, throw-overs and rugs every chance I could get!

The reason for this behaviour, simply put, was that the more I pondered during the drive over, the more I thought they were trying to make a complete and utter fool out of me. He was a teacher of creative writing after all. Maybe they *had* placed hidden cameras or recording equipment around the house because I thought nobody in their right mind, could *ever* begin to believe this story. It just *had* to be made up. I wouldn't, just couldn't and downright *refused* to believe any of it! That was right up until all three of them invited me to their childhood home. Their parents - now a retired and elderly couple, invited me inside, sat me down with a cup of builder's tea and an Eccles Cake and spoke to me for ages. Now I am utterly convinced the professor and his two equally smart sisters are telling the complete and absolute truth. You, are of course, free to choose whether to believe what you are about to read. Reason it out for yourself: did this actually happen? Could such a thing be possible?

Here it is then: Professor Dunne's tale, as told to me verbatim in a silent reading room in the University of Birmingham library a few months ago.

Chapter One

Good children go to heaven. Bad children... go everywhere.

Ali, Bennie and Caitlin Dunne were often told, that they looked like 'Peas in a Pod' as that old saying goes. But they weren't green or round, or filled with protein or Vitamin A. Far from it, in fact. What I mean to say is, you could hardly tell them apart. They all wore the same brand of football shirts, scuffed jeans and ripped trainers with holes worn through the soles. They all had the same haircuts: shorter round the sides and long, swept over fringes which were slightly more blond than the rest of their hair. They had sparkly blue eyes which spoke clearly of mischief. And they were ten years and three minutes, ten years and seven minutes, and ten years and fifteen minutes young. They were in fact, identical triplets.

All lived in a very small town, in the exact centre of England. It was as far away from the seaside as it is possible to get, in a place that you have probably never heard of. The area used to be famous for producing anchors and chains for huge ships like the Titanic and Britannic but those days have now long gone. The triplets went to the same school on Tilley House Lane, were all in the same class and of course, all shared the same teachers.

One bright, sunny morning they all found themselves at home, completely alone, with absolutely nothing to do. And they were all bored. The kind of boredom they had never, ever, felt before, in their whole triple lives.

Yaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaawn (X 3)

Kylie-Mum was out shopping at the *Bargains Are Us Galore Supermarket*. After slamming the front door tightly shut, she had yelled through the letterbox about two really important things on her list that *had* to get done before returning later on that evening: getting her finger and toe nails French polished and something about a long overdue Brazilian hair-trim. Kylie-Mum wasn't really what we would refer to nowadays as a *role model* for her children. She stayed out late every evening and liked to spend a lot of time with her four sisters. They especially enjoyed talking about what was going on in all of the soap operas, what the neighbours were getting up to and how to squeeze more money out of the government to spend at the bingo.

Steve-Dad had a job but it didn't pay much of a wage as he had left school with only one qualification: An *A Star* in needlework. (His mum had been a seamstress) so he was at work in the factory making sofas and chairs and headboards and beds.

He liked to stay inside the house after his shift had ended, watching football, eating TV dinners and smoking long roll ups. His best friend in the world was a Rottweiler dog called Maxie who lived in a large concrete kennel in the front yard. His job was to woof swear words at the locals as they hurried on by and he did this very well indeed. People ran very quickly past the house whenever Maxie was outside.

It just so happened that it was the two-week school holidays: the ones that come along every late March when the sun starts to finally break through the clouds after hibernating for the winter and it is just starting to get warmer and the butterflies are dancing lightly in pairs and...

‘Ah-hem! Er... hello! It’s Harry Hartless-the author who has written down the story for you. That last part-that bit about being on their Easter break *is a bit of a whopper* to be honest. Writer-types are supposed to tell the truth to the reader at all times, right? That’s what the tutors told me back on that incredibly expensive writing course. Strive for honesty they said. Well, if you really want to hear it, the triplets were on a *kind* of holiday; just not at the same time as the *other* school children...

Oh dear... how do I put this? It’s not quite the kind of thing we really speak about in polite society. If you really want me to be honest, Ali had been excluded from school. Yup: he was one of *those* types of kids...

As a result of his removal from period one which followed straight after the morning assembly, his mother had charged into the main reception area of the school, with a bright purple face which matched her leggings. She stomped right in, folded her arms and looked over at all of the office staff. They were busy working behind their polished screens and so she began to yowl at them in her polished screams. Something along the lines of, if Ali wasn’t good enough to be in their silly little school, then neither were Bennie and Caitlin. There was more vocabulary that she added (which Maxie had taught her) but the school staff put their fingers in their ears when the words came pinging out, so I can’t actually tell you *exactly* what she said.

Kylie-mum had then demanded that her children were all removed from their immediate lesson and all three were marched back home in their PE kits after a heated, one-sided row. And that’s really the reason why they had been stuck inside their terraced council house watching daytime TV for the last three weeks.

Yes, it's rather embarrassing, isn't it? But if you want to know the *exact* reason for why Ali had been suspended, keep reading to the part where he is trying to talk to his sisters while swinging from the top of a lamp-post and clutching a brightly coloured, spotty handkerchief...

'Ere! Shall we all go to the cinema and watch that new film everybody's talking about? The one where the old woman becomes a veggie-anti after somebody dognaps her ferret? Filo Harris told me, so he did, that apparently, she totally loses it and machine guns the bad folks all to bits and pieces,' chortled Ali as he flicked a sticky bogey at the TV screen. It landed slap-bang on the forehead of the main character who was an American detective, looking for vital clues in a robbery case. At that very moment, the detective's eyes glanced quickly upwards which caused Ali to jump out of his chair. He was the imaginative one of the three and was forever thinking up interesting and stimulating ideas in order to enrich his sister's lives.

'Go to the cinema with what, Thikko?' grunted Caitlin sharply as she crept behind him on all fours and tied his shoelaces together in a double knot as he sat scratching his head.

'We would need around twenty pounds to get into the flicks. And to make it all really worthwhile, you need hotdogs, popcorn, chewy sweets and a big fizzy drink with a curly straw before you can even sit down to watch the film. Or maybe you just happen to know an out- of- sight window or secret passageway that we can all sneak through and get in for free?'

Caitlin was considered the mature one of the three who always thought beyond the moment. She considered the long-term consequences of any plans or actions and was the one Dunne who could be sensible when it suited her.

‘Why don’t we lend a small amount of cash off somebody and go out and put it all on a horse? If the odds are high enough, we might just make a fortune,’ grinned Bennie in her matter-of-fact way. ‘Then we can buy all the sweets and chocolate that we need for a whole month’s worth of films.’

Bennie was the optimist who always managed to look on the bright side of things, however dreadful or boring the circumstances happened to be. The other two looked at each other. And sighed, at exactly the same time.

Siiiiiiiiiiiiigh (X2)

‘Let’s go to that park by the side of the copse,’ grimaced Ali after he had tripped and fallen flat on his face. ‘The one by the church that still has the multi coloured roundabout in the middle. It looks like a gigantic cheese and tomato pizza. We can get a bag of chips and a jumbo sausage apiece from Tony’s, spin each other round and then see who vomits down their shirt first. Then the loser has to be the servant of the other two for the rest of the day.’

‘What? And take your job? No thanks. Anyways, we don’t have the front door key, anymore, do we? We’ve been locked in like prisoners,’ muttered Caitlin who was combing her fringe with her fingers and rocking from side to side.

‘Why don’t we phone that Mrs Craddock from three doors down and ask ‘er if mum loaned ‘er the spare?’ murmured Bennie quickly. ‘I heard them whispering last week, when I

was hiding in the wardrobe, and I think that's their arrangement. She keeps a spare key for emerging catastrophes and dire emergencies and such like.'

The triplets leaned forward, eyes sparkling and nodded at exactly the same time.

'All fer one an' one fer all,' they chorused happily.

And that's how the *peculiarity* that I spoke of before, began.

Chapter Two

Dunn Sisters: different weeds from the same jungle

Caitlin lay back on the fluffy rug in the main living room and played with the telephone flexi chord, wrapping it around each of her toes and stretching it out straight. The sun came streaming through the windows and lit up the china ornaments arranged neatly on the sideboard.

'Alright there, Auntie Craddock. It's Caitlin from number fifteen. Yeah, that's right. We was thinking of calling the social services. Why you asks me? Mum has locked us all inside the house, that's why! Right against our will too and out of anxiety and depression, our brother Ali 'as been turning on all of the gas rings on that old oven again. That's a child protection issue that is. After our parents 'ave been found guilty of gross neglect and infanticide and taking diabolical liberties, the authorities will stick them both in clink and throw away the key, so they will. An' speaking of which... you what? That's very kind of you, Auntie: you're a mind reader so you are. See ya in a minute then.'

She clicked the receiver button down with a grubby finger and smirked at Ali who was looming over her, his face the colour of a tomato.

‘Liar!’ he shouted. ‘I only ever used that old piece- of- scrap gas cooker once! And that was when I was making my letter go brown over the flame to make it look all old and antique.’

‘The one that you tried to sell to the ‘istory teacher for five quid? The one you said came out of the Tudor times and had likely been written by Catherine of Arrogant ‘erself? You didn’t even bother to use a quill-it was all written with a red biro. Not even Bennie would fall for a stunt like that.’

‘I did, actually. I thought it was quite convincing,’ gushed Bennie through a mouthful of Coco Pops as she leaned back into a love-heart shaped cushion and flicked the TV channel onto the Demolition Derby.

The door-bell dingle-dangled before Ali could think of a clever reply. He had meant to put Caitlin right back in her place but she was now at the front door welcoming the neighbour into the living room. Mrs Craddock entered slowly, rubbing her hands together in a circular motion and smiling as if she was facing a grand jury after being accused of robbing the Bank of England.

‘Here’s the spare front door key my dears,’ grimaced Auntie Craddock as she twiddled her blonde ringlets. ‘I expect your poor mother is at the end of her wits trying to pay the rent now, isn’t she? Yes?’

‘Nah, drawled Bennie. ‘Council ‘as to pay, don’t they?’

‘Yes, well there are plenty of other little things that she is obliged to sort out. Electric bills, poll tax and trying to provide for three growing children. She must have overlooked giving you the key, so just pop back with this spare one later on when you have the time, yes?’ She opened up her purse and began to rummage inside with shaking hands.

Ali considered telling Auntie Craddock the truth: that at nine o'clock that morning, he had locked his sisters inside the house and flushed the key down the toilet in a final effort to be taken just a little bit more seriously. But strangely enough, this hadn't worked. He remained silent for the time being and decided to watch and wait- just like the lawyer on the TV had said was a good thing to do when faced with trying to build a case against the criminals.

He gazed over at Steve Dad's favourite antique: the porcelain statue of an eagle catching a salmon in its talons. Slowly but surely, a plan began to bubble and hiss inside his mind.

'Duck!' screeched Ali pointing over Auntie Craddock's left shoulder.

She flung herself to the floor and screamed at the top of her voice, 'What? What is it?! Somebody, anybody, help me...pleeeeeease!'

As she lay cowering on the living room rug, with her hands over her head, Ali shuffled sideways to the fireplace shelf and quickly slipped the three five-pound notes from underneath the paw of the china Staffordshire Bullterrier and into his back pocket.

'There was a duck flying past the window; I thought you liked wildlife- birdies 'n stuff? Don't you keep budgies an' parrots in that aviary of yours at the back of your garden?'

Auntie Craddock sprung back onto her feet, gazelle like, dusted herself off and stared at him with her bottom lip quivering.

'We 'aven't eaten' nuffin' all day neither,' stated Caitlin in a voice that sounded like she had been sucking on a piece of cactus. 'Mum was goin' to leave some money for our tea but she didn't bother in the end,' said Bennie. 'And that's neglect too that is. So, where's the phone Caitlin? I'm sure them social workers would love to 'ear all about my ribs sticking out

in all directions like the winter twigs on a Pine tree. Ave us all in the orphanage before you could say boo to a moose.'

'No, no, no!' Auntie Craddock's words whizzed out like bullets pinging through the propeller of a WW1 Fighter Plane.

'Here's thirty pounds: ten for each of you, yes? Do *not* make any calls, you hear? That's what neighbours are for: to offer guidance and support whenever needed. It takes an entire community to raise children. Your mother will be livid for days and I can't bare the screaming any longer. Promise you won't call anyone from the council or social services? Or tell your mum anything bad happened? Alright?'

They all looked her straight in the eye with cherubic expressions and rocked their heads simultaneously like the nodding toy dogs on the back of a car parcel shelf. Aunty Craddock smiled nervously and her lips stuck to her teeth. She rubbed her mouth quickly with her finger tips before backing slowly out of the room, her eyes darting from one Dunne to the next.

'Take care then and try not to argue with each other. And don't go near any phones today either,' she quipped from the gravel path as a sudden gust of wind blew her long willowy dress up over her head. She stumbled away with her arms outstretched like an Egyptian Mummy, flashing her bright red pants, past the wheel-less Ford Escort perched on bricks and back to the safety of her pretty house and canaries.

'Well, that was a cunning stunt to pull off, wasn't it?' grunted Caitlin as she gave Ali's Adams Apple a sharp flick.

'Ow! Do you mind?' winced Ali. 'We've ended up with ten quid each and most importantly, a one-way ticket to Freedom City, right?' Bennie smiled brightly. 'And as Aunty

Craddock said ‘erself, that’s what friends are for. She ‘as done ‘er communal duty by us and now ‘as the right to feel really proud. We must ‘ave made ‘er day for ‘er in fact.’

‘Er yeah, whatever,’ snorted Caitlin. ‘Didn’t you see that she was dying to leave, from the very moment she got here? Why do you think we ‘ave that effect on folks round here?’

‘It is because we is really powerful and strong, I reckon,’ nodded Ali. ‘That’s the only explanation.’

Caitlin held the front door open and tapped her foot impatiently on the rug. ‘You two comin’ or what? And its *fifteen* quid each by the by. I saw you snaffle those fivers that mum had left out for us. I might ‘ave been born at night, but it wasn’t *last* night.’

Chapter Three

It takes a life to learn how to live

All three Dunnes stood waiting in line at the village Post Office, only occasionally leaving the queue to check out the aerodynamic capabilities of various toys, sweets and magazines. They did this by hurling them around the shop, at the windows and at various people waiting for the manager, Mr Giles to cash their giro cheques.

‘Why am I the one ‘oo gets the key tied round ‘is throat anyway? This old string is giving me a rash something chronic. My neck looks like Count Dracula ‘as been avin’ a right go at it. Are you two listening to me?’

‘Maybe it’s because you sound, smell and behave exactly like a donkey and they are beasts of burden. Mr Giles told us last week if you ‘appen to recall.’

'Ee said WHAT?' exploded Ali, spinning around and knocking a large jar of multi-coloured gobstoppers all over floor.

Mr Giles slowly took off his glasses and wiped them with his tie.

'Now I didn't *quite* compare Ali to a donkey now did I girls? I simply said that back in the day, back in hallowed antiquity, we used, or should I say, the *Post office* to be more precise, used animals as a means of transportation for letters and parcels. It was usually horses or mules and the service changed both riders and the animals at various points along the way. There's a place not too far from here called Meriden which was three days coach and horse ride from London and three days ride from Chester....'

Mr Giles stopped talking: it was clear that the triplets had better things to do. He craned his neck across the polished Beech counter and saw that they were now trying to entice the Post Office cat *Stamp* into eating one of the large, blue gobstoppers that had continued to roll around the floor in large circles.

Mr Giles was in his early sixties, which in the triplet's minds meant that he should have died a long time ago, and by rights, be sitting on his fluffy white cloud, strumming his golden harp. But here he was, still running the post office after thirty-five years and *still* only too happy to talk about...

The Good Old Days

...whatever they were.

He smiled weakly. 'As I mentioned when you three were in here last time attempting to purchase cigarettes, first of all, the delivery world out in the Wild West of America began with the Pony Express...

'Those ciggies woz for Kylie Mum,' Bennie smirked, returning to the thrust of the conversation.

'She'd gone and smoked half of our Nan's cigars who 'ad then refused to 'and over any more. They had a bit of a wrestle and Nanna ended up sitting right on top of them.'

'Weren't they crushed?' asked Mr Giles.

'Both of them was completely devastated, now you ask. Kylie Mum was still gagging for a smoke and so Nanna had to take the loose tobacco and make roll ups using some old newspaper from the bottom of the cupboard.'

Mr Giles swallowed dryly. 'After the ponies, came the steam trains. Then we had vans and Lorries. Then finally, huge aeroplanes that could take your mail anywhere in the world. That's what we still use today in fact-so we can stay in touch or send parcels to anyone in the whole wide world.'

'So why does our postie deliver dole cheques, birf-day cards and all of that hate mail on his mountain bike then?'

Caitlin blew a large, pink bubble and Mr Giles' face morphed instantaneously into the same shade. 'Well, you know, it's... it's all about protecting the environment these days, isn't it? Think about the reduced carbon footprint from using a pedal cycle.'

Ali glanced casually up at Mr Giles. 'Dad got a footprint off my mum last week. Right across his ar...'

'Reducing footprints is *all* the rage now. *Everyone* now has to play their part in helping the planet to regain its composure by considering their actions a little more carefully. And by doing so, hopefully protecting the planet for the...erm... future generation.'

'After all of that furious peddling round our estate, our positie is always sweating buckets from 'ead to toe. Kylie-Mum says 'e 'as BO something chronic; enough to make the flowers and trees wilt right over at 45 degrees. She says that the local stray cats an dogs die screaming in agony when they get a good whiff of 'im. According to 'er, it must take 'undreds or thousands of gallons of soapy water to scrub 'im clean and make 'im sparkly and smellin' all nice again. Now that can't be right, now, can it? Ow can that be good for the planet when 'es usin' up all of the water from the reservoir an' rivers an' lakes and causin' major droughts to go off left, right and centre?'

'Your mother Kylie is quite right to point that out: thank you Ali. Now then: did any of you wish to purchase any of the stock today?'

Naaaaaaaaaaaaaagh, (X3)

'We just came in ta see how you woz, that's all,' beamed Caitlin. 'You can't 'ave many friends left at your age-most of 'em must be probably dead or bored rigid by now.'

'Er, well... there's a rather long line behind you all and everyone is no doubt waiting to be served.'

The triplets swivelled around. All fourteen people in the queue managed to instantaneously look in different directions; as if they were all seated on the London Tube, going to work in the morning rush hour.

Ali and Caitlin sauntered outside and leaned on the bright red pillar box. They began to watch the traffic go thundering and beeping by. Bennie came over then held out her

hand to show three large, gummy cola bottles that she had appropriated from the post office stock.

‘They’d ‘ave gone mouldy otherwise,’ she stated blandly.

A tiny Yorkshire terrier toddled over to them and sat on his hind legs waiting for a little treat.

‘Aww, what a nice little doggie. Go on, an’ catch a mouse for yourself,’ Ali stated gently.

‘Why are you talking in that manner to my little Terence?’ rasped the elderly lady, shaking with rage as she approached. ‘He only wanted to have a tiny sniff of you, and a bite to eat. He’s a very friendly dog. How *dare* you tell him to go and catch a mouse? Does he look like a cat to you? Hmm? Let me tell you, you great lout, when I was your age...’

Ali looked over at his sisters who both grimaced simultaneously. ‘You call that friendly?’ choked Ali. ‘He was comin’ right at me with ‘is tongue ‘anging out onto the ground and flappin’ from side to side like a clock pendulum. That’s a sure sign of rabies that is. The rabies is like really bad fer yer ‘ealth an’ that. So sling yer ‘ook: before I gets the RSPCA an’ the cops and the army on to ya and they all get togever to put ‘im down at the vets for attakin’ me and me poor little sisters.’

The old lady stared over, unblinking.

‘Never, in all my days have I...’

Caitlin began rubbing her eyes and making exaggerated sobbing noises while Bennie started clutching her chest as if she was having a heart attack. The old lady began to gurgle slightly. She then tottered off on her Zimmer-frame with her Yorkie terrier pulling her automatically towards Bertie’s Bric a Brac Bargain Basement on the corner, in order to spend some more of her pension money on doggie treats.

‘Yet another crazy old bat. This town’s full of them. What was her problem anyway?’ grumbled Ali as he stood watching the old woman’s disappearing back.

‘Maybe she’s got nothing better to do, at her age. An’ listening to Mr Giles is enough to send anyone potty after a while.’

‘Why don’t we go down to the big green pond off Blewit Street and do a bit a fishin’ like? We could try and catch a few tiddlers for our tea. That would save the supper money to spend on games an’ sweets an’ fizzy orange an’ stuff. The rest of the cash we can just waste.’

Ali’s sisters were quick to recognise the cunning deliciousness of the plan. They tied their shoelaces up, turned a sharp right and began the slow saunter down the length of Tennyson Street and towards the Fens Pool. After swinging from the bus stop for a few minutes they started taking it in turns to push each other off the kerb and in front of the incoming traffic, much to the joy and amusement of the passing motorists.

Chapter Four

Walls and Bars do not a Prison Make

All of the Dunne's were very proud of their combined musical abilities and loved to demonstrate their Mozart-like prowess to all of the local residents. They hopped over a low wall into a front garden and procured an Elm branch each from a mature tree standing in the middle of the overgrown lawn. After stripping off the leaves and switches they were left with long, bare sticks. Then, they began walking past the railings and gates, tinkling out various octaves and crescendos along the way.

'Ere!' shouted Ali, pointing with excitement. 'Look at the state of all of them lamp-posts over there, lying in that big pile. They all look like they is out of the ark!'

'That bloke looks like 'e's out o the ark an all,' cooed Bennie.

'E must of been one of the two 'ippo-potta-moses judgin' by the size of 'is backside.'

The man at top of the ladder instantaneously went rigid and gripped the lamp post tightly with both hands.

'Ere, Mister Booty Man! What are you tryin' to be fixin' them old things up there for? Aven't you got nuffin' a bit more up to date to play around with?'

The man from the council went red, then yellow then a deep purple. He could have made quite a lot of money, hiring himself out as a set of disco lights that day. He trembled slightly and opened his mouth to return the favour. But after swivelling around and seeing all three below, quickly thought better of it, quickly adjusted his countenance and beamed happily down at them.

‘Hellooooo... you. Again. That’s very astute of you to notice that these lamps are actually from a bygone age. As you probably know, there’s a recession biting us all at present. Which basically means that the council don’t have much spare cash for building projects and street maintenance.’

‘What was wrong with them other street lights then? The green ‘uns that ‘ave been up ‘ere for a while now,’ chimed Caitlin. She gazed up at him while pulling on her gum so it stretched a good 40cm away from her teeth. She twirled it around her index finger and gazed upwards with her head to one side.

‘Well, the local hoolig..., I mean lads and lasses, not on purpose at all, smashed the last ones into scrap by accidently driving some borrowed cars into them. Due to the cuts being what they are, we are now having to recycle what we can find from out of the big council warehouse.

These street lamps are actually from the Victorian era would you believe? They may look very old and unfit for purpose to your eyes but they have been modified accordingly to the correct British Standards in the council workshops and are perfectly safe and functional.’

Ali stopped skimming stones across the road and looked up at the council man. ‘Yeah, but they look blimmin’ weird mate. The ‘ouses on this estate aren’t Victorian now, are they? They woz built thirty years ago in the 1950s-that’s what our ‘istory teacher told us at school anyway.’

‘These lamps have been gathering dust in storage for over ninety years and someone from the government suggested that we save some more money by reusing them. It isn’t up to me to say whether they suit the style of the road now, is it? I’ve just finished wiring this one in so it will automatically turn on at dusk. Perhaps you can return later on-around seven forty-five, and see if it is working properly? Personally, I reckon they will look

an absolute treat when they are all fixed up and will add a great deal to the aesthetic charm of the area.'

'Kinda dusty and cobwebby aint it?' stated Caitlin. 'Can't you give it a good clean or somethin' before fixin' it all up with the electricker?''

'Well, that's not my department. I'm instructed to wire them all in after the transport team have dropped them off here. The engineering chaps fasten them down into the ground with long bolts and then the cleaning guys will come out to give them all the sparkly once over. Then a safety manager comes to check them carefully to make sure everything is nice and secure and safe. Then the very final group-the management team arrive to sign off the paperwork; they will be along next week I should imagine. But everything looks fine and dandy to me so far. I'm going home-it's almost eleven o'clock and I'm Hank Marvin. Have a nice day now. Bye, bye. Bye.'

The man jumped into the van where his four co-workers were listening to *Big It Up Radio* and drinking tea from thermos flasks.

Ali walked over and stuck his head through the side window. 'Turn that volume up a bit will ya? That story sounds kind of funky.'

Caitlin and Bennie lay on top of the van bonnet looking in at the men. 'Ooh, this is nice and warm innit?' wheezed Caitlin. 'As snug as a bug in a rug, gettin' a hug,' replied Bennie. 'What is you lot lookin' at?'

The men inside the van gawked through the windscreen.

'Ere! We need to be getting' off to our next job, the other side of Fudley Fields. We can't go anywhere with you pair sunbathing on top of the bonnet, now can we?'

'He's a sharp one ain't he Caitlin?'

'Sharp as a blunt razor, Bennie.'

The DJ was busily sharing a story with his listeners about a tragedy that had befallen a young lady when she had begun dating a rather hunky man a while back. The sad music played in the background and the DJ began his story in his famous, melodic tones.

‘Lay-deez an genle-men,’ began the DJ.

‘A young, lay-dee woman by the name of Bebie Jhan-Ji has written in to me at *Big It Up Radio* and I simply had to share her tale with all of my beloved listeners. I did shed a tear for her, so I did, and you will too when you listen to her tale of anguish and woe. After hearing this sad story I’m sure that you will agree that we all enjoy pretty good and happy lives; we should be just a little more grateful for the good times-let them roll on and on.

Bebi Jhan’s brand new fellow in her life was ever so proudly polishing his brand-new Vespa scooter outside their brand-new house, in their new back yard. Oh yes, there was a lot of newness around, on that fate-filled day. Oh, how he loved that scooter! It had taken him three years of working in the pickled onion factory to save up for it, and it was his pride and joy. There he was, polishing away, for all he was worth, when he accidentally pressed down on the gear-change-lever. But lay-deez an’ genle-men: in his excitement, he had forgotten to notice that the engine was still running. The dude, let’s call him Reggie to save his blushes and bruises, grabbed hold of the handlebars as the scooter engaged first gear and was dragged kicking and screaming through the glass patio doors, into the living room and, along with the scooter was dumped like one of his sacks of onions right onto the rug in front of the mantel piece.

Bebi, hearing the tremendous crash downstairs, sprinted into the dining area in her pyjamas and found Reggie spread-eagled on the floor, screaming and bleeding and the patio window shattered into twenty-five thousand pieces. There was petrol everywhere, pumping out left,

right and centre but despite this, our Miss Bebi ran to the phone and called for an ambulance pronto. After around ten minutes or so they heard the nee naa nee naa outside and because they lived on a bit of a raised hill, Bebi went down the several flights of long steps to the street to direct the paramedics to her groaning, moaning man.

After the medical crew had transported Reggie to the hospital, Bebi righted the scooter and pushed it outside. Seeing the large amount of fuel that had spilled on the living room floor, like any good, new girlfriend, she grabbed some paper towels, blotted up the fuel, and threw it all into the toilet bowl, before going off to make herself a nice cup of tea. Reggie was treated with loving care at the hospital and was released after a few hours to come home to his adoring Bebi.

Well lay-deez and genle men, after arriving back, he looked at the shattered patio door and the damage done to his new pride and joy-that lovely, shiny scooter. He became despondent, went into the bathroom, sat on the toilet and smoked a nice cigarette, while wondering what to do next. After finishing, he flipped what was left of the ciggie into the toilet bowl while still seated. Bebi, who was in the kitchen, heard a gigantic explosion and Reggie started screaming at the top of his lungs all over again and this again, brought her sprinting through the place like a cheetah.

She pushed open the door and got into the bathroom and found her chap lying on the floor, twisting and howling away like Elvis. His trousers had been blown clean off and had shot out of the window: they were floating away out of sight like a hot-air balloon and were being chased by a flock of angry seagulls. Bebi ran around in circles for a while, not knowing what

to do, but then eventually calmed down, picked up the phone and called for ambulance number two.

The same crew was dispatched and Bibi met them at the street once again. The paramedics loaded Reggie onto the stretcher and began carrying him gently down the steps towards the meat wagon. While they were going down, one of the paramedics asked Bebi how Reggie had managed to burn himself in such a strange place, so very badly. She told them the full story and the paramedics started laughing so hard, one of them tipped the stretcher and dumped Reggie out where he bounced down the remaining steps, one by one, where he landed at the bottom of the stairwell which broke his arm in two places.

Reggie has gone back to living with his mum since the incident and this has made Bebi feel like reeeeeeally sad. It is unclear at this time whether Reggie will ever find it in his heart to be able to look Bebi in her big almond eyes ever again... I feel ever so sorry for her; I really do. She has asked all of the radio listeners to send out happy, positive vibes into the atmosphere and so hopefully her dreams of getting her new bloke back really quickly will soon become fulfilled. She has also offered to get his scooter resprayed at her uncle's garage, such is her devotion to doing the right thing.

So, here's over to you my faithful listeners: put your hands together, raise your eyes to the skies or do whatever you can to send fate a message: that Bebi Jhan needs her bloke back, pronto. The next record goes out to her from the nation and I'm sure I speak for all of the good folks out there, when we wish her the very best of luck for the future. Here's this week's number one by that brand-new boy band, The Mighty Fried Sausages and their new single, 'You bake my spuds like no one else...'

The men in the van all gulped and slowly looked at each other in a stunned silence. One had tears in his eyes, one was sitting open mouthed and the other two were grimacing with their hands in their pockets and rocking to and fro, not knowing what to do or say.

Bennie and Caitlin looked at each other before doubling up with hysterical laughter which continued for a good two minutes until they slid off the van bonnet and ended up lying in a tangled knot on the floor. They crawled slowly away like a pair of tortoises and managed to prop themselves against a low garden wall where they remained shaking in silent mirth. The engineer did another double take, looked over at his mates, then wheel-spun off the kerb leaving two thick lines of rubber smoking across the white concrete and a heavy dust cloud billowing thickly around the base of the lamp post.

‘Ave you still got that ‘ankerchief; the one what you nicked from out of that magician’s supplies? ‘Im that popped up at our school assembly a couple of weeks back?’ murmured Caitlin as she wiped the tears from her eyes.

Ali nodded slowly, his eyes narrowing with suspicion.

‘I’ve still got ‘is van keys too. What does you want that handkerchief for? I was saving it for something really special. You don’t wanna blow yer nose in it or nothin’ do you?’

‘Nah, nothing of the sort. I just wanna check on the quality of this old lamppost; to see how good this paintwork and glass looks underneath.’

‘What’s the point of that then?’ Ali muttered with suspicion. Caitlin stared back belligerently. ‘I just wanna see what it’s like underneath the dust n stuff, OK? I aven’t seen nuffin this old for ages; not since we seen Nanna a couple of weeks back. I reckon I must ‘ave an appreciation for antiques, that’s all.’

Ali looked at both his sisters who seemed rooted to the spot.

‘Give us a leg up then,’ he sniffed. He wasn’t too sure about whether he wanted to be seen out of doors cleaning council property instead of smashing it into bits and pieces but it was unwise to aggravate his sisters. They outnumbered him two to one and the thought struck him yet again: ‘Why did he have *two* sisters when they only had *one* each?’ It was Maths, that was the problem. He resolved there and then to skip even more of Miss Underhill’s classes as adding and subtracting and division and multiplying never made any sense to man nor beast. That was, he wondered, if the headmistress Ms De Wit ever let him back into school.

Caitlin leaned forward and linked her fingers and palms together to offer a step-up onto the first metal rung. It was around six feet off the ground and so quite a way off as the triplets were small for their age. Eventually, after a great deal of slipping and sliding, Ali clambered his way, simian like, to the very top and came face to face with the glass casing.

‘Start wiping the panels a bit,’ shouted Caitlin. ‘It’s all covered in grubby muck.’

‘That’s what I’m trying to do; are you blind or something?’ muttered Ali. But he was careful to say this under his breath so she wouldn’t hear him.

‘Hurry up and start polishing. We can then lob a brick straight through it and it will be more fun to smash if it looks brand new instead of like really old!’ shrieked Bennie.

Ali took out the bright red handkerchief complete with yellow polka dots, spat on it three times and began to rub vigorously in circles. He looked down at the girls far below and grinned his gappy grin.

‘I wish Aunty Jean was here to see me doin’ this. She loves polishing things an all. You can see your face in her Walnut table in the dining room after she’s been at it for twenty minutes with the wax.’

'You what?'

'I said Aunty Jean...'

'Huh? Speak up will you ? You sound like an old man with badly-fitting false teeth.'

'If Aunty Jeanie could see me now, she'd be really proud of me I reckon!'

'Who ?'

'J...'

'What?'

'Je... '

'You what ?'

'JEANY, JEAN, JEANY!!' Ali roared after completely losing his temper. He started to pant as he rubbed the glass furiously in a circular motion.

'Wow: it looks quite clean from here. Girls? Giiiiiiiiiiiiirls... Hello? Can you see any change yet from where you are standing?'

He looked down and they had both moved away from the lamppost and were standing next to a privet hedge at the bottom of someone's garden.

'I said, CAN- YOU- SEE- A- CHANGE- YET?'

Both girls stood wide-eyed in the sunlight. 'Er yeah. Like a reeeeeally big one. Ali: you'd better slide back down 'ere, on the double. An be quick about it. You really need to see this yourself.'

Chapter Five

Make a Friend Even When You Don't Need One

Ali slid down the post and landed with a sickening crunch on the ground.

'Ow! Me thigh!' he wailed as he rolled around on the floor clutching his ankle. He had expected his sisters to run back over and cushion his fall, firemen like, but they were still staring, unblinking in the opposite direction.

'What's the matter with you pair? I'm in screaming agony here and most likely to die. Girls? Are you both alright? You look like you've seen a ghost.'

Two long, bony fingers shot out simultaneously. The smoke from the van tyres around the lamppost base seemed to be still swirling around them in heavy, grey rings. Ali put his hand over his eyes to shield them against a growing bright green light which seemed to flash sparks and lightning within its depths. As the light began slowly to dim, he blinked a few more times-towards a huge man, floating on a cushion of shimmering, blue cloud with his legs crossed. He was around eight feet tall, bright pink, as bald as an egg and at least twenty-five stones. He placed his hands on his wide hips and looked the triplets up and down slowly. He spat onto the ground and it sizzled like butter in a hot frying pan.

'Bwaay! What you goo an ave to wake me up fer? Me was 'avin like a reaaaaly loong forty winks filled wiv da most splendidness of dreams. It was like the nex best ting to been in 'eaven! An' you ave to goo an spoil it aaaal! Well what is yew all starin' at? Say someting man; me no 'ave haall day.'

'I take it that you 'aint from round ere mate,' drawled Ali, flicking his fringe to one side and wiping his hands down his trousers.

'If I woz you, I'd learn to speak proppa. You're 'eadin' fer been bashed around by the local massive, talkin' in a weird way like that.'

'We don't really go in for strangers round these 'ere parts. Especially big, fat pink 'uns oo is bigger than the TV wrestler Giant Haystacks. If I was you, I'd gerroff out of it on the rapid like,' added Caitlin sharply.

'Maybe 'e can come fishin' with us and help to bring home some of the catch?' nodded Bennie. 'Is 'ands are big enough to catch a pair of whales. We would be eatin' for free for a 'ole month.'

'Man, do you 'ere dat? Me, oo 'as hempowered Hemperors and kings wiv me deep, shiny wisdom! Me, oo as not only seen 'istory but *made* 'istory for all the world to see. Why would I go 'an lower me megga 'igh standards an' goo wiv you tree, fishin' in a dirty old lake fower?'

'Because if you don't come an' 'elp us, we'll tell the cops that you're wanderin' the streets under the influence,' Ali shot back.

'Look at the state of ya: 'igh as a kite, floatin' about on that cloud thingy. You looks like me dad on a Saturday night, though I doubt if e' could ever afford any of that wacky bakky that you've been smokin'.'

The man twirled his long thin moustache between his thumb and forefinger and his eyes narrowed into thin slits.

'Me can see I 'as me work cut out wiv you tree likkle monkeys. In fac' when me come to fink about it, this might just be me greatest challenge yet. *Me* oo as slain a Tyrannosaurus Rex wiv a single inch punch, rescued five Arabian princesses from de wicked ogres oo as

knives for fingers and axes for teeth. *And* travelled single 'anded to the six corners a tha galaxy wiv only 'alf a cucumber and a bag of Wotsits for me lunch...'

He somersaulted off the cloud, flicked his plaited beard over his shoulder and let out a very deep, very slow rumble. His hands did not move from his hips and he continued to frown down at all them. He hitched up his silk trousers but his belly continued to hang over the waist belt, almost touching his thighs.

'Why don't you get a piercin' down there like me little Aunty Roxy?' rasped Bennie. 'Er reckons it makes 'er 'otter than a red ot chilli pepper.'

'Me already is dat,' replied the man gravely. 'You canna himprove on perfection man.'

He looked slowly from one to the other, all the time shaking his head.

'Come on den-follow me,' he said in a lighter tone. 'If it is fishin' you is a wantin' then it is a fishin' yous is a goin' ta be gettin.'

He leapt back onto the cloud and began to drift away slowly down the hill.

'Oi! What about a lift? There's room fer all on us on that floatey mattress thingy ya know,' shouted Ali.

'USE DEM LEGS AN' WALK!' roared the man. His voice shook the very ground and all of the lamp posts on the road trembled in unison, as if they were in the middle of a furious tornado.

'Bad tempered old chump 'aint e?' muttered Caitlin after she had blown another bubble.

The triplets looked at each other and shrugged. Nothing else much was happening that day so they all pushed their hands in their pockets and began to slowly follow the man down the road, taking it in turns to kick an old bean can from side to side.

‘Where’s the exhaust pipe on that fing?’ queried Ali who had been squatting down to take a closer look.

‘Arv nevva seen a motor like that before. Do you think he made it in his garage?’

‘Well, I wants to know why e’s got such weird clothes on,’ retorted Caitlin. She swung her arms around as she walked and whacked Ali with her Elm branch.

‘I mean look at ‘im! Leather waistcoat undone so you can see ‘is big, saggy, man-boobies. Baggy, silky, yellow trousers an’ pointy shoes that curl over at the ends. Do ya fink ‘es one o’ them Muslamics?’

‘It’s ‘is bald ‘ead that get’s on my wick’ re-joined Bennie. The sun’s shinin’ right off it and goin’ in me eyes and ‘urtin ‘em. Go an’ tell ‘im to wear an ‘at like or give me some sunglasses to wear. E’s infringing on me viewing human rights so ‘e is.’

‘You go over an tell ‘im. Ee looks like e’s got a right wicked temper boilin’ away under all that blubber.’

Eventually they arrived at the green boat house but strangely enough no one else seemed to notice either them or the gigantic pink man at all. The man clicked his fingers and the cloud started to shrink and compress like a bouncy castle when someone has stuck a garden fork into it. He folded it up quickly and placed it in his inside jacket pocket.

‘So likkle monkey people. Wat is it that yew wants to be seein’ furst? Me as got aaall kind a magic tricks n ting so if it is hentertainment that you wants then yew ‘as come ta tha right guy.’

‘We ‘ave the TV and comedies like the news and dockee mental-ries for that,’ squawked Ali. ‘There was this magic bloke at school an’ ‘e got me into a whole load of trouble, so no magic-ing of any kind. Pure and simple pal: just make us all like really rich so we can leave school forever and ever. We want to live in a great big massive ‘ouse with 70-

inch Flat screen TVs in every room and 'ave loads of servants an' maids an' butlers to bring us pizzas and chips and fizzy orange every day. That's right innit' girls?'

The sisters eagerly nodded their agreement and the pink man scratched his chin.

'Me as seen a great many folk cum ta grief fru the greed business. The greed business 'aint no joke business. Me 'as to warn yews about dem consequences of not finkin' straight befower yew hasks me fer me elp.'

'JUST DO IT!' All three stamped their feet in unison and the large pink man folded his huge muscular arms.

'An to tink that yews as nevva heeven hask me name yet!'

'Make us all rich and be quick about it.' stated Caitlin slowly. We don't want to know yer name-we juss wants a ginourmous sack-load of dollars each, OK?'

'Did ya momma nevva teach yews tree no manners?'

'NO! And we can't afford 'em!' Bennie shouted back.

'Round 'ere manners is fer the softies and wimps,' retorted Ali.

'Aven't yew 'eard dat manners maketh dem man?'

The pink man cartwheeled over with the agility of an Olympic gymnast and towered above all three. His shadow seemed to block out the sun and they all strained their necks to look up at him.

'Manners mek the eart' spin on de axis ya knaa...'

His eyebrows wobbled and a fishing pole suddenly appeared in his hand. He then cast the line and hook into the very middle of the lake with the merest flick of the wrist.

'This is no time fer fishin' you great turnip!' exploded Ali. 'We is wastin' time so get busy getting the loot together will ya?'

The huge man smiled slightly out of the corner of his mouth as he tugged at the hook. The line reeled in by itself with lightning speed and he hauled the catch up onto the bank. The triplets ran over and saw that it wasn't a fish as they had been expecting but an ancient treasure chest, rusty and gnarled with age with a thick, brass padlock positioned at the front.

'I saw it first!' yelled Ali and wrenched it away, beyond the reach of his sisters.

'Did not neither-it's mine!' screeched Caitlin as she stuck her leg out and tripped Ali over. The chest sprung from his grasp as he hit the ground, rolled into the edge of the water and bobbed around like a buoy.

'You two am too stupid to be rich-I alone will be in charge of the treasure,' hollered Bennie as she sprinted down to the lakeside. She grabbed the box, clamped it tightly under one arm and scampered up onto the roof of the boathouse. She laughed before kicking the side ladder away where it landed with a loud thud between Ali and Caitlin.

Bennie sat on the very edge of the roof, swinging her legs with the wooden box carefully balanced on top of her lap. The other two, fifteen feet below were shouting and hollering for her to come down but she ignored them and started to examine the weather-beaten lock.

'I wonder 'ow this fing opens,' she stated out loud to herself and began to shake the contents vigorously.

With a smirk, the pink man pointed upwards and the lid sprung open, spraying Caitlin with three long jets of lumpy green water. She coughed and spluttered, but her eyes widened into large, shining circles. She sat very, very still and stared directly into the treasure chest.

Ali and Bennie looked at each other and then squinted as there was a bright golden light shimmering like heat haze from out of the box.

‘What’s inside? What’s in the box? Caitlin? Caaaaitliiin?’

She took a coin out before thumb and forefinger and trembling, held it up to the sun light.

‘It looks like gold-proper gold and it’s got a king’s head on an’ everything... there’s some diamonds and rubies inside the box ‘ere as well. And some twisted metal neckbands and bracelet things.’

The large man answered dryly. ‘Dey is called torcs. It all dates from the Iron Age. When folk used to ‘ide their treasure from Viking raiders an’ Berserkers an’ naughty likkle triplets.’

Ali picked up a small pebble and flung it towards the light. It pinged off Caitlin’s forehead and she shrieked in alarm. The box sprung from her grip and she flipped over, showering Ali and Bennie with a fountain of golden coins and jewels.

Ali and Bennie scampered around on all fours, collecting the coins and anything that shone from off the ground.

‘Weem rich! Weem rich! What did I say? I always said it; I always knew it: one day I said-this family will make it big!’

Caitlin slid down the drainpipe and all three began dancing around in circles throwing coins and jewels up in the air. Then they began singing chart hits that their parents and aunties sung to each other on a Friday night downstairs before going to the bingo:

‘Money, money, money, never funny in a rich man’s world...’

‘Ooh...there’s a lot of opportunities, if you know where to take them...’

'We are living in a material world, and I am a material girl...'

The large, pink man glanced over sagely.

'Hi hi hi. Is yew gonna waste time dancing haround haall day or is yews goin' ta get it valued and sell it aaaall on?'

He stroked his long beard again and flicked it over his shoulder.

The triplets nodded in unison.

'Take us to the museum thingey, where we shall get paid in full for all of our treasure. It's time that we started our new life of being really rich and respected by the local massive and beyond,' stated Ali matter of factly.

'I'm going to buy a speedboat,' beamed Caitlin.

'I'm going to buy a bright white Land Rover,' chortled Ali.

'I'm going to buy a shed and lock you pair inside,' murmured Bennie.

'Has you thought this through? Is you sure that you wanna go to the museum? Does any one of you have any other ideas?'

'We don't need to think anymore. We is rich. Take us to the moo-seum on that cloudy thing and step on it!' wheezed Caitlin who was so excited, she could hardly breath. The big man grimaced, took the fishing rod and twirled it around his head three times in a figure of eight.

The entire world spun on the side of its axis and turned into all of the colours of a spring rainbow. The air roared around them and was as cold as ice one moment, then hotter than an oven the next. They simultaneously froze and shivered then sweated and gasped as strange and beautiful voices seemed to be whispering sweet poetry in a foreign tongue

close to their ears. Suddenly they began spiralling down like helicopter leaves in Autumn before landing heavily and upside down with a colossal

...WHUMP... (X3)

and everything went dark and utterly silent. They rubbed their eyes and the gloom slowly began to evaporate as shooting stars and spinning lights like Catherine Wheels filled the air. They blinked and found themselves sitting on a large, creaking leather Chesterfield in a dusty office filled with ancient scrolls, books and files. An old faded sign above the door proclaimed that they were in the British Museum. A shuffling of papers alerted them to the fact that they were not alone. Across the desk, seated on high backed wooden chairs were three very ancient, very dusty and very grim looking administrators. And they were all staring, unblinking at the children intently.

Chapter Six

Keep Learning to Stay Young

The thin man with long, straggly, white hair leaned back in his chair and began to slowly polish his half-moon spectacles.

‘So, children, if er, that is what you are. I would just like to reiterate: you say that you discovered this hoard whilst you were out fishing... for your tea? Is that correct?’

‘Yeah, thass right,’ drawled Ali.

A shrill voice filled the room. It came from the woman sitting to the side of the chief administrator. ‘I beg your pardon? Can someone please go and fetch an interpreter from the

museum's ancient language division? My ears have started to ache. I'm not sure how much more of this I can listen to without going stark raving mad.'

Peregrine Pomphrey glanced quickly from left to right at the women sitting either side of him. One was short and stout and had blue rinse hair. The other was tall and thin and had a mouth that turned down at both ends. They were wearing those scary type of old-fashioned spectacles-the ones that are pointy at the ends and their pig eyes flashed over the children with deep suspicion.

'I'm sure that he speaks a dialect yet undiscovered by mankind. Do you think that they're all from a lost Brazilian tribe or perhaps a race of delinquent pygmies from somewhere nearby?'

'E- said- that- 'e- did- find- the- treasure- while- out- fishing. Are you lot not listenin' or summat?' yelled Bennie.

Caitlin grimaced and stared over at Professor Yentie.

'If you please Miss Yeti, er I mean Yettle. We is all British Arkey-college-ists and we found the treasure in a pool in the middle of Britain. We 'ave not nicked it, if that is what is being implied 'ere. So just get on up with the business then 'and over the ten gazzillion quid each. Then we will be on our merry way and out of yours.'

'Just a moment please. There are certain protocols to follow. This is not a church jumble sale you know.'

Professor Yentie's bull-like neck concertinaed in the middle as she leaned in and whispered carefully to her companions. The leather complained deeply under her weight as she nodded slowly to her fellow committee members. Her lips moved upwards several millimetres. But it was the smile of a shark.

'I do believe that these dreadful creatures are what is known as *Yam-Yams*. They speak a dialect which is deliberately constructed to baffle and confuse the recipient. This is why they always end up as the main beneficiaries in any kind of business transaction. We should tread very carefully with these here... Dickensian street urchins.'

'I quite agree' snorted Peregrine. 'If we're not careful they are more than likely to leg it out of here with the entire contents of the museum in a fleet of Transit vans the very moment our backs are turned. Bessie: what do you think?'

Bessinger Huxtable had still not blinked during the entire meeting but managed to nod very slowly as though her neck was fastened securely inside a surgical brace.

'I simply refuse to believe the evidence of my eyes and ears,' is all that she could manage to say.

The man continued to whisper to his colleagues. He rustled his papers importantly then turned back to the Dunnes and spoke carefully with perfect diction.

'We are the official Treasure Validation Committee and have been given full autonomy and jurisdiction regarding the purchase of antiquities. As chair I am compelled to inform you that after reviewing your case, that you have no claim to this find whatsoever.'

He stroked his nose hair as he spoke. 'Under the Treasure Act of 1976, it is your legal obligation to report any such items found; but only after first asking the landowner's permission to dig.'

'We did not dig, we FISHED. All of this loot was pulled out of the Grove Pool, using a fishing line.'

'That makes your case even weaker. Property found in the sea or seashore could be from a ship and is known technically as 'wreck.' Wreck is not treasure. All wreck must be

reported to the receiver of Wreck. You have not followed the appropriate channels therefore it is my duty to inform you...'

'Just a moment Peregrine!' Professor Huxtable shot up rigidly as if someone had stuck her in the behind with a ten-foot javelin.

Her eyes swivelled all over all three children like a periscope before her cold stare landed on Caitlin.

'What was that term that you used to describe yourselves at the beginning of the interview?' She tapped her long finger nails on the top of the desk as she spoke and this gave her the air of a know-it- all teacher.

'Ark-hee-college-ists is what we all am. We digs for treasure and valuables and 'as adventures like Indiana Jones and Robin 'ood.

'Well, it is my duty to tell you that as 'ark-hee-college-ists,' she mimicked, 'that you have no claim on this find whatsoever. Mr Pomphrey here is absolutely correct.

'You mean we is to get nuffing?' X3

'Nothing... whatsoever,' she smirked before her shoulders began to shake. Peregrine snickered to himself displaying yellow teeth and patted Bessie on the palm of her hand. He walked stiffly over to a filing cabinet and produced a dusty folder from which he withdrew an ancient piece of paper.

'Thank you, Bessie; I'd quite missed the solution, myself.' He harrumphed and began to read very slowly. 'So here it is munchklins: under the ramifications of the third part of the last quarter taking in all matters concerned, considering into the equation your age and background, your disposition to wilfully disregard any form of education and correct speech: we, the committee and treasure validation group of the British Museum of Old London Town shall hereby give you notice that all said monies, goods and properties to wit: the Iron

Age hoard that you have delivered to our keeping today, is therefore forfeit to the crown and thus belongs to her majesty Queen Elizabeth the second.'

He leapt from his seat where one fat, then one thin manicured hand shot out which he loudly high-fived.

'I thang yew!'

'I thaaaaaang yeeew!'

'HUUUUUUUUH?' (X3)

'Archaeologists aren't entitled to a share of *any* reward; look it up: it's THE LAW.'

'Yew what??' Ali rasped weakly. 'That paper doesn't make any sense to man nor no beast; it's all blankety blank. You just made it all up as you went along. It's all goggledgook so it is!'

'You're too young and insane to understand the law of the land. So, I shall spell it out in language that you can understand: you can't keep a single brass farthing from the hoard for yourselves. It now belongs to the museum. So be off with you before the authorities lock you all up in a lunatic asylum and accidently lose the key.'

Peregrine picked up the phone and grasped it tightly in his claw like fingers. His jet-black Dracula eyebrows arched like a pair of birds in flight and he glared at them menacingly.

'I mean it. I shall call the rozzers and have you all in clink before you can say frikkin' to a chicken.'

'Come on' shrilled Bennie, sending a chair flying against the wall with a Kung Fu kick.

'I knows when I am beat.'

She looked at the three grinning curators and held up a trembling forefinger.

'But we shall 'ave our triple vengeance upon you old bats whether it be in this world or the next.'

'Yes, yes: I've seen that movie too. Jog along now,' shot back Peregrine with a patronising wave of his hand.

Chapter Seven

The Less You Have, the More There is to Get

All three children stood shivering on the corner of Great Russell Street with their hands deeply buried in their pockets.

Bennie glanced over the gloomy expressions of her brother and sister before tilting her head sideways and gazing up at the sun.

'Well at least we still 'ave the fifteen quid left. That will get us 'ome, I guess. Let's start walking to Victoria coach station; it should only take about three hours. We can have a nice, warm ride back and should just get back home before mum, with any luck. Hopefully she will bring back some fish and chips for supper.'

'Naa need for dat just yet.'

A familiar voice boomed out from behind them and they shot around. The huge pink man was sitting with a bright white napkin tucked under his four chins and was enjoying an enormous spaghetti and meatball dinner at a street cafe on the opposite side of the street.

The triplets walked straight out into the road causing several cars and lorries to skid to a halt. At the street café, they watched with open mouths as the fork twirled in the pink man's hand like an electric drill before the spaghetti disappeared in huge, knitted balls. They sauntered over and sat down moodily.

'Keep da treasure for demselves, did dey?' he asked.

'Uh huh: and we couldn't do a single fing about it, neither,' whispered Caitlin with tears in her eyes.

'What yews tree needs is a heducation. Cos in dis life, 'ooever 'as the language 'as the power.'

'I want the power to go back in the museum thing and smash all of them stuck up, robbing old duffers all to tiny bits.'

The large man shook his head slowly.

'You don't always need your fists and feet ta fight in dis day an' age. If you is smart, you use your thinking and develop it. You need to know 'ow to use your *brains*. An then you would win an' come out on de top: hevery single time.'

'OK,' said Caitlin. We are all ears, right? Let's see if you got some plans that will get us what we want.'

Her glare dared Ali and Bennie to disagree.

'Alright then, so that's settled. An' if we're goin' to be workin' together like the A Team, what *is* your name by the way?'

'I is glad that you hasked me that at long last. It's Gene. Me surname is E. But just call me Gene, nice n simple.'

He mopped the plate clean with a foot long loaf of Garlic Bread, paid the bill and tipped the waiter handsomely before loudly snapping both sets of fingers. London spun in a

kaleidoscope of assorted colours, temperatures and entrancing whispers and they found themselves lying on their backs groaning feebly in the heather at the side of the Grove Pool once again. They picked themselves up and wiped the greenery off their clothes and sat down on a fallen tree trunk. All three stared up at Gene with their chins resting in their hands. They did not speak but waited patiently and silently.

‘Me did try to warn you.’ Gene stated carefully. ‘But none of yews wanted to listen. So is yew really ready ta follow me lead now, and try listenin’ and thinkin’ for a change?’

All of them nodded simultaneously but still no one spoke.

‘Then ‘ere it is: what you tree need more dan anyfing else at de moment.’

He flicked the fishing line into the middle of the pool once again. The line twitched immediately and an old black, leather-bound book was pulled out of the water with a deft flick of the wrist. It landed in the long grass a few feet away and Ali sprinted over to retrieve it.

‘Open the first page and start readin’. Come on man-be quick about it; you never read a book out loud before?’

Ali’s expression provided Gene with the answer and he narrowed his eyes and looked at him carefully. Gene spoke again but this time in a slightly softer tone.

‘You be careful wiv dat, you ‘ere? It ain’t no toy. It is a mighty weapon; to be used with care. And it needs special respect and hattention as these things change the whole wide world.’

Ali, Caitlin and Bennie sat down and wiped away the green slime from the tatty cover with some dock leaves. Peeling, golden letters shone through the grime, proudly proclaiming the title:

Gulliver's Travels

by Jonathon Swift

'What's in this 'ere book then? Is it any good?' mumbled Bennie.

'Why don't yews open it an' find out?' Gene replied gruffly.

'It no gonna bite you.'

Ali gingerly opened the cover to page one. Once again, the world spun and everything blurred at once into the colours of a hundred Blackpool funfairs, piers and candy-floss booths. This time however, they found themselves sucked up by a roaring, gigantic tornado. Higher and higher they went until the earth below was a tiny green speck. Suddenly they turned and began hurtling towards the earth at the speed of light. *Which is around 186,000 miles per hour as the professor told me.

Chapter Eight

Never Let Your Schooling Interfere with Education

With a huge scrunch, the sound of a thousand Crunchy Bars being munched all at once, they suddenly found themselves standing at the end of a long winding lane, surrounded by clover and wheat fields. Their eyes followed the winding country lane which led up to a little village around a mile away. It all looked exactly as if it had been taken out of a child's picture book: they could see granary barns, a church, a pretty row of thatched cottages with flower-filled front gardens, a town hall and a dark green duck pond. There was a rectangle cobbled area in the very epicentre of the village where a town crier in his long cloak and triangle hat was ding-donging on his brass bell to alert the locals to the very latest news.

'Hear ye, hear ye...' he proclaimed in a hearty, rich voice.

'I 'ave been authorised by the er... authorities, to share with you good folk some rather wonderful news.'

He waited a moment to see if the people had stopped to listen and was pleased to note that they had for a change.

'Our noble Mayor Stacey 'as sanctioned an extra day's holiday next month... as 'is beautiful daughter Miss Nicola 'as just announced 'er engagement to the squire's son. May they live joyfully and 'appily together 'till the end of their days!'

'Does the mayor 'ave any more daughters?' an old farm labourer asked, who was leaning thoughtfully on his pitchfork.

'Why?' cried the Town Crier. You lookin' to get wed to one of 'em are you? That's a bit rich now ennit?'

'Noooo,' the farm labourer tutted. 'I just wondered if there were any more hol- days comin' our way, thass aaaaall,' wheezed back the man. 'I would henjoy another mini break, so I would.'

Polite clapping and murmurs of approval reverberated around the square and people began chatting excitedly within their small groups.

The triplets all looked at each other and the same thought struck them all at once; all they could see for miles around was perfectly formed but... everything was in *miniature*. The entire countryside was in fact, the size of a model railway village and the three children were all towering above it like enormous electricity pylons!

Far below, a tiny girl was skipping through the meadow and wearing a long daisy chain around her neck. She stopped to pick some more flowers to take home to her mother. Three enormous shadows fell over her and she quickly looked up expecting to see rain clouds. She stopped dead in her tracks, swayed from side to side then began to screech out continually at the top of her tiny voice. The town crier was alerted to her blind panic and peered over to see what was going on. He blinked twice and rubbed his eyes before starting to cry out in his formidable voice:

‘Oh-my-great-good-God! We...we is being invaded by massive blondie scum-giants! The day of chav-judgement ‘as arrived! Flee! Flee for your lives! Run to the hills! Where’s mommy? Heeeeeelp!!’

All of the villagers far below started dashing out of the fields and pastures to take a clearer look at the three Dunnes. After accepting that their eyes were not playing tricks on them, they all began screaming and jabbering in terror which made the triplets roar with laughter.

‘Ere! Did you ‘ear wot ‘that bloke in the long coat said about us down there? We must ‘ave been turned into powerful megga-giants by Gene!’ shouted Ali.

‘E must ‘ave gone and made us like Superman and Superwomen! And so, our education begins by being huge and terry-frying!’

Ali looked down far below. 'Let's 'ave some fun then girls. Me first: get yourselves ready an' watch this!'

He drew in the deepest of deep breaths and turned as purple as a blackberry. Then he roared at the top of his voice and swung his arms around him like a windmill.

'Fee and fi and fo and fum! You lot are going... in my tum, tum tum! Moo ha, ha, hwwwooooo!!'

He pointed at a farmer and his wife as he rubbed his stomach in a circular motion. Both of them ran around in jittery circles before turning around and sprinting full pelt into each other. After five seconds of lying spark out, they leapt to their feet, sprinted down a track and dived head first into the duck pond. They swam around in figures of eight and then tried to hide under the reed-bed before eventually coming up for air after several minutes.

'I wonder if Peregrine and his two stony-faced girlfriends are visiting the little town today, spending all of our hard-earned loot? We can stomp on them all and turn them into raspberry jelly!' giggled Bennie with delight.

All three clapped their hands in unison which caused a noise like thunder rolling across the fields and valley. They then split up and began chasing after the tiny people who scattered in different directions like chickens being chased by a hungry fox.

Ali wrenched some ancient oak trees out of the ground and flocks of birds flew shrieking in all directions. He threw the trunks at the nearest granary barns which smashed and splintered into thousands of pieces, sending waves of dust and grain billowing into the air. Caitlin picked herself up from the ground and tried to control her laughter. She filled her lungs and blew as hard as she could which sent a whirlwind that blasted two of the end cottages out of their foundations and high up into the air. Bennie meanwhile, was stamping

down hard with her foot and causing an earthquake which knocked down the statue of the mayor and caused the wooden telegraph poles along the road to shake and ripple then fall like a line of dominoes. The farmer and his wife started making funny gurgling noises which set the ducks off quacking in all directions which made Bennie's sides hurt even more.

The little people below were clambering into haystacks, bolting into the woods and crawling under bushes and outhouses in order to escape from the three, terrible man-woman-eating giants whose wicked laughter was increasing by the minute.

Out of the corner of his eye, Ali saw a tiny old woman sneaking into a barn clutching a pair of geese under each arm. He took a run and kicked the roof hard and watched it fly up, up into the air before flying apart into thousands of tiny matchsticks. The old lady fainted and the geese sat on her chest, honking loudly and wondering where to flap off to next.

Caitlin bent down and picked up a farmer's cart before throwing it into the air and heading it like a football through the large stained-glass window of the village hall.

'Goooooooooooooooooal!!' she roared at the top of her voice.

This made the little people scream and run around wildly even more. Some began to faint at the roadside with fear and others knelt on the floor and began to pray out loud for mercy and to be delivered from the evil that had befallen them.

Bennie popped two pieces of Hubba Bubba Gum into her mouth, chewed furiously then blew the biggest bubble imaginable. She spun round before plucking up a little old man between her thumb and forefinger who was hiding up a Willow tree. She stretched the base of the gum into a long stringy line and began twirling it around his wrists, so he dangled, prisoner like, underneath the gum balloon. She blew out a long, even gust and he sailed up, up into the clouds, wheezing cursed oaths at her. She waved at him and shouted, 'What's

your problem, mate? What you worried about? You will come back down to earth in time for your dinner. I hope you like chewing gum-there's plenty of it for everyone in your family!

The little old man shouted something back at her which made Gene blush an even brighter shade of pink and he looked at the ground and drew a line in the soil with his shoe.

The triplets put their hands on their knees and panted heavily. They looked over at Gene and simultaneously thrust their three right thumbs up in the air.

'Wow! You have made us like really powerful Gene! This is much better than being robbed to bits by those stuck-up old duffers in a dusty old museum. This is the most fantastic fun we ever, ever had!' Ali gasped.

Gene looked over gravely and flicked his long beard to one side.

'I'm off to destroy that town on top of the hill now,' chortled Caitlin.

'You can see that the generals are getting their soldiers ready for all-out war. They are going to need a few more battalions if they want to take the mighty, super Caitlin on!'

'I will come and be your left flank, Bennie can be your right. Napoleon would be proud of our war mongering after today!' shouted Ali.

Gene looked over with a look of disgust on his face. 'It took the best part of tree 'undred years for them folks to build that town up to what it is today,' he rumbled. 'And now you're willing to make literally 'undreds a dem likkle people 'omeless now and filled with fright and fear into the bargain?'

'But it will be fun,' cackled Bennie. 'They're only tiny little things; they don't matter to anybody.'

'OO IS TINY DEN?!' Gene roared, at the top of his voice.

Chapter Nine

Keep Your Eyes on the Sun and You Will Not See Shadows

The world spun round with all of the paint colours, shiny glitter and firework displays ever invented. The triplets picked themselves up from the floor and dusted off their clothes. They all looked around and saw that they were next to a number of gigantic tree trunks stacked high up on the floor like a colossal Aztec pyramid reaching towards the sky.

They were now in the middle of a jungle clearing and all around was the sound chirruping birds and the clicking and ticking of insects. It was hot and moist and their clothes were sticking to their skin as if they were all in a gigantic steam room. Huge leaves, the size of elephant's ears bobbed gently in the wind, sharp blades of grass, eight feet tall stood rigidly and proudly upright.

'This looks just like the back of Grannie's Garden,' mumbled Bennie. 'Er mower 'asn't seen the light of day for at least thirty years.'

'Wow! Just look at the size of that grass. My bunny rabbit could munch on that for six months and still only be half way through!' cried Caitlin.

'Check out the water drop on the end of that leaf-it could fill a bath full right up to the brim. Our postie could jump into that and come out smelling like roses an' tulips,' sniggered Ali who was racing around and attempting to touch and smell everything within reach.

They all began giggling and pushing each other around in a playful manner. Suddenly, two large antennae with a pair of alien-like black orbs on top appeared in front.

They were huge: unblinking, black, soulless eyes the size of dinner plates-attached to a gigantic ant, the size of a horse and it was attentively rigid: staring, unblinking, right at the triplets.

‘Get that thing away from us! Noooooow!’ Caitlin jabbered as she clung onto Gene’s rippling bicep.

He raised a single eyebrow. ‘Didn’t you tree just prove to yourselves ‘ow you is really brave at scarin’ folks so much? You buss up de ‘ole town back dere remember? Goo an’ scare dat likkle ant away now if you can. Why don’t you use one a dem twigs to wave at it? You is aaall so big n tuff.’

‘What do you mean, twig?’ Ali jibbered. ‘Those are ginourmous logs, they are.’

They is twigs. You is actually stood nex to a likkle sapling and dem massive ants is normal, life-sized.’

The children gulped. Then, to their utter horror, they saw that the ant had now been joined by six of his comrades-all now staring, unblinking at the children, with their heads cocked to one side. Saliva was drooling out of their mouths in silvery globules and landing with a plip-plop onto the jungle floor.

‘Yous tree ‘as all been shrunk down to smaller than ladybirds! Let us now see ‘ow the boot fits de other foot as dey say. Now run if you don’t wanna become Fire Ant snacks. An dey is lookin’ really ‘ungry if you ask me.’

Two gigantic insects, the colour of volcanic lava began juddering up the tree trunk towards Ali who had scampered almost to the very top, clicking and pulsing with their terrifying chatter. Just as they reared up on their hind legs to attack, Ali hurled himself off the branch and landed screeching into a soft shrub that broke his fall.

All three Dunnes began running around in circles and howling like alley cats at the top of their voices; they were truly terrified and this made the giant ants stop in their tracks. They began to make strange click-clicking sounds like giant knitting needles-as if they found what was happening in front of them incredibly amusing. The noise sounded like machine gun chatter rolling across a battlefield and it began to crescendo into a terrifying primeval beat.

'This way! Quickly!' yelled Ali. 'We must get over to those caves before we are caught and dragged back to the nest and skinned alive!'

They ran sweating and panting towards where Ali was pointing, all the time dodging spikey trees and huge, shards of sharp grass which cut at their legs like Samurai swords.

Ali lost his footing and fell into a ditch where the water current began to drag him away, downstream. His two sisters quickly pulled on a hanging vine and rolled it up tightly. Caitlin held firmly to the trunk of a tree, while Bennie hung onto her other hand as she flicked the vine out to Ali who was by now in the middle of the stream, gripping with all his might to a jagged rock and whimpering feebly.

The giant creatures suddenly formed a semi-circle and began clicking more loudly-in a cruel way which seemed to vibrate the debris of the jungle floor. To their horror, the children saw that the ants had broken off into groups of three and were now uprooting trees and saplings to use as spears and weapons. A branch was hurled over, narrowly missed Caitlin's head, another struck Bennie on her left shoulder and she yowled out in pain.

After much slipping and sliding, the sisters fished Ali out of the muddy water and all three continued to dart towards the caves, all the while gasping for air and pulling each other, onwards and upwards. Showers of rocks and lumps of earth now began raining down

from the multitude of giant-ant pincers above them and the children became darker and darker with muck and earth.

Despite her terror, Caitlin wiped the mud away from her eyes and caught a glimpse of a small opening in the rock face. She stumbled towards it, shouted to the other two to follow then slowly began to squeeze herself inside. There happened to be a cave mouth behind the crack and she quickly pulled Bennie and Ali in behind her, with the ants hot on their tracks. They all scrambled backwards between the tight rock face and sat panting in the semi darkness. Suddenly, an enormous black pincer twisted its way through the crevice on the rear wall and snapped loudly in a 360-degree arc like the claw of a mechanical digger. Ali strained to pick up a heavy black rock and then brought it crashing down with all his might, straight onto the centre of the pincer. A dark yellow, stinking goo, splattered all over his face and shirt and he let out a cry of disgust. The creature roared in pain and the mangled pincer shot back into the darkness and out of sight.

Ali scrambled deeper inside the middle of the cave where it was completely pitch black, whispering pleas for his sisters to follow him. For the first time since they were toddlers, they hugged onto each other tightly, like Koala Bears and sat shivering violently, with their teeth chattering. They could hear the giant ant screaming and thrashing angrily around, just down the rock corridor and the horrifying din made Ali whimper. Caitlin and Benny began to muffle their sobs quietly into their T shirts, not daring to make any more noise for fear that the terrible creatures would be alerted and discover where they were hiding.

‘Gene?’ gulped Ali. His mouth and nose were half filled with soil and dry leaves and he had difficulty breathing.

‘Are you there, Gene? Please, please answer if you can hear us.’

A voice rumbled through the darkness and echoed around the four walls.

‘Well dat’s the furst time me ‘as ‘eard you use dat special word Ali. An you use it twice in a row an all. Dat is a very powerful word too so maybe try an’ use it a likkle more often.’

At once, the cave filled with a golden light and Gene appeared in front of a small fire where he was roasting something round and yellow at the end of a long, thin stick.

He flicked three gooey blobs towards Caitlin, Bennie and Ali and they quickly plucked off what was at the end and gobbled them up. As they popped one each into their mouths, they were filled with a sticky warmth and hope: they were the most delicious marshmallows the triplets had ever tasted. The happy feelings flooded through their bodies and Caitlin sunk backwards onto the cave wall and rubbed her temples with her fingertips. Bennie crossed her arms over her knees and laid her head face down on top. When they had all got their breath back Ali stood up and snapped his fist into his open palm.

‘Them things might ‘av killed me and me sisters. They ‘ad no right to do that to us! We ‘ave rights ya know. It just aint fair and proppa what they just tried to do to us back there.’

‘An what did yous tree do when yew was bigger an’ stronger dan de rest of de people, huh? What did you do what was better dan dem big ants did? You was terrorising dat likkle innocent township just for the fun of it. All dem ants wanted was a bit of nice lunch.’

Gene looked directly at them through the flickering flames and his eyes shone brightly like red rubies. Whether it was a trick of the light of the fire, the triplets could not tell. But he managed to look both amused and slightly sad at the same time. They all gazed into the flames in silence for a long time before Caitlin murmured softly.

‘Maybe we go back to the Grove Pool and have another try? Perhaps this time we can make a better go of it, being the third-time round?’ The other two nodded once and weakly smiled their agreement.

Gene looked at them hard. ‘Knowing your rights is all very well. But knowing your responsibilities, is more important.’ He blew on the fire and it roared up into a thousand different shades of orange, red and green. They spun around in a whirlpool of golden-blue sparks, whisking them back to safety, to the side of the Grove Pool. All three shakily sat back down on top of the gnarled and ancient log and remained very, very quiet for a long time.

‘Yews sure you don’t wanna go ‘ome, back to yer TV and fish n chip dinners? Your ‘ouse is only five minutes away.’

He looked at them through narrow eyes. ‘Or you wanna try sometin’ a likkle bit more exciting? Sometin dat may actually benefit you?’

‘Let’s try again,’ (X3)

‘But this time, no giant ants or tiny little people-somewhere kind of in the middle where we are all normalish sized,’ grinned Bennie.

‘Normal-ish sized sounds just about alright to me; the middle path is usually the wisest choice. Fancy been just a little bit bigger than the rest of the characters but not too much?’ chuckled Gene. ‘So you can all feel just a likkle bit special?’

‘OK; sounds good,’ breathed Caitlin. ‘Got anything that fits the bill?’

Gene smirked out of the side of his mouth, the fishing rod twisted in a figure of eight and the line was cast two hundred feet into the middle of the lake once more. Caitlin plopped down onto the long grass and sat with the freshly reeled in book. She wiped away the muck on the cover:

The Hobbit

by J.R. Tolkien

She then opened the first page and immediately, the lake spun in a gigantic whirlpool of green and brown which expanded over the bank before gathering them all together and shooting ever upwards towards the clouds. Higher and higher, they went, spinning and reversing in a 360-degree arc before finally being spat onto a flat, rocky ledge on the side of an enormous, jet-black mountain. They had an uninterrupted panoramic view of forests, woods, lakes, fields and valleys for as far as their eyes could see. They shook their heads in wonderment and grinned wildly at each other.

Chapter 10

A Bulldog can Beat a Skunk-Sometimes it's Just Not Worth It

Sitting on a large stone slab just to the side of them was a small, weather-beaten man with over-sized, furry feet and an even larger belly which stuck out like a speed bump in the middle of a road. His clothes were threadbare and ragged; they were however, bright

and cheerful which matched his face perfectly. The triplets felt strangely drawn to him and wandered over with shining eyes. He smiled warmly, took the long pipe out of his mouth before shaking their hands one at a time before bowing deeply.

‘Mr Bilbo Baggins at your service!’ he twinkled.

‘Ali, Bennie and Caitlin Dunn at yours an’ all,’ stated Ali.

‘So how can I be of service then?’ chuckled Bilbo.

‘We ‘ave come here to be at yours, I guess,’ Bennie blushed.

‘You couldn’t have come at a better time, then. We need a little extra backup!’

‘Who is we? And what kind of backup do you need?’ enquired Catlin.

‘Come this way,’ said Bilbo. ‘There are some friends of mine that you really should meet first. Perhaps they can explain the business in hand in a little more detail!’

Bilbo led them around a sharp rock face, towards a perfectly flat ledge, which was hidden from view.

‘Hi, hi, hi!’ Bilbo chuckled.

Around twelve dwarfs sprung to their feet and eyed all four with deep suspicion.

The small man laughed. ‘Don’t worry: they’re only children. Perhaps they’re from The Shire too, I can’t quite tell. It’s rather difficult to understand what they are saying, to be honest.’

‘Ere! Shouted Bennie. ‘Ain’t they all really small? But not as tiny as that last lot back in the country village. Still, they aint as tall as us anyway. So that’s something.’

‘Uh-hum,’ said the small man with the furry feet and scratched the back of his head. She blushed deeply and looked at the ground.

Bennie turned to the most important looking dwarf who was by now scowling over at them in the most frightful manner. His beard was almost as long as Gene’s and he was

wearing a thick, golden chain around his neck. He looked very important and she quickly fathomed that he must have been the leader.

‘What is it that you guys are up to then?’

The important looking dwarf stepped forward and inclined his head to one side.

‘We are not *up to* anything. But if you are enquiring after our business, it is simply this: we have walked many hundreds of perilous miles over field, through valley, over plateau and under cloud to arrive at our present destination for a very grave, and very dangerous purpose. Our esteemed companion Mr Bilbo Baggins, standing before you, by the by, has agreed to explore the centre of the mountain and scout around. This has been our sole objective for the past three months: namely to locate, confront and then kill... the dragon.’

‘Dra... dragon?’ murmured Caitlin. ‘We just had a whole bunch of problems with a flock of ants trying to eat us to death and you guys want to go and take on a fully-grown dragon? That could be like really bad for your health, you know.’

The dwarfs all roared with laughter and began chattering among themselves. The chief dwarf glared at them all and this immediately silenced the group.

‘If we can think of a way to rid the world of the fire breathing beast, not only shall gain the return of our homeland but all will have a share of the enormous wealth of the mountain into the bargain. And with that wealth we can finally begin to rebuild our shattered kingdom and once again, live our lives to the full.’

‘A.. f-f-f, a beast you said? Why does that *small* fella have to go and get involved with ‘im for? What’s he done to deserve such a terrible fate with running the risk of being burned to a frazzled crisp? He isn’t a criminal or nothing? He hasn’t stolen anything like really valuable from you folks, has he?’ stammered Bennie.

‘In a manner of speaking, that is why he is a part of our troupe. He was brought along on our adventure for a very special purpose-to be our burglar. The time has now arrived for him to prove his mettle.’

The important dwarf nodded sagely before continuing.

‘You three are quite near his size and will find it easy to slip through the jagged crack in the outer gully of the rock face. You will accompany him and bring back a small memento from the treasure trove: so, we may come to understand the quality of the merchandise and to try and fathom its exact location inside the mountain.’

He looked over at Ali and smiled patiently.

‘If you have the wits to steal from a magician, perhaps you can relieve a dragon of a little of his treasure too.’

Ali blinked. He looked over at all of the dwarfs then at Bilbo and his sisters.

‘Ow on earth can ‘e knows about that then?’ murmured Ali with his hands in his pockets.

‘You ‘ave shifty eyes, that’s all. Don’t take it personal,’ stated Caitlin, matter of factly.

The dwarfs lined up and saluted them all-which made all three of them feel even worse; as if it was the final farewell before their no-hope, Kamikaze-type mission began.

Bilbo took a deep breath and began squeezing himself through the crack in between two flat sheets of rock.

‘Come on then,’ chirruped Caitlin happily. ‘Let’s get a move on and take a look at this Dragon Treasure.’

They lit a taper each which illuminated the entire rock face and followed Bilbo at a distance whispering fiercely to one another.

‘What the heck ‘ave we got ourselves into now?’ whispered Ali. ‘We could be stone cold dead at any minute from a Dragon’s fiery breath.’

‘We’ve ‘ad ten years of your Dragon Breath and we’re still alive ‘an kickin.’ ‘Ow bad can it be?’

Bilbo began to chuckle. ‘I like you three: facing certain death and still your sense of humour does not escape you.’

‘Whose kidding?’ spluttered Bennie. ‘Kylie Mum reckoned she could strip the old living room wallpaper off in no time if Ali was to breath on it for a few minutes.’

Ali tutted in the darkness and decided it was time to change the subject.

‘And what was that about certain death that you just mentioned? I’ve never been certain of anything in my whole life.’

‘And with that thought,’ whispered Bilbo, ‘doesn’t it make you feel really, really alive? Only when we are on the point of losing something very precious, do we fully understand its true value.’

He hummed softly to himself and they followed closely down the narrow, jagged gully before entering a huge, underground cavern. It was filled with eerie, golden fountains of light that seemed to spill out in all directions.

They all stood rigid and unblinking: for as far as the eye could see, there were huge piles of coins, cups, dishes and bowls stacked as high as skyscrapers and all made from glittering twenty-four karat gold. Rubies and emeralds the sizes of tennis balls were piled high in wooden boxes and metal chests. To Bennie’s mind, it all looked like a vast beach at the seaside with huge dunes, like the holiday in Mablethorpe that she had enjoyed the previous summer. But instead of piles of sand it was all piles of treasure: priceless treasure

that could have bought the entire housing estate back home and everything in it, many times over.

'We're rich!' shrieked Caitlin. 'Bright white Land Rover with extra chrome spot lamps here I come.'

'Hey! That was my idea,' shouted Ali. 'You wanted a speedboat; remember?'

'You could buy a hundred Land Rovers and speedboats with just a handful of these jewels,' stuttered Bennie. And this time, we won't take it to no museum, to be checked out neither! Tarquin and his fancy ladies are welcome to keep those mouldy old torqs for themselves!'

'Ahem. Begging your pardon, but the dwarfs and I have risked a great deal and spent a great deal of time, getting to this point. You three only turned up half an hour ago so you don't really have much right to *any* of the treasure just yet. You need to prove your worth first of all!'

'What was it exactly, that you had to go through to get here?' Caitlin asked.

Bilbo looked at her quizzically and ran a hand through his hair.

'Go on: please tell us. What's a Hobbit thingy actually doing with twelve dwarfs at the top of a mountain filled to the brim with treasure worth more than the whole world with a huge, evil dragon skulking nearby?' She was hopping from one foot to another and looked like a Tom Cat on the way to the vets.

'It is one of the most exciting stories that I have ever heard, even though I say so myself,' smirked Bilbo.

'If I ever get back to the Shire in one piece, I shall tell my story, morning, noon and night, to all the people I meet, for the rest of my life. Old and young alike; no one will ever

get bored of hearing it, I'm sure. I certainly will never tire of telling it, that's for certain! It really is a fascinating tale.'

'Please tell us the story! Tell us about the Shire. And what is Habbits?' implored Ali.

'Well, *Hobbits* are a kindly folk who live very peacefully side by side in a gentle, green place called The Shire in the middle of the countryside. The thing they like most is fine food, fine drink and fine company.'

Bennie looked over at Ali and nodded.

'We live in the middle of the country too. And if the food that you're talking about is pizza, chips and fizzy orange then I think you have might have found your tribe Ali. He would fit right in with...'

Bilbo's hand shot out like an arrow in a bid to silence her.

'Please go on with the story Bilbo, squeaked Caitlin. Pleeeeeease.'

Bilbo pointed over to a mound of gold, around a football pitch length away which had begun gradually sliding downwards like a sandcastle being dissolved by the incoming tide.

He crawled over the floor and then squatted down behind a large barrel of golden nuggets and bade them all do the same. After what seemed an age, he began to speak again but now in a fierce whisper.

'That over there, my friends, if I'm not very much mistaken is the dragon who goes by the name of Smaug the Terrible. Well, he deserves that name. That famous nose of his must have got a whiff of us and I'm afraid that if he discovers us in here trying to steal his treasure, we will all be turned into four chewy snacks, medium roasted!'

'I told you to take a bath Ali!' Caitlin hissed through clenched teeth. 'Next time, listen, will you?'

Two enormous nostrils rose up and began sniffing deeply at the air. A low rumbling noise like fifteen Harley Davidson motorcycles racing through the Mersey Tunnel filled the cave.

Ali turned around stiffly and looked left and right for Bilbo. He was nowhere to be seen.

'E's gone and left us to be scoffed like fried chicken. E' slipped out when the goin' was good and there's nobody to get us out of this!' groaned Ali, his teeth chattering like pistons.

The dragon sniffed twice then two blazing, hate filled eyes appeared from above a hill of emeralds before narrowing into coal black slits. They swivelled from over the left to right of the cavern before fixing abruptly...upon the triplets.

'Who are you? You three degenerate, quivering reptiles? Who of you DARES to break into my beautiful house of gold?' the oily voice thundered.

The words were long and drawn out and the spite dripped off each syllable. Wisps of smoke were rising from the nostrils and coursed across the cave ceiling in jagged ripples.

'We-was-just-'ere-for-a-quick-peep-like,' chattered Bennie who looked as if she would pass out with fear at any second.

'Me and my brother an' sister will g-g-g go now if you please sir.'

'NOT... SO... FAST! WHO ARE YOU, AND WHAT ARE YOU DOING HERE?!'

Ali's eyes seemed to be popping out on stalks and his entire body shook from head to toe.

'We are the Dunne family. I've got all my sisters with me!' he quaked, instantly wishing that he was back at home and watching TV in the front living room.

The voice shook the walls, the floor and the roof of the cave. The smoke parted and stalactites started to break off and began dropping like spears with a sharp whoosh, whoosh around all of them.

‘Explain where you are from you miserable wretches. Never have I heard words being so mutilated and mangled. Why do you speak thus?’

‘I-I nevva learned to t-talk proppa. It’s just the way it is, where we live.’

‘Words are the most important things that you slithering slugs can ever hope to possess! And *mine* will be the last that you will ever hear too!’

Before they could blink, a blinding wall of multi-coloured fire came pouring across the cavern like a gigantic flame-thrower. Just as they were about to be engulfed and burned to three bacon flavour crisps, all three sucked in the hot air and screamed simultaneously at the tops of their lungs:

‘GEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEENE!!!!’

The cave began to compress and shake before spinning round furiously like the Milky Way in a gigantic food blender. A roaring noise filled their ears and they tingled all over from the tiny specks of light that danced around them.

WHAM!

They found themselves once again back at the side of the pool lying on their backs in the long grass and panting like pumas in the hot jungle.

After looking at the sky in complete silence they all suddenly leapt to their feet and chattered away furiously for a good fifteen minutes. Ali began hopping around, Caitlin was swinging her arms like a windmill and Bennie spent the time staring into space then jumping up and talking non-stop to herself before plopping down into the grass again. All this was

being witnessed by Gene who was sitting a good way off. And he had a rather curious smile on his face.

Chapter Eleven

To know yourself, think for yourself

Caitlin and Bennie wobbled over on unsteady legs and sat next to Gene on the gnarly old log. Ali drew a picture of a dragon with a stick in the soil and a Robin with a bright red breast landed nearby with a gentle flutter of his wings.

Without thinking, Ali tossed the stick in the bird's direction causing it to fly away.

'Don't do dat!' groaned Gene. "Ave you still learned nothing yet?'

'It's only a bird,' snuffled Ali but this time he couldn't look Gene in the eye.

'You notice what that bird was doing?'

'He had straw and twigs in his beak-so I'm educationally guessing that he was building a nest.'

'Dat's right Caitlin- e' was tryin' to be buildin' a nest. Before Ali went and disturbed 'im and put 'im off his very important job.'

He stood up and looked towards the horizon.

'All tree of you: go an' collec' leaves, twigs and mud and bring 'em back 'ere. You got ten minutes. Go for it.'

The triplets foraged around at the side of the bank, the hedgerows and fields and returned with armfuls of what Gene had requested. They deposited it all at his feet and gazed up inquisitively.

‘Now mek me a birdie nest. I’m goin’ over there to do some more fishin fer a while.’

Caitlin wound the twigs into a rough bowl shape, Ali lined the base with leaves and moss then Bennie fused it all together using mud scooped from the lake bank. The nest fell apart four times before they finally managed to bind it together with some old fishing line that someone had left in a spool at the side of the bank. They proudly took it over to Gene who had a small pile of books nestled at his feet.

‘Ere’s the nest then. What are you goin’ to do with it?’ grinned Bennie. Gene shook the nest gently and it started to break apart. Caitlin poked her finger into one of the larger holes.

‘These ‘ere birds must be looking forward to all of the fresh air comin’ through inside the nest. It’s the Dunne way of adding some natural air conditioning so they don’t get too hot in the summer!’

Ali and Benny laughed simultaneously. Gene smiled and returned the nest to Caitlin.

‘What ‘appen when de eggs ‘atch into babby chicks an’ the wind blow in and they all die ‘cos of the cold?’

All three fell silent and looked up at Gene, waiting for him to continue.

‘Tell me the three greatest minds that you can think of: one turn each: A, B then C.’

‘Mr John-the ‘istory teacher at school. E was smart enough to see that my letter was a forgery. Even though I included some special Egyptian high-low griffix, he still knew it was a fake.’

‘The manager of Aston Vanilla.’

‘Einstein’s mum.’

‘Don’t you realise that if your tree big-mind folks was ‘ere now, they couldn’t construct a nest neither; not even ‘alf as good as that likkle bird can. Nobody togevver can do what ‘e

does, not all of dem combined. So, what do you think? Is de likkle bird less important 'cos 'e is not as big as dem?'

The two sisters shook their heads vigorously. They shuffled towards him and Ali whispered in a barely audible voice.

'Gene. Will you carry on teaching us more stuff? Like really cool stuff so we can be like you when we all grows up? So, people listen to us when we talk. So, folks do what we want 'em to-but without forcing 'em or bullyin' them like?'

'That Ali, is both a very easy and a very hard thing.'

'What do you mean? How can it mean both things at once, when they are opposites?'

'An oxymoron is what it is. It's an easy thing to say but the fix is real biiiiig. It will take a lot of time and effort to get to that. So 'ow badly is you wantin dis ere ting?'

Ali, Caitlin and Bennie all stood straight up like guards on duty outside Buckingham Palace.

'This is what we want; this is *all* we want,' they all said together.

'Then look down at my feet. There's the first step to your answer.'

'Some more books?' said Caitlin. 'I think we have had enough adventures for one day.'

'These 'ere are everyday books without the giddy, spinning hadventures that 'ave been drivin' you all crackers all day. These 'ere is borrowed from the library in de usual manner. When you was facing down dem dragon, I was in de library choosin' dese 'ere to read. I'm finished wiv 'em now so you can all tek 'em back for me.'

Chapter Twelve

Never let formal education get in the way of your learning

Catlin grinned like the Cheshire cat. 'Can we borrow your cloud thingy to get to the library in double quick time?' Her head was tilted to one side in that special way that she had.

'You aint old enough to get a licence fer one of these 'ere bad boys. Come and see me when you is a likkle older an' me will 'ave a think about it. As for now, use Shank's Pony.'

'Huh?'

'It means use your legs and walk!'

They all walked slowly up the gravel path, past the boatman's shed, over the rickety bridge and onto the bottom of Tennyson Street towards the bus stop. They all sat on the crumbling wall at the bottom of the allotments, waiting for the number 36A to take them all to the Brierley Library. The bus duly turned up bang on time, the double doors hissed slowly open and the driver glanced through the Perspex screen. And gulped.

'O-M-G; not you three! I'd better call for a SWAT Team.'

Ali grimaced and turned to his sisters.

'Whatever could 'e mean?'

'Last time we was on his bus, he had to take one of those detour things to the police station. Because you kept jumping in his cab and trying to drive it by yourself? Remember?'

'That was then and this is now.'

Ali turned to the driver and shrugged.

'Yes: us again. Three to Brierley High Street.'

‘Are you going to behave this time? I don’t want any monkey business on this ‘ere vehicle today, young fellow me lad!’

‘That’s what Gene calls us: likkle monkees.’

‘Well Gene is right, whoever Gene is. Hurry up and jump on, let’s get going. We have business to attend to and the folks on here don’t have all day waitin’ for you three, do they now?’

The driver issued the tickets and Bennie and Caitlin clomped upstairs, plonked themselves down on the back seat and gazed intently out of the window.

Ali stood next to the driver as he steered round a sharp bend at the side of Bartini’s Junk Shop.

‘Does this bus stop outside the library or do we have to get off nearby and walk back?’

‘What do *you* want with the library?’ asked the driver suspiciously.

Ali opened the leather satchel and showed him the collection of books.

‘We want to give all of these back to the man on the desk.’

The passengers all began to howl and whimper like a hilltop full of hungry wolves at full moon. The driver swerved right across the road, straight into the path of a coach which was thundering down the hill on the opposite side. Luckily, he just managed to adjust the wheel and steer back to safety in the nick of time. He turned around, took off his cap, fanned his face and blushed deeply.

‘Er, sorry about that folks. I had a bit of a shock back there and slightly lost it for a few seconds. Is everyone alright?’

Various passengers picked themselves up from the floor and dusted themselves off. One tiny man had been flung right across the central aisle and had ended up being perched on top of a very large lady with a flowery dress. She grinned and called out to the driver.

'Ere, George: I think your dopey drivin' must 'ave finally brought me a bit of luck. There's a little cheeky fella perched on me lap and he looks like 'e don't wanna move, neither!'

'Glad to be of service Glenda. 'Oo needs Cupid when you 'ave me around to sort out your love life for you, eh?' he smirked.

George glanced at the circular mirror which gave him a panoramic view of the upstairs seats and noticed that Bennie and Caitlin were still quietly looking out of the window. They weren't even blowing any bubbles. He did a quick double-take and turned back to Ali.

'So tell me that again, Ali. *You're off to the library to return some books??* Oh, my days; I think I may just pass out.'

He shook his head slowly from side to side with a bewildered smile that seemed to be growing wider with each passing second.

'Hang on a minute, mate; I must get through to the depot.'

George picked up the radio mike and pressed the side switch. The radio crackled with static then some distant words began to filter through.

'Base receiving Georgie Boy. Base receiving George loud and clear. Do you copy? What is your present location over? Is everything alright?'

'This is George One calling base. Copy that: my present location is bewilderment, bafflement and befuddlement, but getting pretty near to shocked joy. Over.'

'Be a bit clearer, Georgie. Ave you won a little something on the horses? Or 'ave you been drinking on the job again? You sound like you may just have lost the plot. Over.'

'Lost in words only. Get this: Ali, Bennie and Caitlin Dunne, the terrible triplets, are all here together riding on my bus, in perfect peace and harmony. And get this...they're all making their way... to the library, over.'

There was a pause then static on the other end.

‘Georgie One this is base. We recommend that you come straight back ‘ere for an immediate psychological evaluation, over. Pull over and pay for all of the passengers to get a taxi to their destination. Walk back to the depot, breathing slowly and don’t talk to anybody on the way back, over. Don’t worry: we shall take care of your wife and kids for you. Especially the wife, over.’

‘I’m not kidding! The girls are sat upstairs, good as gold and Ali is here by my side, clutching a pile of classic novels. Would you Adam and Eve it? Over and out.’

‘Ere; what are they so shocked and amused about? Ali retorted with alarm. ‘Aven’t they ever ‘eard of kids goin’ to a library before?’

‘We are all just pulling your leg a bit Ali; take no notice. To be honest with you, I wish I’d studied more when I was a lad,’ George sighed. ‘Grab hold of every opportunity when you can. You won’t get a second chance, not round ‘ere, you won’t.’

‘Thanks George. And er...I’m sorry about the last time-you know when...’

For the second time that morning, George’s mouth fell wide open. But this time he managed to keep the steering wheel firmly gripped between his podgy hands. There was a light in his eyes as he started humming softly to himself.

The clump, clump of Bennie and Caitlin on the stairwell signalled that the triplet’s journey was almost over. All three stood patiently next to George, waiting for the bus to pull into the stop. Ali noticed that the little man was still sitting on the big lady’s lap and they were happily gazing at each other.

‘Eeeeeew: go and get a room, why don’t you?’ he rasped.

Bennie kicked him sharply on the shin.

‘Ow, me knee! What did you go and do that for?’ he snorted.

‘For tryin’ to embarrass Romeo and Juliet, that’s what.’

George leaned forward on the wheel as the doors hissed open once more.

‘Cheerio you three. Stick with the reading-mighty oaks from tiny acorns grow.’

The bus pulled out into the traffic and George tooted as he drove off. All three, stood blinking in the fumes for a few seconds before turning around and looking at each other.

‘Come on: we’re on a mission. Let’s return these books and see what is goin’ down,’ said Caitlin. She pushed open the heavy wooden doors and all three, with beating hearts, entered the place that they had never even thought about before: the town library.

Chapter Thirteen

Libraries: playgrounds for the imagination.

Caitlin and Bennie took the satchel over to the young woman at the front desk who was busy stamping labels and placing various files into the cabinets behind her.

‘We would like to return these books on behalf of our friend please miss.’

The library assistant looked up. She had jet-black hair which contrasted with her brightly coloured clothes. She placed the stamp back into its holder and her smile grew broader and seemed to fill the very room with light.

‘What pleasant manners you have young lady. It would be an honour to take these books off you. Would you all like to choose some more to take home?’

‘We would love that miss, but we are not signed up members with the library,’ stammered Bennie.

‘Well, we can soon remedy that. Fill out these forms, include your names and addresses and then just pop back with your parents’ signatures. You can take up to ten books each per week if you like.’

Bennie shuffled nearer and blushed slightly. She looked at the top of the counter before continuing.

‘That might be a bit difficult, Miss. You see, we, urm, don’t see our parents so much as they’re... busy a lot of the time. They wouldn’t really go in for us reading at home. They don’t, er, you know...’

All three looked at each other and fidgeted with their clothes.

The lady looked at Bennie with large, shining eyes and blinked a couple of times with her long, mascaraed lashes.

‘What’s wrong Miss? Caitlin leaned in closer. ‘Do you have something in your eye?’

‘I have a slight cold, that’s all. I will sign your cards myself, don’t worry.’

‘You would trust us with borrowing the books, even though you have only just met us?’ Ali enquired with widening eyes.

The librarian nodded, flicked out three green cards from the pile and started to fill them out.

‘Nobody has ever trusted us with anything.’

‘Not with nothing, never, ever,’ echoed the girls.

‘Then we shall all start afresh from today, won’t we? Have you ever heard the saying that give a man a fish and he will feed his family for a day? *Teach* him to fish and he will feed them for a lifetime?’

‘We like to go fishing and something really strange just happened down at the Fens Pool where we got sucked up in a gigantic...’

‘Shhhh!’

Both girls screwed up their faces and put their forefingers over their lips.

‘The proverb isn’t really about fishing. It’s about empowering people and giving them the necessary tools to make a difference to your life. Come and see me again when you have figured out what that means. Here are your cards. What are your interests? Comic books? Cars and motorbikes? We have a few fishing books in the hobbies section, actually.’

‘Classical Fiction,’ all three said at once without hesitation.

The lady smiled. ‘My name is Ruby; Ruby Roo by the way. It’s a pleasure to meet you all today.’

‘Oh, nobody ever said that to us neither,’ said Caitlin looking bemused. ‘You do talk funny miss. But in a good way, I mean. I wish I could talk like you.’

‘Make your way upstairs and start reading, er Caitlin,’ as she peered at the library card. ‘And you *will* speak like me one day. Even better, I should imagine.’

She hummed to herself and continued to stamp the books piled high on the desk.

The triplets walked up the stairs chattering all the way, before Ali pointed to a large sign hanging on chains from the ceiling:

‘Silence is Golden’

They entered the main reading room through huge glass panelled doors and stood and breathed in the new environment: polished Beech floors, Persian rugs, lamps on each reading desk and in every corner. On the walls were lines of framed pictures of famous authors and rows and rows of shelves, bulging with books of every size, shape and colour imaginable.

Benny mumbled to the other two in the lowest whisper that she could muster. 'Let's find a few books each; there's a pointy sign saying that the Classic Fiction is over here. Let's go and take a look.' They tiptoed down the short corridor and turned left into a purple room which contained thousands upon thousands of books of all different colours sizes and age.

Ali chose *Treasure Island*, *The Hobbit* and *King Solomon's Mines*. Bennie chose *Gulliver's Travels*, *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* and *She*. Caitlin chose *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, *How to Stop Your Dog From Swearing in Five Easy Steps* and *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*. Ruby appeared out of nowhere and guided them to the quiet reading area.

'I noticed from your new library cards that you're all ten years old.' She glanced at the books that Ali was holding. 'These might be a little too difficult to follow. Would you like to choose something a little more age appropriate?'

'These will do just fine, Miss. They have a special kind of... stig-niff-ikance. I think they will fascinate us, after our adventures earlier on today,' giggled Bennie.

'That's a big word for someone who hasn't been reading for very long.'

I know what it means too, Miss. My aunty knitted me a jumper with ten buttons, but I can only fascinate.'

Ruby burst out laughing before quickly putting her hand over her mouth. Another, older librarian with fiery auburn hair suddenly appeared from behind a bronze statue.

SHHHHHHHHHHHH!!! Can't you read?' she hissed. Her glasses reflected the light and her eyes appeared as colourless, cold discs.

She stopped short when she saw who she had just told off. 'Miss Roo: I didn't see you there.' 'That's alright Ms Grewl. I was being fascinated by these young scholars here.'

Ruby walked away with a file under her arm, still giggling to herself. Ali walked down the corridor and found a reading cubicle off the side before Ms Grewl could say anything else

to him. He opened the curtain then jumped in shock: Gene was inside reading an Encyclopaedia Britannica with a look of happy contentment, across his large, pink face.

‘Hello Gene! What are you doing here? Come to check on us? We returned your books as promised and borrowed some more-and the ones that we learned about today in our fantastulous adventures. Shall I show you?’

‘Me know which ones you ‘ave chosen, Ali. You may ‘ave noticed that a couple of de hadventures of yours was haall about dem treasure business. That’s what books is-the most valuable treasure in dem world. Dey mek you come alive, then rich beyond your wildest dreams. And above all, open up de mind den take you to places in your heart and in the world, where you ‘ave nevva been before.’

‘I think all I have done so far is make it all worse,’ mumbled Ali shyly. ‘The world I mean.’

‘There’s always time to make a change for the better. It could be hargued that the first book we found today was all about a person’s place in the world and where they fit in. If you are big and important, what will you do with dat strength and power given to you? Help or hinder? Support or squash down?’

‘The second book to come out was about getting up and making things ‘appen for yourself. Fortune favours the brave as they say: because nothing is ever going to come along and just give itself over to you. YOU ‘ave to be the one to get up and make things ‘appen for yourself. Bilbo learned that the ‘ard way- he left ‘is nice little cottage and a life of comfort and had some wiiiild hadventures. And he grew so much bigger as a person because of them.’

Ali opened his mouth to speak. Instead, he nodded and opened *The Hobbit* at the first page. Gene folded his arms and a strange smile started to slowly reveal his sparkling white teeth.

'I'm goin' off for a while now. Share with your sisters what I 'ave just told you and I'll be back later in about a monf to see how yous tree is getting' on. Is that OK?' 'That's OK with me,' whispered Ali, who had already begun to read slowly to himself:

'In a hole in the ground there lived a Hobbit...'

A feeling of contentment settled upon him and he sunk back into the soft leather of the Captain's Chair. 'This is going to be fun,' he thought as he absorbed the rich musty smell of the book. He closed his eyes. The feeling took him back to a time when his favourite aunty used to visit every few months when he was younger. She would wrap him in a blanket, hold him tightly on her lap and read stories from the *Arabian Nights* to keep him out of the way of his parents. The parents who would constantly yell at him and say that he would never amount to anything as he was too stupid and lazy. He remembered with a tear in his eye what Aunty Monica had told him on that long-ago winter's night: that one of the greatest things you could ever do in life, was proving folks wrong when they wouldn't believe in you.

Chapter Thirteen

Get Up, Stand Up

'Ere! Woss goin' on in 'ere then?'

The raspy voice exploded like a grenade in Ali's ear and he dropped *The Hobbit* onto the floor in shock. To his horror, he saw Dereck, Ekka and Fiona Gunn, his three slightly older and bigger cousins looming over him.

'Can I believe my eyes? Allister Dunne reading a book in a library,' sneered Dereck as he elbowed his brother in the ribs.

'Maybe e' wants to be a flower arranger an it's a book about roses an' daffodils and stuff,' snuffled Ekka.

'What is you lot in 'ere for?' spluttered Ali, quickly sliding the book to one side with his foot.

'We woz just down the market lookin' at stuff to nick an' Big Bokka was on 'is stall and said that he'd seen all of the Dunnes goin' into the library of all places. Well, as you can imagine, we couldn't believe such a tall tale so we thought it only right and proppa to come an' check fer ourselves. And 'ere you are: well, well, well!'

The leather of Ali's chair squeaked as he shuffled from side to side as they all eyed him like a pride of lions circling their prey.

'What's it to you what I do wiv me own spare time? And why aint you three at school anyway?'

'Like you: all three of us has been in suspenders.'

'I aint been suspended-it was just a little misunderstanding, that's all.'

'What misunderstanding? Word on the street is that you an' yer ugly sisters are close to being chucked out for good. Well?'

'I was well before I saw you scabby lot. Never mind about us; why was you lot thrown out?'

'It's none of yer rotten business.'

'The only thing rotten round 'ere is yer breath Fiona.'

Fiona and her brothers spun round and saw Bennie and Caitlin blocking the doorway. Fiona kissed her teeth. 'This aint nothing to do wiv you lady-girls; we is talkin' to the man Ali 'ere. So go and do one and be quick about it.'

Fiona glared at them and stood to her full height. Her fingers twitched and she snuffled a couple of times.

Bennie mocked her by sniffing the air as if there was a bad smell. She looked at all of the Gunnes and stated very calmly and matter of factly: 'Ali, Bennie, Caitlin Dunn: the three amigos, the three Muskat-teers.'

'There will be tears in a minute mate; buzz off before you get a fat lip,' lisped Dereck. 'This is your final warning. Leave Ali alone or we shall 'ave our vengeance upon you right now!'

Fiona stepped forward. Before she could say another word, Caitlin swung a large, hardback book and it connected straight in the middle of Fiona's forehead with a sharp crack. As she went flying backwards over a table, smashing a vase and scattering the flowers over the floor, Ali twisted Dereck's nose who tumbled straight over Fiona who was by now lying shrieking blue murder on the floor. Bennie grabbed Ekka by the collar and drew her fist back. He threw his hands up in a gesture of surrender and closed his eyes tightly.

'What on EARTH is going on here?!'

The Dunne triplets all froze as if rooted to the spot. Ekka quickly pulled Fiona upright and she moaned softly while rubbing her head. The Gunnes quickly pushed their way past the shocked librarian who stood swaying in the doorway, holding a thick folder of paperwork.

'Miss Roo just informed me that you have just signed up as new members here. And almost immediately you choose to use the Learning Resource Centre... as a boxing ring?'

'We was just...'

'Not another word. It's an absolute outrage. It's beyond comprehension. You silly little twits...are ALL BANNED! Get out of my library this very instant!'

'But those other three was going to thump us...' chattered Caitlin in a voice rising in panic.

'I said OUT!' spat the senior librarian. She had gone purple with rage. Her mouth was so tightly puckered, it looked as if only a very expensive and long operation would ever open it again.

Ali was too shocked and angry to respond. He barged past his sisters, which seemed to break the spell. They breathed heavily, turned on their heels and beat a hasty retreat down the winding staircase and to the bottom lobby.

'Going so soon?' Ruby enquired, smiling over at them from the front desk. 'You seem to have forgotten your books.'

All three blushed deeply and Caitlin burst into tears. The head librarian's feet goose-stepped out a rhythm of terrifying authority as she hurtled down the stairs. Bennie pushed Caitlin out through the double doors and out onto the street where they huddled underneath a shop door canopy. Ms Grewl strutted over and stared at Ali in trembling rage and pointed a steely finger towards the doors.

'Get your thuggish, loutish self out of my sight this instant!' she hissed.

Ali stood up straight. 'Round 'ere miss, you're either the butcher or the meat.' He turned to Miss Ruby. 'I'm so sorry that we let you down. Especially after you signed our cards for us. Nobody 'as ever done nothing like that before.' Miss Roo glanced over at the head librarian then looked at her watch.

Ali walked outside with his head down. As he stood outside in the light drizzle, he looked back through the window where he could see Ms Grewl waving her arms around and shouting at Ms Ruby. His stomach turned over like a washing machine and he felt sicker at that moment than ever before in his entire life. Ms Grewl handed over a piece of paper before storming off, back upstairs.

At that moment Ruby turned and saw Ali. She shot him a sad little smile through the streaming window before putting on her coat and walking slowly towards the door. She held the door handle before turning around and taking a long look at the many shelves of books. She shook her head and walked through the revolving doors. Ali rubbed his hands on his trousers and walked slowly over to her.

‘She hasn’t... she hasn’t gone and...’

‘It’s quite alright Ali. I had already been given two previous warnings for signing parents’ names for their children to be honest. But what can you do? It was probably time to start looking somewhere else, I reckon.’

Ali marched over to his sisters who were by now both snivelling bitterly. He held out the magician’s special spotted handkerchief and nodded.

‘Blow yer noses on this. Nobody must ever see the Dunnes showing any form of weakness or it will be game over. You both know that.’

They both nodded and huddled up to him. He put an arm around their shoulders and spoke quietly and calmly.

‘If it’s the last thing I ever do, I am going to prove to Ms Roo that we are worthy of her trust. Nobody ‘as ever done nuffink like that for us, ever. We ‘ave to show ‘er what we are made of. And that we can be trusted by anybody, at any time. Are you with me girls?’

‘All fer one and one fer all,’ gulped Caitlin. ‘I want to make Ms Roo... really proud of us... by the time we is through.’

‘That was almost a line of poetry, Bennie. What we need in fact, is poetical justice and we shall have to try and win Ms Roo’s trust back.’

‘Ow we going to do that then?’

‘Easy: we find her another job- to replace the one I just lost her. So, she doesn’t have to go back home, overseas.’

‘I don’t think she will be happy with helping out on your paper round or digging potatoes out of gardens for old people though.’

‘Nope-something decent and worthy of her book knowledge.’

The girls both smiled slightly and nodded.

‘You catching my drift?’ Ali rubbed his hands together and winked. They all walked over with their heads held high to where Ruby was standing.

‘Miss Roo; will you please be so kind as to give us the treasure of your company for the next hour or so. We ‘ave someone that you should get to know a little better and he is really worth meeting. Some of the teachers at school ‘ave told us that we shouldn’t mix with certain people; but we all recommend that you come and meet this guy as ‘e will blow your socks off.’

‘Well, I don’t suppose that I have anything much else going on at the current moment in time: lead the way please.’

Bennie looked up at her with shining eyes.

‘We’re really sorry about losing your job for you Miss. I don’t know if we can ever make it up to you. But we shall certainly try.’

Caitlin stated seriously, ‘Let’s go and get Gene and Ruby, together on the case then. He always knows what to do.’

To be continued...