

Matthew and the Derelict

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## Part One

Epileptic fit  
Ambulance arrives quickly  
Flashing lights don't help.

## CHAPTER 1 – ALAN

It's not a new or original observation; that all cities resemble organic creatures. That a city map bears resemblance to an anatomy diagram. It's not an unexplained phenomenon or a metaphor, it's just a fact. Man creates in his image.

This particular city had something inside it that wasn't meant to be there. Like a piece of shrapnel slowly moving around inside a body. Undetectable until it causes a problem and then gone again, moving to somewhere else as soon as any symptoms start to show.

It was that time of the night when the alcohol is beginning to take effect. When all the shops are closed, when all the restaurants are empty and the city can stop worrying about being clean.

This is when he likes it most, when he can walk past the shuttered shops and the engorged pubs. Walking over the road as if the traffic would pass right through him.

The traffic didn't have as much confidence. It stopped and swerved, horns crying out. One driver leaned out of her window and yelled, but he was gone and she was yelling at no one. He was making his way through one of the main pedestrianised streets, where the occupants of bars spilled out and converged, where people wanting to be occupants of bars separated and queued.

His eyes snapped from drunks to tramps, to women whose bare shoulders were cold to bored doormen, to a group of six men in suits wolf whistling and laughing to a crying girl who appeared lost, to an annoyed city worker who has to walk through this every night on his way home. Pitying, hating, scorning, laughing, empathising, hoping and thinking.

Past trees planted in the concrete and past a postmodern sculpture.

Towards a more upmarket part of the city where drinks are expensive, his eyes snapping from one man in a suit to another, to a woman in an expensive dress carrying an expensive handbag. Past all that and to a cheaper yet less populated street, where he saw The Wolf and Lamb, a chain pub masquerading under a traditional and personable moniker.

Inside, he made his way through the joviality, asking the men to excuse him, moving the women out of his way. Gently placing his hands on their hips and turning them.

Through and out, to the beer garden, where he sat down opposite me and took a long drink of the pint that was waiting for him.

"I thought of a good name for you," I told him. He had discarded his a long time ago.

"Go on."

"Alan Moy. Well, you can change the last name. As long as it's em oh why. Alan Myo?"

"Myo like mayonnaise?"

"It's an anagram of anomaly."

"Yeh."

## CHAPTER 2 – BURGERS

The darkened sky, patterned with stars and clouds, lay over the city as it slept.

Since the blood had retreated inside its organs the veins were sparsely populated and it was cold inside the anatomy. It breathed slowly as it dreamed of surreal activities to keep the brain alive.

Each person inside was a symptom of an uncontrollable subconscious. Hardly able to walk or speak, acting impulsively and with altered reality, fate now responsible, the conscience drowned beneath a heavy weight.

Once the internal impulse is destroyed, exterior forces have free reign.

The ground had become soft, so when a man dropped from the impact of a fist he was unhurt by the fall. He stood quickly to retaliate, his nose exaggerated and spilling blood down his chin and shirt.

The two bodies merged in a manifestation of violence that tore at itself with limbs being thrown out and flicked back like whips. Half movements as its two brains worked in conflict and it travelled clumsily until breaking in half and becoming two entities again.

The man who'd fallen once was lying horizontal again, his arms and legs pointing in odd directions, unnatural directions, and his face was disconcerting in its still calm.

The victor spat onto his conquest and walked away slowly, one hand embracing his ribs while the other steadied him, pressed against a wall.

We'd been watching from behind a large industrial bin and we quickly moved in to strip the unconscious man of his jewellery and plunder his wallet. Alan entered each note individually into his pocket and tallied up the bounty as we walked off.

"Five." He slid a note in. "Fifteen."

"We should have taken his tie as well."

Alan didn't acknowledge me.

Our posture and demeanour seemed out of place as we passed slouching, stumbling creatures that vocalised loudly the discontent they had with their lives or addressed imagined company. They were all, without exception, terribly ugly, with contorted faces, unfocused eyes, uninhibited habits; farting and spitting, some stopping temporarily to vomit.

We came across a van distributing hamburgers to the hungry at unreasonable prices that nobody seemed to mind or notice. In front of us as we queued were a comically mismatched couple. He couldn't reach her broad shoulders so his arm rested on her thick hips. Her dress was tightly wrapped around her like cellophane around cold meat.

He was a shade of her, his diminutive frame looking even smaller next to such a colossus, almost as if they were an experiment in perspective.

Then suddenly a short man in a suit too big for him arrived with a guitar. He marched up and down the length of the queue, singing songs he had obviously made up, or was making up, for a share of someone's burger money. A few people handed him small denominations, not as reward but to alleviate him of incentive.

When he attached himself to the couple in front of us and began a slow ballad his acute irony earned him my respect.

"I think we should give him a tenner," I had converted my respect into a currency he would appreciate.

"I might buy him a hamburger."

"Why not give him ten pounds, they're not even our pounds."

"They certainly are. A parasite's profit is as credible as any other."

I had no time to argue. The man and his intrusive instrument had been bought off halfway through his performance and he began singing a faster and more fun little ditty. Right at us. His jarred dancing drove the beat along as his voice etched meaning to the tune.

We put up with his tenuous rhymes until the climactic finish, after which he paused for a minute, looking around for fireworks that must have failed and then looked at us, smiling like a hungry baby, his head cocked, a vile dependency from a fifty-odd year old man. My face was apologetic. Alan was simply shaking his head. Since we were the last of the queue he walked away dejected, guitar over one shoulder and kicking a can like he was some romantic stereotype. But that stereotype is long gone and it's now diseased dogs and heroin addictions that colour a city's tramp population. He went to sit with a group of them at the other side of the road.

Large discs of pale meat, sweat dripping to the ground, browning salad attached by a slice of chemically created cheese held together between bread that was two hours from stale. We ate sitting next to the river.

"If we save that money we can eat a king's lunch tomorrow. We could buy some Valium tonight, sleep 'til dinnertime."

"We're not going to eat tomorrow." Alan handed me a ten pound note, "hold on to that. We're going to go out, get drunk, revel in the warmth of company."

## CHAPTER 3 – NIGHTCLUB

An overly active cortex in the city's mind opened to us, the sound of the mechanisms spilling out, stairs leading down to alternating darkness and coloured light. We were soon carefully treading the stairs and then we entered a large room divided into two areas; dark for sitting, flashing lights for dancing.

A bar running across one wall, keeping the neurons charged, opposite a large stage upon which, amongst smoke and flashing lights, a group of girls danced despite their restrictive clothing. Groups like small insect colonies occupied territory and only wavered from their group to bring back drinks.

We stood as far from them as we could while still being close to the bar. Uniformly the occupants of the dance floor moved, embracing the unity that their worship of the mechanics offered. The volume was such that it not only made it impossible to hear anything else but it also affected other senses; a thick layer of noise suppressed even the smells of the building and my peripheral vision began to darken. I pressed my eyes closed until they hurt. The flashing light permeated the skin of my eyelids and the only escape I found was internal and inadequate.

Alan leaned close so his lips brushed my ear and he said either "Let's go" or "Let go". I did neither, just stood waiting for him to act so I could follow.

I felt we had skipped two or three stages of a night out and were unprepared for this experience. Too sober. Alan gave no clue as to what he'd said to me. He stood waiting for my reply and, since I didn't have one to give him, we began to generate a confused energy between us that would have torn through us had he not turned away, letting the crackling tension dissipate behind us, to order drinks from the bar.

Any lack of spirituality can be made up for chemically. Enlightenment, prophecy, armageddon. All these and more, the entire landscape of religious fervour can be traversed by chemical means. I felt it was euphoria that Alan was attempting to achieve in that loud, hot room but I couldn't share his ambition. For a reason I couldn't understand and so had to resign to hoping I would after I'd reached it, I was looking for solace.

But this was no place to repent. This was a place designed to suppress any remorse under heavy layers of sound and light. This was a place where solace was so far out of reach it had become indistinguishable, the eye reaching to grasp its form but only half succeeding. A dot like a black hole in the canvas of space.

And euphoria was forced upon you. If you didn't accept it then it was pumped into you through a plastic tube, the way they deal with hunger strikes in prisons.

Rather than embrace balance, overcome balance or become balance, the tightrope walker must learn to ignore balance. Once there's no concept of such a thing it cannot be lost.

I was having trouble forgetting balance and I realised my tightrope ran the circumference of the black hole, the huge thing wasn't lightyears away, it was underneath me, its gravity forcing me to stay and trying to force me further. If I was to succumb to the gravity I would be headed straight



for its core. Solace? Euphoria?

Alan returned and handed me a plastic glass. I closed my eyes and poured the drink down my throat, ready to begin my journey into whatever heaven or hell was in the centre of this black hole.

It took us both several hours. Then I was dragged into the milieu of movement and sweat. I stood facing the nucleus, overwhelmed by a force that pushed from every angle against me and then pulled at me. Something tidal that I felt I was drowning in.

Alan attempted to shield me from it but his success was equal to Canute's and I fled, up the stairs and to the outside where the air was a quiet chill. The sudden shift from inside to out, the lack of walls to offer perspective, made me disorientated.

Alan had followed me out and stood over me as I knelt in a tight alley and vomited. He was disappointed when I refused to return and I was afraid he'd leave me since my gravity was only minimal, I was a satellite to him. It was not fear of being left alone; I was afraid because I knew that if he left I would follow and he would not lead me to pleasure but to punishment.

I coughed and stood upright. Leaned against the cold wall behind me, feeling the sweat soaked into my shirt press against my back. I checked my clothes, found them to be unsoiled.

"Is that all of it?"

"I felt like I was throwing up my soul."

"Purge it, we don't need it. Its obsolete. Like the appendix. Get it out of your system, it'll only weigh us down."

"Now?"

"Not if you have to ask."

The wind brought us the sound of women's screams. Alan grabbed my wrist. Around me a blur of motion; alley, door, stairs, light, volume.

Alan was inside the black hole, wearing it and feeding from it. From my position he was almost out of sight surrounded by bodies, all moving together within the sound.

He left the converge and made his way to where I was sitting. Shirtless and sweating he asked me why I was avoiding the opportunity to taste the pleasure he was gorging on. I told him I needed an entrance and he inquired as to how such a door could be opened.

"Drugs," I said and he spat in my drink, then promptly returned to the motion and the music.

Whilst the sonic machinery had influence over him I left my seat and explored. The place was no larger than it appeared; no hidden doors or darkened corridors. Huge gaudy logos and tunes that cling like a barb in the memory are fine ways to advertise sofas and cereal but illegal narcotics require a more subtle approach. Quick talking, swift hands making an exchange, once it has

finished ignorance of each other's presence, thinly veiled paranoia as they both try to find an interest to focus on.

I saw a subtle advertiser moving swiftly through the crowds, not needing to announce his presence; he knew he would be found. He disappeared into the bathroom.

As soon as the door shut behind me, dulling the sound and reconfiguring the atmosphere, I realised how much of a mistake I'd made.

Three men stood peeing into the trough, failing to avoid it splashing back onto their jeans but for one. I couldn't talk to him while he was busy and I knew I wouldn't be able to piss. No one inside had registered my presence but I knew nothing about those outside - bouncers, staff, undercover police. Who knows - so I could hardly leave. All the dials on all the cubicles were displaying red. One man turned and looked right at me as I stood gormless, eyes darting, lingering for a second on plumbing or graffiti.

I walked to the trough, stepped onto the raised platform and tugged my cock from my jeans. Let it rest on my fingers, dormant, apathetic, and I stared at it while I asked, "Are you selling?"

"What do you need?" Alan would have hated the dialogue. Need.

"What have you got?"

"Es, Speed, Coke. Can sort you out with a bag of Ket in an hour." Speech through unmoving lips like a ventriloquist, quiet and calm and insistent.

"How much for an E?"

"Four quid. Or three for a tenner."

He shook his cock dry and tucked it into his trousers. With my free hand I investigated my pockets and found a ten pound note. I put my penis away.

"I'll take three."

There was a quick exchange, we left, I asked the barman for water and swallowed two mouthfuls, a pill washed down with each.

Alan made no gesture to indicate that he was aware of my presence next to him. He was absorbed in the ambience and had become part of it as much as it had become a part of him. Now I felt it seeping into my pores and veiling my eyes as I danced, the motion of my arms and legs helping the fuel access my extremities.

Still without acknowledging my presence Alan placed an arm across my shoulders so that our fuel was mutual. This was not an experience. It was a surge of energy, overloading the memory and imagination, blowing the fuses. No thoughts, no inhibitions, just momentum but it didn't move forward; it moved around like a wasp tied to a string, anchored and moving in circles.

## CHAPTER 4 – PALINDROME

Grey-blue walls, smashed in television inside an oak armoire, coffee table adorned with overflowing ashtrays, naked lightbulb hanging from the ceiling: Alan's living room. Two sofas set at right angles.

I was sitting on one with an overweight pretty girl. He was sitting on the other with a supermodel. The two girls went to Alan's bathroom.

"What happened to you last night? One minute you were fighting, the next you were embracing."

If he knew I was on drugs I might as well lie, "Just what you said and the way you acted inspired me."

"You won't be able to see how I act or what I say later. You're on your own."

His prediction was more accurate than even he could have known.

I was on my own in the living room, listening through thin walls to the sound of him conquering not only his allocated relief but mine also.

I ran the tap for a second in the kitchen that smelt of soil and swallowed the third pill. I sat by his bedroom door and jacked off until I was sore and gave up. Couldn't come. Couldn't sleep. I read a chapter of a novel he had lying around, each full stop permission to forget what I'd just read.

Exhausted. Nausea rising behind my jaw. Laid myself down, curled myself up. Closed my eyes.

Woke up on the cold, hard sofa. Alan's eyes full of determination looking down at me.

"What time is it?"

"Ten o'clock. We're going to go into town, I have a map and we're going to find every cash machine. Wait until nightfall, then we blitz every one, spray over the screen," and he laughed.

"Spray? What do you mean?"

"We're gonna buy some spray paint with that tenner I gave you, then cover every screen."

Confession was not an option, his eyes almost glowed because of the plan. "What tenner?"

"The tenner I... You bought fucking drugs, didn't you? That's why you suddenly changed last night."

"No, I have it right here." I pretended to root in my pockets. Pulled my hands out empty and said, "Some fucker must have nicked it."

"I gave you ten pounds to look after and now it's gone. You owe me a tenner. And I want it before

nightfall."

He went back to his room. One of the girls' handbags had been left in the living room and I found her purse, transferred ten pounds from her possession to mine. She had nothing else worth taking, just rudimentary make-up and cigarettes. So I took her cigarettes, lit one and sat down to listen as the sounds of sex slowly filled the house again.

One of the girls entered the room as I was halfway through the third cigarette I was chain-smoking. She was the more attractive one, made more beautiful by her natural dishevelment; hair out of place and makeup rubbed into her pores, eyes half closed, walking tentatively.

She brought with her a tension, unable to speak first just as I was. Eyes avoiding contact she knelt in front of me to search her bag. She coughed lightly, clearing her throat of anything physical or otherwise that impaired her speaking to me.

Her eyes remained downward as though she was embarrassed. "Spare a cig?"

I gave a cold reply, "Yeah," then handed her one. She sat next to me on the sofa, I smelled her perfume and sweat and sex. In the silence that followed her lighting the cigarette I contemplated her action of leaving Alan's company in favour of mine.

"Do you feel obligated to smoke with me because I gave you a cigarette? Go back into his room if you want."

"No, I just wanted to enjoy some calm. That guy doesn't understand stamina, it's like he runs on pure adrenaline."

That was a ruse. That's what he thought they expected or admired and it was evident that at least one of them did as we could both hear her through the walls. I spoke little of Alan to anyone, especially those with opinions of him, since he worked hard to create an aura of deceit that he could will over those he felt were susceptible to it.

"Hannah's just pretending, anyway. She doesn't like that kind of stuff but she's easily won over. She has no self esteem."

"What about you? Do you like it?"

"When I'm high I do. But I'm not high now."

The only ashtray in the room was the floor and she dropped the cigarette but, having no shoes on, left it burning. I crushed the embers for her, the first act of chivalry she'd witnessed since walking through the door and she thanked me before continuing.

"I always make these dumb mistakes when I'm high. One day I expect I'll end up in serious trouble because of it. Hannah's already in trouble because she's just so naive. She thinks she's ugly and sticks to men like a barnacle if they show even slight interest."

I knew Alan's interest was driven by a naked id and Hannah would soon be cast away once he was bored.

"That's a shame," I told her.

"It really is, she's a great person..." she began a monologue that both complimented and insulted her friend as though she was speaking to a shrink or a talk show host but I was neither so I didn't pay much attention. "... so she'll just keep doing it, forgetting her disappointment before she meets the next guy."

"People with palindromic names behave accordingly." And people with names comprised of an anagram also act with relation to it, altering situations to suit appropriately. "How is she in trouble?"

"Because she'll follow your friend and he'll get sick of her, tell her to fuck off and then she'll be miserable for a week. If she has another abortion or wakes up in hospital with bandaged wrists again I swear I'll kick the fuck out of whoever's fault it is."

"Destruction can pre-empt progress," I advised her before standing and stretching my body to alleviate the fatigue that had fallen upon me. She contemplated my statement as she lit the second cigarette I handed to her.

The cigarette was still burning between her fingers when she fell asleep and laid down on the sofa so I took it from her and smoked it myself, watching her dream.

The afternoon beyond the window was wet with thick rain that the wind pushed diagonal. If it didn't relent then the two girls, wearing only short skirts and thin blouses, would be stranded and Alan and I would be left caring for them.

I left the house and made my way into town, where thick masses populated the insides whilst those outside trundled rejected. No room for them in the warm shelter so they moved like vagabonds with eyes searching and feet aching. I walked with them, drenched to my skin.

I can't understand people that become horrified when it rains, scared to become wet. Don't they realise that the human body is comprised of seventy percent water. Maybe more.

But then I don't understand trenchfoot and those other diseases that are born from the rain. I suppose it is an instinctive balance, a subtle defence or assault depending on which side you're on.

## CHAPTER 5 – GAMES

A small D.I.Y. store in the market was my target. An easy lift that required no skill, only an acute awareness.

Feigning interest in padlocks and four inch nails I kept my eye on the sole employee, until a customer asked for some feet of tubing. As soon as he'd turned his back to measure it I quickly dropped two cans of black spray paint into my pockets and grabbed a pack of brackets, queued behind the man buying the tubing.

He believed me when I said I'd forgotten my wallet. I offered to put the brackets back but he was kind enough to take them from me, to replace them himself, and he let me walk out of the store with my pockets full.

Confidence brewed within me but I knew to subdue it - luck is only a relative thing. I ignored the idea of stealing from a properly established business such as a supermarket. Super was an adjective I preferred to avoid, not only super in its offers but also in its detriment to a thief.

It was unwise to turn this into a spree so I made my way back to Alan's; a twenty minute walk where the only obstacle was one's own fear of the weather.

Inside Alan's the girls had gone and he was sitting alone with his eyes closed. His head moved to face me as I entered and he asked where I'd been. My reply was tossing over the two cans of black spray-paint and he opened his eyes to see what had landed next to him.

It took three seconds for him to slip from his meditative state and I saw the corners of his mouth creep upward as his eyes trailed deliberately slowly along the label of the can. I apologised for slipping into mainstream consciousness.

My shoulder an inch from his we sat on the sofa and focused our attention on the space between jarred edges of glass within the television's plastic casing. The intricate yet random cracks were evidence in the lesson I was learning; that the actual events inside the space you expect to display happenings are secondary to the instinct of expectance, of learning that what goes on within the plastic front of a television is only valuable if you expect it to be.

Time is an equally subjective reality.

Sometimes we'd stare at the TV until time seemed to stop. Alan had got some black fabric that the sun couldn't penetrate and we'd sit, our watches and the wall clock in the kitchen.

He'd made it a game.

He called it a game but I knew it was a test. The first one of us that had to check the time would fail and suffer some sort of forfeit. I was always the first to get up and go to the kitchen or pull back the fabric to see if the sun had gone down or come up and I'd have to do something degrading or painful. This wasn't one of those times.

My attention was subverted when Alan stood to yawn, stretching and crack the bones of his

neck. The window no longer invited light but was instead a sheet of darkness and vague reflections. A coat - my coat - glided to rest on my lap and I shook away the morphine-like effects of Alan's session and looked up to see him wearing a coat and a low hat with energy crackling all around him.

"Now?" I asked, my voice struggling.

"Within the minute."

I put on my coat and a hat that Alan handed me, pulled it low over my eyes as per his suggestion.

## CHAPTER 6 – VANDALISM

"Keep your head down," Alan scolded me through his teeth. We had covered three ATM screens in black spraypaint and pride was pulling my head and shoulders skyward.

We reached the next screen. Alan reached into the bag slung over my shoulder and took out the paint, shook it as he raised it to the screen. As he sprayed his head moved like a sparrow's, noting potential danger around corners and within shadows while I imitated him, knowing that if any danger was to present itself he would see it a second before I did.

He could do this without me. I probably slowed him down.

The night was a smooth progression through Alan's plan. He was quiet and when he did speak it was quick and sharp and I wondered if it was his alertness keeping him subdued or if he was still annoyed at me from the night before. Punishment was often gradual with Alan, slowly building over a few weeks to a climactic repentance after which he would let go of his begrudging and you realise that you were not suffering during the weeks but learning and growing.

For two weeks I accompanied him on his escapades, a mascot with no relevance trailing behind his pace as he placed dead fish in the pockets of jackets in upmarket tailors, dropped improvised mannequins from motorway bridges, placed carefully crafted dissolving packages with lithium at their core into public fountains.

Throughout all this I was ignored but I knew not to leave, for to do so would be permanent. He had not told me to directly but I knew to consider my actions until I abhorred them.

Not regret, for that would be to regress into a state of speculation, surround myself with should have x, could have y, would have z - speculation being only several steps from inactivity. Coma. We must contract diseases to immunise ourselves against them. Pain is easier than discomfort. Quicker and more satisfying. Less tormenting.

I was on my hands and knees, shuffling in blindfolded darkness across the floor.

Alan took away the blindfold and told me to stop moving. A bulldog clip on my lips turned my words into muffled incoherence. He removed that also and I sighed upon its release.

"Do you understand?" He asked me.

"I think so."

"Don't. Understanding is a subjective approximation. A waste of neurons. Struggle, harm, destroy, obstruct.

"I remember once a bird was lying dying at my feet. It had fallen from the sky, from its triumph over gravity, and landed exactly where I had planned to walk. If I attempted to understand such an occurrence I would probably have deduced that it was Fate, God, Karma, any of those fabricated understandings.



"Instead I kept on walking. My foot pushed down on an entire life and I felt it expand on one side from the pressure and then its blood and mechanics and soul were all launched across the pavement. I didn't look. I smelt it and heard it but that was no fault of my own. Such passive senses are a curse when accompanied by one which you can control. Or shut off completely."

## CHAPTER 7 – WINK

Quadrupeds slid across the surface of solid black canals, spraying sound behind and around them, the contents of their stomachs visible through the clear parts of their skin; people, and the type of beast that has consumed them discerns each person's social standing.

But despite a physical hierarchy they moved with identical pattern, all obeying the laws set by the canals and the peripheral devices as they continued on their mass migration, jostling the ones that moved out of place with shrill barks.

All solid colours; red, white, blue, black, green. And patterned ones, predatory, coming screaming from nowhere to chase down the disobedient.

A deviation of the breed, smaller and slower on the pavement, ridden by a woman too fat to walk, whose skin hung the way wax rolls down a candle.

Lack of sleep makes you see things in a different way, puts a distance between you and the world. Lack of sleep leaves inexplicable dirt under the fingernails. It also screws up time, causes every motion to echo for a few fractions of a second.

Worst, lack of sleep makes you irritable, makes the whole world drag its dirty fingers lightly over your sweating, sensitive skin. It never presses harder than the faintest touch, only adds more fingers.

I borrowed a lighter from an arrogant man. Flame devouring the cigarette that hung from between my lips he looked at me impatiently. I looked back, dropped the lighter to the ground and spat my cigarette at his tie but it stuck to my lip and burned my chin. I knew I was vulnerable but my fatigue had got me angry and I was looking for a fight.

A tramp was asleep, leaning against a wall next to a cash machine as is habitual to him, but there were no people to hand out scraps since the screen was coated with a layer of black paint. I wished Alan was with me. He would have instilled vigour into me and I would have picked the tramp up by his filthy lapels and destroyed his drowsy face, his waking eyes looking through a dried layer of mucus for something to focus on as repeated impacts deformed him.

Vague eye contact as I moved within the tide, focused primarily on those I knew would not reciprocate my hostility and avoiding those who were physically imposing. As I looked for a potential, viable target for my impotent anger I noticed various degrees of beauty and ugliness and came to wondering whether one was a deformation of the other and, if so, which of which.

At dusk the back alleys resembled the holds of slave galleons; walls ascending into consuming darkness while the inhabitants propel themselves one stroke at a time towards a continuation of some parody of life in which chains that incarcerate are soldered to the bones in the wrist and ankle.

I walked through selling Vaseline I'd stolen to the inhabitants, all of them glazed with a layer of dirt but for their eyes which were glazed with something different, less physical but more

important.

I also sold crumpled pages of porn magazines that I found in the streets and on the top decks of busses, immodesty that has to be deciphered from wrinkled interpretation.

They used the pictures so that when they fucked each other - filthy cocks grinding inside filthier arseholes - they had some kind of distraction, something to focus on so that they could come as quickly as possible and thus have more time to repress their embarrassing deviancy.

Whilst there were those who did it purely to quench a basic lust, there were some who did it with a motive to contract HIV and so earn access to at least one plausible exit from the alley.

Upon questioning they would vehemently deny that they were gay:

"Anything but! Would a heterosexual concentrate so hard on fucking another man that the arsehole becomes a vagina? Of course not! We dedicate so much to female genitalia that we can morph any orifice. That is heterosexual; metaphysical more important than real."

Hard skin on the hands brushed against mine with each transaction, texture like a cat's tongue that made me shiver every time. None of them stood, they stayed sitting beneath soiled sleeping bags or deteriorating blankets, lined up against the wall, some with piss creeping from beneath them. I barely looked, the action was mostly mechanical and I didn't count the money because I had no set price.

This afforded me an opportunity to explore the more distant corners of my consciousness, in which melancholy swirled, obscuring tomes that ached and tempted me toward unattainable revelations. I knew I fooled myself when I believed I could ever read the inscriptions, the mist pressing against my eyes thick like syrup. Tasted just as sweet, enough to make me almost sick as it leaked in through the tear glands.

Most of them don't speak. On this occasion one did and I was rushed through the vortex of introspection the way something in a spacecraft is when Space's void sucks upon a breach in its hull.

"Don't think about selling me that shit, you opportunist bastard."

He was vaguely recognisable to me, the lower half of his face covered with a thick beard, the upper half obscured by untidy hair, all under a thin film of dirt. I could see that beneath his baggy, weathered clothes a thin representation of what I once knew shivered. His hand knocked the container from mine before he turned his head away and spat on the ground, a wire of saliva hanging from scowling lips. A gesture that beckoned me to leave him be.

"Wink," I addressed him, "what are you doing? You smell like shit."

"Yeah. I've shit myself."

He looked at me for the first time during the exchange and found a face to fit my voice. His eyes, crumpled beneath heavy eyebrows, opened wide to feast on an acquaintance's face and he spoke again, willing me to forget his former admission.

"What are you doing here? I mean, I can see you're selling lubrication to the homeless but why

this city? Why this alley? Is this a coincidence or...? Either way I am happy to see you, even if your presence does bear hindrance," at which time it began to rain, without any preliminary warning, and Wink put out a hand, wrapped in a fingerless glove for confirmation and said, "We should find ourselves shelter lest we find ourselves drenched."

## CHAPTER 8 – SUCCUBUS

A door fronted by a steel counterpart. Windows with similar obstructions. Wink scoped the house before moving round the back, out of my sight.

He moved with expertise, looking for something I could never see.

The garden to the house was overgrown with weeds and nettles, flying insects hung in the air in groups, leaves rotted on the ground. Beyond the garden wall a road was quiet, the occasional car that sped round the corner disrupted the solitary atmosphere for a second and then it was relinquished. This house as well as every other in its proximity was tattooed with graffiti, names scrawled with spray paint or declarations of 'x loves y 4eva'.

From the back of the house a voice resounded, beckoning me to join him. To get there I had to move brambles out of the way as I passed them and had to keep my mouth tightly closed and my breath held to avoid any insect intruding.

Wink was kneeling, kicking at a small square of glass not big enough to be a window, which was set in the bottom of the house's wall. He shouted, kicked, then shouted louder as the tension of the glass gave with vengeance and the shards that clung to the frame scraped across his skin. He kicked away the remaining glass and slipped himself through the gap. I followed him.

The cellar was lit by the flame of Wink's lighter, to which I added my own. Other than that it was only darkness and I followed him tentatively to a narrow flight of stairs, my feet and the floor separated by a layer of crunching material that I didn't dare illuminate.

At the top of the stairs we found a living room long abandoned. We sat next to each other on the wounded sofa. There were no walls, just darkness. All that I knew was what I could hear and feel and smell. I told him I felt uncomfortable and left, alone, to the closest shop. I bought a pack of cigarettes and eight cans of cheap lager then promptly returned.

"I don't drink."

"You did when I knew you."

"Who are you?"

His retort made me not only agitated but confused; perhaps this wasn't Wink.

"No, I jest," he said and cracked open the can I'd handed him. I opened mine and we drank a few mouthfuls in silence. He had no questions for me and for him I had only one. When I'd known him he'd had a job as a software engineer, a flat and enough money to account for a lavish style of life, which he enjoyed.

"Why are you living on the street?"

He took a long drink from his can. Crushed it in his fist and tossed it into the corner, then told me.

"One night I was half asleep. Half dreaming. I know it was only half of each because I was still in my flat and I could still smell and taste the sausages I had eaten. I was lying on my bed thinking about work. A shadow moved across the wall, a shadow that couldn't have been anything in the room. I know it wasn't anything in the room because of how it moved; animated, alive."

I handed him a second can. He opened it, sipped at the froth that bubbled out and continued.

"Then the shadow moved across me, caressed me like waves caress the beach. Holding me down, on top of me. I felt myself sliding inside of it. It was the best intercourse I have ever experienced. But I couldn't reach climax. If I could've I would have done so in less than a minute, it felt so wonderful. Then the shadow left me and I ejaculated immediately. A succubus is what it was. It didn't leave, it just dissipated like smoke and immediately I ejaculated all over myself, more than I've ever ejaculated before. For five minutes I was lying there as it poured out."

"I don't believe you."

"That's fine. I know it's true."

"Alright, but that still doesn't explain why you'd shat yourself when I found you tonight."

"You didn't find me, you merely stumbled upon me. I've been moving from location to location since it happened, trying to escape her. So far it has worked."

## CHAPTER 9 – PLANS

I awoke to the dank smell of water dried into every surface. The only light was that which spilled in through the gaps in the windows' steel covering. Beer cans lay strewn across the laminate floor - I'd made several more trips that night to the shop and back.

I checked the house, glad of the shutters over the windows keeping everything too dark to see. The wet sounds of the carpet. The dry smell of piss.

I slipped through the gap we had entered by the previous night to see Wink in the garden burning sheets of paper. Upon questioning he told me he liked to illustrate his experiences for consolation but had recently found he had to destroy them lest they be found by ethereal sources. I seated myself in the long grass next to him.

"What are you going to do today?"

"I have nothing planned." He let a burning page drop to the ground. "What are you going to do?"

"Get you some money. Or some food at least."

"I have money and I eat well." He rolled up his trousers, peeling them from bloody flesh that had congealed throughout the night. "What are the chances of this place having running water? Ten percent? Maybe less; hardly favourable odds."

When he'd slipped through the gap to check, I stamped out the flame that was slowly curling the page on the ground, folded up the paper and tucked it into my pocket.

## CHAPTER 10 – WASHING

A man wearing a shirt and loosened tie walked into the cafe's bathroom and smelt stale, dry shit in the air. He saw an untidy, filthy man with one trouser-leg rolled up to his knee, shoe and sock on the ground, balancing awkwardly with his exposed calf over the sink, water pouring onto it and spiraling down the plughole red.

He saw another man rubbing the bloodied calf with stained and soggy toilet paper, moving away a thick layer of dry blood and revealing two large gashes that opened from the force of the water.

He stood for a while, a trembling hand caressing the door handle behind him. Our eyelines clashed when I looked up. He wanted to speak but his lips simply twitched and I took a long drag of the cigarette I was smoking, keeping it in my mouth as I exhaled slowly through my nose. Wink, his back to the door, had no idea of this intrusion and when the man spoke he craned his neck around to see who was confronting us.

"You can't smoke in here," he said, the authority of his voice betrayed by it trembling. "In fact, you shouldn't really be doing that either."

"Who are you?"

"I'm..." He coughed into his palm then tried again. "I'm the manager. I'm the manager and I'm giving you two minutes to leave."

He hitched up his sleeve and studied his watch. I told Wink to stay where he was, went into the single cubicle and unhooked the roll of toilet paper from the wall. I dried and wrapped his leg, he put on his shoe - leaving his sock on the floor - and rolled down his trouser-leg. We calmly walked out of the bathroom, through the cafe and into the street.

I was getting quite agitated by Wink's stench. When I told him he reprimanded me for not letting him know sooner. Outside a charity shop in the centre of town Wink held a fist over my palm, opened it letting a bunch of five pound notes all screwed up together fall.

He waited outside as I bought a shirt and trousers, pocketed the change. I gave him the clothes and half the money I owed him. We realised that even in new clothes he still wouldn't be clean. Swimming naked in a fountain wasn't plausible, the river too dangerous and he would probably emerge dirtier anyway. We wouldn't get further than the lobby of a hotel and breaking into a house was slightly extreme for just a wash.

Doesn't have to just be for a wash. Could ransack the place. Why? So that we broke in for more than just a wash?

From the same DIY store I stole the spray paint we bought a garden hose. Forty-five minute walk to suburbia.



Empty houses exude a subtle absence; warmth that can't be felt, sounds that can't be heard. Unused windows blank like a fish's eye, beyond them a living room slowly becoming dust, television with one dull red light, paintings on the wall projecting beauty. With vain sycophantism the entire ensemble waits in hope.

Living room, a room that is living, coma victim, still alive but waiting, everything beyond its control, actions that will greatly affect it out of reach, unavailable for manipulation - it is being manipulated.

We found an empty house between two others and made our way to the back garden. Predictable tap attached to the wall became host to our hose. Wink stood naked with his feet wide, spreading his cheeks. Water met shit and poured onto the ground brown next to the pulp that his bandage had become.

Eventually the water ran clear. He stood naked as suburbia's sun dried his skin. I smoked a cigarette. A cat pawed at a dandelion. The wind carried a dog's bark to us.

We were in this place that was floating just beneath the surface, unable to break through the tension above but buoyant enough to keep from sinking.

We were only visiting; no doubt we would soon leave and plunge so far as to not see the surface, bear weights that would prevent return. Considering our direction I could see only descent. Once Wink was dry we left the garden.

Between the sun becoming moon we had walked, discussed many topics and rediscovered each other's habits. I questioned Wink more on his ethereal experience but found he spoke in intertwined circles. I spoke in similar patterns when he questioned me on anything.

There is little more underwhelming than arriving in a new city. Each city is a Dadaist interpretation of one original map, an experimental clone of another beast, bearing only subtle differences in its architecture and colour, size and shape. As a parasite moves from one host to another we walked into the new city and began to feast.

## CHAPTER 11 – GIRLS

Inside a pub inside the city we jostled for position at the bar to the sound of a three-piece-experimental-jazz-rock band that played quiet, patient music. We sat close to the stage. The room was different at the back. Struggles for dominance rendered the music barely audible. My back was to the musicians so that I could watch:

A girl peered from behind make-up at each of a group of five men. Her outfit was obvious and striking, theirs uniform and plain. One pool cue was being fought over as though it symbolised the prize, and perhaps it did for she draped her arms around the one holding it as he leaned over the pool table to line up his shot, checking behind him more often than in front.

But a rival was quick, got behind him and landed a kick to his arse that sent him forward, arms spread for the fall, the wooden pole making contact with the girl's face. I heard the crack of wood on skin and the bone beneath.

The other three men rushed to her side but it was the one who had administered the kick that got to her first. He helped her to her feet and to the door. The other three did the same to the man on the table, though he resisted and they revelled in his disobedience, two of them grabbed an arm each and the third, stepping backwards, threw punches at his stomach and head as he was dragged. A path was cleared. I quickly followed them outside.

The man who had brought her out held the girl close. Her shoulders shook against him. Another moved around them with quick sidesteps, trying to intrude their intimacy. The other two took a more violent approach to her heart and were kicking the man who'd hit her into the road.

Weathering the blows he got to his feet and attacked one of them with fist and forehead until they were interrupted by the second aggressor. He stood between them to hold them each at bay. The woman was escorted away by the victor, followed by the man who would prevent them from proper closeness. The other three exchanged curses, knowing that their prize was out of reach and violence no longer had purpose, and then parted ways.

By now jazz was too soft for my calloused senses. Two girls outside the pub were facing each other and toying with their mobile phones; small breasts exaggerated in push-up bras, faces unconvincingly aged with poorly applied make-up. I approached them, asked them if there was anything happening that would satisfy my new hunger. They told me they were going to a metal gig ten minutes away. I instructed them to allow me five minutes and I would join them with a friend.

When I relayed the girls' summary - "huge... really good bands... wall to wall atmosphere..." - Wink agreed. The four of us walked together in the warm night.

"So, what do you two do?"

"We're at uni," they lied.

"How old are you?"

"Eighteen," they said together, as though rehearsed. Like a song.

More arbitrary conversation all the way to a bar in a basement. Blue lights illuminating empty tables, only one occupied and occupied by a group of forty-something men wearing t-shirts emblazoned with old heavy metal band logos. Most of them wore also glasses and comb overs.

Wink ordered drinks from the bar and I guided the girls to a table. I noticed a man sat in a dark corner, black hair hanging over his sunglasses, sipping a whisky with ice. The girls went to the toilet together. Wink asked me which of the girls I would like for tonight and I told him neither, told him he shouldn't want either and he bet me he could have both. Wink put up ten pounds that he could sleep with both the girls, the only stipulation being that I couldn't interfere.

The girls returned and silence hung as we drank until, halfway into our pints, a band walked onto the stage. A torrent of immature noise spilled from them unashamedly - only because they were ignorant to its immaturity. I chose to be more ignorant and walked outside for a cigarette. Wink stayed with the girls who seemed to be enjoying the entertainment.

Outside was a collection of picnic tables, all of them populated by teenage boys and girls dressed in the attire of caste; mostly black, ironically proclaiming individuality with accessories; chains and spikes. The metal of the older ones in the bar had corroded and they were exiled to inside; these out here were the new breed. And they were admirably dedicated to continuing the species.

The girls we were with were dressed similarly though more subtly, subtle enough so I didn't realise their typecast until it was shown to me. I wondered whether they were less gratuitous and stayed inside because they were above this or below it.

The bands were terrible but we sat through them all. When they were finished we followed the girls to another place, three floors below ground and surrounded by people that would have put those at the gig to shame. Avant garde, leather, black make-up on white, multi-coloured hair, men as women, women as men, either as both. Suicide soundtracks beat rhythm into the dance floor. Wink took the two girls to dance as I queued at the bar.

I'd drunk everyone's drink by the time they found me at a table in an alcove and Wink volunteered himself to buy more. The girls danced in their seat with elaborate arm movements. I watched and they noticed, smiled at me and continued, now pushing out their underdeveloped breasts and pouting their lips.

"How old are you really?"

They didn't hear me, or decided that they didn't, and I took that as a sign that I didn't want to know. I didn't ask them how they were doing at school because I didn't want them to leave. If they left they would disappoint Wink. And he'd assume I'd interfered and I wouldn't get my tenner.

The three divided their time between drinking and dancing. I divided mine between waiting and worrying. As they danced I drank, partly because I was bored and partly to take my mind of a potential statutory-rape-by-association charge.

As I drank I watched the hierarchy. Those further outside the mainstream were followed by those who were inside it but trying to escape it. The followers wore less make-up and less extravagant

clothing than those they followed. They followed them out of the mainstream without realising that they were only travelling to another stream, smaller but equally contrived. The forty-somethings at the gig were examples of the sludge at the end of the stream that they were heading towards.

## CHAPTER 12 - THREESOME

Wink explained to the girls that he'd lost his keys and that his electricity had been cut because he'd only moved in the other day and the former owner owed the company.

We broke a back window with a rock and made our way inside.

We sat on the floor, leaning against cold walls. Wink sat with the two girls either side of him, I sat against the perpendicular wall. We made light by burning wood we brought in from a skip outside, Wink and I taking turns to retrieve some each time the fire died down. Each time I went to the skip I thought about leaving but always decided to stay.

The night had become fun. The girls were more interesting than I thought they would have been, almost living up to their lie about being eighteen. They shared stories and as I was drunk I failed to notice any hyperbole as I sat silently watching and listening.

I examined my memory to work out when Wink could have obtained the bottle of vodka he was now handing to the girls but failed to reach an answer before the bottle was handed to me and I drank.

Soon the empty bottle had become the centrepiece of the room. We all stared at it in silence, watching the flames' reflections and thinking about speaking.

Gretchin was the more attractive of the girls, though only by default. Minkz had two scars; one running across her left cheek and one above her left eyebrow that her make-up only served to accentuate rather than hide.

We found out that she had been attacked because of how she dressed by "a fucking right nobhead, she had tracky bottoms and one of them puffy jackets and thought I looked stupid, then I told her she looked stupid and she took out a penknife and, well, this."

Alan had told me, more than once, that subjective thought will be the downfall of the human race. Looking at her eyes fill with salt-water I realised he was right. She began to cry and I felt my pocket get ten pounds heavier. So did Wink and he put an arm around her shoulder, suddenly ignoring Gretchin to which she was most unhappy and so she came and sat by me.

"You don't talk much do you?" She asked, her finger tracing my thigh.

"I didn't want to intrude."

"Do you want to intrude me?"

Alan had told me that all of society's moral values can be traced back to when we were hunter-gatherers living in tribes. It was frowned upon by the tribe to breed with a young girl because she could breed with another tribe or sold to another tribe as pure and this was in their best interests; it would connect the two tribes and make them bigger and, therefore, stronger.

He said that morality is socially hereditary and the reason we don't want to fuck young girls can

be traced back to the conservation of these tribes.

If I wanted to break free from society's placenta then discarding this most important of taboos should have been mandatory. But, despite Alan's teachings, I felt unable to have sex with a girl under legal age of consent so I ignored my erection and showed her only arrogance, to which she responded with the action I was hoping for; she moved back to Wink.

I stayed awake in the pitch black living room underneath Wink's threesome. The fire in the middle of the room had ceased giving light and now filled the room with the smell and dust of ash. I was looking at where I thought the empty vodka bottle was, thinking about history's tendency to repeat itself. Always going back to the familiar. Wars and revolutions. Round and round.

## CHAPTER 13 – ANAGRAM

The night was cold and I sat within it, on a bench by a main road. Shivering and waiting. Cigarette unlit in my mouth. I had given up searching for a lighter after ten minutes. Watered out kind of drunk, slow breathing, eyes half closed drifting from trees to signposts. Intrusion of noise as a blurred car rushed past with arrogant speed, relief as the heavy sound drifted away.

I watched the breeze pick up the charred piece of paper I'd taken after Wink had left it burning, carried with me, looked at and discarded. It wasn't much more than a rough sketch and if you didn't know his story you'd not be able to recognise what it represented. It drifted off, joining a group of leaves and crisp packets on their journey to somewhere else.

Despite being nothing more than a silhouette I recognised Alan as soon as I saw him walking towards me. Once he reached me he noticed my cigarette and handed me a lighter. We walked quietly as he worked out why I'd called him.

In his house I sat in the living room, fighting to stay awake, while he moved around in the kitchen, searching the drawers. He returned and sat next to me. Still not a word had been shared between us. He had brought a piece of paper and a pen, wrote down the word 'altitude' and handed it to me.

I stared at it, waiting for some revelation that lurked in the silence, this calligraphy the summation of my inability to channel the forces that were to direct me towards it. Lines that I expected to move around the page like a Disney hallucination. He took the paper and crossed the L, passed back to me the new word.

"It can be as simple as that. One line. One mark," he told me before standing, placing a hand on my shoulder and looking into my eyes. "Is it altitude with a mark or attitude?"

His question was not rhetorical as I had assumed and his hand tightened on my shoulder as he waited for an answer.

"Tied taut," I told him.

"An anagram."

I nodded.

Alan turned away from me and walked back into the kitchen, out of view. I heard water pour from the tap, the kettle click. We drank tea and played chess with a board he had found and pieces he had made out of chicken bones, string, black paint and pennies for the bases. He won every game until we decided to stop, the morning light coming in hard through the windows and morning radio a balm for my wounded intellect.

Callers demanding vengeance for a murdered toddler, violent suggestions regarding the punishment of the guilty party; scalping, castration, all kinds of imaginative torture.

Their anger was trivial and obvious but I felt compelled towards their cause. I suggested to Alan that we find the woman who had murdered the child and act out these anonymous fantasies but my idea was undermined by Alan's logic; "Their vengeance is limited to asking. If they got what they wanted they would feel a great injustice toward them and the child. Their threats and wishes are rhetorical. They cannot be acted upon. They must exist in a perpetual state of wanting."

It occurred to me that giving them what they wanted, derailing their perpetual state of wanting, would be in our interest. That it would complement Alan's plan. But Alan's plan was something I'd never be able to see and I trusted his judgement. The chaos and anger that the murder inspired was the energy he was attempting to evoke. It was the oil he was drilling for and here it was, pouring out, a great black fountain.

We stood against these people. Not that we were for the murderers but they had caused an unrest in people that we were attempting, a great rousing of anger that united the enemy; a target close together is easier to hit than one spread over an area. That's why, when assaulting the enemy, a squad walk in single file, a couple of feet between each other, rather than as a single unit, a single target.

Though it seemed obvious, or perhaps because it was obvious, we could not replicate this infanticide. The motive of the murderer was completely different to our motives. We were not psychopaths; we were the righteous.

Regardless, we were inspired.



## CHAPTER 14 – KIDNAP

Once you choose to notice, you're overwhelmed by how simple a kidnapper's hobby is. Opportunities are abundant, easy and obvious. Out of ten mothers, at least three leave their child unsupervised for more than five minutes. In five minutes a person can take a child and leave the area. This time includes checking security cameras, evading security officers and buying a milkshake for the kid to earn his trust.

Coercion is easy. Offering sweets is cliché for a reason. Boundaries are simple; babies cry, older children understand what you're trying to do. At a certain age children can walk and are curious, they know they are doing wrong, but prefer to keep any wrongdoings quiet, knowing their parents are always watching over them.

Knowing is not enough, but lack of experience prevents such knowledge. It took an hour to formulate these mathematics, fifteen minutes to walk into town, ten minutes to find a prospective victim, five minutes to obtain collateral and twenty minutes to walk back.

I sat in Alan's flat while Dominic explored. He stood in front of the broken television and invented his own channel where he was presenter, actor and all the puppets. A little rabbit with no friends had been taken from his burrow by two saints to a dishevelled castle.

I built a joint while watching him sneak around. Taught him how to smoke. Then his world was broadened. We weren't in the same room. The room I was in was brown and dank, while he was exploring a treacherous, exciting cave. I saw him swatting flies with a rolled up magazine but to him he was lunging at monsters with an enchanted sword.

And then he turned pale, his shoulders lurched forward and the momentum carried up a huge torrent of vomit.

Alan returned. He watched Dominic stagger around the room, reach me, fall to his knees, vomit on the floor, tears pouring down his white cheeks.

"What's wrong with him?"

"I don't know," I lied.

"Why isn't he bound? Tied taut?"

"I'm sorry. When he was tied up he wouldn't stop screaming and I couldn't stand it."

Alan looked at me, then at the boy, then around the room, at nothing in particular. I apologised a second time and recommended using whisky to send him to sleep. Alan told me he had no whiskey and no reason to purchase any, least of all a hyperactive child that required silencing. He told me to ignore Dominic and to clean up the vomit, that the illness would soon send him to sleep or at least quieten him.

He was right. Within ten minutes of Alan's arrival Dominic was holding his knees close to his chin in the foetal position and Alan and I were playing chess. His Bishop took my Queen. I didn't care since he always won, my Bishop took his Knight and he quickly declared Checkmate and I conceded.

If I had won I would have voiced my opinion of the kidnapping; I stood defiant of the act yet I was quite favourable of its motives.

The child was dormant and I, according to Alan, equally so. He considered my empathy a weakness and, after a short time, I understood and agreed.

Despite our understanding of the situation, which we deliberately kept unimaginative and mundane, Dominic needed parents. It would be unfair to keep such an innocent being our prisoner since he had no knowledge of the suffering that had brought him into such a situation. Martyrs need to know they're martyrs.

It soon became clear to us that we had let our idealistic approximations outrun our physical capacity. Once Dominic woke he would ask questions that would open massive holes in our story. Of course we weren't social workers, even a three year old would have known that. It was possible that he would become loud and alert the neighbours. Or become violent, bite and scratch, assault our skin and, possibly, our eyes. We should not be left blind by our abduction. And anyway, a first attempt does not render he who tried incapable of trying again.

The place we had taken him from was overwhelming. A vast whiteness from which ideals of society stared out; the thin housewife, the promiscuous student, the beloved father. Each had a place, an obligation, a duty within the shopping centre's manifesto.

Dominic didn't want to stay amongst these ideals and followed us clumsily on his undeveloped legs, rushing when he got close towards either me or Alan. We both sent him away with a soft pat on the head and a promise that his mother was on her way.

Alan told me I should have used his high as an opportunity to instill fear into him. "No one is as frightened as they are when they're high."

I ignored him, which I knew was a mistake. My knowledge would be proved right an hour later.

Alan had locked the one cubicle door in the public bathroom. We were inside, hoping that no one would come in and see a little boy hammering on the door, unlock it with a coin and march us to court. After ten minutes he had stopped knocking. I had spent those ten minutes staring at Alan whose eyes, though incapable physically, were fixed on the door behind him.

We thought he'd wandered off so we unlocked the door. The boy was sitting on the toilet floor, picking at his shoe. Alan thought for a moment.

Then he knelt down and said to him, "Do you want to come and get a new toy?"

Dominic's eyes and mouth widened instantly. Alan helped him to his feet.

The toyshop we took him to was unimaginative and sterile; action figures in boxes that couldn't

be played with and plastic blocks that couldn't be built with until they were bought.

We stood at the entrance and Alan told him, "Go and pick out anything you want. But only one thing. Then bring it back to us. But make sure you're sure, ok? Because once you bring it to us you can't change your mind."

Dominic tottered into the shop. We turned and walked away.

## CHAPTER 15 – INCARCERATION

We consoled ourselves with the knowledge that our failure was not down to incompetence but intolerance, and that intolerance was a respectable attribute in a person. Especially a person like Alan or myself.

But we hadn't really failed. Dominic's parents would be worried and panicking while Dominic would be scared and alone. The only failure was in allowing the progress of the two parties to be decided by the cosmic pool we had returned him to rather than by our own hand. Disruption had been caused, surely, but Alan was far from happy about the situation. He felt inane.

"What we have created is nothing more than an accident. A kid gets lost, a kid gets found. They'll be happier to find him than they were distraught to lose him. We've actually made them happier, probably. We should have killed him."

He slammed his hand onto the table and our beer shook inside its glasses. A few people close looked over but soon lost interest. I didn't ask him whether he would or could have killed Dominic; I knew he wouldn't have. I was worried that he would think this was my fault but I didn't ask him his opinion of that either. If he thought it was my fault he would tell me.

"It could have worked as well. An entire country in uproar, with us at the centre undetectable. Remember when that girl went missing? Months they spent keeping the country angry and worried. Did they ever find her?"

"I don't know, it sort of moved through the papers from the front page backwards until it wasn't in there anymore. I don't even remember her name."

"And now some poor bastard's stuck looking after a kid he took for money because no one cares anymore. I suppose that's ironic justice. But we weren't doing it for money, we could have given him back as soon as people lost interest. Got to feel sorry for that guy though, how long has it been now? A year? He probably expected it to last a month at least, now he's celebrating her birthday with her."

"Do you think they celebrate their anniversary?"

"I hope so. With a trampoline that's got a noose hanging over it, seeing which of them can get their head through first."

"Maybe his parents will be happier, but that kind of thing can mess a kid up for a long time. So there's a small victory at least?"

"Like throwing a coin into a river and hitting a fish, we'll never know."

We spent a long time in the pub. We invented a party game that involved five kids, four nooses and one trampoline. We decided that I wasn't good with children because I didn't patronise them.

Eventually there were so many glasses on the table there was no room for our fresh pints so we moved to the bar and leant on it until we were escorted out because I grabbed a barmaid's shirt,

pulled her over the bar and kissed her.

We didn't stay outside long. We marched back inside after a cigarette each with our shoulders back and chests out defiant, struck the bar with fists and ordered another drink.

When they had served us we calmed down and swayed quietly until we felt rough hands on our wrists applying handcuffs, turned round and saw three policemen. They told us we were being arrested for being drunk and disorderly. Guided us into the back of a van that had wooden beams installed for us to sit on.

We spent the journey to the police station plotting escapes then dismissing them.

When the back doors were unlocked the policeman allowed us a cigarette each - two of his own no less - before we went inside. Our hands were behind our backs and we had to smoke with the cigarettes between our lips for the duration of them.

I dropped mine when it had burned halfway down and the officer wouldn't pick it up or give me another so I was taken inside first. After giving my statistics to the overweight officer behind the desk the handcuffs were unlocked and I replaced my clothes with the wax paper trousers and shirt that they provided.

The cell was a wooden cot with a blanket, a steel toilet in the corner and a fluorescent light that hummed and stayed on all night. There was a button on the wall to call for the duty officer but it either didn't work or was being ignored. There was a small slit in the door covered by a metal beam that was occasionally slid open to reveal a pair of eyes before shutting again.

I laid myself on the cot but couldn't sleep; the wood pressed my bones together and was cold.

At whatever time breakfast was they opened the door and placed a plastic box and polystyrene cup on the floor. In the box were two sausages and mashed potato with onions and the cup was full with weak tea. I ate and felt hungrier for it. I thought about pouring the tea onto my arm to get some kind of reaction but remembered that the button to call them was redundant so I drank it.

I let them swab my mouth for DNA and signed the forms they presented to me. They opened the door to the morning and I walked out to find Alan waiting. It was eleven o'clock and he wanted some kind of justice so we went to the nearest pub.

## CHAPTER 16 – LIMO

We held no resentment toward our adversaries. By the same stroke that they had taken us, they had also released us, and had taught us that we would gloriously overcome any adversity that could be presented to us just by waiting. Knowing this was only slight consolation, though, and at twelve o'clock we were drunk again and spitting, cursing bitter the police with two angry pensioners we had befriended.

Ken and Roy both had bad teeth and thin grey hair to match their posture and frames. Their skin was a tough leather moulded into a scowl round their faces and calloused on their large hands. They drank real beer, with a shot of whiskey before each pint.

They listened intently to our story of a night in a cell and urged us to elaborate though there was nothing to elaborate on; the main punishment of spending time incarcerated was boredom.

They weren't being polite or interested, though; only patient. Once we had exhausted every memory of our night - which consisted mostly of counting tiles and pissing - they shook themselves the way a boxer does before a fight and told us their story, taking turns so that when one was out of breath the other would take over and so on.

They had spent five years in prison for armed robbery and assault respectively.

Ken had been stabbed, he showed us the scar, and Roy had wanted to stab the man who stabbed Ken but they both got out before he'd had the opportunity. That's how they had become friends.

It had been another five years since their release, Roy three months earlier than Ken.

This was their pub, they knew the landlady intimately and the regular patrons knew how to respect them; buying them pints and offering them cigarettes and drugs.

To prove that this was their kingdom, Ken walked to the far side of the room and spoke to a man sitting alone, leaning with his palms on the table and his mouth an inch from the man's ear.

He returned to our table proud and after two minutes the lonely man walked over tentatively, inelegantly carrying four pints.

This happened to another three people in the pub. It was always Ken who asked and apart from one, who immediately handed Ken a ten pound note, their attention was directed toward Roy, which seemed to make them comply. After this aggressive show of generosity we owed them gratitude and feared them enough to give it.

We had entered the pub aching and feeling ill. We left aching less but feeling worse.

Slowly emerging from inebriation alone and without the luxury of escaping into slumber meant we had endured every moment of it. This had given the alcohol a head start and we left the pub walking an inch above the ground.

Ken and Roy led a foot in front of us but kept looking round to make sure we were still following them, which we were without showing any of the weariness that we felt. At a fast food restaurant they increased our debt by buying us a cheeseburger each. It seemed that we were repaying their generosity with simple company but we could see where we were being led and, even if it was only a vague shape we could see, we could definitely discern it as a bad shape. But their influence was so heavy that when they left us both alone and went to piss, we stayed where we were without even contemplating escape.

In a different pub we met with a group of people younger and healthier than Roy and Ken but prospectively the same.

Amongst this company their demeanour changed, their loud exclamations and stories were quietened to simple affirmations of whoever was speaking at the time, or answering any question directed at them quickly and directly, trying to shift the attention away.

We stood behind Ken and Roy hoping to be ignored, slowly increasing our distance as the group traded stories of fights and fucks. We didn't get far when more men joined the group from behind us, pushing us forward so that we were close to the new centre.

The conversation flowed over our bowed heads and we didn't get acknowledged until it was decided that the group would change venue. We were invited and, along with Roy and Ken, moved with the conglomerate that demanded with its presence and mass alone that anyone in the way move.

A limousine was waiting for us outside. Its exaggerated length proudly polished promised wonders behind blackened windows. People walking past the car looked, smiled to themselves or their company, nodded, whistled approvingly.

One man resented the machine; its driver. His perfection and neatness, which most of his pride was invested in, was undermined by the car. Imperfections could only be cast upon the limousine through heavy violence; a crash or an attack. He was constantly aware of how his own humanity fought against the perfection he was aching to maintain with polished buttons and a carefully trimmed moustache.

Inside the limo, despite being packed in shoulder to shoulder, having to shift and rub against whoever was on either side of them whenever they wanted to drink a glass of the complimentary champagne, they were excited. It was less comfortable than being on a rush hour bus but the connotations and inclinations of the car blinded them to it or numbed them from it.

When we started to move their excitement rose and the comfort dropped even lower.

Bumps in the road and their drunken, exaggerated gestures pushed us all this way and that. Alan, sitting next to me, was thinking the same as the momentum carried through me and pushed him, carried through him and pushed me. Finding a niche in the sound he leaned to my ear and said something I couldn't quite hear about the holocaust and I laughed when he laughed at what he'd said.

We moved along the road for fifteen minutes, each one taken up with the men's vocal appreciation or damning of the women we passed. One of them lit a cigarette and the glass partition between the driver and his cargo slid open.

"You'll have to put out the cigarette, sir," said the driver without turning his head, presumably watching in the rear view mirror.

"Is he talking to us? You want to talk to us, mate? Get yourself a proper job, get the cash to sit in the back of one of these and not the front, then invite me in and I'll talk to you. Until you've done that, just drive it."

The limousine pulled in to the curb. From the support of his peers we learnt his name was Scaff. The driver unbuckled his seat belt and turned round, rested his arm in the partition window.

"Please put out the cigarette, sir. Is not worth your deposit. We arrive at your destination in only two minutes." Turning back round he reached for a button and the window closest to Scaff slid down. "You throw it out now or you are walking."

"Alright, I'll walk."

The driver pulled over.

Scaff was close to the front of the limo and we all had to push ourselves into the seat while he supported himself with his arms on our thighs and slid his arse across. When he got out he left the door open and stopped, after his third stride, by the driver's door.

When he tugged the handle he found it was locked so he kicked the glass through. The driver reacted and just avoiding Scaff's foot then started the engine, pulling away immediately.

Scaff's foot stayed in the car for less than a second before he fell. The open door hit the parking meter on the pavement we had stopped at and slammed closed.

As the driver had said, the venue was two minutes away and straight down the street. For the two minutes he suffered abuse, violent racist mantras and slaps to his head that knocked his hat off and ruined his perfectly combed haircut.

The first couple of the men who rushed out hurried to the driver's door, tried to overpower the lock while spitting through the broken window. They failed and, once the last man was out, the limo fled.

I felt sympathy toward the driver, but I expected that and disregarded it. I paid more attention to the sympathy I felt for my new - and hopefully temporary - company. If only one of them had stayed in the car, maybe even kept the driver in a headlock, he wouldn't have got away, presumably to report them, certainly to void their deposit.

When the volley of patronising had ended we turned to see Scaff walking towards us, his hand holding the back of his head. He got closer and held his hand out to show us that it was covered in blood. Mick checked the wound.

"Just a knock that was hard enough to break the skin."



Fez leant him a hat and we all lit cigarettes.

We smoked, blamed immigration and the fall of patriotism before we knew what we were blaming them for and came up with some interesting and plausible arguments. Nodded along in agreement just like everyone else as Mick and Scaff cursed pakis, laughed along at Fez's high pitched interjected jokes. Not worrying about the volume of their bigotry. As a group we exuded energy that kept anyone who might have wanted to intervene at the other side of the road.

## CHAPTER 17 – ORGY

The bouncer studied us all as we passed him, making a mental note of each of us. We all paid in by passing a tenner to a girl enclosed in a tiny room, trapped behind a wire mesh.

There was an excited tension being stirred up in the group, like this was the first time we'd ever been inside a club. When everyone had paid, whoever was closest to the door separating this half-quiet ante-chamber from the party beyond opened it and the men rushed in together, arms round each other, arms round us, so no one could turn back. I noticed Ken and Roy within the mass, reluctant to show their reluctance.

Cheap arrogant music from popular radio playlists, sweeping coloured lights, girls without faces pushing against men with pseudo-erotic movements. The epileptic shifting of the light made the room seem busier than it was.

If there was a hierarchy here we had just walked to the top of it.

Our unit split in half. Half to the bar, half to the dancefloor. At the bar they jostled to the front of the queue and snarled at anyone who dared complain, on the dancefloor they found a girl they liked and forcefully attached themselves, pushing aside anyone in their way.

As the night progressed Ken and Roy got quietly drunk and fell asleep on sofas in a dark corner designed for foreplay while the rest found limitless energy in their drinks.

Rejection filtered through our companions' egos until they found a girl that passed herself around them all. She stumbled from one to another on high heels she couldn't control, kept tugging at her small blouse that struggled to contain her tits and at her skirt that kept rising over her arse. Her eyes moved independently from her other actions as though they weren't necessary and she had just left them there in her head.

They danced with her until the end. As they got closer to her the rest of the club fell away, drifted off, until it was our club and everyone else was in the periphery, dejected and watching.

I was in the toilet with Smith and Bell, all three of us pissing - me stood between them and them talking over me, or through me. Other than us the toilet was empty.

"So you think she's the one then?"

"For Jake's present? Yeah, course she is. Who's got it?"

"You do don't you? You've not lost it have you? Fucking hell, you're a right wanker, Smith."

"Yeah you're right it's right here in my pocket. I'll sort it out next time I get her a drink."

Only out of curiosity I went to the bar when Smith did. I followed in his slipstream as he pushed

through people and I got served at the same time as him. We walked side by side back to our party as if we were strangers until he asked me to hold his drink.

We stood for a while and carefully fumbled with the drinks since I was already holding too many. We spilt a lot but eventually I wrapped my hands around them and we began walking again and he emptied a few drops of liquid, from a small bottle he had taken out of his pocket, into her cocktail.

Back at the group the woman was passed over to him and he handed her the spiked drink. He took his drink from me and I handed Alan his.

Ken and Roy were roused and, with the sturdy crutch of a friend each, walked out of the club with the rest of us. The woman was moving in between us all like a pinball trapped beneath glass in a world of flashing colours. Roy had pissed himself and was exiled to the streets as we divided ourselves between three taxis. I realised I didn't even know who Jake was.

The taxi was more comfortable than the limousine. Alan was in the car in front and neither of us was happy with the division. The woman was in the car behind.

I was sitting in the improvised seat in the middle of the back, next to Ken who was struggling to keep his eyelids apart. He was trying to keep away his fatigue by talking to me but the noises came out of him less like words and more like a muddy torrent. I nodded like I was interested and it suited him fine.

While he kept talking I looked around the taxi and paid attention. Jake was actually sitting in the front seat and it was Ford sitting on my right. Both of them looked alike despite different haircuts and Ford's beard. In fact, Jake looked like a shaved Ford.

Jake didn't know that the girl was for him, or that she'd been drugged. Ford didn't know either. Jake was gesturing through the windscreen to Stan in front while Ford was turned and gesturing out of the back window to Slippy.

Before long we were at a hotel some miles out of town. Ken was asleep again and Ford woke him with a slap to his balding head while we all joined together and moved through the hotel lobby and into a room that was immediately overcrowded.

Someone went out and returned with more beer. Some force pulled us all into a circle around the bed, where the woman was kneeling wearily on top of Jake.

We watched him undress her. As they began to fuck, Jake's face an intense drunk mangle of skin while hers as blank as a desert, I looked over them and over the bed to Alan, who was standing opposite me. He looked back, shrugged his shoulders; he wanted to leave as much as I did but couldn't find a way out.

Neither could I.

Jake came and, while tucking his cock in to his trousers, gestured for another man to continue inside the girl. After the next man had finished, everyone cheered and tipped their cans until beer fell out of their mouths. He was substituted by another it became obvious that we were to fuck her in order according to our standing in the circle. After the next it was me and out of the corners

of several eyes I was being watched so that I couldn't leave.

I hoped Alan could save me but he didn't and a tap on my back pushed me toward the half-naked girl. I looked for Alan as I unzipped my trousers and pulled out my cock but he had vanished.

Someone grabbed my dick and pushed it toward the girl on the bed and I saw it was hard. I couldn't help but fuck her and every moment of it was tainted by the sad truth; my erection borne of this corruption; my thrusts puppeteered by their rough heckling; my ejaculation celebrated by a communal drink, everyone tipping their cans back and guzzling til beer fell down their chins.

When I'd finished I wanted to leave and find Alan but was held in place by congratulatory arms that dragged me back to my position in the circle and held me there. I watched everybody fuck her and was released when, after the last man, the group decided to sleep. I was sent to a blanketed part of the floor.

After half an hour, when everyone in the room except the girl and Jake sleeping next to her and Slippy sleeping on her other side had drifted away to their rooms, I stood up tentatively. My hand on the doorknob I made eye contact with the girl on the bed, sandwiched between the two of them. She tried to get up but Slippy's arm reached over her and held her to him. I felt a great heavy guilt as I crossed the threshold and closed the door behind me.

I found Alan outside wandering the car park and asked him what to do next.

"Carry on," was his reply.

I didn't have the time or the energy to decide what he meant by that so I just followed him into the hazy electric orange that hangs around the outskirts of every city.

We walked for a while, to one of those train stations that's no more than a couple of platforms and a graffitied footbridge. "When I left you were next. Did you fuck her?"

"I had to."

"You had to? Really?"

"Well what else was I meant to do?"

"Could've said no."

He was right. I could have said no. I could have said no and a lot more but I didn't, I just fucked her while she was passed out, no more than a corpse except she would wake up tomorrow.

"Do you think she'll remember that I fucked her?"

"Raped her," he corrected me.

"I didn't rape her, I... I was..."

He was right; I'd raped her. He didn't judge me for it though, he asked me what time the next train was. I checked my watch and saw it was a quarter past four. Checked the board. "Forty-five

minutes."

"Is that the next train home or just the next train?"

"Next train, I don't know where it's going."

"We'll get on it and get off somewhere into its rounds."

## CHAPTER 18 – NOSEBLEEDS

At five o'clock in the morning a train is more full than it is at five in the afternoon, though not with people.

We walked the carriages and saw drunks and hookers spitting stories at anyone that came close, most of those drunks and hookers themselves, not interested in the stories they were being told but comforted by the familiarity of the tales and they often kneeled or sat by the storyteller and added to the tale closest to them with their own personal, but almost identical, story.

I tried to sleep but the closest I could get was to pretend. When the train stopped and I opened my eyes the carriage was filled with sunlight; a bitter yellow that invaded through unshuttered windows but didn't rouse our fellow travelers, only myself and Alan.

He was awake when I woke, watching over the carriage like Mother Theresa. He gestured to me and we walked to the doors, unsteadily over the small gap and onto the platform.

We stood staring at the timetable attached to the wall like lepers looking for Christ until Alan declared there was no reason to stay. I followed him through a small underground passage and we emerged in the heart of a new city.

Men in bright yellow vests moved property from vans to stockrooms while women in trousersuits unlocked heavy metal defences that had been held over doors overnight.

We walked past the industrial struggle and to a park in the middle of it all; carefully trimmed grass, tall trees and benches dedicated to soldiers and cancer martyrs.

Whilst Alan slept in shade provided by a tree that could have been plastic I watched the morning sun rise further and saw it as an unfertilised egg. Lack of sleep had caused small dots to form in my peripheral vision and I saw those as sperm racing toward it, knowing they would, all except one, be burned.

I remembered the woman lying on the bed, watching me leave.

I remembered her soft sleep that we had intruded with harsh cocks grown hard not from arousal but from anger and rebellion.

I wondered whether Alan condemned or condoned what I had done. He had seemed indifferent but perhaps he was masking his envy of me. That I could go through with such rebellion would be hard for him to accept since he could only watch in disgust when he knew he should be aspiring to this level of the fight. Assuming his appraisal and understanding that it was silent and hidden helped me shun my regret.

I felt myself being shaken and when I opened my eyes to raise from slumber the sunlight bored through them and made them sting. He told me it was eleven o'clock and that he was itching to disrupt the new city's conscience.

"Have we got any money?" I asked him.

"Very little."

"I'm hungry."

"We both are."

I heard in his voice that he had been watching me while I was asleep and had decided I was in need of an authority figure. Somehow he had lost that mantle slightly and he was now searching for it. I was happy to help him look and I knew that it meant I wouldn't eat today. He held his hands together as though praying in front of his grin and said, "I'll get us some food later but first we should introduce ourselves to this city, play with it a little."

"What have you got in mind?"

He explained to me that we would give the city a jolt if we were to walk through it bleeding. He explained that if we were seen to be indifferent to our wounds we would unnerve sensibilities and send out a dizzying confusion, that our power to do so could be found in letting out what should be kept inside. He likened it to streaking at a sporting event.

I asked him if I could hit him first and he allowed my request so I punched him on the nose but the momentum of my fist fell short on impact and only made his eyes water.

He hit me and the park moved like the sea and when I hit him again a wave carried my fist and we both sat on the grass with nosebleeds, laughing like schoolgirls drinking contraband cider at a disco. He helped me to my feet and we walked into the city proper.

He told me I should not laugh, nor should I wipe away the blood that was rolling into my mouth. I should spit it out with the same nonchalance as I would blink or breathe.

We walked through pedestrianised streets thick with people staring then turning away. We browsed the wares of shops while confused staff talked in groups of three or four and we left before they could come to a conclusion. We spent the last of our money on bus tickets.

We sat on the bus distant from each other, both next to someone halfway through their journey. Whoever we sat next to promptly moved away, having to ask us to stand up as if they were getting off then going up to the top deck. As did anyone sat close so we were left with empty seats behind and in front and beside. Once the bus was filled to capacity people even chose to stand rather than sit next to either one of us.

The driver was duty bound to reprimand those who were standing and they submitted to his authority and reluctantly sat with us, looking the other way or scrolling through their mobile phones.

The blood on my lip and chin irritated me but I kept my promise to Alan and let it settle there and congeal as fresh blood moved over it. As much as my hands twitched to wipe it away my diaphragm twitched to laugh. I controlled every muscle in my body to appear relaxed and indifferent.

We got off the bus and made our way to a museum with free entry that displayed dinosaur bones

and taxidermy, old clay pots and jewellery. Inside we spent time following a group of children in school uniform and looking at the exhibits they were looking at.

There were three teachers accompanying them and the youngest - an attractive blonde woman wearing her hair unflatteringly tight - asked us if we would mind not following them, to which Alan replied that we had no choice but to follow them since the museum was designed so that one walked through it in only one direction.

After conferring with the two older teachers she walked out of view and returned with an usher in a burgundy blazer with a name badge attached. He asked us to leave, Alan took him away from us and talked quietly to him with blood still pouring from his nostrils and him swallowing between words whatever fell into his mouth and the usher presented some tissues from his pocket. Alan declined them - by now the field trip had moved away - and the usher spoke into his radio for a few seconds.

Alan waited and I watched until three more employees in matching burgundy blazers escorted us to the exit and told us that we weren't welcome now or ever again and not to come back.

The exit of the museum was also an outdoor picnic area and we walked past families and elderly couples, putting them off their sandwiches and tarts, to a street that was empty. Alan put his hands on his knees and laughed so I did the same. He wiped the blood onto his sleeve, as did I.

With the sun shining and our noses bleeding we relished our accomplishment despite our hunger, recollected the most memorable reactions. We had wiped away the freshest blood but the earliest was still there, hard now and pulling the skin it clung to tight. With our fingernails we picked away flakes of it until we were more comfortable, satisfied that we had used it well and would not regret abandoning it.

We held our heads back and pinched the ends of our noses, swallowing lumps of blood and snot and I remembered that I'd seen on TV not to do that but I kept that to myself as it seemed to work.

Alan asked me if I was still hungry, I told him I was. He slapped my shoulder and told me it was tough shit since we spent all our money on the bus and my hunger only grew from the revelation. I was a better thief than him, though, so I assured him I would acquire us something to eat.



## CHAPTER 19 – SHOPLIFTING

He waited outside a store while I went in.

Whilst appearing to scour the aisles I made note of the placement of security cameras and patterns of the guards. I slipped a few bags of crisps into my coat pocket. I tried to get a sandwich as well, but it was protected in a cardboard shell that I couldn't manipulate to fit in my pocket so I put it back on the shelf.

Two security guards were standing by the exit, speaking to each other. Thinking they were being surreptitious one used his eyes to point at me and his partner looked over, trying to hide his glance underneath the peak of his cap.

I don't mind conceding when my back's against the wall. I expected one of them to follow me round the store as I retreated back into the aisles, but they both stayed at the door. They must have thought that I was trying to draw them away from it so that I could manoeuvre round, evade and escape, leave them confused in the aisles. It meant that I could quickly find a quiet aisle and redistribute the crisps from my pockets in between bleach and rubber gloves.

When I got back to the automatic doors the security were ready for me, standing as close to the outside as they could be, waiting for the alarms to sound so they could grab me and march me triumphantly to the small security room where they'd sit me on an uncomfortable plastic chair and stand over me waiting for the police to arrive and congratulate them on a job well done.

They were already reaching for me as I passed between the sensors. Even I expected the shriek of alarms. I didn't look back, I didn't want to taunt them because they might have had some footage on their cameras that they could dig up if they really wanted to. So I kept going, having to imagine their frustration and be content with that.

When I explained to Alan that I had no bounty he slapped my face and sighed, shaking his head disappointed. I offered to try another shop but he told me that if I'd failed once I was most likely to fail again. I decided not to argue and we went hungry.

The sun had begun its descent by the time we found a large bin behind a takeaway that had anything worth eating in it; a few individually wrapped bread rolls that had started to grow mould. We picked away the bad parts and ate the rest.

After eating we reflected on the success his plan had turned out to be and talked about what would be said to parents, wives, husbands, boyfriends and girlfriends regarding the two men with bleeding noses that walked amongst them as though they were just like them, not even caring. We laughed and he slapped my shoulder the same way he'd slapped me when he was angry.

He disclosed to me that he had a twenty pound note in his pocket and that if I wanted half of it I had to earn it.

Inside a pub he bought us both a drink and halved the rest of the money between us on the

understanding that I was to do what he asked. The beer suppressed my hunger as well as any meal would and I agreed.

While he sat alone and watched I started talking to a worn out old woman who had been pestering the bar staff. Even though she was etched and gnarled she was put off by my smell. I hadn't realised how prevalent the odour of sleepless nights and unchanged clothes was. I told Alan that she wasn't interested because of my stench and he agreed, laughing.

"Yes, we definitely need to wash and get new clothes before you can earn your keep."

I gave him the money he had given me and he bought another two drinks while we planned how to sort ourselves out.

## CHAPTER 20 – FOX

That night we slept in a tramp alley where camaraderie was priority and newcomers were welcomed with quality hospitality. We were given the best place; an unused warehouse doorway that was sheltered from the rain and security cameras as long as we kept to the corners. We slept there without the blankets or pillows that the other tramps had.

Other tramps? Had I begun to feel sorry for myself?

If I had I rejected the notion quickly and fell asleep remembering stories of flagellants that Alan had told me once.

I opened my eyes to the grey dusk light with Alan shaking my arm excitedly. I was uncomfortable, my head leaning against the concrete, and found no difficulty in waking up quickly.

He pointed to a tramp who was holding an empty bottle in one hand and another bottle emptying its contents onto the ground in his other. A fox had its snout trapped in one of the tramp's jacket pockets, shaking it, unable to free it.

We sat and watched while the tramp half woke and struggled with the creature, not realising what was going on. He punched it in the eye and it tried to bite him but couldn't release its mouth and it moved erratic and furious, kicking its back legs out.

We left the two to their struggle and walked through the alley, tramps at the sides like litter pushed into corners.

I noticed that the stench we were exuding had become physical; a thin film that rested between my skin and my clothes. To make amends for my failed attempt at thievery the other night I volunteered to steal some clothes, but Alan told me he knew a man who lived around where we were and that we should pay him a visit. I was eager to steal something though so I suggested we take Alan's friend a gift. He agreed and gave me his cowboy boots for my shoes when I asked.

Small shops that are easy to steal from keep a shopkeeper between the customer and the liquor. Supermarkets don't, but they collar their bottles with electric tags that trigger the alarm. Alan raised concerns but I told him not to worry.

I took two small bottles of whiskey and slipped them into the borrowed boots - the bottles designed specifically for that purpose. The electronic tag collars hurt my calves but I made sure not to wince or grimace as I walked round the store.

I found some cheap socks and took two pairs. One pair went into my pocket, the other onto the conveyor belt. I paid for the pair then dropped them onto the ground, transferred the socks from my pocket into the carrier bag.

When I left the store the alarms sounded as I expected them to. A short security guard walked out of the shop, a smug grin as he eyed my vulgar clothes, his eyes betraying his excitement at what was probably the only action he'd had all month.

I made sure not to go back through the sensors and gave him the socks and receipt, made out that I was late and didn't care for a refund. He was suddenly disappointed as he inspected the socks and cross referenced them with the receipt.

He didn't trust me and I didn't trust him so I quickly walked away before he decided to search me. He was already salivating onto the socks at the thought of catching a grubby little thief trying to undermine his investigative prowess.

Round the corner I retrieved the whiskey from the boots and gave it to Alan. We swapped shoes back then made our way to his friend's house.

## CHAPTER 21 – JOHN

We walked out of the city, along the grass verge beside the motorway for forty minutes with cars and lorries tearing past, some honking their horns, some swerving to avoid us, some swerving to scare us.

Eventually Alan led a climb over a small chainlink fence and a tricky descent down a muddy embankment on the other side, where I feared dirty syringes or dirtier condoms were hidden under the leaves and newspapers.

We had entered a human battery farm. It felt like we were trespassing. Two huge, grey towers stood; their thick concrete walls looked like they had been built in response to a disease or mould that was attacking their original walls. Buildings had been built and placed in long, narrow rows before being separated into individual homes. This was the swill, this was where the city's sewer pipe eventually cut off and leaked. Or at least it was one of those places, like a sore on a thoroughbred mare.

Alan's friend lived in one of the towers. We ignored the intercom that was meant to be used as a means to alert your host so they could open the door in lieu of the empty window pane that we ducked through.

An inexplicable shopping trolley was parked, upside down, in the corner of the lobby and I watched it while we waited for the lift as if it were watching me, like a lizard or a dog just waiting for me to look away before it was on me and tearing my flesh apart.

A small pool of piss in the corner of the lift threatened to encroach our dry corner with every jolt. Through yellow grease I could see our reflection in the lift's mirror and saw we looked as though we ought to live there.

Eventually we reached the fourteenth floor and we could breathe without ammonia needling our eyes.

We were greeted after knocking by a tall man very pleased to see Alan. He took Alan's hand in both of his and shook it while nodding his head and grinning like a maniac. He shook my hand with understandably less enthusiasm and invited us inside.

We did not pass over a threshold but through a portal. His flat was a pleasant semblance of normality; television, sofa, curtains, coffee table, decorated shelves. And all clean. I was scared to sit in case I infested his sofa, was afraid to stay in case I infected his home, but he insisted and I had little reason to refuse. Alan sat beside me and his friend went in to the kitchen to rattle and shuffle.

Alan said nothing, lit a cigarette, gave it to me, lit one for himself, slid the seashell ashtray from the centre of the coffee table to the edge. His friend came back into the room with three cups of tea and placed them down in front of each of us and sat in the armchair.

"So what's up, man? What brings you round? And why do you both smell like roadkill? I'm John, by the way."

I said Hi and he turned to Alan for an answer.

"Not much really, this and that."

"How's that biology thing coming along?"

"That's old news now, I left it too long and it got stale. Anyway I need to ask you a favour."

John replied with a look that encouraged more information.

"A paid favour, obviously," Alan told him and handed him the two bottles of whiskey.

John held one up to inspect the label. His eyebrows raised satisfied and he placed both bottles on the coffee table.

"As you've noticed we both smell like shit. We need a shower and some clean clothes. You've got both."

"And you're welcome to both. The bathroom's the door in front of you coming out of this one, the bedroom's to your left."

To me Alan said, "Go get a shower and pick some clothes. Get dressed."

I made my way to the bathroom. The water that ran from me was almost black. When I had finished the bottom of the shower was stained with dirt and I rinsed it away. After however long we had spent confined to our clothes and cultivating filth when I stood naked and clean before the white tiles I felt suddenly awake, as though I'd finally managed to lift my head above the swamp-water I'd been skulking in. I knew that soon I'd have to take a breath, hold it and plunge myself back into the quagmire, but for now I intended to enjoy this fresh skin like a new car.

With a towel wrapped around me I opened the bedroom door. The curtains were closed so I found the light switch and clicked it. Upon doing so I heard a feminine voice.

"John?"

"No, sorry, just a friend. Of a friend. He said I could borrow some clothes."

"Oh, Ok," and I noticed the duvet move, heard it exude a sigh. Then it was still again.

I took from his wardrobe underwear, a navy blue suit, a black shirt and a tie patterned with tropical fish. I put them on in the bathroom. I didn't know what to do with my filthy clothes so I found the kitchen and threw them out of the window.

When I re-entered the living room there were three glasses on the table and one of the bottles

was nearly half empty.

Without a sound Alan stood to retrace my steps. I sat on the sofa and John filled two glasses. Since we had nothing to talk about he turned the television on and we both watched a programme about old cars in the stead of conversation.

When both the whisky bottles and a bottle of John's wine were empty the sky had darkened and Alan decided it was time to move on. He invited John to join us and he accepted. He locked his door and I wondered if he had forgotten about whoever was in his bedroom but I kept quiet.

John paid for a taxi to the city. He took us to a pub he told us was a favourite haunt of his and paid for our drinks. When Alan returned from the toilet he had with him a small piece of paper that he put down on the table.

FRIENDS OF CHANGE BROKEN MIC NIGHT - WHERE WORDS OTHERWISE OPRESSED ARE SHARED, it read. Alan said that we should go to it and we both agreed.

We found the venue easily with John's guidance - a small place hidden in the middle of an alley. Inside there were tables scattered around before a stage, upon which was a microphone on a stand and a man accepting applause.

John bought us a drink each. We found a table and sat down expectant, eager to be entertained.

A girl walked onto the stage, set up a stand with a British flag hanging from it, another stand in front of it with a candle that she lit. She moved the microphone stand to the side before reaching up into her skirt and rolling her knickers down to her ankles. She bent over so her arse was facing the candle and rolled her skirt up, parted her cheeks and farted.

The fart carried past the candle with a fireball that ignited the flag. She stood, her drawers still round her ankles, turned to face us and raised a fist.

A couple of the organisers of the event rushed on stage with a fire extinguisher and quickly put out the fire, which contradicted the act: instead of burning the flag they were now saving it from one of their peers' attacks. She walked off the stage proud. We looked at each other, stifling laughter.

A couple of minutes passed while people decided whether their piece could best what they had just witnessed, flicking through their notepads and scribbling. One man decided to take a punt and walked on, moved the microphone into the middle of the stage and stood behind it.

"Hi, I'm Spider McKenzie and I'd like to tell you a story."

There were a few cheers from the audience. He waited and when they'd died down he continued.

"Three men were at a zoo when the zoo-keeper offered them an educational tour. He took them to a paddock where they watched the animals for a while before he turned round and asked them 'So what do you think separates us from the animals?' The first man said 'Tools' whereby the zoo-keeper pointed to an otter that was using a rock to break open a mussel. The second man said 'Art' whereby the zookeeper pointed to a pig who held a paintbrush in its mouth and was painting on a canvas. 'Suicide' said the third man, whereby the zoo-keeper pointed at a monkey that had hanged himself from a tree.

"No,' said the zoo-keeper, 'what separates us from the animals is this fence. And while the animals burrow beneath or clamber over this fence, what do you do? You stand and watch, afraid to traverse it for fear of becoming an animal yourself."

The audience cheered, some of them stood in ovation, as he walked off the stage.

When the noise ended Alan said to us, "What? What does that even mean? I'm next."

He stood up and walked onto the stage.

He coughed into the microphone and after a loud electric scream from the speakers had ceased he addressed the audience.

"Hi there, I'm sure you all agree that the schooling system is a factory, right?"

There were excited yells in agreement.

"Yeah I knew I wasn't the only one," he spoke slowly and softly. "'Be not as your peers; be individual and unashamed' I remember being taught." The audience nodded, poignant. "But follow this advice carefully lest you be exiled to the sewers and back alleys and shadows that lie beneath and behind those that are successful, those that have shunned this advice and buckled and relented to conformity."

He took a step back to take a drink of the pint he was holding while the audience cheered.

"'Stand up,' I remember being taught. 'Be vocal and dissident against that which taunts and angers you.'" The audience nodded again. Someone whooped. "But do not stand too tall or too proud lest you be hunted by that which you oppose, and they will be more powerful than you, with better weaponry and ammunition in abundance while you fight with sticks and rocks."

The audience cheered again, louder this time, some standing.

"I remember being taught of diversity's virtue, to celebrate all our differences. But how far does this celebration go before I am forced to be condemned? The corpse-fucker, the siblings that share their sex between them, he who is aroused by the child or the dog: 'do not celebrate this,' I am warned, 'lest you be...'"

Now everyone was standing but not cheering any more. Now they were hissing and booing. Tearing pages from their notebooks, crumpling them up and throwing them at him.

He stood tall amidst the bombardment, held on tight to the microphone and shouted quickly, "Ignorance is not bliss, for ignorance can be shattered like the most fragile of bones. Apathy is bliss, I say. Apathy cannot be contested by even the most vile truths. He who takes his own life is not to be mourned, he should be celebrated. He who rapes and murders should be commemorated with plaques and statues equal to the greatest of heroes."



They began throwing bottles and shouting louder and he hunched his shoulders, still holding the microphone.

"It is he who holds the mirror into which all others look, an indestructible looking glass that reflects the most basic of truths; that a whipped beast eventually bites."

The same people that had put out the fire now escorted Alan who, instead of resisting as they had expected, was just laughing. He walked with them off the stage and through a fire exit.

## CHAPTER 22 – CULTURE

John and I didn't hurry to find him; we casually walked outside to avoid any guilt through proximity - John's idea - and when we walked out to the car park that the fire escape joined we saw him talking to a man whose black trenchcoat covered a black netted shirt, leather trousers and black boots. Long black hair, black make-up on his lips and eyes. We interrupted whatever conversation they were having.

"So what now?" John asked.

John had a few ideas, as did the goth. Mostly they involved going to clubs in the city. The discussion was mainly over which club, what kind of music. I wasn't sure why we were even attached to the goth, but Alan seemed to be sure of his convictions and didn't want to lose sight of him, he looked at him as though he was valuable, never taking his eyes away for too long unless he escaped and left Alan to search again from the beginning.

The goth's argument was met with enthusiasm from Alan while John's was met with flat, negative response. We waited outside for the goth's friends to join us, then we were to follow, Alan close to the goth while John was stood close to me, as if quietly declaring his despondency, but I didn't care where we went and would prefer to go with Alan if the three of us were separated.

When the friends did emerge from the pub and saw Alan they became enraged. One of them, dreadlocked hair and a pierced face, walked up to him with the rest of his pack encouraging him from behind. Without looking at the goth the dreadlocked one asked him, "What's going on here? You're talking to this prick?"

"Yeah, what's the problem?" He replied with a child's tone.

"The problem is," the dreadlocked one said and stepped closer to Alan in a deliberate attempt to frighten him by pushing into his personal space, "he's a paedophile sympathiser and a perverted bestiality defender."

He was talking to his friend only indirectly; the person he most wanted to hear his spittle-coated words was Alan, who stifled a laugh. The group behind the dreadlocked one made a noise, paraphrasing their leader's words to reinforce them or simply muttering about how much of a prick Alan was.

The dreadlocked one stood for a while, a couple of inches from Alan, staring at him, waiting for him to start a fight. When he didn't the dreadlocked one pushed him, his arms moving outward and shrugging as Alan stepped back, regained his balance and sighed. The dreadlocked one stepped forward so they were close again, leaned his face close enough to threaten a kiss or a headbutt.

"Fucking freak, fucking paedophile freak, fucking dogfucker. Why don't you just fuck off, fuck off back to your sexkids and your sexdogs, you miserable shit."

"You want me to fuck a kid and a dog?"

The dreadlocked one opened his mouth. Then closed it. Then pushed Alan with one hand and turned away, to walk with his group victorious. We watched them walk away and heard their disapproving scorn until they'd disappeared round the corner. Alan was disappointed only by the fact that the goth had joined their group and was gone.

We followed John through the illuminated city that was host to girls in underwear and topless, statuesque gay men handing out flyers for nightclubs that offered 2 4 1 Cocktails and Pints 4 £1.

The children were out too, playing with the drunken men in games of destruction and optical groping. The children didn't need alcohol - they were innocent enough. They couldn't get any anyway. They latched on to the groups of drunken men the way baby sharks attach themselves to their mothers so they can eat the scraps of whatever dead fish she's devouring.

The groups walked zigzag; forward and over the road to a phone box where they kicked out the glass, forward and across the road to a girl they aggressively propositioned, forward and over the road to a bus stop to spit on and kick in, etcetera etcetera until they reached a pub where the men went inside to refuel and the children waited, parading up and down the street outside.

John led us into a place called Alt Dot Ellipsis; a club separated into three tiers, each one playing its own genre of dissident music; heavy metal in the basement, angry punk on the ground floor and techno-beats at the top.

John paid the admission for all three of us and after half an hour we had dispersed and lost each other in the crowds.

I kept moving from the basement to the ground floor to the techno beats upstairs, looking for one of them and hoping that I wouldn't find them.

The counter-culture has been perverted. Counter-culture and the culture it was opposed to now make love to each other. The result is this: a verse, a chorus, a second verse, a chorus again, a middle eight and a final chorus.

I traversed each tier and paid attention to the music then decided on this conclusion.

I watched the crowd downstairs, everyone dancing with their heads down. I watched the crowd on the top floor, everyone dancing with heads skyward.

It makes no difference. They're dancing to different music but the structure, the essence, is the same.

The drinks in Alt Dot Ellipsis were free and I was standing in a darkened corner of the ground floor, because the queue for the bar was the shortest, sipping at what could have been my twelfth bottle of beer, maybe more, I don't think less, watching the crowd as they shook and swayed to music I didn't know.

I was tapped on the shoulder and turned to my right. Standing there was a man dressed in torn jeans, a t-shirt and a bandana, whose mouth and brow were both moving furiously.

I couldn't hear what he was saying to me because of the music. But because of the lights I could see the spit being flung out of his mouth in green, yellow, red and white strobes. He was angry and shouting but I didn't know why so I shrugged and pointed at my ear, made my face

sympathetic. He grabbed the shoulder of my suit jacket and ragged me outside, into the company of cigarette smokers that congregated in the car park.

I felt my pockets and found I had a pack of cigarettes, put one between my lips and asked anyone close by for a lighter. Once I had lit it and taken a drag he grabbed it and threw it onto the floor.

"Why were you staring at my chick?" He snarled, his face close to mine so I could smell his warm alcohol breath.

"Which one is your girlfriend?"

He didn't reply. Instead he looked down at the ground to his left and pinched the bridge of his nose. Then he looked up again and said, "Do you think you're funny?"

"No."

Whenever anyone asks this question you say no or else you end up on the ground. In this case I had another reason as well as that, one that I thought might work in my favour; honesty.

"Neither do I. I think you're sick. Coming to a nightclub to watch chicks dance. Can't you afford a strip club?"

"They don't strip here," I said as if it was a valid argument.

He grabbed my collar and pushed me against the wall.

"Mike," he called out to a group of smokers. Mike turned round - a man twice the size of normal people, arms bulging as much as his eyes were. My antagonist flicked his head back and Mike walked over to us.

My antagonist said something into Mike's ear and then walked away, back into the club. Mike and I stood uncomfortably with each other. I snatched the cigarette from the ground and asked around again for a light. Mike kept watching me, terrifying me.

Maybe if I ran he wouldn't have followed. But maybe he would have, maybe he'd have caught up to me, sent me to the ground and punched my face until I was a messy, toothless runt choking on his own blood. I decided to wait in Mike's supervision. Behave. Comply.

Then my antagonist reappeared, bringing with him a girl dressed in a small skirt and smaller top, displaying her legs and most of her tits.

"So you fancy her do you? Want to see her tits? Want to see her little pussy? You want to know what it'd be like to fuck her?"

"I'm not saying she isn't attractive," I had begun to speak like a politician; diplomatic and slow. Like talking to an angry child. I carried on in the same way. "But that's not my agenda."

"Mike, get a taxi."

My antagonist grabbed me by the collar and dragged me into the taxi. I was sat in the middle,

between him and his girlfriend. Mike in the front. As we travelled the lights and the grey of the city were left behind us and in their place silhouetted forests lined the road.

Soon they had changed to the silhouetted gardens and houses of suburbia. The car stopped outside of one of these houses. After paying the driver my antagonist grabbed the back of my collar and pulled me out of the taxi, into his house and upstairs.

## CHAPTER 23 – BDSM

He took me to a bedroom and told me to lie down on the bed. When I said no he took a cricket bat from the wall - signed by the England team that played that year's Ashes - and hit my shins with it. Hard.

The pain was so unbearable that I felt, heard, saw and tasted it. The sharpest, loudest, most vulgar brightness I had ever experienced.

I laid down without any thought besides avoiding the bat's wrath again. He tied my arms and legs to the bed and I didn't dare resist. I might have been crying but I didn't notice.

His girlfriend walked into the room. At his insistence, delivered through teeth grit below a furrowed brow that was host to burning eyes, she took off her clothes until she was naked, then she took a bottle of lubricant from him and poured some of it onto my cock that became hard immediately, then smothered her vagina with what clung to her fingers.

Whilst she was fucking me he punched my face, focusing mostly on my mouth and eyes. This was my first foray into the sado-masochist world and I felt I was experiencing a second-hand rush. The real victim and perpetrator here was my antagonist, his fetish disguised by a veil woven of indignancy and vigilantism. When he wasn't looking at me to line up a punch he was looking at his girlfriend rocking on top of me. The disgust he felt watching her lent fury to his punches. There was a definite system at work. Cause and effect. Machine like.

When it hurts where it already hurts there's a strange euphoria, an instant of release like an orgasm. It's the smallest flash of light in the largest depth of suffocating darkness, brighter than a supernova. It's what you look forward to. It's a cup of sugar after a thousand cups of salt. It's the breath of air after fifteen minutes of drowning even though you know you'll just sink again. It's your fingertip clinging to the cliff edge and then when it's gone, when you feel your head jerking back but the flash has gone, that's when you've let go and you're in the dark ocean. Warm.

I woke up on the floor of the living room. Pain had manifested itself in hard lumps that stretched the skin of my face. I didn't need a mirror to know how bad I looked. I was alone in the room and could hear snores leaking through one wall. The sun threw as much light as it could muster from so low beneath the horizon and I could see enough, so I didn't begrudge it from not using all its energy. It was using most of it not to produce light but to climb the sky, after all.

As I stood up and fastened my clothes my shins ached from the weight of what they had to carry. Regardless, I moved quietly to the door with my shoes in one hand. It was locked. Obviously. The coat he had been wearing was slung over the sofa. I found keys in the pocket, unlocked the door with the third one I tried, slipped out and locked it behind me. Hoped I had the only copy.

I stood in the air wondering where I was and what direction to walk in. Aching. I didn't think about walking for long. A car on the drive, keys in my hand. They deserved their house burning while they slept. It was an easy decision to make.

## CHAPTER 24 - TIMOTHY

I found my way to the city in the car, parked it on the top floor of a tall car park and got out, leaving the radio playing to either no-one or itself.

The wind and noise were refreshing. The city was in front of me and so, I presumed, was Alan. I could have left but why would I? The idea of leaving without him was as ridiculous as anything I'd ever heard. I hardly even considered it. If I'd known my way to John's I would have gone straight there.

Back in the car, driving around looking for something of interest. What I could see of any interest, after smoking a cigarette from the packet I found in the glove compartment, was a police station.

A painful fatigue dragged my eyelids downward and increased the volume of distant voices, dislocated from the world and trapped inside my aching skull. I shrugged, ran the whole length of the radio dial then turned it off and decided that the police station was my first punt. That while I waited for nothing I'd figure out where else he might be. I suppose that was what I was waiting for. Waiting until I'd figured out where else he might be.

Twenty minutes later, after smoking another cigarette and rooting through the car (and finding a twenty pound note under the seat) I was overcome with huge tidal emotion; relief, bewilderment, disbelief. Alan walked out through the police station's heavy doors.

His face looked as bad as mine and his shirt was missing a sleeve. I sounded the horn and he looked over. He hardly recognised me and he walked tentatively toward the car until he saw John's tropical fish tie and then his step quickened.

He got into the passenger seat and threw the suit jacket he was carrying into the back, next to mine. Once he was in the car the doors were locked and the roads were opened.

Sounds and images rushed by outside of our metal and glass shell and we rolled forward, no direction other than forward. Fields and farms passed by us as the sky went through its myriad spectrum. We sped without conversation. When we heard a steady thudding we decided we ought to pull over.

On the hard shoulder. Outside of the car we felt vulnerable. We were no longer a part of the motion, now the motion threatened us; huge lorries and tiny sports cars each with their own tone of scream rushing past us, an arm's length away, all of them towing a vacuum.

We realised quickly that the thudding wasn't a fault with the car since it carried on even when we'd stopped and shut off the engine. We stood staring at it shuddering with every thud.

Alan found a rock and brandished it and I opened the boot. In the soft luminescence of the motorway's lights we saw, in the shadowed compartment, a face. Obscured below the nose by black electrical tape.

Once we had looked closely we saw the tape went from his mouth and was wrapped around his entire body, binding his lips, arms and legs in a cocoon. We left him where he was and tore away the tape round his mouth, four layers we had to dislodge and each inch he responded to with

decreasingly muffled screams.

When his mouth was free it looked sore; skin had been torn from his face by the adhesive, his beard was in patches, half of the hair clinging to the tape. We gazed into his bloodshot eyes, unaware of what to say to him, frightened and pleading eyes that betrayed a confused uncertainty. Unsure of what to do we put the tape back over his mouth.

Together we heaved him onto the grass verge by the side of the road.

"What are you going to do to me?" he asked through the tape, tears beginning to grow in his quivering eyes.

Alan grabbed the back of my shirt and led me away from the cocoon.

"Who is he?"

"I've no idea."

I'd already explained the events of the night before. He hadn't given any explanation to his own wounds but I didn't mind.

He looked at me for a while, hoping that silence would accompany his contemplation. It didn't. The dark road was busy. He combed his fingers through his hair as he scowled before leaving me and walking to the electric tape man and liberating his lips again.

They spoke quietly but, even despite the ocean that roared a few feet away, I could hear them.

"Who are you?"

"Timothy Price. Please don't hurt me anymore."

There were several reasons why having a conversation with a man wrapped in electrical tape at the side of a busy motorway was a bad idea so we hauled him into the back seat, secured him with the seatbelt, fastened it tight so he wouldn't roll around.

I drove, with Alan in the back seat unwrapping Timothy. The three of us were all as confused as each other. We were looking at a man, once bound and locked in the boot, now a liberated cocoon. In the rear view mirror he was looking at two freaks with battered faces sharing shrugs and disconcerting glances.

The three of us conversed, trying to find out who he was while he tried to find out who we were. Since he said he couldn't remember much, due to heroin and pink pills, we also told him little. He could remember being in the house - the same house I had stolen the car from - and a sadistic and angry man entering, holding him at knife point while he taped him up.

Alan took the tape from Timothy's wrist and blood started pouring from a deep wound the tape had sealed. Panicking a little Alan leaned over Timothy, rolled down the window and moved the bleeding arm so it was hanging out of the car. He took some of the tape lying around and secured the Timothy's arm to the outside of the door.

"You don't remember that happening?"



"No. I can't move my hand," and again, suddenly upright and afraid, "I can't move my hand!"

"It's just cos of the wind; it's cold, that's all."

Timothy didn't seem satisfied with Alan's conclusion but he quickly realised that nothing else was going to happen to help him. Alan had put the tape back on his wrist so it wasn't bleeding as heavily and after the hurried conversation, after the blood and panic, after calming him and telling him he would be fine, there was not much else to say to each other. Alan clambered into the front passenger seat and turned the radio on then fiddled with the dials so it only played in the back, so that we could speak without him hearing.

We decided that it would have been too easy to give him to a hospital. We had acquired him; we weren't going to just give him to some doctors and walk away. Would he be a burden to us? We had no idea where we were going or what to do when we got there, so the question was pretty much rhetorical.

## CHAPTER 25 – CATAclysm

The road passed beneath us and reappeared as if it were on a rotation. A city grew on the horizon, its lights dim efforts beneath the orange glow of dusk. Alan wanted to head into it but I had fallen in love with our movement and didn't want to betray it. Even if the ocean had arrived to lap at our progress I would have held the pedal down. I wanted to push forward, onward, fast and quiet and with eyes focused beyond any destination.

We slowed as we drew deeper into the city. Timothy's arm was back in the car, wrapped so tightly in tape that his hand had started to turn purple.

Alan wanted to find someone to have sex with. I didn't; I was still reeling from my last encounter. Timothy was still terrified because he couldn't move his hand. I parked the car in a dusty sand field and the three of us walked into the noise of the pre-dawn metropolis.

We found a bar and bought three pints of the cheapest lager. Alan paid with a twenty pound note he took from a roll of ten or more, held together by two elastic bands. Once we'd finished the first he bought another round.

Tim didn't seem happy. He seemed nervous, confused and afraid. But he drank the drinks quietly while Alan and I discussed arbitrary questions such as the default speed of escalators and the pity of the obese.

We drank slowly and talked quickly. After the second drink night had overcome the sun. Alan stood up and declared that he was going to find himself something to fuck and that he'd meet us at the car in the morning, dropped a twenty pound note onto the table and walked away. Neither of us made any effort to stop him or join him; we were satisfied with the warm, cheap bar.

After the third pint Timothy went pale and staggered outside, round the corner. I followed and watched him throw up onto the concrete. He wiped his mouth on his sleeve and looked at me but I couldn't understand what he wanted from just his face so I led him to the tables outside the bar. I helped him on to a seat out of view of the staff then went inside and bought another two drinks.

He drank his with a shaking hand and sweating brow as if I was holding a gun to his head and forcing him to. I tried to make conversation with him, asking him about anything that drifted in front of my consciousness. Politics, economy, girls in the bar, sport; every question was answered with a forced shrug or awkward grimace. He was trying to smile, I think.

I bought another couple of pints for the both of us. I didn't know why. He was like an orphan child in some film; quiet now, but later he'd be suddenly overcome with trust and tell me all about his abusive foster parents, crying into his borrowed shirt that was already stained with blood and sick.

But he wasn't this romantic fiction. He was a man in his thirties, cut open, bound, imprisoned and maybe raped, who knew? I didn't, and I didn't care. He was so morose that any sympathy I may have once had was beginning to dissolve. And quickly.

Why had I felt responsible for him? Because he was a victim? Who wasn't? If I could have met

someone who was without such a burden I would have embraced them and kissed them passionately. No-one here, or anywhere, was without victimisation.

My pulse quickened and my face hurt. I told him I was going back to the car and he mirrored me, drinking the rest of his pint by filling his mouth as much as he could and then swallowing as though someone was squeezing his cheeks. He repeated this action four times until the glass was empty but for a half inch of spit diluted lager.

He followed me a few feet behind, waited outside the shop while I bought a small bottle of whiskey, kept following me to the car. I unlocked it and he crawled like a lame dog into the back and laid across the seats. I sat in the driver's seat and turned the radio on, tilting the bottle until it burned my mouth. He slept as I drank.

A tapping on the window woke me and as I jolted upright I heard the choking sound of the bottle before I realised that my lap was getting wet. It was the smell that alerted me to the spill and I scrambled, stood the bottle up by accident then knocked it onto the floor where it made a sad, hollow sound. Not the sharp explosion I expected.

In the darkness I could see Alan's stern face peering in close to the window, illuminated by the lights of the dash board.

I rolled the window down and as my reflection disappeared I saw a woman next to him. He stuck his head in next to my face and told me to get out. After I'd unlocked the door, opened it and begun to step out I told him that Timothy was asleep on the back seat and that if he wanted me to leave I would appreciate another twenty quid. He gave me the money and told the woman to back off then moved, round the car to where Timothy was slumped, and opened the door. He shook him and slapped his face but Tim was out cold.

"He was sick after three pints." I was standing next to Alan, peering over his shoulder.

The woman pushed us both aside and held up the arm that had been bleeding. Blood had poured from the gaps in the tape. She put her hand over his nose and mouth. "He isn't breathing."

Alan and I looked at each other. She put her fingers on his clean wrist.

"There's no pulse. There's no fucking pulse."

I knew that he wasn't thinking. That he was afraid. Content to give in to compulsion. He grabbed her throat and she fell to the ground. He fell onto her and didn't let go. I stood and watched. I should have said something, done something, prised his hands from her throat or hit him or kicked him. Instead I stood and watched.

I helped him drag Timothy from the car and lie him next to the woman on the hard shoulder.

I drank the small amount left in the bottle as I drove. Next to me he rolled a joint.

On the motorway cars rushed past without sound. He lit the joint and we rolled down our windows. He smoked it for a while then passed it to me. I got high and passed it back.

There were two dead bodies behind us. I knew he was forming words to explain their sacrifice, to give reason to them. Whatever he told me I wouldn't believe him. I had stood and watched him strangle a person. Seen her eyes widen and wander looking for help. Seen her plead. Heard her last breath echo against the concrete buildings and dissipate.

They wouldn't be found for hours. I felt cold. Even my bones felt cold. My eyes, my tongue, all numbed by the frost that descended, that I had to accept. My sight drifted downwards, heavy with tears.

I awoke in a white cavern where sounds echoed furiously. White noise. The only regularity was mechanical dots. White sound percussion. White percussion sound. Something. I tried to close my eyes. A woman moved through a curtain toward me. She stopped when her eyes met mine.

"Where's Alan?"

Her eyes moved, sympathetic. "Who's Alan?" As she spoke she checked computers that I realised I was attached to.

"He was in the car with me. In the passenger seat."

She wrote something on a small notepad she kept in her pocket. "You mean Michael?"

"No I mean Alan."

"The only other person in the vehicle was Michael Asquith. I'm sorry. He didn't survive the crash."

"What crash?"

She looked at me for a second apologetic then walked back through the curtain. I couldn't sustain consciousness and fell into the shadows behind my eyes.

## Part Two

Running at closed doors,  
Hoping they'll open in time  
Or from the impact.

## CHAPTER 26 – MATTHEW

I could not move nor feel my body. From a place behind my eyes, somewhere between asleep and awake, I looked around, slowly, between blinks that lasted hours.

The white walls didn't seem solid. They had a depth, the kind that of depth that defines darkness.

I was lying in a bed, my head propped up slightly so that I could see what I assumed was my body hidden beneath a thin blanket. There were machines and screens with wires and pipes that went under the blanket also. Sometimes there were people in the room wearing blue outfits, monitoring them or tampering with them.

I watched a clock grinding away minutes.

I don't know how long I stayed there in the bed. Ten minutes or ten years, it made no difference. I had been placed somewhere isolated from time. If it was eight o'clock I would be laying and waiting. Eleven o'clock the same. Every o'clock I laid and waited.

Sometimes I would be fed with a spoon and a smile. To the uniformed waitresses there were regular intervals and strict patterns, but to me there were only abstract peaks in an otherwise flat landscape.

Desolation was my kingdom, my throne a stiff bed.

Beyond the walls, through the window in the door, another galaxy hurried. I had no speed, no momentum. I was a plant that was tended to, immobile in a corner. The only things I saw were that room and the backs of my eyes. Sleep was dreamless and meant nothing, so it was just a matter of waking up and everything carrying on the same interminable continuum.

I might have been there five minutes or five millennia. Locked in the bed, surrounded by perpetual white. The constant beeping and ticking of my peripheral mechanisms dissolving quickly into the walls.

Sometimes I would look at the machine that monitored my heartbeat and hold my breath so that it would change its pace. That was the only variation that I had.

The piss and shit that often surrounded my groin disappeared between blinks.

Sometimes they touched me with slick metal probes, touched me beneath my skin. Sometimes they introduced a new liquid into my veins. All the while I watched the clock grind away minutes.

Time and mobility became distant memories and looking at them from so far away I saw the link between them. Time can't exist without movement, I realised. And movement without time is chaotic nonsense.

Suddenly I found myself somewhere else, outside the room, outside of anything physical, looking down on Time and Mobility as if they were worlds I was observing from space, the first a remarkable, scattered infinite, the second an ever changing shape with infinite sides and infinite

mass.

I returned in the time it took to blink and was greeted by a figure at my bedside, a creature made of light. It didn't speak but as I looked at it I knew what it was telling me.

I could see it only because I was travelling at the speed of light, otherwise it would have passed by me. Here the figure was static but outside of our speed we were an instant. I looked into it and saw it was not a figure; it was an apocalypse. It was the result of human endeavour. The constant endeavour for speed.

We have always, throughout every era and epoch, become faster. We have created faster and faster vehicles, we have found means to send information instantly. Men are always training so that they can run faster than the fastest man.

Eventually we will reach infinite speed in which every birth and death, every evolutionary step, every thought and action, every possibility will occur instantly. An infinite instant. Time and movement will become obsolete and the world will become an infinitely small and infinitely large flash of light, lasting forever while simultaneously vanishing before it can be seen.

It was with a dry mouth and uncertain limbs that I decided to prise away the equipment that intruded my skin. I pulled off plasters and removed intravenous canals until I was free from my mechanical benefactors. According to the clock it was the middle of the night, two hands hiding each other. On a digital clock four square zeros.

## CHAPTER 27 – ESCAPE

Out of my room I simply walked past the gossiping nurses and made my way through a pair of wooden doors and into a huge corridor. I was wearing a hospital robe; a crude piece of material that hung about me and was tied at the back, leaving my arms, shins, calves and feet exposed. I walked the corridors looking for inspiration.

Eventually I was given a sign: NURSES' LOCKER ROOM, it said, with an arrow that indicated that it was through the door it hung beside. I peered through the door's thin windows and, since I could see no-one inside, crept in.

The room was empty and the single camera that spied over the tiles and steel was easily covered without showing my face. The lockers were easy to open with the safety pin I had found on the floor and after four containing dresses and high heels I came across a suit and polished leather shoes, all slightly too big for me but that was better than them being too small.

I tried to follow the signs to the exit but got lost on the seventh floor. I kept an air of professionalism and asked a nurse the way. He was busy and quickly explained, without even caring, without caring to notice that, beneath the well-tailored facade, I was an escapee.

My progression through the corridors was halted often as I had to sit down to ease my spine, which burned as I moved.

While I felt almost dislocated from the world, my new found prophetic knowledge having the opposite effect of a burden, the pain inside me anchored me so that I could not leave - could not become as fast as my visitor had been - and I was grateful for it. I couldn't afford to leave. I had a responsibility. Not to prevent this instant infinite but to survive it. And to survive it with others.

The darkness held behind sliding glass doors was a welcoming vastness and, when the glass parted, I entered its embracing chill. Upon my departure of the hospital and arrival into a world without bright lights or white walls I was welcomed back into nature by a display of its vigour. The rumbling sky flashed blue and released a force of rain to douse me in its splendour. I breathed deep the scent of wet concrete and sombre trees and found a bench in a park, where I sat and enjoyed the heavy cold that fell on me.

I had been granted a great insight but was unsure of what to do with it. I felt that I shouldn't try to prevent the instant infinite, but I didn't know if that meant I should encourage it. Alan would have pursued it and embraced it. If anything was more beautiful than the race devouring itself unknowing it was the race speeding towards its own, self-imposed destruction, blindly and with gleeful fervour.

I would have followed him into whatever corridor, street or sewer he wanted to lead me through. The rain that poured over me picked up this sentiment and carried it to the wet ground, into the gutters with the sodden leaves and litter.

It had been light, not darkness, that imparted this knowledge to me. I regarded this as a symbolic encouragement to endeavour to save our planet and its inhabitants from their doom. It was



obvious that it would be impossible to halt the progression of speed. No apocalypse can ever be prevented. Instead it must be acknowledged and survived.

Therefore I resolved that I must pass on my knowledge to anyone who would welcome it. But my knowledge was useless if it was offered without sanctuary. If speed was to be the demise of our people I knew I must cease entertaining the notion of time in my own existence and eradicate it from the psychology of those who would wish to be saved.

It would be difficult for me to disassociate myself from such an ingrained belief and it would, therefore, be even more difficult to disassociate others from the same idea, as they would need to understand the conversation between my visitor and me as I understood it.

I would have to present myself as the visitor had presented itself to me; a truth, an unquestioned reality, an obvious foresight but one that is only apparent once it has been shown. The sand on the seabed might as well be rock until it's swirled by naked feet.

## CHAPTER 28 - BENSON'S

At some point I fell asleep on the bench and when I awoke the sky had become bright and the ground dry. I was wet and I felt ill.

I walked shivering and sneezing to the city proper with no purpose.

At a franchise coffee shop I ordered a warm drink and was ejected by scowling faces when I admitted that I couldn't pay since I had no money. Outside I checked the pockets of the suit I was wearing and found a wallet with identification belonging to a James Tamer and sixty pounds that now belonged to me.

I threw the I.D. in a bin and entered another coffee shop that belonged to the same franchise. The furniture and staff all looked the same as the last place and it may as well have been *deja vu* except that the view from the windows was different. I bought a large cup of decorated coffee and sat as close to the radiator as I could.

While I drank it I considered how I could possibly go about explaining my new knowledge to others. I didn't have the mystical properties of my visitor; I was skin and eyes that could easily be ignored or ridiculed, a body that could be pushed away.

Outside again I moved through the city quickly, in no particular direction. I realised I was adept at moving through the crowds; spotting gaps, speeding up or slowing down accordingly and never losing momentum. I'd step in front of someone without tripping or stalling them, glide past another. Sometimes I would spin on my heels or almost dance, arms outstretched, past someone.

While I was doing this I was looking for an answer but I didn't even know the question.

Maybe I'd catch someone's eye and see a spark or maybe I'd hear some quiet exclamation that I could respond to. I expected that I'd just know it when I found it.

With the hope of an answer relegated to spontaneity, I decided to find shelter for the night. Perhaps for longer. Factories and chimneys lined the distance to the east and I headed there.

While the core of the city was decorated with gaudy colours and sex, the factory area sustaining it had no such facade. It was grey and dirty. The mechanics were on display. It was as loud as the city's core but it was a different type of loud; there were no women here, the actions happening were more laboured and the sounds were metallic. Men worked alongside machines and behaved just like them.

Eventually I found a building that lacked any activity. The corrugated metal screens were padlocked to a bearing attached to the ground, the forecourt was bereft of trucks or men, the windows were covered in either metal or a yellow film of filth and no lights were on behind them. I decided that this would be my resting place. On the whitewashed outside wall, above the shielded doorways and the stopped clock, a deteriorating sign read BENSON'S.

Round the back of the huge building grass and weeds were growing through the concrete. A

wooden door, paint flaking away in curls, had been sealed shut with three bolts screwed into the doorframe. I used a coin from the wallet to unscrew them and walked inside. It seemed embarrassing that while the front of the building was sealed with thick metal, round the back it was only vulnerable rotting wood that stood against intruders.

Inside it was colder than outside. I stood a few feet in from the open door while my pupils dilated to accommodate the darkness. While I waited I breathed in the smell of my new home; stale sweat, rust and damp. I could hear water systematically hitting the ground, echoing from the hard walls. Even after five minutes I could barely make out the coloured lines on the ground, though they were no longer hidden in darkness, now it was dust that obstructed my vision.

I left the place, pushed the door closed and walked back into the city. From a camping store I stole a torch and bought a sleeping bag. Outside the shop, in a large street that served as a carotid artery - large enough that even despite the vast amount of people they were spread thin - my stride was halted and my ears snatched at by a nearby voice, louder than the dull mutter and footsteps around me.

It was coming from a large woman who was marching back and forth in the middle of the street, her right arm raised, finger pointing skyward and shaking. Her other hand was cradling an open book that she occasionally glanced down at.

The passing crowds granted her a wide berth to parade in. I moved back, out of the way of any motion, to the side of the street where I could watch her, though mostly I watched those who moved close by her.

Her preaching of God and repent seemed to only aggravate those who heard it, encouraging not penance or prayer but laughter and yells of contention and ridicule.

Despite this rebuttal she wasn't deterred. Her monologue grew in volume and vigour, she was angry and spitting as she reprimanded the ignorant and cast out the devil from even those unwilling to accept her salvation.

I doubted if I could be able to muster such enthusiasm for my cause as she did, if I'd be able to do what she did; disseminate my knowledge with such conviction and vigour.

Then I realised that if I was so certain of my vision, so sure that my knowledge was true, then I should have confidence in my ability to share it with others. I sat down against the wall of a shop.

## CHAPTER 29 – MANIFESTO

Watching the people rushing and using their mobile phones I soon understood that it wasn't faith in my knowledge that I lacked, but faith that shelter from it was what was needed. These people wanted the end to come, if they knew it or not. They were all running toward the same exit, hoping that the door would open when they got there. If it was closed they would feel as if they had failed; their aim was to keep that door open and get through it.

But then I knew to expect that. If they wanted to be damned then damn them. If they wanted to be ignorant then I'd ignore them. That was the difference between the preacher I watched and myself; she believed that they could all be saved, that she belonged to a vigilant army fighting evil and saving the souls it corrupted. I didn't want an army, I wanted to hide.

She wanted to march onto the battlefield with her standard held aloft and confront her apocalypse. I wanted to tunnel into the ground and avoid mine.

If anyone wanted to join me then it was my duty to let them know and to house them in my hiding place. If anyone didn't want to know, I didn't care.

Back in Benson's I tossed the sleeping bag onto the ground and scanned the place with the torch.

There were machines long since retired, covered in thick yellow dust and I had no idea what any of them used to do. Conveyor belts like snow covered roads, desolate and motionless. The floor was a concrete myriad of colour coded lines. Above, metal walkways jutted out like jetties. The whole place had evolved into a shrine of abandonment. Such a lonely place welcomed me.

After exploring the main floor I forced my way through a wooden door held closed by a rusted lock that was easily kicked open. It led to a large office area, desks now anchors for cobwebs but I couldn't see even one spider; even they had deserted.

The second door I kicked down led to what I guessed was the boss's office. Behind it a desk screwed into the floor, an empty windowpane overlooking the factory floor and a wall of filing cabinets.

Like everything else in the place every surface was covered in dust that rose in clouds like smoke when it was disturbed. I kicked most of the dust from the floor and out of the door onto the metal walkway then laid my sleeping bag out.

Behind more locked doors easily kicked down were more offices like the first. I looked through every drawer and filing cabinet that was open or that had a lock I could pick. All I found was blank paper.

I moved all the paper into a pile on the factory floor. It took almost an hour. Eventually I had a huge collection of white pages, a pile that splayed across the ground. It would have made a glorious fire but I decided to use it to fuel something else.

It had grown dark outside. I used a few pages of paper I had found within the blank pages, with graphs and charts printed on them, to make a small fire inside the boss's office. Once the corner I had decided to bunk in was warm I stamped out the fire and got into the sleeping bag, fully clothed and with my shoes on.

I woke up some time in the middle of the night, shivering and with frozen blood. I relit the fire using whatever pieces hadn't turned to charcoal. It hurt my eyes and the smoke hurt my throat but I sat close and warmed my skin.

I was tired but knew that if I was to sleep again I would only wake up colder. The pile of papers glistened in the firelight like a huge jewel. If I couldn't spread my knowledge with my voice I would have to use a pen.

When the yellow windows had begun to glow softly and the fire had been reduced to struggling embers I left them to fade into ash and made my way once again into the city.

I looked for a typewriter but couldn't find one in any shop so I took a few pens from a bank that gave them away for free. I had brought a few pieces of paper with me and found a cheap pub to begin jotting down ideas.

Outside with a beer I sat down at the only free table, lit a cigarette from the packet I had bought and set down the paper.

The pen remained poised in my hand for the duration of the cigarette, hovering over the page, waiting for me to command it. I had a lot to say but nowhere to begin, as though I was in the middle of it all, understanding but unable to translate.

A pair of college girls asked if they could share the table and a motion of my hand let them know I didn't care. They sat down and chatted with each other. My pen still didn't move. I had such great resolve that it was frustrating that I couldn't begin. Just like those men who pull aeroplanes know, the hardest part of having momentum is creating it. But they can find the energy and strength to get the thing rolling.

If I had the energy, I didn't have any place to put it. I didn't know where it should go, where the start was. I drew a stupid picture of a stickman grinding his head against a wall, wrote a stupid haiku then threw my pen down.

"What do you two think about speed?" I asked the girls.

"Never tried it. Have you done it, Jen?"

"Yeah once. I spent four hours thinking there were spiders in my hair. It felt like four weeks. I'd not do it again."

"I don't mean the drug, I mean the physiological idea. Distance over time."

"What's to think about? Distance over time equals speed."

"Time is just an association," I said. I'd decided I'd just start talking and see if I could come up with anything. "The association between Now, Before and After. Distance over time can't ever exist because time *is* distance; a metaphysical distance between action and effect."

I jotted that down next to the stickman.

The two girls took a long drink and looked at each other, communicating with encrypted tics. They declared that they had to leave and hurried away. They didn't finish their drinks, so I poured what they had left into my glass. I took a drink and picked up the pen, aimed it at the page.

*This distance can be manipulated, it can be stretched or shrunk if the man perceiving it so wishes. If it can be shrunk, it can be eradicated; it can be shrunk to zero.*

*By eliminating our concept of time the concept of Instant cannot exist. For Instant is a division of time.*

*If we cannot experience Instant, we will be unaffected by it - we will be unaffected by Infinite Instant.*

*We will survive without time while those who followed it are condemned to their static Instancy.*

*We will build a new world.*

*A world without time.*

*You cannot imagine it for time is ingrained into our thoughts, our movements, our consciousness.*

*But you need not imagine it.*

*All you need imagine is the torture of an Infinite Instant.*

*You need not imagine escape, for it is real.*

*You may witness escape.*

*We shall hide in the old Benson's factory, in the city's industrial area.*

*You will find it if you need it.*

I took another mouthful, almost exhausted. I had almost ripped the paper while I was writing but now I'd come to a sudden and complete stop.

I drank, looked at the page, read what I had written, drank, read it again, tried to figure out a sentence to follow what I had written, drank, lit a cigarette, tried to figure out a word to start the next sentence. I read it a third time and thought about starting again, threw my pen onto the table.

"Ey up, lad. What's that you're writing?"

A round man - round bald head, round shoulders, round belly, round legs, round face - helped himself to the seat nearest me. He didn't make eye contact, he looked down toward the table, but he gestated as if he was miming.

"I says," he threw his arms outward. "What is that you're..." he held his hand as if holding a pen, his other hand palm up, pretending it was paper, "writing?"

His hand went into a controlled spasm to imitate writing.

"It's hard to explain," I said. "That's why I'm writing it down."

"Well let me see what I make of it," he said as he scooped up the paper.

I watched him read it and tried to understand his expressions, but he made none; his face remained a plaster impression of nonchalance.

When he put the paper down and slid it to me he took a drink from his glass and coughed into his fist. I expected him to tell me his opinion but he said nothing. His face displayed no emotion or even thought, it was as if he didn't even know I had written anything, let alone read it.

I snatched the page from him, which didn't bother him at all. I picked up the pen, determined to continue this manifesto. The pen made contact with the page but didn't move. It had nowhere to go. I stared at it, read the words.

"Forget it," I said aloud then tossed the rest of the beer down my throat, grabbed the paper and pen and walked away. I felt like a child who had lost an argument.

## CHAPTER 30 – LIBRARY

I didn't want to go back to Benson's quite yet. I wanted to find something. Words. Explanation.

After walking through the city, making turns without thinking, my back screamed at me to sit down. I was outside a library; a huge, proud building, its heavy wooden doors atop marble stairs guarded by giant stone lions.

The pain that anchored me to life seemed to also be acting as a transmitter that my visitor was using to communicate with me.

It had wanted me to stop at the library.

I ascended the stairs and heaved open one half of the tall doors. As soon as I'd crossed the threshold and had passed between the pair of security scanners I was humbled by the weight of information that threatened to tumble from shelves that could only be reached with ladders.

I took the sheet of paper from my pocket and read what I had written. It was nothing more than a small pencil mark on any of the pages of these books.

It must be impossible to read such a vast collection of knowledge in one lifetime and, even if it was possible, it would surely be impossible for any man's memory to contain it all.

Words written millennia ago, thoughts conceived in some instant some millennia ago as accessible as thoughts and words constructed ten minutes ago. It was timeless. The mark I had made on one of these pages, an instant result from an instant action, would become timeless also.

I wrote for two months solid, doing nothing else except sleeping two or three hours a night. I only left Benson's for food, cigarettes, new pens and to shit and piss.

On each sheet of paper I twice copied a refined version of what I had written at the pub and tore the sheet in half to separate the identical passages. I placed one on top of the other in stacks next to me.

Whenever I found that I couldn't control my hand any more - when it twitched and scratched a line on or through the page, when my fingers couldn't hold pen and it fell exhausted to the ground - I would climb the steps to the elevated gangways, lean on the railing, smoke a cigarette and look at the two piles of paper below. The first slowly diminishing and nurturing the neat stacks of the second.

The ache in my wrist was dulled by the searing pain in my spine. My visitor helping me, cheering me on from somewhere else in the only way that it could.

Until finally I was smoking a cigarette and looking down at a wall of neatly stacked pages next to two loose sheets that sometimes woke with a start when the cold breeze whipped them.



Smoke drifted toward the windows where it glowed the same yellow as the soiled glass, passed in front of the huge shutters to show beams of light passing through the gaps.

Amidst this glory I also saw my sleeping bag laying grim and fetid, covered in ash, a little mould at one corner. The only times I had slept I had done it sat cross-legged with a pen in my hand and a pile of paper on my lap.

I stubbed out the cigarette on the railing and tossed it down to the pile of butts below. Decided that I'd leave those last two pages blank. I was finished.

## CHAPTER 31 – HOLE

I hurried into the city with my back arched forward, my lips pursed and my brow low.

Over my shoulder I carried the sleeping bag, filled with as many copies of my manifesto as would fit.

I'd not put them in as I should have; I'd stacked them and then zipped it closed around them and the corners felt as though they were made of brick and my back was wailing by the time I entered the city proper.

I had to sit down and I was thirsty so I walked into a pub. One of the staff made eye contact with me. I nodded hello and he quickly moved around the bar, out of the door that separated the workers from the drinkers, trotted over to me, grabbed my shoulders, spun me round and walked me outside.

I had been so eager and so confident that I had forgotten my sleeping bag was mouldy and that I hadn't washed or changed my clothes for eight weeks. As soon as the barman had gone back inside I dropped the sleeping bag and scratched my whole body as if it itched. It may have itched, that may have been why I felt a sudden compulsion to scratch, but I didn't notice it if it did.

I didn't have time in my thoughts for itches.

As well as a sleeping bag, I needed new clothes. And a wash.

My handwritten burden was important; we had not parted for fifty-six days, I had known it since its inception, it was my offering, that had been cultivated not with love but with vigour.

I bought a pack of bin liners from a shop reluctant to allow me entrance but unable to refuse.

At Benson's, behind the back door, was a chain link fence that separated concrete and steel from mud and trees. I hoisted the heavy sleeping bag over and then scaled it.

The forest got thicker as I progressed deeper into it. Eventually I found a spot between two trees that I would remember. One of the trees had been carved with initials inside a love heart; x loves y forever.

I unzipped the sleeping bag and transferred the paper inside into the bin liners. I dug a hole in the mud with my hands. It took a couple of hours until I was satisfied and I clambered out, stood on its edge and looked into it.

It was a strange thing. The first hole I had ever dug in my life.

I threw the bin bags, which I had secured with gaffa tape from the factory, into it then kicked the mud I had dug out back in. I stamped down to level it out then placed a few Autumn leaves on top.

I got rid of the sleeping bag by dousing it in lighter fluid, lighting one corner and tossing it over a wooden fence.

## CHAPTER 32 – 506

Back in the city I felt like I had passed through a valve, that there was no way of leaving the chamber I found myself in. It was a chamber of stench and repulsion, of dirt and ill sensations. The only way out was through force.

I stayed close to the silver and glass towers, where suited men wandered important and busy. Sitting on the ground and leaning against a cold white wall I watched them emerge from cars, daughter in the back, wife driving. Each one of them fumbled in their pockets and tossed me a couple of silver coins.

I was waiting in the wrong place, I soon realised, and moved to the back of the building where an array of cheap sports cars were aligned within painted white lines.

As soon as I arrived, though, a man in an elaborate security uniform - bow tie and epilates - ejected me in the same friendly manner as the barman had; hands on shoulders, comforting smile, pity in the eyes.

Since I knew that the area was guarded I decided it would be best to find somewhere else to hunt.

I found an area of alleyways and expensive cafes and coffee shops, the men with ties and briefcases leaking in from all around to converge and consume. I got looks of disgust from the ones I put off their coffee. I sat down against another white wall. Again I had silver coins tossed at my feet.

If there were businessmen in the city then they had to live somewhere. I found a map in a tourist information office and stole it. Back in Benson's I studied it and tried to work out the most likely place. Not too close, but not too far. Probably near the river. It was hard to judge from a simple diagram of the city's anatomy but I made an educated guess and when I went there the next day I found that I wasn't far off.

Three young professionals in matching suits and carrying similar briefcases walked over a bridge. Each one of them on their mobiles. They passed where I was sitting, one of them handed me a pound, then I stood up and walked to the other side of the river, where they had come from.

A long road. A few small cafes that all sold expensive coffee and, further down, tall polished high-rises glistening in the morning.

I sat on a bench, over the road from one of them and counted the floors. I tried to imagine the building's layout but it was only to pass time.

Soon a window lit up on the fifth floor. I crossed the road and wandered to within a few feet of the building. Waited for the light to go out. When it did I started to walk slowly to the entrance.

A man came out, hurrying towards the city behind me. I hurried towards him. Bumped into him,

pretended to be drunk and made a big deal of it, and while stuttering an apology and straightening his clothes for him I reached into his pockets and took his keys. He pushed me away and called me a dickhead. I stumbled back and he hurried away.

There was a card reading mechanism that locked glass doors and behind them two lifts. He must have kept his card in his wallet, I realised. I crossed the road and sat down again and watched the building some more.

A window lit up on the ninth floor. I went back to the door. Next to the card reader was an intercom; a circle of holes, numbered keys arranged like a telephone dial and a slim digital screen.

I started at 900 and carried on through to 912.

Coated in an electric hiss a voice greeted me, perturbed but willing to listen. I feigned that I was a tenant, that I'd lost my card. A sigh came through, then a buzz and then a magnetic click from the door.

I took the lift up to the fifth floor. There were a few keys on the keyring. One for a car. That was not good. If he had a car he could be back any second. He'd think he'd forgotten his keys. He'd come straight back. He had his card for the glass doors and his car wouldn't be far away so I worked out that he'd probably get back in about seven minutes from when I accosted him, which was about three minutes ago.

He didn't have a key for this flat, but if he found it locked he'd wait. Think back over what happened and realise there was only one explanation.

He'd know he hadn't dropped them or left home without them. He'd wait, phone security or something. They'd check the CCTV and see me coming in. I expected he'd be tenacious in his search for me. I'd be found and prosecuted to the full extent of the law.

I'd only known him for the short amount of time that I'd surreptitiously mugged him but even from that I knew he was the type to take that kind of thing as far as he could. Busy, vindictive, eager to destroy anyone who'd dare to cross him.

Or maybe he would assume he'd dropped the keys and just look for them. There was one with 506 written on a rubber fob. I detached it from the keyring. Then I called the lift. I had the keys in my hands, had my hands in my pockets. The lift had reached the third floor by the time I realised he might be inside it.

I found a door that led to a staircase and hurried down. I assumed he wouldn't have ever used the stairs in his life and so wouldn't search there. It was a risk but it was the smallest risk I had available.

The door that separated the stairs from the main part of the fifth floor had a small window set in it, chickenwire between two panes of glass. I peered through it, watching the lifts.

The small screen above the lift doors told me it was on the fourth floor. It changed to say 5. I opened the door I was hiding behind and tossed the keys across the marble floor. They hit a corner and stopped moving. I shut the door and waited.

Then I found the lightswitch for this part of the staircase and turned the lights off. Returned to watch the lift doors open.

He spotted his keys immediately. He picked them up and put them in his pocket without checking them then got back inside the lift. The doors closed. The numbers went down.

4.

3.

Inside room 506 I quickly but thoroughly showered.

While I was drying myself I looked at the pile of filth that I'd been wearing. I was looking forward to wearing something crisp and clean. I'd already picked out the most anonymous suit from his wardrobe and chosen which pair of shoes I was going to take from the rack by the door.

Before I dressed I sprayed some cologne onto myself, combed my hair and shaved. I took a two-hundred pound wad that was on the coffee table and two beers from the fridge, put them in my new pockets. Looked through the small magnifying glass in the door before I left. Threw my horrid rags into the incinerator chute then quickly descended the stairs and got outside unnoticed.

## CHAPTER 33 – DISTRIBUTION

The clothes and shoes were only slightly too small, a close enough fit that I actually looked quite good. I kept glancing at myself in the polished glass and mirrors of the young professional province, then in the windows of the city's shop windows, always surprised when I recognised that it was me.

I bought a spade and a sleeping bag from a camping shop. I saw a tramp holding worn fast food cup in browned hands toward passers-by that ignored him.

I offered him the key to 506 in exchange for a favour. He declined, saying that a hot bath and clean clothes would put him out of business. I suggested he stole as much as he could carry.

He agreed and I told him that he'd have to wait, that the key was payment for a favour. He said that favours by definition don't require payment, only obligation and that the longer he waited the longer the occupant had to change his locks. I yielded and gave him the key. I told him I'd meet him back in the doorway he was sat in but I wasn't confident he'd return.

I waited anyway and three hours later he came back, washed and clean shaven. He smelled of the same cologne I did.

Strange to see a well groomed man covered in dirty, ill-fitting clothes with worn logos and ancient stains. He had nothing with him so I assumed he'd sold or stashed everything he'd stolen already.

"What can I do you for, then?"

"I want you to distribute some leaflets, that's all."

"No one's gonna take anything off me."

"You can just leave them in places. But I need them to be spread wide, all over the city. And beyond it."

"Can I keep the key?"

"Sure."

"Okay."

"Wait here. Don't go anywhere."

He shrugged and looked away, put his hands in his pockets and leaned against the wall.

He'd already come back when he needn't so I assumed that he'd stay. I don't know why I didn't want him to follow me, the address I was trying to hide from him was on the leaflets I was going to give him anyway.

Back at Benson's I dumped my new sleeping bag on the floor and stashed the beers in a filing cabinet in the boss's office. Scaled the chainlink fence outside with the spade in my hand and walked to the x loves y forever tree.

I walked back to the city slowly, a bin bag full of manifestoes over my shoulder. I found the clean tramp waiting where I'd left him and handed him the bag. I told him to steal a suit from room 506 and he said he'd try. I left him with the bag and wandered, clean and suited and with money in my pocket.

I bought a meal and a few drinks in a loud pub somewhere in the absolute heart of the city. I let my instinct pick when to leave and where to go. I went for another meal and more drinks at the pub opposite, then another meal and more drink at a pub a few feet away.

I was heavy with food, drunk and tired so I made my way back to Benson's. I didn't have the energy to deal with the clean tramp asleep in my sleeping bag. Didn't even have the energy to acknowledge it as something worth acknowledging. Walked up the stairs, to the boss' office, laid down on the floor and fell asleep.

When I woke up I went to see the clean tramp. Asleep in my sleeping bag, a half empty bottle of whisky standing upright next to the two empty bottles of my beer. He woke up while I was standing over him wondering what to do, his eyes red like a sad dog's.

"Did you get a suit?" I asked him.

"No, some bloke was in. I read your leaflet and it said to come here so I figured it would be a good place to bunk down."

"Did you read the whole leaflet or just the part about an empty building?"

"The whole thing. You might be right. I might agree."

He could have been lying but even if he was he'd have to perpetuate the lie by doing as I told him or else he'd be back on the streets.

"You need to shift those leaflets."

The bin liner was behind him, still full. He got up, picked up the bag and headed out without saying another word. I went to the woods with the spade and dug out another one. Took out as many leaflets as I could fold and carry then resealed the bag and buried it again.

I moved through the city carefully bumping into people, each time a folded manifesto primed in my hand. It was easy to take things from their pockets so it followed it must be even easier to put things in.

The drunken tramp facade had to be discarded with the outfit that had permitted it and I acted as if I was rushing, late for a business meeting or some conference.

Quite quickly, after using this method a few too many times in one street, my anonymity had become compromised. I slipped into a shop, out of the sight of anyone who had seen my



enthusiastic rushing and colliding act.

It offered a whole myriad of junk; plastic garden furniture and ornaments, board games, magazines, household items - washing bowls and lightbulbs, children's toys, impersonal decorations. All useless and cheap and the only thing common between them that they were useless and cheap. It looked more like storage than a shop but for the few people that slowly browsed, wondering if a plastic frog would complement their garden or would they rather have a plastic squirrel.

I walked quietly up to a woman, who was holding one of each in her hands, studying them both, looking for some kind of inspiration or something she may not have noticed five minutes ago.

I slipped my hand into the pocket of her long overcoat and dropped a leaflet inside. She didn't notice. I quickly primed another in my fist and walked away, looking for the next target.

This reverse pickpocketing technique served me well, better than the drunk tramp or the tardy go-getter, and I moved through the city repeating myself until I had no more pages left.

Walking back I wondered how successful my secretly distributed manifesto could be. If it would be read or discarded. I thought about how many people have converted in hotel rooms, tears falling onto the pages of the free Gideon Bible they held open in their laps. Not many, probably. I chose not to be optimistic.

## CHAPTER 34 – DISCIPLES

I wished I had more paper so I could carry on writing more copies. I had nothing else to do. I waited without time. Sleeping when I was tired, stealing food when I was hungry. I did little else. I would sit for hours while I waited for a visitor. Either The Visitor or a new disciple of it. Or the clean tramp. Wait for hours, trying to eradicate the idea of hours from my consciousness.

Eventually two youths interrupted my meditation.

I was sitting cross legged in the centre of the factory, my eyes on the solid screen of light in the open doorway, my mind elsewhere.

There was music playing somewhere, tiny music, bright like a musicbox's chimes. It danced quietly to me and I welcomed it. It was soft and like syrup it spread slowly into the warehouse, into my mind. Until it stopped suddenly, when the light in the doorway was intruded by two thin silhouettes and my eye alerted me to the two figures.

I remained sitting in the shadows of the dead machinery and watched.

One of them peered in, his face breaking through the screen of light while his body remained distorted by it, blackened and stretched. He pulled his head back into its silhouette and spoke to his companion. Their conversation echoed toward me.

"I don't know if anyone's in there."

"Well let's go in and wait. The door's open."

"What if it's a joke? Or what if it's a group of crackheads luring us here to mug us?"

I waited, perfectly still in the shadows.

"A group of crackheads wouldn't have written this." The silhouette held an arm out, holding a black square. "It's real, man. It's got to be."

The silhouette moved his arm down and walked through the light and into Benson's.

I sat and watched. His companion walked in behind unsurely. They sat on a conveyor belt to wait. One of them lit a cigarette.

I stood and walked quietly to them. They didn't notice me, they were both watching the doorway that was clean light again.

I took the cigarette from the one closest to me and they both turned in unison. Two youths with long hair and thin, wispy moustaches, heavy military style jackets over death metal band t-shirts, jeans with holes in the knees and heavy workboots on their feet.

They asked me who I was while trying to keep an air of confidence and I pointed at the paper one of them was holding and told them I was the man who had written it.

They both stood up immediately and I shook hands with them. Then they waited for me to speak so I asked them their names.

One of them told me he was called James and his companion was called Craig. I asked if they had sleeping bags and they told me no so I told them to acquire one each lest they sleep uncovered on the floor and then I told them that they were to live here and live as I did.

"Using your skills and experience to survive. If you are fighters," I told them, "then fight. If you are dancers then dance. If you are quick and unnoticed as I am then steal."

When they left for the city to get their sleeping bags I grabbed mine and turned it inside out, remembering that the clean tramp had slept in it. I moved it into the boss's office and laid it out on the floor.

I was hungry, and the pain in my spine was enormous. I knew that I couldn't lie down or else I wouldn't get back up, so I lit a cigarette and walked out of the office, leant on the railing overlooking the factory floor and smoked.

## CHAPTER 35 – ACORNS

The light in the doorway, earlier a crisp white, had become a soft orange by the time James and Craig returned.

I was standing at the railing, without any cigarettes left to occupy me, thinking about jumping over it.

They didn't see me. I watched them dump their sleeping bags then retrieve tins of food from their jacket pockets. I'd forgotten which one was James and which was Craig. One of them lit a cigarette and they both sat on the conveyor belt near the door, where I had first met them.

I watched them some more, hoping to hear what they were speaking about but their words became saturated, just sounds and rhythm by the time they reached me.

The one that wasn't smoking pulled a flat bottle from his pocket and took a quick sip before recoiling and passing it to the other.

I walked down to them.

"Hey, we got our sleeping bags."

"And food too. And this," he held up the bottle of whiskey.

"What food did you bring?"

They both pointed at the tins by their feet.

"I don't have a tin opener. Or a knife."

As soon as I'd said it I wished I hadn't. If I was going to keep my recruits I would have to keep an air of mysterious authority and letting them know I was unprepared whilst expecting them to respect me was a mistake.

They told me they had stolen a tin opener and presented it to me. I told them I was busy and to eat well and sleep well and then then I left them to it, walked up the stairs and into my office.

I sat on the desk and watched them build a fire on the factory floor, cook their food over it and eat it. When the aroma of cooked beans and sausages found its way to me I was stricken by hunger and collapsed onto my sleeping bag. I laid there staring at the ceiling through wet eyes while they ate, waiting for sleep to evacuate me from my mistake.

It didn't.

I spent the night staring at the cracked plaster ceiling while my eyes burned with hot water that escaped and travelled to my ears, the smell of food lingering in front of me just out of reach.

Eventually I untangled myself from the sleeping bag. I had woken up so I must have fallen asleep. I stood at the window. Craig and James were nowhere to be seen, nor were their sleeping bags.

The air tasted like early morning; dew still hanging in its refreshing cold. I surmised that they hadn't slept; that they had eaten and left. I didn't expect that they'd come back. Not after they'd already proven their superiority over me by having a tin opener when I had nothing but a dusty old factory and a scribbled, half thought through idea that I knew I hadn't articulated properly.

I walked down the steps and stamped out the last few embers that clung to the ground, checked the empty tin cans for scraps, of which there were none.

I found their forks. They had been licked clean. I wanted a cigarette but had none since they were the most difficult commodity to steal; kept behind every shopkeeper's back, out of reach.

Outside I leaned against the wall and stared at the forest beyond the fence. Even these trees moved, growing upwards and turning towards the sun. Did they have any concept of time? If they moved then they ought to. Did they have any concept of a life without time? Where an acorn is an oak tree simultaneously? And by that same token, a fossil? Germination and petrification in the same infinite instant.

I climbed over the fence and gathered up pocketfuls of acorns. I had some idea that I could experiment with them instead of people but I had no idea how. Another idea that didn't get past its conception, that died immediately. Even that in itself was some reflection of what was coming; what I was hoping to hide away from.

When I got back to the fence my spine clenched and twisted and I fell to the ground. I tried to breathe but I couldn't. I smacked my fist into my chest, hoping to crack the sudden atrophy.

My throat was contracting, trying to drag some air in but it couldn't. My hands dug into the soil. My peripheral vision began to darken. I reached into my pockets and grabbed a fistful of acorns in each hand and threw them.

As if I'd just come up from drowning in an ice cold lake I took a huge, deep, rushing breath. Rolled onto my back. My spine throbbed. I threw out more acorns and it began to subside until I could stand. I pitched the last one as far as I could into the forest and climbed back over the fence.

The smell of recently staled cigarette smoke drifted round the corner followed by James and Craig.

They stopped when they saw me and stood looking at me expectant. I told them to give me a cigarette and they did. While I smoked I returned my gaze to the forest. I saw them turn and look in the same direction, trying to see what I was seeing between the trees.

I was thinking about my office, particularly the empty filing cabinet drawers. I was wondering why I felt it necessary to fill them and I was wondering what to fill them with.

I was still hungry from the night before. I took either James' or Craig's long coat and tore out the pocket linings then told them to sit and wait for me and headed alone into the city. I was unsure if

they would be there when I got back but I had doubted them once and they had proved me wrong. I felt they were my peripherals, that I could work without them and they were only aiding me, would aid me eventually.

But that was as optimistic as I let myself be and even then it seemed like a lie.

## CHAPTER 36 - CHASE

The security guard I walked past was a cliché. His frame sagged, dragged down by the weight of his gut that he had let grow so that it hung over his belt. His face sagged too, dragged down by the wait for anything important to happen so that it hung over his eyes. His nose picked up my stench but he didn't follow me, just watched me pass by from beneath his wire eyebrows.

I walked around the shop, picking up and examining certain products with my right hand while surreptitiously using my left hand like a lizards tongue, whipping out and grabbing whatever my fingers touched, snapping back and dropping the prize into my unlined pockets. I moved swiftly. Once I'd pocketed something I'd move away and repeat my action elsewhere in the store.

Before my jacket became heavy enough to look suspicious I made my way to the double doors that served as both entrance and exit.

When I passed the lacklustre security guard again I turned my head and gave him a quick nod meant for him to translate as "Good day" or "Keep up the good work."

When I turned my head forward I was confronted by a seven foot beast in uniform.

We stared at each other. He was trying to subdue a smile and his lips were twitching. I was trying to work out what I was going to do; I wasn't going to turn out my unlined pockets and I wasn't going to try and fight this creature. I would have to run.

I looked for an opening but he eclipsed the entire double door as he strode toward me.

I took a few meek steps back and he stifled a laugh in his throat, tried to keep the corners of his lips from twitching into a smile.

I dodged left and he lurched his weight toward me. I quickly shifted and ran right, past him and through the door. He shouted after me and I could hear his footsteps sharp and heavy, getting close quickly.

I swung myself round corners, sidestepped quickly past anyone who got in my way, occasionally glanced behind me to see him still determined and pushing past the people I had avoided.

Once I managed to get to a less crowded street I pushed my head down and sprinted.

The tin cans in my coat repeatedly struck my legs as I ran and I had to throw my arms back and let my coat slide to the ground, leave it and my bounty behind and keep on going. I didn't realise how close the security guard chasing me had got until I heard him slam into the ground a few feet behind me.

I slowed and turned to see him with his feet tangled in the coat, holding his grazed hands to his bloody nose. I considered going back and retrieving some of the food but I didn't want to try my luck any more than was necessary.

I sprinted round the corner and finally allowed myself to acknowledge the searing pain in my back that was like a hot knife stuck between two vertebrae.

I leaned my forehead against a wall and while my eyes watered I breathed in air that was cold against my gritted teeth. I knew not to be annoyed, to count it as a draw and not a loss.



## CHAPTER 37 – BATH

When you retch from your own smell you realise how bad it actually is, why everyone stares at you and crosses the road sharing whispers through scowls.

The chase had made me sweat and my shirt clung to my back. Even in the fresh air I could smell my repulsive odour. When it was only slight I felt that it gave me a strange kind of power, a distance from society, a declaration of my different priorities. Now it was just a burden; a heavy stench that I had to drag around with me and didn't declare my different priorities in any positive way but served only to alert authority to my destitution.

Before I went back to Benson's I walked through the forest kicking acorns. I found a small lake coated with a film of algae, undressed and waded in until the water was up to my shoulders.

I stood there shivering with my arms wrapped around myself, took a breath and plunged my head under the water. I scrubbed myself with my fists. When I had finally become accustomed to the harsh cold of the water I walked back onto the bank and shivered some more while I dried myself with my shirt.

I was still damp and still cold while I dressed then walked uncomfortably back to the factory. Water ran from my hair down my skin, streaking it with dirt and cold.

Craig and James had a fire going and were sat staring at it, sharing a bottle of whiskey.

When I entered they moved aside for me and I laid my shirt on a part of the floor that one of them had cleaned, removed my jacket and stood over the fire, steam coming off me. If I wasn't shivering and emaciated I could have looked almost ethereal.

One of them passed me the bottle and I drank heartily without saying a word.

Soon I was warm both inside and out and a little drunk, a hazy elastic kind of drunk.

For the first time in a long time I longed for comfort. It was a childish longing and reminded me of being ill in my mother's bed.

I hadn't felt so weak in a long time. I wanted Alan to take over so that I could follow his lead and not have to worry. James and Craig were looking at me expectantly. I was amazed that they were still here. Maybe my facade wasn't as transparent as I thought.

Or maybe they just weren't looking properly because they didn't want to see through and realise I didn't know what I was doing. Hope is a hard thing to discard.

They didn't know about my failed shoplifting escapade, nor did they know about my doubts. They didn't know about the pain in my back, that was growing in intensity as if the fire I was reaching around me and biting me.

"Craig," I said and Craig came and stood beside me.

I stood up and gave James the bottle. Led Craig to a door in the factory that I'd found earlier. James waited by the fire.

The door was locked and I kicked it, mustering my anger to splinter the rotten wood that surrounded the lock. Craig gave me his lighter when I asked and I used it to light the room.

An old store room. Empty now, metal shelves lining one of the concrete walls, a plastic bucket in one corner.

"If we are to survive the infinite instant then we must eliminate our concept of time." I was drunk and confident. Drunk enough to discard any hope I might have had. "I want you to stay in this room, in the dark, unmoving. Lie on the ground and remain still. Do not do anything that can affect your knowledge of the awareness of time. Just lie and wait. Do not try to count the seconds. Ignore your breaths."

I walked out of the room and shut the door. I didn't know if he'd do what I said but I didn't want to care. I'd had enough of doubting and questioning.

James looked afraid as I approached him and he handed me the bottle. I took a long drink, screwed on the top and put it in my pocket.

"I want you to go out into the city and spread the word. Our word. Return with at least one more person."

He nodded and quickly left. I went back to the store room, opened the door and told Craig to give me his shirt. He obliged and after I'd put it on I shut the door and left him in there.

I sat before the fire and drank the whiskey, hoping it would dull the pain in my back. It only made the pain worse.

I watched the fire and listened to the twigs snap and hiss.

The light from the fire danced as though it were communicating with me. As if my visitor wanted me to know something and I willed it to speak up but suddenly the fire burnt out into dull embers and I knew it was disappointed. I was using my knowledge and the authority I derived from it as an excuse to be left alone. I had no right to be left alone, I had no right to be selfish. I'd promised some sort of salvation and I was obligated to deliver.

## CHAPTER 38 – ANSWERS

When I woke up my sleeping bag was at the other side of the room.

I was lying on the floor with a tight headache that hurt my eyes and roused my gut. The pre-emptive taste of bile in my throat made me wretch but I couldn't vomit regardless of how far I stuck my fingers into my throat.

I held my two fingers in front of me in the shape of a gun, stared at them as if they could answer a question I dared not ask.

There's nothing worse than a man seeking an answer he would rather avoid; rushing headfirst by his own volition toward some individual pain and wishing to stop, looking for an excuse, someone else to blame for his relentless speed.

Answers are rarely found by looking anyway. They surprise you or they pre-empt the question and force you to remember something you haven't thought of yet. They cling to the dark places that are never illuminated so you have to feel for them while you're in there with them, but you never go in unless forced.

I saw a spot of black in my peripheral vision but when I moved my eye to see what it was it dashed to the other side. It would never be in the centre. I would never see it clearly.

When I tried to close my eyes they snapped open immediately.

I needed to concentrate on something but all I had to choose from was the ache in my gut and the pain growing inside my skull.

I struggled to my feet and steadied myself against the wall. Nausea knocked me sideways. I leaned against the metal grid that had once been covered by glass and looked down at the factory. I saw two people asleep in the low light of the morning and the dying fire.

They were just indistinct mounds of clothing, recognisable only as people, not as any people in particular.

My first thought was that both had failed in their tasks; that Craig had left his solitude and that James had returned alone.

I felt wretched and for feeling wretched I felt weak. Weaker than I'd ever felt before. It had become harder to focus away from the ease at which I could just give up - just apologise to my visitor and let it find a new host. Wander into a life without this heavy obligation.

But I couldn't do that. I had no way to communicate with it and I was too afraid of the pain it could inflict on me if I did give up. I had to focus on moving toward the goal I had been bestowed to achieve.

I walked down the stairs, leaning heavily on the metal rail to stop myself tumbling down them. Ready to chastise Craig and James with a tirade of stinging bile for failing me.

James woke first. He pushed away the coat that was covering him and rubbed his eyes, yawning. I waited with my hands in my pockets for him to get to his feet and he started to rush when he noticed me looming over him. He was barely off his knees when the other makeshift blanket was pushed away.

Underneath it wasn't Craig. I'd been wrong about both of them; James had done what I asked and Craig was still, presumably, in the store room.

The other person was a girl in a school uniform, fourteen or fifteen years old, ugly with bad teeth and marred skin.

James helped her up then introduced her to me and she shook my hand. She had a row of pale scars and a few fresh pink ones on her forearm.

I decided to let her stay a while. When she began to miss the home and parents she had run away from I would let her leave with the same ease.

I was more optimistic about James and Craig. If they remained as dedicated as they had proven themselves to be finding a solution to the impending apocalypse might not be as difficult as I had thought. I had only wanted to give up about five minutes earlier. Maybe I was still a little drunk.

After duly and sincerely praising James for his effort I went to check on Craig. I hadn't locked or barred the door in any way, which enriched the satisfaction of seeing him lying on the ground, one arm pressed over his eyes. He laid there as I watched his chest rise and fall slowly. Other than that he didn't move at all, though he didn't look comfortable.

I helped him to his feet and waited as he contorted away the aches that the ground had set in his muscles and bones.

"How was it?" I asked.

"Uncomfortable."

"Comfort isn't the issue. Tell me about time."

"I couldn't get out of it. Well, maybe for an hour at the beginning but then I started remembering songs and rhythms and I could keep track of time that way."

I wondered if an hour would be long enough to hide out the infinite instant. Of course, an hour wouldn't exist after it. Even him saying that he lasted an hour was a failure, though. If he knew he'd lasted an hour then he hadn't escaped time. When we emerged into the new world, in the wake of the Instant and ready to reform it into a world without a concept of time, the memory of an hour would destroy all our work.

With the concept in our memories we wouldn't be free, we would be dormant bombs, still volatile. We needed to be separate from those bound by time. We needed to separate time from our own physical knowledge. Like chemical separation processes.

How could that be done?

In order to avoid becoming part of the infinite instant, we needed to be able to slip away quickly from time. Into an internal dimension without it. Either a quick evacuation or a continual hiding and waiting.

I realised that the latter would be preferable; I shouldn't expect a warning before the event. Maybe I'd already had the warning, why did I feel I deserved another? Wasn't I taking this seriously enough? By asking the question I had answered it. Instantly. A twinge in my spine. I span on my heels three hundred and sixty degrees and saw the whole factory like it was a claustrophobic cylinder.

## CHAPTER 39 – GAMBLING

I got quickly out of the factory and walked fast.

I was hoping that I would cause my back to ache but there was not a slight hint of pain before I was out of breath and had to sit down.

I remembered that I still hadn't eaten. Tried to think about something else. After resting for a while I got to my feet and carried on forward, into the city proper, walking into traffic as though if the cars didn't stop they'd just pass straight through me.

They all stopped anyway.

Whatever track I was following, whatever reason was leading me onwards, it took me into a car park that loomed tall over the city like Mount Olympus.

There was a lift but I needed to keep moving so I took the stairs. Once on the roof I had to make the conscious decision to stop when I reached the edge. It was easier than I expected. I wondered how easy it would have been to carry on walking.

The wind was cold and sharp and came in quick blasts. Long intervals between where everything was still, the sound of the city below creeping up to me. I saw it all like I could hold it in my hand.

The descent was inviting. Somehow fresh. The air rushing up and clinging to my face, the impact that would taste of sour metal. It would wake me up.

I hadn't realised how tired I was but there, looking at the concrete breathe beneath disarray that walked across it, I almost passed out. When it became suddenly apparent that I was toppling my eyes snapped open elastic before gravity could grab me.

I chose the slow descent of the lift to take me to the ground. The ceiling was lit fluorescent and hard. A man was standing in the mirror, thin and dirty. We stared at each other.

I was weary and walked almost dazed. I took an empty paper cup from a bin and sat on the cold ground, leaning against a bank. I put the cup next to me and let myself fall asleep. It was still light when I woke with a sore neck and a cup full of money. Pouring it into my hand I saw it was mostly copper and there was a cigarette that had broken in half.

I smoked the half with the filter first and then smoked the unfiltered half. There were a couple of pound coins. Altogether there was just short of a fiver. All the coins were dirty. Like I had put down a bin for old, used money.

I put them in my pocket and took them to a betting shop.

I looked through the window before going in. Inside I picked up a miniature pen and a slip of paper from a counter and feigned taking notes. I didn't know exactly what I was looking for but I

watched the men, some old, some young, all scruffy and dirty. While the rich gamblers wore suits and smiles and drank cocktails in casinos the underbelly of the scene converged in grim rooms painted white with simulated horse racing on computer screens. The gamblers had more stamina than the real horses and needed something to bet on between races.

The best one, the one that was seemingly winning the most money, was a wiry middle aged man with thin brown hair held back with grease. His denim jacket had deceptively deep pockets and he fished around in them for more coins to feed his blinking machine, a large collection of winnings filling up the plastic tray underneath.

I didn't think he'd deny my offer, what with him being a gambling man. I held the coins in my hand in front of him and asked him whether he'd be interested in helping me.

"Seventy thirty split. You make the bets, you take thirty percent of the winnings," I offered.

He didn't look up, just fed a coin into the slot and tapped the touch screen controls. "Fifty fifty."

"Sixty forty."

"Fifty fifty."

"Fiftyfive fortyfive."

"Alright."

I gave him a handful of money. He dropped a few of the coins and I knelt to pick them up as he continued betting. Nothing could turn him from the screen and I scrambled on my hands and knees picking up the loose change.

He continued to win and the winnings from my money mixed in with that of his in the plastic gutter. It was impossible to know how much I had won; the money poured out so fast and the information on the screen was tapped away as soon as it appeared.

When all the money had been fed into the machine and subsequently regurgitated he scooped out a handful of pound coins. His eyes moved quickly as he counted them.

He took two more from the gutter and poured the handful into my upturned palms. He didn't ask for thanks, just turned back to the machine and carried on feeding it.

I turned and left, kept looking back over my shoulder. I walked slowly, waiting for him to stop me, as if there was something unfinished. He didn't. I counted the coins as they dropped into my pocket; more than five times what I had given him.

## CHAPTER 40 – COMFORT

I had retreated. I'd slipped away from my new world of responsibilities and obligations that I'd awoken to. Slipped back into the society I used to frequent.

Into a pub that was a soft darkness and a low blanket of sound like smoke. I wallowed in it, sitting in a corner and sipping a pint of lager. The seat was comfortable, the sound was comfortable, it was all brilliantly comfortable. Like I'd returned to a bed that I'd shaped over the years to accommodate me, to cradle me.

I wondered whether I should return to this comfort. Leave Benson's and the mission in the capable hands of James and Craig. Just wait for the end to come and accept it the same as everyone else would have to.

Everyone knew things that they should have changed, everyone had tasks they'd been charged with but ignored. It was easier to ignore them. Easier than taking them on, despite the burden of guilt that you had to carry. It was a burden lighter than that of the task.

Eventually the night drew close. I moved from the pub to a busier, louder one. Abstract paintings on the walls and music playing for the students that sang along or moved their lips silently, miming the lyrics to themselves.

Polished surfaces, art decor lights, candles on the tables. It looked expensive. I considered leaving but as I queued for the bar I noticed an argument going on outside, amongst the picnic tables and cigarette smoke. A girl was shouting at a man who was standing and shouting back. Their faces were contorted into angry scowls and they shouted over each other and she prodded at his chest with an extended finger.

He grabbed her hand and said something quietly. She responded with a slow shake of her head, staring straight into his eyes from beneath lowered brows. He snatched his coat from the back of a chair and left her.

She sat down and breathed deeply. The barman asked me for a third time what I wanted to drink.

"Lager. The cheapest one you serve."

I didn't look at him, I kept staring at her. She was somewhat obscured by the distance between us and the shadow she leant into but I could see that she was breathing slowly and methodically, staving off tears.

"Give me another," I told the barman when he placed my drink in front of me.

I took both drinks over to her and asked her if she would be interested in my company. Even outside I had to shout over the music when she didn't hear me the first time. She looked reluctant but nodded anyway. I sat down and gave her the drink I bought her. She smiled a shy smile and took a sip.

"Are you okay?" I shouted at her.



I could see that she was already a little drunk. She didn't notice that I was completely drunk. I had been for so long that I'd got used to it and looked and felt sober. She started talking quietly. I couldn't hear a word she was saying but I nodded sympathetically whenever she paused to look at me.

I drank as she talked so when I'd finished mine, her drink was still almost full. I held the empty glass loosely in my hand and rolled it idly on its base. When she noticed she held her pint up to her mouth and poured the whole lot in.

The two drinks had cost me more than I had expected but I bought another two. What else, I reasoned with myself, was I going to do with this money if not drink it?

She and I ended up very drunk. I didn't know her name. We spent a lot of time pretending to talk to each other but we both knew that while one of us was talking the other wasn't listening, couldn't listen because of the noise. Just nodding politely sufficed. Eventually I wasn't saying anything, just moving my mouth and making low phonetic sounds instead of words. She nodded nonetheless.

She went to the bathroom and I waited outside, round the corner where it was quiet, smoking a cigarette she'd given me. When she returned she asked me where my place was. I asked where hers was and she told me she lived with her boyfriend and that he'd have gone back there after their argument.

I couldn't take her to Benson's and I didn't want to acknowledge that it existed. I didn't want to breach those walls that held my obligations and my companions. They were conveniently contained while I was moving further away from them. They weren't chasing me and I felt no compulsion to return to them. It was discarded.

Without a house to go to we walked idly together down the streets, chemical yellow light and busy windows. In one hand I held the coins that remained of my worth. She held my other. I counted them as we walked and she led the way. I nearly tripped over the curb and we both laughed. After we had stopped laughing I told her I had enough for a bottle of wine and suggested finding somewhere quiet to drink it.

We found a supermarket's smaller and more outgoing cousin that stayed open all night. The fluorescent ceiling attempted in vain to recreate daylight. All the shelves were malnourished but for one section where alcohol was abundant, bottles and cans pressed together so tightly they might have burst.

I took a bottle of red wine and waited while a well-dressed man argued with the sole cashier over ten pence. Eventually he got bored and left without incident or his ten pence, I paid for the wine and we were back in the soft darkness and cold concrete.

## CHAPTER 41 – BRIDGE

She kept half a step ahead with my hand still in her grasp until we came to a steep set of steps that led to a small park, hidden from above.

A single street lamp lit the grass and the flowers that had been planted in the soil at the centre. We sat near the flowers, she lit a cigarette and gave it to me before lighting one for herself and picking a flower and stroking its petals with her index finger. I screwed away the top from the wine and took a drink before handing it to her.

Without the rich noise of company and music to hide within we had to listen to each other as we spoke. We discussed arbitrary, benign topics. She told me that she thought rabbits looked like cats that had been made wrong.

She pondered aloud the merits of misinterpretation, surmising that if art is essentially expression of a belief or reality then misinterpretation must be art as well.

She supposed that aliens might already be on Earth but may be microscopic or gaseous or incomprehensible to human logic.

I didn't want to tell her about my visitor. I didn't want to even think about it. My role in the discussion was to sit opposite her, watch her face move behind the thin mask of cigarette smoke in the dim light that crossed the grass to where we sat, and adore her.

She reminded me of Alan. The way she could talk without interruption or encouragement, stirring ideas into whirlwinds while she waved her cigarette and stabbed the air with it.

We talked like this long after we had finished the wine. The bottle lay empty on its side surrounded by cigarette butts, exhausted. Even our drunkenness became exhausted and dropped away.

She grew quiet and we both sat in the early dawn picking at the grass and yawning. The thin sunlight was filtered through heavy black clouds that coated the sky, not revealing a sliver of blue. They promised rain and delivered with sudden vigour. Huge raindrops cascaded upon us and she hurried quickly away without a word. I sat and became drenched as I watched her run up the steps two at a time until she disappeared from view.

The rain poured into my eyes and onto my lips. My hair and clothes became sodden. It felt as though the water was dragging my skin down with it, dragging me into the ground. It was an angry rain, roaring and hitting hard. I imagined it piling up as if it were solid like sand, covering me as I sat waiting for her to come back. On the sodden grass and softened soil I stared at nothing in particular, engrossed and without reason to move. The cold rain brought with it warm comfort.

Wrapped in its embrace I felt no compulsion to move. When a breeze dragged itself abrasively across me I shivered and my teeth crashed together with quick, sudden repetition.

My head fell into my hands, my elbows held my knees close to my chest and I shook as the heavy rain pummelled me relentlessly. I wanted to stand so that I could leave but the weight of the weather leaned on me and kept me on the soil that was becoming increasingly pulpous.

A heavy hand on my shoulder roused me from a half slumber. Turning my head and looking up I saw two police officers looming over me, a man and a woman in matching uniforms, unisex. Beads of rain dripped from their helmets onto their day-glow vests.

"Are you alright, pal?" The male one asked me.

I looked at them and nodded slightly.

"You don't look well," the female one informed me. "You must be cold," she insisted with empathy, either fabricated or honest, I couldn't work it out. The tone of her voice betrayed nothing of her intentions.

With the assistance of the male one's hand I hoisted myself to my feet. They kindly offered me a lift to my home but I declined and walked away.

Remembering the route back was strangely easy. Somewhere in my being I had acquired a knowledge of the city and a magnetic link to Benson's. I was being taken back there, back to my obligation. But whether I was compelled or condemned to the obligation I was unsure.

It seemed as though the visitor had condemned me and then left me, leaving behind a residual burden. I was struggling to comprehend properly my importance in the events that I was now a prophet of.

I had set out on this task headstrong and optimistic. Now I felt betrayed and weakened but also unable to return to the life I had enjoyed before the revelation. I had tried in the night to find my old place and ended up walking dejected back to what I was running from. I didn't know where I wanted to be. Where I belonged.

Walking past toppled bins that had spilled their contents over the ground. Broken chairs and rusted bedframes with rain clinging to them. I had no question regarding the validity of the infinite instant, what I questioned was my part in the situation. This burden had gotten too heavy and I hated that I couldn't carry it. I would gladly sacrifice myself but I didn't have the opportunity. If I was to stop I would have simply wasted the knowledge I had. That was no sacrifice. There was no sacrifice that could be made.

I stopped walking when I found myself on a bridge. I watched lone cars emerge from beneath me and disappear round a grass embankment on one side of the road, emerge from the embankment and disappear beneath me on the other.

On one side of me I had a world I wanted to be back into, on the other side of me a world that wanted me back. Both once had a guide and both those guides had now deserted me, left me in this no-man's-land, unable to retreat and walk back to the trench, being forced to surrender and walk into the other.

Standing on the ground between the worlds, a ground I had never traversed, I was afforded a

new perspective of my conflict. I saw them from the outside, saw their respective shapes, their edges and their contours. I saw the reality of the infinite instant. It was so clear, so obvious when viewed from there. The event that would exist both suddenly and constantly, in which all possibilities occur in an instant. If it was possible for me to avoid it when it happened then I would, just as I would also fail.

It was a dejecting realisation. Regardless of my efforts, I would succeed. Regardless of my efforts, I would fail. It was unavoidable. Avoiding the infinite instant was both certain and impossible. By its very nature it would destroy everything, including its own prophets. The prophet of apocalypse fares no better in its wake than those who deny its imminence.

The middle ground I occupied was too convenient to be an answer of itself. It could not be a refuge, my stay here was only temporary. I had been ejected from the company I had once discarded but now longed to return to. There was only one place I could go to and whatever realisations and revelations I had seen from this most generous of perspectives was academic.

I would carry on, regardless of what I had realised. I had nothing else to do. I would try to avoid the infinite instant knowing that I would succeed even if I failed. It was an utterly futile task yet I had nothing to do but carry on in vain.

## CHAPTER 42 – RETURNING

Leaning against the factory wall, beneath the second N, James was smoking a cigarette. He didn't see me as I approached. What he saw was his leader, the prophet, the one who would rebuild after everything was reduced to an instant. He saw the man without time walking towards him, the man who would eradicate time and save them from its bounds, shelter them from its ultimate conclusion.

I was a man who had only time, and too much of it. Now I would spend that time convincing these people and anyone else who happened across our mission that what we were doing was important. Until someone questioned me, shouting from the middle ground "it's all pointless!" I would carry on devout to the cause, whilst knowing I was separate from it.

I had heard men describe themselves as shells and never understood why until I saw James walking to meet me halfway. I was vacuous, my vitriol had leaked out of me and had been washed away in the rain of the night before. He held out his cigarette to me and I took it from him without acknowledging him even being there.

He followed me round to the back of the factory. Craig and the girl were sitting on the ground outside and talking about mundane distractions. James joined them. I walked into the factory, became a shell inside a shell.

In my office I undressed, peeling the wet clothes from my skin. I stood naked over the pile that leaked water onto the concrete floor. I redressed in a suit I had left in a drawer - shirt and trousers - I left the tie and jacket where they were. From the window I watched my three disciples talking.

The weather had lulled to a nondescript absence; no wind, no rain, no sun. If I didn't assert myself I could stay in the window, watching and waiting, waiting for nothing in particular, just waiting. The three would leave, go back to their world with a story of a crazy man they lived with in an abandoned factory, a good anecdote perhaps but that wasn't why they were here. They had believed me, trusted me and obeyed me.

Regardless of my knowledge of the futility of our mission I couldn't let them leave. I felt as though I owed them the sincerity I had welcomed them with. Only now it was a lie, a false sincerity built on to extend the original.

I marched down the metal steps, walked outside and declared my presence to them by standing over them until they stood. I couldn't give them honest sincerity so I lied, both to them and perhaps to myself. Perhaps to the visitor, perhaps in an effort to encourage or coerce its return.

"We need organisation and so I am delegating roles to each of you. James, you will spend time in the city. You will find bins behind supermarkets and cafes that you can take food from, good food that needn't be in a bin. Take it and bring it back here so that we can eat. On the street there'll be spent cigarettes, especially outside pubs and at bus stops. Collect them so we can smoke. Also take any paper you can find; posters, mail in bins, if you look you'll find it in abundance.

"You," I pointed at the girl. "You stay here. Copy our manifesto until you can't feel your hand or until we run out of paper. Also, deconstruct the cigarettes that James brings back, discard the burnt end and extract any tobacco that hasn't been smoked.

"Craig, you will sacrifice yourself more than these two. You will be the one with which I will devise our method of avoiding the infinite instant. We two shall craft our vessel.

"James, when we have manifestos it will be your duty to disseminate our message, which you can do while you scavenge."

They all agreed to my proposal. Without a word James left us and headed toward the city. I had created a momentum and I had to ride it.

"We've tried one method to negate time and avoid the infinite instant but it didn't work," I told Craig. "We have to try other methods."

The girl spoke out. "Have you tried drugs? Drugs can mess up your perception of time."

"No, we haven't. I've considered it but it would be difficult to acquire drugs so that method has descended in priority."

"I can get drugs easy."

"How easy?"

"Pretty easy."

I had given a speech, instilled resolve in my followers yet I had no resolve myself. She was waiting for me to say yes. Maybe she just wanted to get high. Her eyes were on me and her mouth was open slightly and ready to smile. I looked around for reassurance, palm on my forehead and rubbing my sore eyes with my fingers.

I sighed as if I was relenting but I didn't care enough and it was the only idea available. If I turned it down they would expect me to offer up another so I nodded to her. I didn't want to go with her into that world lest I become trapped. I had made my decision to remain in this world, this factory. The decision had been made for me. I would have probably enjoyed a rotting apartment and its drug addled inhabitants, so much as to stay there, so I forbade myself from entrance into it. Craig stood beside me and we watched her walk away.

While she was still in earshot I shouted, "Be back before nightfall. Before James' return."

She nodded, turned and carried on into the distance.

## CHAPTER 43 – HOPE

As soon as we were back inside the factory it began to rain again, heavy and hard. The sound of it echoed around the concrete walls and the wind threw it in through the doorway so we felt a subtle moisture dapple our skin. Sitting on a conveyor belt we watched the grey day throw down its wrath. It hammered on the steel roof with such vigour I expected it to collapse.

The sound retreated into the background, not as loud or as prominent as when it had started but still as energetic. It became like a silence, a substitute for silence, soft drumming in some distance. Craig lifted his head to look at me and I did the same, looked at him. Our eye contact locked so we couldn't pull away, just sat and stared at each other, his eyes full of questions, mine full of fabricated wisdom.

"I hope we can... I hope it works," he said with a voice that would have been a whisper if it hadn't needed to contend with the thudding and echoing that we'd forgotten surrounded us.

I nodded. With James and the girl gone, out doing their chores, we should have begun doing ours. But I didn't know where to start. We'd tried keeping him in a dark room so he could try to forget about time. But that was all I had. I suggested we do it again. I suggested that maybe the white noise of the rain on the roof would help somehow, maybe it would drown out his consciousness of time or flush out his subconscious awareness of it. So he went back into the store room.

I went back to my office. Climbing the stairs was a chore. I had to stop halfway up and sit down I was so tired. My hands were shaking and my mouth was watering the way it does before vomit. I was dizzy and nauseous.

I struggled to the office and sat leaning against the wall. I don't know how long I was there. I don't know if I slept or not. I might have fallen asleep and woken up a few times, or I might have just lost interest in being awake and forgotten that I was and then realised again. When I decided to wander downstairs, James was just arriving back. Empty handed.

He apologised profusely. Any food he had found was sodden and inedible. Same with all the cigarette ends he'd come across. I expected as much, but he said he'd noted everywhere that he'd found anything so that he could go back when the weather wasn't against us. Then he produced two bottles of whisky that he'd stolen and we sat down to drink them, one each. Soon it didn't matter that we had no food.

We drank in comfortable silence. The rain had stopped. Craig didn't emerge from the store room so I thought he was either asleep or he was succeeding. Or at least trying to succeed. I didn't care, though. I was drunk and I wanted to do something. Go back into the city, into that world.

James got up and walked outside, leaning against everything on the way to the door to stop himself falling over. I thought he was going for good and I felt a rush of despair. Then the sound of him pissing onto foliage echoed faintly into the factory and relief overcame me. I didn't want to leave. I didn't want to go back into the city, into that world. I had found something else.

The sound of two quiet voices drifted in, followed by James and the girl. I had expected that the

confidence she had shown regarding the acquisition of drugs was a facade that she would sneak away behind. I was surprised that she'd returned, wearing different clothes and carrying a black handbag. James slunked down across from me and sucked on his bottle. The girl put the bag on the ground and pushed it to me with her foot.

I was laughing before I even looked inside. I handed her the bottle of whiskey. She took a quick drink and handed it back.

"You want to see what I got?" She said and knelt down.

I tried to look her in the eye but I couldn't focus. I stopped myself laughing in case she thought I was laughing at her. I don't know what I was laughing at.

She didn't need me to answer. She unzipped the bag and I stared into it, looked at the amount of different drugs amazed. Clear bags of pills and powder, full syringes stuck in corks, a stack of paper the size of a small diary that I guessed was LSD. I didn't want to know nor assume as to how or where she had got the bag.

"See, I told you it was easy."

James came over, put his arm around her shoulders and looked inside. He started laughing and looked at me, nodding. He reached inside and grabbed a sandwich bag full of weed. He held it in his hand as if he was weighing it, held it to his nose and sniffed then opened it, stuck his nose in and sniffed again. Then he held it out at arms length, looked at it. Suddenly disappointed.

"No baccy."

The girl gave him a pouch of rolling tobacco she pulled from her coat then a packet of rolling papers. He sat down, laughing again, and rolled a joint. We smoked to the music of James' laughter.

I felt like telling them how much I appreciated them being there with me. But that would have implied that it was some sort of effort on their part, that they weren't going to be rewarded in some other way. I'd found it hard to accept that they really believed in the whole infinite instant thing. They hadn't been visited the way I had. They'd just read about it on a piece of paper, a poorly written idea in poorly handwritten block capitals.

But the more we smoked and the more we drank the more they talked about it to each other, as if I wasn't even there, discussing what they thought about it all; what the visitor had been, what life would be like after, what I'd meant by this and that, discussing possible interpretations of what they thought were profoundly impenetrable sentences but which I knew were just clumsily written. Each one of them still had their own copy, now tattered and fragile things that they handled carefully.



## CHAPTER 44 – PROCESS

For months we survived on my plan of delegated responsibility. We never had much but we never went without. James had the idea to steal a newspaper each day so that we would know the weather in advance and could take food to store for the days that our refuse harvest would be ruined by rain.

Some days I would go out with him and follow as he deftly dropped manifestoes into people's pockets and shopping bags. Some nights I would go out with him and he would show me proudly the most fruitful bins he had discovered, the ways that he would access places obstructed by fences, how he could extort cigarettes from drunk groups smoking outside nightclubs.

He could tell who was on drugs that made them sociable and his sales patter often got him three or four cigarettes from a group. He was adept at mimicry and at making sure no-one felt sympathy for him. He had learned that sympathy doesn't get you anything more than a friendly ear to talk to or a shoulder to cry on. That you usually have to smoke the cigarettes right there with them while you're making up some pathetic nonsense and that was no good to us.

It was on our way back from one of these outings that he confessed to me something that I already knew, that on his way back he had been eating some of the food he had taken. I didn't mind, he'd earned it and I told him as much. I asked him if he'd ever stolen from the drug bags and he assured me that he hadn't.

I asked him if he'd thought about it and he told me that yes, he had, but he knew that he shouldn't so he didn't.

Every two weeks on a Tuesday the girl would leave in the afternoon and arrive back Wednesday morning with a new handbag full of drugs. I never asked her where she got them or what she did to get them. I never really gave it a thought, it just happened.

Other than those hiatuses she would sit cross legged at one conveyor belt and copy out manifestoes then when her legs ached move to another to stand and dismantle cigarettes so that we had a pile of tobacco, then move back to the manifestoes and write.

She mostly kept to herself. She didn't seem to need anything. She was like a new machine in the old dead factory. I told James that if he could he should bring back beers or wine for her and he could so he did. She always shared with me whatever he'd brought her. I never declined.

And as much as they were dedicated to their roles, Craig was dedicated to his.

Whatever the girl brought back I put into him. We started off light; a couple of joints and then a few hours in the store room. A couple of bombs of speed or MDMA and then a few hours in the store room. A couple of tabs of acid and then a few hours in the store room. Then we started mixing them up, a bomb of speed and a couple of joints. A tab of acid, a joint, a bomb of speed. A bomb of MDMA, a tab of acid, a couple of joints.

We experimented with administering them at different times. Wait for him to come up on MDMA then drop a tab of acid. Wait for him to come up on acid then drop a bomb of MDMA. A line of

speed, wait half an hour, a tab of acid with a joint right after, wait for the acid high to reach the MDMA high, smoke a joint then into the store room.

All different mathematical combinations to see what worked the best and I kept track of it all in notebooks that James had brought back.

When he wasn't in the store room he was somewhere out of sight drinking bottled water or throwing up. There were enough rooms in the factory that each of us had somewhere private, somewhere to make our own.

James and the girl would often go to his or her quarters to smoke and drink and fuck. I had the old boss' office. As well as the store room Craig had the security room, though he was rarely in it.

## CHAPTER 45 – HEROIN

I was reluctant to use the heroin from the bags and after a while I had a drawer full of syringes with corked needles. And as much as we were getting close to an existence without time there was always something that made Craig think of a clock or a song or something. Something always sabotaged our attempts.

He would stagger out of the store room and I'd go down the stairs to meet him and he'd tell me he'd got a song stuck in his head and the rhythm of it had made him aware of time, or he'd started remembering a film and playing it back in his mind in the dark room.

For some reason I do not know heroin has always seemed at least one level above any other drug. All the other drugs were fun and as well as Craig, the girl, James and I would use them as well.

It started with James smoking weed the first night the girl brought back the first bag. Then he'd asked if we all wanted to do some MDMA or acid and it became just a thing we did whenever we were together, drinking stolen wine or stolen vodka or whiskey and being inside Benson's, together.

So when I asked Craig to come and sit with me and I explained to him that I wanted to use the heroin as a catalyst, just a few millilitres with every bomb or line or toke, I expected to have to explain things to him and to carefully and gently alter his opinion. But I didn't have to say anything.

"Ok," he said and nodded. Then he shrugged and smiled. "Whatever it takes."

His eyes were milk white in yellow skin but behind the frosted glass there burned intense belief and dedication.

He chewed a tab of acid while I went and fetched a syringe. I wrapped a parcel of MDMA and speed inside a cigarette paper and fed it to him. We'd done this before. A few different times with a few different doses.

Then I tied his arm off below his elbow. It didn't take long for a vein to make itself apparent and I uncorked a syringe and slid the needle in. Pressed the plunger down a couple of millimetres.

Waited with the plastic tube between my index and middle finger. Expecting him to pull it out, or fall so that it slid out.

"A little more," he said and I obliged him.

With my free hand I held his shoulder.

"All of it," he said.

"Not yet," I said.

He reached across and held my hand and pressed my thumb down so the whole thing emptied into him. Then he pulled my hand away and the needle came out. He smiled at me and laughed twice, then staggered to the store room door, pushed it open. Closed it behind himself.

James and the girl grew closer. He'd bring her back wine and beer. There'd always be surplus drugs. We'd sit for an hour or two after James returned every night and drink and smoke. They'd drop a tab of acid each or do a bomb of MDMA or a couple of lines of speed and I'd leave them to it, go up to my office to sit and wait until I fell asleep or until morning, whichever came first.

They started sharing a room, but neither of them properly moved out of their own. One night James would stay in hers, the next she'd stay in his. He'd go out to the city in the morning, a briefcase full of manifestoes, but not before she kissed him on the cheek at the doorway. Then she'd get to work at her makeshift desk copying up more for him to take out the next morning.

I'd watch from the walkway above, then walk down and check on Craig. Wipe away any dry vomit from his chin and chest and listen to him try to explain how things in the store cupboard were going.

He said the heroin was better than any of the other drugs. He said that it made him feel inside something and whatever it was he was inside of, time was outside of it. We started gradually increasing his dose, still using acid and MDMA and speed and whatever else but with our focus moving quickly to the heroin so everything else was just peripheral.

So much so that one Wednesday morning when the girl came back without any heroin at all, and my drawer only had three syringes left in it, I sent her straight back out and said she couldn't come back until she'd got more.

We didn't see her for four days and I spent those four days looking after Craig as he wept and threw up and shivered.

But he didn't know if it had been four days, four months or four minutes. So things were going well.

## CHAPTER 46 – BILL

One night a screech of car tires right outside Benson's woke me. Then the sound of a car door slamming.

I clambered out of my sleeping bag and dragged on a shirt and a pair of shoes. A heavy man's voice echoed metallic, projected from the doorway and off the roof.

"Sharon? Sharon! I know you're here."

I ran down the metal stairs. A man was walking slowly into the factory, a big man invading us, his hands up like a boxer. He spat onto the ground.

"Sharon I swear to God if you don't come out now."

He walked towards one of the machines and kicked it, roused up dust and sound.

"Sharon! Sharon don't fucking hide from me, I'll find you. Just save me the fucking time."

I stood at the foot of the stairs, hiding in the shadows, breathing heavily and trying not to. He walked around, not able to decide on a direction to walk in.

Another car door slammed.

A woman's voice: "Bill! Bill, please."

I couldn't see the entrance from where I was hiding. Just him and one corner of the factory. He turned.

"What? She's in here. I'm gonna find that bitch."

He looked over to where I was standing. He didn't have to look hard. We made eye contact and his face changed as he started to stride toward me.

I took a breath, long and sharp. Exhaled slowly. I didn't know who he was so I didn't know what to say. I didn't know who Sharon was but I assumed it was the girl's name. If Sharon was the girl's name, I didn't know who she was either.

There was nowhere behind me to run to. Just the factory's wall. I put my arms up to guard my face and scowled. He laughed and his pace slowed. I could have run back up the steps but he looked determined and I was afraid that if I did he'd follow me and throw me off the balcony.

He pointed at me and with a voice that made me wince said, "Back to the wall?" And then he laughed and swung a punch.

The darkness that happened when it connected with my temple was a deep syrup that I enjoyed, but I knew I had to drag myself out of it. I saw Bill's shoes, felt the collar of my shirt choking me, then felt white impact on the back of my head.

I opened my eyes. Bill was a few feet away from me. I stood up. Ran at him and jumped onto his back, held on with my legs and an arm, tried to reach his eyes with my free hand but he grabbed my shirt and threw me over his shoulder. I landed on the concrete winded and coughed while he kicked open rotting wooden doors.

"Sharon? Sharon!"

I hoisted myself onto unsteady feet and held my arms out in cautious submission.

"Look, there's no Sharon here. If she was here she'd have come out of hiding or whatever, right?"

He spun on his heels. He thought he'd put me out. Was angry that he hadn't. He walked toward me with his guard down so I threw a punch at his head. It hit his chin but didn't move it, he just looked at me and grabbed my throat with his left hand, held it and hit me repeatedly in the face with his right. Nose, eyebrows, cheeks, teeth, jaw. I threw a few punches that bounced off his head. I don't think he noticed.

From some corner of the factory or of my fading consciousness I heard a girl's voice screaming, "No! No. Please. Stop it!"

From the entrance of the factory or of my fading consciousness I heard a woman's voice screaming, "Bill, please. Bill, this is too much, you're going too far!"

From the mess he was holding I heard a struggled wet groan, "Bill... Bill... "

Then the girl's voice, shrieking. "Dad!"

The word destroyed him. He let go of me and turned away, toward the word. I couldn't stand up. I was a heavy weight beneath water and dropped slowly onto the seabed.

Blood from my nose, eyebrows, cheeks, teeth and jaw floated around me. The tide pushed, swung me. Day and night spun like a Catherine Wheel. I could taste seawater, blood, sick.

She emerged, running from a corner.

"Please, Dad, please. Please."

He grabbed her hair and dragged her away screaming, out of view. I heard the sound of a car door opening. There was a series of screams and then the sound of the car door slamming shut. I waited on my hands and knees and listened for the sound of the car reversing. A sound that didn't happen.

Footsteps echoed in the factory again. My face was warm with pain and wet with blood.

Nowhere was the pain acute, just the whole of my head pushing in on itself and pulling itself apart at the same time.

I saw his feet come round the corner and I tried to get up. I had a foot on the ground and, leaning on the knee, tried to push myself upright. He stood watching me. I felt my weight too far over to the right but couldn't shift it back and I fell onto my side, hit my head and my elbow on the

concrete. My mouth was too numb to spit so the blood fell out in strings and hung from my lips and chin.

Too weak to stand I knelt and watched the blood pool on the ground. His foot hit my face before I saw it. I felt myself standing but couldn't understand why; I'd given up on getting up and just wanted to kneel there unmoving.

When my eyes focused I saw his hands on my collar. My eyes rolled up and I saw his face an inch from mine. Even through the broken bones and blood I could smell his coffee breath as he stared at me, his eyes darting erratically, tracking my face like a machine.

I couldn't stand unaided and swayed slightly in his grasp as though wind or tide were pushing me softly. His head recoiled and snapped forward and a mass of his spit hit me in the eye.

A voice behind him, soft with hope. "Bill, that's enough, honey."

A woman in a trouser suit, leaking mascara from her eyes, threw herself round the corner.

Bill disagreed. It wasn't enough. His head recoiled again and my eye that was covered in spit got a distorted close up of his brow before everything flashed white and I staggered backwards.

I think he wanted to kill me. I wanted him to kill me. It was easier than doing it myself and easier than carrying on this pretence that I had been forced to perpetuate.

I choked up bile. Spat it out, a mix of clear liquid and red. "Bill. Just fucking finish it."

"What did you say, you fucking pervert?"

Even my thoughts were pulped. I said something but even if I could hear my speech it would have been a garbled mess of blood and agony.

He grabbed my collar again and caught some of my skin in his hands. It would have hurt if I had cared. Water obscured my vision and I saw his face as though through frosted glass, saw his mouth moving in its own echo.

"Think it's alright to fuck little girls in your little hovel? Well it fucking isn't. You piece of shit."

He picked me up off my feet and threw me upwards and backwards so I landed spine first on the metal stairs. Every other impact had been a flash of white followed by a copper agony but this one, the impact of my back on the steel, was a slowly burning glow.

Now that I was out of his grasp the woman placed her hands on him.

"Bill," she addressed him softly, "that'll do, honey."

She stroked his sweat-beaded head. "That'll do, ok? Let's just go. Please."

Blood made its way into my mouth as I lay awkward on the steps watching him disappear round the corner. When my mouth was full it poured out over my teeth. My spine clenched tight and I saw the visitor standing over me.

It didn't say a word.

I put my hands on the dusty metal behind me and pushed myself to my feet as I heard a car wheelspin and scream away. It was a vague sound, competing with my screaming agony. I felt my swollen, aching face drag a smile that burned vehement and assured.

If I was an empty shell then I had suddenly become filled with a warm liquid that was alive in all my organs. My skin sparked electric, the lethargic darkness that had begun to cloud my periphery dissipated.

It was a childish relief that filled me, my dependency that had started to rot suddenly turning ripe once more and it was with giddy glee that I laughed and sprayed blood out of my mouth.

When the visitor left me the fire in my spine roared. There was so much kindling for the flames to consume. I washed myself in the pain, plunged myself into its refreshing oasis. The flames turned my doubts to ash and melted my frozen nonchalance, turned it into fuel. Craig was in a dark room involved in our most extreme experiment yet, bound and blindfolded, full of drugs.

Perhaps the visitor had returned because I had succeeded. Returned to see my triumph for itself, to congratulate me but also to warn me that I was still human, that I was still anchored to the Earth.



## CHAPTER 47 – TRANSCENDENCE

I managed to stand up and make my way to the store cupboard. I was eager to see what was inside, to see what our accomplishment looked like.

Craig would be the only man on this Earth that had escaped his bounds, loosened himself from the constraints of time and transcended. How would that manifest itself physically? Transcendence. True transcendence. I would have run if my aching body had allowed it. I would have imagined it if my mind was clear of any expectation. But how could I even imagine how he would appear now?

I noticed my stride slowing and each step requiring even more effort than the last. Every movement seemed to drain my ability to see and the factory around me eventually blurred into a complete darkness.

My whole self a throbbing pain inside vast darkness.

The sound of leaves rustling outside.

I was on my back. Blinking erratically, looking up the the flickering ceiling. It hurt to breathe and I felt sick. I rolled onto my front. Pressed my palms against the ground to lift myself as much as I could and threw up.

I was cold. Shivering. Overcome with a sense of despair you can only reach after being beaten unconscious, a sudden awareness of vulnerability. A regressive childhood terror you never overcome, only forget about.

Something pressed against my shoulder and I screamed in agony. The sound of it hurt my ears. The effort of it hurt my face. Then I felt hands pass under my arms and cross round my chest.

I tried to kick and struggle as I was hoisted to my feet. Then I was held until I gave up. Turned around slowly to see James. He ducked under my arm so that he was supporting me and we walked to a conveyor belt, where he sat me down and I leaned against it, let my head drop backwards and rest on it.

He sat down cross legged in front of me, reached across my shoulder to the tobacco pile and rolled a cigarette. Lit it, took a drag then handed it to me.

I couldn't move my sore, swollen lips so I held it to my mouth and tried to smoke as best I could whilst he watched, his eyes tracing my face as if he could find an answer to his question by reading the blood and bruises.

"Someone came and took the girl, " I explained. "Her dad I think."

"Where's Craig?"

I managed to get to my feet but couldn't keep my balance and I stumbled forward. He caught me

and propped me on his shoulder and we walked to the store cupboard. He opened the door. Inside, Craig was on the ground.

It looked as if he was crawling towards us but he was completely still as if he had suddenly stopped, his body halfway into a motion, one hand held out in front of him, his hand suspended inches above the ground.

His face was a placid mask, his eyes open staring beyond us at something we couldn't see, vomit dripping from his bottom lip the only movement. Pure stasis.

He wasn't among us. He was somewhere else, somewhere that movement didn't matter. Somewhere without movement. Somewhere without time.

James dropped to his knees in front of him, saying "Craig? Craig can you hear me?"

"No!" I yelled. He was going to bring him back and ruin everything.

I tried to walk forward to stop him but he stood up. He put his hands out in front of him and tried to block me from getting to Craig. I tried pushing him out of the way but I had no strength at all. He put his hands on my shoulders and guided me gently backwards. I wanted to wrestle him out of the way, out of the store cupboard so I could explain to him what we had to do next, even if I didn't know what that was.

We had it all in my notebooks; how we'd reached this point. All we'd have to do would be to copy every step exactly. Get more test subjects first maybe, see if we could start at an earlier point. Maybe just the last dose combination would do it. Craig could come back, it wouldn't affect the fact that we'd succeeded and could succeed again. But we needed him in stasis. That way he was totemic. That way we could show others that we'd succeeded and that we could free anyone.

And I didn't want him to come back, for his sake. I didn't know when the instant infinite would happen. It could have happened at any time. Right then, even. It didn't seem fair to bring him back. He'd worked hard to escape and he deserved it, who were we to go find him in his hiding place and drag him back to our doomed existence.

James knelt down in front of him and held his hands out, wanting to touch him but afraid to. I tried to ignore my aching and stepped forward, intent on grabbing James and dragging him out. But he stood up again and turned round and pushed me backwards.

He pointed at me as I stepped back, opened his mouth to say something, but I felt my legs go weak, lost my footing and fell backwards.

The sound of my skull hitting the ground shook in my teeth and in my eyes, echoed around the factory and in my head.

Then suddenly I was moving. Still on my back but hurtling forward and being jostled and bumped around. A high pitched cacophony wailing at me and blue lights flashing. My breath was hot and wet against my chin and my dry lips. Something was wrapped around my face. A plastic mask over my mouth. I tried to grab it and prise it away but rubber hands held each of my wrists gently and lowered my arms down without any resistance.

"You're alright, you're alright, that's just to help you breathe. Just relax, we'll be at the hospital soon."

I looked around me. Trying to figure out where I was. Everything was close; the walls, the ceiling, the machines with blinking lights, the cabinets with rattling contents. And movement. But I couldn't know how fast I was going. I couldn't see anything beyond the tiny confined space I was in, hurtling forwards.

I tried to remember how I had ended up there. I remembered being in Benson's. I remembered falling backwards, down. Hearing the sudden smack when my head hit the ground. Then in the space of one blink I was suddenly somewhere else.

I was reluctant to even entertain the idea that I had transcended as well. If I had then I couldn't come back and carry on, couldn't go back to Benson's and watch our group grow. But I had left my notebooks and I had left James. He could use them and I would meet everyone who transcended, welcome them into our new existence.

I let myself want it. Want the incalculable speed and the wailing and the flashing lights to be revealed to me as the world from a new perspective. From Craig's perspective. Then the motion slowed, the bumping and rattling stopped and everything became still.

I heard doors open behind me and a cold wind blew into the small chamber. It shook and swung a few loose hangings and soothed my hot skin. The mask was removed and I was asked if I could stand. I didn't answer because I didn't know. Then I sat up, swung my legs round and stood.

A hand in mine steadied me as I descended two small metal steps down onto concrete. Blinking lights in the incomprehensible distance, sound being carried over by the wind and behind me a huge building that glowed from within.

I was seated in a wheelchair that was waiting for me and pushed past glass doors that opened on their own, into a corridor of artificial light and air. Past rows of seated casualties holding wounds, moaning and weeping.

## CHAPTER 48 – ALONE

Then I was left alone in a small room. Cabinets, a yellow bin, a crude bed covered with a coarse paper sheet. A clock on the wall behind me. I could hear each second but couldn't see it.

I rolled the wheelchair forth and back as much as the small space allowed. The light above me glowed white and I was too warm, my face sticky with sweat, stiff with congealed blood, hard with aching bruises. I kept my eye on the door, wondering where it led and what was going on behind it.

After a while it opened slowly, slightly, and a face crept through the small gap. Peered at me then retreated and the door closed quickly.

It was a strange intermission in the long wait but that was all it was; a quick interruption. Then I was waiting again. The aggressive light from the ceiling and the incessant clock forbade sleep. I was incredibly tired, it weighed down my eyes and made my breath hurt.

When the door opened again a young doctor walked in and introduced himself, followed by a nurse who didn't. She dragged stinging wet cotton balls over my face to clean off the blood. If the blood was stubborn she'd scrub at it like she was cleaning a pan. Where it was dried around hair the hair would be pulled out with it.

She'd filled two kidney dishes with red cotton wool balls before the doctor said it was enough.

He held my chin between his palms and explored my face with his rubber covered thumbs. Everywhere he touched hurt. I'd wince and he'd ask me if it hurt. If I didn't answer he'd ask again. We soon got into a routine of him pressing and me saying yes, without my wince or his question.

He took the nurse to one corner and they spoke quietly so that I couldn't hear them, couldn't know how broken my own face was. I wanted to know how bad it was but I realised before I asked them that if it was even slightly good they'd have told me, or they'd tell me. They didn't.

The doctor left. The nurse took the two kidney dishes and she left. There was a mirror above a sink and I tried to stand so that I could look at myself but I was too weak to push myself up from the chair. There was nothing else I could look in, no polished metal. Anything that could have been reflective had been painted white. I tried to pick flakes from the metal of the bed but I couldn't.

When the doctor returned he was carrying a tray. He set it down, took a syringe from it and injected something cold into my eyebrow. Then he threaded a needle with blue plastic thread. Tapped my eyebrow, asked me if it hurt. I told him it didn't. He pushed the needle against it and I felt the skin break and the metal slide inside. Then I felt the skin break again and it slid out. The thread was dragged through with sharp tugs that jerked my head back each time.

While he carried on sewing me up I didn't know where to look. I tried to close my eyes but the strange feeling of the needle and thread was amplified in the darkness and I had to keep them open. I stared at the blue rubber palms of his blue rubber hands, tried to keep them in focus as my head was jerked back then let to loll forward and then jerked back again.

He snapped the thread and tied it off. He took some thick blue paper from a box of it and wiped away tears that I hadn't noticed I was crying. A tourniquet was fixed around my arm, a metal buckle like an aeroplane seatbelt buckle that tightened it. Then a syringe slid in, took some blood from me and slid out. A second slid in, deposited what was inside of it and slid out.

As soon as the doctor had picked up the tray and left, I heard the door behind me open and I was suddenly jolted and dragged backwards. I couldn't turn round to see who was in control of where I was going. Whoever it was dragged me into the corridor then to the lifts. An arm reached over my shoulder and pressed the button and we waited.

I'd left all my pain in the room. The doctor had taken it out on his tray. I was tired. I was content. I let myself fall asleep.

## CHAPTER 49 – DETECTIVE

The room I awoke in was large enough to make me realise that it needn't be so large. I couldn't get up from the bed and walk around. I had been in this room before. Not the same room, but it might as well have been.

Like the franchised coffee shops. Same placement of furniture, same machines. Same tubes and wires and the same body disappearing beneath the same blanket. I wondered who had tucked me in. Wondered who had undressed me and replaced my clothes with the paper robe that rustled against my skin.

I didn't want to get up or walk around. I wanted to lie and watch the clock on the far wall. Watch the thin red spike jerk one degree every second and wait for my spine to hurt.

Sometimes between blinks the time would have moved forward four or five hours. But I knew I hadn't escaped time. The second hand would snap one more degree. Not that it mattered. We were close now. One of us had achieved what we had set out to achieve. We could carry on.

Every time I awoke a nurse would be in the room with me. They'd put a paper cup of pills on the steel table attached to the bed. A paper cup of water next to it. Pills for the pain and pills to help me sleep.

While the nurse checked machines and changed my catheter I'd swallow them down one after the other, each one sticking in my throat a little and making me gag. I'd drink all the water for one pill and the nurse would roll her eyes and sigh, stop what she was doing to fetch more and then resume what she was doing. Soon they started bringing a glass jug full.

At some point I was visited by a man in a suit and a woman in a police uniform, holding her hat in front of her. I opened my eyes to see them standing at the foot of the bed, waiting for me to wake. Impossible to know how long they had been waiting.

He introduced himself as Detective Inspector Robert Farrows. She remained anonymous.

"How are you feeling?" She asked.

I looked at her. I wasn't feeling anything, so I didn't say anything.

Robert Farrows coughed into his fist and then put his hands on the rail at the foot of the bed. Leaned forward, looked me in the eye and said, "We are here to inform you that we've correlated a DNA sample from you with other evidence we have ascertained, placing you at the scene of a crime.

"I'm arresting you on suspicion of the murder of Timothy Price and Amanda Reed. You do not have to say anything but it may harm your defence if you do not mention when questioned something that you later rely on in court. Anything you do say may be given in evidence."

He stood upright and stared at me, giving me a chance to say something. I didn't have anything to say. I looked at the woman, for no reason. She was rotating the cap in her hands.

He continued. "After you have recovered from your injuries you'll be placed in police custody. In the meantime there will be a police guard outside your door. It's likely that we'll have to return to question you further. Is there anything you want to ask me?"

There wasn't.

"Anything you want to say? Anything at all?"

There wasn't.

"Alright, sir. Then I'd like to thank you for your co-operation and wish you all the best in your recovery."

He turned to the woman and nodded. They walked to the door. I looked away, to the television, and watched the reflection of them leaving the room.

My jaw and cheekbone were broken and I couldn't chew, so every meal was soup. Breakfast was juice in a plastic cup. Cold fruit soup, I realised. I told my observation to the nurse. He told me not to speak.

There was a television I could watch but I didn't want to. I preferred staring at the screen, my vague reflection transparent in its blackness. I'd see how long I could stare at it for, but the clock was always in my peripheral vision.

I asked one of the nurses, when they brought me a plastic cup of whatever it was that time, if they could take the clock down or move it to somewhere else in the room. They told me they couldn't do that. I asked if they could cover it up. They told me they couldn't do that either.

If I asked for anything to be changed their response would always be negative. So nothing changed. Soon I began falling asleep at the same times, for the same amount of time. My routine of swallowing a pill, swallowing a cup of water, refilling it, repeat became a series of actions that took eight minutes to complete each time. A cup of soup took fourteen minutes. A cup of juice three.

Everything immutable, time left the room. Almost. I existed in its absence, but it was still present within me. The clock on the wall. The red needle injecting into me the thin sliver that was left. After realising that I had almost eschewed time completely, as if to affirm my realisation in lieu of any pain in my spine, James visited me.

## CHAPTER 50 – JAMES

He was there when I opened my eyes. I got the sense that he had been talking while I was asleep but had stopped now that I'd awoken.

I had the vague recollection of someone speaking to me in my dream, but I couldn't remember anything more of it. In the sudden fluorescence of the hospital room all dreams, and all memories of them, were immediately obliterated.

His mouth was open, halfway through a word. When he saw that I was awake he closed it and looked away. Looked around the room, at the television, at the other machines and screens, at the white walls. He walked over to the window. His hand went up to reach for the string, to open the blind.

"Leave it closed," I said.

I never had the blind open. I never wanted to know what time of the day it was, except from the clinical numeric time of the clock and the precise angles of its hands. James sat himself down in the one visitor's chair and waited, as if for instruction.

A nurse came in and placed a plastic cup of juice on my table. I shuffled myself up to a half sitting position to take a long, slow sip. It was always difficult to stop myself from drinking the whole cupful in one gulp. My mouth and throat were always dry.

I let the juice pool in my mouth for a second, then swallowed. I didn't look at him. I stared at the television's black screen and said, "I can't come back to the factory."

James started to say something but I cut him off.

"You'll find all my notebooks in the drawers in my office. The ones that document mine and Craig's experiments. The girl's gone now, I doubt that she'll be able to come back. She might, but I wouldn't be too hopeful about it. So you'll have to get drugs from somewhere else. Everything will be up to you for a while. You'll have to distribute manifestoes like before, but you'll also have to write them. You'll be doing a lot. But a lot has already been done, it's all in the notepads. And soon enough more people will come. Like how you and Craig came. Like how the girl came. Then you'll be in charge. It'll be up to you. But I know you'll be able to handle it."

I turned my head to look at him. He was sitting looking down, the fingers of his left hand tracing his forehead and the bridge of his nose.

He looked up when he realised I'd finished talking. Our eyes met. He pushed his teeth together, behind pursed lips. I saw his jaw tighten. With his muscles still clenched he opened his mouth. Then he shut it and stood up.

He walked past the foot of my bed. To the door. He rested his hand on the handle and looked at me. I looked at him, expectant. I thought he was going to say something. He didn't.

He looked down at the floor. Turned the handle. Traversed the threshold and shut the door



behind him. The policewoman guarding the door asked him how I was feeling. He stared at her but didn't answer.

He walked out of the hospital and to a bus stop. He waited there with a woman who was late for work and a man who staggered around confined to a few square feet of pavement, leaning on the lamp post and the drybrick wall and the bus shelter until the bus arrived and he got on.

The bus went through the city and it went through suburbia and then it carried on. The drunk man was asleep, his head hitting the window with every bump and turn.

It arrived at the industrial estates, where the mechanisms of the city existed like an exoskeleton. James dropped a manifesto onto the sleeping man's lap as he passed him on his way off the bus.

He walked to an abandoned industrial estate. Went round the back of the building with BENSON'S written in huge white letters, pushed open the rotting wooden door and went inside.

Craig was there to greet him. He asked how their hospitalised leader was and James said that he was fine and not to worry. Then he went upstairs to the boss' office and gathered the notebooks from the filing cabinet. Took them downstairs and began to read them in reverse chronological order, making his own notes in a fresh one.

Craig did as James asked and began writing out manifestoes on half sheets of A4 paper, ready for them to take out later that day and distribute while they also foraged for food.

Getting drugs to continue the experiments, and to use themselves when they felt the time was right for them to hide from the infinite instant, would be a problem. But James knew he was up to the task. It was only a matter of asking, or waiting to be asked. Of finding the right people and following leads.

Eventually James would spraypaint the entire manifesto on one wall of the abandoned factory and he, Craig and the small but ever growing group of followers would work tirelessly before it. The final words painted at eye level:

A clock that has stopped.  
Written beneath its two hands:  
"Time waits for no man."

THE END