

A PARLIAMENT DISPLACED

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It was the grey pre-dawn of an Autumn month. A McDonalds not far from the city centre was glowing from within and its floodlamps cast a wash of light over the car park.

A white van sat with its engine ticking over. A pigeon hopped about pecking at the ground. Silhouettes moved across the restaurant's steam-glazed windows.

Round the back by the Biffa bins where it was dark, Gaz lifted the lid of one bin and reached inside. He handed Brian a Happy Meal box and Brian dumped out the wrappers and then dropped the empty container. Gaz did likewise with the boxes he managed to get at through a hole in a bin bag.

Chelsea unzipped her rucksack. -Nowt else smells like maccies does it.

Gaz let the bin lid fall. -Owt else smells like proper food.

Chelsea took a laptop out from her rucksack. -Owt else is proper food.

Leaning against the wall she knelt and opened the laptop and set it on her thighs. Brian scratched at his thick greying beard. -Saright that.

-Yeh it int bad. Cash converters wunt teck it though cos i ant got charger.

The blue-white glow of the screen glinted off her lipring as she typed and tapped. She tucked a lock of hair behind her ear and leaned in closer to the screen. -Yeh ere we are. Neighbourin councils crack down ont omeless. Article dunt say much more thant edline.

Brian knelt down beside her. His knees cracking punctuated the drone of his long exhale. -So thev come ere. That explains whats appened wit economy.

Gaz took his cap off and ran his palm over his stubbled head. He put it back on and lifted the lid of the second bin and reached inside. -Innit.

Inside the McDonalds, in the back office, the head of security watched on black and white grainy CCTV

three homeless people, one of whom one was holding in their lap something glowing.

He picked up the phone.

The police arrived some fifteen minutes after the call. They'd no need to hurry, they'd said, if a threat isn't being posed. They came without sirens and without strobes. Just regulation uniform; helmets and stab vests. And they met the head of security and they walked round the back to the Biffa bins.

One of the officers rapped on the top of the bin with his knuckles. Chelsea clapped the laptop shut. The three of them stared at the two cops and at the head of security standing a few feet behind.

The officer who'd knocked ran his fingernail down his cheek. Down the designer stubble rough as a matchbox strip and he looked at the three rough sleepers in front of him. -So. Av you lot got any reason to be ere.

Brian stood. -No moren you av.

The cop raised his hand in front of him. -Alright Brian.

The second officer took a step forward. -Now. Were not going to be chargin anyone here. Alright. We just need ya to move off the premisis. Alright.

There was no argument. No discussion. No noise at all but for the rustling of their jackets and carrier bags as they all turned and started to move away. The intermittent hiss click burst of a lighter.

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In the centre of the city was a vast expanse of white concrete; Independence Square.

A few pubs and a museum, a non-descript theatre, and a main road demarked its perimeter.

Colin was slunking about on the terrace of Wetherspoons that overlooked the square. He leaned on the railing and closed his eyes. His shoulders lurched and he doubled over and he opened his mouth and threw up.

Henry was sitting on the museum's concrete steps and was using his foot to bend the kink out of his crutch. Jade sitting beside him danced her naked Barbie.

Pikey and Tom were sitting on a bench watching the huge television screen that loomed above and transmitted animated line graphs zigzagging up and down.

Tom shifted and twisted his large body on the avant-garde seat. -Sallus fuckin news twentyfower.

-Ah think the put yanited games on an all.

Colin spat and wiped his mouth. He picked up a newspaper from a table. The words of the article were blurred and smudged together but the headline was uneroded: Neighbouring councils crack down on homeless.

He walked down the steps and to where Tom and Pikey were sitting. -Av ya sin this. Naybrin councils crack down. Ont omeless is what edline sez. Ah cart meck out nonnet. Rest.

Pikey took it from him and looked at it. -Cos ya fuckin pissed. Oh aye. Soz mate ya right. Its indeciphable.

Pikey handed the paper to Tom. Tom turned the pages until he got to the crossword. He tore the crossword out and folded it and put it in his shirt pocket. Then he tossed the newspaper onto the ground.

Brian, Gaz, and Chelsea walked across the empty road to them. Henry stood and leant against his crutch and joined them with Jade behind him. Pikey got to his feet and Henry sat. Those that had tobacco rolled cigarettes and handed the cigarettes to those without and then rolled again for themselves. Lighters sparked and orange glows were held inside cupped hands.

Brian blew a smoke ring. -Wiv worked out whyt economies gone to pot. Councils are crackin down ont omeless so thev come ere wi reckon.

Pikey nodded. -Wi saw int paper.

Pikey turned and looked across the square. A student was wandering with his mouth open. Hair very carefully shaved here and long there. Clothes deliberately dishevelled and jeans torn in the factory before being shipped out. Pikey beckoned him over. -Ere mate yant got a bit a change ya could spare av ya.

His hands working through his pockets the student cross the square. When he got close he held out his empty palms and shrugged his shoulders. -I cant am afraid man. I gave the last I had to some other guys.

The rough sleepers mumbled together and shared glances. The student stood, looking at the ground and scratching the back of his neck. He coughed into his fist and looked with wide eyes at the group in front of him.

Gaz raised his eyebrows. -What.

The student pointed in a vague direction. -Am just gunner.

Tom looked up at him. -Ya dont need ar permishun.

The student turned and made to leave and almost walked into Scott who was striding towards the group. The student explained again that he had no money but Scott wasn't listening. His asking had been no more than a reflex.

He stopped just short of the group. -Ere you lot. Brian. Thes a load a people undert bridge.

Gaz turned. -Ya what.

-A load a. Ya know. Rough sleepers. Thev tecken over undert bridge.

Brian licked his fingertips and crushed out his cigarette and put it in his jacket pocket. -Aright. Wid best go av a chat we em then.

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They followed the river.

They encountered the rest of them that had been displaced. It was a group huddled low at the side of the path. They were the very old and the very young. The coldest and the hungriest. Pikey put his hand to one of them and rested it on the old woman's shoulder and nodded.

Gaz strode towards those charged with protecting them. -The fuck appened.

Spack shrugged. -Gaz we jus got back an it wer like this. We dint know what to do so we sent Scott out to find yer an let ya know.

They arrived at the bridge and they stood looking up at it and they looked at the blackness beneath it and the blacker shapes of tents within that. Brian shaded his eyes from the breaking dawn sun and looked toward the bridge. -Ah cart see anyone.

Gaz looked as well and tilted his baseball cap down a few degrees. -Ah can see all us fuckin stuff though. Int river look.

Pikey rolled up his sleeves. -Al go av a look. Ya comin Tom.

Pikey and Tom advanced towards the camp and the group advanced behind them. Gaz joined them at

the front of the group. Colin drained his can of Special Brew and crushed it hurried to the front of the group pointing with the crushed can high and shouting. -Ere whats the. Fuckin idea a this.

Pikey put his arm like a barrier in front of Colin. -Chill out man.

Colin was pulled backwards by Brian and replaced at the front of the group. The crowd moved on past him and he caught up and marched alongside them.

There was the sound of rustling and zips unfastening. The group stopped. They watched figures move in the dark. The figures came to the edge of the shade and did not move out from it but stood silhouetted.

Brian took a step forward. -What da ya think yer doin.

One of the figures folded its arms. -Al be doin you if ya dont fuck off.

Pikey stepped alongside Brian. -Wiv got kids ere man.

The figure unfolded its arms and put its hands in its pockets. -So av we. And what.

There was more rustling and unzipping and a low murmur of voices. The silhouettes were joined until there was just one black mass within the blackness of the bridge's shadow. On the river the floating jetsam drew level with its owners.

Colin spat and shook himself. He stamped forward and tossed the crushed can he'd been holding and stooped and picked up a brick. Pikey turned to face him. Pikey put his hands up to Colin's chest and took his weight and looked him in the eye.

Colin broke eye contact and leaned upwards and threw the brick clumsily over Pikey. It landed some three feet away from the shade's edge. A jeering roar came from the darkness.

Colin backed off and Pikey turned. Brian and Gaz and Tom were backing away. The group backing away behind them.

Their sleeping bags and blankets lapped against the bank of the river.

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So they made their way together to the railway viaduct. Down to the very ground it stood on. A level lower than any road. Lower than the rest of the city. The viaduct towering over them.

They went into one of its dark arches. A train leaving the station rattled a cacophony above them that echoed inside the chamber. Pikey wandered outside and kicked some rocks about. He watched the last few carriages of the train leave and then he returned to the archway.

Tom folded his arms. -What da ya think Pikey.

Pikey shrugged. -Ah dunno.

Chelsea nodded. -Av seen a couple a new girls around but that int owt weird. Ah could talk to em.

Spack shook his head. -Al talk to em if ya want.

Chelsea rolled her eyes. -Shut up Spack.

Tom leant against the wall. -It int right what thuv done to em. Could appen to us.

Brian looked around. -Aye.

Gaz threw out his arms. -Diffrence does it meck. The cart jus come an chuck all us gear int river. An thats ar fuckin bridge. Wiv bin there time. Wi shud go back now an deck lot of em.

Henry nodded. -Is got a point.

Colin swayed on his feet and pointed. -E as. The need ta be. Fuckin taught a lesson.

Brian looked at Gaz. -Only when allt other options av bin exhausted.

Gaz shook his head. -Fuck that brian. One options enough.

The archway began to shake and rattle again. The roar of another train above grew and became a din of rush and clattering metal that again filled the chamber and drowned their voices. And in the noise the group began to divide itself. All of them shifting and passing one another until half stood behind Gaz and half stood behind Brian.

Brian smoothed down his beard. -Ya know ya cart win a fight wit lot of em on yer own.

Gaz nodded slowly. -Yeh ah know.

And the two groups walked to the archway's entrance with two feet of space between them and they turned, Brian's group to the east, and Gaz's group to the west.

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Gaz led his group to a nightclub. Its lease had long run out and a third of it was fire damaged. A half collapsed roof with pigeons nestling on the exposed charred beams. They manouvred through the Do

Not Enter tape and the temporary perimeter fence.

At the service entrance round the back they found the door was secured with a bolt and padlock. Spack picked up a 2x4 and wedged it in behind the bolt and tried to jimmy the bolt off the door. The plank snapped and half clattered to the ground and Spack threw the other half down with it.

Colin kicked the door with the full sole of his foot and stumbled backwards into the group and they caught him.

Gaz held the padlock and took its weight in his hands. He yanked it pulled a couple of times then let go and stepped back. He looked around and then nodded towards a broken window. -Ere. One a you lot. Give us a boost up ere.

Gaz stood beneath the window. One of the young rough sleepers from the group knelt at his feet and cupped her hands. Gaz took off his jacket and wrapped it around his hand and arm and Henry tied a string around it. He put his foot in the girl's cupped hands and she hoisted him up. He kicked off and scrambled at the wall and got his covered arm hooked through the window.

He pulled himself up and dropped inside then looked out through the window. -Ere. One a you. Give us an and.

Another of the group hurried to the window and the girl boosted him up. Gaz reached down and pulled him the rest of the way and through the window.

A minute later there was a thud and the door jolted. Repeated thudding and the door resisting the impact coming from behind it. Hardly moving at all. Repeated thudding and the screws in the deadbolt loosening.

Until the screws were torn out and the door flung open. The deadbolt and padlock hung from one remaining screw. The group moved inside.

Inside they seated themselves on the adhesive half dry sweat, spit, booze and birdshit laquer of the dancefloor. Henry walked to the bar and leaned against it. Jade climbed on to it and sat cross-legged. Gaz hoisted hiself onto the stage.

He stamped his foot and the sound echoed and the pigeons on the ceiling beams flew away. -Right. Listen up. Dont start thinkin that cos wer not fightin right now means wer not gonna be fightin at all. Wiv just gotta wait fer brian to come round. An e will. So lets just get comfy ere fer now while we wait fer im to get is ed screwed on.

The crowd sitting on the floor nodded. Some of them slapped the floor with their palms and there were intermittent words in agreement.

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Brian's group were inside a pub that had been abandoned during the recession. An anonymous pub with its signage removed. A pub with sheet metal covering all its doors and windows but for the beer drop. The doors of the beer drop were missing and the sheet of metal covering the opening had been plied back on itself.

In the cellar Brian was sitting alone on a keg and squinting against the smoke that stretched and coiled from the cigarette between his lips. The rest of the group had settled upstairs in the bar. Most of them were at a table in the corner playing cards using matchsticks for currency.

Pikey dropped his losing hand onto the table as the last of his matches were scooped away by the winner. -Oh well. Ther worth nowt anyway. Sez outside all items of value av bin removed.

And he walked to the bar where Tom and Colin stood leaning and sitting on a stool respectively and drinking a pint each. He walked past them and around them and behind the bar. He slung a mouldy bartowel over his shoulder. Colin drained his drink.

Pikey grabbed a glass from the rack of them above him and blew the dust out of it. -Same again sir.

-Aye go on then son.

Pikey took a can from the carrier bag of them on the bar and cracked it open and poured the lager.

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Scott has washed in a fountain and combed his hair back with his fingers. He had retrieved from one of his hiding places a clean shirt and four cans of lager.

He waited on a grass verge in Legacy Park with the cans next to him warming in the rising sun's glare.

He saw Jenny's sillhouette appear on the shimmering horizon and fixed his hair one last time and picked out from under his fingernails whatever dirt remained there. He saw that her t-shirt was inside out and

he wondered as to why. Perhaps a stain on the other side, he thought. Warm and gluey and sticking to her skin. To her stomach or her breast.

He picked up the cans and walked to her. He scratched his cheek. -Yaright.

She shrugged. -Yeh am ok.

Scott swept his free hand arcing through the air around him. -Teck a seat.

She sat right where she was standing, all but dropped to the ground, and held her knees to herself. Scott placed the cans on the grass and sat beside her. He twisted one free of the plastic looping that gripped them together, cracked it open and sipped twice. Then he twisted out another and handed it to Jenny and she cracked it open and drank.

For a time they sat supping at their cans and looking at one another in turn. Jenny, watching Scott, would see his gaze begin to move to her and would avert hers, and likewise Scott would avert his when he saw her beginning to look at him. Scott taking long, slow draws from his can. Jenny taking regular sips from hers.

They knew the answers to preliminary first date questions. They'd asked them on their first date. What music they were into. What films and TV they liked. They both shared the same taste. -Owt thats good really ya know.

Scott leaned forward. -Weathers cleared up annit.

Jenny plucked at the grass beside her.

Scott leaned back. -Were awful earlier.

-I seen four magpies ont way over.

Scott looked at her. She didn't look away. Then he blinked and turned his gaze to a dog that was bounding across the grass after a stick. -Gaz wants a war.

She turned to look in the direction he was looking in, at the dog bobbing along to return the stick to its master. -What we you.

-No. Wiv all them whove come over.

-Oh. Whos Gaz.

-Tall. Shaved ed. Well. Like a grade two not like totally skinhead.

-Is he fat. I know a fat lad called Gaz.

-It int im.

-K.

-It dunt matter anyway. Whered ya see yer magpies.

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In Chelsea's squat room Henry was sitting on the mattress with Jade's Barbie sitting on his knee and he helped her brush the tangles out of its plastic hair while Gaz, Chelsea and Spack leaned over the laptop on the floor, Spack hunched and typing in frantic bursts, waiting, and typing another frantic burst again.

Chelsea teased a lock of hair from her scraped back ponytail and divided it into three strands and began a plait. -Seriously Spack its not appnin. Da ya not think av tried allt passwords ya gonna think of already.

Gaz drummed his fingers on the floorboards. -Innit. Yer not gonna get it mate.

Spack stood up and walked to the window and looked out at the alley. He scratched at a spot growing inside his nostril. -Ya seen this cat sniffin at allt spilt rubbish ant bin bags an that.

Henry handed the Barbie to Jade and unbuttoned his shirt so as to take his arm out of the sleeve and inspect the wet red and yellowcrusted dressing wrapped around his bicep. He twisted hs arm and prised away the dressing and squinted at the raw weeping skin.

Jade pressed at the doll's head with her thumbs, crushed it in, then let go and watched the two concaves pop out. She lifted the doll and turned it and looked at its face, correct again.

Spack picked sleep out of his eye and flicked it out the window. -Anyone got any baccy.

Chelsea shook her head. -Nah mate.

Gaz shrugged. -Nope.

Spack took his tobacco and rizlas out from his back pocket and he rolled a cigarette and left the room. Gaz stood at the window and saw Spack walk into the alley.

Chelsea went through her rucksack. She took out tobacco and rizlas and weed and she rolled a joint.

When Gaz turned back to the window Spack had left the alley. Two minutes later he was knocking at the door. Chelsea opened it and let him in and then she left the room with Gaz following. Before crossing the threshold Gaz turned to Spack. -Keep tryin that wifi password mate. I reckon ya gettin close. Will be back in a bit.

Gaz and Chelsea left the squat and took a left and a right and another left through the terrace maze to

the park. They sat on the swings and Chelsea swung gently. She sparked the joint and took a drag. When she spoke each inunciation billowed from her mouth. -Are ya seriously gonna wait fer brian ant rest of em before doin owt.

-Yeh. Ah know what am doin. Ya learn tactics int army.

Chelsea passed him the joint and swung higher. -Gaz ya screwed lug nuts onta jeeps.

-Its stilt army.

-Thel a spread all over by time ya do owt an even then ah bet brian wunt pull is finger out.

Gaz leant forward and rested his forearms on his thighs and tapped a fist into an open palm. -Its only early. Il a come round byt end ert day.

Chelsea let her heels scuff the ground and bring her to a halt. -That int really me point Gaz.

Gaz took a drag of the joint and passed it to her.

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As Scott wandered through the city he noticed nests inside doorways, made of sleeping bags and blankets. Some were occupied and some were occupied double. The ones that weren't, the ones that were empty sleeping bags or a rucksack and a few blankets, these he thought of demolishing. And he walked past them and did nothing.

On the highstreet he passed so many rough sleepers unfamiliar to him that if it were not for him knowing the city's architecture he would have thought he was somewhere else. And all of them had hats and paper cups that were brimming with coins.

They sat outside department stores and ATMs. They were shameless, he thought, and he wanted to kick over their moneycups and spit into their moneyhats.

His gaze lingered on one rough sleeper. A guy who looked no older than Scott and looked a lot like Scott. Gaunt and pale. Hair cropped short. Shaving cuts healing.

The guy shuffled in his sleeping bag and sat upright. E yah mate yant gorra bit a change ya can spare av ya.

Scott shrugged. He patted his pockets and held his palms skyward and walked on.

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In Chelsea's room a game of dominoes coiled on the floorboards with Chelsea and Gaz and Spack sitting cross-legged on the floor and Henry and Jade sitting on the mattress and playing as a team, passing their domino to Chelsea to put into the sequence.

Chelsea looked up at the clock on the wall. She looked at Henry and tapped her wrist.

Henry stood up. -Aright Chelsea wid best be off. Come on then jade.

Jade stood up and took Henry's crutch from the wall and handed it to him. Gaz, Spack, and Chelsea got to their feet. Spack went to the door. Chelsea hugged Gaz and she hugged Henry. She knelt down and held Jade tightly. Jade tucked her head into the space between Chelsea's neck and shoulder.

Chelsea let go of Jade and scrunched up her nose. -See ya later mash potater.

Jade scrunched up her nose. -See ya soon macaroon.

Spack held the door as Gaz and Henry and Jade left and he let it shut behind him as he left with them.

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In the anonymous pub Colin was out of his mind drunk. Crushed cans and a shattered pint glass surrounded the feet of the stool he was swaying atop.

The cards players discarded their hands. One of them threw a handful of matches onto the table. -Ten on im tippin left.

Another threw ten matches into the pile. -Yeh go on al av ten on im goint other way.

Colin leant left and started to slump. The gamblers began a chorus and one of them drumrolled with his fingers on the table. -Wooooaahhh.

Coling grabbed the bar and right himself and the gamblers groaned. Colin picked up a can from the bar and drank.

Tom went down to the cellar. He kicked one of the kegs. -What da ya think about gettin one a these open.

Brian looked up to the ceiling. -Ther all empty. Whats allt noise about.

-Colins pissed. Or is gettin there.

Brian got to his feet. He looked at the unlit cigarette between his fingers and put it in his jacket pocket.

One of the gamblers picked up a matchbox and held a matchstick upright against the lighting strip. She flicked it and it arced towards Colin and mid arc it burst into flame. It hit Colin's back and landed extinguished amongst the detritus at the feet of his stool. Colin groped for a beer that was right in front of him. He snatched at the can and then cursed it for being too quick for him. He snatched at it again and again the can was too quick for him, dodging out of his reach.

Pikey picked up the can and cracked it open and handed it to Colin. Brian and Tom walked into the barroom and Pikey took two cans from the carrier bag and tossed them over. Brian and Tom caught the cans one each and tapped their fingertips on the lids. They cracked them open at arms length to avoid the explosions of foam and held them as froth grew out of them.

Brian walked over to Colin and put a hand on his shoulder. Colin shrugged it off and almost fell and grabbed the bar. Brian took a step back. -Al be reet fer now.

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They had arranged to meet at Legacy Park, same as always. Scott hurried past yoga classes and Tai Chi lessons to the bench Jenny had chosen as their meeting point and saw her sitting on the bench with her legs crossed, hunched over.

She didn't notice him walking towards her and when he sat down beside her she quickly uncrossed her legs and made to get to her feet and then didn't. She crossed her legs again and he offered her a packet of crisps from his carrier bag. -Found this byt gates. Saright innit. Sonly ready salted but its not open or owt.

She tucked her hair behind her ears, wiped her eyes with her sleeve and sniffed twice. She took the bag and opened it.

Scott reached behind her. Then he retracted his arm and rested it on the back of the bench. Then he moved it to his lap and hunched forward. And they sat as if both were strangers. Her looking down at the grass and him looking out across the playing field at nothing in particular.

He shrugged. -I wer thinkin. It looks like its gonna rain later but its aright now innit. We could go av a wonder about. Go somewhere nice or summat. Like somewhere diffrent for a bit.

Jenny said something under her breath, so quietly that Scott couldn't make out the words.

-Ya what.

She didn't look up or move at all but for her shoulders rolling twice as she sniffed and swallowed. And she spoke again soft and quiet but loud enough now that he could understand. -The other night. I was. Av bin.

She waited as Scott did for the word. She sniffed again. She shook. She shut her eyes tight and started again. -The other night I. I wer at a party in a squat an a load a lads cem in. This girl fromt ostel took us but she dint know em. She only knewt lass who ad arranged it and that lass dint know these lads either. The said thed bin sleepin rough an theyd a load a weed an booze though so she let em hang around. An then there was this joint been passed around an I ad a toke but it wer awful. It wer like smokin plastic. I only ad one toke but it proper blagged my ed so I went to this other room to lie down an I musta passed out an then when I woke up there wer this guy on me. One a lads. An he was. Scott. He was.

Scott reached out to hold her and again retracted his arm from her and rested his hands in his lap. He picked at his fingernails. His lips and tongue moved but there was no air in him that he could make words with.

Jenny stared into the bag of crisps. Scott looked at the distance. A group of students followed a football into his view. They caught up to it and kicked it between themselves. One of them set up jumper goalposts. Another did the same some hundred yards opposite.

-Why dint ya tell me this mornin?

Jenny held her teeth together firm and sucked in her cheeks. She pressed her fingers to her closed wet eyes.

Scott rolled his jaw and it clicked.

A frisbee landed at his feet. He looked across the field to a topless student waving. He stood up and kicked the frisbee. The student that was waving held his arms out wide. -Hey man. Whats yor problem man.

Scott picked up the frisbee and started to walk towards the student. The plastic in his hand was buckling and his knuckles were white.

Jenny wiped her eyes with her sleeves. -Scott.

Scott stopped. He flung the frisbee onto the ground and kicked it and then turned around and went back to the bench and Jenny.

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Jade was asleep over Henry's shoulder. He was holding her tightly to his chest and stooping under her weight. Taking most of the burden on his crutch the clasp irritated further the chafing wound it had already gnawed into his arm.

Gaz was some ten feet ahead of them, canvassing anyone he saw for spare change. Apologising when they said no, they hadn't any.

Henry lowered himself down onto a bench and eased Jade from his shoulder. Cradling her in his lap he held her to him. With his lips and teeth held clenched he coughed and then swallowed and winced. A lock of Jade's hair was clinging to her red cheek and he brushed it away. Her eyes twitched and shuddered beneath their lids.

Gaz turned and saw Henry sitting on the bench and walked back to him, zigzagging from one businessman on one side of the street to another on the other, from one group of shoppers on one side of the street to another on the other, and asking them each if they might have any change they could spare.

He sat next to Henry then immediately stood again as if the bench was hot, and walked around it as if he was waiting for it to cool. He counted his quarry as he walked, dropping one coin into his open palm at a time. A dozen copper coins with one silver amongst them.

He sat down again and leant forwards and rested his arms on his thighs and held the coins in his clasped hands. -Wiv got thirtyseven pence. Evryones sayin thev already give ther change to some other cunt.

Henry nodded. -An allt bins are empty.

-Innit. Fuckin sucked dry mate.

A group of four rough sleepers emerged from a sidestreet, all stained jackets and squalid trousers and their faces iridescent with boozeglow. Henry tilted his head towards them. -Ya dont recognise them do ya.

Gaz looked and shook his head slowly. -Do you.

-Never sin em before in me life.

They watched the four drag blankets and sleeping bags the width of the highstreet dragging and then sit between two ATMs and placing down their hats and McDonalds cups in front of them and leaning against the wall in the sunshine.

Gaz got to his feet. He walked toward them then stopped and turned in to the alley they'd appeared

from. He walked down it and to the pub that was sequestered there, away from the white and steel and brightness of the city, in a shadow it seemed to cast onto itself.

He walked inside where it was almost empty but for one old man reading a newspaper. Gaz walked to the bar. -Ere Sonya. Who were them four eds in ere just now.

The barmaid topped off a pint of stout. -No ahdea. The sted artside except one av em come in after a glass a warter fer is dog. Eyar kenny. Eres yer stout love.

With his hand in his pocket clenched around the coins Gaz walked back into the light, back into the noise and the city and to the bench. Henry and Jade squinted against the reflected sunlight to watch him return.

Gaz tussled Jade's hair. -Mornin. You ungary.

She shrugged.

He held out his hand and opened it. The coins glistened in his cupped palm. -Wiv got enough fer a pasty from morrison's. So its aright if you are.

She shifted back on the bench. -Yeh ah sponse i am a bit.

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Spack's mum was watching the television when she heard the back door open and her son come in. -Yer dinners int microwave.

He turned the dial to one minute and waited in the kitchen as the microwave hummed and rattled, until it pinged. He took the plate into the living room and sat on the couch next to his mum.

He folded gravy into the mash potato, cut a third off a sausage and scooped the forkful up into his mouth. She'd put cheese in the mash and he leant forward so as to devour it quicker.

When his plate was clean he wiped up the rest of the gravy with a slice of bread and ate it, placed his plate on the coffee table, leaned back on the couch, stretched, and belched. -Cheers mum. That wer ace.

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Criss-crossing the city by its highwalled shadowed alleyways Scott dragged Jenny with his hand clasped around her wrist ensuring she kept to his pace and she hurried to keep up. Scott repeating the same words like a mantra. -If ya see im let us know. Wer it im. Or im.

In one of these alleys he stopped abruptly. He let go of her and turned to face her. He stooped slightly and put his hands on her shoulders and held her looking into her eyes. -How can ya not know.

She looked away. -I didnt fuckin see him proply an you all. They all kinda lookt same.

Scott pointed down at a pile of blankets. -What about im.

-I dunno. Ow could ah know. Ah cart even see is face.

Scott retrieved a broken neck of a bottle from his jacket pocket and held it brandished ready. He knelt and he tugged on the blankets, pulling them and revealing a face amongst them. Gnarl setting in but shaved and not blemished by recent grazes or bruises. Twitching in sleep.

Scott looked from the face to Jenny's. Jenny nodded.

Scott's eyes widened. Really.

-Yeh.

-Him.

-Yeh. Him.

-Its im.

-Yeh.

Scott replaced the blanket like he was covering a dead man and stood. He swapped the bottleneck in his hand for a can of spraypaint and marked a quick X on the wall. Then he took Jenny's hand and they walked at her pace to her hostel.

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At the town hall Pikey and Tom were sitting between two pillars at the summit of the concrete steps.

A group of tenagers arrived at the foot of the steps and some of them sat down. Some of them had bags of McDonalds and and they reached in and handed round wrapped burgers and boxes of chicken nuggets and cartons of fries. They all stabbed straws into lidded drinks. They ate and talked loudly.

Pikey lifted a bottle of cider so large that when he cradled it to drink he had to hold its width with two

hands and tilt it slowly and be careful not to depress too severely the soft plastic. He drank gasped when he took his lips away. He passed the bottle and its lid to Tom.

They looked out beyond the lurching teenagers and to the other side of the road where the shell of a Greggs stood at the corner with newspapered windows and unlit insignia. Scott was standing in front of it at the curb.

The lights turned to red and the traffic slowed to a stop. Scott walked quickly through the gaps between bonnets and boots. He stepped up the curb town hall side and the traffic behind him started up again. His head down and his hood up he walked past the teenagers and ascended the steps.

Pikey nodded to him and Tom nodded to him and he nodded back. He sat with them and took the bottle when Tom offered it. Holding it in two hands and leaning backwards he drank.

Pikey picked up a cigarette butt. He examined it and flicked it into a corner. -Yaright mate.

Scott put the bottle down and screwed the cap on. -Yeh man what about yersen.

-Yeh sound.

-Tom.

-Maright. Ows it goin we ya bird.

Scott put the bottle in the centre of the three of them. -Jenny. An its sound mate cheers.

Tom picked up the bottle. He unscrewed the cap and drank.

At the foot of the steps the teenagers passed around an empty burger box. Each of them placed a few fries in it and some a chicken nugget or two. After it had gone round all of them it was handed to a pair of rough sleepers neither Pikey nor Tom nor Scott had seen arrive.

The two rough sleepers left. The teenagers that were sitting stood and the teenagers left. One of them looked back, at the three men sitting between columns and beneath a Latin aphorism drinking from an oversized bottle.

A pigeon landed where the teenagers had been and plucked up the one chip that had fallen and battled with it. It flung it and lunged at it and pecked at it until it abandoned it, then took flight, leaving it decimated on the ground.

Scott retrieved a small cardboard box from his jacket pocket. He opened it and slid out a plastic blister sheet and pushed out four pills into his cupped hand and clapped his hand to his mouth and drank from the bottle. He offered the box to Pikey, who waved his hand in declination. And he offered the box then to Tom who took it and pushed pills into his own hand and clapped his hand to his mouth and took the bottle from Scott and drank.

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Suddenly, there was rain.

It was cold and sharp and it fell relentlessly.

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From their shelter at the top of the town hall steps Pikey and Scott and Tom saw the sudden rush of rain descend. Pikey twisted secure the cap on the bottle. He put the bottle in a carrier bag and he got to his feet then helped Tom to his feet.

Scott screwed his hat down and pulled his collar up and stepped down onto the steps, down into the weather.

Tom leant against the column behind him.

Pikey handed him his crutch. -Whers e off.

-The lad must av summat ta do. Ow should i know.

Scott turned and waved then turned back hurried away into the rushing crowd.

Pikey and Tom walked down steps. Squalls of wind threw rain at them and when they had descended fully they turned so that these flurries would drumroll on the backs of their jackets and the backs of their trousers.

They walked and passed men holding briefcases over their heads and past past women holding folders or carrier bags over their heads and past others that were without such makeshift headwear, who held themselves low and braced against the weather.

They pushed through the throngs of people until they were walking alone and silent in the downpour. And they walked to the back entrance of a large and now derelict furniture store, where their possessions and food was secreted beneath sleeping bags and blankets and the rain pelted its metal rooves and the ground beneath them was dry.

Pikey rolled up his sleeping bag and tied it. He rolled up Tom's sleeping bag and tied that also.

Tom picked up a carrier bag and then went to pick up another and then didn't. -Pikey. Ere mate. Looks like someones bin at yer stuff.

Pikey walked over and looked at the carrier bags. He lifted one by the handles and looked at the knot tied of them. -I always tie em tighter an this.

Tom prodded a bag with the toe of his boot. -Thisns got a big fuckin rip in it.

Pikey knelt down and looked at the torn carrier bag. he tore it further and dumped out its contents. -I ad a can in ere. An a sarnie an all.

-Ya reckon it wer them new cunts.

-Could a bin anyone ah suppose.

Thunder rolled from miles away and the rain doubled its efforts.

Tom picked up a carrier bag. -Thes a bit a voddie under me bag if its still there. Av summa that if ya want.

Pikey dragged everything away from where it was. -Ther int.

-The fuckin ought to be.

-Well ther int.

Pikey slid a carrier bag to his feet and transferred what was left of the other bags into it. He tied the handles double and picked the bag up. -Where ya wanna go.

Tom secured his load. -Its them at av done this ya know.

-Yeh. Might a bin.

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The rain was relentless. Its crackling sound hovered an inch above the concrete pavements and off benches and statuettes. A small river ran down the middle of the highsteet and sewergrates bubbled.

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A dark doorway in a shadowed alley lit up orange for a second. The glow illuminated a pair of eyes and a spraypainted X hovering above them. Scott watched from the other end of the alley. A plume of smoke emerged from the alcove and it became dark again. Another plume of smoke came from the alcove before the first had dissipated and the two clouds merged and swirled together. Scott opened a can of lager. The plastic scented smoke drifted past him. He drank without taking his sight from the alcove and between his cracking open the can to him swigging the last dregs, there was no more smoke.

He tossed the can and walked over to the doorway. Amongst the mounds of blankets there was the kid's face. His eyes were closed and his mouth was hanging half open. Scott tested the blankets with the tip of his trainer. The blankets didn't stir nor did the kid's face respond. He tested the blankets with a kick and again nothing moved. He dropped to one knee on top of the blankets and pulled his fist back. He took a breath through gritted teeth and then thrust his fist forward. The kid's nose broke like porcelain on impact and he started to snore.

Strings of blood between the kid's face and Scott's knuckles snapped as he pulled his fist back again. The kid's eyes opened slightly and Scott hit him again and then raised his fist and brought it down like a hammer. He continued with slaps and punches with the kid underneath him shrugging and murmuring. -Gerroff us.

When the kid had stopped murmuring and moving and his eyes were closed again Scott spat into his bloody face and stood up. He kicked the mound of blankets and then left the alleyway.

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Pikey and Tom pushed through groups queueing for busses and pushed against a current of people rushing to queue or rushing for shelter. They turned into a side street where there was no-one and then into another. They stopped and they looked at the X on the wall. Then down to the pile of blankets beneath it.

Tom poked it with the toe of his boot. -What do ya think it is.

Pikey shrugged. -Could be a stash perraps.

He knelt down beside it and peeled away the layers of wet blankets. He pulled the last blanket from the wetness beneath it that it clung to and revealed the concave and contorted face, the mouth open, one eye open, the other eye demolished and the nose flat beneath thick congealing blood.

Tom staggered back away from it and leant against the wall behind him. Pikey replaced the blanket and got slowly to his feet. He turned away from Tom and held his fingers to his closed eyes and held his breath. He shook his head and took his fingers away and opened his eyes. -Ya saw that right.

Tom nodded.

-What did ya see.

-A face. Ah think.

-Yeh.

-It wer ard to.

-Yeh.

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Scott was in a payphone. The rain beat down on it and the wind swept it inside as he was holding the door open with his foot. His eyes were stinging and he was gagging from the acrid stench of old piss vapour.

He dropped coins into the slot and dialled. A woman answered. He cleared his throat. -Hi yaright. Is jenny there.

-Old on please love.

Scott thought about kicking backwards at the glass behind him. Then he heard Jenny talking to the woman and he heard the phone being passed. -Hiya.

-Hiya.

-Dya wanna meet us later. After its stopped rainin.

-Kay.

-For a drink or summat.

-Are we celebratin.

-Yeh. We are.

-Thats weird.

-What is.

-I can ear ya smilin even when yer not sayin owt.

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Under an overpass a pigeon five days dead dripped drop by drop through the net it had died in, its half liquid corpse keeping a steady percussion rhythm to the white noise downpour. Gaz and Spack and Henry and Jade stood where the cars came in. From where the cars went out Brian arrived and with him Tom and Pikey and Colin.

The two groups converged.

Gaz looked at Brian and Tom. At Pikey and Colin. -So ya gun elp us then.

Brian shook his head. -What av ya done gaz.

Pikey picked up a cigarette butt. -We saw what ya did.

Gaz's brow furrowed and he shrugged. -What. What did ya see.

Tom folded his arms. -Mebbe not you persnally. But one a your lot.

Gaz looked at Spack and then at Henry. Each of them shrugged in turn. He turned back to Brian and shrugged and shook his head.

Brian put his hands in his pockets. -Tom an pikey found an omeless lad we is ed caved in. Reckons is one a them new lads on account a.

Gaz's posture dropped. -Fuck. An it want one of ar lot.

Tom shook his head. -Wid a known if it wer.

Gaz narrowed his eyes. -An ya reckon i ad summat to do we it. Wheres colin. Mebbe it wer fuckin colin.

Brian shook his head. -Colins at pub pissed.

Henry leaned forward. -Whar about scott.

Pikey shook his head. -We wer just we im at town all. Went to get us bags then came acrosst body. So ah dunno. Ah mean. It dint seem like id just. Ya know.

Gaz shrugged. -Could a bin im.

Brian stepped forward. -Yourt one who wants ta fight em. Yourt one we allt weapons back at club.

Gaz folded his arms and shrugged.

Brian nodded. -Right. So aright it want you. But it might well a bin one a them stayin at club.

Gaz sighed. -Aright brian. Al geya that. Not that it as owt to do we me if it wer.

-Wil deal we that when wiv found out who did it.

Brian turned. Tom and Pikey turned and followed Brian out of the underpass.

Gaz shook his head. He looked at Henry and he looked at Spack. Gaz took a long breath and let his lips clap together rapidly as he slowly breathed out. He rubbed his forehead and looked around. He shook his head. He paced.

He turned and pushed past Spack and began walked out from under the overpass.

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The downpour ceased as suddenly as it had begun. In one moment there was rain, in the next there was not. Instead there was sunshine that made the residue of the rainfall sparkle where it clung to metal and wood and glass.

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Chelsea arrived at the nightclub. She threw off her soaked jacket and walked to the group that was standing around. Its members comparing weapons; a 2x4 two thirds wrapped in barbed wire, a screwdriver, a broken bottle with plasters around the neck to make a hilt. She pushed her way into the group. -Wheres jade.

The door crashed open and Jade ran in and Chelsea walked out of the crowd and got to her knees and Jade ran into her arms. Henry came in and walked to the bar. He slipped his arm out of his crutch and put the his crutch on the bartop.

Gaz came in and looked over at Chelsea. He held her gaze for a second then looked away. He climed up onto the stage. With all eyes looking up at him he folded his arms. -Right. Which one a ya cart control yersens.

Weapons were lowered and gazes cast around.

Gaz narrowed his eyes. -Brian an is lot found a lad rough sleepin we is ed stoved in.

The members of the group looked around at each other. Each of them spoke quietly to themselves, and to everyone else around them.

Gaz sat on the front of the stage. -None er ya.

The members of the group looked again at each other, from one furrowed brow and open mouth to the next. Weapons in hand and palms sweating.

Gaz walked down the steps at the side of the stage. -Am not gonna ask again. But yerd be better off tellin us if ya did it.

The group stepped back from Gaz as he passed them. He walked to the bar. Chelsea followed him and Jade followed behind her.

Henry shook his head. -This int good.

Chelsea tussled Jade's hair. -Aright monkey shall we get yer to bed.

Jade nodded and held Chelsea by the hand and led her away. Henry waved to her back. He stopped waving and took a drink from his hipflask. -This int good gaz.

Gaz clenched his teeth. -Nah. Saright.

-What.

-Want any of us at got attacked. Want any of us at did it. Its probly them new cunts fightin amongst em sens.

-Well. Brian int thick. Il see it same way sooner a later.

-E fuckin better urry up about it.

-So da ya wanna go get pills now or would ya rather not.

Gaz shrugged. -Nah fuck it. Wil go. Might as well.

Henry picked up his crutch from the bar and winced and clenched his teeth as he slid his arm into it.

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From the top deck of the 56 Pikey, Tom and Scott surveyed the electric aurora borealis that crowned the city; a golden haze pricked with myriad flaring bulbs and streaked with neon and caressed by sweeping blue searchlights.

Pikey turned in his seat to face Scott. -What dya know abart this guy.

Scott looked at him. -What guy.

Pikey looked around the empty deck and leant close to Scott. -The fuckin guy wiv is ed smashed in.

Scott shrugged. His eyes made tiny frantic movements.

Drawing nearer the city its aura dimmed until the bus entered the city proper and the sky was awash with silver clouds.

Tom rang the bell and patted Pikey on the shoulder. -Come on pikey. Al see ya later scott.

Pikey turned in his seat and then stood holding the bar and swaying with the bus' momentum. The bus slowed and pulled up to the curb. The two of them hurried down the steps, Pikey using the bars for momentum and Tom holding the railing and shuffling tentatively down.

They alighted and pushed through the crowd that stood squinting in the bus shelter's bright glow and they made their way to the throng of evening in the city centre. Tom approached three men that were smoking outside a pub. -Scuse me lads. Ya cart spare some change can ya.

The three of them looked away and then one looked back again and fished around in his tracksuit bottoms pocket. -Yeh here yar mate.

He dropped two twenty pence pieces into Tom's open palm.

Tom held his fist tight around them and nodded smiling. -Cheers ar kid.

Another of them held out a fifty pence piece. -Ere ya go mate.

Tom took it and the third gave him another. He held out his other hand for them to shake and then retracted it when they didn't. -Cheers lads thankyou. You av a good night.

The men dropped their cigarettes and crushed them out with their trainers and went back inside the pub. Tom picked them up and went round the corner to where Pikey was walking slowly and looking down at wet cigarette butts and testing them with the toe of his boot.

Tom gave him a fifty pence piece and a twenty pence piece. They both knelt leaning against the wall and secreted the coins in their socks. Pikey stood and helped Tom to his feet and they set off further into the city, to where cars are banished and people can walk freely on the cobbled road.

Pikey looked to his left and saw a doorway lined with blankets and sleeping bags but otherwise empty. And he looked around and saw another, with a blanket and a sleeping bag and a dog bowl. And another; a sleeping bag, an opened out cardboard box, plastic bags and an empty two litre bottle. He scratched the back of his neck.-Allt nests are abandoned.

Tom looked around and saw the same. -Aye.

They walked a few yards and then down a side street. Pikey leaned down and reached for half a cigarette discarded and dry when suddenly there was a clink of glass, a hollow pop, a burst of glass shards bouncing off his jacket and the scent of stale beer.

He stood and turned and looked at Tom and another bottle shattered at his feet. They looked up to where the bottles were coming from. Another came spinning in an arc towards Tom and hit his cheek and shattered and his eyes snapped closed, his eyelids cut by shards. Beer on his face and in his beard, and then blood.

A sharp whistle drew their attention to the roof of a garage opposite. To the two guys standing on it, their faces in shadows cast by the hoods they were wearing. One of them was holding a beer bottle loosely between his fingers. The other pointed down at Pikey and Tom. -Indipendencequare ya cunts. Wil bi waitin. Ya send one er us tet ospital we send all a yus tet morgue.

The one with the bottle pitched it and it came spinning towards Pikey and Tom. They both stepped back away and it impacted and shattered between them.

The sound of footsteps running on metal rooves was prominent for a second and quickly receded.

Tom spat blood and held his hand to his cheek and then in front of him. Blood dripped from his fingers and he flicked his wrist then wiped his hand on his jeans. He opened his mouth half an inch wincing. -Ah fink duv brock ma fuckin cheek.

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The city centre's main highstreet was filled to capacity with late shoppers and early drinkers. They merged in the centre as a rushing crowd, a river with two opposite currents.

Brian was sitting on a fishing stool and working a tune from a three-stringed guitar. He could see the white cardboard at the bottom of his McDonalds cup through the gaps between the coins. A couple of two pences schlucked in and he interrupted the lyrics to his song to thank whomever had tossed them, looking up at the ceaseless motion in front of him.

He saw Pikey and Tom amongst it, pushing through it. Tom leaning on Pikey and hobbling slightly and blood on the both of them.

Pikey and Tom got to Brian. Pikey helped Tom lean against the wall. -Fuckin cunts lobbin fuckin bottles.

Brian set the guitar against the wall behind him and got to his feet. -What appened.

Tom spat thick blood onto the ground and a string of it hung from his lip.

Pikey took a cigarette from his pocket and lit it. -Couple a them cunts started chuckin bottles at us. One ov em it tom. Fuckin pricks.

Brian looked at the both of them. -What do ya wanna do.

Tom poured vodka into the side of his mouth and some ran over down his chin. -Ah fink thuv brok me cheek brian.

Amongst the shifting colours of the crowd there were flickers of luminescent yellow that began to draw closer to Pikey and Brian and Tom.

Brian picked up his money-cup and his guitar and his bag. Tom pushed himself off the wall and stood with a hand on Pikey's shoulder. Pikey threw his cigarette onto the ground. And the three of them hurried and slipped into an alleyway. They took a left and stopped in a smaller alley lined with drainpipes and moss. Something gurgled and shuddered above them.

Brian scratched his beard. -Wiv gotta find out who breyed that lad.

Pikey slammed his palms against the wall. -Fuck brian. Like gaz sed it could a bin anyone.

Brian took off his glasses and wiped them with his shirt, smearing grease around the lenses.

Pikey pushed away from the wall and stood upright. -If ya reckon it wer one a them then go an ask em yersen. Tom. What do ya wanna do.

-Honestly ah reckon if it wer one a gazzes lot wid know be now.

-No ah mean what da ya wanna do about yer eye.

-Al go downt ay an e.

Brian nodded and picked up his guitar and turned and walked away with his guitar over his shoulder.

Tom took another messy swig from the vodka. Pikey put a hand on Tom's shoulder and looked at the damaged eye that had swollen closed and leaked blood through a slowly clotting wound. He put Tom's arm around his shoulders and took his weight.

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Inside a bookmaker's was a din of voices and electronic exclamations. Men sat about watching the high-mounted televisions and some tapped at betting machines and some stood hunched holding small pens writing on small slips of paper. A girl behind a perspex screen tapped at her iPhone.

Scott put his winnings in his jeans pocket and walked to the door. He smoothed down the smart shirt he was wearing under his jacket and pulled the heavy door open and walked out.

He had walked a couple of yards when he heard his name being called. He turned and waited as Brian walked towards him.

Brian was sweating and flushed. He put down his guitar and held the neck, resting the base on the ground. -Scott. Yav gotta come we me. Am off to see gaz. Find art which one er is lads did this.

Scott shrugged and looked around. -Ah cart mate. Am seein jenny in a bit.

Brian looked at him. -Therl be time fer that later.

Scott shrugged again and looked at Brian. -Sorry man but yknow.

Brian picked up his guitar. -Scott ya shud see what thev done to tom.

-What hav the done to tom.

-Al tell yer at nightclub when ah telt rest.

-Ah really cart mate. Am sorry.

Brian looked at Scott and clenched his teeth behind his closed lips. His beard moved as he rolled his jaw.

-Aright lad. Go see yer bird.

Scott smiled and put a hand to Brian's arm. Brian nodded and turned and hiked his guitar over his shoulder.

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Gaz and Henry walked an empty pavement. Wheelie bins stood at the end of driveways in front of large Victorian houses. Gaz lifted the lid of one that was overfilled then let it drop. -Nowt.

Every second step that Henry took he grimaced; clenched teeth with lips pulled back and eyes almost

closed under a brow furrowed and low. He sucked in a high pitched shrill of air.-Doctor its me leg. Its bin lark this since i dont know ar long. Am ont streets ya see an i just come in and get seen to whenever i cart beart pain any mower.

Gaz nodded. -Friday night an all innit. Theyl want yout quick befort proper trouble starts comin in.

Henry rolled his shoulder. He pulled at his sleeve. -Ah wonder if the can give us owt fer me arm. This fuckin crutch int arf chafin.

Gaz squatted down and opened a pizza box on the pavement. He picked up a slice and stood up. He sniffed it and took a bite then spat it out. -Just get pills man. Wil sort yer arm out later. That int an ay an ee job.

-Aye ya right. Ope the give us same as ah got last time.

-Innit. They wer good.

They turned a corner and left drystone walls and flourishing trees behind them for the high orange-brick and the white and the glass of the general infirmary.

Ambulances sat with their engines running. One with its back doors open. Paramedics wheeled a body on a stretcher through sliding glass doors. Around the entrance to the accident and emergency department a few clusters of people were milling, as well as couples, and those that stood or sat alone, many wearing thick dressing gowns and bandages and tubes.

Gaz elbowed Henry and pointed to a pair of men. -Ere int that pikey. An tom an all.

-Aye ad seh so. Looks like toms dun im sen a mischiff.

Gaz and Henry walked to Pikey and Tom. Tom was leaning against the wall and smoking a halfsmoked cigarette. There was blood on his eyebrow and on his cheek and the fingertips of his smoking hand. Pikey walked out to Gaz and Henry pointing behind him with his thumb. -Fuckin lobbin bottles now man. It tom int face. Might a brock is cheek a summat.

The three of them walked to Tom. Gaz put a hand on Tom's shoulder to look closer at the wound. -Fuck me.

Tom nodded. -The down indipendencequare now.

Pikey stepped forward. -Ant rest of em an all it sounded like.

Gaz nodded. -Aright. Enry. Go downt club. Get evryone tooled up an over to indipendencequare. You up fer deckin these dick eds pikey.

-Yeh am up frit man.

-Aright. Wil go down indipendencequare now an wait fer enry.

Tom wiped blood from his face with the heel of his hand. -Al come an all. Bollocks tay an e.

Pikey patted Tom and Gaz on their backs. -Ang on al be back in a bit.

He walked away briskly and through the sliding doors into the hospital. Henry turned and walked away also, hurrying on his crutch. Tom dropped the cigarette that he had smoked to the filter and stepped on it. Gaz plucked a cigarette from an ashtray inset in a bin. He straightened it and lit it and smoked. He handed the cigarette to Tom. Tom took it and smoked.

Pikey returned. He held out his hand and it was full of small white sachets. He tore one open and took the plaster from inside and handed it to Tom. Tom put it over the wound. The blood pushed it away and afforded the adhesive no purchase.

Pikey handed the sachets to Tom. -Sgonna need stitches that man. Nowt a plasters gonna do.

Tom tore open a few sachets. He took out a napkin from his jacket pocket and held it to the wound then used plasters to secure it. -Be reet fer now.

Gaz slapped Tom on the shoulder. -Nice one mate. Right shall we get us sens to indipendencequare then.

They passed the vodka round and drank until the bottle was empty then set off away from the hospital.

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Brian arrived round the back of the nightclub and hammered on the service entrance door with his fists. He stepped back at the sound of the lock being slid.

The door opened and Spack was there holding it and standing in the darkness. Brian walked up to him and stood at his full height and looked Spack in the eye. -Enough a yer games now son. If you ad owt ta do we that dead lad then ya tell me right now.

Spack chewed his lips and scratched the side of his face. -Seriously brian i ant dun owt mate.

Brian looked at him and then took a step back. -Go ome son.

Brian walked into the dark corridor. Spack let the door slam shut.

Brian walked the length of the corridor with Spack at his heel and through double doors and into the nightclub proper. A dozen young rough sleepers were sitting against the walls smoking and drinking and examining their weapons. All of them talking fast through scowls and nodding.

One was holding a 2x4 upright against the ground, leaning on it. Brian kicked it away. The group looked up at him and set their weapons down.

Brian surveyed them. He looked at one after the other and each of them met his gaze. He took off his glasses. -None er ya are gonna say owt then no.

A few of them shrugged. One of them near Brian was sitting cross-legged. Brian kicked his shin. -Wer it you.

The kid shuffled back. -Nah mate.

Brian walked into the group. He leant down and grabbed the scruff of another kid's shirt. -Wer it you.

The kid held his hands out and shook his head frantically with wide eyes. Brian let go and turned around. He pointed at another of the rough sleepers. -Wer it you.

The kid got to his feet. -No it want.

A door opened. Everyone looked in its direction. Chelsea emerged from the darkness and walked out and across the dancefloor toward Brian and the rough sleepers sitting around him. -Ere what do ya think yer doin brian.

-Toms bin attacked. Is face is a mess. Cos a what one a these did.

Chelsea looked at Brian and then at the rough sleepers sitting around him. One of the group shrugged. Chelsea shook her head. -Whats appened.

The sound of banging came from down the corridor and Spack turned and hurried toward it.

Brian took a couple of deep breaths. One of the young rough sleepers handed him a roll-up. Brian lit it and smoked. Some other of the young rough sleepers lit cigarettes. Chelsea bit her lip ring. Brian walked to the wall and leaned against it.

The sound of footsteps punctuated by a high clickclacking came into the room from the corridor and was promptly followed by Henry and Spack. Henry stood upright. -Aright you lot. Its appnin. If yav got a drink drink up. If yav got a weapon tool up. Wer off to indipdencequare to beat seven shades a shite outa these cunts.

The sound of excited anger swelled around Brian's feet. Low and deep voices. Metal and wood being struck against the ground. It rose up around him as the rough sleepers got to their feet. Brian stepped out of the group towards Henry. -Yer what.

Chelsea walked over to them as well. -Sabout to kick off now ya say.

Henry nodded. -Aye.

Chelsea walked awy from them and left the room and returned carrying a baseball bat. -Sav it then.

The crowd cheered and whistled.

Brian took off his glasses and rubbed the bridge of his nose between his thumb and forefinger. He took a breath and then replaced his glases. He nodded. -Aright.

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Scott was sitting on a wall watching Jenny as she walked ignorant of his watching. He watched her walk to the pelican crossing and press the button and wait.

He watched the breeze tug her summer dress so that it clung for a second to her thighs.

Then he dropped from the wall and looked down at his fingernails and then touched and teased his hair in such a way that made no difference to it.

The amber lights started to blink and Jenny hurried from the middle of the road to the curb and to Scott. When she got to him he stepped back and put his hands in his pockets. She tucked her hair behind her ear and looked at the ground, then up at him.

He looked at her. -Dya wanna get a drink then.

-Ant ya already got em.

-I mean proply get a drink. Like wevverspoons or summat.

Her eyes narowed and she tilted her head.

He shrugged. -It were six to one on Portsmouth winnin. Both teams to score. I ad a couple a quid on it.

They walked side by side and Jenny reached slowly for Scott's hand. She slipped her fingers into his softly closing grasp. On the motorway overpass they stopped and looked over the railing, Jenny on her tiptoes. And they looked as if they were looking down at a river, wanting to throw stones in and watch the ripples.

Scott let go of her hand and reached around her waist and held her. She rested into him and they looked away from the traffic below them and at each other, and smiled together as if their mouths were

synchronised.

Scott let go of her waist and took her hand and together they walked to Mellenium Square and to the pub there and once at the pub to the bar. And once served, out to the busy terrace where they sat and were surrounded by other people sitting and other people standing, amidst the noise and the movement that swirled around them.

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Gaz, Pikey, and Tom spanned the width of the pavement walking with their fists clenched and their teeth clenched past pedestrians that gave them a wide berth either walking into the road or crossing the road entirely.

They walked into an alley and down its full length to the opposite entrance.

Gaz cracked his knuckles. Tom touched the wet napkin pad on his face. Pikey walked to the end of the alley and turned and walked back. He slapped his hands against his thighs and shook himself. -Ther ere.

Gaz rolled his shoulders and turned his head slowly one way, then slowly the other. Tom wiped his fingers on his jeans.

Chelsea entered the alley from the far end followed by Brian and Henry and behind them Spack and the others from the nightclub. They walked towards Gaz and Pikey and Tom, muttering quietly and some of them raking and hitting their weapons against the walls.

Chelsea handed Gaz a wrench. Brian handed Pikey a length of chain. Henry handed Tom a plank of wood.

And the group walked together out of the alley and over the road and to Millennium Square.

They reached its perimeter and stopped.

Across the square on the museum steps a group of rough sleepers were congregating. The ones that were sitting stood and the group walked together, and they also stopped upon reaching the square proper.

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Weatherpoon's terrace became a din of screeching metal on paving slabs as everyone pushed their chairs back and stood drink in hand rushing to the lip of the banister terrace to look down at the two groups either side of the square, lined up opposite each other like a chess game waiting for the first move to be made.

Scott got to his feet and stood on his chair so as to see over the heads of the crowd in front of him. And he saw the two phalanxes of tattered, ragged chess pieces.

Jenny stirred the ice cubes in her Rose with her straw. -Sappnin.

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Pikey strode out alone from the line holding his chain doubled in his hand that it hung at his side almost to the ground. From the line opposite an rough sleeper strode out holding a broken bottle and pointing at Pikey with it.

They stood face to face and squared up to each other. Pikey jerked his head forward, into a nose and a set of teeth and pulled it back and he swung a right hook that connected. The other rough sleeper dropped his weapon and it shattered into green shards and Pikey swung the chain. It smacked into and swung around and wrapped about the rough sleeper's head. Blood and white flecks speckled the black steel links.

Both lines began to move.

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Scott saw the stalemate break. He saw both phalanxes retract and, then, as if two waves, rush towards each other. They collided, pointing and yelling and spitting, and receded. Then collided again.

Scott put his pint on the table and dropped of the chair onto his feet. He picked up his pint again and drank.

Jenny sucked at the straw in her Rosé and her lips made a clapping sound when she stopped and opened her mouth. -Sappnin scott.

Scott took a drink of his pint until he couldn't drink any more and put it on the table. -Big fuckin fight.

Jenny's chair screeched and then clattered behind her as she stood up. -Sav a look.

-No. Drink up.

-Ya wha.

-Fucks sake.

Scott picked up his pint in one hand and her wine in another and hurried past her. He turned to see her standing, on her tiptoes and leaning on the table. -Come on.

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The melee, as though it had consciousness, began to organise itself. Targets were picked like partners at a dance and couples were given their own space in which to duel.

Gaz swung his wrench low and hit a man deep in the gut and snapped two jabs quickly into the man's face. The man spat and threw a punch. Gaz grabbed his wrist with his free hand and swung the wrench again into the man's gut and stepped forward and snapped his forehead against the man's nose.

Spack was grabbed by the throat and punched repeatedly in the face. He flailed back. His blows landed on the face of his assailant but had no effect. Spack dropped to his knees and held the trousers of his assailant, who jerked his knee up and into Spack's jaw. Spack fell to the side and crawled.

Brian moved with his shoulders low and holding a boxcutter close to him, jabbing out at anyone that came near. He caught a man on the cheek. He was blindsided from behind; his head knocked suddenly by a point blanc thump. He turned and thrust his small blade upward and stuck the man that had hit him. They both backed away from each other, Brian holding his knife aloft.

Others maneuvered and fought. Fists landed hard against faces and heads, pounded at bodies, gripped at clothing and hair.

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A barmaid came out onto Wetherspoon's terrace and saw empty seats, abandoned tables, and all her patrons crowded at the terrace's balcony, pushing against it, each spectator jostling that they might take their place at the front of the shoving.

With her head low and her shoulders high she pushed through the crowd and saw what was happening at Millennium Square, span on her heels and hurried back inside the pub.

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Bodies fell and crawled or were kicked. Anyone suddenly unoccupied and without an opponent hurried to help their comrade or attack a similarly unoccupied enemy.

Chelsea ducked a punch and swung her baseball bat into the shins of whoever had thrown it and then swung it upward with the momentum of her standing and felt the impact of it against a jaw vibrate through the wood and into her wrists. She saw a white beard turning red and pushed the man away.

Pikey held a lad's arms full nelson while Tom swung lefts and rights into an increasingly unconscious face, the head lolling from side to side with each blow. When Pikey let the lad drop Tom doubled over and spat red.

A guy grabbed Henry's crutch and a girl raked her nails down Henry's face and drew three lines of blood all parallel down his cheek. Henry punched her in the temple and grabbed her hair and flung her away. He swung a punch at the lad holding his crutch and the lad ducked and backed away quickly.

Groups of threes and fours developed, each with bodies clinging to each other, or falling, punching and grappling, bleeding and choking with hands around a neck or pushing at a face maybe searching for an eye.

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Everyone inside Wetherspoons rushed out to the terrace, patrons and staff alike. They climbed onto chairs and onto tables. A few who had been left inside collecting glasses or carrying trays soon hurried out after them, carrying trays of drinks and towers of empty glasses.

People behind the crowd jostled and pushed attempting to get to the front until BBC News 24 became a neutral blue glow, and then CCTV footage of what was happening.

A cheer rose and pints were held aloft.

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Those who still stood fought on. Those who could got to their feet and fought on.

A coin arced from the terrace and landed on the concrete silently amidst the racket of the melee and cheering of the crowd. Then, as if it had been the first tentative drop of rain before a storm, a shower of coins came down clinking and bouncing.

Gaz was still on his feet. He was holding his hands out in front of him, backing away from a woman holding a lighter in her fist, thumb poised on the wheel, her other hand shaking an aerosol can.

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Within the noise and hurry of the train station Scott and Jenny could have been anyone.

Scott stood looking up at the board where cities and towns and times written in orange lights ticked over like a strange clock.

He turned and took hold of Jenny's hand and led her to the ticket counter. Behind a perspex screen an old man looked at Scott and blinked once slowly.

Scott fished out a handful of coins from his pocket. -Two singles to Wakefield please mate.

The old man filled in an answer in a crossword puzzle then looked up. -Seven sixty.

Scott picked coins out from the pile of them in his palm and slid them under the perspex to the man behind it, who jabbed at a keyboard with his index finger and plucked two tickets from a small printing device and slid them through to Scott.

He handed one of them to Jenny. Jenny tucked a lock of hair behind her ear. -Why we off to Wakey.

-Wer not off to Wakey.

-Where we off then.

-London. Or as close as wi can get ta London before we get kicked off.

And they walked to the turnstiles and to the platforms beyond them.

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A flash and the muffled roar of flame elicited increased cheering from the crowd. Chelsea's hands went up to her face and she turned away and vomit gushed from her throat. Gaz looked down at his shirt, at flames that germinated quickly and were soon rushing upwards. Another burst of heat singed the backs of his hands and his sleeve and he struggled with his jacket, trapped in it, trying to wrench it off. The flames spreading. A scream coming out of him.

Brian ducked and dodged and hurried towards Gaz when some rusted thing from the underside of a car was swung into his ribs. He doubled over and it was lifted and then brought down behind his head as if to behead him, and raised again and brought down again. Brian dropped to the ground. His face hit the concrete. His eyes rolled back and his nose crumpled and his glasses shattered.

Chelsea looked at Brian. She looked at Gaz. And she looked around her, at the rough sleepers standing with their weapons lowered. Watching Gaz.

Gaz dropped to his hands and knees. His palms on the cold concrete. Flames growing from him and enveloping him. His skin hot pink. His hat melting onto his scalp. A crowd gathered around him. Some stepped forward and then back.

He fell to the ground. He rolled left and he rolled right. The fire clung to him. Where it appeared extinguished it flourished again. His screams becoming hoarser and hoarser.

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There was a wail of sirens. The crowd on the terrace that were leaning on the railing hurried to their tables and drank their drinks and left the terrace empty.

Police cars arrived speeding to the square and braking suddenly with doors opening and officers already rushing out and onto the square, where the rough sleepers dropped to their knees with their hands above their bowed heads.

Two sprinting policemen unzipped their stabvests and took them off and threw them onto Gaz and extinguished the flames with them. An ambulance arrived reversing. Paramedics rushed out with a stretcher and they surrounded Gaz.

The police moved through the crowd. They approached the rough sleepers kneeling on the ground and the rough sleepers moved their hands from their heads to behind their backs and the police ziptied each of the rough sleeper's wrists.

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Scott and Jenny arrived at their platform just as their train did. Its doors slid open and swarms of people hurried off, pushing through the swarm of people hurrying on. Heads down, Scott pulled Jenny by the hand, shouldering his way into the carriage. They found a seat and Scott plucked the reservation tickets from the headrests. He slid the window open and slotted them through and out onto the tracks and they sat.

The doors slid shut and the train hissed and lurched and the platform glided slowly away until the train was out from under the heavy brightness of the station and picking up speed. A chorus of a song recognisable yet incomprehensible carried through the carriage on a stench of booze. Jenny spoke but her words were drowned out beneath the singing.

Scott turned in his seat, his gaze moving from the reflection of her in the black window and to her eyes proper. -Ya what?

She looked away. -Dunt matter.

She took his hand in hers and rested her other hand on her stomach and then moved it to her lap. She bit her bottom lip and looked out the window.

She looked at Scott's reflection in the black glass and she watched the city slide away behind it.

The train's clattering echoed inside the empty arches below them.