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MANCH ESTER

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“...he felt as if an endless procession of unseen people were sweeping past him on the wind, borne on resistlessly and aimlessly, vainly striving to stop themselves, to catch at something that might arrest their flight and bring them once again into contact with the living world of which they had formed a part.”

LOST HEARTS

M. R. James

Annie's new flat was down towards the park end of Mabfield Road, just before Langley Road came in on the diagonal and Albion Road came from the left and made a corner. It was in a house which was part of the terrace. Where the terrace ended Platt Fields began. From the outside it looked like most of the other houses on the street; the tiny front yard was bare cracked concrete and the two steps which led up to the front door were uneven. This was Fallowfield, so the houses had been rented out for decades. Because so many people had passed through, the street had fallen into a kind of easy, exhausted slump. Roofs had bowed in, paint peeled from sills, and Manchester's rain had turned dead leaves into a kind of mulch or plaster which collected in the gutters. Annie liked it. These houses were battered, had contained multitudes. She'd moved early in the year, in the dark, wet months: the north's cold monsoon season.

The difference between Annie's home and the other houses on Mabfield was that while all the rest were three- or four-bed households, hers had been split into two discrete flats. The tenants before her had used the bright plain surface of the boiler in the kitchen as a whiteboard. She could read ghost-letters written once in marker-pen and then wiped away: ring letting agents, oven fucked again. There was dark mould between the tiles in the bathroom. She'd bought three lamps from Ikea. She wanted to keep the flat as light as possible. Her last flat – in another city, nowhere important, not Manchester – had been very dark.

There was a broad set of bookshelves in the corner of the living room and she'd filled it. There was a dressing table with a mirror in the bedroom – an unexpected piece of furniture – and she'd covered the surface of that with her make-up. If her shoulders ached she got onto all fours in the space of empty carpet at the foot of the double divan and did cat and camel stretches, arching and unarching her back. There was a tall dark wardrobe which had just enough space for her clothes. She left her shoes in a battered turquoise suitcase, permanently open, its lid leaning against the damp eggshell wallpaper. The kitchen sink was old and chrome, the oven particularly cheap; if she used the grill there was a metal guard she had to attach to the roof of the oven to stop the heat melting the plastic control knobs. In short it was everything she wanted from her new home: a cheap place where she could quietly begin the next stage of her life. She'd had her childhood, her adolescence, she'd been a student, she'd graduated, she'd lived the first five or six tentative years of adult life.

So: when she was coming back from the shops, for example, she'd jiggle the key until it bit, open her front door and see a staircase which led up to her floor. It smelled of damp and glue, and gave the impression that whatever thick adhesive had been used to stick down the oxblood carpet hadn't cured and never would. To her right was another front door. This flat belonged to someone else, another tenant, who she did not meet for the first weeks of her tenancy.

On the first day of the job her new manager said, ‘We’re meant to do all kinds of training.’

He was a middle-aged Geordie called Kalvis. His belly stuck out in front of him and his large bottom lip jutted as if he wanted her to tug on it. The name was Lithuanian – that was his heritage. They sat together at a desk in a little annex of the human resources department. It was a day of introductions, inductions, lectures. Health and safety. Sickness and absence policy.

‘I don’t think you need it. It’s a waste of time. So what I suggest is, you think about things you’d like to be trained on, if any, and I’ll sort that out, and all the rest of it we’ll just ignore. I’m not saying you can’t do it if you want to – you can – but life’s too short, isn’t it?’

MediTract was on the top floor of the Outlet Mall at Salford Quays. Her job there was to process CVs from oncologists, anaesthesiologists, ophthalmic surgeons, palliative care nurses, whatever, whoever, to match them up with vacancies, and then to ensure that various NHS trusts and private providers were happy with the staff she sent them. Kalvis was right; she didn’t need to be trained. It was the the same thing she'd done at her last job except that had been for a smaller agency and a lower wage.

‘I’ll pick it up. I’ll ask people for help. Until I drive them all mad.’

He said, ‘Good. I’ll take you to your desk. I’ll show you where the loos are. That's the most important thing. And the kitchen. In fact, we'll have a brew.’

There were sixty-something people in the main open-plan area. It seemed a good mix. Young people and old people, a lot of laughter and chatter, a radio somewhere playing dance music. Noise was good; it was something to hide under or behind. The desks were strangely curved and here and there were potted plants, a spindly kind of fern which, Kalvis told her, was known to suck toxins out of the air. People worked at double-monitors, and spoke into headsets with slender microphone-stalks at the corners of their mouths. Managers had their own glass-walled offices. There were large meeting rooms with long board-tables, and projectors that hung from the ceiling. Kalvis showed her all this, waving his mug of tea at it.

'That's the fire alarm. It's tested once a week. If there's a fire you go out of that door over there. That's Mark; he's the fire marshal. That's Kirsty; she's the first-aider.'

There were three other people on her team. They were all more or less the same age as her. As Kalvis introduced her to them she wondered what they thought of her, what they saw as they looked at her. Her tight lips. Her shredded cuticles. Her carefully chosen clothes, all

blacks and whites, shirts and trousers, cheap simple pumps. Were they thinking about how old they were, how young they were, how serious this all was?

Kalvis said, 'Well. Here you are. The end of the line.'

She logged into her computer for the first time. Satisfied, Kalvis left.

They started talking. Primo and Darren played together in the office's five-a-side team. Laura's work-station was next to Annie's on the wide kidney-shaped desk. She covered her teeth with a hand when she laughed. When Annie looked at Laura she could see her forties and fifties writing themselves on her body, the slow ballooning, the constant smile. Primo was mixed-race and fashion-conscious – he had the air of an off-duty member of a boy band. Darren was pale and doughy.

A few days later she told Laura where she lived. Laura said, 'Fallowfield's for students. I mean, I'm sure you're in a nice bit. But it's studentville.'

They were standing by the row of printers in a corner of the office. Annie looked at what Laura was printing as it slid from the machine: spreadsheets with coloured columns and bold box-outs.

'It's just a bit scruffy, isn't it? And you should be careful walking home at night. I mean, last year there was a guy driving round pulling women into his car.'

'That's horrible. I suppose, it's such a big place...'

She said it to say something but didn't really know what she meant. Fallowfield was full of takeaways and pubs-cum-nightclubs. Black cabs like killer whales cruised for fares. Rubbish and loose leaves blew down the alleyways. It'd been a suburb once. All the young people passing through, staying for one or two years and pumping their money into the bars had made it into a different category of place. She liked to watch students, eavesdrop on their conversations in the supermarket, spot the fashionable ones. Sailorish woollen caps, ubiquitous tennis shoes. Heavy boots, hooded sweatshirts, skinny jeans, skinny legs, sunken

eyes. At that age she'd felt mature. She'd felt worried and wise. Really they were children. Children pretending to be adults, dressed like adults, acting like adults, drinking and fucking each other.

They walked back over to the desk with their printing. They sat down. Laura said, 'Primo, Darren; Annie lives in Fallowfield!'

They laughed. Then the conversation moved on to fights they'd seen in bars across the city, and incidences of road-rage.

Across the plaza from the mall the angled aerofoil of the Lowry Theatre looked like a chrome frown. Annie had consulted maps; the thin river Irwell hook-looped around and through the city like a bloodworm. At the Quays the river had been disguised as something orderly. The whole Lowry complex had been built on a promenade of land which jutted out into the black water; this spur and others like it had formed bays, and they'd been given the simplest possible names: South, Central, and North. There were two basins where fields of water had been separated from the bays proper. These were called Erie and Ontario. The basins were joined by Mariner's Canal. Annie's tram stop – the main stop – was on the other side of North Bay. It was a long low concrete terminal that served Mediacity, the regional home of the BBC. At the end of each day, as she walked tired to the tram stop, the new buildings of Mediacity looked to Annie as if a switch somewhere could be flicked and the reflections in the countless windows would coalesce into a single image.

After a couple of weeks of work she set aside a Saturday to go up into Cumbria. Her train left from Victoria, which at this time was still undergoing long improvement works and so was partially a building site. Areas were fenced off, chunks of the floor had been pulled up, and men in hi-vis and hard hats walked around, smiling at each other. Their work was still thoroughly exciting, even after all the effort and hours they'd put in thus far. It was a gift.

She had to change at Preston, where she stood on a cold, long platform and eavesdropped on two old women. They'd fallen out with someone.

'She's terrible for it.'

'It's been the same thing forever. She's always been awful.'

'How does she expect people to treat her? That's what I don't understand.'

They stood in silence for a moment. They were tiny, both of them, shrunken by time, turned pocket-sized. One of them blew her nose into a folded tissue then tucked it back up the sleeve of her waterproof.

'The daughter's the same. Who moved away. No better than she should be.'

From Preston she had a carriage to herself. It was the opposite of rush-hour, some empty island of time during which no-one but her wanted to travel. At times the train swayed from side to side as it ran along its tracks. She went to the toilet to get some tissue to blow her nose and saw that the bowl was blocked with paper and full of piss; it rose and fell with the motion of the train and splashed over the seat onto the floor.

Reading on trains made her sick. She'd put her headphones in and listened to a BBC radio documentary about sweatshop workers, and then one of the long-running panel shows. Old comedians and young comedians made jokes about how terrible everything was, the deep corruption and idiocy of politicians, the inevitability of war. In a little under an hour she arrived at Windermere. She stood on the platform for a moment, leaning back against the building, the waiting-hall or whatever it was; it was clad in white wood except for its trim and its guttering, which was blue. The station seemed proud of itself, of the fact that it had survived into the twenty-first century and that the service it provided was still required. She took a photograph on her phone, swiped with her thumb to turn it black-and-white.

Her parents were in the station car park in their black 4x4. She got in the back seat and pulled herself forward between their seats to kiss them on their cheeks, one, two, quick pecks.

Then she settled back and fastened her seatbelt.

'How was the train?'

'Fine,' she said. 'I thought I'd sleep but I couldn't.'

Her mother said, 'Come on then, let's get moving.'

They drove.

Coniston Water. Five miles long, a ribbon lake, narrow and deep. Cold and coppery water. Annie's father parked the 4x4 at the campsite connected to the sailing club and they got out. Her mother stretched her back so it cracked. Her mother was slight, strong, and had a gap between her front teeth. Her father was six-two, a bit of an ox. He shambled around with his shirt untucked. They'd raised her left-wing, middle-class, bright. They walked down into the boatyard. There was row after row of packed-away dinghies, wrapped in bright red or dark blue covers, their sails taken down and furled and stored away. The sailing club was in a natural harbour. The clubhouse was a long, squat building and a long jetty projected beyond it, splitting the bay into two zones of moored yachts, bobbing sedately on the dark water. The wind blew across the anchored yachts and the beached dinghies and made cables snap against their masts with a gloining sound. The dinghies rested on three-wheel trailers. They were stored sloped, the bow-end propped up on low wooden runners which ran along the yard. This way if any rainwater got into a boat it would trickle out of its runnels onto the grass. They were secured to their trailers and the trailers were secured to the wooden runners by chains and ropes – padlocks and knots – as if the threat of theft was something real, as if someone might actually turn up in the night and take a boat away. There was another reason to tie them down so thoroughly: if a boat got free, if the wind was strong, if it was a storm, it would batter against its neighbour until they were both stove in.

'Listen,' she said. 'You can hear the wires.'

Her mother smiled. It was eerie; there were so many masts that if the wind was strong the

plinking, ringing noise was loud, like a musical voice or voices speaking indistinctly.

Her father said, 'What?'

When she was young he'd taught her to sail. She could handle Toppers, Lazers, and larger Wayfairers. This was in the quiet years between nine and twelve, when she was self-aware, thin and serious, not yet maddened by adolescence. She'd swum in the shallows of the lake where the weeds hung still in the cold water. With goggles around her neck she'd sculled around the wooden poles of the pontoon jetty alongside the sailing club's narrow little launching ramp. With goggles tight around her head she'd sunk down to the lake-bed to see tiny brown fish, an inch and a half long at most, and no thicker than a pencil.

The grass was wet and the lake looked solid, as if it would resist any attempt to break its surface. They went in to the clubhouse to look around. No-one was in there; no-one challenged them. Since her childhood the pool table had been replaced. She remembered the stained baize of the old table. There was a new vending machine. It was strange to be back there as an adult. The changing rooms were still the same. Wet white chambers with a mortuary air. A dry-suit boot lay on its side beneath a bench. They went outside again and watched the yachts go up and down while Annie smoked a cigarette.

Her father pointed at the hills and said, 'Is that him? Or is it that one?'

One of the hills was called the Old Man of Coniston. It was one of their jokes as a family that any of the hills could be called the Old Man, that it was impossible to tell them apart. They were just hills. They were all Old Men. They walked back past the clubhouse, around it, and looked at the big sixteenth-century farmhouse there, the Old Hall, which had four huge chimneys on its roof. A peacock in the yard lifted its feet high as it stepped, its tail hanging down. Nearby another peacock or peahen called. There had always been peacocks there. Generations of peacocks had been and gone. Her father drove the peacock ahead of them into the campsite, shooing it, waving his arms. It walked slowly, its train twitching, and soon

veered off to the left and turned to stare back at them.

All the way her mother and her father talked to her about jobs they'd had when they were young, in the dark ages, in the seventies, jobs they'd had even before they met. Tents stood in pairs and alone. The campsite was large and quiet, and there was no particular order to where the tents were pitched. Every so often there was a wooden stake driven into the ground with a tap fixed to it and a blue plastic water pipe as thick as a garden hose disappearing down into the grass. They passed the toilet block. They passed a bent oak tree with a sign nailed to it that read NO FIRES. Now they were talking about early holidays, and the various campsites they'd stayed on in Europe.

'Do you remember the German couple? They shouted at you? In the Mosel Valley. I think you were ten.'

'Yes.'

Her mother said, 'I could've killed them. They were shouting at you in German and you had no idea what they were saying. It was such a pointless thing to do.'

It hadn't been pointless. They were swimming in a river and she'd been on the bank throwing handfuls of stones into the water, strafing it, imagining herself a Stuka. She'd refused to stop as they swam closer and closer to her field of fire and eventually entered it. Her stones started to fall around them, pock, pock, very close to their faces. Her mother pointed out a hovering hawk in the distance and the three of them stood and watched it until it dipped away. They discussed her life up until this point. Her small friendships with colleagues, her half-formed and unsuccessful relationships with three or four men – she couldn't decide who counted and who didn't – three and half. They asked her about Manchester.

‘It's got the busiest bus route in Europe,’ she said. ‘I’ll be living close to that. It’s the route that serves all the students at Manchester Uni, and Manchester Metropolitan.’

'Will you see a lot of Lorelei?'

'I hope so.'

They'd been at university together. Lorelei had lived in Manchester for years. Annie had visited her in the city every six months or so since they'd graduated. They understood each other, more or less, as far as they could, both of them being the kinds of people who wrapped themselves up in thickets, concealed themselves behind deep hedges. They valued each other.

They walked through trees down to the lake edge where there was a curved beach of pale stones, thin as a cuticle. She spotted it: a big green beer bottle with a pop-top stopper on its side just where the water met the land. It drew her attention because it was still whole. Broken glass wouldn't have registered. She picked it up and thumbed the metal frame around its neck. It unsealed. She turned it upside down but the note refused to fall out. She shook it and shook it. Before she knew what she was doing she had thrown it at the pebbles to smash it. Quickly, before the wind could take it, she bent down and picked up the folded paper. Then she kicked the dun and bone stones over the shards in order to make it as if nothing had happened.

‘What are you doing?’

'I want to read it.'

'Why didn't you -'

'It wouldn't come out.'

They stood with her. *Dear Adam,* it began, *So sorry. Still don't know what happened. You should have talked to us you know we were always ready to talk to you.*

Adam had killed himself. The letter was unsigned. Some friend of his had written this note and slid it into a bottle and thrown it into the lake. Coniston had mulled it over for a little while. Who knows how long; the letter was undated. Then the body of water had gently refused the bottle, the message, and edged it back up onto the beach.

Her father said, 'How sad!'

The letter mentioned parties, raves. Annie could imagine him, eyes sunken in, skin grey,

a great appreciation for dance music, a propensity for black-outs, curled up on his sofa with a paper and pen to write this letter. They had a discussion about what to do with the letter. She'd smashed the bottle so it couldn't be put back where it'd come from. Her parents looked tired. Her mother was certain that they couldn't take it away.

'It's not right, is it?'

It wasn't an argument, really, although it was almost one. In the end her mother threw up her hands.

'Do what you want, love.'

Her father said, 'That shall be the whole of the law.'

Annie folded the paper. There was a felled tree, silvered with age, on the grassy borderland between the land and the shore. It had been positioned there by the campsite managers to act as a bench. She posted the note deep into one of the long cracks in the trunk, where it would eventually rot away, where rain would seep in and turn it to mulch. They walked back through the campsite, looking at the campers. Outside their domed or boxy tents they were cooking on little gas burners, putting together the frames of camp-beds, untangling fishing line, watching the peacocks and peahens as they moved around the campsite.

Her parents had bought her a new digital radio as a flat-warming present. It was in the boot of the 4x4. Her father got it out in the train station car park and stuck it in her arms.

'We didn't wrap it. We didn't want you to get too excited.'

She thanked them. She kissed them on their cheeks again, leaning awkwardly over the box and craning her neck. The box sat next to her on the train to Piccadilly. The bus from Piccadilly Gardens was very full, so she put it on the luggage rack and sat near it, in case someone tried to take it with them when they got off. The windows of the bus steamed up from the breath of the passengers, so it was as if they were travelling through fog. She got off outside the Owens Park student accommodation block in Fallowfield, hefted the box and

walked back up past the off-licences to the turning for Mabfield. When she got to the house the light was on in the front ground-floor window but the curtains were closed. She balanced the box on one hip and took her keys from the pocket of her coat. In the hallway she stood for a second and leaned her head towards the door of the ground-floor flat, and heard nothing. In her own flat she took the radio from its box, removed it carefully from the shaped styrofoam frame which had cradled it, and put it on top of the fridge-freezer in the kitchen. She read the instructions thoroughly but still it struggled to scan for and pick up stations. She tried again in the morning and it worked first time.

Another flat-warming present: she met Lorelei early on Sunday afternoon, outside Manchester University’s student union. She took Annie into her arms and it felt quite natural. Lorelei smelled medicinal, as if she'd had to treat her hair with something that killed nits. She’d been in the Uni’s main library, a huge old building behind the students' union. She was an alumna, and had a library card. The library had a huge automatic revolving door which span slowly on a motor to let in and let out a constant trickle of students. After the door were turnstiles which opened when a card was scanned, like the gates on the London underground.

'It's like Fort Knox,' Lorelei said. 'They're desperate to make sure no-one gets to read a book who shouldn't be allowed to.'

They walked along Oxford Road towards the city centre. Lorelei had an office job but her real work was art. She drew small, fine pen-and-ink illustrations which made Annie think of the diagrams in old anatomical textbooks – not that she'd ever looked at an old anatomical textbook. Still, that's what they resembled. Sometimes Lorelei did posters for gigs, or album covers for local bands. She contributed to zines, and screenprinted her designs in limited runs and sold them for not much money. Each drawing had a title, inscribed beneath it in flowing copperplate. These titles were jokes, or nonsense, or quotations from unexpected sources. So a

delicate starling on the wing might be titled *where are my keys* or *more and more homeless people every day* or *we will fight them on the beaches.* Annie thought it was much or a muchness, really. It didn't do much for her. A vintage shop in the Northern Quarter stocked non sequitur birthday cards she'd had printed, and a bar around the corner from that shop had a series of her pieces framed on its walls. She was working on a new series, a long chain of drawings, about which she'd told Annie little, other than that she was thinking about it all the time, researching, reading.

‘How’s it going? How's your thing?’

‘Good,’ she said. ‘I managed to get a desk up on the top floor. There are students sleeping in there. I was watching one of them. He woke up and worked for a while and then put his head back down.’

After fifteen minutes of walking and talking they reached the top of Oxford Road, where they turned right onto Portland Street, lined with tall office buildings and tiny pubs and doorways to staircases that led down to subterranean restaurants. They cut through China Town. It amazed Annie, this sudden even-busier zone within the busyness of Manchester. It was a tiny little area of somewhere else, a slippage in reality. The streets were narrow, the windows bright with signage. Oily pigeons crossed and re-crossed the narrow streets. There was a high red Chinese gate at the centre, and of course a car park with pagoda-style shelters at its corners. In one of the pagodas a woman threw chunks and globs of pale Char-Siu bun out for the pigeons. They hobbled around her feet. Lorelei was at home here. Annie decided that she was at home as well. From now on, forever. A chef in his whites squatted smoking underneath the air conditioning unit at the back of a restaurant. One street over a delivery-man leaned back against the wall, fag clenched between his teeth, as if he was so tired he might fall asleep and topple forward under the slow wheels of the cars crawling around the one-way system.

They were going to the Manchester Art Gallery.

Lorelei said, 'Come on. You've got to see it from the front.'

They walked alongside the long building, looking at the glass atrium section in its middle. At the corner they crossed over narrow Mosley Street and the parallel sets of tram-tracks to the far pavement, then turned back to admire the gallery’s calm straight lines dead on, its pillars, its projected portico. The stone was a certain shade. It looked as if decades of rain had washed it clean and at the same time had driven dirt into its pores. She expected Lorelei to say something. Then she wondered if she should thank her. A tram passed along Mosley Street, moving between them and the gallery. It was full. A little boy with a buzzcut looked out at them blankly, bored, as if they were statues or buildings themselves. They crossed back over, climbed the wide steps, went carefully between the two middle-most pillars as if they might give way and drop tons of stone on their head. They walked straight into the back of a group of fifteen or so Dutch tourists and edged through them. There was a Perspex donation box on a plinth in the centre of the entrance hall and a member of the gallery’s staff, a thin man with a severe undercut, stood next to it as if it required constant attention.

He said, ‘Can I help you?’

Annie took her purse from her bag.

‘Is there a tour on or something?’

‘It’s just about to start. It’s a free introduction to the gallery. Have you been here before?’

She slid three pound coins through the slot in the top of the donations box and they fell clinking onto the bed of money below. Before her people had posted folded twenties into the hoard and there was even a red-brown fifty.

Lorelei said, ‘I’ve been here hundreds of times. But it's her first visit.’

He smiled. Annie thought that he didn’t know what to say. He swallowed.

‘The tour's free. It’s just about to start.’

‘Well then, we’ll join in.’

Lorelei was short and diffident, or seemingly diffident, but really like iron, Annie thought. She would grow up to be a Shetland Islander or survivalist, a woman hard as teak, living an austere life and wearing heavy woollen jumpers, home-knit.

The guide's shoulders jutted forward and his glasses hung around his neck on a wide black strap. He led them up the stairs and into long, high-ceilinged rooms. Old art, wide canvases, classical scenes, landscapes in warm colours. The guide worked hard to make the tour interactive – to make it, Annie thought, a conversation. They stood in a crescent around a huge painting and he pointed out a boxy thing in the corner of the frame, almost hidden behind dancing figures.

‘This is an Aoelian Harp. Does anyone know what that is?’

Lorelei said, ‘It’s played by the wind.’

The rest of the tour group looked at her.

‘The wind blows across it and it makes a sound.’

‘That’s right,’ said the guide.

He pursed his lips and blew a weird little tune. Annie wondered how Lorelei knew it; a horror story, she thought, something she’d studied on a Gothic fiction module, or something she’d read recently. Lorelei read books and filed everything away, every sliver of gleaned information. In a room full of twentieth century art, as the group was being told about Francis Bacon’s interest in dentistry, Annie and Lorelei split off and stood before a small portrait of a terribly alive young woman wearing a black beret. Her skin was pale as chalk and the set of her neck and shoulders and jaw made it look like at any moment she’d speak. There was a single black rose on the floor in front of the painting. Annie looked from the rose to the nearest gallery assistant, a woman about her age – about the age of the model who had sat for the portrait – who was sitting on a stool, a walkie-talkie at her feet. The gallery assistant

smiled at her. Lorelei took out her phone. They searched the internet for the artist’s name, and as they walked around the rest of that wing of the gallery Lorelei read her the obituary. Tour abandoned, they walked down a modern glass-and-metal staircase into the atrium. A hollow figure of a man made from mesh was suspended from the ceiling in the void of the staircase, arrested in a moment of falling or rising.

'That's Anthony Gormley.'

Annie said, 'He did a beach, didn't he?'

There was a beach somewhere – neither of them could remember the name of the place – and the artist had positioned metal men along it, emerging from the sand, standing in the surf, ageing colourfully and beautifully as metal does, leeching blues and browns and greens out of the air. They went to the gift shop and looked around. For 50p Lorelei bought a postcard of Caravaggio's *The Taking of Christ*.

'Look at this. I love this. Look at them.'

Jesus and Judas were very close, ruddy Judas either planting the kiss or whispering something, mid-hiss, and Jesus's face was drawn, resigned, his fingers interlocked before him like a structure of intricately interlinked levers and pistons. There were soldiers in anachronistic armour which made them look like Conquistadors and although they were presumably moving in to take Jesus, it seemed rather more that they were trying to pull Judas away from his target, to prevent what was about to happen, to undo their own purpose in the scene. They flicked through the display of posters which hung on the wall like a great thick-paged book. The frames clacked together. She didn't want a landscape, she didn't want a portrait, she didn't want anything abstract.

'I like this,' Lorelei said.

They'd exhausted the gallery's catalogue now and had moved into a collection of prints of works which belonged to other places. Lorelei's pick was *The Beggars* by Bruegel. Five

figures gathered in a cluster as if arrested in the act of chasing each other around and around in a circle. They were missing limbs, missing their legs, and had crude wooden crutches. It was strange and dreamy – they wore white smocks with pieces of fur pinned to them, perhaps the tails of foxes, and their hats were like folded paper or lampshades. There were brick walls in the background, an old woman passing, an arched doorway leading perhaps to an orchard. On the print, in the white border underneath the picture, was a printed inscription: cripples, take heart, and may your affairs prosper.

'It does look like your kind of thing.'

'Go on. I'll buy it for you. It's a flat-warming present. I'll buy you a frame to go with it.'

'I don't think I like it.'

'That doesn't matter. You need something up on the wall, and this is the best thing we've seen all day. Pretend you've never seen it before and I've just given it to you out of the blue. You'd like it then, wouldn't you?'

They parted ways at five. She walked Lorelei to the tram stop at St Peter's Square and stood on the platform with her as they waited.

Lorelei said, 'Manchester changes so much. You'll notice it when you've been here for a while. Every time I come into the centre it's like they've knocked a building down or put another one up.'

Three boys on mountain bikes cruised along the tram tracks, down in the valley between the chest-high platforms, their hoods up, their faces set in carefully neutral pouts. When Lorelei was safely off, Annie walked down to Oxford Road, to the bus stop in front of the Palace hotel. Some function was happening inside, and a circle of middle-aged men in tuxedos passed a pack of Lambert and Butlers between them, sparking up their cigarettes with a neon-green disposable lighter.

She got off the bus at Whitworth Park where there was a Lidl at the base of a high block

of student flats. This was the start of Rusholme's Curry Mile, a busy and polyglot stretch of restaurants and shisha bars, takeaways and jewellers between the city centre and Fallowfield. It was early evening, the sky had greyed, the traffic was heavy and there were people everywhere. She couldn't name all the languages being spoken around her; she heard French, and something like Polish, and there were families moving into and out of Rusholme speaking, what? Perhaps Hindi, or Urdu. It excited her. A knot of Spanish boys were laughing by the supermarket's automatic doors. Her eyes were sore. She walked through them. The key thing to do, she thought, was to only buy as much as she could carry. She hung the print that night. Although she didn't own much she did have a hammer and a box of little brass tacks.

One day when Annie came back from work after three or four weeks in the flat she heard someone moving around in the ground-floor flat and could smell onions cooking. She stood on the landing for a moment weighing it up, then knocked on the door. It took the drunk a long time to open it. She was in her fifties or sixties. Her age had blurred. Her cheeks looked almost calloused or cauliflowered, her fucked liver written on her skin. Her hair was grey, long, and she was the double of an illustration of a hunched little elf or goblin that Annie remembered from a children's book.

'Hi. I'm Annie. I live above you.'

She was dressed like a house-painter or a carpenter. A boat builder. Someone whose work required them to wear throw-away clothes. She tucked the long tail of her shirt into the loose waist of her corduroy trousers.

'It's a pleasure. How is it up there?'

'It's fine. I thought I'd just come and say hello.'

'Very nice of you. Do you live by yourself?'

'Yes. I've just moved here. To Manchester.'

The drunk nodded. They stood in silence for a beat.

The drunk said, ‘It’s a quiet house.’

Annie wanted to ask her questions. What did she do? Why did no-one live on the ground-floor? But it was obvious that as far as the drunk was concerned they’d done enough.

'Goodbye, then.'

'I'll be seeing you.'

The few days later Annie saw the drunk again, on Wilmslow Road, the main artery of Fallowfield. She was holding a half-full bin bag and shouting at a teenager on a BMX.

‘You’re a big lad!’

The boy looked back over his shoulder, disgusted.

‘Get a real bike!’

They never bumped into each other at the house. They ran to different schedules, had different body clocks. Sometimes Annie could hear her, vaguely, moving things around in the night, bumping off the walls, singing. It was as if she had waited until they had met before allowing herself to make a sound. Quite often Annie spotted her on the streets nearby, coming out of the newsagents with a bundle of papers under her arm, Racing Post uppermost. Or smoking outside the bookies, one hand in the pocket of a tan leather coat, the other pinching a fag at her lips as if it was a dog whistle and she was sounding a crooked note Annie couldn’t hear. Almost every night Annie listened to groups of drunk students wandering home, shouting non-sequiturs at each other, laughing. Other times they were arguing, or crying into their telephones. Her windows were single-glazed. As she lay in bed she felt protective of them, these people just a little younger than her who didn't know she could hear them. Manchester was a city for drinkers. Drinking was the city's hobby and true love. At the distant end of her long street oaks and elms marked the beginning of Platt Fields Park, and somewhere nearby there was a church where the bells rang at unexpected times.

The nearest dentist was on Old Moat Avenue. She took a morning off and walked there. The surgery was in a house much like the one she lived in. It had the same chipped bricks and cracked roof tiles. It had been gutted and converted. She pushed open the heavy front door, stepped in, and scrubbed the soles of her boots on the welcome mat. There was a waiting room off the broad hallway – she looked in as she passed the door and saw a well-dressed and very old black woman staring through thick-lensed glasses at an equally ancient Asian woman opposite, who plucked at the edge of her black hijab with thumb and forefinger.

The receptionist was on the phone. She adjusted her glasses at Annie, then ignored her. Someone didn't understand that they had to pay for treatment.

'Then you'll have – we've got – there's a bit of a wait for the hygienist. There's a waiting list. Six weeks. Six.'

Annie kept her hands in the pockets of her coat. She heard footsteps and whirring and muted voices from upstairs. The receptionist huddled down in her chair, her big shoulders rounded, the wattle of her neck jiggling when she shook her head at the muddled person at the other end of the line. The call ended. Annie smiled and stepped forward so she could rest her elbows on the counter.

'I've just moved into the area. Can I register here? Are you full?'

'We're just taking on a load more NHS patients. So you're OK. I'll need you to fill in this form.'

The next available appointment for a check-up was in three weeks' time, and early in the morning. It was sooner than Annie had expected. A petite nurse in a blue smock, her hair in a high ponytail, came down the stairs and went into the waiting room.

'Mrs Kang? Ji-Yoon Kang?'

Her voice was hopeful. Annie imagined the two old women turning their stares on the

nurse, slow as molten treacle.

As she was walking back down Mabfield to her door a gaggle of men came jogging towards her in tight clothes that clung to their chests and arms and thighs. They looked high-tech. They might've run straight off the set of a science fiction film. She stood to the side to let them pass. She was tired and it was strange. They were so noisy, the sound of their feet hitting the pavement, their deep equine breath. The white wires of their headphones were bright. The last one of them smiled at her and she saw that he'd bleached his teeth and made them unnaturally bright. This was Finley.

He followed the gang into the park and around its various paths, his lungs hurting. After a while it felt very good. His hands were freezing. The playlist was on shuffle but it was all dance music, stuff he'd never listen to unless he was running. If he thought at all about Annie after having passed her on the pavement and smiled at her it was only something passing, vaguely obscene, a pink-tinted thought.

After the run the group hung out for a little while at the place from which they'd set off, a big pub called The Friendship Inn. They stood on the pavement tapping the toes of their running shoes against the wall of the pub, or leaning against each other for support while they stretched their hamstrings. They were all friends or friends-of-friends. At twenty-eight Fin was the youngest or second youngest. Mostly they were in their mid-to-late thirties.

Finley said, ‘I thought it was ace. The spaceship coming in, you know, that shot – this big fucking ship coming in...’

'What did you think about the end? The bit in zero gravity?’

The conversation really consisted of Finley rehearsing or retelling his favourite moments, and the other runner only agreeing that yes, those moments had certainly been in the film, and yes, he could remember them. Finley's voice was rough, and there was a musical rise and fall

to it; his sentences resolved themselves neatly. They talked about work. He was an electrician, and the firm he worked for had contracts with a number of the letting agencies, so for the most part he fixed things for rental tenants, using the cheapest parts, working as quickly as possible.

He'd parked the van in the car park of Sainsbury's. He said all his goodbyes. They'd meet again next week. In the supermarket he bought bread and milk. When he ran he kept his card and his keys in a little compartment in a special belt. Walking the aisles in his shorts and running shoes, mud spattered up his long calves, he enjoyed his difference from the other shoppers, the students and the natives, the ever-present elderly, all dressed as expected, none speckled with or daubed in mud. He was easy-going. He was between girlfriends. Money was coming in his direction. Savings were accruing. Australia, he thought, or New Zealand, next year or the year after. Beaches and bars. You could coin it in out there he'd heard, you could rinse it, if you had a trade. He'd travel to Thailand for a Full Moon party. He'd get a large tattoo across his back, wings or something like that.

At home he played Modern Warfare for two hours. He had no headset; the people he played against had headsets. A kid in Spain, teenagers in New York and Ohio who called him a faggot again and again, a man his own age or perhaps older in Dublin, a baby crying in the background. Noises off. He played until he was tired. All the while he listened to his international strangers swear at each other and order each other around. No-one listened to anything anyone said. He shot down a helicopter. The baby started crying again, hundreds or thousands of miles away, invisible. His legs were stiff from the run. They stiffened and stiffened.

That Friday was pay-day. She got into the office early, just before eight. It was almost empty but – she wasn't surprised – Kalvis was already there. She met him in the snug kitchen where

he was spooning white sugar into a cup of tea.

‘What time do you call this?’

‘I know.’

She shook instant coffee granules into a MediTract branded mug.

‘I think we’re going out for a drink tonight, if you’re interested?’

He shook his head gravely.

By luck more than planning she’d managed her week so that she had just enough to do to fill the day. She left the office at lunch, went into the mall proper, and sat at an empty table in the food-court to eat a salad. Then she went window shopping, to earmark things to buy later with the wage she’d earned. Everything could be found cheaper on the internet but it seemed important to visit real shops. In a small way that might help keep Manchester ticking over.

The air-conditioning in the shoe shop blew a breeze that was too cold and the sales staff all looked bored beyond belief. There was a pair of ankle-boots made from leather the colour of oiled walnut. She weighed the display pair in her hand. In the small bookshop there was a glut of novels on a special display. They were the recently announced short-list of one of the major literary prizes. She thought that the next day or the day after or maybe the following weekend she’d come back. She could buy something for Lorelei. She could buy something for herself. She was in the mood for murders and snow, a thick brick of a book written by any one of countless Scandinavian crime authors.

As the afternoon went on the office became more and more relaxed. People seemed to stop working entirely. They crowded around each-other’s computers, watching funny videos or critiquing emails from clients and applicants. Darren and Primo talked about their football league. Someone had been badly fouled at the last match.

‘I heard it go,’ said Primo. He spoke softly and sleepily. ‘He went down and he was grabbing it.’

Darren said, ‘What did it sound like?’

‘Just, crack. A cracking sound.’

Laura held a hand to her mouth as if she was about to vomit.

‘That’s disgusting. Stop it.’

Annie wanted to ask, how long did the ambulance take to arrive? Did the bone come through the skin?

At the end of each week an open invite email went around the office. There was always a group going into the city. At half past five she left the office with Primo, Darren, Laura, and a few others. She knew some of them by name but others were strangers. As they walked around the little bay to the tram-stop Laura offered her a fag. She took it. The surface of the water was unquiet. Empty cigarette packets and beer cans bobbed like miniature boats.

‘This is nice, isn’t it?’

Annie nodded and blew out smoke.

‘I’m excited. I haven’t really been out in Manchester yet. I haven’t had the money.’

She didn’t say, I only have one friend. It was windy – she looked down at Laura as she cupped her cigarette in her hand to stop it burning too quickly. They reached the tram-stop. She looked back across the water, at the Imperial War Museum.

She pointed at it and said, ‘Do you think it looks like a turtle?’

It was a slip-up. Laura was at sea. Eventually she said, ‘I’ve never seen it like that.'

Darren introduced her around. There was a manager, a man name Jim Tuttle. He was getting towards forty. He was chunky, built like a teddy-bear, but he had a pianist's or a strangler’s long, wide-spanned hands. His wedding ring bit into his finger. They shook.

‘How is it so far?’

‘I’m enjoying it. I think Kalvis is happy with what we’re doing.’

‘Ignore him. Ignore everything he says. He’s a twat.'

He laughed to show that it was a joke. Darren checked his phone. Annie looked over at the tall, sail-shaped Quays apartment blocks. The tram arrived, hissing on its tracks, and slipped into the terminal. The doors opened. They boarded. Annie stood in the aisle in a knot of people, not saying much, laughing politely when it was needed. There were handrails. All this metal-work was glossy yellow, and dangling down from high horizontals were plastic loops for commuters to hang from. Annie took hold of one. The tram sat stationary for a while, filling up with people, then set off. The tram crept along its route through redeveloped Salford and into sister-city Manchester, winding between buildings and rising and falling on slopes of concrete like a slow roller-coaster. In the centre they all alighted in a rush at a crowded stop next to the high, curved brutalist wall that dominated Piccadilly Gardens. Primo led the group.

They walked through a gap in the wall. They passed the huge white Ferris wheel which took empty capsules up into the sky and brought them back down again. The Garden's dealers wore dark hoodies which made them monkish; they sold weed with the clumsy half-subtlety of misbehaving children. Shoppers criss-crossed each other everywhere. Men in dashikis and sportswear played koras among the municipal furniture, the long-suffering trees and wooden benches. These koras were bowl-backed, with a timbre somewhere between harp and music-box. The men played well. The music was beautiful, and fell on the city centre from above somehow, the usual rain changed for a little while into glassy notes.

‘Adam.’

He nodded when he said it, agreeing with himself, a little embarrassed by his own name.

‘I'm Annie.’

‘Are you having a good night?’

She smiled at him. She wondered if she looked drunk. She wasn’t, particularly. She was a

little.

‘It’s been OK. I was out with work people. But everyone went home early. They had a couple of drinks and shot off. People had to get trains home and stuff like that. To Bolton. Someone told me that they’re running a marathon tomorrow. So they were just drinking lime and soda anyway. I thought it was going to be a late one, but it was all done by nine.’

She’d caught a bus, feeling slighted. She got off at her stop, crossed the road, and passed the bar on her walk home. It was called Anchorage. When she looked through the window she’d seen that it was almost empty.

‘That’s a shame,’ he said. ‘That’s not very good.’

‘You?’

‘I went and got some food at the Japanese place down there. Then I came here for a drink.’

It seemed natural for them to talk to each other – two people by themselves. His voice was gentle, and his accent was northern but not Mancunian. His hair was short and blonde. His beard was a shade darker. He was slight and tall and tired. The furniture was made from reclaimed wood. Speakers in the corners played music from the 60s. Annie asked the barmaid about it. The barmaid adjusted the piercing in her septum, making it catch the light.

‘It’s a playlist– the manager made it. She’s just called it “Pre-punk.”’

‘Oh. OK. Pre-punk.’

They moved to a table. When he pulled back a chair it screamed against the floor. He sat across from her. They talked about Manchester. He’d lived there since University. His mouth was wide. Annie was halfway through a vodka and lemonade that she’d decided would be her last. He was drinking a dark ale with a head of foam on it the colour of parchment. He struck her as sensible, attractive. The kind of person she had wanted to meet in Manchester. He had good teeth. He picked up a beer mat and passed it from hand to hand and she found that she

was doing the same thing. She wasn't blind; she understood what was going on. They talked about their flats. She thought that he was hiding something, but it was more likely that he didn't want to bore her. Mentioning the bottle and the note at Coniston would've killed the conversation, so she didn't. After all Adam was a common name. She talked at length about the office.

'Do you like it there, then? Is it everything you'd hoped?'

She said, 'I like working. I always have.'

They left together two drinks later. She walked him to his bus. The traffic was heavy; there were taxis, little souped-up hatchbacks with spoilers and loud sound-systems, a slow coasting ambulance. He bent his head against the wind. She tucked her chin into her jacket.

'Have you ever seen a ghost?'

She laughed.

'No.'

He was heading back towards the centre. They walked up the slight slope of Wilmslow Road to the brow of the rise, where there was a long stand of bus stops and benches. Fifteen benches in all; Annie had counted them the first time she saw them. The whole assemblage would've been more at home on a sea-front promenade, at Blackpool maybe or Southport, where there was something wide and changing to sit and look at.

She said, 'I went on a school trip. An adventure week, in the Alps. The French side. The coach driver was so fat. I've just remembered how fat he was. The roads were really narrow and he went around corners like a maniac. You could hear all the suitcases shifting about in the luggage compartment. We went mountain biking and canoeing and that kind of thing. There were about thirty of us. We slept in wooden huts like big garden sheds, in the forest, with two bunk-beds in each of them. We were all girls. I went to a girls' school. Not a posh one.

‘It was shit. One of the rules was that we weren’t allowed out of our shed between ten at night and six in the morning. Which was ridiculous. I was fifteen. Nearly fifteen. But there were some really young girls with us, eleven-year-olds. So at night, when we weren’t meant to be out, we left our shed and crept over to the sheds where the youngest girls were sleeping. And we scared them so much! We were knocking on the walls, gently, so the teachers couldn’t hear us – they had an actual chalet to stay in, and the sheds were close to it. We could hear all the teachers laughing and talking.

‘It was better that way, I think, because it’s scarier to hear a quiet knocking, and wonder what it is. Anyway, soon they started screaming, really screaming, and we ran back to our shed and got in bed.

‘They were so scared that for the rest of the holiday a teacher had to sleep in the shed with them, on the floor, in a sleeping bag.’

There was a rough sound, a raspberry, as a helmetless man zipped down the road, weaving between cars, on a quad bike. Adam’s bus arrived: the quad had been its herald.

He said, ‘Look. I’ve had a really nice time talking to you.’

He gave her a triangular scrap of paper with his phone number written on it and his name. He had written it when he was at the bar, or when she was in the toilet, or at some other point. The bus took him away. His numbers were small, his zeros crooked, his sevens crossed on the vertical; she wondered why he hadn’t just told her the number. She could’ve saved it in her phone. The letters of his name were large. She walked back to her flat. She held on to the wall as she climbed the stairs. She made toast and ate it, made more, couldn’t eat it. She drank a pint of water and took two co-codamol because she wanted to sleep deeply and wake late. She got into bed and lay there as the painkiller worked on her and a gang of students bellowed and cat-called in the dark on the street, and below her the drunk drank.

The year after the trip to the Alps the school took her away again. This time the trip was

for the senior year only. Twenty or so girls. And they didn't travel so far afield; they went to the Lake District for five days. They camped. They canoed. They climbed a low cliff. They stayed in a barn which had been converted into a dormitory with a kitchen. They burned citrus candles in saucers to try to keep the biting flies away, but everyone suffered. Annie was bored. She knew all about the Lake District already. On the last day they went on a hack and she rode a horse she liked more than any other horse she'd ever ridden. It was a little mare, black from nose to tail-tip. The first half an hour of the hack was great, although the horse was jumpy.

When they were ambling along an uphill track between banks of blackberry brambles it suddenly went wild and took her off. The track led to a viewing point at the brow of the hill. From there she could see a couple of miles of fields and, in the distance, mountains. It all jumped in time with the horse's body. The horse stopped, shocked by the landscape opening up before it. Momentum snatched Annie straight over the animal's head. She landed on the crown of her helmet. The horse danced a few steps away from her. Then, calmed, it came back and dipped its nose as if to ask what she was doing on the ground. Soon the other girls and the teacher stood around her as if she'd fallen from the sky. Behind them, a circle of standing horses.

'I've broken my neck.'

It sounded like someone else's voice. Actually she'd cracked a rib and torn the muscles around it. The teacher was a well-upholstered woman in her thirties who Annie hated for the whiny way she tried to reason with or bully the girls, and the fact that she seemed to know a great deal but not want to share any of that knowledge, choosing instead to talk only about set texts and exam strategies.

She said, 'You're going to be fine, OK? There's no need to worry. There's no blood, OK? And you're talking to us.'

She made one of the prefects remount her horse and ride back down to the equestrian centre to raise the alarm. The girls hadn't been allowed to bring their chunky, simple mobile phones. As the prefect rode away the teacher called after her.

'For God's sake don't fall off!'

Then she knelt down next to Annie and folded her hands in her lap. She didn't know what to do with herself. She leaned over, close to Annie's face.

'We had a discussion last night, didn't we? All of us. We said that you had to stop messing around.'

Annie lay in the mud. She could only take very shallow breaths. The back of her neck was wet and there was mud drying on her face. She could hear the horses – pithy, cursory snorting, idle stamping. A magpie cackled to itself.

'I'm not crying.'

She raised a hand to her face to wipe her cheek with the cuff of her fleece and it hurt so much that she moaned up at the girls looking down at her, top-heavy in their black helmets, all of them with the chin-straps still buckled. A wasp buzzed around them. When the white-and-green helicopter buzzed down out of the sky Annie looked up at its belly. She'd expected something huge. A big red Chinook. The paramedics joked with her. There were two of them. The first, a grey-haired Chinese man with a soft Midlands accent, said, 'You can move your toes, can't you?'

She moved her toes.

'You'll be up and dancing in no time. Do you dance? You look like a dancer.'

He poked at her side with blunt fingers.

The other paramedic had short dark hair, a masculine jaw-line, and freckles in a spray across her cheeks and the bridge of her nose.

She said, 'He's a dancer. He's very good.'

He looked down at Annie.

‘Ballroom. Me and my wife. She’s not the best. To be honest, I’m carrying her.’

She laughed, and the pain from the broken rib made her want to throw up. Her diaphragm moving was more painful than the laugh. They strapped her to a stretcher. Then – how ridiculous – they loaded her into the helicopter.

She was early for her appointment with the dentist. She had to wait in a queue behind an old Scottish couple who couldn’t hear anything, either of them. She watched them watching lips as they talked to each other, the receptionist Annie had met before, and another woman behind the counter who had a pixie cut that didn’t suit her. In the queue behind Annie was a young girl as pale as a marble statue, in a black hoodie, the hood pulled up. She was looking down at her phone. A little boy was asleep in the pram next to her, and another hung around her legs and bared his gappy milk teeth at Annie. The waiting room was busy and no-one in there was speaking. The plastic chair made Annie’s back ache. First she thought she could hear wet breath, but after listening for a few moments she decided that it was the sound of a vacuum being used to suck saliva out of someone’s mouth. She sat for fifteen minutes wondering what she needed for the flat and kept deciding that it was nothing. She had lamps, and the Bruegel print. Once the door was closed and locked and the heating was on it was like being in herself, as if each room was a space contained within her. She sat on her sofa, wrapped in an unzipped sleeping bag, and battled page-by-page through heavy thrillers. She took her laptop to bed and logged in to MediTract's server remotely to finish up little bits and pieces of admin, or stream television shows in the dark. A schoolboy sitting near the door sniffed over and over again and she wished she had a tissue to give him. The child in the pram woke up and kicked against his straps.

His mother said, ‘Go back to sleep.’

He did. His brother read a dog-eared picture book with deep concentration.

The dentist was Portuguese. His silver-black hair was long and it hung down over his left eye until he swept it back. Annie liked his soft accent. Her skull didn’t fit correctly against the firm headrest.

‘I think they’re fine. I mean, I haven’t seen a dentist for a few years, but they’ve always been good.’

He said, ‘Well. We will see.’

He pressed gently on her chin and she opened her mouth. His mirror and hooked probe rattled off her teeth. He read them out in code to the nurse, who typed his dictation into specialist software. He put a frame in her mouth which sat on the tongue-side of her gums and dug in uncomfortably. A thin length of plastic with a hoop on its end stuck out of the side of her mouth. The dentist pulled over the compact x-ray machine on its long white arm. He slipped its muzzle through the plastic hoop. Dentist and nurse stepped out of the room. He looked in at her through the crack of the open door, his face sombre. There was a whirring sound.

She'd been texting Adam on and off. Sometimes she wouldn’t reply to him for a day. Sometimes he wouldn’t reply to her for a day. Annie thought about the x-rays shooting through her cheek, the whole of her head. Was everyone afraid, she wondered, of radiation? There had been a point in history when no-one had been afraid of it, because no-one had known about it. The dentist came back in, the frame was swapped for one which mirrored it, and that was put into the other side of her mouth so the same thing could happen again. She wondered what terrifying things were yet to be discovered.

On Sunday she went into the centre, to buy clothes. Nothing much; one or two new things, to mark the fact that time was passing. Outside Burger King on the Gardens a tall teenage boy

picked his girlfriend up and span her around. Her jeans were pulled down as he span her so Annie could see a bright pink thong. The girl shouted, 'Stop, stop, you prick, stop.'

He put her down and smiled at her and she swung for him and hit him in the jaw. It wasn't a slap but it wasn't a punch. It was more a shove in the face. He had a leggy moustache and when she drew back her hand he raised his own hand to his top lip to make sure she hadn't wiped it away. He stood shocked for a second as the girl turned and walked off towards Starbucks, tugging up her jeans. He followed her.

Over her shoulder she called, 'I told you not to pick me up. I don't like being picked up.'

Annie walked close to them so she could hear what they were saying. She stared past them so they would think she was a shopper, an innocent, uninterested. Now he had her by the elbow and had fixed her with an aggrieved scowl.

'Never, ever hit me in the face.'

'Don't pick me up.'

'Don't hit me in the face.'

'Don't pick me up.'

'Give over!'

Annie said it to herself again and again. Give over, give over, give over. It fit the rhythm of her footsteps as she walked down Market Street, plotting her route between shifting groups of people, dodging hawkers with umbrellas and bubble-machines and little whistles that fitted in their mouths and allowed them to mimic bird calls. Half-moon crowds had gathered to watch beatboxers or kids doing football tricks, or artists who sketched intricate scenes on the paving slabs in chalk. Venice and volcanoes. New York and the moon. At a cash machine she thought, fuck it. She tucked her money away in her purse, took out her phone and sent Adam a message asking if wanted to do something.

For the next few days in the office she found herself thinking about it, a little nervously.

She could’ve told Laura – it was the kind of thing Laura would’ve liked to know. She found herself going over to Kalvis’s office to ask him things she already knew, to show him that she was working.

Eventually he said, ‘Annie. This is a stress ball.’

He took it from a drawer in his desk and handed it to her. It wasn't a ball, it was a little star-shaped figure of a man with a crudely moulded face. The logo on it had faded – some old software company, long since bought-out or re-branded.

‘It doesn’t come with instructions. It's an idea as old as time.’

She squeezed it. It felt like she was killing something small.

‘Sorry.’

‘Don’t apologise. It’s fine. It’s all fine. Unless it isn’t. Is it?’

‘It is, yes. I’ll go away.’

When she got back to the desk Darren said, ‘What was that about?’

She squeezed the doll at him.

‘Nothing.’

Primo said, ‘Stress? You need to exercise. Join the football team. We’re equal opportunities.’

The restaurant was called Peter’s House. It was in Didsbury. It was large and busy, and the sound of people talking and laughing was very loud. A waiter led them between crowded tables and seated them at the back, near the kitchen.

‘Sorry we’re a bit crammed in,’ said Adam, as if he was the owner. ‘When I rang up to book they weren’t sure if they could get us in at all. I left it a bit late.’

It wasn’t the kind of place she would’ve picked. But she thought that maybe it was a canny move on his part, because of course the evening was going to be a little awkward, and

going somewhere more relaxed would not help them escape that. She read the menu and was happy to see that they served venison. The waiting staff, neat as nurses, walked between the tables. It was hard to catch their eye, and when Annie managed to persuade a waitress to take their order she felt that she was keeping her from some other, more important duty. The people eating around them were middle-aged; the car park was full of BMWs and Audis. Her dress was charcoal grey. Adam looked more or less the same as he had on the night they'd met. He dressed simply and well: black jeans, a pale blue shirt. The bags under his eyes were more obvious, and the delicate purple tinge to the skin of their upper lids. Veins stood out on the backs of his hands. She thought that she could reach a hand out across the table and touch his chest – prod him in the way you prod beef to check where it falls on the scale between rare and over-done.

She scraped the tip of the blade of her knife across her plate. He removed the skin from his salmon and laid it like a caul on a side plate. Now the flesh of the fish glared up at them, as pink as the scar left by a burn. The venison came with a blackberry compote and slivers of strong Stilton. It was easy to talk to him, and he seemed to feel the same thing, whatever it was, something like a pre-existing connection.

'I'm an only child.'

She said, 'Me too.'

'Oh god.'

They were both drinking water. He ate with beautiful manners and little obvious enjoyment. It was intimidating. With a loaded fork on its way to his mouth he said, 'I do eat out a lot. It's my big expense.'

He worked at an online marketing agency in the centre. He did something technical there. It was nothing to do with clients.

'They keep me shut away. And then every so often something goes wrong and I have to

go to a meeting and dazzle people. I just batter them with technology. But if they have an opinion on something, if they've read about something or someone has told them the best way to do something – which is never, ever actually the best way – I just agree with them. Then I do whatever it was I was going to do anyway.'

Her cutlery felt heavy in her hands, but of course she couldn't put it down. There were spotlights in the ceiling and she felt uncomfortably hot. She imagined that she was a wax cast of herself. Droplets of melt running down her face.

He said, 'Look. I don't want to sound mad.'

'OK.'

'But I want to say this now, so it doesn't cause problems later.'

She thought that he was setting up a joke. But he drew himself upright in his chair in a way which told her that he was serious about something.

'I want to tell you that I believe in ghosts.'

She laughed. 'Really?'

'Really. Don't worry about laughing; people always laugh. And I know it sounds stupid. But I hope you can tell that I'm not stupid. I don't think you'd have come for dinner if you thought I was stupid.'

She nodded. What a thing to have to tell someone.

'But because I know it sounds stupid I like to get it out in the open as soon as I can. So you don't find out later, and lose all respect for me.'

Another waiter, a different one – the third or fourth who'd served them – suggested they might like to eat dessert. Adam asked for a coffee. Annie chose a chocolate mousse. The mousse came quickly and was too sweet. She offered him some and he used the sugar-spoon that'd come with his coffee to take a little and taste it.

'Have you ever seen a ghost?'

‘How it started was, I was living with my dad in Preston. I’d moved out a few years before and he’d bought a house. This was a year after the divorce. He was completely self-sufficient. So I’d moved out but I had to move back in – I wasn’t working. It was 2009. Then I got a job, the one I had before this one. But I stayed living with my dad for a while to save up.

'He was working in a big DIY store on the other side of the centre of Preston, on the trade counter, where they sell to builders. It was one of those jobs retired people get that seem like they'd be really depressing, but he loved it. The store was open early and then late, you know, to match builders’ hours. So he was doing early mornings and the late evenings, and the pattern of his shifts was weird – sometimes he’d have days and days off, and other times he’d be working all the time.

'One night I came back from work and he was upset. He was sat at the kitchen table; he’d been waiting for me to get home. He'd never complain about anything. He was the kind of person who’d be really cheery even when he had a hangover, you know. He only ever got angry about football.

'He looked sick more than anything – he looked really ill. And I said, What is it, Dad? And he said that he’d had a funny turn in the afternoon. He was sat down in the kitchen with a brew and the sugar-bowl in front of him with the spoon in it. I said, Oh, a funny turn? And he said that he’d had a shower when he got in from work, because he was planning on going out for an afternoon in the pub, and after it, when he was walking across the landing in a towel, going into his bedroom, he said that I was there. He said, You were going down the stairs fast. I saw the back of your head. You made me jump because I thought you were out. I dropped my towel. I said, what are you doing here, I thought you were out. I just felt awful all of a sudden.

'I said, I was out, Dad. I've been out all day. I haven't been here. Do you think someone came in the house?

'He said that he knew that I'd been out all day and he knew that no-one else had come in the house because he'd followed me down the stairs, because he said that he thought it was an emergency or something. But at the foot of the stairs he realised I wasn't there. And just like me he'd thought maybe someone had come in and he'd disturbed them, but he checked the front door and the back door and the windows and everything was locked.

'I thought he was fucking losing it. Like he might be about to have a stroke or he had a brain tumour or something. Because when you love someone you just go nuclear straight away, don't you? But I couldn't say any of that to him, so I said, Maybe it's stress? He said he wasn't stressed, he said he was happier than he'd been for years because I was back with him for a bit. I hugged him. We're not big huggers in my family.

'It kept happening. It wasn't always the same thing, but it was strange stuff. He'd tell me that he'd hear my voice upstairs when he was downstairs, like I was on the phone. He couldn't hear what I was saying, he could just hear the sound of me speaking. And he said that he'd come into rooms and the TV would be on, or the shower would be on. But if the TV was on, it'd be showing something I'd watch, like a film I'd watch or something. And if the shower was on then the radio would be on as well, and I always put the radio on when I have a shower.

'We were talking about it the next Sunday – I remember it was Sunday because we'd had a roast together, the two of us, he'd done a chicken and he always made his own Yorkshire puddings. We'd had a few beers. I don't know why I'm telling you this. Sorry.

'We'd eaten and all that, and broken the wishbone. And then I said, Isn't it funny that you only have these turns when I'm not in? It's the law of averages, he said, You're not in that often. And he said, I seem to have them after work. I said, Do you think it's work then? No, he said. He said, I've been thinking about it, and then he didn't say anything else. And I said, What have you been thinking about it? And he said, Well, it's always the same. Every time I get hit by this terrible, you know, like a wave or something. It runs all over me. Is it in your

head, I said, or is it more like on your skin?

‘He stopped talking a bit then. We went in the front room and put the TV on. Have you ever fainted?’

Although it was a lie, Annie said ‘Yes.’

‘He said it felt a little bit like you do before you faint.

‘Anyway, my mum had organised a party. This is when she still lived in Preston. I went because I thought it’d be a bit of fun. It was her and some women she worked with. She was a teacher. Some of her other friends were there as well, most of them were in their fifties like her, and some of them had known me since I was a kid, so they made a bit of a fuss out of me. She'd started having these parties when they were getting divorced, when she'd started renting her own house. It was always a good laugh, and I think she liked me being there. I didn't go every time. I went every so often.

'I didn’t tell her about my dad’s thing. I didn't think he'd want me to tell her anything about it and I didn't think she'd want to talk about him when she was meant to be having a good night. It’s not something you bring up, is it? She didn't live that far away from my dad's house, but they hardly ever saw each other. They didn't bump into each other in the street or anything. They had different routines.

'That night there was an interesting-looking woman there. Very gothy. She was younger than everyone else. She was the new drama teacher at my mum's school.

'I was chatting to her a bit about life-stuff. I was flirting with her, you know, or she was flirting with me. It was a bit of fun. She'd drunk a lot of wine. My mum was there, so it was a joke more-or-less, because we were flirting in a very over-the-top way right under her nose. I'd been talking a bit about living in an old house. My dad's house hadn’t been looked after before my dad had moved in, and he’d done it up loads before I moved there, but there was still damp in my bedroom and the roof was a state.

‘So I said, Yes, we’ve had a few problems. She said, You and your father. Some of my mum's friends thought it was funny that I was living with my dad again, and they kept saying we were two old blokes together. So she was taking the piss a bit. I said, Yes, I live with him. It was an awkward moment because I was in the middle of the room and every one was around us like an audience, and my mum was there. I didn't want it to become about my dad.

'She said, Is it haunted?

'I said, It might be, yeah. She said, Have you seen a ghost? And I said, I haven't seen anything. And my mum said, Has your dad been talking about ghosts again?

'I didn't know what she was on about. And she didn't want to say any more, so I left it. The drama teacher said, You should do an exorcism. You can lay spirits if you just ask them to leave. The books say you need to burn sage and stuff like that, but I know these people who used to have a poltergeist – they ran a hotel – and in the end they just asked it to leave.

‘I got back to mine-and-my-dad’s house at about half-eleven. My dad was sat in the kitchen and he was crying. I said, What’s to do? And he said, I’ve had a turn again. I said, When, and he said, About twenty minutes ago. I thought I saw you in the garden, through the window. It was so strange, the whole evening. Have you ever been in a car crash?’

‘I’ve been rear-ended,’ Annie said. Again, it was a lie.

‘It was like the feeling you have afterwards. So I got my dad to stand up, right, and we went around every room in the house together. He wasn't into it at first, he said it was ridiculous. But I made him say it with me. We said, Please leave. I said, Please stop upsetting my dad. Just leave him alone.

'When we were in the hallway, after we'd done everywhere, my dad passed out. He knocked into the telephone table and the telephone fell on to the ground. His head missed the radiator by about this much -’

He held his hands maybe twenty centimetres apart.

‘I picked him up and put him in the front room on the sofa and made him some sugary tea. After a while he opened his eyes and then, you know, I gave him some of the tea. He didn’t really say much. It was disappointing. I wanted him to say something. I wanted him to have seen something. He just looked very confused. And then he shut his eyes again for a while.

‘I smoked a couple of cigarettes. Then he opened his eyes again and said, I’ve got to go out. So we went out and walked around. We went down the main road, where everyone was smoking outside the nightclubs, and getting takeaways. We came back through this big park, which was totally empty. We weren't talking to each other, we were just walking around.

'So: I haven't seen a ghost, but I do believe in them.'

She took him to see Hamlet. They met at the cenotaph in front of circular Central Library. They walked around Central and the huge neo-Gothic Town Hall came into sight. They crossed the cobbles of Albert Square, passed the fountain and statues of people Annie did not recognise.

‘Do you know about the German markets?’

Annie said, ‘Sorry?’

‘The German markets. At Christmas. They set up a load of stalls here. Gifts, mulled wine. The stalls are faux-alpine little chalet things.’

‘I think I’ve heard about it. Is it good?’

‘It gets too busy. Just a press of people.’

They walked down Cross Street towards the Royal Exchange Theatre.

‘How much time do we have?’

She’d bought the tickets – she’d picked the play. There was an anxious note in his voice that she hadn’t expected. He didn’t like to be late.

‘Bags. Bags of time.’

In unison they apologised to a woman in a head-scarf who offered them an armful of Big Issue magazines. Buildings were being worked on; the scaffolding dripped rain-water and at ground level the struts were wrapped in bright orange protective padding. Two young boys came out of a supermarket swearing, and a metre-broad security guard in a dark blue uniform followed them slowly, frowning, saying something to himself.

When they reached the steps of the theatre Adam said, ‘I’ve got to smoke.’

‘I’ll meet you by the bar.'

She loved the strange theatre on sight. In the middle of the high, echoing old corn exchange building sat the self-contained performance space, a three-storey chamber like a chunk of deep-sea exploration equipment or an artificial heart. There were hundreds of people waiting for the play to begin, all talking to each other, laughing. She imagined Lorelei working on her project. A desk upstairs in her house in Chorlton. Lorelei sitting hunched over, one hand wrapped up in her hair, pulling it out in clumps. She bought a glass of white wine. The desk walked stiffly on its legs – it banged off door-frames and left dark scratches on the walls. In their seats in the dark they sat and watched the actors, who shouted in regional accents, bouncing Brummie and broad Yorkshire, and raced about. Their costumes implied both deep European history and a kind of vaguely contemporary or post-apocalyptic setting. The sound of a drum echoing outside the performance-space, in the larger emptiness of the Exchange building, represented the coming and going of Hamlet's father's ghost. After the performance, when Hamlet and almost everyone else was dead, they left the theatre and kissed for the first time by a cash machine. She led him to a taxi.

The driver had a skinhead and rolls of fat on the back of his neck. He looked the kind of man to have a cross of St George tattooed on him somewhere.

‘I’m not going through Rusholme. It’ll be impossible. The traffic. It'll be mad. They're all

out in their drug-dealer cars.'

The journey took longer than she thought it should have. They travelled along dark, winding residential roads she didn't recognise as rain spattered against the windows.

Adam followed her up the stairs. Through the drunk's front door came explosions, a helicopter's rotors chopping air. In a half-whisper he said, 'That's so loud.'

He sat on her bed and she stood in front of him for a moment and then pulled her dress up over her head and completely off. A little while later she opened her eyes and saw the ceiling. The main light was on, and the lamp. She could feel his beard on the sensitive skin of her buttocks. He pressed his tongue flat against the ridged ring of her anus. She was standing. He was squatting behind her, gripping her thighs for balance. Her knickers were down to her knees. When they were on the bed and he was on top of her, her hands running across his chest and his back, she realised that she was thirsty. He wanted to push her legs over her head or something. It was uncomfortable. It was fine. As soon as was decent she went naked into the cold kitchen and scooped water from the tap into her mouth with her hand. She had a rising feeling inside her that felt like it had grown out of the potential orgasm she'd only just missed. But it'd been there beforehand as well, a drone in the background which could be ignored until another sound arrived and harmonised.

When she came back to the bedroom he said, 'Can I kiss you again? Once?'

'OK.'

Then, 'I've really enjoyed this.'

He kissed like a teenager; it was full-on.

When he left the next day she sat on the sofa, which had slumped in on itself after years of being in the flat, years of arses, fat people and thin people, people who sat down all the time and people who rarely sat down. The heating system in her flat wouldn't work. It stubbornly refused to make hot water. In the end she had to boil a kettle just to wash-up. She

felt gusts of anxiety blow through her. She had to talk herself down; secretly you're on edge, she told herself. She thought that she'd been that way since long before she'd moved, and that although things seemed like they were going to be better in Manchester, the structures inside her hadn't changed yet – for this reason or that reason, or whatever.

He had a tiny studio apartment on the seventh floor of a block in Castlefield, between the Museum of Science and Industry and the Bridgewater Canal. There was no centre to the apartment building. Instead it opened up into a roofless space. There were broad decking walkways, wide staircases, raised concrete beds full of cacti. In the foyer were kidney-shaped pools of gravel and a strange steel bridge over a fake river made from blue glass beads. At ground level there was a social space for barbecues and polite parties and other activities which never took place among the tenants but must have lived vividly in the minds of the architects and investors when the building was being planned and built.

The traffic noise and the sound of other people walking the corridors, opening and shutting doors, made Annie feel like she was listening in on the city's conversation with itself. The morning after the first night she spent there, although it was cold and raining, she took her cup of coffee out onto the narrow balcony and looked over at the ridiculously high Hilton tower. Cars crawled the roads below, and she saw a train grinding effortfully along the raised railway into Deansgate station. Overall she was happy with the decision she'd made. What did she like about him? The way he hid annoyance or hurt. How carefully he picked his words until he forgot and started gabbing. His flat stomach, the trail of light hair leading from his shallow navel down to the base of his penis, the strong muscles flexing in his forearms

A pale pine desk took up a third of the floorspace in his bedroom. It was piled high with paper covered in his ugly handwriting, and splayed books. Some were obviously second-hand, others brand new, their covers glossy and the spines not yet thoroughly broken. She'd been

surprised by it the first time she saw it – in most other things he was so neat. But everyone had to have their own small messes, their hidden zones of untidiness. Here was one of his theories: the human body is a disturbing presence and it moves in novel ways, appearing and disappearing under the hands of a lover. Our movements become automatic in the way that a ghost's movements are automatic, more or less the performance of a loop, a re-enactment of the same movements towards the same conclusion.

Counter-case: the body under the hands of a lover is hyper-sensitive, and feels no longer like your own body which shits, is bathed, aches, sweats, is fed, dies. So in that way we're like ghosts. The orgasm is a paroxysm close to terror. A moment of experiencing yourself as another self, mirroring your partner or partners, themselves suddenly another other, not the person one has met and come to terms with. Everything returns. Life is the experience of everything returning to us, sometimes ironised, sometimes awful, sometimes meaningless, sometimes comforting. Art ditto – or it tries very strenuously to avoid being recognisable as an iteration of ongoing repetition; free-form, spiralling, improvisational – an attempt to run away from ghosts. That was Annie's gloss on what he'd told her, and what she'd read of his scattered notes. He didn't mind her reading them, he said. He didn't write them for any purpose.

What she didn't like about him was that he wasn't interested in news from overseas. If she mentioned something terrible happening somewhere, he'd shake his head and say, 'It's awful, isn't it?'

His notes made her think that perhaps she should write down her opinions. It would be like having a diary again. She'd tried to keep one as a teenager. She'd sat in the garden of her parents' house, holding pen to page after writing the date, not knowing where to start. She thought that she could buy a wooden box with a brass lock and a hinged lid with some design like intertwining ivy carved into it. Each day she could write a statement about the news on a slip of white paper, and put it in the box, and lock the box with a key.

She spoke to her parents on the telephone every other week, and kept the information she gave them general and positive. Sometimes there was a whistling noise on the line. They'd call her to let her know that they were free and then she'd ring them back on her mobile. She'd sit on a hard wooden chair at the kitchen table because the sofa didn't feel right for talking. She hadn't told them about Adam. Instead she used up time telling them how great it was to live in a city where you could find almost any kind of ingredient, where you could see plantain and scotch bonnets in the supermarkets, not that she ever bought them. And even when they told her that it was pretty much the same in the little town where they lived – everything was available everywhere, really – she still felt that she'd made her point. Manchester had been a good idea and they had nothing to worry about.

Fin drove slowly through Fallowfield in the van, the window down, the radio up, a cigarette in his mouth. He looked at the girls. He said, 'Look at those fucking tits.'

He said, 'I wouldn't kick her out of bed.'

He said, 'Get in the van, love.'

He said all of this quietly, to himself. It was a performance for no audience. There was no consequence. It didn't take him long to find the right address and as if fated there was a parking space right in front of the house. He sat in the van for a little while with his smartphone, looking at the odds on various football matches although it was too early in the day to place his bets. The wind blew a plastic bag down the road. A gaggle of student boys walked past, all skinny jeans, plaid shirts, thick jackets, sparse beards. Finley got out of the van, slid back the side door with a thunk and took out his heavy toolbox. He locked the van and walked to the front door of Annie's house.

After a couple of seconds of trying to work out which doorbell was for which flat he gave in and pressed both. The drunk took a while to answer. When she opened the door to

him, he smelled a wave of booze coming off her that took him aback. She was small and looked at him with dark and bloodshot eyes, the eyes of a strange animal, an armadillo or a porcupine.

'Hello,' he said. 'The lettings agent sent me round. They say that you say that there's something up with your electrics?'

It was going to be a shit job. He knew it. She led him up the stairs, chatting half-sense.

'They rang me and said you were going to come and you could have a look at everything. Because it keeps happening, exactly the same as it was happening before. Are you the one who came last time? That was you, wasn't it?'

He shook his head. Her voice was ancient. She'd been alive in Manchester, drinking, floating around the streets, since the Industrial Revolution. Since the Irish slums. Since Peterloo.

'This is my first time here, love.'

She was wearing a long raincoat the colour of moss although it was hot in the house, in the corridor. The heating was on. He could smell sweat through the booze-cloud. Her grey hair was tucked up in a woollen hat. Her key was in a pocket – which pocket – she patted herself down until she found it. He followed her in. It was a bomb site. They went into the living room. What surprised him was that someone had been here before and yet no-one had thought to warn him. There were bin bags and carrier bags everywhere, bulging or flaccid, there were month's worth of newspapers spread out and ripped up. There were ashtrays everywhere, stolen from pubs, full. Here and there beneath the litter were patches of carpet, streaked grey with ash and mottled with stains from years of various spills. It was full of everything, of rubbish and thick atmosphere, neglect, madness, sadness, a long life lived freely and badly.

'So what's the problem then? It's all a bit vague.'

'The lights go out. Sometimes I turn them on and they turn off straight away. Sometimes I

turn them on and they're on for a while and then they go out. Or sometimes they turn on by themselves. They're mad, they just do whatever.'

She waved at the nearest light-switch. She went into the kitchen and he heard a can opening. She came back. It was super strength. She drank two big mouthfuls.

She said, 'Help yourself to whatever you want.'

She walked across the rubbish and sat down on an armchair in the corner of the living room. Fin walked around the flat. He came back to her and said, 'Does everything in your kitchen work? All your appliances?'

'Yes. There's a girl upstairs,' she said. 'She watches me. She looks at me. She's probably at work now. She works.'

She sat and drank. Her chair was next to the window and she looked out at the street. He went around and flicked on every light, to see if he could get the fault to show itself. He went back to her.

'How often does it happen?'

She said, 'I don't know – I'm not sure, you know. It's every so often. It's enough for it to be annoying. What state's her flat in up there? I bet it's full right up. You should give her a knock. I don't think she's in.'

The lights went out. They came back on. He spent half an hour trying to work it out. He checked everything he thought it could be. Nothing seemed broken, but still the lights did whatever they wanted. In order to have done something he changed a few bulbs. He knew he wouldn't be coming back. It was something in the guts of the house, the walls, something small, something which would take billable time. The lettings agent must've known what a state the flat was in, and that plenty of work would have to be done when the old woman died or was taken away somewhere, and so there was no point fixing anything. He wondered who paid her bills. He wondered who knew that she was there. He switched the lights off to make

sure that there was no way they could flicker while he was talking and prove him a liar.

'That should've done it, I think. But ring the lettings agent if there are any problems, and they'll send someone out again.'

She had finished drinking and looked close to being asleep. It was so hot – he was sweating. It was like being inside a compost heap.

'Thank you very much. It's so nice of you. It was good of you to come. You didn't have to.'

When he shut the front door behind him and breathed fresh, real air, he felt a great sense of relief. He wanted a pint. He leaned against the van and smoked a cigarette. He called the office.

'It needs longer than I can give it.'

There were always more jobs.

'You could've told me she's a pisshead. It was weird. We should tell someone about it. We should tell social services or something. We should tell her landlord.'

They told her that she was the landlord; she owned the property, leased the top flat, and the service charge she paid the letting agent covered the upkeep of her own flat as well. He finished his cigarette. When he turned and looked back at the house he saw her staring out of the window at him, her face small and sunken in the corner of the window. Even when he was streets away, idling slowly in the van at a junction, waiting to turn right onto Wilmslow Road, eyeing up the girls again, he couldn't shake it. It put a dampener on the day. So he made himself think about travelling. He could imagine myself somewhere sunny, really. Or rather he could imagine himself drunk on a beach. But he could also imagine himself living in Berlin or somewhere. It's not difficult to imagine yourself somewhere. But he couldn't imagine doing everything between being in Manchester and being in those places. On that beach. In that Berlin.

The radio told him about a two-car accident on the M60. He drove quickly to the next job, where he couldn't concentrate, and made a number of small, silly mistakes. The tenants were a young Spanish couple who spoke broken English and made him a mug of very strong coffee. His fuck-ups were fine; they had no idea what he was doing or how he was meant to be doing it.

She walked from the tram to the office. As always the wind made wavelets on the water. MediaCity, the theatre, the mall, the Imperial War Museum; the buildings were beautiful. How many hours it must've taken to build them. How many people must've worked on them. A gull came down out of the sky and landed on the concrete near her, paced around for a few seconds then took off again.

Darren had a purple and yellow bruise around his right eye. There was blood in the white because a vessel had burst.

'It hurts like fuck,' he said. 'Like this whole bit of my face has been pushed into my head.'

Primo leaned back in his chair, smoothed his white shirt across his taut stomach, and laughed.

'It was beautiful!'

Laura was fascinated.

'Can you see out of it?'

He looked at her, carefully expressionless.

'What? Is that a stupid question?'

'I can see out of it.'

It was the football team again. Annie had an image of where they played: an astroturf pitch, floodlit, flanked by other pitches all separated by low walls, and around the outer

boundary a high green metal fence. The thwack of boots hitting footballs, the whinge of footballs travelling through the air. Voices, high and echoing, drifted from game to game, and no-one listened to anything anyone said.

‘Was it a fight? Did you hit them back?’

Laura looked aggrieved on his behalf. Darren shook his head. Primo said, ‘He couldn’t.’

‘I couldn’t.’

‘Why?’

‘It was Jim Tuttle. It was an accident.’

Annie said, ‘Was it really?’

‘Of course it was. I ran into his elbow. He didn’t do it on purpose.’

‘Did you see stars?’

‘No, Laura. I cried though, just out of this eye. It wouldn’t stop watering.’

Primo said, ‘Show them what he bought you.’

Darren opened a drawer and pulled out a metallic purple gift-bag. He took a half-litre bottle of Jack Daniels out of it. Solemnly they passed it around the table. No-one knew what to say about it. Annie hefted its weight. She read the label. She passed it to Laura, who tipped it one way and then the other, watching the level of the liquid shift.

‘He came over this morning, before you guys were in. I don’t drink.’

After lunch Annie spent twenty minutes plaiting Laura’s hair. Laura asked her out of the blue and she couldn't think of a polite way to avoid doing it. Hijacked, she stood behind Laura’s office chair. Laura pumped the handle beneath her seat to raise herself up. Her hair was thick and well conditioned. Annie tried her best. Primo was interested.

He said, ‘I think you’ve started too high-up.’

Darren was concentrating on his monitor. He moved his mouse. He tapped his keys. His damaged eye and the colours across his cheekbone no longer surprised Annie. Kalvis drifted

past like an unmoored tug-boat. He looked them over, Darren with his bruise, Annie methodically passing cords of hair from one hand to the other.

He said, 'Stop fucking about.'

That evening she went to Chorlton, where Lorelei lived. There were trendy bars and restaurants and delis. In Manchester the area was a byword for a kind of boho lifestyle, for hipsterish or hippyish people, for fixed gear bikes and pugs and veganism. There were bars and restaurants everywhere: it was like entering a principality, a tiny neutral state propped up by its banking or gambling industry, or deep reserves of fossil fuels. Lorelei's street was in the centre, near a busy junction called Four Banks because it had a building society on each corner.

Lorelei's front door was red, and the paint was peeling. Annie knocked on and Lorelei answered and came out onto the doorstep in her socked feet and hugged Annie. She felt dollish, thin. The door swung shut behind her with a click.

She said, 'Shit, I've locked my keys inside...'

'Shut up. You make the same joke every time.'

They went in. They went through to the kitchen. The house was surprisingly big – it had two large bedrooms, a living room, a kitchen, and access to a little yard at the back of the building. The house was owned by her grandmother, who was in a home now, and the family as a whole had agreed that Lorelei might as well live there, and pay a token amount every month, to make sure the place didn't fall apart. Sooner or later it'd be sold out from under her.

'You should hear the things Adam says about Chorlton.'

'It's great. Honestly, you should move here. There's a great butchers and fishmongers. It's like a little bit of London. They show classic films in the church.'

Lorelei sounded like a hanging judge. She put the kettle on and said, 'Make the brews, will you?'

Then she went upstairs. Annie found cups and teabags. A toilet flushed. Lorelei came back down with a fresh pack of cigarettes. It was a soft pack, not a stiff cardboard box. The livery was white and sky-blue.

Annie said, ‘Can I have a look?’

The warning messages were written in Cyrillic.

‘I’ve got cartons of these, if you want some.’

‘Oh, no thanks,’ said Annie.

Lorelei knew what she wanted to talk about. She asked her a series of basic questions about Adam, what they were doing, how Annie felt. They worked together, agreeing with each other and explaining each other's points, digging through words together, until eventually Annie was ready to say what she wanted to.

'I don't know if it's what I'm after or not what I'm after. It's a thing now. I'm not sure how I've ended up in it.'

'Well, that's alright.'

Lorelei was sitting cross-legged on the floor. She said it helped her back and her hips, which hurt a lot of the time, although Annie couldn't work out how the hard wood could help.

'What's the sex like?'

'It's good. It's OK. It's sex. He's very enthusiastic. When he kisses me it's a bit porny. Like he doesn't know how. But it's just like anyone, you know. I have to keep telling him to slow down. Breathe.'

'Has he been with many people before you? Maybe it's just high spirits.'

'He's been with enough people. I don't think he's really had many relationships. I think he's had a few short ones. But he's quite adventurous. He wants to do it outside. Which is not my thing. When he's drunk he gets enthusiastic.'

She waited a little while, and then told her that he believed in ghosts. Lorelei screwed up

her mouth. She waved her hands at her face like she was in a horror film.

‘How did you find out? Was it like that fairytale? I can’t think of what it’s called. Bluebeard. Was it like that?’

The tsunami that caused the disaster at the Fukushima nuclear power plant destroyed miles and miles of houses. Many people were killed and the landscape was scrubbed. Wreckage, structures blasted meaningless. In the aftermath people returned, to view the places where they had lived. There were many reports of sightings of ghosts. A department at the local university began a research project into these ghost sightings, there were so many. That was the scale of the phenomenon. Adam though it was wonderful. It was a validation. He'd explained some of this to Annie. She explained some of it to Lorelei.

They went for a drink in a pub by the Oxford Road surface car park, the waste ground which had once been the footprint of the BBC Manchester building. Adam needed a pint desperately.

'I'm spitting feathers. Work was a cunt.'

They stood in the deep crowd around the bar.

'What went wrong?'

'Nothing.'

He ordered his ale, her wine, and paid the Scottish barmaid who reminded Annie of someone she'd studied with, a girl from Hull who had disappeared in the second year. She had dropped out of university without telling anyone. The real world had swallowed her back up. The resemblance was so strong that she wondered if they were the same girl, if the accent was assumed, and now she was living a fake life here in Manchester. She wanted to look the girl straight in the face and she if she flinched or bolted out from behind the bar and ran out of the door.

'Nothing specific. That's it. Nothing. Just a long day of nothing. Like, little things happen

and I sort them out, and I'm on top of every email. No-one can complain about me.'

He sipped beer.

'I don't know what you mean, then. I don't think I get it.'

He looked at her oddly.

'Sorry, I just don't understand what you're saying.'

She did – or she could've, if she'd been bothered. But she'd had her own day. She was as tired as him. She sipped her wine. Now they'd moved a little distance away from the bar and were wedged in uncomfortably between the quiz machine and the door to the gents. Annie had to keep squeezing up against him so people could pass her. It was hot and damp from bodies and the rain which had soaked into peoples' clothes and was now steaming off them, and the floorboards were slippery with spilled lager. A plump Chinese girl leaned against the quiz machine. Annie recognised the look on her face: she'd have rather been anywhere else in the world. Adam was silent; he was checking the football results on his phone.

A little old bloke came out of the crowd, making a bee-line for the Chinese girl. His cheeks were sunken and his shirt was half-tucked. His spectacles were slipping down his nose. He stopped in front of the girl, who tried to ignore him. It was impossible, so she smiled at him glassily, as if partially anaesthetised by the booze he was exhaling.

He said, 'Are you Chinese?'

She didn't say anything.

'Does that sound rude? I didn't mean it to. Are you Chinese?'

She said, 'Yes.'

'Wonderful.'

Annie braced herself. But he didn't do anything terrible. He started to speak in Mandarin. The Chinese girl was shocked, and then she laughed, and he laughed too. They nattered away at each other. He waved his arms around, describing something – telling some story or other

about Manchester – until he noticed Annie staring. He glanced at her. She smiled and turned back to Adam.

'Do you want another?'

He shook his head. 'I want to go home and sit down. Forever. I want to go on holiday.'

She turned back. The man was pointing at her and telling the girl something.

As they walked to his building, winding through side streets off Deansgate, they passed The Volunteer. It was one of the pubs the natives drank in, a place which had as yet managed to avoid gentrification or rehabilitation or redevelopment. People sang karaoke in there in the afternoons. Carling and Stella on tap; nothing from local breweries, or breweries in America, which was the fashion. They were holding hands. His skin was dry and cool, the bones that made his hand were big, his fingers were thick. Her hand felt delicate in his grasp. A middle-aged man staggered out of The Volunteer's narrow front door at the head of a little group. He had a generous double-chin and a XXL belly that strained against his white t-shirt. As if to relieve that strain he reached down and took hold of the t-shirt's hem. With some difficult, raising his arms and twisting one way and then the other, he pulled it over his head and off.

He rolled his hips. His tits swung. The men who'd followed him out of the pub stood around him in a circle, holding their half-drunk pints. He draped the t-shirt over one his friends' shoulders and drummed on his belly with the flats of his hands. He did it so hard that he left scarlet prints on his white skin. Like Annie and Adam people stopped to watch, or else glanced over and carried on walking, writing the whole thing off as just drunkenness, Manchester, someone else's business. The fat man and his witnesses were in the road, blocking it; a taxi had to stop for them and the driver stared darkly out through his windscreen.

He shouted, 'I told you! I told you!'

Something had been settled. His circle closed in on him, patting him on the back, laughing, calling him a cunt. These were nicotine-lacquered men. Years of happy drinking and

heavy smoking had made all their voices alike, buggered rasps, tarry. One of them laughed until he coughed. One of them lit a fag. The fat man slapped himself again and laughed, looking from face to face – from his friends to Annie to Adam to another and then another bystander – as if everyone naturally understood why he had done what he had done. His friends steered him back into the pub. He entered with his arms above his head, a world champion. The taxi moved off again. Annie and Adam carried on walking.

Mid-morning the next day – Saturday – she caught a bus back from Adam's side of the city to her own. They had sex quickly before she left and she held that knowledge like a pearl, a secret, unknown to the people around her. The bus was overtaken by two ambulances on Portland Street and on Oxford Road under the railway bridge a red-faced, bullet-headed man got on, stood at the front, and said that all of his money had been stolen and he needed anything, anything, so he could get the train home to London to see his sick daughter. No-one believed him. They ignored him. Annie looked out of the window at the people at the bus stop looking in to see what was happening. The driver kicked him off. He shook his head, wronged, struck dumb by their cruelty. He climbed off the bus to wait at the stop for the next.

In Fallowfield before going back to her flat she wandered down Wilmslow Road. Children trotted in shorts and socks to football or hockey at the University sports centre, or ghosted around hungover. She felt a little grizzled with booze herself; she'd drunk a bottle and a half of red wine the night before. There was a little black mongrel dog wandering about. Reflexively she whistled to it. It came to her side and looked up at her. It had a beard and eyebrows that jerked expressively as it weighed her up. It had a collar and seemingly no interest in running into the road, so she thought it must've got out for a bit and would go back wherever it'd come from, to whomever it belonged, when it was ready.

'Morning.'

It looked at her.

'I'm going to Sainsbury's.'

It yawned, its tongue very pink and long. Its breath was a plume of steam in the air. They walked together. It waited with her at traffic lights for the green man. When they reached Sainsbury's it seemed to understand that it wasn't allowed to follow her in. The supermarket had been built where before there had been a train station, long ago disconnected from the lines and orphaned. The old station house remained and had been incorporated into the new building. It was a Sainsbury's cafe now, and above the door it said Fallowfield Station. She didn't stroke the dog or scratch it behind the ear, although she thought of doing so. It seemed funnier to politely say goodbye to it.

She leaned over and said, 'Have a good day.'

Its eyebrows danced. She was in the busy supermarket for a quarter of an hour. She paid for her croissants, her magazine, her milk. She bought beef brisket, lamb breast, chicken livers, because they were close to out-of-date and the prices had been reduced. She had space in her freezer; she felt safer when she had a stock of meat. As she walked from the tills back to the supermarket's wide front door she could hear barking. It was trouble. The dog had waited for her, and now it had gone mad, seemingly, and it was nipping at the heels of an eleven- or twelve-year-old girl, biting at her trainers. She was screaming and holding her head-scarf to stop it coming loose as she jumped and hopped to avoid the dog. The higher she lifted her feet the angrier the dog became. People stood around watching – no-one knew what to do because the dog didn't belong to anyone. Annie stepped forward and kicked it in the ribs. She stamped at it. It fucked off down the street, running from the pavement onto the road and back again. As it went it looked back over its shoulder at her. The girl snivelled.

'It was just a dog,' Annie said. 'Just a little one. Next time, kick it.'

Adam's finger was through one of the loops of the knotted handles of a carrier bag. They were

in the subterranean car park underneath his apartment building. The extinguished headlights of the cars looked like the closed eyes of sleeping frogs. There was traffic on the road above their heads, a half-hearted rumble which mixed with the hum of the refrigeration unit of the apartment building's air-conditioning system. His little black hatchback was parked in the corner furthest from the lift. Each space had a number, and each number was painted in white on the pitted and oil-stained concrete between the lines which marked it out. This way there could be no confusion, and no-one could ever accidentally park somewhere they shouldn't. His space was number 3.

Down here was also where the rubbish was stored, in the cold, which kept the stink down a little, and people piled black bags against the blue and orange wheelie bins. Adam put his carrier bag not on the top of the pile but on the concrete next to it, a little away from the rest, expanding the footprint of the mound. Annie nudged it with the sharp toe of her black boot. It touched the pile and so became part of the slope.

When they got onto the ring-road they sat in the slow lane and Adam fiddled with the radio, which lost stations faster than it should. He had to struggle to pull them back again out of the static. The radio was also plagued by traffic updates which cut in at a song's peak, or effaced important information when the radio was tuned to the news. It was late in the afternoon and the traffic was starting to get heavy, but from the ring-road to the southbound M6 motorway it was flowing. Then the digital displays above the road said, QUEUE, 40, and Adam had to slow the car. It was the eve of his twenty-eighth birthday and they were driving for hours, for hours and hours, from Manchester down to Wiltshire, to a town called Royal Wootton Bassett. It was the first time they'd been away together. Annie had wrapped herself in a dark shawl like it was a blanket, she was freezing cold, she was a refugee.

They were going to stay at a hotel called The Spread Eagle. Annie had woken up at six because she'd forgotten to turn off her work alarm. She'd killed the phone and opened her

curtains. The quality of the light then, its reticent blue-greyness, had continued through the day. They crawled along in the queue for twenty minutes. They were having a funny kind of half-argument about his council tax. He'd forgotten about it and now the council were threatening to take him to court.

'I'll pay it,' he said. 'But I'm going to make them sweat. I'm going to do it on the last possible day.'

He turned the air conditioning on and then off.

'Right. I'm bored. I think we should smoke in the car.'

They wound the windows down, got their cigarettes out. They lit up. Annie's cigarette tasted acrid and made her stomach feel tight. She looked at the blasted road-side. Beyond the grimy verge thin trees bent in the wind. The traffic shuffled itself into the inside lane of the motorway and crawled in single-file past the wreck. A little hatchback like Adam's had worked its way beneath a lorry and imploded. The undercarriage of the lorry was broken up. There was a wound in the covering of the trailer and Annie could see the dark space inside. The crash, the way the hatchback was wedged, had lifted the lorry's wheels off the ground on one side. The tarmac was covered with broken glass and white foam. There were no ambulances now, just police officers waving the traffic along. Whoever had been hurt or killed had already been ferried away. After the wreck the pace picked up again and soon they were driving at real speed. Adam rattled on about gigs he'd been to in Manchester. He liked to go to the Academy because the sound was better there, he said, and sometimes to the Bridgewater Hall. He said he'd take her to see something, if they could find something they both agreed on. He didn't like the little venues in the centre, the bars, the toilet circuit. The sound there was always far too loud.

'You come out with tinnitus. And I'm glad that there's stuff going on, it's really good, but a lot of the music is just shit. It's self-indulgent. And it's so loud, in these places with low

ceilings. It’s like being in a pressure cooker. And everyone acts like they’ve invented music, like they’re the first bands ever. I used to love it a few years ago.’

‘You’re getting old.’

He reached across and slapped her leg lightly.

Annie said, ‘I’ve never really liked going to gigs. If I’m going to listen to music I’d rather just sit by myself.’

He started to talk about football matches. Then they talked about the psychology of crowds, and about belonging, and peer pressure, and the riots a few years previously when a Miss Selfridges on Market Street had been set on fire and Sports Direct had been looted.

Annie said, ‘I didn’t realise it was bad in Manchester.’

‘It wasn’t bad. It was just kids. I thought it was funny. All these kids and lads out of the rough bits came into the centre and everyone else emptied out. They occupied it. It was weird seeing the centre on TV, like a ghost town, with all these kids in hoodies and caps charging around. I was in The Deaf Institute, off Oxford Road, and the bar staff locked all the doors because they’d heard the riot was coming our way. I was waiting for them to start throwing stuff through the windows. *Assault on Precinct 13*. But nothing happened.

'Then there were load of photos in the paper the next day that these kids had taken of themselves, and put them up on the internet, of them posing with the trainers they’d stolen. Who can blame them. There was one lad, and I can’t remember if this was in Manchester or London or Birmingham or wherever, but there was a photograph of him with a big sack of rice that he’d stolen. He was smiling about it – he knew it was absurd. I thought, good on you. These are kids who think that no-one in the country gives a shit about them. I think that’s what they think anyway. I don’t know what they think. No-one in the country gives a shit about anyone, that’s the thing. Except social workers and people who volunteer for things. But in general, in terms of systems, the country doesn’t care about lads on estates who are shit at

school and look rough-as-fuck and steal trainers.'

When Adam had first mentioned Royal Wootton Bassett, Annie had a sense of deja vu, or that some other type or form of faulty recollection was occurring. Her first thought was that it was a fictional place, the setting for a popular television programme or a novel by Austen, Dickens, Hardy, some other ancient author she hadn't read since she'd left education. But then it had come back to her in a trickle of images, crowds dressed in black, cellophane cones of flowers, weeping women, Union flags, run-off from the reservoir of general knowledge.

Around the turn of the decade, the bodies of soldiers and airmen killed in Iraq and Afghanistan were flown back to mother England in Hercules aeroplanes which landed at an airbase, RAF Lyneham. Hearses took the coffins from the airbase to the coroner's office in Oxford. The route took them through Wootton Bassett. And slowly the townspeople began to mark the passing of these slow motorcades, the passing of lives, the passing of the nation from the certainties of the past into the uncertainties of the future. They lined the town's high street. All other traffic was suspended. The press arrived, so the nation could look at itself, so photographers on step-ladders and television cameras controlled by quiet, technically minded men and women could capture the cortège as it passed, or focus on individual faces in the solemn audience. Silence was the thing – silence was the defining thing. Silence as the hearses passed. Silence sweeping over the town like a great wall of blue-white snow as the hearses crested the hill and came into sight at the foot of the high-street. Silence for a moment after they had passed. Of course that silence was only a lack of speech: the world was still completely noisy with the engines of the hearses, the cut-off, wonky songs of birds, the wind distractedly whistling to itself, blood pounding in the eardrums.

When he'd told her about the ghost walk she'd said, 'Why not Manchester? There must be something like that?'

'Because I want to get away. I want to go somewhere I haven't been. I just found it on the internet.'

Maybe he felt trapped. It seemed a bit desperate. Their hotel was called The Spread Eagle. It was a large old country pub with a long conservatory restaurant stuck on its side. They checked into their room and investigated it, tried the television, plugged their phones in to charge, opened up the window to let air in. She put the shower on to see what it was like. The water just dribbled out. The bin was full.

'They haven't emptied the bin!'

He was in the bathroom. Through the door he shouted, 'Is there anything good in it?'

They went and sat in the little snug off the side of the hotel bar. A fire burned in the fireplace. Every so often a log banged and the fireguard caught embers. They drank Prosecco first, cold and tinny, then heavy ales. It seemed that the hotel was empty apart from them. Low ceilings and dark-wood furniture made the room feel smaller than it was. The whole place had been designed for people built on some other scale. Annie looked down at her her black jeans. She stretched her right leg so the cartilage in her knee made a snapping sound. Adam didn't say anything. His eyes were closed and his head lolled back against the wall. She got up and went to look at the horse-brasses hung on the walls, and the old sepia photographs. Men in Edwardian clothes standing in a field around a huge plough, men sitting up on the beams of a half-built house, men with black dogs and guns beside a heap of dead pheasants, a woman in a white apron kneeling, half turned away from the camera, scrubbing a doorstep.

Adam said, 'Do you ever get flashes of light, kind of, when you're tired? In the corners of your eyes? I think I need another drink.'

When he came back from the bar he was carrying a tray with two pints on it and a bag of pork scratchings.

He opened the bag and offered her one, which she took. The fat was soft and unctuous,

the skin hard as a seashell.

Adam said, ‘These taste like gunpowder, I always think. How I imagine gunpowder tastes.’

‘They’re delicious. I had a bag once, when I was down in Brighton. I'd gone by myself, just for a couple of nights. I was having a pint on the Sunday. I pulled one out of the packet and it had a nipple on it.’

‘Did you eat it?’

‘Of course.’

She hadn’t eaten it. She’d put it in the ashtray on the table – she’d been sitting outside the pub, in the sun. She'd gone down to meet someone, a man; it hadn't worked. On Brighton beach she'd found it hard to walk on the pebbles. Other people would come, she’d thought, and find the curl of old skin, in the ash, among the butts. It’d give them something to talk about.

Gradually the hotel bar filled up with walkers and locals and other guests. At eight-thirty they went out into the car park. The leader of the ghost walk called them over. He was a cavalier old man with a white goatee and the build and posture of a dedicated hiker. The hood of his dark green waterproof jacket flapped in the breeze. The floodlights mounted on the corners of the hotel cast their orange light over everything, and deep shadows formed like pools beneath the parked cars.

‘Hi!’ said the guide. ‘It’s great weather. It’s unbelievable weather for the time of year. We had to abandon it last week because it was really tipping it down.’

The rest of the group were middle-aged. There were nine of them, all wearing fleeces, hiking boots. Annie tugged the neck of her sweater up so that for a moment her chin was tucked into it, pulled her hands back into the sleeves of her jacket. Adam was smiling, a little flushed in the cheeks from drink.

‘It’s going to be great,’ he said. ‘Just don’t draw attention to us.’

It made her laugh. The group looked at them warily. They set off. The guide spoke about the deep history of the town, the thousands of years people had lived there. He finished with the repatriation ceremonies.

'The Royal British Legion,' he said, 'our veterans, they started it. But we had all kinds coming. We had the families, of course. But we had bikers as well, big bikers. It goes to show.'

The route was circular, and would take them around the outskirts of the town, on small lanes and roads, and would end on the high street. The guide's preamble took them perhaps a mile – he answered questions from the group, and made small talk and small jokes and left short periods of silence. Finally he drew them to a halt. When he clicked on his torch, Annie jumped. The beam played across the field that the lane bordered. The grass was tall and the torchlight made it silver. It swayed in the wind. A rabbit froze – another showed its white rear as it moved off.

'Has anyone heard of Shuck?'

Annie looked at Adam. Whatever it was, he'd know. But he smiled at her and did nothing else; he didn't want to interrupt. He had a kind of fundamental passivity or inertia or fear-of-action which disguised itself as politeness. It annoyed Annie. It angered her. To use a phrase she'd learned from her father, it boiled her piss. No-one in the group volunteered anything. If Lorelei had been there, Annie thought, she'd have known. The guide smiled and then spoke, his voice low and intimate. His schtick was over-rehearsed and over-the-top. Perhaps that staginess and amateurishness was vital to the performance. By admitting that what he was doing was fake he proved himself authentic.

'There are recordings of sightings of Shuck across England, dating over centuries. In remote places, in lonely places, but in busy Cathedral towns as well. Royal Wootton Bassett is only one of the hundreds of places where Shuck has appeared.

'Shuck is a black dog. We're standing on Black Dog Road. Do I need to explain how it got its name? Usually when we visit haunted places we want to see a ghost. I'm assuming that's why you're all here tonight. And who knows – perhaps later on we will. But here on Black Dog Road, we *don't* want to see Shuck.'

He let it hang in the air. Some night-time insect buzzed in her ear and she waved it away. The group stood in rapt attention. The men had their arms folded over their chests. The women smiled, unmoving.

'The only people who see Shuck are those who are soon to die.'

No dog appeared in the darkness, and no-one in the group flinched as if they'd seen a dog visible only to them. But they all looked, half-certain they'd see the silver-coins of Shuck's eyes reflecting at them in the depths of the field, half-certain that they were soon to die. The guide clicked off the torch. The tension broke and they laughed. Adam put an arm around her waist and she looked at him, but he was looking at the guide, mesmerised, as if the guide was a novel piece of machinery, the workings of a watch. They walked on and for a short while the guide became a kind of university lecturer. He shifted into a different register, easier and more tentative, as if he was sharing real secrets with them.

'You might think of *The Hound of the Baskervilles* – before, of course, Sherlock Holmes works out that the spectral hound is actually flesh and blood. Conan Doyle was playing on this folk-belief, this folklore about Shuck. We might also think about the dog as an image of depression; Winston Churchill famously described his misery as a black dog. The use of the black dog as the symbol for that kind of existential fear and fatalism, the undoing of all our efforts, pre-dates Churchill – he learned it from his Nanny. Samuel Johnson uses the phrase in his letters in the 18th century. The image occurs naturally to us. It goes back and back. The Middle Ages. Roman times.

'I wonder if it's because of how close we are and have always been to dogs; we think of

them so affectionately, we feel as if we know them and they know us and we can understand each other, they're so familiar to us. But we know they're dangerous. That's why the country pricks up its ears whenever a child gets bitten. When a bulldog goes mad.'

At the Bottle Inn they stopped and the guide made them stand in a narrow line along the pavement, because the Inn was on the corner of a road and he was afraid a car might come around the bend too fast and plough into them. They looked in through the windows of the Inn and saw big-bellied men against the bar, saw the barmaid's bored look and her tightly scraped-back ponytail, saw that night's specials chalked up on a patch of wall which had been covered with blackboard paint. If anyone inside knew that they had an audience, that they were being watched by people out in the dark, they gave no sign.

The guide said, 'He wears period clothing.'

Everyone nodded, and so Annie imagined a fussy little ghost in regency clothes, in stockings, a tail-coat, tight breeches, yellow teeth. Why not go the whole hog? A white wig as well, of course, completely ludicrous.

'Guests in the Inn – there are rooms on the upper floor – have witnessed him. The first sighting was in 1945. The most recent was 2007. There's a small writing desk in a nook or a niche in the long corridor which runs the length of the Inn. Each sighting has been made by someone walking along that corridor late at night. When they reach the niche or the nook they come upon him. Each witness is consistent about the fact that this man in period clothing can't be seen from the end of the corridor, but instead seems to appear as we reach him, as we draw abreast with the table. There he is, writing something or other.

'There's been a single sighting of the apparition in the bar area, on New Year's Eve 1997. According to two witnesses, he walked across the bar after almost all the revellers had left – there had been a lock-in, apparently, so it was very late. He looked around in a confused fashion, and then he vanished.'

Adam squeezed Annie's cold hand. She whispered, 'It's interesting. It's weird.'

That was the best she had to offer. More walking in the dark.

The Hart Inn had recently been refurbished. Now it had a tacky chain-pub interior that jarred with its thatched roof. Here an unseen presence blew on people's hair to make it move, pushed them, twisted their ears; it was a flirtatious spirit. They had a ten-minute toilet break. Annie eyed the bar, but Adam was deep in conversation with the guide, and it would've been wrong to drink alone, hurriedly, while the rest of the tour stood and watched her. So in silence she waited for Adam to finish his conversation, which was hushed and intense. A sense, a pre-taste of the thought had been gathering in her mind over the past weeks, but as she watched him leaning into the guide and the guide leaning away from him, and as she cast her eyes across the cluster of people who were on the ghost walk, these harmless, pleasant people, it found a true and direct articulation as clear as a voice speaking from somewhere else directly into her skull.

From the Hart they walked in a long loop of steeply sloping back-lanes and footpaths as if the guide was leading them down to a low point in the earth like a mouth in the ground or a sink-hole. All the while he was talking about Napoleonic soldiers and the Tommies of World Wars One and Two, and how they'd been seen by their widows, walking into houses as if arriving back for good, or standing by the side of the marital bed in the middle of the night, grinning. He shone his torch on a stile and they climbed over it and into a field. The moon came out from behind the clouds and made it quite light, so they could see the mud ahead of them. Annie's trainers sank into it.

'What were you talking about?'

Adam shook his head and spoke quietly. He didn't want to upset the other members of the tour.

'He doesn't believe any of it. He told me he's interested in ghost stories – you know, M.R.

James, that kind of thing. Which is great, obviously, I love M.R. James. Everyone loves M. R. James. But ghosts aren't literary things. There's a lot of literature about ghosts, but they're not *from* literature. He's a mature student at the University down here. He does this because he's a local history buff. It's a performance.'

Then Adam slipped and his feet nearly went out from under him. His arms swung and swam in the air and he caught hold of her arm through luck and jerked her hard..

One of the other people on the tour called back to them, 'Are you OK?'

Laughing, he said, 'Yes, we're fine. I nearly went over! I nearly landed on my arse!'

The shortcut across the field took them to a main road. The guide brought them up the steep hill which became the high street; they were following the route of the repatriation processions. The high street was wide, with estate agents and a charity shop, building societies and jewellers either side. It loomed up to their left, bizarre in the orange glow of the lampposts. The high-street was busy with cars. Townspeople passed the group, eyeing them suspiciously, or ducked into off-licences or takeaways ahead of them as if hiding. Adam pointed out something ahead: a strange, incongruous building set on ten-foot stone pillars. The space underneath it was open. It was as if someone had elevated a bungalow.

They reached it. The guide said, 'This is the town hall museum. I spend a lot of my time here.'

It was half-timbered in the Tudor style, and had a short staircase leading up to its door. They stood in underneath the building, below its belly, in the void between the pillars, where there was a community notice board and next to that a small and ancient cannon. It had belonged to the French, or something like that. The guide spieled out a history of the architectural curio, but Annie didn't listen. She'd given up. The final point of the ghost tour was a pub called The Crossed Swords. It had a large black door which was propped open with a cannon ball. The pub had been built on top of, had incorporated, an earlier medieval

structure.

'If you were to strip away the plaster and fibreboard walls,' said the guide, 'you'd find the original wattle and daub.'

Now Annie could feel waves of cold dislike coming off Adam. If he'd been a different kind of person he might have heckled the guide, and denounced him in front of the group as a fraud, a dangerous rationalist. The guide was smiling, playing his smile over the group as earlier he'd played the beam of his torch over the ground. If he noticed Adam's bad vibes he gave no sign. Probably, Annie thought, he'd met his fair share of nutters in his time as a ghost tour guide, a mature student, a human being.

'This is my favourite part of the tour. We've had some genuinely spooky experiences doing this. If you'll follow me to the rear of the building...'

He took them down an alleyway to the back of the pub. As the ghost tour turned the corner a security light came on. The outlets from the air-con and the kitchen extractor fans blew the smell of cooking oil into the hidden yard. The group bunched together. Before the guide could speak, someone shouted. Where the empty kegs were stacked, between two orange wheelie bins, they'd disturbed a couple. They were young, a man and a woman, and they were fucking face-to-face against the wall.

Adam turned and said, 'Oh God.'

Annie laughed.

The woman was very thin. She pulled her skirt down over thighs that looked like an old woman's or a pre-pubescent girl's. The security light cut out and in the brief span before someone moved and it came on again the man's cock and balls were a pale shock in the dark. Annie brought a hand to her mouth, like she was trying to hide her teeth, and she wished she could explain that her laughter wasn't cruel – that she thought that this was wonderful. They'd never know what the guide had wanted them to see. Adam looked around with big owlish

eyes.

‘Fuck off, will you?’ the young man shouted. He was gym-bulked, furious, and he had a tattoo on his neck of a date and a name.

Annie took a step back, put her hands up.

‘Sorry. We’re going. We're sorry.’

They had time for a couple of drinks at The Spread Eagle before the bell rang for last orders.

She said, ‘I’m sure I’ve been bitten by something. I’m a magnet for them.’

‘It’s your blood.’

‘I’m O negative. You can give it to babies.’

‘I didn’t know that.’

She said, ‘Why would you?’

‘Do you donate?’

‘No. I should. Do you?’

‘No.’

Then she mentioned the couple behind The Crossed Swords again and they laughed, and re-told each other the story. If they hadn't driven out of Manchester and down the country they never would've seen that. But still, after the fact, she was sad and frustrated. Her time had been wasted. Ghosts didn't exist. He told her that his dad was a one for moods. Sudden patches of utter darkness and a silence which were very childish, or at least sounded childish when Adam explained them to her; his father before the divorce sitting on a chair in the kitchen and refusing to answer either Adam's mother or Adam himself. Staring ahead. Shifting the focus of his stare if they moved in front of him to make him look at them. A man acting as if his family could be willed in and out of existence. She hadn't met his father or mother yet, although sometimes Adam suggested it. Probably she never would – the rest of her life would

play out without her ever coming into contact with them.

They went to their room. Annie lay on the bed. Adam took his shoes off and sat next to her. He turned and came down towards her, his face getting bigger and bigger until they were kissing. They had sex without speaking. Every light was on in the room. The toilet door was open and the light in there was on as well. The television was showing a documentary about big ships and the old northern shipyards. She came twice, the first time surprised by it even though she'd worked towards it, the second time feeling like an old pro, a deft hand, a master.

As always when he came Adam said, 'Fuck,' in a breathy voice, like someone putting down a heavy object after carrying it a short distance. Then he lay next to her with his chest moving up and down and his eyes closed. She reached out, encircled his wrist with her thumb and forefinger and felt for his pulse.

The wind was cold but half-hearted. Lorelei was in a small crowd of people smoking and drinking outside Black Monk's, a bar on Oxford Road. It was near the barn-like Academy and the strange futuristic castle of Contact theatre. It was a stretch where the spaces between buildings opened up a little before the campus drag, and even Oxford Road itself widened like a river. Black Monk's was a long squat two-storey building. It was cool, and too busy.

There were people from Lorelei's work, people she knew from other places. The people she knew knew people as well. She was one part of a large organism which had evolved to spend money on cocktails and bottled beer. They were young women with severe bobs, young men with top-knots. They were men in their late thirties and early forties in black t-shirts strained by nascent bellies, and women of the same age with heavy-framed spectacles. They were nervous art students. They were guitarists and drummers in unsigned bands who played badly attended gigs. She was talking to a girl called Thana, whose temples were covered in little pimples which might've been speckled on with a sponge. She had sleepy eyes and her

chin came to a sharp point. They were in and out of the bar all night. She was enjoying the music; if Annie had been there she could've told her that it was pre-punk. She did her best to mix but found that she was stuck with Thana. Occasionally Thana said, ‘Are you OK? You don't have to spend all night with me, honestly. I just don't really know anyone. Do you want a drink?’

And Lorelei would say that yes, she was OK, and yes, she did want a drink. They talked about Manchester. They talked about public transport and parking. They talked about museums and galleries. They talked about places to eat. Every couple of minutes Thana said something with which Lorelei disagreed, or vice-versa. She drank quickly.

‘Are you OK?’

‘I need to keep an eye on my drinking. I only came out for one.’

She'd been in the library again, among the children and the mature students, reading about amputees, doodling miniature bone saws and champagne bottles across a plain white sheet of printer paper. On a whim she told Thana what she was working on.

'Oh, wow. Are you studying for something?' Are you postgrad?'

'No. It just interests me.'

'I was a charity collector once, right. A door-to-door collector. I only did it for two days.'

This was the most animated Thana had been all evening.

'One of the guys who was training us was this Scouser, obviously, with gel in his hair, and he wanted us to lie through our teeth. I was in my first year of uni, very young, we were all students. Most of them were shy boys. So they were just lapping it up, because this guy was a complete alpha male. I wish I could remember his name. He was a lech, and he looked like a footballer or something. You know when you see footballers you've never heard of on the news and they've been accused of rape?'

Lorelei did know. They were inside now, crushed up at one end of the bar, near the DJ

booth, and the music was so loud that she had to lean in to hear Thana's words. So their heads were close together that they looked like life-long friends.

'We got the train out to some suburb of Manchester where no-one ever goes, and he gave us this pep talk at the station, and then he led us around the streets, knocking on doors. These old grannies would answer them, or mums with kids hanging off them, and we'd have to do this thing called *neg handling*, which means that you don't give up until they've given you five consecutive negative responses. It was horrible. But he was a demon at it. He could just bulldoze them, they were all women, he just didn't give a fuck about what they were saying. If a bloke answered the door he'd give it about 30 seconds and then move on.

'We were collecting for a charity for disabled children, right, and what he'd do is, he'd wait until they'd said no two or three times, and then he'd start talking about his son, who was completely imaginary, who had never existed, but he'd say, My son is disabled, blah blah blah, this cause is very close to my heart, and he'd say, My son had his leg amputated, my son has a prosthesis leg.

'Which isn't right, is it? You have a prosthe-*tic* leg, not a prosthe-*sis* leg. It's like saying, it's like saying, I shave with an electrics razor. And if your son did have a prosthe-*tic* leg, you'd fucking know how to pronounce it, wouldn't you? You'd know everything about prosthetics. So it was a total giveaway. But no-one ever called him out on it. No-one ever seemed to notice. I'd stand there next to him and listen to him say it, cringing.'

'Is that why you only lasted two days?'

'No, I quit on the second day because they put me with one of the student boys and made us go around in a pair, and I swear he was retarded. Actually had a piece of his brain missing or something. We were in a nicer bit of the neighbourhood, a new-build estate, all families, and there was this woman on her front lawn with her kids playing, these two little toddlers, and this boy I was with marched across the lawn at her and said, Hello Madam. How would

you like it if one of your children woke up and they were paralysed. I just thought, I can't hack this, it's blackmail, it's miserable. So I rang the head office on my mobile and quit in the street, and I gave the retarded boy my tabard and my clipboard and my photo ID and went back to the train station.'

Later on, in the hour between midnight and one, a man in a long black coat limped into the bar. He zigged and zagged between couples and groups, talking to them, patting people on the shoulder. As he moved from group to group the glum bar-staff tracked him; one spotted him and told another, who told another. Whatever he said it made people shake their heads.

Then he turned and saw Lorelei, who hadn't noticed him. He touched her on the shoulder.

‘I know you,’ he said, and smiled. ‘Would you like to buy some cigarettes?’

He waved a hand to indicate that they weren’t the best cigarettes, but they were certainly smokeable. He was her connection. His beard grew almost all the way up to his eyes. Thana looked at him as if he was dog shit.

‘Cheap.’

Up close he seemed eager to leave. He shifted from one foot to the other awkwardly. He stank of weed and his eyes were puffy and red from it. His long black coat was stained and plucked.

Lorelei said, ‘I bought two cartons the other week. Outside The Salutation, behind the student halls. I'm still smoking them.’

‘Smoke faster!'

She laughed. Soon the cigarette man was arguing with a bouncer. He wasn’t as tall as the cigarette man but he was broader, bald, and had only very fair, almost invisible eyebrows. In a sing-song way, like the bouncer was an upset child, the cigarette man said, ‘Come on, it’s fine. You know it’s fine.’

Lorelei, echoing the cigarette man, said, ‘It’s fine.’

‘I know Marcus. I know your boss. He’ll tell you it’s fine.’

Thana said, ‘I think he’s in trouble now.’

The bouncer was talking quietly to the cigarette man, saying something that they couldn’t hear. The bouncer put a hand on the cigarette man’s arm.

‘You don’t need to touch me,’ the cigarette man said. ‘I’ll go.’

The bouncer said, 'Out. Out.’

‘You can’t touch me.’

His black coat came open and underneath it Lorelei saw a football shirt. It was light blue – she didn’t know the team. The bouncer pushed the cigarette man towards the door. He turned and pushed back. The bouncer grabbed him and swung him into Thana, who fell into a man nearby, who caught her, one arm around her waist and the other across her breasts. A circle of people opened up around immediately. Someone had selected 'Smokestack Lightning' on the little red jukebox. The cigarette man tried to push the bouncer but the bouncer had put his shoulder into the cigarette man’s body to muscle him out. The cigarette man set his legs and stood solid for a second but then the bouncer somehow hooked a hand behind a knee. He jerked up and they twisted and fell back. They came down. The cigarette man hit his head on the floor; the bouncer was on top of him. Lorelei stood in the middle of it all, untouched, drink in hand.

Thana shrieked. Someone said, ‘Woah, woah, woah.’

On the ground the cigarette man had the bouncer by the shoulder. A couple of men pulled the bouncer up and away. Then Thana had a hand on the bouncer’s chest, trying to stop him getting at the cigarette man, who was still on the ground. The cigarette man held his open hands out in front of him.

He said, ‘No trouble.’

Lorelei said, ‘You can’t touch him. You can’t touch him. We’re all watching you.’

The bar manager appeared along with the two other bouncers. The manager was a Northern Irish woman with a jutting underbite and the knees ripped out of her jeans. The bouncers spoke calm words to their colleague and the manager tried to talk to Thana, who argued with fractured, drunk logic.

‘No,’ she shouted, ‘No, right, there’s been a complete over-reaction, and it’s assault. None of this would've happened if...’

The cigarette man was trying to get up. He turned over and crawled and began to lift himself. The distance between him and what he’d lost became greater. It lay on the floor like wreckage from a broken-up aeroplane: his prosthetic leg. The bouncers waited for him to re-attach it. He had to undo his jeans and pull them down. Lorelei looked away, instinctively, and looked into the faces of the people staring past her at the cigarette man. When he was ready for them the bouncers helped him up and frog-marched him to the door. He disappeared off into the night. Everyone was talking, excited, and the music banged away to itself, the ghost at the feast. Lorelei wanted to go. Something remarkable had happened and there was no point drinking any more. What was at home? Nothing much. She could've sent Annie a message on her phone, something about the fight, the leg, what it might mean, how she felt. But Annie tired her out, especially over the phone. She found Annie hard work.

When Lorelei looked at Thana, who was talking to other people now, explaining how the fight had started – it hadn't even been a fight – she wondered if there was any difference between them at all, whether there was any difference between anyone. It was fine, really, it was fine. There was nothing wrong with disliking someone. Thana laughed at something someone had said. The bar sucked Thana away from her, into a new knot of people, and for an awful second Lorelei wondered if all night Thana had been humouring her, desperate to get away but too polite to cut her loose.

At half-seven in the evening Annie's phone rang and stopped. When she checked the call-history there was nothing logged. A little later it did it again, while she was in the bathroom and her phone was on the arm of the sofa; she could hear it cycling through its ringtone, the volume rising, but it stopped before she could get to it. Again nothing was logged. In the middle of the night it came alive on her bedside table. It had a voice-operated search function. You were meant to say, OK. Then it would know that it had to listen to you. It woke her up talking to itself; it said, 'I'm sorry. If you said something, I didn't understand it. Please try again.'

She said, 'Shut up, phone.'

In the morning on the tram she held it tightly, hoping that it wasn't broken. She didn't want to have to pay for a new phone, or go through the rigmarole of sorting one out. But it seemed fine, as if it had been only a passing phase, a brief fever, a seizure.

When she got into the office she saw that she had been summoned by email to Kalvis's office. She walked over and knocked on the frame of his door, which was open. He looked up, smiled when he saw it was her.

‘Will you come down for a coffee with me?’

She said, 'I'd love to.'

They descended from MediTract into the mall, and walked past window displays of beachwear and 3D TVs to a chain cafe, where he bought her a cappuccino. It was the first thing she saw when she looked at the menu-board on the wall above the rattling silver espresso machines. They took a table with a view down onto the thoroughfare on the mall’s ground floor, where shoppers wandered in small groups and a man dressed as a clown kicked his heels outside a toyshop.

‘Right,’ said Kalvis, pouring sugar into his cup. ‘This is more or less your review.’

‘OK.’

‘So. How are we doing?’

It took a moment for her mind to adjust. The spinnerets of language began to grind.

‘I think it’s going well. I think the whole team is doing well. I think I’m working well with Darren and Primo and Laura. They’re all great. The workload is – it’s fine. There’s always something to do, but we’re on top of it. I’m not aware of any issues in that regard. I suppose I wonder if there’s more I could be doing.’

He said, ‘Exactly. That’s what I want to talk to you about.’

She wondered if she was going to catch a bollocking. Then from the way he touched his cup so it shifted a little on the saucer she realised that it was the opposite.

‘We’re keen for you to start moving up. I want us to talk about how it can happen. If you want it to. You’ve been great. Head-down, no nonsense, punctual, no time wasted, no mess, no drama. A lot of people come in and they either float about or they’re nipping at the heels all the time, trying to get on when they haven’t proved they can do the job they’ve got. I have a lot of confidence in you – that you could be very good for the department. How does it sound?’

Down below the clown had wizarded a little plastic hand-pump from up his sleeve. He took a black balloon and made a dog. Its neck was too long, and when he looked around there was no-one nearby he could give it to.

‘Great. It sounds great.’

He explained. New responsibilities would come her way. She could begin to pass certain tasks – boring tasks – on to Laura. She wouldn’t be Laura's superior, necessarily, nor her manager. She'd be allowed to use Laura as a resource. She wondered if Laura would mind, and if she would mind if Laura minded. In turn she was to become a resource herself, sopping up the overspill from Kalvis’s workload. And if it went well, once she reached the end of her first year there, there’d be a change in title and a step up the pay-scale.

In the office Primo asked her how it'd gone.

'Good. Interesting. I haven't been fired.'

That afternoon Annie ate an apple. It was mealy, supermarket fruit, from somewhere far overseas. It seemed that everyone in the office was on the telephone. People to the left of her and the right of her, before her and behind her, all speaking loudly and clearly into their phones. When she'd eaten half the apple she felt something wrong in her mouth, hard at the back, a chip of ice or stone against her palate. She stood up and walked quickly to the bathroom with a hand cupped under her chin. In the bathroom she spat mush into her palm. She poked through it until she found the shard of tooth. She darted her tongue around her mouth. She went back into the office. No-one turned to look at her, and when she was in her seat she realised that no-one had noticed her going. She put the chunk of enamel on the desk in front of her, took up her desk phone like everyone else, and called the dentist.

They managed to fit her in a few days later.

She lay in the chair.

'How did this happen?'

The dentist sat next to her with his elbows on his knees, his hands clasped in front of him. His hair still hung in his face, his dark Mediterranean colouring looked washed-out in the surgery's fluorescent lights. He was the manager of a losing football team, in his dug-out, in despair.

'I don't know. Honestly. I was just eating.'

'Was there pain?'

'No, not at all. I just noticed it in my mouth. I almost swallowed it.'

He scratched his wrist. 'You would've passed it after a few days. I'll take a look now.'

She opened her mouth as wide as she could. It was late in the afternoon, she'd been at

work and cut out early. She was in her work clothes, simple white shirt, simple black trousers, simple black court shoes. She tried to keep her tongue away from his tools.

‘OK. You might need a crown. I mean, I can crown it for you if you want me to. But I think that at the moment you could wait.’

‘If it doesn’t need to be done, I’d rather not have it.’

He shrugged.

‘It’s your choice. I’m surprised by this happening. I mean your teeth, last time I saw them, were absolutely fine. Have you been grinding them?’

‘No.’

‘People grind them in their sleep. Do you wake up with a sore face?’

He put his hand around his jaw to show her where he meant.

When she was at home, she wondered if she should ask Adam. Surely he would’ve told her if he’d noticed her grinding her teeth in the night. She imagined the sound of it – marbles crushed together. Adam, awake in the night, pale in the dark, listening. He would’ve told her.

Adam's father's best friend died when Adam was six. He would've been in his early forties. It was a heart attack. Adam had only one memory of him. A camping trip; a dog had gone wild in the middle of the campsite, and there was a whole family, mother, father, daughters, sons, chasing after it. It was a big dog, a Labrador or something that size, chocolate brown. At first it had a red towel in its mouth, but then it dropped it and ran in circles around the tents, impossible to catch, the family swearing along after it, exasperated. Little Adam watched this from a foldable chair outside his parents' tent; they were off somewhere, doing the washing up at the crooked sinks outside the toilet-block, or talking to the campsite's owner about good pubs in the area.

His father's best friend and his wife, a lovely, hippyish woman, were looking after Adam.

They sat on the ground next to his chair, drinking brown glass bottles of beer, laughing and laughing at the dog and the family, really laughing loudly. The dog barked as if it was laughing back at them.

At the funeral Adam did his best to do what his parents wanted him to do; to be quiet and well behaved, to be sorry and sad. Long into adulthood he remembered sitting in a church, all the grown-ups crying around him. He remembered the change which had come over the new widow. From his seat on the pew between his mother and his father he could see the back of her head jerking as she wept, as if it was sprung or motorised. This is how Adam learned that death makes no sense.

The second death in Adam's life was a strange death; he didn't know the person who had died, but still knew about their death and thought often about their death. This was the death of a little boy, the son of a couple who lived on the same street as Adam and his parents, and who came to be their close friends. Their son had died before Adam's birth. They were brave, generous people who fostered many children during Adam's childhood. Sometimes his parents took him around to their house to play with the foster kids, challenging kids, kids with huge problems, each of them requiring lifetimes of love. He did his best to get along with them and not gawp at them or examine them. His parents had explained to him that what these children needed most was to be reminded that they were normal, just children, just like him. They had games nights, played monopoly or cards, the front room warm and aromatic from the squat square wood-burning stove that sat in the corner like a combination safe.

There were photographs of their son in the house, unremarked upon. Did the foster children know? How could they stop themselves from asking about him? It could've been any one of them. This was the first time Adam understood that he could die, that he might die.

Perhaps the foster children did ask about Peter – perhaps they waited until they were alone with their foster parents, after quiet, shy young Adam had been taken home. This is how

Adam learned that a death has an afterlife, and really never stops happening.

When Adam was nineteen, the boy's father was diagnosed. Adam only saw him two or three times before he died. He came home from university and went around to their house to drink tea with them; he and his father moved a wood-pile in their back garden, sorting small logs for the stove and stacking fresh wood for the next year. His painkillers were strong and he didn't speak much, but then he'd never been voluble. He had played the guitar and sung sometimes at parties, that's what Adam remembered most. He had often sung a song called *When an Old Cricketer leaves the Pitch.*.

When he died Adam's father said, 'I shouldn't have had to lose two best friends. I've had two best friends and I've lost them both.'

At the funeral, Adam watched his father. The casket was woven from wicker. At the end of the ceremony everyone walked to the front of the chapel, formed a queue, and when it was their turn they placed their hands on the casket and said a goodbye, or said nothing but stood there silently, thinking whatever it was they had to think. When it was Adam's turn he tried his best to send love into the coffin, to send love somewhere, to do something with love. This is how Adam learned that death is always unfair.

Adam's grandfather – his father's father – died a couple of years later. He had been unwell in various ways, and Parkinson's had started to move him away into a new territory. In the end it was pneumonia, which happens often for the elderly. This was after Adam's parents had divorced, and he was worried. But his father held up. His mother came to the funeral. That was right, it was the right thing to do, and she hugged his father once and then busied herself talking to people she hadn't seen for years, real old northerners from the town she and her ex-husband had grown up in. During the funeral service Adam found that he was furious. He had to rub and rub at cuff of his shirt-sleeve to control himself. He wanted to stand up and say something.

The vicar said the things that vicars say, all of which rang false to Adam, although later he wondered who he thought he was to deny the truth of the vicar's version of his grandfather's life. He didn't know who his father's parents *really* were, as people, as human beings in their own right, rather than simple precursors of his own vital existence. After the funeral there was a wake of sorts at the village hall, a one-storey building with plastic chairs of the same colour and design as those at his secondary school. His grandmother had done her crying, and sat, frail, as people came up to her in dribs and drabs, in twos and threes, to share their condolences. His father was talking to an old school friend who had stayed in the village all his life, and ran the little shop-cum-post office. His mother was over-seeing the buffet, passing out paper plates and plastic forks. Eventually his grandmother was unattended, and without allowing himself time to think he went over to her.

She looked at him.

He said, 'Have you had a good day?'

This is how Adam learned that death strikes us stupid.

His kitchen was well equipped. His non-stick pans and super-sharp day-glo ceramic knives had hardly been used. It was sad that he didn't like to cook. Annie liked the knives especially, and as she walked to the sink with the one she'd used, grease from the raw chicken smeared up its blade, she briefly imagined jabbing it into someone's stomach. Not seriously, of course, not really, in this world. When the rice was on she went over to his desk.

She picked up a sheet of paper covered with his handwriting. She read: ...history is not a part of that person, tho it affects them. It isn't alive but it affects them. So personal history is a ghost. Events which were originally inconsequential, or at least benign, are revivified, and start haunting, causing problems, making some places impassable and some things impossible. So a person becomes unable to drive their car, for example, or finds that now they're attracted

to a person they wouldn't otherwise be attracted to, or that they're the victim of a new desire to eat compulsively, or that they have a long-term stomach complaint. So history like a ghost doesn't exist but touches us and causes physical symptoms. Bumps in the night. Rattling chains. The face in the mirror. The cold spot.

The shower was still on, and his wind-up waterproof radio was chatting away loudly. Another piece of paper. She read: Sex is another something automatic – automatic movements and the replaying of stored memories or some attempt at accessing or dubbing over the tape of those memories. Note that it occurs in dark rooms or, unexpectedly, with someone you hardly know, in the full light of day, exactly like a haunting. The shower stopped. She moved back to the hob, scraped and scraped at the base of the pan with the edge of a wooden spatula to try to free what had burned. He came into the kitchen with a towel around his waist, dropped it. She laughed at him, and threatened to empty the rice pan over him. She picked it up and went as if to do it and a little boiling water slopped out and when it hit the floor it missed his bare foot by a couple of inches and splashed droplets onto his skin. He backed away, grimacing, and moved nude toward the balcony as if he had business with the city. But it was a fake-out and he turned back.

He said, 'I've got a lot of energy.'

Oldham Street: a narrow road where second-hand clothes shops and record stores marked the beginning of the Northern Quarter. The buildings were run-down and everything was grotty and cool, Annie thought, definitely cool, although whether that coolness was a good thing or a bad thing or a neutral thing – a truth – she was unsure. On Oldham Street you could learn everything essential about the city, its heart and face, its laugh and sneer.

'Where are we going?'

He said, 'I want to have a look at the vintage shop up here.'

He bought an old peacoat with brass buttons. They wandered towards a bar on Edge

Street. She stopped to look at a poster taped to a lamppost. The rain had made the ink run disastrously, and now the poster showed only a couple of blobs of pastel colour. Adam in his peacoat turned back to look at her, his hand moving up to his beard to rub it. He seemed air-dropped in, a spy from a country where they had an academic understanding of early twenty-first century dress, idiom, poise. They went to a bar near the gay village. The light in the ladies' was broken, the floor wet with pissy water which had leaked from behind a blocked toilet, and out in the smoking area the table-tops were deeply marked with nonsensical graffiti. There were tap-flies in the air and Adam swatted at them, tutting. They went outside and found a table in the smoking-area.

That's where Lorelei met them. There was something in the air that made all three of them want to get drunk. They said funny things; they made each other laugh. Adam slapped the tabletop with his hand to punctuate his jokes and soon Lorelei and then Annie started mimicking him. They were pissed. Adam had gone red in the cheeks and he mixed up the letters of his words. Lorelei pointed it out each time. They went outside to smoke. They debated moving on to somewhere else but instead decided to go to the nearest Tesco - it was before eleven, so it would still be serving – and buy booze, and take it back to Lorelei's, and drink it.

'And,' Lorelei said, 'if we decide we want to go out again, we can walk up to Four Banks. A couple of places around there are open late. That'll be fun, actually. You should see Chorlton late at night. Everyone's destroyed drunk, everyone, from little eighteen-year-olds to, you know, managing directors. Headmistresses.'

Once they were in her house, Lorelei stood in the centre of her front room and waved a carton of cigarettes over her head.

She shouted, 'Who wants to smoke?'

Adam mixed drinks in the kitchen. He muddled vodka and ice and mint in a stainless

steel shaker. The sound of it jumping up and down in his hands was like a tiny mining machine eating earth. He struck the shaker against the edge of the worktop to loosen its lid and dumped the cocktail into mismatched glasses. He brought them through to the sitting room. They topped the drinks off with lemonade. Annie realised that she was also starting to misspeak, to spoonerise. Adam had infected her. Soon it'd be hiccups. She sat on the sofa. She could smell Lorelei's sweet perfume like lilies, the delicate cumin and vinegar of Adam's fresh sweat. She thought she should stand up and put an arm around Adam, or make some other gesture of ownership, maybe; that would be right, wouldn't it? But she didn't. He went to the shelves beside Lorelei's small television and took down a DVD case. He put it on the table, then took a plump baggie of cocaine from a pocket.

'Look!' he said. 'Look what I've got!'

He dumped a little out, and chopped it with the edge of his debit card pushed it into lines. He offered one to Lorelei.

Lorelei said, 'No, give it to Annie.'

It was a test. She snorted the line through the same rolled note Adam had used. She became aware of the back of her throat, and sipped the cocktail. It had been years since she'd taken anything – she'd done MDMA twice at university and hadn't liked it. She'd chewed the inside of her mouth, felt terrible for days.

She said, 'Can I have a look at it?'

He handed her the bag and squeezed it gently between her fingers.

Lorelei said, 'These cigarettes are fucked. They taste like paint.'

Then she said. 'Adam, you'll like this. There was a haunted tree on the back fields behind my house when I was a teenager. It was when I was at secondary school. A boy hung himself from it. I can't remember why. There was some reason. His parents had kicked him out of his house, or he'd left and they were trying to get him to come back.

‘A dog walker found him. I didn’t know this boy at all – but then the tree was haunted, obviously, and if we were out at night someone would dare you to run down to the tree and back, or lads would say they’d camped under it. Which they might have done, actually; there were always loads of empty cans and burned patches where they’d had fires around the tree. There was a bronze plaque screwed to the trunk with his name on it, and a date. And I knew one girl who lost her virginity at the tree, actually, in the summer. Her boyfriend was older than us – he was at college.’

'How was it haunted?'

'Because the lad had hung himself.'

'No, I mean, did people just say that it was haunted, or did people see things there? Did people hear things?'

The coke had hit them. They were both running on at the mouth, speaking fast and freely.

'No, of course not. It was just... we just said it was haunted.'

Annie said, 'It sounds like the kind of place that should be haunted.'

Adam flicked the rim of his glass with a fingernail.

'One of the theories, right, is that you have to be on a certain level of emotional resonance to see ghosts. You have to be keyed in. That's why a lot of people can go to haunted places, places where there have been independent reports, you know, places where no-one has any reason to fake it, and completely separate people who've never met each other report the same thing happening, report seeing something. But other people can go to these places and not see anything. Because they're not emotionally keyed in. So that tree, right, I bet if someone from his family went there again, they might see something. Or one of his teachers or something. Or someone who had lost a relative of their own, someone whose son had killed themselves as well.'

Annie said, 'Why?'

'You know that if you smile, it makes you feel happier?'

'OK.'

'It's something like that. There's a connection between your body and your emotions, isn't there? So this theory assumes that hauntings are constant, right. If a place is haunted then it's constantly haunted and if people don't see the ghost it's not because the haunting isn't occurring, it's because the person doesn't have the capability to see it. The theory also assumes that people aren't split into two discrete groups – those who can see ghosts and those who can't see ghosts – instead, people can move between those two states. The emotional thing, right, being keyed in, that's something you feel, some way you feel. Your own bereavement or whatever. And that affects you physically, and does something to your ability to perceive which means that whereas before you wouldn't have seen the haunting, now you can. In the same way that if you make yourself smile, you feel happy. But in reverse.'

Lorelei said, 'As in, if you feel sad you frown?'

He shook his head. They drank. The coke had given Annie a hard, sharp feeling, a kind of sterile pleasure.

Lorelei said, 'What do you think they would've seen?'

He held his hands wide open.

By quarter to four in the morning Adam was drunker than Annie had ever seen him. He got up, went into the kitchen and span a plate out of the back door like it was a Frisbee. It smashed against the high wall of the little yard. On his way back into the sitting room he barged into the dining table and knocked a bottle onto the floorboards. It span there and beer foamed out of it.

Annie said, ‘For fuck’s sake, Adam.’

She pushed past him as he stood, affronted, looking down at the mess he’d made. She got a tea-towel and mopped up. Lorelei lolled on the sofa. When Annie had finished cleaning up

his mess, Adam came up behind her and took her around the waist, and slowly shifted his grip on her until her breasts rested on his forearms. He kissed at her hair, trying to find the nape of her neck, a place she did not particularly like to be kissed.

'Get off.'

'I think,' he said, 'I think we should do something.'

'Get off.'

Lorelei said, 'Stop man-handling her.'

He let her go. He took a step back, so he was in the centre of the room, so he could see them both. Annie turned around to glare at him.

'Look, we're friends. Let's all sleep together. Let's go upstairs together and get in bed. Why shouldn't we?'

Lorelei laughed. Annie said, 'Adam.'

Lorelei said, 'I don't think you're reading the room very well.'

'Come on. Let's do it. It'll be a story. It'll be something we can tell people in the future, that we did it. We're all adults.'

Lorelei leaned forward over the DVD case to cut coke into thick lines with the photocard that she used to work the turnstiles at Manchester University library. The baggie was nearly empty now. It was the last of it. Adam knelt before her, rolled-up note in hand, and snorted. He stood back up and sniffed a couple of times, and tilted his head back. Then he shook it from side to side. He paced around the room, trying to convince them to go to bed with him, and then trying to convince them that he was joking. His breathing was quick and high pitched. He opened and closed his hands.

He said, ‘My fingers have gone numb.’

Then he said, ‘It’s not good.’

Suddenly Lorelei stood up and went over to him, and took him into her arms as best she

could. She eased him down onto the floor. Annie went into the hallway and took his peacoat down from its hook, folded it, and came back to place it under Adam's head.

'Too much.'

Lorelei bent over him, hands on her knees.

'I've had more than you, and seriously, I'm fine. I think you're having a panic attack.'

His arms curled up so his fists were near his collarbone. The bodies of people who have been burned to death assume the same position, like boxers with the guard up. He was crying.

'Has he had one before?'

Annie laughed.

'I've got no idea. He's never said anything about it.'

Lorelei said, 'Adam, have you had a panic attack before?'

His breathing was still too fast, his eyes too wide.

'I don't think there's any point asking him.'

'I think I'm dying. I feel like I'm dying.'

Annie picked up her bag. It was a little black clutch with her purse and her phone and her keys in it.

She shut the front door behind her. She walked quickly down Lorelei's road. She turned left, right. She reached the supermarket by Chorlton's tram stop. There was a stretch of busy bars opposite, and the sound of people talking as they smoked on the pavement and on smoking-area benches was very loud. To prove that she'd made the right decision a black cab idled up to her, its orange light glowing, ready for a new fare. She got in.

'Fallowfield, please. I'll tell you where to go when we get there.'

The driver said, 'Good night?'

'Not really.'

'That's a shame.'

A police car blocked the road ahead. Blue lights strobed. A policeman waved them off down a side-street – a policewoman unspooled incident tape – an ambulance was at the curb. They took the diversion and soon enough were back on Wilbraham Road, the main corridor leading from Chorlton to Fallowfield. Her phone rang but she ignored it. The back of her throat was sore and she sniffed and thought that she'd never take cocaine again. There was no point. His mad father, she thought. His way of ignoring everything, of not seeing what was in front of him. For all these reasons.

The cabbie said, 'Have you ever heard the phrase, A.C.A.B? All coppers are bastards?'

He was middle-aged, Asian, fat in the face and with a curve to his mouth which promised good humour. His accent was deep northern.

'No.'

'Yeah,' he said, 'It's a thing, a phrase. You see the initials sometimes, A.C.A.B. My son is seventeen and he goes skateboarding, you know, and he says some of his friends spray-paint it up. Well, I think it shouldn't be A.C.A.B, it should be, A.B.A.B. All bastards are bastards. Because some police are alright. I've met dickheads in my time, believe me. But some of them are alright.'

'That's good. That's sensible.'

He took her home. It was so early in the morning, or late in the evening, it was such a dead time, that there was hardly anyone about. Cars sped past them along the empty roads. She saw a few pedestrians on the pavements. Walking home, she thought, or starting work early. She paid him. There was no sound from the drunk's flat, no sign that anyone was alive in the world. Upstairs, with the door closed behind her, she did the only thing there was left to do; she made a cup of tea. It was too hot to drink so she left it until it was too cold.

She woke at five as if struck, or as if she knew she was late for a vital appointment. She

looked around the bedroom for a reminder – work, the dentist again – until she realised it was nothing. After ten minutes she got up. She stood in the kitchen with the light off as the kettle sent up a plume. Once the cafetière was loaded and the coffee was steeping she reached upwards until something cracked in readjustment. She bent at the waist, ignored the pain in her hamstrings, and touched her distant toes with outstretched fingertips. She had a shower. Under the hot water she wondered if she'd been cruel. She rubbed shampoo into her scalp. She rinsed the suds away. It would all fade eventually, his hurt, her frustration with him. She'd stamped on its neck. She contemplated shaving her legs, decided against it. When she wiped the fog from the mirror she saw that she was tired. The lines on her forehead seemed deeper than they had been. She could see her mother and father in herself.

Later she caught the bus. Four young men, thin students, dreadfully hung over, still drunk, commiserated with each other across the aisle.

One said, ‘I can’t believe they shut us down.’

‘I can’t believe they confiscated my fucking speakers.’

‘...she was being sick out of the window. The front window. Like, when the police came up the drive she was hanging out of the front window being sick. And Cam was crawling around in the hallway.’

‘Who were the lads in the back room? They’re the ones who kicked off. They just came in. They crashed it.’

‘How do I get my speakers back?’

She got off at the foot of Portland Street and walked through China Town. She stopped at a bakery and bought a steamed Char-Sui bun and ate the sticky, claggy thing by the high ornamental oriental gate and the busy pay-and-display car park that marked China Town's centre. Homeless people huddled in a pagoda, smoking.

In the lobby of the Manchester Art Gallery she slid four pound coins into the donation

box and a volunteer thanked her with a nod.

He said, ‘There’s a tour in ten minutes, if you’re interested?’

She shook her head. She climbed the main staircase to the brief landing where it split, turned left, and ascended to the first floor proper, looking at the casts of the Elgin marbles embedded in the walls, the incomplete centaurs, and all the other figures which had first been defaced by time and then recreated in facsimile. But what she really wanted to see was a painting by William Holman Hunt; she wanted to look at *The Scapegoat*. So she wandered on, past glorious paintings and vases in glass cases and pieces of notable furniture. It was a small painting, and it hung in one of the rooms that connected the older part of the gallery to the new high glass atrium. The focus of the room was another, much larger Holman Hunt: *The Shadow of Death*. Jesus, his robe or tunic hanging around his waist like a loose skirt, his bare torso all vulnerable muscle. He was stretching in his workshop, throwing his arms wide, his hands up, to ease an ache in the lower back.

Curled shavings of wood from the work of his plane carpeted the floor. To his left, a saw was embedded in a plank set on a sawing-horse. To his right Mary was squatting to look into a wooden chest. She was caught in mid-pivot, her weight on the ball of her left foot, the Achilles tendon of the ankle taut with movement. The chest contained Christ’s ornate golden birth-gifts. In the background, through a window, the olive-green and ochre hills of the holy land rolled themselves away to the horizon. Holman’s white Jesus had a surfer’s locks and casual beard and white teeth, and he cast a shadow as he stretched. It fell on a rack of chisels on the workshop’s back wall, and there was the crucifixion, overlaid upon the scene or underlaid beneath it. Mary, turning, saw her son’s future.

The Scapegoat was humbler. A salt-marsh. A flood-plain. A range of high, bare mountains in the background, like a dam. In the foreground a ragged goat searched for something, for drinkable water, its hooves gouging into the salt-crust and mud, its head down

in a defeated shrug, tongue out and eyes stupidly desperate. Behind the goat, a goat's skull resting in a yellow disk; a reflection of the low sun. At the right-hand side of the canvas was an over-bright, a crayon-bright, a childishly bright rainbow. Around the goat's horns was a circlet of red thread. Annie hugged herself.

It was stupid and honest. The goat was alone, trying to get on, to keep on. There was a bundle of red thread in *The Shadow of Death* as well, tucked away, hanging around, not a big part of the painting, but there, signifying away to itself. Red thread to mark sacrifice. What did she think? She thought that the red thread was life. You wore it or you waited to wear it. She wished the painting of Jesus looked more obviously like Adam, so she could laugh. Adam pinioned invisibly on his rack of tools, very noble. A bit of a wanker.

The simple struggling goat, the salt marshes, the skull and the rainbow – each time she looked at *The Scapegoat* it seemed to redouble its efforts to earn its place on the wall. She drank from a bottle of water. She'd been re-using it for a week. It was dented and crumpled, it crackled when she handled it, and the label had fallen away. She drank more water. A couple in their early forties came into the room from the depths of the Pre-Raphaelite exhibition. They spoke to each other in French. They walked between her and her paintings. The woman read the little explanatory plaque mounted beside the huge golden frame of *The Shadow of Death*, and translated snippets of it to her partner.

He said, 'On va prendre un café?'

Annie thought that meant, Something-something coffee. Let's go, let's drink some, enough of this, please. She followed them downstairs, through the gift shop, into the cafe. She queued behind them. She took her mug to a table near them, and she sat and read a newspaper some other visitor had discarded. In America they were burying the victims of a school shooting. Mad evangelicals were picketing the funeral. There were photographs. Annie knew the church – everyone knew the church. Their position was that the school shooting was

deserved punishment. Their placards said, Too Late To Pray. Paedophile Rape Enablers. Fag Enablers. God Hates The World. God Sent The Shooter. God Hates Dead Kids. No Funeral Will Go Unpicketed.

At work the next day the email system had gone down and so all the talk in the office was about that. Laura said, ‘How are we meant to get anything done?’

And whenever someone else walked past she said it again. On occasion at work – this was one of her new responsibilities – Annie had to sit in on candidate interviews. Her job was to answer questions for the rest of the panel, to firm up or contradict the plea of suitability the applicant was making, or to offer the inside track on a healthcare provider. Each time Laura spoke, a silence settled over the table, over Annie and Primo and Darren. That silence had the same texture as the silence in an interview room after a difficult question had been asked, or a candidate had slipped up, had undersold or exposed themselves.

Annie ate a damp sandwich from an air-tight packet that she'd bought from one of the shops in the mall. The scent of Laura’s deodorant prodded at her stomach, trying to stir up nausea. Down at the end of the office one of the light-tubes flickered and went out. Laura turned to her and before she could speak, Annie said, ‘The whole place is falling apart.’

It was important to sound bright, to be bright.

‘It is! Look at Kalvis – he’s going mad.’

Kalvis came out of the IT support team's enclave in the corner and stood under the failed light, looking up at it. His hands were on his hips and his belly stuck out like a target. Annie went over to him. His teeth were yellowed, the pores across his cheeks gaped.

He said, ‘I’m sending you out-of-office next week. There’s a one-day conference at – at a hotel. In the city. I can’t think of the name. I’ll email you the name. When I can send you a sodding email. And it’s an evening thing. Jim Tuttle from marketing’s going. Do you know him? He’s swish. He talks about rugby every time I see him and every time I say, I don’t care

about rugby. He'll be the one buying the drinks and all the rest. But you need to get a sense of it. Have a drink. Network. This fucking light. I'm going to kill someone.'

When Lorelei was seven her parents took her to the east coast to visit her paternal grandfather. They did it every summer and sometimes at Christmas. They set off at some painfully early hour of the morning. At that time they lived in Cheshire, in a town called Northwich. Her grandfather's home was in Ipswich, in Suffolk. Her parents had a navy-blue Volvo estate that was bigger than they needed. The drive took four hours. Lorelei read Roald Dahl in the back-seat for a while, felt travel sick but said nothing, and after a toilet break at a service station she finished the second leg of the journey reading a Dick King Smith about brave speaking animals.

Eventually they arrived in Ipswich. She knew they were really there because of a narrow metal bridge they had to pass under on the outskirts of the town. At some time someone had climbed up the outside of the bridge, or hopped over the barrier from above, and painted the word GOURANGA across its side. The white letters had yellowed over the years as if the fumes from the road were tobacco smoke and had nicotine-stained the paint. She knew that it was some kind of slogan or motto for the Hare Krishnas, who were peaceful, religious people. They wore robes. Anyway there was something silly and magical about the idea of them, this cult or secret society or big joke or whatever exact adult thing they were. When the bridge came into sight the whole family, all three of them, shouted 'Gouranga!'

Before they went to her grandfather's house, her parents took her to the dock. There was a car park where they could have a good look at the works, albeit from too close to see it all laid out. They parked up and her parents drank tea from a Thermos. Huge yellow cranes like birds or beasts but not alive lifted container after identical container onto the decks and into the holds of ships bigger than buildings, their hulls bright red or dark red. The docks went on

and on. There was no end to the docks.

They took the coast road away from the docks and she saw the same ships or their doubles out on the horizon, dots at the edge of the visible sea. Her mother pointed and said, ‘Do you see them, Lorelei? They’re off to Holland.’

‘Their cargo,’ her father said, ‘goes all around the world. It might go to Russia, or China, or Africa. It’s exciting, isn’t it?’

They were dark little people, her parents. They were academics. They were members of the green party.

Lorelei said, ‘Yes.’

Her grandfather was barrel-chested. His ears stuck out madly. He wore chinos and a cable-knit jumper, smoked cigarettes against the advice of doctors and wheezed because of it. The house was full of paperbacks. He liked fast-reading crime novels of every era, and military history specifically concerning the RAF and the Home Guard. He’d cooked them a huge meal – it was basically a Christmas dinner. They passed around tureens of bronzed potatoes and knuckley sprouts. Her grandfather deconstructed the Turkey with an old electric carving knife and long two-pronged fork. Lorelei piled food up on her plate and then emptied it.

‘Oh god,’ said Lorelei’s mother, laughing, ‘This is ridiculous! You shouldn’t have.’

He said, ‘Rubbish. Go on, Lorelei, eat it all over again. You're going to be a tall girl, aren't you? A supermodel. Feed those bones.’

After the meal her mother and father washed up, tipsy on red wine and Adnams ale. Lorelei went into the front room with her grandfather and he played his black clarinet to show Lorelei what he'd learned since last time she'd seen him. He played lilting klezmer and then raucous Dixie ragtime, then stopped to cough. When the instrument was at his lips and his fingers moved like pistons on the chrome stops, or he was talking to her about the music,

comparing her piano-lesson knowledge of musical theory to his self-taught understanding of it, he was obviously happy.

The next day they went out together into Felixstowe. Lorelei's grandfather. He had an appointment for a hair-cut. He made an appointment every time they visited. The salon, a little place on a quiet street off one of Felixstowe's main drags, had an indoor swimming pool in the back in a large conservatory. The hairdresser had built it for his late wife, that was the story, and you could swim in it, it was allowed, somehow. The water wasn't as chlorinated as in proper swimming pools. There were three cubicles to change in. There was no diving board. In her bright orange bathing suit she looked into the water and listened to the sound of the waves made by her mother's slow crawl. Her father waited for her to take three steps towards the shallow end then yahooed suddenly and pushed her. She shrieked as the water came towards her and didn't finish shrieking before she hit it. She came up coughing. Now her mother floated face-up, and she said something Lorelei didn't hear.

Her father stood with his hands on his hips, just above the waistband of his trunks, his bare chest and shoulders covered in black hair.

'Are you alright?'

She was on the knife-edge of upset but the sun came out suddenly and shone through the glass roof. The light moved on the surface of the water and the pool glowed. It was like being in a film, or on another planet. Too loudly she shouted, 'I'm OK!'

She started swimming. Soon an old man came into the conservatory pool, went into one of the cubicles, came out changed and joined them in the water. He was missing the lower part of his left arm. He had a grey teddy-boy's quiff and a pouchy gut, and although he was swimming his flip-flops stayed somehow on his feet. The arm ended after the elbow. When he did the crawl he looked like a machine of utterly foreign design. It was frightening. It was exciting. Her grandfather's hair looked the same after it was cut. They hung around for a

while because her grandfather was talking to everyone, introducing his son and daughter-in-law and granddaughter to each customer. The hairdresser was a funny, tubby Greek man who gave Lorelei a little bar of stuck-together sesame seeds that was too hard and too sugary. Her grandfather introduced her to the amputee from the pool.

'This is a good friend of mine.'

He said, 'I'd shake your hand –'

Lorelei's father laughed.

Her grandfather said, 'He was a soldier – weren't you, Cyril?'

Cyril nodded.

'Would you like to be a soldier when you grow up, Lorelei?'

She looked from her grandfather to Cyril. She didn't know what to say. Yes, or no. More laughter. Then the hairdresser used a hair dryer and the sound made it hard for anyone to hear what they said to each other.

They returned to her grandfather's house. Lorelei ran around the garden. There was a pond with clots of frogspawn in its corners and the three big orange carp that rose slowly to the surface to greet her. There were roses. Her grandfather had a knack for them. At the bottom of the garden were crab-apple trees, and honeysuckle which she hated because its awful heavy scent was like drowning in syrup. Indoors the adults talked about something – there was something they had to talk about. She entertained herself, having half-vocalised conversations with herself and imagined others. Her play was intense. A host of characters acted out their parts around her and she could almost see them and touch them. A watching adult would've found it uncanny. Her mother came out, a glass of lemonade in hand, the breeze lifting the black, curly hair of her fringe.

'Lorelei, you and I are going to go and pick up a takeaway.'

She sipped the drink. 'It'll save your grandfather from cooking again.'

So they drove through her grandfather's neighbourhood. The roads were wider than in Northwich. It felt a little like a dream – at least, Lorelei always remembered it afterwards as feeling dreamy.

'You know where we're going,' said her mother. She'd brought the glass of lemonade with her, had stuck it in a cup-holder built into the housing of the handbrake. 'It's near where my friend Sash lives. Do you remember, we went to see them? They had a little black dog.'

Lorelei had absolutely no idea. 'I don't remember,' she said. 'Sorry.'

'You don't need to apologise for not remembering. It was years ago.'

Unlike home there were no high hedges here; instead there were low beds of white and purple flowers on roundabouts, and tall feathery plants in front gardens.

'What's it called,' she said, and pointed, and said it again a couple of times. Her mother didn't answer until she had to stop the car at some traffic lights.

'Pampas grass,' she said. It made Lorelei think about horses. It was something like a horse's tail.

After a little while they pulled up on the pavement. Lorelei undid her seatbelt and got out of the car, and pushed the door shut carefully. No slamming doors. It was gold outside, the light, the warmth. She waved her arms around to better feel it. It was the temperature the sea looked on television adverts for holidays. Her mother came and put her hand on Lorelei's shoulder and they walked to the takeaway. A plastic bag lay on the pavement near the car. The wind pulled at it gently, so it looked like it'd beached itself, but might still summon a burst of energy and flap off seaward. It had bubbling red liquid smeared on it like blood mixed with spit. Lorelei felt suddenly worried and as an answer to that worry she heard a shout from somewhere. She looked up at her mother. They climbed the ramp to the door of the takeaway. The whole frontage was glass and the light glanced off it. Her mother pushed open the heavy door and that made an electronic beeper speak somewhere in the ceiling as they stepped in.

There was a young Ipswich girl behind the counter, her face covered with purple acne. Her uniform and its matching baseball cap were red. Her lips were twisted sadly – the smell of frying – Lorelei's mother grabbed her shoulder hard. In front of the counter was a man in a wheelchair.

'You're a fucking…'

His hair stuck up greasily in strands and waves and he rocked himself backwards and forwards in his chair..

'…you're a fucking cunt you are. You are and you know you are.'

The young woman behind the counter shrugged at Lorelei's mother.

He didn't have any legs; he had stumps. His jeans were folded-over and pinned. He wore a tank-green military surplus shirt underneath a black bomber jacket with orange lining. Everything he wore was stained and muddy. His fingertips – this was the worst thing for Lorelei – were black with dirt from driving the wheels of his chair. The manager emerged from behind the fryers and the milkshake-machine in the takeaway's open kitchen. He was middle-aged man with dark, southern Asian skin and a look of despairing surprise at what was going on in his premises. He wore his baseball cap very far back on his head, the peak pointing towards the grey tiles of the ceiling in a way which was always for adult Lorelei, when she remembered it, a seal of absolute truth; it was so incongruous that it couldn't be something she'd imagined.

'I've called the police again,' the manager said. 'I'm very sorry. They're nearly here. You can still leave. You can leave. You can still leave.'

'You fat Paki cunt.'

'I'm from Sri Lanka. You can leave now.'

Lorelei's mother said, 'I think you should go. It sounds like the police are on their way.'

The man pivoted in his chair, then pivoted his chair itself to face her. Lorelei couldn't

understand why her mother had chosen to speak, why anyone would make themselves obvious.

‘Shut up.’

He didn’t look at cringing Lorelei.

The manager said, ‘Don’t insult my customers.’

‘I am your customer.’

Lorelei’s mother said, ‘Can I just order?’

‘Shut up.’

‘Don’t tell me to shut up in front of my daughter.’

Embarrassment settled over Lorelei like a burning jacket.

‘I don’t care about your daughter,’ the man said. ‘Why would I care?’

‘Look, I just want to order.’

The young woman behind the counter scratched at her hairline and said, ‘You’re making it worse.’

A police car arrived, and as it parked beside Lorelei’s mother’s car the siren whooped. Two constables got out. They came through the door; the beeper sounded. Lorelei’s mother pulled her out of the way. They were absolutely huge. Their boots were massive. The radios clipped to their stab-vests chatted quietly to themselves. One of them smiled absently at Lorelei. The other took hold of the handles of the wheelchair and pulled backwards sharply. The man jerked awkwardly in his chair, startled, and for an awful moment it seemed that he might fall or slide down onto the floor.

‘Come on,’ said one of the constables.

Lorelei’s mother had stopped squeezing her shoulder. Now instead she had the short sleeve of her dress between finger and thumb in a slight and utterly firm way. They took the man outside. Halfway to the door he said, ‘Stop fucking pushing me.’

He drove his own wheels with violent movements.

Lorelei's mother ordered a bucket of fried chicken, gold and knobbly, a bottle of diet cola, French fries, hot wings, dips – she ordered a huge amount. And the manager gave them a free thing, a kind of structural frozen dessert, strange stacked waves of differently flavoured and coloured ice-cream. The atmosphere was thick between Lorelei's mother and the young woman behind the counter. The manager stood nearby, waiting for them to leave, so he could say something secret to his employee.

'Come on,' said Lorelei's mother. She'd paid, they had the food, there was no reason to stay. 'Let's get going. Let's get the food back. Granddad will have starved.'

She nudged Lorelei with her knee.

Lorelei said, 'Starved.'

She laughed dutifully. They went outside – Lorelei's mother didn't say *thank-you*, or *have a good afternoon*, or any of the things she normally would've said.

Three boys, older than Lorelei, definitely in secondary school, were talking to the policemen. They were tanned, blonde, skinny. One had his hands on his hips. One had his hands on his head. One had his arms pulled in through the sleeves of his blue football shirt and was hugging himself. The man in the wheelchair shouted, waved his arms.

'We were down the woods, down the armoury,' said one of the boys.

The man in the wheelchair rolled his heavy head on his neck as Lorelei passed. He looked through her as if her and her mother and the takeaway and every building in the town between him and the sea were transparent. The boys' Suffolk accents were fantastically broad. They spoke in turn and as one, birds on a telephone line singing to each other.

'And he came down the path and he was swearing away at us.'

'And we hadn't done anything.'

'And he came and we had this stick-'

‘It was like a fencepost-’

‘We’d got that and we were going to build a lean-to with it.’

‘You were going to burn it,’ said one of the policemen, and the boys shook their heads seriously.

‘And he grabbed it-’

‘He took it off us.’

‘And he started swinging it.’

‘No I didn’t,’ the man said, his voice loud and beginning to crack. The sun was low and full. ‘Why would I go down the backs? Over the bridge? How would I get down there? Why would I steal a fencepost?’

‘Keep your voice down,’ said one of the officers.

‘Fuck off! They hit me in the mouth with it!’

‘We were pulling on it.’

‘And he pulled back-‘

‘And I let go.’

Either the boys had tracked the man across town, or it was all an unlucky coincidence. The manager of the takeaway stared out from behind his glass wall. He had no way of understanding where the boys had come from; he hadn’t heard their story, down the backs, the armoury, the fencepost. Lorelei’s mother unlocked the car. Before they set off she put the bag of food in Lorelei’s lap. She felt the warmth of the chicken, the chill of the ice-cream. They drove.

‘Lorelei, you’ve got to feel sorry for people like that, OK? Now, we might be scared of him as well, that man, and angry because he was being horrible. But we don’t know why – we don’t know what happened to him, do we?’

‘To his legs.'

‘Not just that.’

That night her grandfather sat her down, gave her a sip of beer, and told her a ghost story. He sat in a high-backed green armchair and she perched on a matching footrest like it was a low barstool.

‘It was after your grandmother passed away. At that time a lot of people I knew were dying. Although I was young, really – not much older than your mother and father are now. Which means nothing to you, does it. We’re ancient. It was a sad time. One day I had a telephone call from a school friend. He was called David. He was a fantastic musician. A jazz drummer. When I was your age I spent a lot of time with him and his sister. We used to get in trouble together. His sister had grown up to be a dance teacher. He was calling to tell me that she'd died, out of the blue. It turned out there was something wrong with her heart. No-one knew about it. Her name was June.

‘I stood by the telephone table, holding my chest. I thought I was having a heart-attack.

‘A very strong breeze went through the house. It started at the front door, just like someone entering the hallway. But the front door was closed. I could hear this breeze...’

He whistled a long low note.

‘And it went through the kitchen and the living room, where I was, rustling the newspaper, you know, on the table– all the hairs stood up on my arms and the back of my neck.’

That was the end. There should have been more. It was like seeing a humped back break the surface of an otherwise calm sea. Her grandfather rubbed his forehead. So close to him she could smell tobacco smoke, rich and leaden.

‘Would you like to see a photograph?’

Little Lorelei thought. ‘Yes.’

They went to the dining room together hand in hand, as if they were both children. He

dug around in a drawer. Of course Lorelei expected the photograph to show a woman dancing, but she wasn’t dancing.

June was beautiful. She was sitting on the edge of a table in a pub in a light summer dress, with a string of pearls around her long throat, her legs crossed at the ankle, her wrists crossed in her lap, her face broad and her smile open. No sign of her faulty heart. Lorelei tried to think about her as someone who was no longer alive.

Annie answered the call automatically, without looking, thinking it was Kalvis checking how the day was going, or one of the team – eager Laura – needing to be told something they could’ve found out themselves with two minutes of applied thought.

Adam said, ‘Hi. I wasn't expecting you to pick up. Can you talk?’

She thought, Fuck.

‘Not really. Honestly, I’m not trying being rude. I’m at a conference. It's got about two minutes until the next presentation.’

‘Right. Well, all I wanted is to say that, if you’re up for it, I’d like to see you. Just for a drink or something. To see how you’re doing.’

‘I don’t know. Do you think we need to? I know it’s shit. I really don’t have time to get into it. I don’t want to sound heartless. Are you OK?’

She wished she had it in her to end the call, blame it on the connection dropping out, blame it on her battery dying, blame it on her thumb pressing the cancel icon.

He said, ‘I’ve been fine. I'd offer to come and pick up my stuff, but I don’t think you’ve got anything I need. I’ve got a couple of your books, if you want them?’

It was a lure. She didn't need the books: in each one she already knew who the killer was, and the nature of the twist. She said, ‘Look, I’ve got to go in. It’s all starting again. I’ll have a think. I’ll let you know.’

He said, 'That's fair.'

People filed past her, back into the guts of the hotel, to the function room where the presentations were taking place. She joined the flow. They walked between the black sofas and broad slate-grey check-in desk of the hotel's lobby and down a long and strangely sloping corridor. In the function room chair were set out in rows. She edged her way along a row to regain her seat. There was a tightening in her stomach. Now there was no way of getting out again without disrupting everything, forcing people to stand to let her pass. It was a funeral. She imagined Adam gliding grimly up to the podium to eulogise himself. The presentation began; two short young women, one Indian and one Canadian, both wearing fashionably thick-framed glasses, spoke about data analysis. Everyone in the room, they said, could use it to drive retention rates and spot which elements of their brand's offering were underperforming. They explained how to pull data from the industry-standard software's dashboard and transform it into easy-to-read charts, strikingly coloured circles, shapely word-clouds. They promised that these diagrammatic visualisations would allow even the slowest of colleagues to begin to understand an ocean of complex statistical information which had been hidden within easy reach all along. It calmed Annie. She could find a use for it.

After the presentations finished, when she was in the line of people moving slowly back into the lobby, she remembered Adam's mouth, or just the idea of the kind of mouth he had. Thin lips, small teeth, the gums over-pink. The teeth were gone, his lips, his tongue, his eyes, the length and heft of his body, the skeleton within it, and of course each individual instance of him smiling. All of this had been burned. Annie took herself to the toilet, shut herself in a cubicle, and swore under her breath, furious. She pulled toilet paper off out of the dispenser and crushed it into tiny pellets. She checked her watch. Enough. She went back out into the lobby. Jim Tuttle was surrounded by people. She stood nearby, waiting for a break in the conversation. He had wax in his hair to make it stick up. She watched him laugh at someone's

joke, knowing that he knew that she was there. He had the manner, she thought, of a television psychic. He was the kind to creep around an old stately home, followed by a camera crew, making up transparent lies about painful psychic vibrations, pretending to detect evidence of suffering long ago. Finally he acted as if he'd just noticed her.

'This,' he said, 'is Annie. She's a rising star. She's being groomed for great things.'

She looked at his gang – their suits and their dresses, their momentarily attentive faces. A bright tie, a bony wrist, unexpected vivid plum lipstick.

She said, 'It's nice to meet you all. You're going to have to tell me what you do.'

They went to a restaurant off Deansgate, a Greek place called Cassandra's. It was Annie, Jim Tuttle, the group he'd introduced her to, and a few other people they'd picked up outside the hotel. Annie thought that they'd never get a table. But when they were in the dark bar, after Jim had ordered drinks for everyone, glasses of red wine and vodka-tonics and pints, he said, 'Table for Tuttle? We've got a few extra.'

The bar manager said, 'No problem. No problem at all.'

Tuttle handed over a credit card. 'Do you want to just keep it behind the bar? It's all going on that.'

A waitress Annie's age took them through into the busy dining area. It was a glass roof over a cobbled floor. It was a reclaimed alleyway. People were in the throes of their meals. The waitress kept tucking her dark hair behind her ear as she lead them to a long table. She scared up extra chairs and slotted them in place, and brought new cutlery, little white side-plates and menus. Tuttle blushed with authority and spoke to the waitress and whoever else met his eye.

'A couple of bottles of wine for the table? Three red, three white? Where's the list? What's good?'

Once they were all seated there wasn't much elbow-room. It was hot, and tea-light

candles burned in red glass jars. Olives arrived, and baskets of tough bread. The olive-dishes were small, shallow and strangely curved, and looked to Annie like surgical implants contoured to serve a vital structural purpose. They might replace the orbital bone in the reconstruction of a face smashed in an accident. She popped a green olive in her mouth, kissed the stone subtly into her hand, and then took a black one. She sipped rum and Coke. She dived into conversation with the people next to and across from her. She made them laugh and they made her laugh. She told them short, well-structured anecdotes. She spoke more about them than about herself.

'Right,' Tuttle called down the table. 'Right, shall we do this banquet thing? Mezze? Share-and-share-a like?'

No-one really responded. The meal was on the company card. Responsibility had been waived. Tuttle was in his element. He was out of his chair, half-standing, leaning across to show someone something on his smart-phone, raising and lowering an almost-empty glass of red wine to emphasise whatever punch-line he was delivering. Up, down; Annie wondered how such an anxious, active man got through a week alive. Annie said something polite to the person next to her, and listened to their slow, dry response, all the while wondering how she herself would age. Children, a new-found athleticism, recurrent stubborn haemorrhoids; countless things might happen to her body, let alone the rest of her. It took a long time for the food to arrive and by the time it did Annie was half-cut. A team of waiters and waitresses brought out platter after platter. A high pile of calamari on a wide plate. Next to that, a deep ramekin full of baby octopuses in a bright red sauce. Grilled white fish steamed. There was a frenzy of passing and tasting. Annie speared a dark spiced sausage, scooped baba ganoush onto a pitta, bit into an artichoke heart, dropped the bone of a finished lamb chop onto a side-plate.

There were crumbs all over over the tablecloth, and patches where oil from the

undersides of carelessly placed serving spoons had seeped into the weave. She wiped her fingers on it distractedly. At his end of the table Tuttle finally knocked over his wine and the stain spread even as he mopped at it with a napkin. The people seated around him lifted their plates out of the way and nodded in absent-minded agreement with him.

He said, ‘Fuck, I’ve got butter fingers. I’m naturally clumsy.’

There was too much. When everyone had eaten their fill there was enough left to feed them all over again. The staff began to clear plates. Tuttle leaned in to one of them and said, ‘Can I get it to take away? All of it?’

Someone laughed and Tuttle smiled and said, ‘I’m not joking.’

Annie didn't know what was happening. She sipped wine, tired, and it fought the taste of garlic and paprika still living in her mouth.

Tuttle addressed the table: ‘What I do is, at meals like this, when it’s all going on the plastic, on the expenses, I get all left-over food to take away. And then I go out into the streets and give it to homeless people.’

Annie said, ‘That’s a brilliant idea.’

If anyone thought it wasn't a brilliant idea, she thought, then fuck them. Everyone was listening to Tuttle.

'It’s not my money. We can’t take it with us.’

No-one in the world was utterly bad; the wine thought that for her. The group broke again into their own conversations about giving, volunteering, martyrdom, or funny-bleak or bleak-funny experiences they’d had with tramps in Glasgow, Lancaster, Madrid. The restaurant was getting busier and the background noise increased as the other diners drank themselves voluble. A stocky waiter with a pen clenched between his teeth delivered a small tower of aluminium food containers and two white plastic carrier bags, still flat and virginal, not yet shaken-out into shape.

Outside the restaurant Annie said, ‘Give me a bag. I’ll come with you.’

Tuttle handed it over. The rest of the group were going to Mother's. It was around the corner. It was the conference after-party.

‘We’ll see you there,’ Jim said. ‘We’ll only be ten minutes.’

The group set off. As they moved further and further away Annie saw how formal they looked, how smart. High-heels clicked on concrete. A man paused to light a cigarette, tucking his chin into his black raincoat. They left him behind. He quickened his pace to catch up with them, smoke trailing behind him, a steam locomotive.

‘Mother’s?’

Annie said, ‘I've never been before. I’ll go for a couple.’

They set off, swinging their bags of food. They looked in deep doorways, down side-streets. They combed the area. As they walked they talked about their jobs, the industry. It was wonderful. They couldn't find anyone – there were no homeless people. The doorways were empty, and the little vestibules and nooks in the sides of buildings, the negative spaces of the street. It was bizarre; Manchester was full of homeless people. They spoke to each other like old friends.

'The key thing,' said Tuttle, 'is to recognise when it's time to eat shit.'

They stopped at a dingy pub called The Lyre. He bought Annie a drink out of his own pocket.

She said ‘I’ll get it.’

‘No, no, I’m senior. It’s an unwritten law.’

A little later he said, ‘You're being groomed. You are. Kalvis has his eye on you. He’s been waiting to see if you’d stick it out through the first seven, eight months. High turn-over in his team. Because he’s a Geordie cunt. No offence. He’s a little Geordie cunt. He’s a great bloke, actually, Kalvis.’

Tuttle had been married when he was very young, had divorced, and now lived with another woman and the various children they'd collected between them. They had a house in Stockport that was too big for them. Despite or because of all this she thought that if she gave him the opportunity he'd try to persuade her to come to a hotel with him. Annie told him about the flat, the drunk. She skirted Adam.

Tuttle said, 'Tell him to just make it clear.'

They were talking about Kalvis again.

'Tell him you want a time-line. A schedule. I'll get *this* by *this* point. I'll be doing so-and-so by January. Whatever.'

'Do you want another drink?'

'Absolutely.'

There was a mirror behind the bar and when Annie saw herself in it she was surprised at how dramatic she looked. Her face had thinned, her hair had fallen into a severe shape, and the light made her skin look vital. Frightening, she ordered. After The Lyre she navigated Tuttle up to the big department store at the foot of Market Street, where she thought there might at least be a Big Issue seller. No luck. But they could hear a trumpet playing somewhere and took off in search of it. The music hung in the air. It sounded so sad that they looked at each other and laughed.

Tuttle said, 'I love Manchester. I love it. I saw a taxi-driver once and he'd parked his cab and got a Saxophone out of the boot. He was playing it on the pavement.'

On the curved street that led between the Printworks and the rear of the Trafford Centre into the flank of the Northern Quarter there were chicken shops and second-hand book shops where the window displays promised adult publications. Here was the trumpet player, an old man in a thin Nike sweatshirt playing soft notes now, unlike the mournful blasts which had led them to him, as if his instrument was sore. His face was weathered, his stubble bright white.

‘Sorry,’ she said. ‘Look, do you want this food?’

He looked at her.

‘We're not going to eat it,’ she said. ‘It’s still hot.’

He took it. He said, ‘Thank you. I haven’t...’

Then he told them what he hadn’t, what he had, what had and what hadn’t happened to him.

Mother’s was dark and large. There was exposed pipework and every table was crowded with empty and half empty glasses. It was an after-work place, an office-party venue, so the crowd was mixed and chatty. A serious-looking DJ on a raised platform fiddled with his laptop, as if euphoric house music needed constant encouragement. Tuttle went off to the bar. Annie walked straight through to the smoking area at the rear. People stood around the smoking area in pairs and trios, quietly chatting. A bouncer watched them impassively, his arms folded. He stood under the heat lamp and it cast its red glow over him. He caught her eye as she walked past him because his eyebrows were so thin, his scowl so deeply set, as if he'd been born with a scowl and since then had worked to perfect it. Some trick of the topography of the city meant that although she was on the ground floor of Mother’s, she could look out over the rooftops of a cluster of one-storey buildings. There was a little newsagents – she'd been in there once to buy cigarettes. And there was a bicycle repair workshop. She wondered if she should buy a bike. She'd know the city better then, know it really, its circulation and breath. Tuttle followed her out to bum a cigarette.

‘I’ve quit really,’ he said. ‘Kids.’

She asked about them. It was completely safe territory. While he was talking she made decisions. She was going to finish her drink, then go home to sleep in her bed, starfished, luxuriously alone.

Near the Corn Exchange and Printworks arcades and the Urbis Building, a curved chrome wedge which had once been a museum of pop culture and art but had become instead a museum of football, was Manchester's Gothic, medieval cathedral. One day in the nineteenth century a young man was walking in the cathedral's nave when he saw his sister, Fanny. He was surprised; as far as he knew she was away – she had left Manchester.

He called out, 'Fanny!'

What a name! She stared at him, terrified, and ran away without a word. He chased her but couldn't find her. Eventually he left the cathedral in confusion. The next day he was told that she'd died, far away, wherever she was. Of course she'd passed at around about the time he'd seen her in the nave.

Again in the nineteenth century, again at the cathedral, black Shuck was seen on the bridge over the Irwell leading into Salford.

In the 1970s, cleaners at the airport saw an old man walking around with no shoes on. Possibly there was some connection between this ghost and an RAF Squadron which had been stationed there during World War II.

A ghost at the Manchester Royal Infirmary that threw bedpans around in the 1980s.

There was a police museum in the Northern Quarter. It opened one day a week, and was run by volunteers who were ex-officers. In the museum there was an old push-button bell from a long gone custody desk. At times it dinged when there was no-one nearby to ding it.

On Peter Street stood the Methodist Albert Hall, a fantastic building a century old. It was one of the city's many fantastic and little-noticed buildings, background, set dressing, wallpaper for the quick, full lives of Mancunians. From the nineties into the noughties the bottom two floors were a nightclub called Hoppers. It was a shithole, part of Manchester's unparalleled lineage of shithole nightclubs. The dance floor lit up like a chequerboard. It had a ghost that pinched the barmaids' arses, threw pint glasses around, tried to push bouncers

downstairs. Perhaps the ghost was an articulation of all the desires of the drinkers and the dancers in Hoppers. What none of these dancers knew was that up above them, on the top floor of the building, there was a huge theatre space with a balcony, a beautiful arched ceiling, chandeliers, all empty, cobwebbed. This space had been used for Methodist church services in the building's past. Then it'd been sealed up. Likewise on the top floor of the Primark building on Piccadilly Gardens, there was a boarded-up ballroom on the top floor. It had suspended flooring for dancing. It had a domed ceiling. These were ghost-spaces.

All these stories could be found on the internet. That's where Adam had dug them up. In Chorlton someone had seen two children disappear through park railings. The night of Adam's panic attack, after Annie had disappeared off into the night, Lorelei sat with Adam for a while while he shook all over and hyperventilated.

She'd asked him, 'What is it? Can you tell me what it is?'

When that hadn't worked she'd said, 'It's just the coke, that's all. It's just drugs. It's come on too strong but it'll be over soon.'

Then: 'Do you want me to call someone? Do you want me to call your parents? It might calm you down.'

Eventually he'd tapered off. He relaxed, he began to breathe, his tears dried. She gave him some tissue and he blew his nose.

He said, 'I don't think Annie's going to come back.'

'Not tonight, anyway.'

He asked her for some water.

'Get it yourself. It'll do you good to stand up and move around.'

He climbed up. She helped him. He walked to kitchen on legs like stilts. He came back with a plastic jug full of water which he sipped. He sat on the sofa next to her and leaned back against the cushions, exhausted. His beard made his jaw long and his cheekbones high and

defined. He had a little scar on his cheek. Broken glass, she thought, or something.

'Tell me about ghosts.'

He shook his head. If he could've spoken he would've said: A ghost, right – is it *them*? Is it the personality – the personness – of a dead person? Or is it a copy of them, a likeness of them, a reflection of them? Where are they when they're not haunting? And if they are speculary (that means, like what you see in a mirror), if they're speculary, what's casting the reflection? Where is the reflection being drawn from? I don't believe in god and heaven, I don't believe that people go anywhere when they die, so they can't be *coming back* from somewhere. They're nowhere. Are they just rattling around? The idea that they've been recorded, that someone's actions have been stored up and can play out in front of you without them being there, but visible, that's the only thing that can hold water, isn't it?

It's such an understandable human desire though, isn't it? To want to see the dead again. They're not your dead, necessarily, but they're someone's dead. And also it's promising – it promises that you might be seen after you're dead. After I'm dead someone might still see me.

When I'm dead, I wonder what part of my life my ghost will be drawn from? I lost my virginity in a little copse of trees on a housing estate. Maybe someone will be walking through them in 2083, at night, in the dark, and they'll see my sixteen-year-old face, pale and concerned and drunk, looming out at them. When I was twenty-two I was very depressed and isolated and I used to drink a lot, alone, and walk around Manchester by myself. So someone might see my ghost doing that and not even know I'm a ghost. I used to wear a big black coat and a little woollen hat, I dressed like a longshoreman. That's an evergreen look; people will still be dressing like that by the time I'm haunting. So maybe those are my ghosts if I die sometime soon. But then who knows what else will happen to me in my life? I don't think anyone gets through without passions and suffering. Even if I live quietly, just me and you, or whatever, and life is just work and retirement, there'll still be deep, dark moments. That's

where my ghost will come from, when I'm dead.

Are you afraid of dying? I'm absolutely terrified of it. Not being dead, but the moment of dying. Knowing that the game's up, that you don't get to make any more decisions, and that there's absolutely nothing you can do. It makes me feel claustrophobic. It makes me feel like my allotted amount of life is too small for me, is like a coffin around me. I get a tight feeling in my chest. I hear a voice in my head sometimes that kind of interrupts my normal flow of thoughts and internal monologue, such as it is, another voice just talking about death and how everyone's going to die, how I'm not going to be able to know anything about what happens after I die, how the people I know will carry on without me and I won't get to hear what they say to each other. My heart rate goes right up. It happens at work sometimes and I have to go the toilet and sit in a cubicle, my heart going, like it's proving that it's still working.

But he didn't say any of that. He pawed at Lorelei. She stood up.

'You can stay here, but if you try to come in my room, I'm going to call the police, and they'll come and get you. And also, I'll kick the shit out of you.'

Lorelei turned the radio on and pressed buttons until it found a classical station. She wanted to hear music she knew nothing about. She wondered what to wear; what clothes were right for a jolly to the hospital? When she was ready she called a taxi and went and stood at the window, chewing on a piece of dry toast. Although she'd been putting the trip off for a month or so, she'd finally decided that there was no harm in it. The taxi was at the curb. Lorelei walked towards it and the driver leaned out of his window and said, 'Hughes?'

'Yes.'

'Manchester Royal, yeah?'

'That's right.'

She got in the back. The taxi was a silver estate, and the back seat upholstery was an

awful black fake-leather, wipe-clean. She sat behind the empty passenger's seat and worried if she should've got in the front instead. But she wanted to be driven. She fastened her seatbelt. His car was an automatic – he pulled a kind of trigger on the gear stick and tugged it back into Drive.

She'd spoken to Annie about Adam in a little bar in Chorlton called Chairs.

Annie had said, 'Well. He's doing alright, I think. He hasn't wasted away. I think he'd probably like to talk to me. Do you understand why I'm not talking to him? It's better to do that, I think, sometimes. Just a complete clean break.'

Lorelei said, 'To be honest, I think he's just a bit of a cunt, really. A bit glassy-eyed. That rabbit-in-the-headlights thing.'

The taxi driver was angry. By the first junction he was swearing at pedestrians and other motorists. The car radio played perennially popular hits from the eighties which had never been allowed to be forgotten. She thought about Adam's ghosts. She hoped he could find the end of it, or the centre of it, whatever would let him finish. Then he could put it away. In a drawer, in a desk, in a frame: this is what I used to think. The taxi driver was having a conversation on his hands-free set in a language Lorelei didn't know. When he started speaking to her he had to repeat himself twice before she realised that his other conversation had finished and he was using English again.

'Are you visiting someone at the hospital?'

'Oh, no.'

'Is it an appointment then? I hope for nothing serious.'

'No, it's not an appointment.'

He looked at her in the rear-view mirror.

'Job interview?'

'No. It's just – it's for a thing. It's research.'

'You're a student! That's good. A lot of people in Manchester don't like the students, but I do. Students bring so much money into the city. So much work into the city. And a lot of them drink, you know, and make a mess. But it makes me very happy to think that in this city there are thousands of people who are just learning, who are reading books every day, and doing experiments.'

She didn't have the heart to disabuse him. She let him lie to himself about what she did, what she studied, and if he asked her specific questions she cast her mind back to her degree and tried her best to keep the story rolling. In front of them a bus pulled jerkily away from its stop.

'What a cunt. How late does he want to put his indicator on?'

It didn't take long to get from Chorlton to Manchester Royal Infirmary. They drove through Moss Side and came up by the side of Withington Park. They passed Black Monk's. They turned right off Oxford Road and into the hospital grounds. Suddenly there was an ambulance in front of them and an ambulance following them. The taxi driver pulled over. She handed over her money and he handed back the change. She thanked him and he thanked her. Where had he come from? Where would he go now? She wanted to stay in the taxi with him all day, a silent partner, observing, eavesdropping on his passengers' conversations. She went in through Casualty. A cold breeze followed her into the waiting room through the double doors, which were wide open to admit the city's damaged people. She saw a huge woman in a dress like a tent with a neck like a tyre. She was holding her stomach and moaning. A young man with dried blood on his face pressed a balled-up hoodie to his scalp. An old man coughed with a sound like a pick going into earth. A little girl sat between her parents, her father holding a cardboard vomit-bowl to her chin. A teenage boy cradled his wrist. A middle-aged man was trying to staunch a nosebleed, the front of his white work-shirt covered in blood. There were others whose injuries were less visible, who could've been

patients or not, hurt or not, ill or well. Wall-mounted TV screens showed the BBC's 24 hour news channel, with automated subtitles that erred often into gibberish.

She walked off down a corridor. She tried to follow the signs above the doorways – purple zone, orange zone. After a little while she saw a pale young woman with a prosthetic arm. She followed her, knowing that possibly she wasn't going to the right place, that she might lead her out of the hospital entirely, and thinking that possibility funny. Without knowing, this woman led the way. She took Lorelei through quiet sections of the hospital. Nurses glided around busily, but other than the woman she was following she saw no other patients. They'd all been removed to somewhere else, and now only the staff were left, and the hospital could finally run perfectly. She turned from one corridor on to another and she saw a sign for the amputee clinic, and that the woman she'd been following had disappeared into it. Then another sign of life: a chubby young boy on crutches. He worked his way down the corridor towards her.

She said, ‘You’re doing well. Are you making a break for it?’

The boy wore a baggy Adidas jumper, had thick black eyebrows and a clumsy flat-top haircut. He’d lost a foot.

He said, ‘Yeah.’

The waiting room of the amputee clinic was small and the quality of the light and the paint on the walls made it a yellow cell. Chairs were set out in a horseshoe around a television that was showing a programme about buying property, improving it, selling it on. There was a window with a view of the wall of another part of the hospital. The waiting room was two-thirds full; there were perhaps seven people in there. The nurses behind the counter didn't notice her. She sat for a while, trying to look as if she belonged to someone, and reading the headlines of the thin, gossipy glossy magazines on the waiting-room table. She was on the cusp of getting away with it. A name was called. The woman she'd followed down the

corridors rose and followed a nurse through an open door which closed behind them. Lorelei wished she could go along. She'd read so much – she understood a great deal, from the battlefield surgery of the First World War to the microchips in the most advanced false limbs still currently only prototypical. She didn't know quite what she was doing to these people, the right or wrong of it, the use she was making of the suffering of others. The lives of others. But it belonged to her too – that was her defence. Because she breathed air. Because she understood that every person was as well as a person also a symbol, an image, some piece of currency in a secret economy.

To stop herself thinking she took a magazine from the low table in the corner. It wasn't that she wanted to examine people. She only wanted to sit in a room with them. She read a story about surviving incest, another about the nation's favourite sexual positions.

Annie woke before her six o'clock alarm. She cracked the window and cranked the heating up as far as it could go, to try to beat the damp. She held the curtain's hem between the finger and thumb of her left hand. It was only just dawn. The street looked like a different street, seen on a film or in a photograph, the blues and greys digitally painted in. The drunk was on the pavement, talking into her mobile, and when she laughed Annie could hear it. A blackbird worried a pizza box, trying to shake out crusts. The drunk walked backwards and forwards. She wiped her hair with the flat of her hands because it was raining a little. The rain darkened the shoulders of her ancient waxed jacket.

When Annie showered the water ran fine for five minutes and just as she was ready for the final rinse it crapped out with a surprising little groan. The water died away to just a trickle. She had to get out and scrape the suds off her skin with the towel, and wash the shampoo out of her hair with a plastic jug from the kitchen which she filled four times with hot water from the sink tap. Once she'd dressed for work she still had bags of time before she

needed to leave, so she rolled up her sleeves and took the shower-head from its clip and inspected it. She unscrewed it from its hose. She poured water through it with the jug and it ran out again as it should've. She reattached it to the hose. It was electric, so there was little else she could do.

On the bus into the city there were two small children, a brother and a sister, both wearing their primary school uniforms. They shouted at each other, explaining something to each other, telling each other a story. Annie was one seat back and could see nothing of the children's father except the back of his hood and nothing of their mother except her scraped-back blonde hair, her ponytail, the gold hoops of her earrings. The rest of the bus was quiet – people muttered into their phones or else had their earbuds in, listening to podcasts, or playlists shuffling themselves. There was something wrong with the children's voices. They slurred their words. Annie listened to them and it spooked her. Their letters ran together, the end of each word blurred into the next. It made her want to shake her head from side to side and rearrange their voices for them. Their dad leaned over and told them to shut up. He slurred too, because he was pissed. Their mother rubbed her neck with one hand and told them to shut up. She slurred. Taught to speak by drunks, they spoke like drunks. It depressed her.

On the tram she wrote notes into a pad, scheduling the day, putting down more detail than was needed, occupying herself. When she got into the office, Kalvis was waiting for her. He ushered her into the kitchen.

'Jim Tuttle got mugged. I think it's awful. That's my official story.'

'Is he OK?'

'Broken jaw. When did you leave him?'

'Maybe half past twelve.'

Kalvis was in an olive-green sweatshirt instead of his usual suit. It was like seeing a policeman out of uniform, freed and vulnerable. He slipped his cup underneath the samovar's

dripping black plastic tap and flicked it so it trickled boiling water onto instant coffee grounds. Annie was microwaving porridge.

‘He’s not really sure what happened. I think he was pissed out of his skull.’

She dug a spoon into her oats. It was gluey. She blew on it.

‘He was wandering about looking for a taxi. I don’t know how much they got off him. His phone, his wallet. They didn’t take his wedding ring or anything. That happened to my dad once, in Newcastle. He fell asleep pissed, you know, in a pub, and when he woke up in the afternoon his wedding ring was gone. It was terrible. It was before I was born. I don’t know why they had to hit him. Jim, I mean. But I can imagine him saying something, can’t you? Giving them a bit of lip. The police found him quite quickly. They'd spotted it on the CCTV. They might even have footage of it happening.’

Annie thought that Kalvis would like to see it. And so would she, out of academic interest. As a curio. For a laugh. Desk-phones were ringing in the office. Porridge was cheap and wonderful. She'd started eating it everyday.

‘He’s been very complimentary about you.’

She swallowed. She said, ‘Good.’

That afternoon there was a meeting for the management team – supervisors, team-leaders. It was the first time Annie had been told to attend. While twelve people sat around a board-table chatting she stuck a USB stick into a laptop, brought up her power-point. A projector wrote her presentation large on the back wall. She showed them the same diagrams she’d been shown at the conference.

‘I don’t think there’s any point in talking through this in great depth. You can find the methodology here...’ she played the cursor over a URL on the slide ‘...so I might just say a couple of things that have occurred to me. Chris, Claire, I think that you could find applications for it.’

The whole thing felt airless and cartoonish. It didn’t matter what she said, only that she was saying it. They wanted to see her speak, to check she could. When her section of the meeting was complete she stayed in the room for a little longer and listened to the supervisors malign clients and job applicants.

At home she tried the shower again and it worked fine. She wondered if someone was trying to drive her mad. She told herself a joke: the drunk downstairs had a secret key to the flat, and was coming in to sabotage things. Or Adam, he had a way of getting in somehow, he'd made some arrangement with the slick lads at the letting agency. Her stomach felt as if there was a heavy stone in it. Exercise was the answer. Or she should've read a book. She sat on the edge of the bath and drummed her heels slowly against the laminated board that enclosed the tub so it boomed like a kettle drum. Ageing was the process of distancing herself more and more thoroughly from the possibility of simple, costless pleasure. The next night she heard running water or splashing, something, she was half asleep and it was an almost silent night, very late, very cold. She worried that it was something leaking in the flat, the shower trying to make up for its failings, but then she heard the clunk or chink of glass against pavement. She opened her curtains just enough to see out but not be seen herself. She'd become deft at that now. A girl was in the middle of the road, squatting down, pissing a huge running puddle. It was coming out of her with great force. She had a bottle of wine in her hand and was using that to prop herself up when she wobbled. When she was steady again she drank from the bottle. She was wearing a fake fur jacket and had masses of back-combed hair. This was the real deal; as far as Annie was concerned this is what the children of Fallowfield should've been doing forever.

The girl finished and stood up, arranged her underwear and her tights, pulled down her skirt. After she'd gone the puddle, orphaned, huge, looked like the silhouette of a jellyfish or a comet with a long tail.

Finley could've been a para. He could've. When he was younger; when he was nineteen. He'd got his run time right down so he could do the mile and half in eight minutes and spare change. He ran the canals and the parks around Sale, where he lived. He ran after work. There was thirty weeks of basic ahead, and after that jump training at RAF Brize Norton. His press-ups and sit-ups were a thing of beauty and his numbers were well above the minimum. These benchmarks had become part of his mantra when he ran or did his other exercises, his squats and pull-ups, and when he was on jobs, doing the donkey work, still edging out of his apprenticeship and into full electricianhood, not trusted to complete complex work on his own, and trusted even less now they knew that he was hoping to fuck it all off for the parachute regiment.

The assessment course was approaching. This was a three-day test. There would be medicals, physicals, briefings, beastings. He'd already done his best to persuade them – to persuade everyone he had spoken to in the army, at every stage, the magical practical men of the army recruitment office, these men who had a secret, deep understanding of life – that he was ready to join them, that he understood. The Middle East was kicking off; it was a *real* decision. He was ready to be introduced to the SA80 rifle. He was ready to throw himself out of a plane. At this time he was still hanging around with lads from school, although they were trouble. Whitey, Blake, Terry, Baker, Daz, Lew. There were others. They liked the gym, they talked about fucking all the time. They lived with their parents, still, and went on holiday together to hot islands. They drank like fish.

A night out with them: their reason for going out doesn't matter, nor does it matter who exactly was out. The group was fluid, and there were friends of friends with them as well, so they were a roaming gang, twenty strong give-or-take, stinking of aerosol deodorant and aftershave. Tight t-shirts and tight jeans. They stuck their tongues out in photographs, hung

their arms around each other's necks, in love with each mate as much as they were in love with themselves. They drank shots and shouted at the bar in a pub by the railway station and then in a nightclub called Hassy's where the bottles in the fridges glowed in the UV lights and the DJ shouted booming and incomprehensible things through the PA.

There were girls there in short skirts and with their tits pushed up like shelves, like trays, like there should be something balanced upon them. Their make-up was warpaint, their eyebrows dark and menacing, and they laughed at each other and they laughed at the men, at the boys, hundreds of laughing, drinking women rolling their eyes at each other. Like the recruitment officers, of the same species as them, with the same steel somewhere in their spines, these young nightclubbing women understood the world in a way Finley did not. Either they had access to a secret world or his world was the secret one, small, sweaty, an isolation cell. At his interviews with the recruitment officers he'd told them that he was dedicated and honest, that he valued integrity, understood teamwork, worked well with others, wanted to be part of something with a history.

They bought each other drinks and laughed and laughed, having reached a point where their words no longer mattered because they'd never be remembered even if they were understood initially; the music was so loud they might as well have hooted or sung, la-la-la. They were ecstatic. Whitey had sorted them out some pills with little stars embossed upon them. They swung their jaws involuntarily and thrust their heads back and forth on neck muscles which felt like cables of pleasure. Whitey's parents were away in Mexico. The lads moved backed to their house after the club had kicked out, to carry on drinking shit lager and vodka-redbull. For whatever reason, for a secret reason he understood later, at about six in the morning when there were only two other people still awake (Baker, maybe, and Lew) he went into the kitchen and took Whitey's parents' spare car keys from a drawer. At parties, when drugs were involved, he thought that he learned things in the centre of the rush, little pieces of

knowledge, which came back to him later, apropos of nothing, and almost always proved to be false.

Baker and Lew passed a joint between them, playing on Whitey's Xbox with the volume down low. It was cold on the driveway and he looked in through the window at them. They didn't see him. Honestly he hated them. He unlocked the car and got in the driver's seat and with some effort and thought, because he was clumsy with booze and shivering from cold or from the pill, he started the car, turned the windscreen wipers on and off, indicated and turned off the driveway and onto the road. The road was long. There was nothing coming in either direction and no pedestrians around, but there were cars parked on both sides all along. The aircon vents were open and the heating was on full; it blasted him with hot air so it felt like his eyes were cooking. He coasted slowly down the road, thinking that there some shops nearby. They wouldn't be open yet, and he could turn around at the car park there and drive back. No-one would notice. No-one would ever know what had happened.

But there was a police car idling at the lights as he swung wide on the amber and the shock of seeing the police made him fuck it up and crash into a parked van. He was going hardly any speed at all. The bump shook him in his seat. When one of the policemen opened the door he was crying, pushing the heels of his hands into his face. It was done.

The paras would probably still have taken him. It might have delayed him for a year or two. He paid off Whitey's parents for the damage. He was lucky to keep his job with the driving ban; more time doing the donkey-work. He stopped seeing his friends and stopped wanting to be in the regiment. It was something you had to really, really want, with every ounce of yourself, or you'd already confirmed your failure. Instead he began to think about travelling.

He'd cried and cried in the back of the police car until the policemen eventually asked him to stop, as if he was upsetting even them, who had seen so many traffic accidents,

decapitations, toddlers jettisoned out of windows, people assaulted outside chain pubs on rainy autumn evenings, hit in the head with heavy objects, their brains leaking out. From then on Finley couldn't go out for a drink without thinking about it, or thinking about not thinking about it. He got a little tightening in his chest. Even years later in his bathroom as he cleaned his recently bleached teeth, and flossed, and examined the deep pores of his nose, out of nowhere he found himself spitting out toothpaste foam and saying, smiling, 'What a fucking shame. What a waste. What a fuck-up.'

There was a dented yellow skip opposite Annie's flat. It said the name of the plant hire firm on the side or rather it would've but the letters had been eaten away by time and weather, which made the skip look like a naval landing craft. A landlord had decided to do up one of the houses; this happened every so often. Men had been brought in to rip everything out, to smash up the kitchen units and tear sinks out of the walls, to kick the doors down and annihilate brick fireplaces. To be a landlord in Manchester was, Annie thought, more or less a licence to print money. On her way out to meet Lorelei she looked in the skip to see if there was anything worth taking. There wasn't.

They met Finley at midnight at a cash machine next to the little Tesco on Wilmslow Road. There was a yellow square painted on the ground in front of the cash machine: this represented the personal space of the person using the machine. Annie didn't recognise him and he didn't recognise her. There was some problem with her card or with the machine, which didn't want to give her the money she had requested. It was Lorelei who started talking to Finley. He was standing behind them, waiting for Annie to get out of his way. Lorelei said something small to him that later neither of them could really remember. She was drunk and he was drunk. Annie and Lorelei had met for dinner and it had turned into three bottles of wine between them. Finley had come into Fallowfield for pints with the running club.

Annie turned around and said, 'Stay out of the box, Lorelei. Stop looking over my shoulder.'

And Lorelei laughed but really she was interested in Finley, in whatever it was that he'd been saying. It was only natural that he came with them for a drink. He was heading in the same direction. He was polite and made every effort to talk to Annie as much as he talked Lorelei, so she didn't feel left out or isolated, but he couldn't keep it up. Annie watched drunk Lorelei flirt. It was a mismatch, prim little Lorelei with all her sensitivities, and this healthy-looking man who seemed, from everything he said, not stupid, exactly, but not especially bright.

In the morning Annie was hungover. When her phone started buzzing on the bedside table she was in two minds about answering. It would be Lorelei, she thought, telling her what had gone on after she'd left them. She flipped the phone and saw that it was her father. She had a sip of water, turned over the pillow so she could have its cool side.

'Hello?'

He cleared his throat.

'You're calling early. I've just woken up.'

He said, 'You're at home?'

'Where else would I be?'

She stretched her free arm, pale and thin, up towards the ceiling, and twisted her hand back and forth. As she stretched she let out a kind of grunt of a yawn, something that sounded like a sigh or a burp.

'Look. Your mum's not well.'

'What?'

'She's has been in hospital.'

On the train she looked out of the window at pretty hills and then suddenly the backs of

houses. She wished she could read. She was near the end of something grisly set in Helsinki during the sunless arctic winter. She drank a little can of premixed gin and tonic. She stretched her legs as much as she could and rolled her shoulders until the bones clicked. When she'd finished the book she drank another can of G&T. It felt like it had no effect at all, like nothing was passing into her and later – soon – she'd need to piss nothing out.

She rang a taxi from the station. The driver seemed to understand that she didn't want to talk. The journey took twenty minutes. The fare was expensive. At her parents' house no-one answered the door when she rang. The house was small, white, with a low steep roof. She left her small black case in the porch, tucked out of sight. She walked around the side of the house, edged between her father's rose bushes, and peered through the kitchen window. The room was empty but the extractor-fan light was on and its dim bulb was glowing tangerine. There was a deep ceramic pot on the hob, steam rising lazily from it. Something moved and she jumped. It was their white cat, December, flopping onto its back in the middle of the kitchen table. It gazed at the ceiling.

Her parents were in their orchard.

She shouted, 'Hello!'

They turned from the tree they were considering, and her father waved a ball of string and then made as if to throw it at her. She walked down the garden path and through the open gateway in the thigh-high stone wall that marked the beginning of the fruit-trees. Her mother had cut her hair very short and dyed it purple. Silver seashells hung from the lobes of her ears. The bags under her eyes were huge, and she looked thin. Her father looked paunchy. She hugged him.

Her mother kissed her on the cheek and said, 'Gorgeous. Manchester agrees with you.'

They were using the string to mark points on the tree's limbs where they might prune it.

'We have to make it kind of goblet-shaped,' said her father. 'Last year I got carried away.

In the end they were all a bit straight-up-and-down. Like a supermodel. So now we've agreed to take the tactical approach.'

Annie helped them cut the string, and went up on tiptoes to tourniquet the branches her mother couldn't get reach.

Her mother said, 'We've been talking to a local cider company. A lot of these are good cider varieties.'

Annie touched the trunk. It was cool, the bark rough. 'Is this one a cider variety?'

'It's a pear tree.'

Her father laughed. It was a wonderful brassy sound and had embarrassed her deeply when she was a teenager.

Annie said, 'Well, perry then. Will they make perry from it?'

'I hope so. It's not bad money.'

She looked at her mother and said, 'I can't believe you've been in hospital.'

They ate in the kitchen, arranging dishes and cutlery around the cat, which refused to move.

Her father said, 'Little shit.'

He nudged it with the blunt butt of the handle of a butter knife. Annie had brought a bottle of red wine and she poured three heavy glasses.

'I can't, I'm afraid,' her mother said. 'It's not good for my medication. If I drink I feel a bit strange.'

'I'm sure it's not, you know,' her father said. 'I'm sure there's no interaction.'

'Better to be careful, isn't it?'

There was a moment between them – Annie didn't get it. Her mother was thin, had always been so, but her blood-pressure was sky-high. She spooned stew into Annie's bowl. The pot it'd been cooked in was bright orange. The bowls were hand-thrown, rough-surfaced,

the colour of mud.

Annie said, ‘Shall we split it, then?’

'Spot on.’

Her father decanted half of her mother’s glass into Annie’s, and tipped the rest into his. Her mother poured herself a mug of cold tap water. They clinked, glass to mug. Annie said – this was the family toast – ‘Death to your enemies!’

They drank. They ate. The food was salty. Chunks of sweet root vegetables, stringy beef, translucent strips of soft onion. They talked about books, about her childhood, about their childhoods. They talked about Manchester. They talked about music and her mother did a vicious impression of a singer she'd seen on the television. She wanted Annie to guess who it was, but Annie didn’t recognise the song or know the names of anyone who it might have been. She piled gristle and fat on the side of her plate.

Her mother said, ‘There’s something holy about eating together. I mean it. It's close to the divine. I think it’s about vulnerability. Or just being together for a shared purpose. Fulfilling a base need. A basic need.’

After a while the cat barked a shrill meow like the first syllable of a fire-alarm and took itself off somewhere.

Her father said, ‘He’s gone to kill mice. He hates mice. I find bits of them everywhere. I found a mouse’s arse and head on our doorstep because he’d just eaten the soft middle out of it. The centre. Like a chocolate. He’s a savage.’

Finally Annie's mother was ready to talk to her.

‘Well,’ she says. 'I had a funny turn – I was in town shopping and I became very faint. I was walking down the high street and then suddenly, whoomph, I was sitting down. It felt like there was a hand around my heart. Some teenage girls called an ambulance. At the hospital they said they were going to have to keep me in.'

'Did you get the blue lights?'

'She did,' said Annie's father.

‘I thought that I’d never be able to sleep because it hurt so much, and of course I was worried. About who was going to go and pick my car up from town. I didn’t want anyone else to worry. And I was worrying about dying. I really tried to think about dying, because I thought, this might be my last chance to think about death and life.'

Annie's neck prickled. Her scalp buzzed.

‘The doctors asked me about my family history and I told them what I could – I was very upset – and I remember wishing that I had more family, that somehow I had an extended family. Who would rally round. I wished I'd had more children. The doctors and the nurses were quite cold, I thought. They can be very condescending to older women.

‘I thought I’d never be able to sleep. But a nurse came and gave me some painkillers, or something – I had an IV drip and various pieces of equipment attached to me and she injected something into one of the lines attached to the cannula in the back of my hand. It made me very woozy and I dropped off.'

Annie's father said, 'That's when I arrived. I'd been working out in the garden and I wasn't expecting her back until late anyway, and because I'm stupid I'd left my mobile in the house. So I didn't see the calls from the hospital for ages. And then of course your mother had parked the car in the town and then been taken to the hospital. I worked out that it would be quickest to go and get the car first and then drive that. So I had to call the cab to take me to the car. The hospital were very good, they kept me very calm.'

Annie's mother: ‘I woke up in the night and there was someone standing at the foot of the bed. I thought, It’s someone checking my chart. He was a tall black man with quite a long beard, although he wasn’t very old at all. It was the kind of beard that a young man would grow to make a point, if you understand.’

Reflexively she thought of Adam's cheeks and how they had felt to the touch. His beard had always felt too soft, not quite part of him.

‘It didn’t seem strange at the time. When you’re in hospital the weirdest things can happen and it all just feels normal. For example, there was a very old man on the ward who had dementia. The nurses had put him in a private room because he was so distressed, and he was distressing other patients. He kept screaming and screaming. He was screaming, I want to go, I want to go. And although that was horrible, it quickly just felt normal, especially after the nurse gave me my painkillers.’

‘So I thought nothing of this black man at the foot of my bed in the night. Because his attention was very fixed on me – he looked like he was sizing me up in a medical way – looking at me not as a person but as a collection of parts, and as if by looking at how I was laying in the bed he could work out how I would be in the morning. If anything, you know, I didn’t think, Oh, who is this strange man at the foot of my bed. I thought, Oh thank god –’ she lifted her hands suddenly, as if she was a marionette, ‘– someone knows what they’re doing.

‘In the morning the pain was still horrible. I’d say that before it was like a hand was around my heart but when it got worse it was like my heart was in a bear-trap. As if it was in an animal’s jaws. I was really writhing around. A consultant came around at about eleven in the morning and he told me that I’d be in for a few more nights. I didn’t like him.

‘So I had my first full day on the ward. The woman in the bed next to me, her daughters came. I listened in on them and they were saying, they were telling their mother how they hadn’t brought their grandchildren because they were worried that it’d be too upsetting for them to see their Nan with tubes in her. Which upset me because I thought, I’m ill enough to upset children. Then I wondered when or if you'd have children, and whether I'd be around to see them.

‘I thought, this is how people die. People die in hospital beds with their grandchildren

kept away, in case it’s upsetting. Because it’s upsetting. They were right though, I think. That old man was still screaming in his private room. You can’t expose children to suffering.

‘They kept me doped up. It was like being drunk. Your father came in to see me but I was out of it.'

He said, 'She was really out of it. I'd been talking to the doctors and they didn't know what it was. They don't now, really. But they were still doing tests and everything like that, and as your mum says she's was doped up to the eyeballs. So I just sat there and talked to her when she wanted to talk, but she wasn't saying anything that really made sense. And when it was time to go I gave her a kiss and went.'

‘That night again I woke up and the man was at the foot of my bed. There are lots of black nurses in the NHS, I thought – they come from Trinidad and places like that, don’t they. So I didn’t think it was strange. He was wearing white and I didn’t think that was strange because white is a very hospital colour at first, when you first thing about it – but then you realise – then I thought – nurses and doctors wear green or blue as well, don’t they?

‘So from my position in the bed I tried to look properly at his clothes. And do you know, I just couldn’t work them out at all. I couldn’t work out what they were – if they were a uniform or a smock, or perhaps I thought maybe a white overall, that could be something that hospital staff working late at night might wear. I just thought, it’s all a dream. The old man was screaming in his room.

‘In the morning I woke up and it was bedlam because the old man had got up in the early hours of the morning and I don’t know fully what he’d done, but I have the sense that he’d attacked a nurse and that he might have smashed something. I asked a nurse why everyone was acting as if something had happened and she told me a little bit and I listened in on the other nurses as best I could. I pieced it together.

‘On that day – the third day – it didn’t feel as bad. But I could tell that something was

still happening. It was like my heart was growing inside my chest and pushing against my ribs.'

'The day passed. A doctor came again and he said that I was doing very well – better than expected – and that I would be out in two more days.

'The woman next to me, her daughters came again and they talked all afternoon about their father, who none of them had seen for a long time. He was in the army. They had a lot of problems and then unfortunately he chose to just disappear. Which didn't need to happen. He should have stayed.

'I ate some food. Have I already said that the food was disgusting? Everyone says that food in hospital is disgusting, but this really was disgusting. Everything tasted of antibiotics. I said this to your father when he was there – I said, It's like the food is ill. The nurse came around and dosed me again through the intravenous line.

'Of course I woke up again. In the armpit of the night, my mother used to say, your grandmother. I say, the arsehole of the night. I woke up in the arsehole of the night. And he was there. I only opened my eyes long enough to see him standing there in white, the man, looking at me, and looking around the ward.

'Then I shut my eyes again. Because I thought, this isn't a dream, it's a hallucination. And I didn't want to be part of it.

'I stayed like that for some time, with my eyes closed, and I knew he was there, watching me. I thought, open your eyes, see that he's not there. But I knew he was there.

'And just as I was about to open my eyes there was a scream. The old man from the private room had got free again. I opened my eyes and the black man had gone, and that old man was there standing not far away, in the walkway between the beds. He was screaming and shouting, Black people! There are black people! Black people!

'A nurse came running in and hit the lights and it was all over. They took him back to his

room shouting, Black people, black people. Then they came to check on us. Because there were a lot of people with heart conditions there, and, you know, they'd been woken in the night by a scream. It was a bit of a shock. But everyone was fine. I said to the nurse, I just woke up and he was screaming.

'The next morning the consultant came around and asked me how I was and I said – and I only realised it when I said it – I said, I feel fine. And sure enough later that day I was discharged. I did feel a bit like he'd healed me as I lay there, the black man. But that's orientalism, isn't it? There's this phrase that film critics use: the magic Negro. So I decided in the end that he didn't heal me. I wish I'd asked him something. You think you're one thing, and you're not. I would say that over my life that is the thing that I've learned.'

The more her mother said the more she seemed like a stranger. Annie didn't feel like she could or should reply. After the meal, with the dishwasher stacked, Annie lit a cigarette and stood under the extractor fan. Her mother's chrome espresso pot bubbled to itself on the hob. Her father sat down again at the table and took slow drags on an electronic cigarette, blowing the vape's fake smoke across the room and tapping the tube with a forefinger every so often as if it was a cigar.

Then she told them about work. They were excited by it. They moved into the living room where the log-burning stove smouldered. Her father poured two tots of sloe gin and handed her one. It was too sweet but it warmed her throat.

'Will it mean a pay rise?'

'At some point,' she said. 'Yes. If I don't fuck everything up.'

Her mother said, 'I'm so glad. I knew you'd get on.'

She'd take the week off work. It was short notice, but Kalvis would understand; everyone would understand. She'd receive supportive messages from Darren and Primo, as if it was she who was ill, and an answerphone message from Lauren, garbled and panicked, Lauren

terrified that she might accidentally say something terrible, I hope your mother dies, I hope you never come back to work.

‘Do you remember,’ said her father, ‘when you were at university? You used to ring us whenever you picked up your papers, and tell us your marks, you know. Mum, Dad, I got a seventy-five. I got a forty because they capped it because I didn’t hand it in on time. And I used to say to you then, you’ve just got to find something that can hold your interest. Or, I think I used to say, you’ve got to find something that’s worth your interest. In life, or in work, or wherever.’

In Chorlton, in Lorelei's dark bedroom, Finley lay underneath her. It was an examination. He'd taken off all of his clothes because she'd told him to, he'd come upstairs because she told him to, he'd driven over to Chorlton in the van on her suggestion. Really they'd said very little to each other, he and this woman who was strange to him, who he'd only met the evening before. For her part she wasn't sure what she was doing, but there was a thrill in it. Watching Annie, being with Annie, being Annie's friend, had made her critically aware of how important it was to appreciate the value of a thrill.

The light was low in the room and he was very still and very pale. He had a modest roll of fat at his belly and his hips. His nipples were dark like the markings of a moth, a moth's fake predatory eyes. His cock had a thick blue vein. His ribcage was deep. Lorelei ran her hands all over him, from his feet to his wrists, from his neck to his testicles, feeling the shifting of him as he breathed and the heat of his flesh. He wondered what she was doing.

Nothing was missing. Of course even if he'd lost a leg or an arm nothing would've been missing.

In the morning when Annie came down from the guest bedroom, her father looked grizzled.

His silver hair stood on end like bare electrical wiring. He buttered toast.

'I slept like the dead. But not for long enough. We went to bed at, what, about midnight? I had to get up again at six because your mother elbowed me in the side. I came down here. I've been reading since then. A book about Turkey. Ancient Turkey. This is my second breakfast.'

She tucked it into the corner of the kitchen. She took an orange from the fruit bowl, feeling its cool glossiness, dug her nails in, and peeled it. Soon her mother came down. She was terrible. It was frightening. She sat at the table and looked absolutely bereft, her eyes wide with grief. How much she'd changed in hardly any time at all. By the afternoon they were genuinely worried about her. Annie's father busied himself with little jobs. She groaned and sobbed. She said very strange things. Her sentences didn't connect.

At one point, although neither Annie nor her father had spoken, she shouted 'Of course not!'Then, 'I never, ever, ever cared about that.'

After a while she went into the front room and fell asleep on the sofa and snored like a pig, her mouth wide open and her brow furrowed as if she was dreaming that she was awake and still suffering. Annie's father pulled her out into the garden so they could talk. Annie smoked. Her father was twitchy and uncertain. He tugged at the loose ends of the strings dangling from the spare bare limbs of his fruit trees. He turned to her, rolled his shoulders. They walked down the orchard now, away from the house. The lines of trees made a channel that seemed to impel them to carry on off the property, into the hills. They agreed that the problem was the pills the hospital had given her. It was some novel, unexpected side-effect. The chemistry of her body was wrong. They reached the end of the orchard. Annie looked into the landscape as it continued away from her.

'She's been saying very hurtful things. Completely out of character. I mean, you know your mother, she can have a sharp tongue. But it's really poisonous. Things I did years ago. Every dissatisfaction.'

Annie said, ‘You don’t have to tell me what she's been saying.’

‘She’s linked it all together in a kind of grand plot. It's a conspiracy.’

Her father leaned against the low dry-stone wall that marked the orchard’s boundary. He'd turned and was facing back towards the house. Her mother appeared in the back door of the house, a distant figure. She waved. Annie waved back. She saw her mother cross her arms and stand looking at them, across the garden and the orchard, from the black void of the doorway of the beautiful little house.

‘What can I smell? I can smell something really nice.’

Her father said, ‘It’s lemon balm. Look, we’ve crushed it. You crush it a bit and it gives off its scent. It is lovely, isn’t it?’

There was a stepladder leaning against one of the trees and as Annie's mother walked towards them she passed the ladder, and stopped to take hold of it. She tucked it under one arm. Annie was reminded of a silent farce, some comic television show from the depths of her childhood. Her mother was crying and they could see it about the same time that they could hear it; she was sobbing as regularly and violently as if she had hiccups. Her cheeks were bright, bright red. She looked as if her face had been painted on, a doll's face. She was with them. She swung the ladder at Annie's father. She swung it high and edge-on and it clattered off the side of his head. She didn't swing it with much force – it was ungainly – so it didn't knock him over, but he did bend and put his hands to his head to try to block it as it came. Still it caught him just above his hairline. Annie took hold of her mother, who dropped the ladder.

Her father said, 'Fuck!'

Annie said, 'What are you doing?'

It had cut him. He patted at the cut with his finger tips and looked at the blood. A hank of his grey hair turned sticky and dark red. Cuts to the scalp bleed more than they should. Birds sang. It took them a long time to persuade her to come inside the house and sit with them.

While her father held a tea-towel to his head and her mother cried Annie spoke to the non-emergency phone line. She answered a series of questions about her mother's health, doing her best to fill in the gaps in her father's understanding, and to coax answers out of her mother. Through some unspoken agreement with her father she didn't say anything on the phone about the ladder. She couldn't have explained it anyway. She read the labels on the pills her mother had been given at the hospital. The quiet, kind man at the other end of the line listened and hummed and tapped away on his keyboard.

'She's so depressed. It's come on so quickly. It's too quick for it to be natural. It's unbelievable how quickly.'

'The thing is,' he said, 'there's no record, there's no information of those drugs interacting in any way, and none of their listed side-effects include the kind of mood issues you're describing. They've given her a relatively mild painkiller and anti-inflammatory. If she wants she can stop taking that and switch to Ibuprofen.'

Her mother went back to bed. Her father went and sat with her until she fell asleep. Then he came back down and they sat in the kitchen to have a cup of tea.

'You might need stitches.'

'I don't need stitches.'

She sipped tea.

'Why do you think she did it?'

'How should I know?'

There was a plate on the table with a single biscuit on it. Annie took the biscuit and ate it while her father poked again at the cut.

'It's mad.'

'Annie.'

She looked at him and saw a kind of pride. He was warning her not to speak against her

mother. He was saying, this doesn’t belong to you. It was between her father and mother, lovers, conjoined elements of one on-rushing life.

'Has she ever been violent before?'

He picked up the plate with one hand and held it up high, as if he meant to bring it down on the corner of the table and smash it. But he lowered it slowly and placed it carefully back in its spot on the tabletop.

He said, 'Enough, Annie.'

The Arndale shopping centre: the beating heart of Manchester. It had been so since the beginning of time. The IRA couldn't beat the Arndale. In the future there would probably be some other terrorist attack there, and that wouldn't beat the Arndale either. Over the years the shops changed and the people shopping in the shops changed, that was all. It was so busy there that it took some time before Adam was discovered. It was late in the afternoon and he'd locked himself in a toilet cubicle. The cleaners knocked on the door and he wouldn't let them in. He gave no sign that he knew that they were there. One of the cleaners was Polish and the other an old Scot.

The Scot said, 'Come on. Come on now.'

The Polish cleaner, whose anglicised name was Michael, had already looked under the door. He'd seen Adam's shoes. He checked again.

'He won't have disappeared, will he?'

Michael got up and shrugged. To be a cleaner in a shopping centre was to understand that fundamentally there was no difference between practical acts and absurd acts. Men were pissing in the urinals. Men were queuing for the cubicles. In the wide mirrors men adjusted their carefully chosen baseball caps to just the right angle, checked their teeth, or stared simply into the eyes of their reflections for a moment before heading out again into the

shopping centre. One man, drunk, held his hands under one of the soap dispensers above the long sink-trough, and waited for a long time while nothing happened before he realised that it was not, in fact, a hand-dryer. Michael and the old Scot banged and banged on the door, and radioed for a security guard, who came eventually, scratched the rolls of fat on the back of his huge neck, and undid the sliding lock from the outside using a master-key which was a little hexagonal piece of metal. Inside the cubicle Adam saw the bolt slide back by itself. They came in for him.

'What have you taken?'

'Are you a shoplifter?'

'Who should we call?'

'Do you need any medication?'

He shook his head.

'You're very pale, mate. Feel his hands – they're ice cold.'

The heaved him upright and out of the cubicle. They walked him out of the toilets, Michael on one side and the security guard on the other. They found a bench and sat him down. He wouldn't or couldn't speak. The security guard went away and came back with a bottle of water and after some persuading he managed to make Adam drink.

As yet no-one had called any authority higher than the security guard. Adam was a mystery rather than an emergency. There was no obvious reason to call an ambulance or the police. Likewise for the cleaners or the security guard to involve their managers might have been a risk; if Adam turned out to be something entirely benign, or easily solved, then all three of them would look ridiculous. The old Scot was firm on that point.

'Let's just see what he has to say.'

They waited. Shoppers streamed past, gangs of teenage girls with their bellies out and their hair up, gangs of teenage boys with their heads down and their headphones on. People

from countless countries. The bored, the tired. Keen to spend. They stared at the tableau as they passed it: pale Adam on the bench, the Scot sitting next to him with his arms crossed over his belly. Gawky Michael leaned against the cool grey tiles of the wall. The security guard stood on the other side, fingering his radio, framed in the bright window of a 99p shop.

'Maybe he's a deaf-mute. Or pretending to be a deaf-mute. We had a gang of them last summer. This was before your time, Michael. They hung around at the Market Street entrance and they were begging with these little laminated cards that said, what was it? That said, I cannot speak, I cannot hear, please help me with a small donation. And we never worked out if they were really deaf-mutes or if they were acting. If they were acting they were very good.'

They waited. After a little while he cracked. He seemed to melt down into himself, to become smaller. Michael, who knew something about drugs, thought that Adam was at the end of a bad trip. Adam tried as best he could, but it was impossible to describe. A figure in the background a little like a person glimpsed only in the corner of the eye. A certain way of moving. A trick of vision which meant again and again as he'd turned the corners of the Arndale, as he exited one shop and walked across to another, as he'd idled in the food court between McDonald's and KFC, he was troubled by the knowledge that there was something happening which only he was aware of, him alone in the whole world and no-one else. All that time waiting and when it finally happened it had hit him like a wave of pressure and sent him scurrying through the crowds, whimpering, clutching at himself, to hide in the toilet utterly terrified.

The old Scot said, 'A ghost?'

He patted Adam on the shoulder. He looked from Michael to the security guard and back again, and raised his eyebrows. They examined Adam as Adam examined the flow of shoppers, his gaze flicking from face to face as if each one of them had the potential or the possibility to be a ghost. It was a kind of triumph for him.

After a couple of days without the painkillers her mother was back on an even keel. The scabbing cut on her father's head was the only evidence of what had happened, like a fingerprint or a signature of that mad moment, the swung ladder, the boiling up of whatever it was which had boiled up. The thing was – this was the thing, the thing itself – there was no dark secret. Annie had read enough books in which whole lives revolved around dark secrets, in which no family was allowed to exist without a dark secret at its core. But in her parents' history there was no drowned child or unacknowledged infidelity. The swung ladder. Who could ever know its point of origin? Life happens like a city growing. Because it must.

The cat was on the drive by the Range Rover. It rolled around and as its body shifted a mouse no bigger than the tip of Annie’s thumb jetted out from underneath it. The cat dropped a paw on its head like a judge sleepily bringing down a gavel. It was late in the afternoon. She'd hugged her mother goodbye, holding her tightly, and had kissed her on the cheek.

‘He tortures them,’ said her father. ‘I don’t like it.’

The cat released the mouse and it jumped around, not knowing which way to go. Her father grabbed the cat by the scruff of its neck. His shirt untucked itself.

He said, ‘Little Hitler!’

He hefted the cat up by its scruff and shook it gently. The cat looked at him and screamed like something within it was metal, a butterfly hinge, and it’d been left for too long without oil. They drove most of the way to the train station in silence. She wanted to ask him something, but didn't know the right question.

'Can I smoke?'

'Go on.'

He pressed a button to roll down the window. They were travelling slowly down a winding lane that cut through farmland. There were low dry-stone walls either side. It was

dusk. She had just finished the cigarette and thrown it from the window when something flew in. It was a small dark blur and it zoomed around the interior of the car. She shrieked and her father swore and jerked the wheel to the left and put the brakes on hard. Whatever it was it flew up into Annie's face and into her hair and she struck at it with her hands. The sound of its wings was like the sound of typing, of keys clattering. The thing fell down into the footwell and she drummed her feet. The 4x4 had come to a stop now and her father turned on the overhead light. It was a little bat, and she'd killed it. She picked it up by a wing with some tissue and threw it out of the window into the gloom, onto the verge. Her father was holding the steering wheel.

'Fuck me. I almost had a heart-attack. I almost crashed us into the wall.'

'I can't believe it.'

'Why do things keep happening?'

'It's mad, isn't it. It's mad.'

He said, 'This is the strangest period of my life. I have no idea what's going on. Your mother.'

He stopped. He drew air into himself so his chest swelled out and she had a sense of his strength, that he was a body, that he had lived a life before hers had begun and his had continued since her birth, and just like anybody's life his was a house with many rooms, occupied by many people, slowly falling apart.

She said, 'I know. Well, I don't know. But. You can call me anytime. We can talk.'

It was such a paltry offering that after a moment they both laughed. He set off again: she had a train to catch. She needed to get back to Manchester.

Annie could smell the smoke from the foot of Mabfield Road. If it'd been daylight she could've seen the column hanging in the sky. She wondered what was burning. As she walked

down along past the houses the smell of smoke became stronger and stronger, and before long she thought that it was her flat, surely, it must be. She told herself that it couldn't be. Why would it be? Because she felt apocalyptic. There was no-one on the road.

The skip was full of fire. The flames were low and their glow was reflected in the windows of the houses. She stood and looked at it. The smoke was bitter with the taste of burning plastic, a taste she remembered from somewhere, from some time; from whenever it was that she'd learned that plastic shouldn't be burned. On top of the rubble, bin-bags and newspapers and empty cider bottles warped and blackened as they burned. She pulled her scarf up over her mouth. Out came the drunk with an armful of trash. She walked around Annie and threw it on the bonfire.

'Hello, love. I'm having a clear-out. They're going to do work on my flat. The council won't take this stuff. It's too much for the bin. It's years of shit. I don't need any of it. Have you been away?'

'I went to see my parents.'

'Ah,' she said, 'family. I thought you looked pale. Get by the fire, warm yourself up.'

'I can't go near it. It's plastic. It's toxic. You shouldn't burn stuff in a skip – there might be tins of paint in there, or something.'

'It's all rubble. What would tins of paint do? Would they explode?

Annie didn't know.

'Someone's going to call the fire brigade on you. It's probably illegal.'

The drunk fixed her with a look.

'Who cares about that?'

She went back into the house for more fuel. After a hesitant moment Annie found a gap between parked cars and sat on the curb opposite the skip, where the stink wasn't as bad, and if anything exploded she wouldn't be burned up herself. She couldn't, she thought, just go and

and shut herself in her flat and watch from the window. Someone would need to speak to the police on the drunk's behalf. It was cold, and the pavement was wet. She scuffed dead leaves around in the gutter with the toes of her boots. By the time the drunk had come downstairs again and out onto the yard, a police helicopter was thundering in the sky. It was impossible to know if the helicopter had been sent out to look down at them and their burning skip, or if it was simply passing over on its way to track a car chase or hunt a burglar around back gardens with its thermal camera. The drunk dumped her rubbish in the skip which coughed up sparks and scraps of black smouldering paper. Then she stood in the road with her arms crossed and looked up at the helicopter, or rather the spot in the sky where the sound of its rotors were coming from, and the little winking light on its tail or its snout.

She came back over to Annie. Who was expecting her to say, all coppers are bastards. Instead she wiped her nose on her sleeve, and said, 'I've always wanted to go up in a helicopter, and look down. I want to see it all laid out. I want them to take me over the pubs, where the pubs used to be, and my school. And Southern Cemetery. I've got people in Southern Cemetery. I could drop flowers.'

'I was in a helicopter once.'

'Lucky.'

Annie started to tell her about the horse, the fall, the air-ambulance. But the drunk wasn't interested.

'Have you not got anything you want to burn?'

Instantly she thought of the Bruegel, of Bruegel's beggars, his truncated men in their strange hats. As much as she wanted to, she couldn't; Lorelei would come around and notice its absence, there being so little else in the flat. She'd have to persevere with it. She'd have to carry on looking at it.

'No. Nothing.'

If she could've she would've burned every painting she'd seen since she'd moved to Manchester. She would've burned Adam. She would've burned her parents, Lorelei, the buses, the trams, Salford Quays, Piccadilly Gardens, everyone except the musicians who played in the streets. The drunk said, 'Let's have a drink, love. Come for a drink in my flat. I've got red wine. You look like you drink red wine.'

The helicopter left, its noise echoing away until it was a reverberating hum on the horizon and then gone. In the new quiet she could hear the fire in the skip crackling. Then a siren. There were blue lights down at the end of Mabfield Road.

The drunk looked down the road and then at Annie.

'Come and have a drink, love.'

She went into the house and shut the door after her. Annie heard the lock click. When the police car stopped by the skip she stood and brushed down her coat to make sure nothing had stuck to her. She walked to the window of the police car, trying to frame an explanation, to prepare her speech. There were two policemen in the car. One of them turned on the overhead light and they sat there, watching her come towards them, illuminated in orange like exhibits in a protective glass case in the museum. There was something comforting about being at the centre of an event and knowing she couldn't blamed for what had happened. It was a problem that needed to be solved; it was work. Work would carry on for the rest of her life.

Note: I've invented various pubs and renamed others. Details of ghost sightings and hauntings have been lifted from largely anonymous accounts on internet forums and websites. I've altered them to fit my purposes. Information on the lineage of Churchill's black dog comes from '*Black dog' as a metaphor for depression: a brief history*, by Paul Foley (available from www.blackdoginstitute.org.au). The Manchester Art Gallery relies in part on donations from visitors, and other forms of patronage. It's a wonderful place: go and see for yourself.