WENSUM

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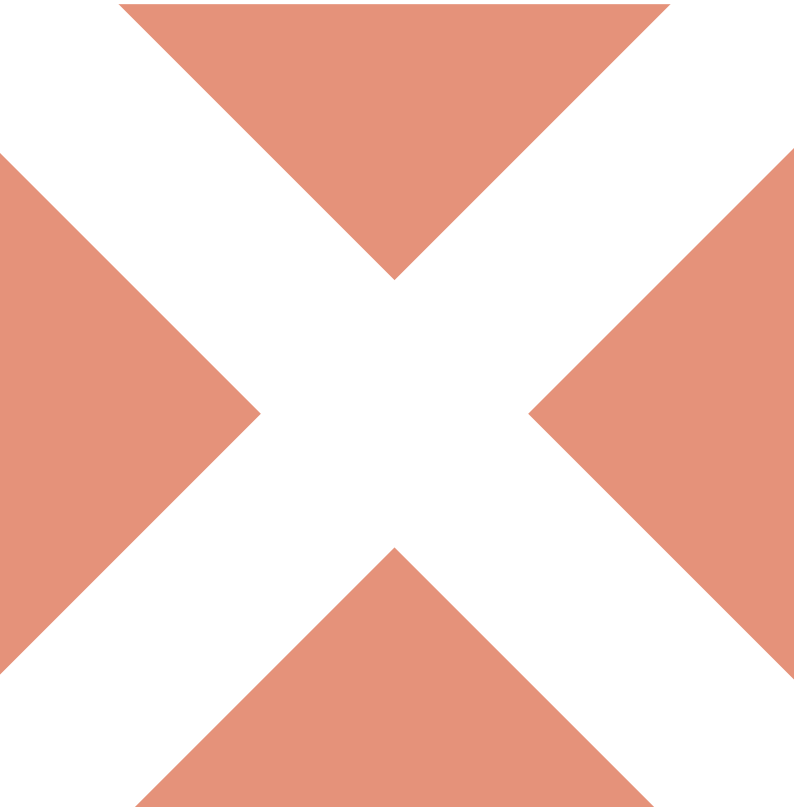

WELCOME

David Sexton | Editor

Issue 10 is the last issue of 2025 and will also be the last edition of the digital magazine for the forseeable future. We're planning on using the time we spent on the magazine to improve our social media output, make the website the best it can be for all devices, and explore the possibility of creating a simple app version of WENSUM.

The goal of the digital magazine was for readers to experience quiet and contemplative literary works in those little in-between moments, and we're hoping a streamlined mobile/tablet experience will better achieve that goal.

Working in the digital space means that things are constantly evolving, so we hope you enjoy whatever WENSUM becomes in 2026!

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Besides What Is

Anne Frost

We arrive early at the museum, Jean and me. It's a special event for patrons but my friend has somehow acquired two free tickets. Two, she has emphasised, in order that I might accompany her. She is wearing her aquamarine scarf; Jean always wears a scarf. Over the years I have seen their twirls and whirls grow wider until her ageing neck has disappeared completely, her head held up only by layers of silk. Sometimes I imagine what might be below, wonder if I were to take a sharp knife and slice through the material I would find her loose skin mummified into waves like sand after a receding tide. I don't bother with scarves myself. I'm content to let people see what time has done to me.

The bespectacled man at the door greets us like friends and indicates an anteroom filled with uncomfortable-looking wooden chairs set out in rows before a low stage. He hopes we will

enjoy the lecture.

"I didn't know it was a lecture," I say to Jean but she is already hurrying towards a front-row seat from where she can be guaranteed to hear the show. Above her, to one side of the stage, a small board proclaims the title of our evening's entertainment, The Philosophy of Time: An Ancient Greek Perspective.

"Goodness," I say to no one in particular.

The rest of the audience appears in dribs and drabs. Groups and couples who call proprietorially to other groups and couples. I know this, the being in a crowd but not part of it. I twist in my seat to observe them. The women hugging and air kissing with baby pink lips, the men shaking hands or touching each others' shoulders briefly, apologetically. Occasionally a glance slides towards my face, searches, then slips away.

Jean is examining her ticket. "We're entitled to a complimentary glass of wine," she announces, "Sauvignon Blanc, please."

Just as the hubbub reaches cocktail party peak, a middle-aged man and a young woman

step onto the stage. The man introduces himself as the museum director, and the woman as our lecturer. We are in for a treat, he tells us.

It's surprising that someone so young will be speaking about time, having experienced so little of it. When I was young I misunderstood such things, assumed that time roared forward in a straight line, like a river, from the mountains of the past to the delta of the future. But experience tells me that time is not like that at all. Rather, it ebbs and flows, all the while dislodging debris from beneath its surface. Time can be uncomfortable when you get to know it.

Our lecturer steps towards the lectern, adjusts the microphone to the correct level for her height. There are, it seems, some central questions in this subject. Does change exist? And if it does, is time a separate entity or merely a measurement of change? In the seat beside me, Jean snorts a response. She is not, by nature, a philosopher.

We live only in the present, the Greeks apparently pointed out. The past is in our memories, the future in our imagination. But surely

not. If this is true why is my past clearer than my future? Perhaps my memory is improving as my imagination fades. But no, the past is in my imagination as much as is the future. More perhaps. Ebb and flow. Not. A. Line. I would like to share this with our lecturer. Explain that if time were linear it would be this morning that I would remember best. I would clearly recall what I ate for breakfast, what I heard on the radio. But it's all a blank, gone. Instead, my sharpest, strongest recollection is of an entrance gate. A gateway, I would tell her.

A gap in a red brick wall edged with white stone, beyond it a courtyard, lead-panelled classroom windows. Above, a carved stone lion, face scraped flat by the elements. And, here, in front of the gateway, a family. Tight, stonelike, about to squeeze through into an alien world. In that moment I looked straight ahead, not touching him, my child. Robert had warned me not to mollycoddle the boy in front of the other pupils, had explained that this would encourage bullying. So I knew I was to be strong for both of them. Arms clamped to my sides, foolish

eyes blinking into dams, inhaling the scent of my boy, the special aroma that returned as soon as I dried him from his evening bath. I remember I stretched out my hand just enough to feel his breath waft against my fingertips.

There were others, families who streamed past our tableau chattering excitedly about regrouping at Christmas then parted easily, mothers waving cheerily, fathers solemnly shaking their son's hands. We watched, waited for a cue until rescued at last by someone, an older pupil, a young master, I couldn't tell. He smiled in what he must have thought was a reassuring manner.

"I'll take the boy from here," he explained.

And in a blink, the forces of necessity, of expectation, swept our little group in different directions. Robert was, of course, right. It was for the best. We were securing our son's future, he would receive an excellent education, learn to be a man.

"Mother will leave now," the man instructed.

The lecturer is self-possessed, comfortable in her subject, but surely not much more than a student. She will start with Heraclitus, she ex-

plains, who believed that reality is characterised by unending change. A river might seem eternal but the water within it is perpetually being replaced. Another river, how interesting. And of course all things must change. When I was student age, although I was never actually a student, only an almost student. When I was that age, I was the same as now but also so very different. Hopeful, excited about the future. I was going to gain learning, share learning. Water flowing. Evaporating. I would like to tell her this, share with her that sometimes time, our past, offers up only a droplet, a glimpse. Here was a voice, belonging to the man who was once my son. Only his name remaining, the rest of him reshaped.

"You have no idea."

We had been saying goodbye to Robert, as the vicar had euphemistically announced to the half-empty church. I imagined waving a handkerchief at a quayside, Robert looking down from a ship's deck. Going where? He and I had attended church every Sunday, of course, although neither of us was religious. It's what one

does. So here I was, saying goodbye. I had let the service wash over me, reflecting instead on the way we begin our lives acquiring. Things. Statuses. And then, towards the end, lose them. One by one. We used to have money, Robert and I, but not now. It had somehow floated away like flotsam and jetsam. The embarrassed solicitor had explained this in her quiet office piled high with books and papers. There were, apparently, debts. I must sell the house she told me.

After the funeral, I stood on uneven ground watching a cheap coffin being lowered into a narrow gap. I didn't belong with the ragtag group who claimed to have known my husband and they stood away from me. Giving me space, one of the wet-eyed solo women said as she edged past on impractical heels. Another euphemism. Perhaps that's the way with such occasions. But as I watched, instead of grief, I felt something else. Surprise maybe. Goodness. No money and no longer a wife. I was, it seemed, unravelling.

Then, I saw him. My first thought was that he

was so like Robert. And drunk. Or perhaps it was the other way around. I must have greeted him. Said something about not having known where to find him. But my memory, my imagination suggests otherwise. It offers a single sentence.

"You have no idea."

His breath betrayed the sharp tang of whisky. My fingers twitched.

"That place," he said, "you have no idea what it was like."

They shuffled away then, the others. Gave us our space. But I could feel their interest. And the truth is he was wrong. I had had every idea. I knew it in the blank set of the walls and the cold eyes of the man who led my boy away. I understood completely what it was like.

"Your father always wanted the best for you," I said.

Which was also true.

The lecturer explains that the final section of her talk will consider Parmenides. There's the ting of a glass being knocked over, a rustle of acknowledgement that we are approaching the

end. I swivel my eyes towards Jean, her head has fallen forward, her chin resting on an aquamarine knot. I try not to worry about possible snoring.

Parmenides it seems believed that the world is timeless, changeless. That nothing is or will be besides What Is. How interesting. But how sad it would be if there was only the now. If nothing changed, if people remained as they always were. For myself, I've changed a great deal. There was a time, in my past, when I was almost so many things. Adult, student. Free. I remember I was on the edge of so much.

Here, I sat with my parents in our dull front room breathing stale air.

"He's quite the gentleman," my father said before inhaling on the cigarette he held between thumb and forefinger, "he asked my permission."

My father sat in his mock leather armchair, my mother and I at opposite ends of the sludge-brown sofa. We stared at our slippered feet, unpractised in important conversations. My mother had made tea in recognition of the oc-

casion. Her cigarette rested on the edge of a saucer, ash trailing from its tip.

"It's flattering," she said.

She meant for someone like him to want to marry a daughter of theirs. They had begun to amuse me, my parents. They inhabited a world of short horizons, clichéd language. Feet stuck to the riverbed unaware of the secrets in the waters above. Assuming, because it didn't occur to them to think otherwise, that I was trapped as well. They only saw that I was quiet, kept myself to myself. Which was all they wanted.

"She's a good girl," said my father.

I hadn't bothered to tell them about the letter, the one snuggled into the back of my underwear drawer. You have been awarded a place to study… They wouldn't understand what it said, let alone what it offered. Instead, I had been imagining what would come next. My brain and prospects would grow. I would listen to lectures. I would give lectures.

I feel sorry for her. The earnest young woman talking about time. She thinks she understands but she does not. In years to come, many years,

she will see someone, a person of about the age she is now and the sea will move towards the shore as a feeling, an emotion. Time will, as people like to say, stand still. In that moment of connection deep, deep into the past, she will inhabit that feeling once again. Anticipation. The thrill of a life to come that she knows will be everything, everything she wants.

Back then, in my real or perhaps imagined past, my father turned to the grey nets separating our window from the people in the street beyond.

"Robert is well-off," he said softly.

I remember taking a sip of tea, examining the tufts of mud brown carpet as my thoughts surged forward to my alternative future. I imagined the taste of champagne, the smells of bazaars, the confidence of a life with choices. In a moment, I saw what it could be, what I could be. Rising to the surface. I doubt my parents asked what I wanted. It was assumed. After all, they knew, they believed, that I was a dutiful daughter.

Suddenly the lecture is over. The museum director reappears, encourages us to applaud. He

calls for questions, points to someone in the back row who quotes Aristotle. I would like to ask something, anything, to show I understand, to offer a connection, perhaps. But my brain doesn't work as fast as it used to and the moment is lost. As the crowd dribbles past us to the bar, Jean stands unsteadily and reties her scarf into a tight choking knot. Silently she turns towards the exit and I slowly follow her retreating back.

Good Enough to Rock and Roll

Danny Anderson

Burls threw water over his face and ruffled the tight curls of his thick hair like pigeons did in the fountain in Washington Square Park. In his first week at NYU, he learned how just being in the city slickens you with a creeping layer of grime. It wasn't always visible, but the dirt was always there, thickening as it seeped over his skin. He could feel it, spreading over him. And when he thought of how his mother was offended by the sight of sweat and dirt, he realized he was starting to like the grit that New York licked his body with.

Still, he liked to step into the streets a little fresh.

He looked at himself in the mirror, figured he could live with the minor acne on his left cheek, and nodded. Behind his reflection, he saw his acoustic guitar, a cheap Kay he picked up when he moved into the dorm two weeks earlier. His

friends in Delaware would never have imagined him swinging an axe. Pudgy, rich boys didn't play guitars, they faked their way through sax solos in the school jazz band. And they certainly didn't go to NYU for their economics degree. But here he was doing both, defying expectations.

Everyone here called him Burls; that much he made sure of. Not like back in Delaware where his friends would draw out his full legal name, Burleson Addison Winchester, exaggerating it for cheap comic effect and dramatically tacking on "the third" at the end, as if his family legacy was something he could do anything about.

But New York was a new start and he began with his name. Here he was Burls and no one knew any different. And even if they did, it wouldn't matter anyway as his new friends had family names that stretched out four and five generations deep.

Burls swaggered through the dorm's halls with his Kay slung over his shoulder, seeking acknowledgement from his new social circle with a series of head nods, making mental notes of

the new faces that reciprocated.

He hurled himself out into the street and breathed in deeply. September already felt cooler than August.

Burls quickly developed one habit in New York. He could not get enough of Washington Square. The chaotic bustle of liberated people fed his soul and triggered something in his imagination about what he wanted New York to be. On a sunny afternoon, there were people blazing, sunbathing, juggling, pounding calf skins in drum circles, making student films, feeding birds, and, of course, playing guitars, most even cheaper than his Kay.

Another habit was to not take West 4th into the park, even though it was the most efficient path. He liked to go up to Waverly and across. Then he would stand in front of the arch, which framed the mad spectacle of the Washington Square carnival for his Delaware eyes. He let it wash over him with the rest of the city's exhilarating filth. Then he walked through the arch, reborn, and joined the rest of the freaks. In the Square, there wasn't a trace of Burleson left.

That chunk was annihilated and it wasn't even midterm yet.

On the other side of George Washington's arch, his ears picked up a sound. It was the fuzzy distortion of a small, battery-powered amp rasping out a riff desperately running behind a 12-bar blues. He followed the sound to the east side of the fountain, where he saw a thin man hunched over a Telecaster knock-off with chipping, blue paint and a dingy, white pickguard. No strap.

Burls thought that the man resembled his guitar in important ways. He guessed he was in his early thirties, but he somehow looked too beaten up to be that age. He had a long, broken nose that had been left un-straightened and his brown beard was thin and patchy, like the chipped paint on his starter guitar. As he moved in for a closer look, he saw that the man's guitar strings were uncut, wriggling frantically above the instrument's head. The angular chaos of his strings was mirrored by the player's hair, which, though cut short, was still wild and untamed and it shot out from his head.

The flailing strings and wild hair darted around

the player in quick, jerky movements that were a hazard to anyone sitting too close. So no one did. The cement ring around the fountain was jammed tight with New Yorkers, except for the five feet on either side of this mad axe thrower.

The city accepted and ignored his madness, as it always does.

Burls watched him flail and heard a rudimentary talent in the pentatonic scale he fired into the city's soundscape. He was playing an extended solo for a band that wasn't there, though he seemed completely unconcerned about their absence. Burls listened to the solo and imagined drums, bass, and rhythm guitars backing this slayer up in some invisible, dark dimension. He nodded along, grasping at admiration for the spectacle.

In mid-shred, the music stopped and the player spoke.

"You play, man?"

Right up to this instant, Burls was unaware the man even noticed him, such was the rapture of his own frenzy. "Yea, I play a little."

"You know any blues?"

"Well…"

"Can you lay out a twelve-bar blues?"

"Yea I can do that."

"Well sit down and let's rock."

Burls sat at the man's right, away from the menacing swings of the guitar's wild neck. The maniac wielded it like a mace on a medieval battlefield.

"We in tune?" the man asked.

Burls was in tune according to the electric tuner he bought, but it left him nowhere near the tuning of this stranger's battered, blue electric. He tightened his strings to match the pitch of his new soloist's instrument and cringed with every twist he wrenched into the knobs. Surely his strings would break under this pressure. Or would the Kay's neck crack first?

"Alright, baby. That sounds good enough to rock and roll." The player lusted for his muse and a half-turn of a D-string wasn't going to make a difference to him.

Burls nodded and began plucking the twelve-bar in C that he'd learned the night he bought his guitar. The first notes, he hit lightly. It was

the first time he'd played with another person and he had to pick through his self-awareness. The player nodded, squinted, and bit into the left side of his lower lip. In the middle of the third bar, he found his on-ramp and his fingers ran through the scales he knew. By the end of the first set of bars, he was bending the E and B strings (or whatever ethereal notes they were tuned to) and losing himself in the wilderness of his blues.

For the suburban freshman, it was a New York dream. Burls kept his rhythmic pattern steady and watched his partner's face contort and his head bob and weave on the chord changes. He was absorbed into the player's art and Burls had finally taken shape in the void left by Burleson.

After forty-eight bars of blues, the player had run through his repertoire and brought their coupling to its climax.

"Brother that was sweet," the player said.

"You can really run it up. Down too," Burls replied.

"It helps to have someone to play to man. Rock and Roll is the art of the people, brother.

You gotta find people. What's your name?" he finally asked.

"My name's Burls."

"What? Burls, you say? Burls?"

"Yea, Burls."

"What is that? Short for something?"

"Ah…I don't know. It's just Burls."

"Whatever brother. Burls it is. You got a cigarette?"

"No, I don't smoke."

"Man, we gotta do something about that. Can't rock and roll without your smokes."

The player circled the fountain, spotted a fellow smoker, and talked his way into a free cig. By the time he got back to Burls, he was already tapping away the first of the ash.

"My name's Chuck, by the way."

"Nice to meet you, Chuck. How long you been playing?"

"Ah man, me and music go way back. Way back. You from the city?"

Burls lowered, then lightly shook, his head.

"I grew up here. I grew up in clubs watching bands, man. You see the Grammys the other

night?"

Burls made a non-committal gesture.

"Man the Grammys are bullshit, man. This Hanson bullshit, man. I know exactly what happened there. Some suit in an office said go find me three little blond kids and we'll rob everyone blind, you know what I mean? That's all bullshit. That ain't real."

Chuck was asking questions but Burls never felt like he was supposed to answer them. All the world was Chuck's stage, he was learning.

"I seen the real thing, Burls, let me tell you. I saw the Beastie Boys in some little bar in the East Village back when they were a hardcore band, man. That was powerful. Everything you hear on the radio is bullshit."

Chuck was pacing around, holding his chipping blue guitar in one hand and sucking down his purloined cigarette with the other. The cable between the axe and its amp rolled and bounced over the plaza cement as it futilely followed him, helpless.

"You're pretty charged up about the Grammys man," Burls said.

Chuck stopped, flicked the cigarette carcass into the fountain and pointed a long, bony finger at him.

"Listen man, there's nothing more important than music. If you don't push back on all the bullshit, it will drown you, Burls. Don't ever forget that. Learn something from me, brother. You got those twelve bars down, son. Follow that to the truth. It will never let you down. It will never leave you wanting."

It was a speech he'd either given a thousand times or had waited years to finally deliver. When he finished, he nodded and grinned, satisfied with himself.

"Woo! Baby! What a day!" he shouted to a group of tourists walking by.

Burls smiled and found himself jealous of Chuck's reckless freedom.

"You're in a good mood, Chuck," he told him.

"Best day of my life, brother. Best day of my life."

"What you meet a girl or something?"

Chuck shook his head.

"Nah, man. I quit my job today." Chuck was

looking somewhere far away, uptown, galaxies past Burls. "Gonna concentrate on music full time now. Never felt so free in my life, man."

"Oh man, congrats," Burls said. "What did you do?"

"I was a public school teacher, brother. Caught up in all that crap. Now I get to make music. Full time. No obstacles, no bullshit."

Burls had had fun jamming with Chuck but was dubious about his career prospects.

"Got any gigs lined up yet?"

"Hey man I just quit my job today, remember? Give me time. It'll happen. Plus all the clubs want you to have a whole band already formed with a dedicated fan base to boot. Like you're supposed to do their work for 'em. You ever try and find a bass player in this town?"

"No," Burls could say, truthfully.

"I see this dude whacking the bass one night and he was awesome. A real rock and roller. I asked him if he wanted to play a gig with me sometime. He says his minimum fee is 400 bucks. Can you believe that? I ain't gonna make 400 on the whole gig and I'm supposed to give

it all to him?"

Eventually, Burls got Chuck to jam on one more set, which sounded much like their first. He wasn't sure if it was his limitations as a rhythm player or Chuck's dependence on the same well-trod riffs. He figured it was both. After that, they parted ways, with the promise to meet up again and jam and Burls would look for Chuck's posters sometime when he finally started playing gigs.

When he left, he didn't go back through the arch. Burls cut through the trees and headed straight for West 4th.

A mere freshman again, he put his guitar in his closet that day and didn't pull it out much after that, not for a while. He would strum that guitar for the rest of his life but never got much beyond the twelve-bar blues in C that he'd mastered that day in the park with Chuck.

He found school came easier to him the more he stayed away from Washington Square Park. One day, an Econ prof called him Burleson and he didn't bother to correct him. His given name quickly caught on with his New York friends,

but it didn't weigh him down anymore.

One dark November day right before Thanksgiving break, Burleson had to go out in the rain to buy a bottle of Olive Oil to take home to his mother in Delaware. There was a little shop on W. 6. His mother loved cooking with artisanal ingredients and he wanted her to know that New York wasn't ruining him after all, though for a while he tried hard to let it.

The rain was cold and thick and Burleson cut through the trees of Washington Square, seeking shelter. Under a pin oak, he shook the water from his freshly trimmed hair and wrung out his jacket sleeves. He heard the fuzzy, tuneless distortion of a familiar amp coming from the fountain.

Burleson nudged closer but stayed inside the tree line. He peeked around an old, thick tree and saw Chuck flailing his dying, blue axe around in the pouring rain. He wore a torn length of plastic over his head, cut into a makeshift rain poncho and Burleson had never seen a man so alone. Even the pigeons had abandoned him.


SABATÉ
VIVE
Victor Jara
NO BORO
NO BORO
NO BORO

Not An Exit

Shaun O Ceallaigh

The HiAce van eased to a stop in the train station car park. Ossian's uncle said nothing. In silence, they emerged into the morning light and slipped behind the van. Ossian took his time, soaking up his surroundings: the row of commuters' cars, the boarded-up station house, the pinkish sky over the town below, and the scattered lumps of dog shit. Not awe-inspiring, but still home. And he'd miss it.

Uncle Benny heaved the rucksack from the van and handed it over. "There you go. Now, do you have everything? Money? Ticket? Passport?"

"Yeah, I have everything."

He lowered his gaze. He wanted to avoid a scene. That's why he'd not let his mother come. After all, he was moving to England, not China.

"Well, see yeh," Uncle Benny said, jumping into the driver's seat.

The HiAce rolled away, spluttering exhaust fumes, leaving Ossian alone. That's it? That's my fond farewell? Well, fuck him. He threw the bag onto his shoulder and hurried on.

The platform was virtually deserted. When he stepped forward, the gate snapped shut behind him and an old couple on the steel bench overlooking the track spun, each holding a sandwich to their mouth. They shot him a disgusted look.

Ignoring them, he strode in the opposite direction. The platform stretched thirty yards beyond the station house, separated from the car park by a stone wall. Not a soul around. After walking a stretch, he dropped his bag and stopped to wait.

Across the tracks, small birds chirped, darting between hawthorn and blackberry bushes. Beyond these, a ploughed field sloped towards town. Ballyanthony, its cluster of buildings – even with the surrounding ghost estates – looked small. Spring scents soaked the air, and a light mist clung to the river – a cloud fallen from the sky.

"How's things, Ossian?"

Startled, he turned to a girl standing beside him. "All right," he said, not recognising her. Where the hell did she come from?

"I'm Sandy, Sandy Heart. Like, I'm Jerry Heart's sister."

He nodded, trying to think of something to say. "It's…good to see you."

"Yeah," she said, pulling a blonde plait. "I'm just going shopping. I need some stuff in the city, like, for school and that. I can't believe Easter is over. I hate school. I'm going into fifth year, and I can't wait until I'm finished. So, like, where you going?"

"Dublin."

"Cool. Are you, like, working up there, or something?"

"No," he said, suppressing a smile, "I'm getting the boat to Liverpool."

"That's cool. I wish I was going. When I finish school, I'm going to America. New York, maybe LA. I haven't decided. I have it all planned. I'm gonna get a job as a buyer for a magazine, like – I have it all thought through. Why did you pick Liverpool?"

"Eh, it was easiest."

"Yeah." She sprang away towards the platform's edge. "What time is it? Where's the train? It should be here. How long have you been waiting?"

He looked at his phone. "Ten minutes."

"Hmm, do you think it's gone? Like, there's no one here, it might be gone."

"When I arrived, a couple was waiting below."

"Cool, I'll go ask. Hold tight."

She bounced away.

He looked down the track. Fuck. The next train was at midday. Too late. He'd miss the ferry. He picked up his rucksack, twisting the handle.

Sandy returned, her trainers scuffing the platform, both hands buried in her school jacket. "Naw, it's not coming." She glanced behind her. "Those relics said it was cancelled."

The hairs on his neck prickled. "What?"

"Yeah. Bummer, right?"

"No, you don't understand, I have to get to Dublin. I've been planning this for months. I…I need to get to Dublin."

"Yeah, I wanted to buy some shoes. It's a downer, all right."

He dropped his bag and flopped down beside it.

"So," Sandy said, "are you heading home? We can walk together."

"No. You go." He let out a long sigh. "I'm going to sit here a while."

"Oh, eh…okay. See you later, Ossian."

He stared at his shoes. What the hell am I going to do now?

After a long spell sitting in silence, he got to his feet. It wasn't the end of the world. He'd get the train tomorrow. Everything would be okay.

As he came around the station house, the old couple were still sitting on the bench. They glared as he approached the gate, mouths pursed and eyes squinting, watching until it snapped shut behind him.

That night, he couldn't bear the atmosphere at home. At eight o'clock, he headed for The Corner Bar. A quiet drink was needed. When he pushed open the door, he found the place deserted – every table free – the window blinds

lowered. He took a seat and waited, staring at his reflection in the bar top.

"Thank fuck! Company at last."

He nearly leapt from the stool. The booming voice wasn't the bartender's, it was Danny Evans returning from the lavatory, a damp patch on his slacks – the old man obviously had a few.

"Young Dorgan. Ossian Dorgan, isn't it? I know every cunt in this town, I do."

The tubby, bald man positioned himself at the centre of the bar and waddled onto a stool. "And how are things, young Dorgan?"

"Shite," he said.

"Ahh, that's a shame. Place is quiet – I'm the only one here all day. Town is dying. Everyone buried or abroad. But we'll keep each other company, you and me."

Ossian's face burned and he turned and bolted towards the door.

"Hey, hold on, boy, have a drink," Danny shouted, but he continued out into the night.

As he surfaced from beneath his sweltering duvet, surrounded by Arsenal posters, he recalled the previous day with a groan.

He dragged his legs over the side and sat there, wearing only his boxers, a fog idling in his head. He'd no energy. Then it rushed back to him. He grabbed his jeans off the floor and pulled a zip-lock bag of weed from the back pocket. A big bag. How much was that? The previous night came into focus: running from the pub, bumping into Filly Forrestal, and the rest.

Shit. He examined his wallet and found it two-hundred-euro lighter. Jesus, what was I thinking? I'll have to stash it.

With the bag of weed hidden under his bedroom carpet, he trudged into the kitchen. His mother gasped, holding a tissue to her mouth. As he sat at the table, he quizzed her with a look.

"Oh, I'm sorry, love. It's just…we have to say goodbye again. When you're gone, I'll be lonely. This is probably the last time I'll see you eat breakfast. What would you like?"

"Uh, just cornflakes."

"Right away, Sweetheart," she said, reaching for a bowl. "Why don't you forget about England for today?"

"No," he snapped. "I'm already a day behind. I'm leaving this morning."

She held the tissue to her nose, whimpering.

"Did you ask Benny to drive me?"

"Oh, em…I asked, but he said he couldn't. Sorry, love."

"How come? He's not working."

She turned her back to him, clutching the tissue to her face. "Oh, God," she said, before running from the kitchen.

He rose from the table and retrieved the cornflakes, checking his watch as he sat down again. It took twenty minutes to walk to the station. He cursed his luck. He'd have to eat fast.

As he entered the car park, he wiped the sweat from his face. A silver BMW was parked in the corner, but the place was empty – not a soul to be seen. At the gate, he noticed an A4 sheet taped to the wall. It read:

ALL TRAINS CANCELLED DUE TO MUDSLIDES

ALTERNATE BUS AVAILABLE FROM KILKENNY STATION

He braced himself against the gate. What will I do now? Why is the world against me?

With no one around, he walked out onto the road. Fuck it, I'll hitch a lift. He set off back into town. Someone will give me a lift. How long can it take?

Two hours later, his optimism had ebbed. All manner of cars, vans, and lorries passed: Small Nissan Micras, driven by beady-eyed pensioners; people carriers, with scummy mummies behind the wheel; massive articulated lorries, with fat, tattooed drivers – they all sped by without a glance.

People hitchhiked. So why would no one pick him up? He'd had a shave the day before, a smart haircut, and his clothes were clean and tidy. Why would no one stop?

He looked at his watch. Crap. At that moment,

a loud droning sound drew his attention. A yellow Honda Civic, spewing smoke, growled towards him. He stuck out his thumb. The car, with two young men in the front, shot past. He dropped his hand, defeated again when the skid of tyres made him flinch.

The yellow car had stopped thirty metres away. They were waiting. He snatched his bag off the ground and began trotting towards them. Someone was bound to stop. Good people existed.

As he approached the car – its polished paintwork reflecting the clouds – the back wheels spun, spitting stones, before it sped away.

Something inside him broke. He threw the bag over his shoulder and charged towards town. Not long after, he passed Kennedy's petrol station and then the school. He marched on, a man possessed until he reached home.

Twenty minutes later, he lay sprawled on his bed, half a joint smouldering in the ashtray.

Leary, the owner of the Corner Bar, covered the pumps with a towel. He'd already lifted the chairs onto the tables and swept the floor.

Ossian, the only customer, hovered over his pint.

It had been a quiet night. Old Danny Evans was in earlier. For a change, he didn't ignore the fool, listening to the drunkard's never-ending ramlatching. But even Danny pissed off home.

He looked up and saw Leary make a face – one expressing a simple sentiment. In the nicest way, it said, "Fuck off home." He slipped from the stool, nodded to the owner, and staggered to the exit.

A cool breeze whipped along Downs Street. He squinted at his phone: nearly midnight. Then, with a wobbled gait, he headed home. He hadn't gone far when the night's peace was split by a roaring engine. The yellow Honda Civic from earlier was rocketing towards him. It sped past and, as it did, the passenger threw something from the window.

The milkshake struck him on the chest and burst open, spattering onto his face and sending him stumbling as the car thundered away. He wiped the sloppy liquid from his eyes and licked his lips. Chocolate. Another day in town over.

A warm light through the curtains woke him. He squirmed in the bed, his mouth dry and head aching until he spotted the clock and bolted upright. Midday. Shit! He'd slept through his alarm. He leapt from the bed and got dressed, then grabbed his rucksack and rushed downstairs.

He ducked into the kitchen to say farewell to his mother, but she wasn't there. The previous night's dishes were drip-dried on the sideboard, but no sign of her. She must have gone shopping. Not even a goodbye.

He strode along the quiet streets, head lowered, determined – at least the rain had stopped. The first port of call: his uncle. He needed a lift, and Uncle Benny would see him right.

"Fuck off!" Benny said, slamming the door in his face.

Stubborn old prick. He slumped down on the doorstep and thought over the situation, struggling to focus against the trickle of cars that skirted the driveway. Will I ever get away? He checked the time: nearly one.

Damn it, I can't stay here all day. He took a

deep breath and got up from the step. If walking was the way, then walk he would. He marched down the drive and started his journey out of town.

He kept a steady pace as cars sped by, his thumb out in the hope someone might stop. They didn't.

Gaps soon appeared in the landscape – the repetitive house-after-house layout broken by fields, with cattle grazing, sheep milling about, and freshly ploughed soil. Now he was on his way, he began enjoying himself. Something to tell the grandkids: how he left Ballyanthony on foot.

As he strolled along, smiling to himself in the sunlight, a small dog emerged from a narrow lane. A terrier. He stopped and the animal eyed him.

It looked harmless but, just to be sure, he crossed the road, giving it a wide berth. As he drew parallel, the dog bared its teeth. He stopped, more surprised than frightened. The terrier baulked, then snarled, running across the road and blocking his path.

He was ready to kick it when a second dog, a black spaniel, appeared. A third emerged, then a fourth and fifth. Nervous now, he backed away. The newcomers growled, gnashing their teeth. He moved backwards, but the dogs closed in, barking and snapping.

Then they pounced. He bolted back along the road. A collie snapped but a kick sent it recoiling, and he raced on, clearing fifty metres in no time. Across the road, the ditch morphed into a stone wall. Without slowing, he vaulted through the air and landed on the grass, his bag flopping at his side.

Bent forward, he struggled to catch his breath, limbs shaking. He straightened and spotted the five-bar gate in the wall. Shit! In a clamour of barking, the dogs scrambled into the field.

He took off towards a gap in a nearby hedge, cursing the soft ground that had him slowing to find purchase. Near the opening, he glanced back. About a dozen dogs, large and small, galloping towards him. When he reached the gap, the path was muddy – mashed by cattle hooves – but there was no stopping now, so he ran

through.

On the edge of the next field, his foot sank in the muck. As he tried to yank it free, he lost his balance and slapped face-down in the slops. The dogs surrounded him. Cold with fright, he wiped the mud from his eyes and pulled his leg free – his shoe remaining in the sludge. The dogs danced around the wet patch, yelping and snarling.

He kept kicking out and swiping as he dragged himself towards the next field, connecting just enough to keep the frenzied animals at bay. At some stage, he managed to get back on his feet, minus a shoe, and set out running.

The dogs picked their way across the mud and continued the chase. He gasped, hobbling forward, his chest stabbing. Then, salvation – in the corner of the field, a copse of trees. He struggled towards them, summoning the last of his energy.

On reaching the trees, the pack at his heels, he leapt into the air and hooked a branch. He scrambled up, hauling his legs behind him. Below, the dogs danced, crazed. He climbed

higher until he got himself seated, then pulled out his phone and almost screamed. The battery was dead. What the…? He hadn't just slept through the alarm; he'd forgotten to charge the bloody phone. His mud-spattered watch told him it was nearly three o'clock. Ok, I'm going nowhere. Nothing to do but wait.

Hours later, with the sun setting, he shook his head and shifted, trying to ease his stiff limbs. The pack of dogs slept on the grass below. Now and then, one would rise, look at him, and snarl. They were settled in.

As he inched over on the branch, an explosion shattered the silence. He clung to the tree and looked around. The dogs were up, searching for the source. He saw it first – a man, dressed in blue overalls and Wellington boots, marching closer, a smoking shotgun held across his chest. In the dusk, the dogs failed to see him until it was too late. A second bang, a flash, a whimper.

The dogs scattered. He looked down at the black collie. It lay on the grass, panting, its tongue lolling. Even in the dim light, the wound was visible, the animal's intestines coiling onto

the grass.

The farmer reached the injured dog and knelt at its side. After a moment, he stood up, clicked two cartridges into the barrels, and shot the animal in the head.

In the roaring silence, Ossian held his breath. Hidden high amongst the spring growth, hugging the coarse tree trunk, he watched the farmer, stunned by the sudden violence – the absurdity of his situation. He waited until the man moved away, back across the field.

Long after the farmer was gone, with darkness fallen, he let himself down. Guided by starlight, he crossed the fields until he reached the main road. Without light, the search for his bag was futile. He tried, anyway, but found nothing.

Later that night, he reached the town centre, exhausted. The hardened muck flaked off his clothes, and his foot ached. He limped along Downs Street, towards home.

A din of voices spilled from the door as he passed the Corner Bar. Sandy Heart burst onto the street. She must have seen him passing.

"Hey, Ossian," she shouted, flinging her arms

around him. “Like, where you going?”

“Eh, hi, Sandy. I’m just headed home.”

“That’s stupid. It’s Friday night. Come have a drink.”

She dragged him into the pub, ignoring his protests. A small crowd was gathered inside, mostly around the bar. Among the patrons, he saw Danny Evans, spitting opinions into the sour faces of an old couple.

Sandy dragged him towards the bar. Someone threw a beermat that skirted his cheek. Following the trajectory back to a corner table, he found the sniggering lads from the Honda Civic.

Finally, at the bar, his mother turned to face him.

“Hi, Honey.” She giggled. “Where’s your shoe?”

Sandy danced at his side. “Buy me a drink – a vodka and Red Bull.”

Ossian, sighing, reached for his wallet. It wasn’t there. He grabbed at his other pocket, but that was empty. What the hell? He stood stock-still and cast his mind back. The fields. All the muck. He must have dropped it. Fuck.

Uncle Benny turned from his conversation with a man in shit-stained, blue overalls. "There you are, at last. Will yeh have a pint?"

He nodded.

"I'll have a vodka and Red Bull," Sandy chirped.

He sidled in beside his uncle and leant on the bar. What more could he do? He would never get to England. Never escape the town. He was broke. Stuck at home. With little to be done about it. A pint was about the best thing he could hope for.

House Edging

Tomasz Lesniara

"Seven, red!" the dealer shouts.

I am sitting on a padded black stool. My elbows glued to the upholstered edge of the roulette table, with my chin resting against my intertwined fingers. The guy in a black Puma tracksuit, who's been standing next to me for the last six hours, is punching the air with excitement. He has just won nearly nine hundred quid. For him, it's relatively nothing in the grand scheme of things, but it could signal the beginning of a much greater winning streak. He's been chasing a single number for some time, just like me, but luck seems to be on his side tonight, or this morning, rather. For him, the risky decision to bet on only one number has finally paid off. It's a common thing to do. You stick to one number and increase the bet after each spin. If you stay loyal to this mentality for long enough, the ball will eventually land on your number, or you

will run out of money. I guess these two polar opposite endings apply to all existing roulette strategies.

An old Chinese lady who calls herself Deedee, a regular, slaps my arm. "Five no good! Change number!" she moans at me.

She always does that. She hardly ever plays herself, but she enjoys being the live commentator, congratulating those who are winning big, while blaming the poor bastards who aren't doing that well. Tonight, or this morning, that's me.

"He's always been chasing the drought, ever since I met him.", says Scott, the dealer, in response to Deedee.

"Stupid boy!" she shouts.

The guy in a Puma tracksuit has this unsettling, intimidating aura to him. He's aggressive. He would punch your cunt in if you said something he disagrees with. His phone is ringing. I can see his screen light up behind the thin cotton facade of his front trackie pocket. It's his Mrs. I know, because he spoke to her on the phone a couple of times in the last hour. She

probably wants to ask him where the fuck he is, again. It's god knows how late, or early, and he had promised he would be home by now. My phone is pinging too. My friends, who don't know I'm here, keep sending me voice notes on WhatsApp. Spilling their guts, opening up about the latest Hinge date they'd been on, the plans for the upcoming movie night on Friday, or anything else that doesn't concern me at all, while my financial life is at stake. Or it could be my mum, asking me to voice note her back, because I've not been in touch in more than a week. She's unaware of it all, yet still worried.

We all said goodbye to Monday a couple hours ago. It's probably around two in the morning, but the place is anything but empty. Two roulette tables out of four are still open. Young and sexy bar staff keep walking around like zombies, with trays in their hands, asking for drink orders.

"One Staropramen, please", I say to a hot guy with a buzzcut who's just walking past.

I open my tightly closed hand under the table. There is one chip left, and I'm holding it in my

sweaty, shaky palm like a sacred artefact, expecting it to glow up with magic and kill the main antagonist of this story.

The chip I'm holding is a black one, and it's worth twenty-five pounds. In gambling jargon, we call it a pony. I place it in the middle of the table.

"Colour, please, Scott", I ask politely.

Scott runs his fingers through his brown, freshly faded hair and places my last pony on a tiny, wooden shelf.

"Twenty-five, cheap change," he announces. "Fancy a new colour?"

"Emm, yeah. Give me yellow, please."

In times of desperation, people often decide to switch the colour of the chips they're playing with to a different one, hoping it will trigger a change in their circumstances. We all know it doesn't work like that. There probably isn't an ancient god of gambling staring at us from above, rolling his eyes at us because we're playing with blue, and he happens to support Celtic. But we're all delusional.

The hot buzzcut lad puts a freshly poured

pint of Staropramen on the small, wheely table behind me. I can hear the bottom of the glass hit the wooden surface. Scott slides twenty-five yellow chips towards me, each worth a pound. I place ten of them on number five. I've been chasing it for ages. My plan is to try that again if it's not a win, and if that doesn't work either, I will bet with the remaining five. Then, I will reassess.

"Bets on!" Scott shouts and looks me in the eyes for a single second. The ball is spinning. Deedee is humming along to Katy Perry's Firework song, which is blasting through the speakers. I close my eyes in some sort of prayer.

"Five, red!"

I open my eyes. The overwhelming sense of warmth fills my chest, as if my heart is leaking lava. Deedee smiles at me and rolls her eyes right after.

Finally, I hit the drought number – the number that hadn't come up in the most consecutive spins. It's always my choice of play because I enjoy rooting for the underdog, both in gambling and in life. But, after a drought number is

finally hit, it updates itself to another one. The new drought is begging to be drawn from the moment it arrives on screen. That's the tricky bit.

"How much is that, Scott?" I ask while taking a well-deserved sip of my beer. I know the answer, but asking the question helps boost the sense of accomplishment.

"That's three hundred and fifty pounds, my man. You've finally hit it. It's been getting close for a while", Scott replies.

"I'll have three pinks and two ponies, please. I'm going for a break."

The pink chip is a cash chip worth a hundred pounds. Everyone's favourite chip, no doubt. Scott hands me my three fifty in five cash chips and says well done. While getting up, I grab my beer and look at the screen placed next to the table. The new drought number is seventeen, and it hasn't come up in exactly two hundred spins.

"Catch ya later, Max!" I hear Scott say as I walk away.

The casino is like a candy store for a lone fruit-

cake like me. There are all sorts here. Spice boys in Represent hoodies, neds with hands down their pants, lads from the Royal Navy – all you can eat, really. Sometimes it feels good just to be in close proximity to them. It's like being admitted to an exclusive circle you've been rejected from time and time again in your life. And if I keep my cool, they might invite me for a vape, buy me a drink, or spoil me with their patter for the rest of the night. I mean, morning.

I go to the toilet. Two ripped guys in baggy jeans and super tight t-shirts are pissing next to each other at the urinals. I notice their chiselled triceps as I get closer to the sink. In the round mirror right in front of me, I see my greasy black hair and tired eyes glued to my skinny yet puffy face. I wash my hands and pretend to adjust my contact lenses with my hands still wet. "Let's finish with a wee shake, that's it", the guy behind me says in a jokey manner, and approaches the sinks while still zipping up his trousers. His mate is still at it, pissing like an elephant.

"Any luck, mate?" he proceeds to ask me.

"Nah man, not tonight."

"Just keep at it, bro. We all have to win sometime!"

Despite standing right in front of the sink next to mine, the guy chooses not to wash his hands. If this whole gambling saga has taught me one thing, it's that men usually don't wash their hands after pissing. I've seen it in clubs and concert venues, but here, in this hyper-masculine enclave of circle jerking, they are all at their most natural.

My phone vibrates in my pocket as I keep looking at my reflection in the mirror. This empty bathroom serves as a temporary shelter from the battlefield on the other side of the wooden door. Laddish laughs mixed with 2010s' pop songs, the manager's raspy voice inviting people back to the poker room, and over-the-top sounds that the slot machines make to announce that someone has just won 34 pence – that's the soundtrack to my life. At this point of the night, or morning, I always ask myself – should I just give it a rest and go home? Cash out the three-fifty in my back pocket and order myself an Uber? Okay, I might be a couple of

hundred down, but it might also all go to shit again. Or, something exceptionally good could happen. Whatever that is.

Eventually, I splash cold water on my face, wipe it with my cuff, and lift the beer from the marble countertop. I almost bump into a muscly, middle-aged guy in tradie trousers as I leave the bathroom. He's not been home yet either. "Sorry, pal", I say after spilling a few drops of Staropramen on the brownish carpet. The place is even busier than a few minutes ago.

As my feet approach the table, my eyes shift towards the screen. I check the drought number. Fuck – seventeen came up while I was in the bathroom. The new drought is number thirty-four. I instantly get angry. If only I had stayed at the table, I would probably have another couple hundred quid by now. Scott is giving me the side eye as I stand outside a circle of desperate souls. At the corner of the table, there is a middle-aged woman in a baggy, grey tracksuit, sitting with a cup of tea in her hand.

"Excuse me, could you let me in if you're not playing? Sorry to ask."

"What?", she looks at me, sort of unfazed.

"If you're not playing, could I take your seat, please?"

"Excuse me, pal! You need to let him in if you're not playing!" says Scott, backing me up.

The woman gives me a sad look, as if I just evicted her from her house, and leaves the table while taking a sip of tea from her white cup. I push the stool underneath the table, as I don't want to be the only one sitting down, and pop my pint next to other people's drinks. The Puma tracksuit guy is still here, this time to my left, and he isn't happy. Things clearly didn't stay good for long. With each spin, he keeps aggressively throwing more and more ponies at poor Scott, who is clearly exhausted after several hours of high-intensity play.

When a table is busy, there is always another employee watching over the dealer, making sure the payouts are accurate. Tonight, the guy keeping Scott right is an older gent named Stevie. He can't be fucked with other people's shit. He will not say excuse me, he will not empathise with you if things don't go your way,

and he will not hesitate to tell you off if you're betting after the "no more bets" call. The young lad on my right-hand side is the first to experience the wrath of Stevie. A few inches shorter than me, palish, with short blond hair and a Stone Island jumper, he looks interesting.

"No more bets means no more bets! If you don't understand a simple rule like that, then you can give slot machines a go! Maybe you will find that easier!" shouts enraged Stevie. "Sorry, bro. I didn't mean that."

Stevie is in a particularly bad mood this morning. He is frowning. He is sighing. He doesn't want to be here. In reality, none of us do. Or do we? Perhaps, you could say that winning big makes you want to stay. But that's not necessarily true. It's losing that ignites in you the dedication to keep playing until the birds start chirping outside. You have things to prove to yourself. You want to validate the theory that you're not a foolish person – someone who would intentionally waste money by losing it. If you're gonna gamble, you need to demonstrate that you're smart and special. You're tricking

the system. You're able to earn ten times more money than most working people earn during a tough, twelve-hour shift, and you don't have to wait a month to get what you earned. You're a genius.

Suddenly, things are better for me now. Number thirty-four comes up. I keep playing. Only a few minutes pass, and the ball lands on another drought number that follows. The lack becomes luck. My bravado levels increase. A metaphorical Stone Island badge appears on my sleeve. I sip my beer. Life is good. The lad on the right gives me a look, but I think it's actually the look. Am I steaming? These things never end well for me.

I see his struggle. I can feel his stress. His short, shyish pal keeps popping in and out of the picture. Here he is, pulling the cuff of his jumper, telling him they should leave. Another spin, and he's here again, asking for money so he can buy them both drinks.

"Don't fucking annoy me, man, you're being a pest!" the guy on my right says to his mate while the ball spins around the wheel.

"You want a drink or not, mate? Relax, fuck sake."

"Vodka red bull", he rushes to decide, and quickly turns his head towards the wheel, squeezing the leather-padded edges of the table with his pale, veiny hands.

He is in the same position I was in just twenty minutes ago. There are questions spinning around his mind, all flying around in circles at high speed like the ball that determines our emotions and reactions.

Suddenly, everything disappears.

I wake up wearing my clothes. My eyeballs and eyelids feel glued together because my lenses are still in. I'm half-sitting, half-lying on the edge of my bed. The first thing on my mind is work. It's clearly morning. But is it six or ten? That's a roulette of its own. I touch the left front pocket of my jeans to get my phone. It's not there. Fuck, it's not there. I know I have to stay calm. I knew this day would come. I've been mentally preparing for it for a long time. That's what happens when you're a 365 party boy. Sooner or later, you lose your phone. One

time in twenty-eight years is totally acceptable. Gen Z cunts smash and lose their phones all the time these days. Don't focus on it too much just now. Just get on with it. The only important thing right now is work.

I open my old silver MacBook with anticipation. My heart is pumping. Am I fired? Am I going to lose my job? Are they all working at their desks right now, talking about me, wondering where the hell I am?

As soon as I'm presented with the opportunity, I type in my password as fast as I can. I see my desktop. It's quarter past seven. My head is pounding, but at least I can breathe again now that I know the world is still spinning. Quarter past seven is not bad at all. I need to look at the bright side of things. I might have lost my brand new iPhone, which I took out on a three-year contract, but it's not nine o'clock yet. I got away with it.

I open the FaceTime app on my laptop to call my manager, Sara. She picks up immediately. "Why are you FaceTiming me?"

"I'm sorry, I need to ask a favour."

"Oh-oh."

"Yeah," I sigh. "I went out on a date last night after work, and it got a bit out of hand. I'm an idiot, I'm sorry."

"What do you mean out of hand?" she asks with more concern than anger. "Are you too rough to come in?"

"I lost my phone at some point during the night. I think it was stolen."

"Max, what the fuck?"

"I was wondering if I could put in a last-minute annual leave through, and take the day to go to the police, report it, and stuff like that. See if I can track it as well, and notify my parents. I had my cards inside my phone case as well."

Sara doesn't know that the wallet part is a lie.

"Jesus, Max," she replies. "I guess it's a yes. What else could I say? You need to do what you need to do. Who were you with?"

"Just a guy from Hinge," I lie again. There was no guy. The spinning ball was my date.

"Was he with you?"

"We said goodbye, and he left to get his train. I went to the bus stop."

"Did you have your phone then?"

"I don't remember."

She's already in her office. I can see a concerned look on her face. I'm walking around my room, holding the bottom of my laptop with my open palm.

"Max," she sighs again. "Oh my actual god. Is there a chance he might have took it? Or that you were spiked?"

"No. I don't think so. I need to gather my thoughts. I'm still in a bit of a shock. Please, I just need today to get everything in order. If there are any urgent emails or calls, you know, work-related, I will take them from here. I'm sorry. I obviously didn't plan for that to happen."

"Ok. Take care of everything and keep me updated. Hope everything is okay." "Ok. Thanks, Sara. Bye."

I terminate the call.

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A long sigh. I take a seat on my bed and rest my back against the wall. Open the FindMyiPhone

app from the bottom dock of my laptop screen. I see the motherfucker, whoever he is, running around the whole of Glasgow with my phone in his pocket like a postie with a jetpack, like it's Subway Surfers. Actually, I don't even know if it's a he, but I feel like it is. Dirty bastard is trying to sell it. I can tell. I stare at the Apple map like it's the World Cup final, and the shitholes I see don't make me think the guy's a taxi or bus driver.

I block my phone remotely with a few clicks on the touchpad and type in a message to be permanently displayed on the screen:

THIS PHONE IS STOLEN. DO NOT BUY THIS PHONE. MAX LAS, GLA

The app gives me an option to send pinging noises to the phone. Fair to say, if the sounds really get played by the phone, I'm giving the rascal a real sonic pounding. My adrenaline is so high that I can't concentrate on one thing at a time. I try to log in to my bank. It's asking for a text message code. Damn it. I fucked up big

time.

I'm still wearing my clothes from last night. I get up, get to my cheap white desk, and put on a pair of black trackie bottoms I threw on the chair a few nights prior. Now, no bottom can function without a top, so I settle for an old Nike tee that's been hanging on the drying rack for what seems like weeks. Time to get the fuck out of here and do something.

The street stinks. The door to the building bangs shut right behind me, and my headphones are in. I'm thirsty for blood. Based on the bravado in my walk and the outfit I'm wearing, it would be difficult to guess I'm listening to Radar by Britney Spears, but here we go. Interesting sense of style, ten million quid smile, I run through the depressing high street passing old ladies on mobility scooters and neddy lads who would gag on it for a four pack of Stella. Chinese takeaway, Indian takeaway, a place where gorgeous ladies get their nails done, a vape shop, another vape shop, a mortgage place no one goes to, another vape shop, Greggs, and finally – I'm where I'm supposed to

be. The bank. The godforsaken Virgin Money. Give it to me, Richard Branson. Give it to me as hard as you can.

I walk up to the cash machine. My heart is racing. I put my bank card into the ATM. Pin, pin – what is my pin? Okay, 2-0-1-2. The year of Summertime Sadness, but you're not supposed to know that. I click to see my balance.

AVAILABLE FUNDS 700.00

What the fuck? I didn't do too bad. That said, I don't remember winning it, or cashing it in – giving my bank card to the malevolent twink at the cash desk, and saying: "I'm worried I will lose my money. Could you please put it on my VISA card?". That's my usual shtick.

I withdraw all the money from the account and shove the cash into my trackie pocket. God knows what delayed transactions or charges might appear on my account in the next few hours, unexpectedly, like the annoying boomers who show up at your door to pester you for your TV license. Okay, I don't know how much

I actually spent last night, but that's not important. Seven hundred quid is enough to get me to the point where I decide how to deal with this situation.

I head back home. On my way, I jump into a corner shop. The lovely older lady in a striking, colourful hijab greets me with a smile. I'm fuming, but I smile back. She's the wife of the shop owner. I buy a can of red Desperados and open it as soon as I'm out of the shop. The headphones are back in. I have cash, it's time to go home and get to work.

I finish my can of Desp the moment I walk into my bedroom and throw it in the laundry basket. The laptop is on again, and the FindMyiPhone app is displaying the blue dot that represents my phone at a place called Pump Up Your Fitness. It's a gym. The dot is moving slightly, but only what seems like a few millimetres at a time. I immediately Google the gym and phone the number.

"Hello," A deep voice makes a sound in my ear.

"Yes, hi. My phone was stolen last night, and the FindMyiPhone app is locating it at your

gym. The person who has it is at your gym right now. Can you please help me?"

All I hear is silence.

"Please answer, I know you're there," I say.

"This must be some sort of mistake," the deep voice states. "This isn't a gym. This is my number."

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"What do you mean? The phone is showing at a gym in the West End, it's called Pump Up Your Fitness, and this is the number that comes up when I Google the gym. What doesn't add up on your end?"

"Again, I don't work at any gym. But I think I could help you. What's your name?" the man asks calmly.

"Max."

"Max, maybe I could help you."

"How?" I begin to lose my patience. "How are you going to help me exactly? Do you have my phone or not?"

"I don't have your phone, but I think I might

be able to help you find it. Would you meet in town for a chat?"

"What are you talking about?"

"We could meet and see what might have happened when you lost your phone? Maybe you left it in a taxi, or an Uber?"

Uber. I'm not gonna let some old pervert meet me for a coffee and fuck me up the ass under the pretext of helping me find my phone. This is not my first rodeo. I was locked in hotel rooms before, after being promised lavish afters. I'm not looking to be put in the back of a Toyota Yaris and taken somewhere where I'll be taking in my meals through a straw. Fuck that.

As soon as I put the call to an end, some memories start to come back. The lad, the palish Stone Island lad. It's always them, by the way. I can see the smoking area upstairs, full of people. The metal bench and the dreaded words.

Fuck this shit, I'm going to get my phone back. I realise I must have got this lad an Uber. We were sitting together in the smoking area, on the bench, and talking. That must have been after I cashed out. It must have been.

In a typical Max fashion, I thought we could be sipping champagne in Lake Como one day. I recall the conversation.

"Let me at least order you an Uber."

"You don't have to do that, man. I appreciate all your help tonight."

"I wanna make sure you get home safe. You're a wonderful guy, and all I want to do is to make sure you get home safe."

"It's going to be expensive."

"It doesn't matter."

I go to the Uber website and log in. Check the past trips. There is one at 4:22 am. The destination is Cambuslang in the South East of Glasgow, departing from the casino. I don't wanna play any games anymore. I want my phone. This guy might have the answers I need. I order an Uber from my browser, and as soon as I'm done reading my account history again, the car is waiting for me outside my place.

The ride is taking ages. Big tower blocks, poor bastards begging for mercy, and bookie shops everywhere. I fall asleep for a split second, and once I catch myself, we're at the destination. It's

a neglected terraced house, with high grasses dominating the front garden, and wonky rough-casting hurting my eyes.

I leave the Uber car and walk to the front door. Ding-dong, the bell rings.

A miserable figure appears once the doors open. I get goosebumps all over my body.

"You're back. You really meant it! You're back", he proclaims, all excited, exposing the gaps between his brownish, rotten teeth.

His face looks like it survived a nuclear blast. His eyes are tired, bloodshot, and keep wandering towards his forehead and back down again. A stench travels from the space behind him and hits me in the face.

"I'm sorry," I say. "I was expecting someone else, must have rung the wrong bell."

"No, don't leave. I know it's you!"

I turn back and walk as fast as I can without turning it into an obvious run.

"Don't be shy, come in, please," the guy begs as I walk away.

"Please, come back", I hear him shout from a distance. "We all have to win sometime!"

Flight

Lauren Hill

Nella hated the new extension. The builders had rolled their digger right over the grass and the daisies and taken over her garden. When they dug the foundations, she'd run out with her red plastic beach bucket and tried to collect all of the worms, beetles and spiders that had been so cruelly uprooted from their homes. That really set Mum off, finding her out there, crawling about in the dirt. She made Nella throw the bucket away and scrub her hands raw, convinced she'd catch some bacterial infection from the mud.

Her broken swing was the last straw. Nella came home from school to find it tossed into the skip, its wooden frame snapped. She got that swing for her sixth birthday last summer. As Nella took it all in – the swing lying broken, her precious garden now a mudbath strewn with tarpaulin and stray bricks – she felt a heat rising

from her belly to her chest. Hot tears stung her eyes as she broke into sobs, her small body shaking with the effort of each breath. She knew that when Dad came home, he would lose it. The swing had been his idea. Nella had begged and begged for a trampoline, but Mum's mind was too flooded with Facebook horror stories of broken collarbones and snapped wrists to ever allow it.

A swing was a fair trade, much safer, Dad had promised. He and Albie had built it for her with their bare hands. They'd argued the whole time they were building. Albie wasn't holding the frame steady enough, and Dad's hammer had slipped and whacked his thumb. Nella remembered the howl of pain, the way Albie had whisked her off her feet and run for cover, how they'd crouched giggling in the thick green of the rhododendron.

Nella remembered how, later, Dad and Albie took turns pushing her on her new swing. Higher and higher they pushed until she was almost upside down. Her knees had looked especially white and knobbly up against the

blue sky. Nella hadn't been scared. She knew if she'd let go, she'd have launched into the air and flown over England, over the sea to Africa like the swallows do.

She started practising swinging herself. For hours after school, Nella would try to will herself high enough to kick the branches of her garden's beech tree. Free as a bird, Albie used to call her; she couldn't have felt further away from that now.

Nella was shaken from her rage by the sudden feeling that she wasn't alone. Through her watery vision, she made out the shape of a man standing in the breeze-block beginnings of the kitchen. He was youngish, with a scruffy beard and clothes covered in cement dust. One of the builders. Nella turned her face towards him, cheeks red and swollen from her tears. The man tilted his head, as if taken aback. He didn't stride over and take her by the hand like her teachers or parents would. Instead, the man hesitated, as though he too were waiting for instruction from an adult. Finally, he sighed. Nella shrank backwards as the man walked over. He was a good

meter taller than her. Too shy to look into his face, Nella fixated instead on the hands which fidgeted at his sides. They must have been the size of her head, dust-covered and calloused like the surface of the moon.

"Hey, you're Nella, aren't you?" said the man, bending down as he did so. Nella nodded, wiping the snot away from her upper lip with the corner of her sleeve. "My name's Cal. Where's your mum?" Nella gestured back to the house. "Did you hurt yourself?" he asked. Nella shook her head. "So what's up?"

"You–you broke my swing, so now I can't practise flying."

"Ah, I'm sorry about that. We had to clear a path. Your Dad said it could go." Nella's breath caught in the back of her throat. It had to be a lie. Her upper lip began to tremble again. Cal's expression softened. He told Nella he was sure Mum and Dad were planning to buy her an even nicer swing once the work was finished. He didn't understand.

She took in Cal's appearance. His wiry beard reminded her of a sponge. Even though he was

a lot younger than Mum, he had dark circles under his eyes like hers, but she didn't point them out because that was rude. His face seemed kind, though, maybe he wasn't a liar, and this was all a mistake. Cal ruffled her hair, getting it dusty, but she didn't mind. As he walked back to the extension, he called to Nella.

"I guess you'll have to come up with a new way to practise flying until the work's done." That got Nella thinking.

***

The next day, Nella couldn't wait to get home from school. She'd had an idea for a new project. She didn't even pester Mum for a play-date, happily squirrelling herself away in her bedroom instead. Nella realised she'd need to get supplies from the garden. Her project required feathers. She hurried out and began gathering as many as she could find. Then, she spotted Cal sitting on the damp grass under the beech tree, a half-eaten sandwich on his lap. Nella noticed he was smoking, so she held her breath. Cal ges-

tured to the feathers in her hands.

"You don't want those ones," he said.

"Why?" She asked.

"They're feral pigeon feathers. Vermin. Like rats with wings," said Cal. Rats gave Nella the creeps. She dropped the feathers. Cal scoured the base of the tree and picked up a different feather. This one was a lighter brown colour than the others, fluffier and more delicate too. "You want this one. It's from a wood pigeon." He held it out to her. She took it quickly – her face was bright red from holding her breath for so long, and he was starting to get a little blurry. "What's up with you?" The smoke was still swirling around her head, the tar smell tickling her nostrils. She pointed at his cigarette. He dropped it and stamped it out. "Sorry, sorry. What're all the feathers for?" He said.

"They're for my project."

"I see, what project is that? Is it for school?"

"No, it's a secret. You can't see it till it's ready." Cal laughed then. That got on Nella's nerves. Albie was like that all the time, too, laughing at things she said that weren't funny. "Don't you

know that smoking's bad for you?" She asked.

"Oh, I know, don't ever do it. Once you start, it's hard to stop." As if to prove a point, Cal rummaged in his pocket for a packet of thin white papers. Nella knew she shouldn't like it, but there was something transfixing about the way he packed the paper neatly with a line of dry brown tobacco. His giant fingers rolled the paper delicately and quickly, sealing the cigarette with a flash of his tongue.

"Maybe you should pray on it," she said. Cal laughed again.

"Yeah, maybe I'll give that a go. Is that what your family does, pray?" he asked.

"Not Albie. He's my brother. He doesn't like Church."

"I haven't seen him yet."

"He doesn't live here anymore." Cal went quiet then. Nella felt bad. Her parents didn't like her talking about Albie – Dad said it made people uncomfortable.

All of a sudden, though, Cal's face broke into a wide grin. Nella thought he was laughing at her again, but he pointed at the branches of

the beech tree above them. There were three of them, teetering on the highest branch and bristling their lime green feathers – the ones Nella loved the most.

"Parakeets!" She was pleased that she already knew their name.

"That's right. Ring-necked parakeets. In London, God help them."

"My Mum says they must have escaped from the zoo."

Cal cupped his hands to his mouth and started making a chirping noise. It sounded to Nella like a finger rubbing on the glass of the car window. The parakeets sang back to him. It made her giggle.

"Nella?" Mum was leaning through the flap where the back door was going to be. She kept her frayed pink slippers firmly planted in the new kitchen. Mum never went into the garden if she could help it. Nella thought that was probably why she didn't mind the builders digging it up. Mum didn't laugh at the parakeets. She didn't smile at Cal either. "What are you doing? Come inside." Cal's smile had disappeared, too.

He started packing up his lunch. Nella gathered her feathers. "Leave the feathers," said Mum.

"But I need them for my project."

"Feathers don't belong inside. Do you have any idea about the number of diseases birds carry?"

***

Nella woke the next morning to a glorious Saturday – a whole day to work on her project without being disturbed. The theme tune of Mum's favourite weekend breakfast show drifted up the stairs. Dad was away at another conference. He'd return late tomorrow with a furrowed brow, shirt sweaty as he bent to give her a goodnight kiss. She could tell from the van doors slamming and boots stomping over gravel down below that the builders were there again – Nella wondered if Cal was too. She hadn't spoken to him when the other builders were around; the garden got too noisy, plus the shrill cry of the power drills scared the birds away.

"Late one more time, and you're off this site."

The voice in the garden boomed so loud that Nella heard it from her bedroom. She recognised the voice, and thought the man it belonged to must be Cal's boss – when the builders first arrived, he'd shaken Dad's hand and unrolled a big piece of paper with all the plans for the house on it. Peeking through her window to investigate, Nella saw two men standing in the garden below. One with his back to her, wearing blue jeans and a checked shirt that stretched across his back, was indeed the boss – the other was Cal.

Nella thought it was strange, looking down at him from this height, Cal looked almost small. His boss practically towered over him, arms folded. Cal's boss said something else to him that Nella couldn't make out. Her stomach squirmed. Cal had looked tired before, but today he was bone-white. There was something off about the expression on his face, like he was searching for something. He shifted from one foot to the other until his boss strode away. He had an audience. The rest of the builders had downed tools to watch. Cal didn't seem both-

ered. He pulled out his phone and stared at it intently before chucking it away and putting his head in his hands.

"Fuck's sake," said Cal.

The word took Nella aback. She shouldn't know it, but she did. Once, at the dinner table, Dad had told Albie off for wearing his nails painted black to school. There'd been a letter home and everything, Dad had called Albie an "embarrassment" and Albie had told Dad to "fuck off". Dad got really angry then; he threw his pint at the wall and it smashed, spraying beer and broken glass everywhere. That had been in the old kitchen, before the extension. Nella didn't hear what happened next because Mum sent her to her room, but she remembered worrying that Dad wouldn't let Albie paint her nails anymore either. He used to take her to Boots and let her choose any colour she wanted. Nella's favourite was duck egg blue. Albie left soon after that argument, and now, Nella began to worry that Cal might have to leave as well.

***

That afternoon, however, Cal seemed in a better mood. Nella had seen him eating his lunch on the scaffolding boards outside her bedroom and hovered, unsure whether or not to make her presence known. Cal noticed her. He was still pale, his eyes sunk into the grey of their sockets, but he'd greeted Nella enthusiastically, and she climbed out of the window to join him, pleased he'd cheered up.

"I forgot, I brought this for you, Nella. Thought you could use it for your project," said Cal, rummaging in his backpack, his hand trembling a little. Cal pulled out a long black feather and handed it to Nella. She'd collected a number of black feathers from her garden already, thanks to the crows, but this feather was different. Halfway down, it had white splodges that made a pattern like thin clouds stretched across the sky.

"What is it?"

"That's a capercaillie feather. They're very rare. You can only find them in the Highlands, where

the Cairngorms lie. They live in the pine woods up there."

"cap-er-cai-llie" Nella repeated the word several times, relishing the way it bounced off her tongue. "Have you ever seen one?"

"Yeah, with my grandad, when I was a kid, only a little older than you, maybe. We went in the winter, that's when the capercaillie move into the woods to feed. The snow was up to my knees, and I wasn't wearing my overalls, so my trousers were soaked. You can't complain to my grandad, though, he'd just say it was my fault for not wearing overalls."

"Do you miss your family?" said Nella.

"I don't know, do you miss your brother?" Cal replied. Nella's heart started beating double time as she calculated her answer.

"Hey, it's ok, I'm sorry – we don't have to talk about it," said Cal. " And yeah, I would love to go back to Scotland, take my son camping like my grandad took me."

"You have a son?"

"Yeah, back in Glasgow."

Nella tried to imagine Cal as a dad, dropping

her off at the school gates. Maybe he would tell her friends all about the different species of trees in their field, pointing out which ones grew conkers in the Autumn or blossomed in Spring.

"Why doesn't he live with you?" Nella asked. Cal sighed and stood up. He fiddled with the edge of the scaffolding's plastic banner that had come loose and started flapping in the wind.

"I've got some work to do, Nella, before I can go back and live with him again."

"Like building work?" she said. Cal let out a laugh.

"I wish," he said, but his face looked tired. As usual, Nella couldn't work out what was funny.

***

When Cal went back to work, Nella scurried to her bedroom, clutching the capercaillie feather. Finally, she could finish her project. Her own set of wings – much better than a swing. She'd used a cardboard box for their frame, tracing a pair of dress-up fairy wings to get the right

shape before glueing on all the feathers she'd painstakingly collected. Only the most beautiful made the cut. Cal's black and white capercaillie feather was the perfect final touch. Nella secured the wings to her back by poking two holes in the middle and threading her dressing gown rope through, tying it across her waist.

Nella waited until she heard the sounds of the others shout goodbye and the van crawling off the drive. She peeked through the curtains. Cal was alone, sweeping up and down below.

As lightly as she could – she wanted it to be a surprise – Nella climbed out of her window and scampered across the scaffolding boards to the far end directly above Cal. He didn't look up. Not even when Nella clipped the metal scaffolding pole as she ducked underneath it, and a twanging sound rang out. Her heart hammered in her chest. Teetering on the edge, Nella summoned her courage. She saw herself taking off, soaring above all of London's glass and the concrete to see Cal's mountains for herself. She'd pick up Albie, too. He would be so surprised to see her.

"Nella!" Cal had noticed. She saw him standing alert, his face twisted in panic. She didn't want him to be scared.

Nella jumped.

Her stomach plummeted through her feet. The ground rose up at her in a great green wave. A shape came out of nowhere. Her body made contact with something – the crook of an elbow.

Pain shot through Nella's right arm as she and Cal hit the dirt. She felt it snap. She smacked her lips, her mouth heavy with the metallic taste of blood. Cal untangled himself from her, panting.

"You're all right, lucky I caught you. Silly salmon, you nearly took us both out".

She started to cry. Her eyes were only half open. Someone (Mum?) came sprinting. Nella felt her collapse over her. Mum took her in her arms and started to rock, wailing like a wild animal caught in a trap. Another set of footsteps came thundering out of the house. She opened her eyes fully and saw Dad's brown leather shoes by her head, and Cal's muddy boots, facing them.

"What have you done to my daughter?"

"She jumped; I couldn't stop her. I tried catch-

ing her and–."

Nella strained her neck to see Dad's fist balled into a punch. He lunged at Cal. Dad's knuckles smacked Cal's jaw. Cal's boots stumbled backwards.

"What the fuck?"

"You're not coming near my family again. I'm gonna have you fired. Tell me why I shouldn't call the police," said Dad. Nella tried calling out, tried to tell him that it wasn't Cal's fault. It was her project, not his; they didn't have to send him away. Mum stroked her forehead, shushing her.

"It's ok, baby, you're ok." The pain in her arm overwhelmed her. Nella choked on her sobs. If Albie were there, he would have helped her find the words.

"Don't bother," said Cal. "Fuck this. Nella, I hope you feel better."

Nella watched as Cal's boots turned and walked away. When he disappeared, she rolled her head back, turning her face upwards to the sky. A couple of sparrows flitted above her, just out of reach.

Spring River Flow

Nemo Arator

"Row, row, row your boat, gently down the stream…"

"Merrily, merrily, merrily, merrily, life is but a dream…"

We sang this, over and over, bellowing with drunken enthusiasm as we did indeed row a boat – a long wood canoe, rather – down the winding passage of the creek through the valley. Our hoarse disjunctive singing made a jangled round of the lullaby, our voices rising to the sky and dissipating. The singing was broken only by exhaustion and sips from the bottle, which we passed back and forth between us, while the others carried on without him.

The three of us – Guido, Gaston, and I – were in high spirits, for we were on our way to the secluded residence of our friend, the infamous Jose von Walpurga, who had invited us to this year's birthday party, which was being celebrat-

ed with a select gathering of people at his home, a ramshackle old mansion located somewhere along this uninhabited stretch of waterway, several hours downstream from the city.

(His house was accessible by road too, of course, but taking a boat was the customary method of going, among those who had been there, for it lent an aspect of pilgrimage to the journey, as invitations to his home were nearly none. Guido had been there before, but Gaston hadn't, and neither had I.)

All around us, spring was blooming new life; the shore was dense with fresh foliage. Floating down this old river route, the same meandering course it's run for centuries, it flowed steadily enough to keep us moving without too much effort. The way was long and treacherous; we had to watch out for rocks and occasionally manoeuvre around piles of fallen branches.

Eventually, we came to a sandy cove at the foot of a small cliff, where a handful of canoes, kayaks, and dinghies were lined up in a row. We hauled our own vessel up the beach and placed it among the rest. I noticed some old liquor

bottles mired in the sand, the glass mottled from how long they'd lain there, evidently discarded by debauchees during the midst of some distant revel. I picked one up to see if anything was inside, but it was empty.

A staircase had been carved into the face of the cliff, the steps cut according to the sedimentary layers. With Guido leading the way, we climbed them and emerged up onto a grassy plateau. A cracked flagstone walkway led to the gates of the six-foot chain-link fence encircling Walpurga's compound. Having made a fortune from his many patented inventions, Walpurga then bought this plot of land out here away from the city, and built this wall around it soon after taking residence; inside the wall was this place he was building, a piece of the world being remade according to his own designs.

A guard emerged from the sentry booth outside the gate. He glanced dismissively at Gaston and me, but he gave Guido a familiar nod and allowed us past. As we walked across the inner lawn, we had a good view of the small lake Walpurga had constructed at his proper-

ty's lowest point. It was well known that he had a penchant for alligators, particularly albinos, and that he kept several as pets.

One might think they couldn't survive in this part of the world, but that is untrue. The summers are, in fact, just barely hot enough for nearly half the year; he dug caves for them to hibernate in over winter. The fence was as much to protect them as to contain them, for the affliction of albinism made them too conspicuous to survive in the wild; that's why they were so rare. Only eighty are known to exist at the time of this writing; most are in captivity, and Walpurga had four of them.

They were allowed to roam the grounds freely, and though I never heard about any of his guests being injured by the beasts, the absence of such stories itself was worrisome, for Walpurga was a man of such means that could easily have such things silenced. He was said to be breeding the creatures, developing some type of super-gator; rumours told of a humongous grey one with crimson eyes. But as to why he was doing this, the reasons were unknown; that part was never

made clear — perhaps it was simply to preserve something strange and beautiful.

At the house, we rang the doorbell and waited. We could hear its resonant chime sounding within, and a few moments later, it was answered by an elderly fellow wearing a tuxedo. He greeted us with a knowing pleasantry and bade us enter.

"Right this way, gentlemen," he said.

He led us to a room midway down the hall and paused outside, gesturing for us to go in, which we then did. Inside, the party was in full swing: music was playing and everyone was having a good time: talking, laughing, dancing. Mostly people I didn't know, though I glimpsed a familiar face in the midst (or thought I did). A band was playing in the corner: crashing cacophonous noise, frenetic bursts interlarded by some fool shouting random gibberish into the microphone, before they started up again.

At the very moment we entered the room, Isolde was swinging from a chandelier and screeching insanely. And then Jack stood up, looking very pale, holding a pistol, and started

yelling and waving it about.

"I'm going to kill you all!" he shouted, and fired several rounds into the ceiling. But everyone was already either too intoxicated to notice or else they simply didn't care, and eventually he sat back down and continued drinking, somewhat sullenly. Isolde dropped to the floor, and someone burst out a hysterical jag of laughter.

Naked women walked amongst the crowd, covered in paint and glitter, imbibing the libations with everyone else. I quickly inferred these must be the house-girls Walpurga was rumoured to keep on staff. Then I noticed the woman on her hands and knees upon the billiard table in the corner opposite the band. She had a horse-tail butt-plug stuck in her rear, and she was sweating and gyrating her hips feverishly while someone idly whipped her buttocks with a riding crop.

Others gathered around with pens and wrote things upon her. Verbiage was scrawled up and down her arms and legs, all over her torso, even her face, hands, and feet: her entire body was covered in writing. This woman was the May

Queen. She would have much of that tattooed onto her after the weekend. Like a series of I Ching throws, dice and coins were scattered across the green, along with chunks of bone and tiny figurines.

Just as I realised both Guido and Gaston had disappeared into the festivities, I heard a male voice declare loudly with smooth confidence: "The future is ahead of us."

I turned to see the source of this remark, and saw a handsome thin man with a moustache sitting at a table with a group of people. He set down his drink, leaned forward and snorted something from the plate in front of him. Then somebody nearby raised their glass for a toast and shouted, "To the future!"

And a chorus cheered: "To the future!"

"And whatever comes in between!"

"Cheers!"

And the toasting and celebrating continued. But eventually, it became too much for me, so I asked Jose if there was somewhere I could go have a smoke and gather my thoughts.

"Of course," he said, and summoned the

butler. "Geoffrey. Please show this gentleman where he can get some fresh air and have some time alone."

"Of course. Right this way, sir."

He led me down the hall to a glass door, through which I could see an enclosed courtyard garden, with little pathways leading into a maze of shrubberies and flowerbeds. He held it open for me and said, "I'll leave you to it then."

I walked through, lit a cigarette and started strolling. Pale statues lurked amid the greenery, doubtless Walpurga's own, though they had aspects of classical antiquity. But the garden was not entirely enclosed, for I soon found a gate that opened onto the rest of the yard.

From where I emerged, I could see the lawn slope down to the pond, the expanse of water across which was scattered the log-like shapes of floating alligators basking in the sun. It was a bright, beautiful May afternoon, the sky was blue, the sun was shining, and there was a faint breeze.

And so, I smoked and strolled, keeping to the periphery of the lawn, not striding across the

middle, for it is indeed hazardous to be caught out in the open on this particular property. I kept an eye on the hedge along the fence for any gators that might be nesting in there, but it looked like most of them were out on the water.

I had gone most of the way down to the water's edge when I noticed a sizable hole in the perimeter fence. It was big enough for a crouching man to crawl through; thus, it was big enough for an alligator, too. I'd have to tell Jose about this immediately; it would have to be repaired before anything escaped. But instead of going back at once, for some reason, I went over to investigate more closely; perhaps I thought I could block it with something.

I was halfway over there when, suddenly, the head of a humongous grey alligator emerged from that hole. I stopped dead in my tracks and stood staring helplessly at the great beast. It was poised so perfectly still in that ragged aperture that for a moment, I was unsure whether it was a statue or a living creature. It could be a joke, a Styrofoam bust operated by some sort of pop-up mechanism. I wouldn't put it past him:

Walpurga was well-known for his pranks.

But I didn't think this was one of them: it was the eyes, those albino eyes, reptile eyes: cold, primordial patience, boundless appetite. This was it, the beast of legend, and the stories were true: it was the size of a horse. It looked like it could eat a whole person in a single gulp.

At the sight of it, my mind went blank, overcome with the sheer dread and awe of beholding the beast right there in front of me; it cancelled any possible thought – nothing else in the world existed except that ancient demonic face, the colour of slate protruding from the ragged opening in the fence like a dinosaurian jack-in-the-box.

That moment seemed to last forever; the only thing that kept me from fainting was the knowledge I would be devoured immediately. Incredible tension, like a wire being pulled on either end until finally it must snap.

Then something did – a flick of movement and the bubble burst – I whipped around and ran for the house, pushing as hard as I could, but my legs felt weak and jellied. I remembered alli-

gators run fastest in a straight line, so I jerked to my left, then to the right, zigzagging back and forth across the lawn as I charged toward the house, mind bulging with terror. I couldn't hear if it was behind me; I didn't dare look back to see if it was; I ran so hard I felt my thigh muscles rip. But I forced myself onward, and I was nearly at the house when one of my legs just suddenly gave out, and I fell.

I landed on my hands and continued like that, pushing with the one good leg, a loping onward hobble, pawing, crawling, scrabbling forward, my leg kicking desperately as I pushed for the final stretch across the threshold and into the safety and enclosure of the garden.

I made it, but I nearly fainted with the effort, grabbing hold of the gate as I reached it and swung around to slam it shut, expecting to just barely evade the gator's jaws. But instead, there was nothing. The way was entirely clear of pursuit; there was nothing behind me at all.

Relief and confusion washed over me. Did that just happen – or was it a hallucination, some kind of crazy mindfuck? If anyone saw

that, they would surely be howling with laughter. But it was no matter: I was safe. I brushed myself off, the trembles subsiding, and stood there awhile until I felt calm enough to go back inside.

However, I must have entered a different door than the one I went out of, for I had some difficulty in finding my way back. As I arrived, Jack and Isolde emerged and said I was just in time, the May Queen was about to begin her dance. I went in with them and stood by the door and listened to the musicians, who played sonorously now in the lengthening afternoon.

Somebody dimmed the lights, so that the only illumination was from the windows, and from the candles and sparklers fizzling atop a heavily frosted cake on the central table. Walpurga was seated before it, his face shining in the radiance, and he was surrounded by four or five people gathered closely around him. He waited until the sparklers died down, then he took a deep breath and blew out all the candles, from which there was a great profusion of smoke.

Then the May Queen somehow emerged from

the cake and performed a series of particularly suggestive gyrations with the smoke drifting around her; then she descended to the floor and commenced moving amongst the party-goers, a narcotic frolicking, traipsing through the crowd trailing ribbons of silk. In the dimness, I could barely see her pale shape. Mesmerised by the languidly lugubrious movements of her dance, I was enchanted by her rolling hips moving about the room; at one point, she cavorted right past me. Her eyes had a sleepy cloudiness – like she was hypnotised or in a trance.

She was performing a series of sacred dances, each with a central motif, and she would dance until she either finished the sequence or collapsed from exhaustion, for once it was begun, it must be completed. The musicians played along in accompaniment; they knew the program, having practiced rigorously in the preceding weeks. For this was a rare procedure, once recorded as having been common in olden times; they used the day of his birth to inaugurate the season with this dead tradition resurrected.

Then I noticed someone had opened one of

the walls, which gave way to another room that consisted almost entirely of a huge tank with an alligator inside. At the sight of it, I had a sudden sick feeling that they were going to feed her to that gator; either that or it would get out and attack someone.

Then I saw someone go to her and offer her something that looked like a twig, like a little fig branch, or a dried-up piece of vine. I heard them say, "Try it. It's like E."

That cloudiness cleared from her eyes when they focused on the shape; she seemed to recognise it immediately; she had a look of horror and revulsion on her face. She started shaking her head back and forth, saying, "No-no-no-no-no-no-no," and they had to take her away.

After she was gone, her absence created an empty space, like a lull in the tide where something was supposed to be, but isn't. All the people here suddenly seemed stilted and awkward, uncertain what else to do right then, including myself.

Something seemed sinister about the butler now. I saw him standing in the doorway, talking

to Jose. They were leaning in close together, clearly conspiring about something. I decided it was time to get going now myself, so I got up and departed from the premises.

I walked across the lawn to the gate we had entered. The guard was asleep inside the sentry booth, and I passed by without being noticed. I carefully descended the steep steps carved in the cliff-face, and at the bottom, I found Gaston and Guido were already here.

Guido was sitting on a driftwood log drinking a beer; Gaston stood nearby smoking a cigarette. They looked oddly excited. They'd been waiting for me; they figured I'd be coming back sooner or later; they got tired of that scene themselves; and furthermore, they found something in the trees some distance up the shore.

They beckoned me to follow them, and we made our way through the undergrowth until we came to a wooded clearing. The trees had almost overtaken the building, a ruined, run-down monolith with gaping holes in the sides. They said they almost didn't notice it through the trees; they came over for a quick peek, then

came back to wait for me; they hadn't even gone inside yet. They figured it must be an old mill or some sort of riverside watchtower.

We went to the only ground-level entrance, a pair of huge black double doors. They were heavy and rotted in place, but with some effort, we were able to kick and pry them open enough to get inside. The place was a burned-out shell, gutted by some ancient fire. The roof had collapsed in upon itself. Scorch marks rose up the walls to the jagged hole where the ceiling had been. We saw a balcony above us, but the stairs to reach it were ash and cinders now.

We stood there awhile amid the heaps of rubble, drinking in the serene desolation of the scene. The air had a faintly acrid smell, like burning bones; like being at the dentist, or the crematorium. There was nowhere else to go, and nothing else to do, so eventually we had to tramp back through the bush, the branches scratching and tearing at me the entire way.

And then something clicked, I suddenly realised who she was – the May Queen, the goddess in flesh – I had known her once ago.

But she slipped away, and I let her; there was nothing else I could do. And so, we lived our lives according to chance and circumstance, and somehow it ended up that I would see her again. But I didn't know it was her, and I didn't know what to do, so I didn't do anything. And that was my punishment: to see it all slip away again, because it hurt so much.

We arrived back at the boat and carried it to the edge of the water. Gaston got in first, then me in the middle. As I settled into my seat, I remembered what the moustache man had said, declaring with smooth confidence: "The future is ahead of us."

And indeed it is, I thought. Life goes on; whether we want it to or not, it just goes on, and that is surely its curse, as well as its balm.

Then Guido climbed in the back, and we pushed off and sailed on down the river.

Fly Hook

R.W. Chapman

You were rinsing your plate in the sink when you found the orange gun. Why was it in the same kitchen cupboard as the lemon soap? You picked it up and your fingers struggled to wrap around the handle. The dock and bullrushes bobbed outside of the houseboat, and your stomach lurched.

Your dad grunted behind you. He was hunched, wheezing, and lighting a Camel. His stomach bulged under his oil-stained t-shirt.

You wanted to drop the gun, or stuff it back into the cupboard and pretend that you hadn't seen it. But Dad would have seen your heaving chest. Your tenth birthday was approaching, and by then, you had told yourself, you would be better at pretending.

"Dad?" you said.

You had only ever seen a gun like this in the video games you played late at night under your

engine-smelling duvet.

"Stupid," he coughed. "It's a flare." Sweat tumbled down his forehead. "Use to set 'em off at ducks when me and the boys were fishing."

Fishing. That trip he took you on a week before. He had rowed you through the water in the skiff while you sat at the stern. In the clearing, he pushed a worm onto your hook and threw the line into the water. You both waited in silence as you did every evening in front of the television. Pressing your knees to your chest, you wondered what it would take for him to talk to you. You thought that the trip was a test, to see if you had grown up yet. Then the hook caught. The line drew in. A slip of brown life was birthed. He handed you the oar and gestured.

"It's your fish," he croaked. The small fish tried to drink the air. "What are you waiting for?" he wheezed.

You held up the oar. You met the green eye of the fish. A heartbeat crawled into your ear. Your dad's eyes ran over you. What would happen if you didn't kill the fish? Your dad might never talk to you. He wouldn't respect you enough as

a boy or his son. You would both carry on living in the same rooms, but being alone.

The orange of the fish's fins flickered as it jumped in desperation. The oar slipped from your hand as the skiff dipped beneath you.

You fell from the boat.

In the water, you opened your mouth to scream and tasted mud, petrol, urine. Something grabbed your collar, hauled you out. Your dad. He dropped you onto the floor of the boat. You gulped air.

There was silence after that. Only his struggle for air and the occasional flicking of a Camel husk accompanied you on your way back to the houseboat. You had failed. Your dad sat in the living room while you found a towel. You could still taste the water. Your dad turned on the TV.

That is all you knew of him. Silence. You had been sitting together, silent, for your whole lives. If you had not fallen into the water, maybe he would have spoken to you. If you had pretended to be a man and plunged the oar through the fish's skull. If you had smiled and killed and shaken his hand and eaten the fish's flesh right

there in the clearing, maybe he would have said something about his sadness. Maybe he would have said something, anything, to you.

The cigarettes were killing him. Starving him of air. Sometimes, as you laid in bed, you tried to think of ways you could help him. You wished that he would tell you. On the fringes of your dreams, you thought about winning the lottery and buying him a yacht. Fishing in turquoise water with browned skin and smiles.

Back in the kitchen, his eyes darted to the flare in your hands as he pulled the Camel to his waiting mouth. His brow crumpled.

"Try catch us something again. For tonight," he said, snatching the flare from you. The heartbeat slunk back into your ear. Another test. Your legs wilted as you were pushed up the narrow stairs to the deck of the houseboat.

You stood on the dock, by the skiff. The day's warm breeze kissed your cheek. Your dad checked the ammunition in the flare. A fishing rod and leather box were handed to you. He nudged you with the flare.

"Take it," he murmured. Smoke floated from

his mouth. “If you… you know…” He nodded towards the water. Your heart thundered.

You could have run. You could have pretended to faint. You could have pretended to be someone else. A lion tamer or an explorer captured by pirates. The long plank of the ship stretched before you as the crew poked and jeered. The water looked black. Your hands curled into fists by your sides. You would have to catch something and prove to him that you were not just a boy. You were an explorer. A man.

Your foot stepped forward onto the skiff, and you grabbed the flare from your dad. A smile broke across his face before a cough, and a flame devoured another Camel.

He pushed you out.

You struggled to pull the oars. The water was thick and rancid. Bottles, cigarette butts, and beer cans danced around you. A white plastic bag swam onto your oar and lay limp in the air before being submerged. The fish was just like that.

You never wanted to taste that water again.

Your back strained as you pulled harder with each stroke. The boat began to lilt towards the channel. It led to the clearing that you and your dad had fished in the past. You stuffed the flare gun into the leather box. It was not needed.

You watched the plastic bag float further away. Beneath it, you thought you saw scales flicker.

The water began to submit against your strokes. The heat from the evening sun wrapped around you, and the tips of the parched bullrushes leant against the breeze. The Broads were weaved of marshes and scrapes and peatbogs and dykes. You pretended that they were the veins of a giantess and that you were her child warrior searching for a way to be born. You could have gotten lost within her bloodstream.

But you knew that channel and where it led.

This was the inlet that your dad sped down in the midday sun a year ago.

That morning, you felt the softness of lips against your forehead. Your mum's hand guided you to the small boat. It was going to be an adventure. You were going to be a big boy and pretend. She rowed you, smiling, into the clear-

ing.

Later that day, your dad told you that he had woken up to find that your mum was gone, her wardrobe was empty, and you were not in your bedroom.

You were hugging your legs when he found you. Just you. In the skiff.

He pushed you against his chest and you smelt the engine oil and leather of his body. Crying, he thanked God. He was silent the next morning and returned from the mechanic's carrying cigarettes.

Back in the skiff, a plastic bottle pecked at the hull. The setting sun hugged your neck. You entered the clearing.

You tried to thread the line and push the worm onto the hook the way your dad had done a week ago. A pool waited beneath you.

You might not look at the fish once it was in the skiff. You would try to kill it without thinking. As you cast the line into the water, the wind embraced you.

Something soft bit at the end of the line. You fumbled, reeling it in. Under your breath, you

promised yourself that by your tenth birthday, you would also be better at this. The brown leaves of the fish's skin winked in the light as you cradled it out of the water and into the skiff.

You grabbed the oar and measured the distance between your knight's sword and the foe. The small fish's belly plunged and contracted. It grasped at its passing life.

You met its eye. You saw your dad wheezing on the sofa, struggling against the weight of his sadness as the smoke choked him.

You felt the crash against the hull of the skiff before you heard it. The boat lurched in the water as the oar was knocked from your hands. You could not see the cause yet. Great waves surged around you. Then a mass of green scales sank into the darkness. Something was beneath you.

The fish you had caught had jumped out of the skiff in the chaos. Your chest clenched. The sun was setting. Something lived out there. A bigger fish. You would be knocked from your small boat. You would plunge into the murk and drink the disgusting water. You would fail.

You closed your eyes and tried to steady your heartbeat. The waves slackened to ripples. A warm wind weaved through you. You sucked in a deep breath.

Your shaking hands found the oar. There was a bigger fish out there. Maybe you could use this fish to become someone else. Maybe you could become a sea captain, catch the fish and make your dad happy.

Your captain's hands worked faster baiting the line the second time. You cast the hook out of your ship and waited.

A plastic bottle bobbed past you. It dipped in the water, and you thought you saw the scales again.

The sun sank as you waited. Your stomach tightened. Your eyes grew heavy.

A tug on the line heaved you to the water's edge. You strained to pull back and smiled as you wrenched the rod between your legs to try and gain leverage. The reel clicked as it was dragged closer.

A slick green dome rose from the water. The tips of two pointed ears. Yellow cat's eyes stared

at you. The slits burrowed into its skull above a stretched and fanged mouth. Gills wrapped its scaled throat. It lifted a scaled hand from the water. The hook had caught in its palm. You screamed.

It tore the hook from its hand and made a high, cold screech. Almost as if in fear, the skiff jumped beneath you. You fell from the boat.

The water was warm. You held your breath, not wanting to drink the filth. It was out there, beneath you. It had seen you.

You kicked through the water, pushing yourself to the surface. You crawled onto the reed bed and nestled yourself amongst the spike-rush. You saw the leather box floating against the bank.

You imagined your dad. He was hunched and wheezing. Then choking. The image became fainter. You were going to die on the reed bed, and you would never get another chance to try and save him from his sadness. He was already dead, and so were you.

You heard broken breathing behind you. Flinging open the leather box, you grabbed the

flare.

You spun and met dry, swaying reeds. You pushed the barrel of the flare through them.

You held your breath.

In the moonlight, the creature hunched over an oval of woven reeds, plastic bottles, and cans. Cigarette butts jutted from the nest's walls. The creature straightened. It wheezed, clutching a plastic bag in one of its hands. It searched for where to place the bag, being led by its translucent, bulbous belly.

Her green young huddled within the nest.

The creature's wheezing stopped and started. A low tone floated from her throat. It modulated. A melody cut through the night air. She sang.

You lay in the dirt and listened to her gentle lilt.

A breeze rubbed against your cheek, and you remembered being in the veins of the giantess, the warmth of the water, and the wind that hugged you as you fished.

The rushes cradled you.

You were not going to die, and neither was

your dad.

You rose and turned in silence, but she saw you. Her eyes were no longer slits, but full silver circles. The melody stopped, and, for a second, there was only you and her and the breeze across the reeds.

Your heart hammered. Your legs rooted themselves within the peat. You raised the flare to call for help. From Dad. From anyone.

The orange flare made a damp click, and the shot jammed.

You met her eyes.

The creature turned, pulling herself through the thick reeds, and disappeared into the water.

The young curled into one another in the nest, still except for the occasional rock of the breeze. Their peeling scales gave way to off-white flakes of flesh. Their cat-eyed faces twisted. Their chests bent.

The flare fell to the ground. You crumbled. The warm peat and hugging reeds felt cold and dry beneath you.

You lay beside the nest and tried to recall the melody she sang.

Do You Hear Me?

Uduak-Abasi Ekong

Forgive me, Father, for I will sin unless you come down and tell me not to.

But you won't, will you? No. That's not your style. You prefer the theatrics of signs and wonders. Signs, like when Mummy dreamt we'd be poisoned if we ate at Mama's funeral. So, we sat under the tent in front of the village house, our stomachs aching while Daddy buried his last living parent. Wonders, like when St. Agnes church on Ikpa road burned down during an overnight service, killing thirty people, but leaving a Bible untouched. I still remember the onlookers murmuring, "Wonderful! God is good," as rescuers pulled out the Bible from the wreckage of charred bodies.

I know you don't always speak through signs and wonders. You can be subtle, as Mummy claims to see you in everything.

"God is telling me something," she says when

the clouds form a vaguely human shape or when the Psalm of the day coincides with her troubles. You've blessed her with the ability to see hidden messages stitched everywhere, while all I see are coincidences. That is why subtlety won't cut it for what I'm about to do. You've made me far too rational, and I'll reason away anything less than a clear sign from you. So, here I kneel in the front pew, my eyes fixed on the statue of your son on the cross, hanging above the altar. Here, I must hear you. Evening mass does not start for another three hours, and I will wait till then for you to tell me not to go through with this sin. If you say nothing, I will take that as a sign too.

Do you hear me? Whether or not I will commit this sin is in your hands.

A woman slides into the pew beside me, her rosary in hand as she whispers the "Hail Mary." A little girl in a white T-shirt and red chequered overalls kneels beside her. Her hands are folded, and her eyes squeezed shut.

"Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name…," she says.

She can't be more than three, but the prayer rolls off her tongue like a nursery rhyme. Does she even understand what she's saying? Surely. The way she crosses herself so effortlessly, like it's her second nature. At her age, I could barely remember which shoulder to touch when invoking the Holy Spirit. Left, then right? Or was it the other way around? I'm sure you're impressed by this little girl. You must be proud of her devotion at such a young age. I know Mummy and Daddy would be.

"I hope she ends up with a husband who prays with her," Mummy would say. Nearly every conversation with Mummy involves an imaginary future spouse.

When her younger sister, Aunty Grace, had her breasts removed because of cancer, Mummy prayed, not just for the cancer to leave, but for Aunty Grace's future husband to love her regardless. She prayed more for the latter. Perhaps that's why you didn't hear the former because Aunty Grace died a few weeks later.

"I'm sure she will. Her parents are raising her the right way. She will choose the right partner,"

Daddy would say. Daddy's big on raising children your way. Raising wives, too, apparently. Mummy had to convert to Catholicism before he'd marry her. As though you were any different from the version she worshipped at the Methodist Church. I always wondered why her conversion was necessary, but I knew better than to ask. I've learnt that when the topic is you, questioning is often misconstrued as an attack, and you've seen how anyone who's perceived to be attacking you is treated.

I wonder what Ini would think of this little girl. It's hard to say. Ini lives in a remote village in Germany, far away from churches, I presume. And even if she saw this by some miracle – your doing, of course – she'd roll her eyes, open her laptop, and write an award-winning essay on early indoctrination. She'd talk about how children are moulded into believers before they know how to form their own thoughts and beliefs, and title the piece something like "Shaped to Believe: Childhood Conditioning and the Absence of Choice." Like Ini, I am rolling my eyes, but for a different reason. This

girl should be resting after school. It's a Monday afternoon, for goodness' sake.

Unlike Ini, though, I would never write what I think. Ini's never had trouble criticising you, but I don't condemn you or your people, even when they deserve it. Like that Sunday, ten years ago, when news broke that Father Edet had impregnated a chorister. The chorister was suspended for three months while Father Edet still delivered his homily.

"It is not fair what they're doing to that girl. They didn't punish Father Edet. They didn't even mention his name, but they mentioned her own," Ini said on our way back from mass. I was sitting beside her in the back of Daddy's black Toyota, staring out the window as we drove past Akpan Andem market.

"Why should they? If not for those hotel pictures that leaked, Father Edet should have even denied the pregnancy. Don't you see what that girl wears to church? Ehn? She knew what she was doing," Mummy said, not masking the disgust in her tone as she adjusted the black fascinator on her head.

"She is just seventeen, Mummy. Father Edet is in his thirties. He's the one who knows what he's doing, and for them to punish the girl and not him is just misogyny," Ini shot back, her arms draped over the front seats.

"Iniobong! Shut up your mouth. Don't you have respect for God?" Daddy nearly screamed, glaring at her through the rearview mirror. "That girl is two years older than you and one year older than your sister, yet two of you are smarter than her and you're here defending her," he added with a hiss.

Ini folded her arms and pouted as she sank into her seat. I could feel her gaze on me, expecting me to back her up, especially after Daddy had referenced me in the conversation. I wanted to. I understood her point and knew I had a better chance of getting through to our parents. But I could not feel what anybody in the car was feeling. Not the anger that burned in Ini's voice, not the self-righteous judgment in Mummy's, not the disappointment in Daddy's. Just…nothing. The same emptiness I felt whenever I prayed to you. And so, while Ini looked at

me, I continued to look out the window. When I got back home, I reached for the razor in my drawer, desperate to feel something.

I often wonder if Ini would have written the essay that eventually drove her away from home, "From Eve to Us: Tracing the Religious Origins of Misogyny", if I had backed her up that day. The essay went viral on social media. Some condemned Father Edet while others defended him, citing the chorister's big breasts as an excuse. Mummy and Daddy yelled at Ini for tarnishing our church's image, but she kept writing. A few months later, she was travelling to Lagos to speak at conferences and shake hands with strangers who saw her as something fierce and necessary. Meanwhile, in Uyo, we were going to mass with our heads lowered, avoiding the death glares that followed our every move.

Today, Ini is thriving in Germany. She has an MFA in Nonfiction Writing and recently spoke at a TEDx convention. She does not feel this nothingness that has grown with me. I've stayed silent and yet, here I am, begging you to hear me. Why is that? Why is it that Ini, who

criticises you, does not feel what I feel? Why do the thoughts that plague me evade her when I haven't wronged you like she has?

Why?

And, I have tried to hear you. You know I have. I have been calling out to you since I was seven, when I was seated in the front row in the children's section at mass, listening to the children on the pulpit say the "Prayers of the Faithful." While some fidgeted with their dresses and others gossiped with their friends, I clasped my hands and closed my eyes, giving all my attention to you. I cleared my mind and left it blank. But you left it blank as well.

"Aunty, who are we praying to? Is there really a God?" I asked a church warden after mass, and she looked at me like I had sinned.

"What kind of nonsense question is that?" She pulled my right ear as she responded.

I never questioned you again. Not out loud anyway…

I much appreciated Ini's demonic possession because while it occupied my parents' attention, I snuck out to follow Joy to service at her

church. I would sneak out during the week too, to attend Tuesday Bible studies and Wednesday midweek service, under the guise of going to visit a friend. It wasn't really a lie. You are supposed to be my best friend, after all. I have been living like that for the past eight years. Two different churches, and still, no word from you.

Where are you?

The church doors creak open, and I turn back. Father Edet walks in, his white robe swaying in the breeze and his hands clasped in front of him. He smiles as he approaches me, and I feel my skin crawl when he offers me a limp hug, his arm hovering over my shoulder.

"Good evening, Father," I force a smile. Even this disgusting man still hears from you.

"Abasiofon, peace of the Lord be with you," he says, crossing himself. I do the same.

"Are you here for evening mass?" he asks.

"Yes, Father,"

"Welcome," he says with a smile before he walks away. He goes over to the little girl and her mum, and as I watch him, I wonder how he would react if I told him the real reason I'm

here. He would think I was mad.

I know two mad people – one, from a distance and one, personally. Oga Sunday, we call the former. Every Sunday, on our way to you, we drive past him. He stands in front of the large bin beside Akpan Andem market, his hair rough and overgrown, his skin unclad and covered in dirt, and his teeth so brown I can see them from behind a tinted glass window.

"Kase idad," Mummy usually says, shaking her head. Idad. In Ibibio, that's what we call people who have "run mad." But I've never thought of Oga Sunday as Idad, even when I see him muttering to himself as he eats from the bin. He still knows that food, albeit trash, goes into his mouth. If he were as mad as everyone deemed him, wouldn't he be trying to eat through another orifice or perhaps trying to feed his toes? I believe Oga Sunday either sees the world differently or has just decided the world isn't worth seeing clearly, so he'll do his own thing, and I don't think there was anything wrong with either. Maybe that is my problem. While everybody saw a madman, I saw a dif-

ferent man. Maybe that's why I didn't recognise my own madness until it was too late.

The worst part about Oga Sunday is that I'm sure he used to be "normal". I don't know his backstory, but I know that of the other madman, our neighbour, Uncle Felix, and he certainly used to be normal. Uncle Felix was a Shell Engineer. He was married to Aunty Enobong, and they had three beautiful children. Every Sunday, they'd drive to church in an SUV, sit in the front pew and put ₦1,000 notes as offerings, while my family arrived in a Toyota, sat in the middle, and put ₦50 notes as offerings. Life was perfect for Uncle Felix till Daddy got a call from Aunty Enobong one Saturday morning. Uncle Felix was at the police station.

According to eyewitnesses, he had driven to Enwang Bridge, parked by the road, got out, and tried to jump into the water. But, an okada man who was passing by saw him and grabbed him just before he was able to jump. Other okada men gathered and beat him up before handing him over to the police.

"Can you imagine? They should have even

beaten him more." Mummy said. She was in the kitchen, breaking Maggi cubes into the pot of beans on the stove while Ini and I were frying plantains on the second stove. Daddy was standing by the doorway, his phone still in hand, his arms folded in disbelief.

"Suicide is the worst sin. He would have gone straight to hell if he had succeeded," he said, shaking his head.

"He needs Jesus," Mummy said, and I nearly dropped some plantain on the floor while taking it out of the pan. Uncle Felix paid his tithe, prayed, and went to church all the time. How much more Jesus did he need? And worst of all, if someone like him, who had Jesus, could still want to commit that sin, what about the rest of us? What about me?

"He needs to see a psychiatrist," Ini said as the plantains sizzled in the hot oil. Of course, Ini suggested that as if she did not know what it was like to live in Uyo and visit a psychiatrist. A town so small that I knew when Mfon, a girl I attended primary school with and hadn't spoken to in over twenty years, went to see a

psychiatrist at the University of Uyo Teaching Hospital, because a church friend of mine who worked there told me.

"Mfon has run mad o," my friend said before going on to tell me about how Mfon heard voices in her head, and sometimes outside her head, even when there was nobody else in the room with her. As she spoke, I wondered if she would use the same glee and enthusiasm when telling people about my own lack of voices. I wondered if she would laugh if I told her about the empty void that was my existence. That night, after a day of listening to Ini and my parents talk about what was wrong with Uncle Felix, I knelt and begged you not to let me end up like him. I reached for my razor, begging you to stop me, but still, you said nothing, as the sharp edges touched my skin.

Your silence left its mark, deeper than any blade could.

My phone rings just as the little girl is leaving with her mother. It's Mummy. I should answer, after all, if you don't give me a sign, if I go ahead and sin, you know where I'll be tomorrow by

this time. This could be the last time she's able to call me. But I don't, because I know how the conversation will go.

"Where are you?"

"Church,"

"Okay, Daddy and I are coming for evening mass. Just wait there for us,"

"Okay,"

"You can be praying for husband while you're there," she'll add with a chuckle to suggest she's joking, like I wouldn't know she's not.

"Okay,"

And then, I'd hang up, and she'll not notice that for a while now, my replies are mostly one-word sentences. She won't notice that I have never told her a friend is coming over because I've pushed them all away. She won't notice that I can go for days without wearing a smile or eating a meal. These should mean something to her, but they won't. And I don't blame her. I have no reason to feel this way, not after she has done her part by praying for me. She prayed for me to have a good job. I do. I am working for the BBC all the way from Uyo. Earning in Pounds

and spending in Naira while not paying rent. Isn't that the Nigerian dream? She prays for my health, and I have a clean bill of health. Maybe I should ask her to pray for something silly like my happiness. Maybe then, you'd listen. But, she would ask what's wrong with my happiness, and I cannot tell her how I feel.

About this endless ache, too quiet to scream, and now, too heavy to carry.

The bells for evening mass chime, low and solemn. I get up and drop a couple of thousand Nairas into the offering box. It's a few more than Uncle Felix used to drop, and I hope it makes you hear me when you ignored him. I look around the church, no idea what my eyes seek. Maybe I'm expecting the statue of the Virgin Mary to start crying blood or the statue of your son to move. Maybe I'm hoping a voice will call out to me like it did to Samuel. I don't know what I'm doing anymore. What I do know is that this is where it all began, and this is where it will all end. If there's any place you will hear me, it will be here.

Please, I don't want it to end. I don't want to

go straight to hell. Mummy and Daddy would never forgive me. You'd never forgive me.

You said you'd listen.

"The righteous cry out, and the Lord hears them; He delivers them from their troubles."

I'm here,

I'm righteous,

I'm crying out.

So, why won't you hear me?

Requiem

Sergey Bolmat

In the end, I think that we should dispose of our dead in some easy, practical, pragmatic way. Ultimately, we are all just walking bags of dust, aren't we? Why so much fuss then? What is it all about? Certainly, it's not about memory because it stays with us, generally. And all those graves and tombstones – what do they have to do with our memories? They are the opposite of our memories. They are grim and depressing, and our memories are always bright and poignant. I mean, they are just an old obsession, all those holes in the ground full of dead bones, a fetish that keeps going on and on for centuries for no reason whatsoever, like some superstition.

We should probably throw the dead away with the rubbish. I know, I know – this idea is nothing new. But it is amazing how we are still not doing this. Like many painfully obvious things (take, for example, parachutes for pas-

sengers on commercial flights, which could literally save hundreds if not thousands of lives), this one has been totally overlooked.

What could be easier? People die, we pack their dead bodies in special heavy-duty bags and just place them outside our houses. And call the collection service like we do when we need to dispose of an old mattress. The local government could do that, couldn't they? We all pay taxes. It's not too much to ask. Hospitals could also collect the bodies and use them for organs or medical experiments. Or just burn them together with their medical waste. They have the facilities.

Or they could make diamonds out of those bodies. I read about it online. They make diamonds out of dead people now. Because, as we all know, ashes and diamonds are basically the same thing. Carbon – same as coal. The difference is just density, as far as I can understand. Apply some pressure, and you can have a diamond made out of your dead spouse. A diamond in the rough – if you'll pardon my joke. Cut it, set it in an engagement ring; wear

it to your new wedding. The possibilities are endless. An average body yields a four-carat stone. Prices for such a gem range from 1500 to 50000 quid and higher, depending on the cut, quality, clarity and colour. This is probably the best way to dispose of the corpses. Some of us could have their utility bills covered for years.

And imagine – no more of those horrid vultures circling us all, making their money out of our misery. No more of those awful funeral services. No more of those lugubrious wretches selling you overpriced coffins and urns with fancy names. "In this antique white finish Justinian casket made out of 18 gauge steel with briar rose interior in a French fold design and a high security digital locking mechanism, your granny will be perfectly safe from any intruders". No more those ridiculously pompous resting places with all those hypocritical, sorrowful maidens and cupids, and stupid portraits of people who invariably look like they are waiting for a border control official to check their documents. And also, no more of those mind-numbing stories about the people buried

alive. No more of that horrid stuff. The local services just collect the bodies, and you don't hear about them anymore.

Because what difference does it really make? If we are all about to be recreated at some point in the admittedly very distant future by some hyper-intelligent being into which we hopefully should evolve after billions of years according to de Chardin, Frank J. Tipler and all those Omega Point billionaire dudes – how does it matter if someone was buried under a huge slab of carved stone in a wooden box dressed like a waiter or cremated, or simply drowned at sea? That super-brain must be able to reconstruct you from something else apart from your bones, or hair, or photos, or even DNA. It must be something like quantum mechanics, or gravity, or pure information. Otherwise, it doesn't make sense. We only need this super-intelligence if it can restore the entire history of humanity down to the last aborted foetus and make all the people who ever lived or attempted to live immortal, and connect their interrupted consciousness of the past seamlessly with their new-born intellect. If

not, who cares? If human evolution is not about it, we shouldn't even bother with progress. But we do, we advance, and it means that we do believe in our collective rebirth. And if we do, how does it matter in the long run in what way we dispose of our dead? Just place them somewhere outside of your house. Put some ice in that bag if you do it in summertime, and make sure that foxes or raccoons don't get to them. That's it. Now you can mourn your beloved in the privacy of your own soul.

Only he couldn't. He tried hard, but he couldn't do that. He didn't miss Pam at all. He just didn't feel it. He didn't miss his wife. All the time he tried to think about her, to remember her, he could only find the most abstruse, awful, meaningless ideas circling his brain like flies buzzing inside a lampshade.

It wasn't that he didn't love her. He did, very much so. Impossibly so. He loved her at first sight when he caught a glimpse of her in that café in Soho, typing away on her laptop with a huge bowl of latte macchiato on the table to her right and a stack of printed paper to the left.

And he started visiting that café almost every day, and he saw her a couple of times more. And then he stalked her a little around, and then he knew that she had a boyfriend, and that she was a lawyer, and she was writing a novel, and then he couldn't just wait anymore. He also started writing a novel, sort of. Later, he was able to connect with her online, having subscribed to the same creative writing tutorial, visiting the same discussion groups and, finally, meeting her at a signing event in a book shop and later at a reading in a pub, and then at another reading in another pub. He knew she loved Erica Jong, Olivia Laing, and Chris Kraus. They talked about literature. He learned that she had recently broken up with her boyfriend. They started dating. He met her parents. He proposed to her. They married.

And it wasn't some mental issue either, his apathy. He didn't feel anything about her death, but he could feel many other things. He could feel shame, for example, for his apparent coldness; he could feel anxiety about it. It did appear to him that he didn't care at all, only about her

death – and it scared him. It was strange, like he did it on purpose. He knew this wasn't true. It freaked him out.

He tried hard to miss his dead wife. And then he suddenly understood why he couldn't do that. Because she wasn't dead, he realised. She was still very much alive. She had never drowned. They had never found her body on the beach. He had never identified it. He had never buried it. She was still alive. He kept talking to her. He kept discussing things with her. In the middle of a conversation with someone else, he would stop and wait for her to finish her argument.

At night, he would have sex with her, almost every night, sometimes twice, sometimes wide awake, sometimes while he was asleep, in his dreams. In his dreams, she could be an entirely different person, sometimes a man, but he knew that it was his wife straddling him, talking dirty, her eyes shining in the dark. He could hear her every word, feel every breath. Weirdly, she was twice as alive now, he realised, as she was when she was alive. Their lives became one in a sort of transcendental, metaphysical

marriage, he thought, truly made in that Medieval illuminated heaven full of colourful abstractions and gold symbolising infinite light. If happy, she became twice as happy after her death; if sulking, she became twice as grumpy. Every sensation became insanely sharp, shared between the two of them. I am losing my mind, he kept thinking.

He understood now that in order to properly miss her, he had to make her disappear. She was too much alive for him to continue like that. And she was always near. He could always feel her presence at all times. Every moment now, she could become more alive than he was. She could become him. This possibility scared him. He had to do something about this transformation; he had to protect his identity. He had to continue with his life.

He had to start meeting other women, he thought. He tried. Nothing helped. He couldn't really talk to anyone with her sitting at the same table, listening to them with her lips pressed into a sorrowful little smile. A single nod from her could make all those women look really bad,

a single remark. Oh, she could be funny when she wanted to; she could be really sarcastic in a very insidious way. He couldn't do anything about that. He could have sex with another woman and see his wife watching them, hear her making jokes. Not a single living woman, he thought, could survive a dead woman.

He tried hard to keep his wife away from his dates, but she kept reappearing no matter how much he tried. He tried drinking hard and taking drugs to keep her away, but it only resulted in all the women he tried to meet avoiding him. He couldn't stop laughing during sex. No one wanted to go on a date with a drug addict. Only she was always happy to see him. She didn't care if he was drunk or if he pissed himself after sniffing some speedball.

Eventually, he decided that it was time to end it all for them both. It was time for him to join her in the afterlife, he decided. He wanted to jump from a motorway overpass into some approaching articulated lorry. But he couldn't do that because, once again, she was near and she was waiting for him to do just that. She was actu-

ally expecting him to do that, to jump from that overpass into an approaching vehicle at night. She kind of dared him to do that; she kept challenging him. She made clear that she doubted he could do that. She was sure he wasn't tough enough to jump. Do it already, she kept saying – or just walk away and don't be ridiculous. Don't be such a wuss. Do it.

And he did it and landed on the top of the lorry trailer and rolled off the roof down onto the tarmac, and some cars swerved wildly away and honked, and in his shock, he was even able to stand up and walk to the shoulder and collapse near the guardrail. He was diagnosed with a broken arm, several broken ribs, a crack in his femur, and a crack in his skull; he remained in hospital for three weeks. His dead wife kept mocking him for his failed attempt, and one night, all of a sudden, he knew what he had to do. He understood that she wasn't his wife anymore. She had become a stranger; she had become someone who wanted him to die, too. She mutated into a really bad undead creature, he thought. Probably because she missed him

terribly, he thought, and she was angry that he didn't miss her back enough. She became a really different person, a person he had never known. She lost her mind, he decided. He really had to make her disappear now because this new woman wasn't his wife. She was a monster, a ghoul. He had to kill everything about this monster, this impostor, this wretched double destroying his life. He had to kill every memory of his wife, he understood. He had to destroy everything, like in a huge bonfire inside his head. He had to burn each and every one of those madly vivid pictures of her picking a shuttlecock up from the tall grass in their garden, or reading, or working; each and every one of those inner videos of her walking their dog, or discussing a film with him, or adjusting her hair. He had to annihilate all those little gestures, all those glances, all those words and intonations one by one.

And he did that. He started with her eyes. Her eyes were dull, he thought. They expressed nothing. They were just two globes of protein or collagen or whatever tissue those mammal

eyeballs were made of. He used to see a lot in her eyes, but he always saw himself, he decided. He always saw whatever he wanted to see in her eyes, nothing else. He saw his own reflection in those eyes, his own desires, his own thoughts. Her legs were average, truth to be told; he couldn't really remember anything specific about them. Her ankles were just normal. If I had to say something about them, I could hardly say anything, he thought, could I? Honestly, what was so special about her ankles? Nothing. Her mind was average, and her brain was nothing remarkable about that part of her, too, just a standard brain shaped with boring childhood and uneventful youth, tamed with education and some timid social climbing, riddled with trifles and trivialities. Her tits were kind of uninspiring, barely passable, and those nipples were unmemorable. Her lips were too thin, her mouth was too wide. Her neck was also thin and kind of graceless. Her habits were pedestrian. Her vagina was nothing to write home about. All he could remember about her vagina was that it reminded him of an illustra-

tion for a Wikipedia entry, generic. Everything just in place, all those folds and crevices, with a bit of carefully trimmed hair above, of a nondescript colour. The vagina of an ordinary decent human being. Her bottom was second-rate, another item of a common or garden variety, maybe even flat, yes, flat and rather square, but not too much, not enough to make it noticeably square. Her smile was plagiarised from her best friend Lynn, who used to flash a smile suddenly and unexpectedly, like headlights at night, and then to hide it quickly behind her overly serious, pointedly business-like, blank façade. Her jokes were flat, too, truth to be told, like her bottom. In retrospect, they had only seemed funny because he had wanted them to be funny. Analyse them a bit, listen to them carefully, and they become dull, too careful, too safe. Her fashion taste was plain. Her interests were regular, the same as those of any other person. Her career was unexceptional.

He looked around. Disassembled, his dead wife occupied half his mind, a heap of random bits and pieces. He glimpsed her eyebrow, her

elbow, her toe. He heard the receding echo of her voice. He didn't like himself for what he had just done. He didn't feel comfortable at all about it. If anything, he felt miserable. He felt like a serial killer who had to kill and dismember the same person many times over and over again. Limbs everywhere, her chest, her neck, her lips, her brains, her eyes, her hair, her smile – all reduced to mere leftovers, to waste, to litter. And it wasn't her, he thought, it was me. I am the monster. She's just dead. I've made my dead wife a monster, he thought, I've made her an impostor, a ghoul. It was me all along. It was all the bad stuff in me personified as her. I made it look like her, but it was all mine. And she didn't just drown, he thought. How, he thought, could you know that? No one could. But I know, he said to himself without moving his lips, his face numb with tension. We had a fight. We had a fight, one of many, and then she went swimming. And she knew about the riptide at that time of the day, in the afternoon, when the wind changes. She knew about that – they had those signs on the beach everywhere. She just didn't

care anymore. She was a good swimmer, but the sea was pretty rough. And I didn't stop her because I was angry. I didn't stop her. That's the truth. I made her drown. That's the undeniable truth.

He understood that he was alone now, completely, entirely alone in the whole wide world – his wife dead, the monster inside him destroyed. The only thing left now for him to face was the tedium of his life. This is how I did away with them both, he understood. I infected them both with my own drabness, with the interminable dull routine of my life. It was his own life, he understood, that made everything around him insipid, dreary, bland. Not her eyes, he thought, mine. And now I don't even have that monster within. I erased it, suffocated it, unscrewed it into pieces, littering my vapid self. Vacuous, he thought, monotonous, tiresome. Not her life, mine. It has always been like that, he thought, my life, for as long as I can remember, from early childhood; I'm not even sure that my memories are really mine – I could as well easily borrow them all from somewhere. From

that repetitive onslaught of information, he called his life. Because there was nothing worth remembering in my life at all, he thought, apart from that moment when I first saw her in that cafe in Soho, typing away on her laptop with a huge bowl of latte macchiato on the table to the right and a pack of printed paper to the left. That was mine, he thought. That was real, that moment alone. Everything else was just lifeless background noise.

This is what I should miss, he thought, that moment. She brought an entire world with her, an amazing, extraordinary, phenomenal world as unique as a distant exotic continent, and she opened this world for me, and I infested that land with my ordinariness, with my monotony and boredom. It was me, not her. This is what I should miss, he thought, that territory, still undiscovered, and that moment before I touched it. I destroyed that place and forgot about that first sight. I should miss it all so much that my breath stops. This is how I should do it. I should miss it so much that I blackout on the spot. This is how much it should mean to me. It should

make me giddy with something I can finally call my own.

Try it, he thought. Could be a good start.

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