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Synchronesia: A Depressing Existential Novel (First 15 Chapters)

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For whoever wants it the most.

Ask and it will be given you; seek and you will find; knock and the door
will be opened to you.

-Matthew 7:7

I am not what happened to me. I am what I chose to become.

-Carl Gustav Jung

What doesn't kill you makes you more miserable.

-Me

Chapter 0

You think this feeling's going to wear away one day, but it's not. It's going to last forever.

I used to feel the same way. By the time I'd realised, I'd been working there for a few months, an interminable run of being humiliated and demeaned and having to do the same thing over and over again for the sake of a few pounds an hour. I was beginning to not feel like a person any more, my hands cracked from the handling of too much junk, my inner nasal passages singed on a miasma of pale farts and body odour. I felt disenchanting and numb towards all things, rarely spoke to people any more. I was even getting used to the smell.

It had found me at the height of my desperation, after I got sick and had to quit my fancy job overseas, and move back to England to a cheaper place in a rundown city. I couldn't leave because I needed to visit the hospital so often and I was waiting for somebody I didn't know to die so that I could borrow something they didn't need any more. I saw a sign in the window so I went in and applied. I knew that I was overqualified and I knew that I'd get the job. I knew I'd end up trapped and full of hate but, because I had debts to pay, I went ahead and applied anyway.

The town we were all in was a dive, the kind of place where the billboards advertising new cars or breaks away were for the people passing through to someplace better, because nobody who lived here could afford anything. Some people dropped cigarette butts and unwanted food on the streets and the worse off smoked and ate them. There were proud old buildings made of big stones and embellished with carvings, but their insides were vacant and full of crumbling furniture. The windows had white writing on them that said 'closing down'.

I used to tell myself that these buildings were signs of a more prosperous past. These days, everybody of worth had upped and gone away, leaving only the needy and the confused like me behind. It was a bit like being stuck at the dead end of a garden party, where all the sensible people had gone home for the night and only the drunks had stayed behind to yell up and above one another and howl against the moon. Some people still tried to convince themselves that things were better than they really were. But these were usually just the people too proud to admit and face their own faults -the armies of the deluded, gilding their own cages, and synthesising pallid versions of happiness with which they would confuse themselves and everybody around them.

People out and about and on the buses would shout obscenities at each other and throw empty crisp packets.

All for no reason at all.

Chapter 1

I had an interview and they told me to start work the next Monday so I spent the weekend in denial. I couldn't believe that my life had reached its nadir already. Before it happened, I had been living a satisfying life of impecunious obscurity on the dole. Every Monday, my post office account would be accredited with the money I needed to hit the discount section of the supermarket and I'd still have a little left over for beer so I could drown my sorrows and try to forget about the world.

Sometimes, I would drink in the street, on the steps near the town hall, even though you weren't supposed to, and I'd try to imagine what it might be like to have a job with power on my side. One where I could walk with a stride and a bounce to my step instead of slinking through the streets with my hands in my pockets and my head down. I'd have an expense account and a private registration plate, eat in restaurants where you got served by waiters instead of till attendants, and have a driveway at my house instead of blinking light staircases and elevators that didn't work.

That Saturday and Sunday I did the best I could to find a way out of Monday's maelstrom. I had hated this town ever since I had arrived in it, the broken promises of half-finished buildings and talk of regeneration, the half-eaten fast foods that had been dumped on top of dustbins and telephone boxes, or the empty gentrified mills with smashed windows and keys stuck in their locks. And the people were even worse, spitting every other footstep that they took, talking loud and talking cheap, pushing, shoving, yelling at each other, like at the guy in the post office, or the bar tenders, and the bus drivers, each as poor and desperate and hateful as the next fellow. The last thing I needed was a job that would bring me closer to myself.

One night, I woke through the morning with a yen and a thirst. I climbed out of bed to the kitchen sink and drank speckled water through a dirty glass. I was drawn to a window that overlooked the yellow lights of the street just in time to see a white van pull up and a masked guy with a hammer climb up onto the roof. I watched him smash the windows of the building across the road and then drive off. I never knew why. Another time some guy down the road got shot. They cornered off the street and then they put a picture of him in the newspaper.

I spent those last two days lost within a haphazard panic, wandering in and out of backstreets looking for alternative work, something, anything, whatever would allow my ego to support the crumbling walls on which it now stood. I went to empty bars in search of hiring landlords, climbed steps to vacant offices, and paraded the vast aisles of white supermarkets in search of vacancies. But nobody wanted me and so there was nothing I could do. All that remained was to keep my fingers crossed and pray that fate would somehow save me from the slippery slope into hopelessness.

When I got back to the cold apartment I sat on the floor and trawled the back pages of the local rag for the scraps or scams or get-rich-quick schemes. All I could find advertised were people seeking girls to be 'models' or opportunities for cleaners that could speak foreign languages. I gave up all hope and decided to get drunk again instead. I might have even shed a few tears.

Monday came like a train without the brakes. I woke up earlier than I had in months, showered, and then looked at my reflection in a toothpaste flecked mirror. I threw myself a sardonic smile, knowing all the while that this experience was about to change me, and there was nothing I could do about it. Perhaps the charm and humour that used to reside within the younger version of myself would somehow work their ways back through the haze in my head or the languish in my belly. Only months ago I was young and healthy and running around the city, and yet now I felt senescent.

'The real world sneaks up on us like a killer in the night, pulling us out of the bliss of childhood and tearing open our eyelids to only harshness and the pervasive bitterness of incessant disappointment.', I thought to myself.

And then I remembered that I had once considered myself an optimist.

The place was situated outside a shopping centre, and each morning to get there I had to walk past drones of other retail workers, dressed in uniforms, as though squirming children forced by sneering parents to wear lurid, itchy Christmas sweaters. Occasionally, at this time, you'd see a well-to-do face in the crowd, suited and booted with the old suitcase, eager to get out of there, away from the riffraff, back to the comfort of their offices and their water coolers and the cleaning ladies that they looked down upon. Music that I remembered from my high-school years as being subversive would play over the CD player as an innocuous accompaniment to people shopping or drinking tasteless coffee in the food hall.

I stood outside the shop with my new co-workers: a long-haired guy with tired, red eyes and an attitude, a thin-haired paunchy guy that dressed like an American truck driver, and a ginger-haired stoner. They all had pot bellies from too much TV, eating microwave meals, and drinking Pepsi. As the four of us stood about in silence we smoked cigarettes and curled our eyes. Occasionally, we'd try to make small talk, but it would only serve to fall flat and compound the intensity of it all.

To distract myself, I stared at a sign above the door that said:

'Arbeit macht frei.'

But I had no idea what it meant.

After a while, the long-hair with the attitude checked his watch, then pulled out an ominous and fist-sized bunch of keys with which he began to open the shutters. He had introduced himself as a measly shop supervisor but, you could tell from the way he walked, that he'd convinced himself he was supervising the whole of the nation.

I checked my own timepiece to see how I was attuned to the workings of these people. It was a watch that I'd picked up in China when I had been travelling, when I had seen the Great Wall slice up over the horizon, like there were no limits and that anything was possible. On its face was the official portrait of Chairman Mao, the Chinese big cheese, with the two hands taking the form of his arms, rising to salute and then contort as the hours went by. Red and lurid against his dirt green uniform, it had an innate kitsch built into it. Unfortunately, I'd broken it, drunk and falling in the road, and so one of his arms had fallen off, leaving it to count only the minutes and not the hours.

This constant counting of minutes had started to make me feel like I'd be waiting forever for life to pick up again: A constant sixty minute cycle of going around in circles and routine and waiting for something to change or kick up and out of there. I thought about body organs and getting on the move again, about feeling free instead of trapped. But then, I looked around myself, and realised that some people spend their whole lives feeling like this, and so I told myself to feel grateful for the good things that had happened to me, even if it did seem that they happened a lifetime ago, to the same version of a different person, one who shares memories and head space with me but nothing here in the 'now' and whom I probably wouldn't even recognise if I passed in the street.

The shutters opened and I crossed the threshold.

When you got inside, they made you empty your pockets and write down everything that you had with you, so that you wouldn't steal things. The tattered binder on which you did this was called the 'Search Log'. It was green and sticky. The procedure was simple enough, but people would write in the book with a flourish, as if they were the President of the USA signing a new Bill of Rights, as though they were doing something important just because it was official, and that everybody was going to crowd around them afterwards and shake their hands and take pictures for the paper.

It's the small people like us that make the biggest deals.

Because I was the New Guy, I went last; I wrote the following items beneath my name:

-I-pod.
-Nokia.
-£2.36

I had a copy of *The Catcher in the Rye* in my inner waist pocket, but I didn't have to write it down because they didn't sell books. Nobody had even seen one since high school.

There was a space in which you had to put the time you wanted your lunch. Here I had to write:

10 a.m.

All the other lunch slots had been taken.

I took my allocated lunch break. Though the town was bleak and dilapidated, it had a wide selection of pasty shops. As I stood about outside, smoking and deciding which one I should go to, a yoke of chavs passed me by and told me to get my hair cut.

I wondered for a moment if they were perhaps messengers of some divine force, imbued with the knowledge that we as humans are supposed to one day gain understanding of, their didactical invective serving as a gentle shot in the arm to put us mere mortals back on the right track.

Before I could ask them, their squat bodies and caps evaporated into the grey and amorphous cloud of the city's denizens. Up above, a group of youths were throwing stolen shoes at people from the top floor of the multi-story car park that overlooked the shopping promenade. It served to ground me and so I ceased my metaphysical musings.

When I went to the pasty shop I joined a long line of hungry people in tracksuits. Everybody that left the shop before me had crumbs around their mouths as they ate out of white paper bags. It was as if the humble pasty had brought people of all ages and nationalities together: white babies in prams had pasties wedged between their chubby hands, and so did black people in wheelchairs. I marvelled at the simplicity of it all.

I got back to the shop at 11.01 on the till clocks and was called over by the Supervisor to be castigated. Via a series of curt, staccato utterances and a tone that one may speak to either a dog, an illegitimate child, or a half-wit in, he demanded that I go and talk to him in a quiet section of the shop.

I knew this meant that he wanted to give me the introductory assertion of authority and I could tell he was the kind of guy that felt it necessary to do so. The ridiculous rules that held the place together and his relation to them were his only source of confidence; he was a martinet, purely because he was too stupid to figure out any other way of handling his authority without throwing it in people's faces.

'You're late', he said, before pausing, as if something magical may be about to happen, like a butterfly were to be born from a chicken's egg on the shelves at Tesco, or the traffic lights outside were to flash in new and exotic colours that nobody had ever seen before.

Then he stared at me through the insomniac, computer game addled red eye that has afflicted a whole generation. Waiting. I stared at Mao's arm and its full rotation. But eventually I was forced to say it.

I said, *'I'm sorry'*.

Morally and rationally, I felt quite confident that I had done little if anything wrong, but I had convinced myself that I was too world-weary and wise to play juvenile games with such an abominous no-hoper. I walked off back to the shop floor, fully aware that my youth had left me, and that my life was over. A large part of me wanted to get out of there before things got any worse. But I knew I couldn't, because I had debts to pay, and I would feel guilty if I quit simply because of my proclivity to fallaciously believe it possible to be in control, if not of one's own destiny, then one's existence.

If there is one thing that can be said for sure about this life, it is that sometimes there is nothing you can do but eat a little shit for a while. Perhaps it's the only way you can appreciate the caviar that everyone keeps telling you is in the post.

I went back to the shop floor and attempted to alphabetise the stock on the shelves. Every time I thought I could see the top of the mountain some lowlife would walk in, with a banana or some other non-shop-safe edible, their sticky fingers leaving marks on the already dirty DVD cases and the crumbs from around their mouths and beards (regardless of gender), leaving wanton trails of disregard behind them on the floor.

Like a man tied to a tree as the house he has just built is set on fire, I could only stand and watch aghast as they nonchalantly reordered the fruits of my labour into systems of ill-reason and arbitrary assignment. For example, they would pick things up from the 'DVD Movies' section and capriciously reassign them to the 'Documentaries'. Titles that began with 'A' would find themselves in the 'S' section and vice versa. It was a never ending struggle for order in the chaotic world of human interaction; the next round in the eternal battle between Chaos and Cosmos.

I began to feel that I was just another soul lost in time, another one of God's shelf stackers, lost to the banality of it all, and the hell and the drudgery. Having convinced myself that my personal problems were much worse than anybody else's, I began to see myself as smitten with a secret disease and no way out of it. With each passing second I began to feel that perhaps the earth was about to open up and swallow me whole, so that piles of junk food detritus could fall down on top of me, like straws and ice, and the spit of strangers, and that I would be forever lost in the quagmire of anonymity, forgotten in the casket of eternity.

One day, the Shop Stoner approached and asked me if I could lend him twenty pence, an act which immediately piqued my curiosity because I had been accosted time and time again by drunks on the street who had made similar requests for the same denomination. For some reason, in all its heptagonal glory, the humble twenty pence piece had been exalted to a sort of *soup du jour* of things to be begged for within the city limits, like ten pence was too paltry and shameful, but that double the amount would allow one to maintain a degree of dignity without having asked for too much. Fair game for the penniless but socially self-aware.

I had liked to imagine that, somewhere within the walls of this great city, there was a secret door that only the bums knew about, and that, if you put twenty pence in the slot by the entrance, it would allow you access to a secret world in which all of your problems would be solved.

His answer, however, was far more mundane:

'Bus fare.'

Besides the Supervisor, he was the first of my co-workers to acknowledge my existence. I gave him what he asked for, and as a reward he opened up to conversation.

'How long have you worked here?'

'Two years, give or take'

'Do you like it?'

'Best job in town.'

'Where'd you work before?'

'MacDonald's.'

'Across the street?'

'Yeah.'

We both looked out across the road, where the staff at MacDonald's waved out to us with the familiarity of some secret brotherhood. The Stoner waved at them before melting away to the till area.

As he wandered off, I began to wonder why everybody was so poor. It had become a regular occurrence that staff members would be reduced to borrowing money from each other midway through the month, because their minimum wage pay cheques couldn't reach out past the finish line, and so they would be forced to protract and extend and lengthen in time the pennies in their purses. As a result, we had become experts at eating cheaply and unhealthily: two flapjacks for a pound from an adjacent health food shop, all of which tasted of the same, bland, powder despite being labelled in different flavours or colours that we couldn't care for or discern. Some of us would survive on MacDonald's breakfasts and coffee tokens, whilst others would run down to bakeries at the end of the day to buy discount throw-away foods, at lukewarm temperatures and with crusting edges. Some took on pound shops, or raided the discount section at Tesco, whilst others yet wouldn't eat at all, remaining reticent, hanging on until the first Monday of the month, so that they could stuff their faces for a day and then start the whole cycle on over again.

The wheel turns and the Earth burns but some things never change.

There was rent to pay on apartments and council tax so that the politicians could park their cars outside city hall and hire more traffic wardens to guard the rest of the streets. Electricity was up and so was water and people had birthdays and then Christmas would come and there was nothing you could do about it. Family members would get used to being disappointed in us yet nobody could understand how we could spend all our time working and being in a place we didn't really want to be with so little reward.

I wished there was a secret door, so that I could put my twenty pence into the slot and disappear forever.

Chapter 2

The place that I lived in had eaten away at my savings from the Old World and been sold as a 'luxury apartment', because it had been furnished with cheap furniture that was falling to pieces, and was close to the canal and the train station. In truth, it was just a cold old stone wall building full of drunk people running through the halls and where the corridors were without lights and where there was rubbish trailing down the steps like corpses left on mountainsides. You had to keep your doors locked at all times, even when you were in, because all the drunks and the thieves of outside would shake at the door handles, like furious, anguished burn victims trying to get away from it all. Dreams of elusion or plans of evasion pervaded, because life was cold and scary outside and nobody knew what might happen to them. It began to make me nervous. And my blood pressure was too high anyway.

I'd been living on my own ever since coming back. In the Old World, I had been engaged to be married, but when she found out about my illness and its implications our relationship became complicated and so we decided to throw it away, as though dumping old clothes into the ocean, but maintaining that we were doing something noble, like freeing a bird from its cage, or releasing a majestic zoo animal back into the wild. We reassured each other that it was fine, 'right' even, and then she accompanied me to the airport and kissed me on the cheek and I can still remember her lips wet with tears.

She cried but I didn't and then I disappeared through the gate wondering what the plane food might taste like and if I might be sat next to the type of stranger that would change my life. Someone with all the answers.

For a few months we shared emails about non-events, the kind of polite small talk that you'd make with an unknown at a bus-stop, but they tailed slowly away like puddles evaporating in the morning sun, until finally I was left truly alone; like a blank piece of paper in a warped plastic bottle out to sea; or a repressed love affair; a private, shamefaced dream. The last I heard she was engaged to a banker. Just like her parents had wanted.

So I keep telling myself that everything happens for a reason.

I had become so used to loneliness that it began to seem like an old friend whom I no longer liked but tolerated all the same. For years, I'd tried to convince myself that I would one day find a way to be by myself, so that I could write, even though I never knew what about and didn't really have anything to say. And I had always assumed that I would never be lonely, because I would have chosen to be living in solitude, instead of having it forced upon me, as though somebody with a flawed personality, or a case of the heebie-jeebies might, because I was an individual, built of strength and virtue, or so I had imagined, and so that parasitic need to cling onto others, which so many of us seem to be infused with, was not expected to haunt me. It had never occurred to me that true command of social isolation is contingent upon strength of character or true goals and motivation. And so, when I realised that I didn't have anybody, I could only turn inwards, towards those demons that come up in maudlin, hushed admissions of flaw and foible, so that I could berate myself for all the mistakes that had led me here. And convince myself that each action has a consequence. And that it was destiny. And that there could be no other explanations.

And in the midst of all this chaos, I began to notice that my senses were somehow intertwined, perhaps on account of their being too many stimuli in the vicinity; the constant bombardment of advertisements on the TV or in the magazines, or each time that you turned on the radio, or walked around a corner to be accosted by a barrage of assailants trying to sell you charity or new shoes or new ways of life that would solve all your problems.

In many ways, I felt like my circuits had been fried and that I had become the kind of person who no longer ran on oxygen, but upon electricity, because I was so dependent upon and in love with the modern times: the amenities and the colour TVs and the Internets and the constant communication and the shopping and everything else that comes with it, that I almost felt they were a part of me. And these colours and sensations would come to me at the strangest of moments; for example, when I was eating my daily dose of junk food and would associate the flow of the juice in a burger with a cool buzz of red in my head, or when I would drink water and hear the sounds of shattering glass, or when I would cross roads and see green men flash in countless other shades and feel a shudder down my spine because it was all too much to take. But still, despite these intermittent intrusions upon my psyche, I still felt lost and bored and broken, as though I were an inflatable toy that had been deflated and stuffed away in the back of the cupboard, or an apple that had been bruised in transit and then shoved upon a supermarket shelf; an autumn leaf that had fallen from a tree and been stamped upon into wet concrete, so that it can stay there and be stuck and remain in a state of austere inertia for the rest of its eternity.

I imagined myself at the end of an unwound ball of string, saturated and permeated with the sewer waters that I had been trying to vacation in, and I said to myself that, by looking backwards, I would somehow be able to untangle it all and find a reason for this perennial state of discontent. Yet, through the skewed vision brought on by the subjectivity of feeling sorry for myself, I could only ravel the string further. Eschewing sorrow and moroseness would prove to be futile I realised, unless I could convince myself that this was 'fate', and that everything was supposed to be this way.

When all we know beneath the moon has turned away from us, we have no choice but to turn to higher forces, but that doesn't mean that there is no longer a paucity of doubt in our hearts.

And anyway, Nature cannot make mistakes...

I had lived for months and seasons in the same routine: Wake up and listen to traffic reports on the radio, walk to work and lose faith in it all, eat lunch in empty market cafes over syrupy coffee, and then relive the past on an evening through hangdog masturbation, so that I could go to bed to toss and turn and see shapeless, wide-eyed dreams. I kept waiting for something to happen, a lesson to be learned, something that would give the answers that I'd been seeking. Why had this happened to me? What was next? In my old life, I had been complacently ignorant, living in the city, young and free and in demand, as I had 'genuine' conversations over 'real' coffee, bought from multinational chains. But nothing ever came. I stood as a dead pawn waiting to be turned into a queen, unaware that the game was already over.

And so, as the leaves fell from the trees and the sun forgot to shine, I gave up all hope, convinced that this was all I could ever be good for: hovering in and out of questions and answers, uncertain as to whether my faith was really mine or just some wall I had put up in order to shield myself from it all, relating to everything and nothing. I felt weary as though I'd seen the whole spectrum of life and each of the shades and colours it had to offer. But I didn't sympathise with any of them. I couldn't get out of my own head.

The only luck I seemed to have was that the job didn't require the use of a mind, just the flailing of limbs and the scanning of codes and hitting of keys with fingers, and so I was able to escape to some degree within myself. I knew about computers and video games what Bill Gates knew about cheap sex and broken dreams and so, as they threw cables in my face and spoke in esoteric languages that I couldn't understand - questions about control pads, or wires and adaptors and memory cards - I began to feel ever more detached from the world. It was a different planet, one where people went out in the day to find new ways of staying in their houses. A troglodyte nation that I couldn't get my head around.

Before, all I'd ever really done was to travel from place to place naively imagining that I was some kind of poet, or a Leonard Cohen gypsy boy. Now, all that was left for me was to swim in a sea of routine, waiting for old age to creep up on me, so that my body could finally sag and fade out completely, allowing me to be as forgotten in death as I felt I had become in life.

I was out of all circles, being only able to vaguely imagine the people I used to know and associate with getting on with their own struggles, as I had been left me to try and get over mine.

I knew it was only the beginning, but I couldn't *wait* for it to end.

All of this changed when I met a well-dressed man on the shop floor. He had a Half Wit with him that kept smiling, a simpleton that was in his care for the day, following on behind like some well-trained pet and grinning impetuously, as though our conversation was the most stimulating thing he'd ever seen. For all I know, it could've been.

Compared to the majority of customers, the Well-Dressed Man exuded a confidence that no doubt stemmed from his ostensible lack of financial problems. He marched around the disordered shelves of DVDs and video games as a Western tourist may some Indian shanty town, standing proud and unafraid, as though he had secret links to the consul himself, like he was immune to the reality of it all, yet still had a sense of ownership over everything surrounding him.

The clothes were rough and purposeful and in fabrics that were clearly built to last, ingrained with an old-fashioned sense of functionality and character, diametrically opposed to the polyester aesthetic that the yokels were wearing: the zombies over by the video games in their shell suits, or the old guy with the holes in his jumper and the stains on his pants drooling in his wheelchair besides the adult section.

There were people in the queue with mismatched colours, out-of-season prints and cuts, beer stains on their legs and fag burns about their bellies. The Well-Dressed Man stood there untarnished and colour coordinated, his hair rugged but still highly refined, as though he didn't need to please or answer to anybody, and so he had cut it himself. And down his sinewy arms coursed strong veins as though all of life itself were flowing through him, or a great river that could knock down walls. Set against the rubicund of his face were two world-weary eyes, like holes in the ocean floor, and around his neck was a golden rood that sparkled beneath the sterile indoor lighting of the shop floor. He looked at me as if he found me to be somehow incongruous. Then he opened up his mouth and blessed me with his words.

'Don't mind him,' he said, and he pointed to the Half Wit by his side. 'He's just sore because he lost a piece of his jigsaw.'

And when I looked I saw that the Half Wit had a plastic bag in his hands, one so cheap that it was almost transparent, and inside of it sat a jigsaw in a box, but I couldn't tell what the big picture was.

'Looking after half-wits is just my day job', The Well-Dressed Man piped up again, and then he stopped to think, as though he were pausing on a walk to sniff at a rare and exotic flower:

'I'm actually a Thinker.'

His matter-of-fact tone and the potency of his declaration awoke my curiosity. It hadn't occurred to me that there might be good wine in town. So far, I had only managed to taste the mould at the bottom of the barrel.

My stomach settled and I felt a great wave of relief as I looked up at him, the benevolent smile of the Half Wit behind him shining like the sun and thus causing my interlocutor to silhouette and stand in high contrast and at sharp angles, as though some holy edifice upon the top of a hill.

'I do a lot of thinking too', I said.

He paused but didn't look at me. For a few moments I got the impression that he didn't quite believe me. The silence between us was filled with the sounds of the sirens outside the front door, people shouting in the streets, another commotion between strangers. It was the city's version of elevator music, something that's always there but which you only pay attention to when suffocating in a dried up or awkward conversation. I stood silent and waited, pretended to refill shelves. Out the corner of my eye I watched the Half Wit rocking back and forth on his sandals. He was wearing white socks which, combined with his choice of footwear, I found to be particularly distasteful.

Finally, the Well-Dressed Man let the words flow out of his mouth, as though all morning he had been wanting to whistle a tune but had only just been able to remember what it goes like.

'Well...', he said, 'If you're as ardent a thinker as you claim to be, you must surely be familiar with the Big Guy Upstairs?'

As he uttered this words he fingered the rood around his neck. At the time I didn't think anything of it.

Unsure of what to say, I turned instead to the Half Wit, who was still rocking on his feet but now also chewing on the air around him. He obviously didn't have the answers for anything.

'A big guy upstairs?', I asked.

'Yes', said the Well-Dressed Man, 'Haven't you heard of him?'

'No, I'm afraid not.'

I began to instantly feel that I had been missing out on something.

'Well then, you simply must seek him out. He has the answers to all your questions.'

A pregnant pause interposed itself between us, an uncanny silence; the only sound that remained was the cacophony of sandal rocking against the angst being channelled through the shop stereo.

'Where can I find the him?', I asked.

His mouth opened up like a flower and emitted a beautiful, beatific smile.

'Why... He's everywhere.', he said, 'in everything, even right here in this very city.'

Then he took the Half Wit's hand, and left me alone to my labelling.

Chapter 3

I began to try and remember the last time I had felt anything. There had always been that crushing feeling of being an animal in a cage, but I couldn't quite fathom my animal nature. Maybe I was just a person.

For some reason, as we get older, our feelings become subdued, diluted almost, like that piss-pale orange juice that they give you in plastic beakers with biscuits at nursery schools, despite our knowing that the full on promise of the concentrate in the bottle offers so much more. When we are born there can only be potential, yet as our bodies grow and our minds become full of our pasts, we are watered down until we join the minions of the flavourless and the pallid and the confused. All of a sudden, there is no taste or demand for us anymore, and so we begin to fade away, once and for all, ceasing only when we are at our most ethereal, existing only in memories, in passing references, or, if we ever managed to touch their hearts, in the frames on people's mantles.

I'd spent the morning using tiny bits of clear tape to adhere the face plate labels on to shelves as I listened to a wall of sound on my headphones. The labels were designed to slide into a groove that was built into dusty units, on which all the merchandise was displayed, and they had the company's name and logo on them, along with some pseudo-virtue catchphrase about recycling. Most of the time, they'd be seen hovering about the floor, because a disgruntled public would pull and tear and ravage at them, and so most of them were covered in footprints or had been torn into hundreds of pieces. Some shelves didn't have them at all, but, all the same, I was determined to have the remainder stay strong and intransigent in their official roles, determined that the place needed order of some kind, despite my generally lax attitude towards it all.

Occasionally you felt a compulsion to do things like this, if only to get away from the till area and that inexorable queue of thieves and mooncalves slinking towards you with their garbage tucked under their arms.

It had been a busy morning, but I'd almost finished my taping task, and the shop was actually beginning to resemble something close to a place of commerce, instead of a bomb site being salvaged by thieves. Hardened balls of chewing gum remained stuck to the floor, but The Stoner had mopped and removed the debris left by passing shoppers, and even the objects in the window display were now beginning to hide their pre-utilisation behind a cursory shimmer, like polished toasters at a car boot sale.

Over the tills, I watched the manager being bellicose, telling people that if they didn't queue in the right place then he wouldn't serve them. They looked at him with furtive animosity, but they couldn't do anything because he had the money that they needed, and that was when I thought to myself:

In times of peace, the warlike man attacks the queue.

That morning, the light of the northern sun had an uncharacteristically pellucid quality to it. Deep shadows ran down the course of the shop, silhouetting those who walked through the doors as though golden nomads, and making the concrete slabs of the pavement outside shine with all the lustre of ice and magic. It was on mornings like this that the whole town looked beautiful and that, instead of the dystopian sinkhole that it appeared to be most of the time, became a functional haven of quiescence and tranquillity. The sun on proud faces and the clamour of people turned to murmur, as they sat about on benches and turned their heads to the sky; a noticeable change from the usual eyes to the ground, the general air of cunning and conniving, as though everybody was planning to tunnel their own way out of here, of escaping from all their problems.

And then a breeze picked up. It was rare that one would make its way into the shop, but this one had somehow found the strength to move in circuitous breaths about the walls, in and out between our fingers, cool yet somehow warm and liberating, opening us to each other, people smiling and commenting upon it instead of pining about their 'issues'. I watched a till receipt dance about the centre of the DVD section, an American Beauty plastic bag, and so I had to force myself not to be a cliché and project some kind of meaning on to it, as though some guiding force resided behind it all, and that we lived in the bubble of purposefulness. My playlist took a break between songs and, during the silence, I heard the laughter of a child. I looked around from the shelves to see a boy, maybe about two or three years old, running in and out of the rows of shelving units, completely unaware of the other customers in the shop. Some looked at him and others ignored him. Some smiled and others didn't.

'Crockett's Theme' from the original Miami Vice TV-show swam through my headphones. I knew it was unhip, but I had long since stopped caring. It reminded me a 1980s childhood, Saturday afternoon synthesisers and cheap special effects. I thought about weekends and what they felt like before I had to work on them; I remembered being scared of my father, before I realised that he was just a human and as infallible as anybody else. Bedtimes and home-cooked meals; being told to eat your vegetables; trips to the supermarket, belted up in the backseat of the car. Plastic, toys, and sunshine.

The sounds of the laughing child fell inwards to the breeze, his mother calling him over but to no avail. He sat on the floor and ran around in mysterious circles, oblivious to the pain and misery of those around him. And, as the music died, his mother dragged his limp body up by his thin arms. Then the breeze went away and the sun clouded out and the people were back to normal and the day continued.

I put the tape to one side and put my head in my hands as I leaned back against one of the dusty shelves. So suddenly it had hit me: I needed something to care about.

Chapter 4

It had been almost a year since I had come back after finding out about my disease. Though the doctors had said that I would be a list priority, due to my relatively young age, nothing had come, and so I had started to forget my reasons for being here. I found myself institutionalised, lost to it all like some barefoot orphan in the backstreets of some hypodermic city. The tastes of the disappointment and the waiting became as regular as air. And when I looked around me it seemed that everybody else was waiting for something too. I felt normal in the most eerie of ways.

I began to ache for intimacy as though a drug. The weight of an eternity on my shoulders was taking its toll: A new irascibility that I wore like a coat of wire, the ways my palms would sweat and I'd bite my nails without realising, only to later look down at cracked and bloody fingers and wonder what had happened to me. That final embrace at the airport had been the last I could remember, flash mob memories, swimming up to the surface, like old World War II mines lost out to sea. Prior to that before I was hospitalised, after a day at the beach. Back home. Listening to old CDs.

The voice in the back of my head whispered that I might like to end it all. Another wished that I'd died when I had the chance. I wasn't really living for anything anymore, it would say, just trying to change things. And it made me realise that I no longer looked forward to the future, just mooned down about the past.

I took a breath and counted to ten.

Images and faces and places rose up like decaying bodies with flowers in their pockets and empty smiles: A glint in her eyes as she crossed a bridge by the sea; the wind flowing behind her as she ran towards me. One time she got drunk and lay in the road and caused a traffic jam. Another time, down the underground, she held my hand and looked at me like it might mean something. I had wished the train would never stop.

The shop became my watering hole, leading ill-proportioned ladies to my front door, though none that I would've really opened it to if this hadn't happened to me in the first place. When we are desperate for one thing we will often deny ourselves another, and so I was prepared to let my ego slip, though it had slowly faded anyway. I took the plunge, into the darkest of caves, despite knowing that the torch had burned out long ago and that these needy people were revving themselves up to judge me for being slight of build and sinewy with my messy, needle-hole arms.

In the Old World, I had been used to superficial city chicks, the ones who wore makeup for trips to the convenience stores, or who knew about films and different blends of tea and read books about poverty, but only when they were out and about in public. They were the ones who would buy expensive clothes on a whim and embellish their tales with a false irony, acting free and spontaneous in pre-planned ways, because they were beautiful and knew that they would never have any problems. I missed the sense of reality that came from the superficial.

It was rare that a girl would come into the shop that would pique the interest of the guys who worked there. And even if this did happen they were never anything special. Maybe there would be the odd one or two out of term time, usually by accident, when the hotties hit home from the universities, rife with their Stockholm syndrome and slavish bouts of confusion, tailed by dumb and drooling, computer game addicted boyfriends who didn't know what they had on their hands. During the regular parts of the year, it was just more of the same: Too poor to concentrate on looking good, and too depressed to stop eating. I wondered if I would see myself turn the same way.

One day I read the free newspaper on the train. Tucked in on page six, beyond the weather report and the negligible novelty sections, there was an article about how the English working classes die twenty or thirty years earlier than those who had scaled the heights. I no longer wanted to live that long anyway, but it still grieved me that I might not have a choice.

I closed my eyes and counted to twenty.

The maze had found myself trapped within had invisible walls, Perspex or perhaps thin but impenetrable glass, and though I could see those living and walking around freely outside of its confines, I couldn't break through to express myself in the fuller terms that I would once have been able to. My bleached confidence, locked behind the counter with the pariahs and the clueless. The affected air of insouciance that seemed to once hold the key. Gone. People let you get away with what they expect you to be able to get away with. If you're dressed to the nines in your best suit you might be able to fool them into thinking that you're intelligent or that you've got something to offer, but if they look at you and see a tool behind a till then things aren't quite the same. Sometimes the customers would look on, low-life looking down on low-life, and they would say:

'Do they just let anybody work here?'

And I don't know why, but despite knowing that I was being insulted, I would hear myself reply:

'Yeah, I guess so', as my co-workers looked on disdainfully.

Chapter 5

There would always be the younger girls, the ones that could send us to hell and back, on account of their very beings. They were the ones who dressed tall and wore too much makeup, trying their bests to walk in tune to the curves of their new bodies. They were the ones who opened their mouths to still gurgle, or let out effervescent cackles that would ring out through the store like alarms we should all heed, but which some of us didn't or couldn't even if we wanted to.

But hell was probably over-hyped anyway.

I don't know how it happened, but it left me feeling dirty and strange. I was so desperate for attention from the opposite sex that I could probably have turned to Mary. And I needed a change in my routine to distract me from the waiting, because Mao's hand had turned transfinite degrees, but for months nothing had changed besides the weather.

This was how it played out:

It must have been close to Easter because I was wondering where my chocolate eggs were. I was half asleep, working the tills on some narcotic midweek shift. Nothing much had been happening except for more of the same, so when I noticed that some girl in the queue and her friend were apparently checking me out, I was too enveloped in the quagmire of minimum wage lassitude to do anything about it. I tried ignoring. Part of me convinced the rest of me that it couldn't be happening; maybe they were sharing a private joke of some kind, because they kept giggling; or perhaps I'd finally lost it completely and was projecting some twisted and repressed fantasy on to the faces of the general public.

Analogous thoughts continued. My eyes were avoidant of other eyes. I looked down and kept scanning barcodes, but when they eschewed the front of the queue because some other till monkey might serve them, choosing instead to wait for my own till to free up, I knew that something strange was about to take place.

I tried to swallow my tongue but it wouldn't fit, so I called them over in as gutter-free a way as I could muster. They approached me still smiling and I felt the sides of my eyes drying up.

As they walked on up, I determined that the fates had presented me with the classic teenage duet of a leader and her sycophant. Beneath her blonde hair, the Leader's smile was as knowing and as thin as the crack in an egg. She wore her low-cut orange top like a warning sign. A palpable tension spawned of reverence fell like a curtain over the serving staff, as we stood like hidden erections at choir practice. She was more confident than an older woman might've been but hadn't made it public yet, and as she passed me the empty box for a Sofia Coppola movie, it seemed as though we were partaking in something heavy and deserving of gravitas. The whole thing felt like a coming of age ritual; I opened it up to levity with a sardonic comment and a wry smile that I wore uncomfortably, like a birthday party clown in a business suit.

'I thought girls your age only liked movies about little cartoon animals that are trying to find themselves', I heard myself say.

They turned to each other for direction, laughed with their hands over their mouths in tentative stupefaction. The Leader recomposed herself by pulling her hair out between her fingers.

'I grew out of that weeks ago', she said.

And then I turned back inwards.

I explained that it might take me a minute to find the disk they wanted, because stuff went missing all the time; we didn't really know what we were doing. I made orphic jokes to obscure references. They didn't get them and I felt stupid. It seemed that all they were capable of doing was watching me sift through gutter piles of disks and sleeves and boxes about the floor, trying to dig out Sofia Coppola, whilst she no doubt sat oblivious in a Hollywood mansion somewhere, hanging out with people cooler than me and drinking champagne. I began to sweat and heat up and have minor palpitations.

Whilst I was down with my head in the pile of disks, I could see them leaning in close to each other and talking about something. It shouldn't have intrigued me like it did, but I imagined the warm breath passing back and forth between them. I thought about riding it.

Certain parts of the Leader were starting to get the better of certain parts of me, hanging there, like ripe apples on a tree in the middle of this desert, this dried up sea that everybody was drowning in together, yet too afraid or distanced to ask each other for help. I imagined my arms around her waist and that perfect curve of her back as I pulled her towards me.

When I found her movie, I put it in the box and passed it on over to her. Rated eighteen, but I didn't ask questions. The Sycophant was thin and freckled with pasty skin, fraught with anxiety. As I threw her change across the counter like James Dean might, The Leader threw me a know-it-all smile. I assumed it didn't mean anything, that she was just being young and confident, and that she would have smiled like that to anybody.

I really thought that when they left it would be the end of it.

Chapter 6

After work, burned by the horn, I bought into the whole 'going for a run' thing. I dressed down and dowdy, old shorts and a faded *Kiss* t-shirt, then I did the best I could to keep up the pace as I hit the other side of the canal by the apartment. To get there I had to cross a bridge. It was the revolving kind, but I wasn't expecting things to turn around any time soon. I was just killing time and learning to feel proud of the fact.

The sun filled the sky and took my breath away, which can perhaps account for why I began to wheeze so quickly. A few fields down the line, it occurred to me that I was even unhealthier than I had led myself to believe, and so I stopped running and began to walk. Real runners passed me by, proud like animals, with empty eyes and slick attire right out of magazines. The trails of dust that they left floating down and about behind them spread like seeds of doubt in my mind. I began to question my self-worth as I stumbled after them, clutching my belly, and cursing the absurdity of it all.

Coughing, I thought about cigarettes. I hadn't brought any, so all I could do was keep on walking. I didn't know where I was heading. The path led me through a village and up a hill.

For a few minutes, I stopped to gaze at the tattered yard of a ramshackle church besides a village green. Nobody had been inside for years, so my intuition told me, its old coats of paint cracked and flaked and falling intermittently to the ground. And, as curtains twitched in the windows of houses behind me, I felt eyes on my back. It was the first time I'd ever ventured to this side of the canal and the houses were bigger with elaborately groomed gardens and ostentatious ornamentation that projected images of stylised rusticity.

The cars in the driveways shone like they might in TV commercials and sported detachable roofs. And, despite the furtive peering out of windows and twitching of drapery, the surrounding houses each felt cold and unoccupied, even though they carried trinkets on their window sills - like little glass beads, or toys from overseas. Neatly-trimmed lawns and shrubbery seemed to pull me closer with one hand and push me away with the other. Yet, all the while, I knew that not all of these houses could be empty and that I was being watched and analysed as an intruder.

The village green comprised a few benches and a lawn full of clinical daffodils with nobody there to enjoy them. A footpath cut along behind the side of a bush and up into the woods, and so I climbed on, sweating, with the first sun of the year on my face, expecting to find nothing, but looking for everything at the same time. For the first time in weeks, I felt a renewed lucidity. The lethargy of mind and sluggishness that had defined the days since I found myself back in the mire of lower-class reality evaporated, as though I were shaking off and out of a dream, or as though I were a man just pulled free of the grip of a fever.

I forgot myself.

Following the path up into the woods, I found myself amongst the trees. Unseen birds scuttled under faraway bushes as they tried to forget about me too. And though I knew it was the work of nature, the forest carried a stillness, not exactly a state of peace or tranquillity, but the perfect sort of trimness that you might find in the set of a B-movie, where everything is placed exactly where it ought to be, and where each tree looks like a prop, or the shade of each leaf has been pre-determined by some great set designer in the sky.

Beyond and up from the woods, the world opened up into pastoral splendour and open spaces that I had not realised I had been surrounded by. I knew I had been living in the basin of a valley but I hadn't paid attention to the vastness of the hills. When we're lost in the city, we forget that we are borne of something this empty and mysterious, and we begin to think that down there with the sounds of the traffic and the artificial lighting is all we need, but as I sat myself on a hill covered in odd, sporadic rock formations, I fell recumbent against a blanket of warm heather and looked to the clouds, as sunbeams laved like lake waters against chalky shores. I listened to the silence and then my eyes took to the horizon. The whole city awaited in the distance and I began to remember and awaken.

Down there, I thought. Down there are all my problems. There waits disease and money issues. Dissatisfaction. Down there are the things that I need or that I want. There are people that can't be shaken from my psyche, because their very existence has left me weary and disenchanted, but whom I must either learn to love and tolerate, or learn to avoid and forget about. Down there resides ambition and aspiration and all that keeps me from it. There rests the past as I have lived it and as it is to be remembered. There wait the people that I have loved and have spent time with and maybe will do again sometime. Down there awaits the present and drudgery and whatever comes after it. Down there is a lot I have to work at.

I fell back deeper into the grass and the heather beneath me as I watched the cars on the road slide like skittles over ice, as shards of light reflected off of windshields, a light show for me alone. I thought about the people in the cars looking out at the hills and wondering whether anybody was up here. I tried to put myself in their shoes, see things from their points of view, but there were too many of them living free and out on their own time; things I had nothing to do with. I tried to get back in tune with my own life and then I closed my eyes and when I awoke it was dark and time to head home.

Chapter 7

A few days later, after work, I was heading home through the town centre. We were always the last shop to close for the day and so it was rare to see anybody about, except for the drunks in the doorways, or the chavs, and the hangers-on. Usually, at that time it would seem that a great storm had just taken the city; newspapers would litter the streets in discordant order; drink cans and cigarette butts would be blown up against the sides of the kerbs. They'd scrape along as the winds carried them away to wherever it is that the gutters lead to, and so I would feel a strange sense of relief because, until that moment, I had thought I had been living there, wherever that place might actually be.

I was tired from poisoning my already poisoned blood with too much coffee and nicotine. It was light out but should have been dark, because there were no people around, and the street lights had turned themselves on, flickering ungraciously, as though tuned into to the irregular pulse of whatever it was that had happened to this shithole town. The moon was out in synchronicity with the sun, as though it was scared to show up in solitude, and as I walked the incline to the bus stop, I looked to the sky as though wounded, because it reminded me that I was alone. My feet were swollen and heavy from being stood on end all day and my trainers were tight because they were too small; I winced with each footstep as I convinced myself that my pathetic life was even more unbearable than I had previously led myself to believe.

On each side of the hill were dusty, unlit shop facades; a town of closed doors where all the shutters were pulled down like poker faces. Strangers passed me by with their hoods up. They spat on the floor. I got to the top of the hill and then from around a corner, with unplanned fluidity, appeared the Leader girl and her Sycophant. They saw me and giggled. I was out of breath and so I tried to pass them by with my head to the ground. When they were a few metres past me and we were away from each other, the Sycophant shouted in my direction.

'My friends likes you', she said.

And so I stopped in my tracks and turned back round.

We hung out in the park that backed the school fields up on one of the estates. We had to catch a bus to get there. It was beginning to get dark, dying gradually, a light bulb on the dimmer. On the way we walked about strange neighbourhoods, where people had toys sprawled out about their gardens, where fences had been torn off hinges and empty cardboard boxes, which had once had electrical appliances in them, sat on unkempt lawns like abandoned corpses. One house we passed had water flooding out of the door, asparagus green down some torn up porch, a tired-eyed woman leaning lost against the jamb, watching her grubby young child dance barefoot in water that trickled down onto the street. I felt high and got stupid about things, showing off and dancing around to make sarcastic jokes about pointless observations.

They asked me to get some wine from Tesco so I did and then we bought some cigarettes and sat around smoking them together. I hadn't had red wine with cigarettes in an age. It went straight to our heads. Little girls were easy to please.

With their thin knees up against their chests, they sat gazing through self-conscious squint eyes, as they contemplated the things that had happened to them, or the places they would or wouldn't be going to in their lives. They affected earnestness and understanding about the world, talking about the boys they had liked and done things with, through giggled admissions and broken eye contact. The Leader smiled at me, her lips like hot tongs, and as I smoked a cigarette down to the bones and drank more wine from the bottle before passing it along, I forgot about all my problems for a while, and felt that I had found the solution to it all. When the conversation wore thin, I'd peel the label off the bottle, curl the bits of paper into little balls, and I stare philosophically into the distance. I could tell they really thought I was on to something.

They talked about high school or college or whatever it was. They rarely went despite the government's best efforts, choosing instead to hang around the shops in the city centre and gaze listlessly through windows. They talked about one of the catalogue stores; it had a lawn table and some chairs set up inside of it. They used to go sit there and chat about whatever it is that girls talk about. Sometimes they'd get thrown out by the security guards. They always went back though. An endless cycle. They knew everybody in town and everybody knew them.

As the wine kicked in, I could feel my head loosen up and my inhibitions fade away. I sat up close to and put my arms around the Leader. Her shirt lifted with the pull of her back against the wall to reveal her stomach; I lit another cigarette and pretended that I hadn't noticed that the Sycophant was starting to feel negligible. She sat with her arms folded and stared on straight ahead, keeping her lips pursed, trying to hide her disdain for it all. The Leader leaned in and kissed my neck. Her breath was warm but it sent a shiver down my spine.

I lit another cigarette and stayed up cool against the wall. Not a word, just breathing and living and taking it all in.

When the sun had faded away completely, we pulled ourselves up from the floor, and walked through the school field and across the tarmac playground to the school buildings. We were drunk and in high spirits, kept shouting something obnoxious, but I don't remember what it was. She held my hand as the Sycophant, now sullen and malevolent, followed on behind.

The bushes that lined the school buildings were brittle and the distances between them were measured and regulated. The moon lit the windows and threw our reflections back in our faces. I took a running dive and leaped into one of the bushes. They laughed. I came out with scratches and blood and shards of green stuck to my limbs. The pain started to sober me up a little.

I looked around and drank in my surroundings, walked up to one of the windows and peered inside the classroom, the whole of the world in miniature. I could see a rug on the floor by a tiny bookcase and a neat arrangement of tiny chairs and tables spread about the room. There was a blackboard covered in white dust and, up around the rim of the ceiling, was a pictorial version of the alphabet, all the way from 'apple' to 'zebra'. I tried to remember how it was different to my own primary school classroom but the differences were infinitesimal. Flashbacks of finger painting and story times and tepid bottles of milk and uniforms; I used to be so easily impressed by things, I thought to myself. Why does nothing surprise me anymore?

She came up behind me, still drunk and laughing, and pulled me by the T-shirt, away from the window. I'd left foot prints in the flowerbeds and breath against the windows. The gap between my T-shirt and the sweat on my back started to cool me down. I looked at her as she looked up at me. The wine had run out about an hour or two ago.

'Where's your friend?', I asked her.

'She got bored and went home.'

'Oh'.

I looked as though I might have been concerned.

'Don't worry, she does it all the time.'

Taking my hand, she led me over to an alcove between two of the school buildings. An automatic security light turned itself on as we slid down against the wall but it didn't faze us. She dipped into the pocket of my jeans and pulled out the cigarette deck, lit one and passed it over to me, then lit another for herself.

'I used to come to this school', she said.

She pointed over at the classroom unit next to the one I had been peering through the window of. There were pictures on the wall, scribbles; abstract works of unfiltered intuition and unbridled genius.

'Did you paint any of those pictures?', I asked.

She smiled.

'Yeah, that one of Buckingham Palace over there.'

'I thought that was a dog.'

She responded with a cursory laugh then took in a burn of her cigarette. I was starting to get a headache. I looked at the paintings stuck up against the windows for all the world to see.

'When we're young we're so unaware of the fact that our lives are already over.'

I let out a sigh as she looked on at me and laughed.

'You're weird.', she said.

'Yeah'

I slumped back further and looked at her chest again. I felt a twinge of compunction. My favourite food was in the fridge but I wasn't allowed to eat it. There was a silence between us for a while, and she must have felt my gaze on her, because she turned to me and said:

'You can touch them if you want to.'

And then the world froze.

I lay her on her back against the slabs of concrete outside the classroom doorway, just in time for the automatic security light to turn out. Darkness fell over us like a cloud, but I could still see her because of the moon, and her skin was cool to the touch, and she started to get little goose pimples on her skin as I listened to her breathe.

When I looked at her laying there she seemed so very small and so very young and inexperienced to me that it tore me down the centre, a part of me wanting to unveil what I had been dreaming of, but my conscience telling me otherwise.

'Go on', she said.

And so I tugged down on her underpants. Her top inched up and revealed the curves of her hips. I could see her belly button and she let out a sigh.

'You can touch them', she said once again, as though there was an echo.

My eyes moved to the curves of her chest and I slid my hands up along the sides of her ribcage. The skin was warm beneath her sweater. I was getting closer. She closed her eyes.

From the door that lay beyond the alcove I glimpsed a reflection of myself and what I might have been about to do. Memories of sanctimony before being sent back here washed over me like a muddy rain, as I remembered myself with girls my own age, and with relationships and conversations and less bravado. I knew what the right thing to do was but the brain in my pants was trying to convince me otherwise. I put my lips down towards her mouth. We kissed and I didn't feel anything. She moaned like she must have done.

Running my fingers through a strand of hair on her face, I slid it behind her ears as I gazed at her. Pulling away and sitting myself back against the wall, I took out a cigarette and began to smoke it. I looked at her and felt sick. The alcohol wore off with a snap and I stood up and pushed my soldier back into his barracks.

'What is it?', she asked.

I kissed her once on the stomach and then I left her there and went home.

Chapter 8

Life had become a series of self-betrayals and bitter tasting delusions. I tried to convince myself that I could still be somebody, get back on track, and, time and time again, I said to myself that one day things would pick up again, that I'd have the operation and so things would go back to normal, just like before. But I knew that I was just fooling myself; I knew that this was just a coping device, one to keep me going, because, in truth, I had no idea what the future might hold, and there was no point making plans if you might die tomorrow, because even the plans of the people who probably wouldn't pass away any time soon would most likely be derailed when they least expected it.

It seemed to me that despite being once known for loquaciousness, I no longer seemed to speak to people anymore, just the customers at work, so that I could ask them for money, or give them prices and tell them the locations of things on shelves, so that they in turn could waste their money and go home lost and alone to stare at their TV screens. Even if I did have the operation, I had changed so much inside that I would never be able to relate to the people I had known before, the city types with their mortgage plans and their ambition; the successful ones with their savings accounts and their fast cars. The past year or so had forced upon me a humility and a timorousness, and these newfound sentiments told me that we were each the same, each of us trying and wanting and in need.

All the same, the vicissitudes had slowly reached a stand-still. Nothing happened for days. At work, everybody seemed to have come to terms with the fact that they were there and so became subdued and introspective, less likely to flaunt their egos, instead just slipping into the throes of a silent and mechanical routine, doing the things that were expected of them without question or subversion. It was one quiet morning after another followed by dreary afternoons. If you asked the manager a question he would tell you to:

'Fuck off.'

Or:

'Get fucked.'

Or:

'Try harder.'

And I kept thinking back to the other night at the school, trying to figure what I might have been doing right now, if I had boned the Leader, instead of playing into my conscience and disappearing like a thief that hadn't stolen anything, or a fox that had left the chickens safe in the pen, choosing instead to slink away with its tail between its legs. Maybe if I had caught a glance of what I'd really wanted to see, it would've stirred something in me, and I would have found the courage to quit my life of drudgery, or perhaps it would have taught me something, and I would have been hanging out and making out with her now, instead of standing here emasculated behind a counter, with a barcode around my neck, silently looking for meaning in a place full of goods that nobody really wanted.

She hadn't come into the shop since. We never swapped phone numbers. I prayed that distance would help us to both forget each other, but I still had flashbacks at moments that didn't suit me, and when I was home alone I would think about her and then feel dirty and strange and have to wash my hands with alcoholic lotions. I kept my eye on the door to see if she'd come to give me a second chance, a way to change my mind. Mao was waiting with me, with his broken arms, and every time I looked at him he seemed to know what I was thinking and he would seem to wink at me, but not as though he was colluding with me, that we were in it together, but as though he found my behaviour to be worthy of his disapproval, and as though he knew that I could fail at any moment, and that he would be laughing when I did, because there was nothing I could do about it.

I had only seen the Well-Dressed Man that one time, over on the shop floor, the grin of the Half Wit, the clean plastic squeak of sandal rocking, and the smog of mysterious conversation up and above us all. And, though the whole exchange could not have lasted more than five minutes, the amount of time that I had since spent reflecting on his words was inordinate. I kept thinking about the Big Guy Upstairs and figured that this was just an eloquent man's way of describing a Fat Man. And, as I found myself out drowning in a well-thawed lake of intrigue, I began to become paranoid that I was perhaps the victim of some elaborate trick, that he had seen a credulity or innocence within me that could easily be taken advantage of for his own amusement; one that he had found risible in some way, and that he had been unable to resist reeling me in with his sartorial supremacy and well-veiled machinations.

There is a doubt that all of us at the bottom feel in our most private moments, myself being no different, and it pulled me down to the extent that it only seemed sensible to conclude that the Well-Dressed man had looked down upon me and seen a simpleton, or a foolish dreamer, one that he could toy with for his own gratification. Perhaps to him I was nothing more than a loner on the shop floor in need of a little stimulation: a shot in the arm or a kick in the pants.

Still, though these nagging dubieties occasionally got the better of me, I would at other times find myself taking reversed stance: believing everything I considered the Well-Dressed Man to stand for to represent the unadulterated truth. I realise now that these prolonged periods of gullibility came at those times when I was at my most desperate, on the days when I would leave the shop feeling consumed, believing that this was forever, and that the rest of the world was judging me for it and that I had failed to live up to all the promises of human splendour.

I hadn't been able to see that this period was just one of many small chapters in my life, and that with each day that passed the pages would turn, and that soon it would all end perfectly and with closure, and that there would probably be nothing to worry about, because it had been reasonably well-authored for a first-timer, and was over as well as it possibly could be.

Back then, during lonely moments, slinking through the streets with my hands in my pockets, or sitting meekly on steamy-windowed buses whilst trying to avoid animal confrontation, this promise of The Fat Man stood as the only diamond in the mine. If I could seek him out, I felt, I would be able to find the answers that I needed. And so, despite the reservations that I had on the days when complacency had taken my soul, the dream of keeping the fire alive would be fuelled on those rare days when I was able to shake away complacency, a snake shedding its skins and slinking off into desolate places, from the underbellies of rocks into the vastness of the desert, for better tasting food and a new way of life.

The remarks of the Well-Dressed Man would haunt me:

'The Big Guy Upstairs has the answers to all of your questions.'

As though his words were a ring of nettles trying to keep me out of a field, but that if I could build up the courage to panga on through the thicket, I would find myself out free and in the meadow, everything I ever wanted and all I would ever need right beside me; all the time in the world in my hands and no fear of it ever running out.

I took another breath and counted to thirty.

Once I had determined that The Fat Man was my only way to salvation, I knew that it would only be a matter of time before the signs led us to one another. Deciding that it was inevitable helped me to stop worrying so much, as though I had slipped over my eyes a pair of glasses that were designed to show me only the richer colours of the world and with a complexity that I had before managed to overlook somehow, perhaps because I had previously been too full of myself, or because I doubted so much, or because I had forgotten that good things can happen to all people, regardless of their station in life.

I began to notice within myself an acute and growing awareness of coincidences, small things that happened to me which seemed to be linked by some greater force, what I believe Jung had called 'Synchronicity'. These coincidences would be few and far between, and usually small, like how I would learn of a new word on one day and then the next hear it fall from the lips of a stranger, or like how I would perhaps read about or hear of some book by some author I didn't know, and then find either that book or one that was somehow related to it in a charity shop somewhere, or left on a dirty table in the coffee shop.

When things like this happened, which they seemed to be doing ever more frequently and with increasing greatness and intensity, I would treat the event with a sort of veneration, stopping to think and learn whatever lesson could be garnered from it all; I devoured books that I found in waiting rooms, and read reams of newspaper pages, left open and waiting for me on the public transportation networks of the city. Everything had something to teach me, or so I believed at that time, and so I followed attentively and kept my ear to the ground and my eyes peeled for whichever clue came next in the series.

Then I started working backwards. I thought about my meeting with the Well-Dressed Man. When I considered the probability of my having been out on the shop floor when he came in, or the fact that I was working in the very section that he was browsing in, it seemed phenomenal. Thinking of our meeting as being anything but miraculous seemed ridiculous, and of course, as his words had left me being required to seek out and speak with The Fat Man, I could not comprehend anything but this being the next logical step that the universe wanted me to take. I would put all my energy into finding him, believing that it was the only option I had left for finding meaning in my life.

Then, I began to look back even further. I questioned my disease and realised that before it had afflicted me I had obviously been living my life in a way that deviated from the path that I was destined to be walking. I began to feel thankful for the nausea that I felt, that each symptom was in some way a blessing, despite the pain and the turmoil. And then I would feel myself sinking into a well of self-abasement and languor, yet trusting in it for fear of not knowing what else to do. I thought back to my childhood and the anguish I had felt, but then felt it evaporate and dissipate as I realised that, without any of those things having happened, I would not be here right now, walking the path that I knew would lead me to The Fat Man's door. It was a path I had been following my whole life.

But there was a problem:

There were too many fat people in town. You could hear them trundling round every corner.

Chapter 9

I had always noticed that there was something inherently wrong with the majority of customers that shopped in the store. And, though I'll readily admit that nobody's perfect, it occurred to me that the people I found myself dealing with on a daily basis were especially not so. I've already mentioned the bulk of their foibles, each a fine wine cocktail of: obtuseness, odour, and obesity. Perhaps it was because we dealt in second hand goods, meaning that we were cheaper than other places, or because we were in a deprived area, where anybody who had made it to be over thirty years old had slowly witnessed their confidence ebb away or their idealism crumble like the old bricks that surrounded us all.

Whatever it was, it had left wan little clouds of 'numbness' floating up and about our heads, as though everybody had given up, as though their feigned indifference to it all had eventually encroached upon their souls in toto, so that all they had to do with their lives now was to play video games, or collect movies that they didn't really care about, but felt defined them in some indistinct way. The rest of the time would be devoted to stuffing their faces some more or consuming more sugars and fats and then smoking more cigarettes to take all the pain away.

One day I took the bus into town, I was going to the hospital. Slinking through the inner city, we passed the local business school, a renovated building in the tenderloin embellished with banners of false promise: *Local Enterprise is The Future* or *We Can Do It*. I watched two surly looking youths stumble out the building, blank-eyed and out of touch, getting down in a beat up boy racer, blasting out the latest and greatest in 1990s house tunes, revving up and out of there, and on to their enterprising futures. Spitting out of windows and on to the road, staring at the girls that they passed and beating their heads to the music, as an older, sweatier fat man, smoking cigarettes and wheezing with his shirt tight up around his no-neck sat watching them from upon a wall.

His pits drenched with the blaze of the saturated photo sun and broken marbles of sweat bejewelling his hairless, rubicund head, I gazed listlessly through the bus window, inexplicably overpowered by the scene. It occurred to me that he was probably one of the teachers, and that he would probably be dead soon, not just because he was so green and feeble, but because he had lost hope and lacked the animation of spirit imbued by purpose. He wheezed some more as the bus shifted onwards. Each of us could die at any moment, I thought, but few of us will ever change anything before we do so.

Behind the tills, looking for signs and waiting for clues, I began to notice that the way I treated the customers of larger proportions became more respectful. Should a fat man come to me, for example, armed with the bags of junk that I was expected to give him money for, I would find myself being more amiable towards him, sanguine and chirpy as opposed to the curt and muffled utterances that I dealt with the regular, thinner customers in. Though it hurt my pride to give the impression that I were actually happy to be there, I convinced myself that it was actually a form of insurance, just in case I happened to be talking to the man that I was one day destined to engage myself in conversation with: He with all the answers.

The last thing a pious man would want to do is inadvertently offend his God and so, in my own way, I began to consider myself as having become a man of piety, because I was walking the holiest of paths and I had a mission. And though my god did not yet have a name, nor for that matter even a face, I knew that he was somewhere out there, and that, if my faith refused to waver, I would be rewarded with a moment of his time. At the end of each transaction, I would linger for a few beats as I handed over change and receipts to the customers. Looking deep into their eyes for surreptitious signs of a connection, perhaps a hidden wink, or a knowing lambency, I would pause until they either broke eye contact with me by walking away, or asked me what the hell my problem was, as though I were some object of disgust, to be dissected and analysed in front of everybody.

Figuring that birds of a feather might flock together, I began to treat fat ladies with a similar degree of reverence, ever hoping that they would know of The Fat Man's whereabouts, and that I might impress them enough to introduce me to him. But, alas, despite of days and weeks and months of sugar coating, prostration and ingratiating obeisance, not one of them gave so much as a hint of knowing, seeming only strangely flattered by the veneration with which I treated them, waiting and breathing for more, and then leaving at pace when they realised I had no longer had need for them.

All the while, in the back of my mind, my eyes were awake to the opportunity of being reunited with the Well-Dressed Man, as though he might be able to offer me some sort of short cut, a ladder instead of a snake, a less ambiguous clue, confirmation that his words were the truth and not the folly of a mind more cunning than my own. Whilst sweeping up the crisp packets and biscuit crumbs from the shop floor, I would peer through shelves and watch the people deliberate over what they might be about to purchase, what they should spend their money on, all the while hoping that their choices would lead me to destiny's door, or that some new clue would present itself and make my life a little easier. But, as the seasons changed, I found that I was still not any closer; behind the tills, I would keep my eyes on the door, gaze forever out the window, as my ears attuned to the sounds of sandal rocking, a Native American with his head to the ground awaiting approaching bison, ready to run out and on to the street at the slightest hint of being able to get a step or two closer to the answers that I needed and the promises of eternity.

Chapter 10

My co-workers began to think that I was normal, because I started to do everything that was expected of me, like how I would laugh politely at their stupid jokes, or pretend to be an enthusiastic member of the gang when they held collective drooling sessions over women on the Internet, or when I joined in with the butch and the bravado, whenever we found a picture of the tits of some chick that had sold her phone to us and forgotten to wipe its memory first. I helped them to feel decent and normal about themselves, by buying into the tacit agreement shared between us that meant we would read into each other's comments before responding to them, replying with whatever tone or information was obviously required of us: approval, acknowledgement, understanding, a sense of allegiance or unity, of us versus them; that everybody on our side of the counter was winning the game and that everybody over there, on the outside, was clearly losing it or out of touch.

Our words were used to prop up the scaffolding of each other's delusions, as though we were parenting each other, because if anyone dare admit the truth about themselves, that they were just one in a group of failures, then they wouldn't be able to go on living like this, stuffed low down and dirty in this bin sack of complacency, and they might have to change some things about themselves, or they might have to start working towards something, or look at themselves long and hard and in the mirror, through the eyes of men instead of just dreamers.

Collectively, there was a sense that it was too late, that we were too old and too stupid for potential to still be a part of our lives, that society had forgotten about us like we had once forgotten it, and so now we were left to either go on pretending, because the hardest thing a person can do is consciously change, or we could accept that the only thing we had really succeeded in was removing all sense of purpose and wonder from our lives and continue to meander through this endless space, through this life of barriers and mind games and endless competition, doing things that don't feel right or natural, but which we had no choice but to do anyway, because everybody else was doing the same thing, even though they didn't want to.

First we are born, then we dream; we are forced to compromise, and then we become complacent until we die.

The pantomime played daily between nine thirty a.m. and six in the evening and we all had our roles to play. I stood back cool and aloof and ad-libbed in my role as the Mild-Mannered Gentleman, condescending politeness, so polite it becomes an insult, pushing my luck with dumb superiors, giving minimum effort to receive my minimum wage.

Though I couldn't allow myself to consider the manager to have any authority above me out there in the 'real' world, I would submit to his will down there on the stage, as though some tractable farm animal. Maybe it was so the public would come in and see that somebody was in charge when they saw him barking orders at people, that it would add the colours of life to the performance, an unquestionable degree of verisimilitude that couldn't be toyed with; I'd interact with my co-workers in the same way, listen to their shit and smile with a mouthful, but, should I bump into them out and about in the public sphere, the badinage would be gone, as though a fire had been left over night, and now there were only a few embers as forgotten memories.

Sometimes on your shift, you might bump into somebody in the back stage of the staff room, see them broken enough for candid conversations where the rules and roles had gone out of the window, where you were allowed to see each other as souls instead of barcodes, listen to their tales of woe, and share the horror of their lives for a few unsatisfactory moments. But it hardly ever happened.

At the end of each show when the shutters had gone down, we would check each other's wallets and pockets to make sure nobody had been stealing parts of the Mise-en-scène, and then we would courteously wave our goodbyes to the CCTV cameras that had recorded the day's performance, the insensate eye, storing our lives on video tape, should a discrepancy arise. We'd give stock phrase goodbyes and receive like or nothing in return, and then I'd mope out of the door and into the street, beneath the dramatic skies and the clouds that could swallow me whole, wander to the empty train station by the old bridge so I could sit on vandalised benches, and wait for something to come and take me away from it all.

I began to think of myself as an actor, saying lines that weren't really mine, mouth on autopilot, whatever people wanted to hear, so they'd zip it and leave me alone. I became skilled in convincing my body to react in ways that dissembled the contents of my mind, because if I didn't I would only be able to get through the day with a series of grumbles and mismatched undulations filling the air between myself and whoever I might have found myself engaged in speech with.

Nobody else seemed to understand the mysteries of life, not that I had the answers to any of them, but nobody else seemed even to wonder where we had come from, why, or how it might have happened. Instead, they seemed genuinely convinced that the purpose of our lives was to make failed attempts at dressing in the latest fashions, abide by the laws of temporary fads and trends, download music from the internet, spend their days floating in the empty spaces between the shops in the town centre, the insides of their own heads, the void between the blue lights of the TV screen, and the sofas that they sat on, where old crumbs from toast and biscuits sat moulding in the cracks between cushions

Without the masks of politeness or reserve, I could no longer speak with people, as though I was locked deep within myself, that outside the house the sun was shining, but in the living room was a deluge.

I didn't know where to turn. On the bad days I'd be near the end, on the good, I'd feel a strange elation when I walked through the streets, as though I alone might be on the verge of the discovery of some great secret, one that Joe Public was too slow to get his head around; the one that would set me free. Perhaps it was society that was the cause of my discontent, its structures, and the way it worked. I saw a new enemy in the face of anything that went against the natural order, things that didn't exist in the animal world, but which the human being had created, either physically or mentally - buildings, organisations, rules and customs, ways of doing things. I dug out an old camera and started taking photographs of street furniture, or abandoned buildings, hoping that analysis of the way we had chosen to develop our surroundings would tell me something about the mysteries of it all

Perhaps society would eventually collapse in the same way as those buildings, I thought, because they had both been built by the same force. Maybe the signs and signals and lights around every corner would speak to me, if I could just understand their language; I spent long nights on the linoleum floor of my kitchen, staring at them, digital photographs, wondering about the ultimate fate of the universe. It was hot so I kept the windows open.

There was a proud old building in the centre of town with rusting iron girders exposed like cuts through flesh to the bone. It used to be a theatre. Years ago, it had been closed down because people had become tired of pretending in front of one another, and so now they just walked past it as though it wasn't there. Homeless people sat outside it now and begged with torn paper cups from Starbucks, this particular area of the town having degenerated into a magnet for the kind of energy suggestive of dereliction or decrepitude, as if the homeless felt that they had finally found a place which made them truly feel welcome, where they could sit huddled into themselves, and where their forms could adopt the shapes of black plastic bags of unwanted junk that some virtuous office worker had dumped outside a charity shop one morning.

The Victorian walls of the building had holes in the bricks, chips missing, pushed out by weeds, and abraded edges. Yellow warning signs with black writing adorned the front and said: 'DANGER ASBESTOS!' or: 'DO NOT ENTER 24 HR SECURITY' and carried silhouette pictures of stern looking men with glowing eyes and uniforms and torches and Alsations by their sides. The colouring of the old dome roof had faded, like the untended photographs of some dead relative left upon your window ledge, and the bricks were beginning to see themselves go the same way, as though the whole of life had unexpectedly become anti-saturated, different shades of grey, boarded up windows and gutters that needed clearing, but probably never would be. Nobody knew what to do with it; just one big problem, right in the middle of the city, neglected by all, despite the secret awe that they felt towards it, a metaphor that nobody could understand, analogous to each of us that lived here, and just as ignored and uncared for.

One night, I approached with my camera. Across the road from the empty theatre was another abandoned building, not as old as its cousin across the street; screaming prefab, nineteen sixties concrete, flat and uninhabitable, except for pieces of machinery, and two-tone computer screens that flashed deep through the night like digital fireflies at the foot of some long abandoned mountain. I couldn't tell what the building might have been. It offered no clues. Regardless, I set my camera up on the wall around the perimeter and adjusted my shutter to capture what I would perhaps consider to be the 'essence' of the theatre across the street. It was dark and people streamed by as though shadows of the night itself; some were drunk, screaming in high spirits; some were sober and screaming for reasons known to them alone.

I set the shutter speed to sixty seconds, the camera resting on the wall around the non-descript building, taking in any light that it could find; stolen streaks from the backs of passing cars, out of synch traffic lights, or the burning embers of cigarettes in the hands of passers-by. Neon fuzz of mobile phone screens sent motes of light through the eye of the lens, as people walked down the street sending text messages, sharing trivialities, so they need not feel so alone. People poured out of pubs and crawled out of night club doors, or the backs of taxi cabs and into the night, drunk and listless and on their ways home. I kept my eyes open for salient fat people, but there were none that stood out as being the one with all the answers. If anything, everybody around here looked more lost than even I was, having stopped looking for answers long ago, and instead convincing themselves that distraction was the only way to saviour.

As the shutter made its way down to zero, I saw a man approach me beneath the street lights. He was haggard and attired in dirty clothes that he'd obviously been wearing for a long time; tracksuit bottoms and withered space age sneakers, juxtaposed against his primordial confusion and sluggish posture. Taking insouciant, almost French-like steps towards my place on the wall, he stopped sporadically to count upon his fingers, an intense but delicate concentration in his eyes as his lips trembled, and he craned his neck upwards towards the starry sky and attempted cognition.

There was a veil of stubble about his chin, though I didn't get the impression that this was a conscious fashion choice on the man's behalf, more like he had forgotten how to shave, so I imagined, or perhaps he had never been shown how, because daddy had run away and he had been forced to grow up hard and alone. His emaciated face and tired eyes lent credence to my musings, accentuating the image with the tale that they told of strife and worry, and of anguish and disappointment.

Anxious, I tried to direct my eyes away from his gaze and to focus on the light being exposed to my mechanical eye. I checked in on the viewfinder and saw that only ten seconds had passed. Time was dwindling like the dying ends of an uncomfortable telephone call. I looked up and he was still there and so I was forced to do my best and look right through him.

But before I had a chance to even blink, he had taken a place next to me on the wall. He didn't mention the camera, nor question what I might be doing. He didn't even introduce himself. Instead, he just said:

'I can't read or write.'

Then he pointed to the clock tower of the city hall, which stood behind us, a light house to stop the fools like us crashing into the banks of tardiness.

'Does that say ten o'clock?'

And I confirmed that it did. He thanked me and was about to leave, but then he saw the camera, that it was pointed at the theatre, and, for some reason, it made him stop in his tracks. Looking at me as a sick tiger might some rodent it may or may not want to eat, he inched ever closer to me on the wall. It was cold and our breath began to condense. He opened his mouth and tried once again to allow his brain to turn over the new information it had just processed but he couldn't find the words. Instead the two of us just sat in silence, staring at the camera between us on the wall, waiting for the remaining thirty seconds of exposure time to dry up so that we'd have something to talk about.

Cars and taxis and buses went by; I watched the traffic lights change. People crossed the road, some at the appropriate times, others in between traffic, darting with their heads forwards and carrying themselves as though they were invincible, because in their minds that's what they were, far removed from the realities of a physical universe. And then, finally:

Click.

I had captured the essence.

I reached out for the camera, quite forgetting about The Counter sat beside me. He was calm and poised, very Zen and quite motionless. Somehow, without my being able to pre-empt his moves, he snatched the camera away, before I could even find the time. I looked at him but his eyes told me I best not say anything; instead, I should listen to what he has to say and take it on board, like my life might depend on it.

It was a sign.

'If you want to understand the moment', he said, 'you are best off living it instead of toying with these infantile fantasies about being an artist, or about being creative, or about seeing the world from your own unique perspective. We are all of the same species and we are much more connected to each other than they would like to have us believe.'

I tried to take the camera from him. But he wouldn't let me.

'How do you know that if you can't even count?'

'Because there is only one of everything', he said. Then he paused, because he could tell I was the kind of person who was at the stage in life where pseudo-profundity would be instantly overwhelming.

'If you need to understand something, be it a building or a person or even a dream, you are best off seeing it from the inside.'

And then he turned the camera around and showed me that the picture I had taken was nothing more than a sheet of white, a blank screen from being exposed to too much for too long; a useless photograph on account of its looking too intently from the same perspective, finding the wrong kind of light in the wrong places, and assuming that it could capture the essence of anything from such a limited and extrinsic vantage point. He handed it back to me and I put it in the case before he had a chance to change his mind.

I stood up to leave, but he pulled me by the arm and back down to the wall.

'Have you got twenty pence, mate?'

I emptied my wallet for change and gave him all the twenty pence pieces that I could find in there, then I walked as quickly as I could to the bus station and got on my bus and went home.

Chapter 11

I bumped into the Sycophant in the town centre; she still had the same look on her face, like she was half expecting somebody to beat her in it, and so she kept looking around nervously, flinching, with her mouth agape and her eyes wide open.

I was on my lunch break, heading to get a pasty, something which recently I found ever more irresistible, and when we both saw each other I could see in her eyes that she would rather not talk to me, and I was tempted to treat her in the same way.

Unfortunately, my curiosity got the better of me and so I cut through the crowds of drones and foreigners and b-boys that populated the streets in the day time, and I stood directly in front of her, so she couldn't escape, and then I attempted to strike up a conversation, as though a match against a soggy box.

'Hey,' I said. But she seemed to be too busy to be bothered with small talk.

'If you just wanna know about the Leader, then you can ask me.'

And so I did:

'Yeah, what's happening with that?'

She looked at me and for the first time stopped being so nervous, like she was intent on telling me something, but couldn't quite figure out how.

'You should really call her and find out.'

And that was when I explained that I didn't ever get the Leader's phone number, although I didn't explain that it was because I had been too weak-willed to sleep with her, and that I had just run off and left her there at the school like that.

'Is she angry with me?', I asked.

'What do you think?', said the Sycophant.

Then she double-checked that I had the number and took her fraught face off through the crowd as though we were two people that had never met before and that nothing really mattered anyway because one day everybody would be dead.

I called the Leader on the telephone. From the way that she spoke I could tell she was in a room full of childish things, like perhaps there were posters on the walls of plastic pop stars giving the impression that they were down with the streets, or perhaps she still had stuffed toys or Barbie dolls set around her bedside table, and that instead of the bland patterns that real adults adorn their duvets with, she would have some kind of cartoon animal that was trying to find itself and a way to be accepted in the world, because in the eyes of her parent or parents, she was probably still a child, something to be protected and isolated, and had never left the realm of childhood for the one of phallic objects and wet vaginas and lust and smutty discovery out in public spaces. I felt dirty and ashamed.

It was about eight p.m. when I called her up. The Sycophant had most likely informed her by now that we'd exchanged numbers and I had been enjoying the thought of The Leader living in anticipation of my call, because I wanted to believe that I was still an important person; somebody of worth, or if not, at least somebody whose existence could still have a minor effect on the lives of other people.

She answered the phone in a tone that suggested certain dubiousness, a more high-pitched edge to her utterances than I had remembered, rising intonations and sticky inflections, as though an electric current was flowing through her veins. I sat back into the dusty chair of my living room, the lights out and the sounds of the geese attacking each other on the canal outside. I sat sideways with my legs over one arm of the chair and then I tried my best to act like I was in control of things, when, to be honest, I knew in the back of mind that I was far removed from the helm of the ship, and was much more truly lost out to sea.

'Oh', she had said upon recognising my voice, 'It's you...'

And I wondered if perhaps she hadn't been expecting my call after all, because she didn't sound particularly excited to be speaking with me. But then, it occurred to me that perhaps she was still embarrassed about how our last encounter had finished up. And so, to relieve the heavy burden of the past, I opened things up with a factitious nonchalance, as though I were totally fine with things, as though they couldn't have happened in any other way because that's just the way the cookie crumbles. I acted as though the past were irrelevant and that now was the only moment that mattered.

'I saw your friend the other day. She looked scared but she gave me your number.'

'I know...' said The Leader, 'I thought you might have called sooner.'

And then there was this pause, as though we were at a train crossing waiting for a train to pass, even though we didn't really want it to.

'I'm sorry about the other night', I said, 'For just running away like that.'

'It's okay. I thought it was kind of sweet in a way', she said.

I couldn't decide whether I wanted to meet up with her again. I knew that I shouldn't, because it would most likely lead to places I didn't need to be going. I was tempted to forget it all and make small talk about the weather, or about how my day had been at work, or about the guy that I'd met outside the empty theatre. But, before I got a chance to say anything, she said:

'I think you should know something...'

'What is it?', I asked.

'I'm pregnant.'

And she hung up the phone and I didn't know what to do.

Chapter 12

For the next few days, the regular haze that I bumbled from one place to another within seemed more fog-like, darker, mistier; a miasma of other people's cigarette smoke, fag ends, and conversations that never really began and didn't seem to end either. I didn't know what it could mean, that the Leader had fallen pregnant and had taken it upon herself to attribute the germination of the thing growing inside of her to be because of something I had done. I started to wonder if I had slept with her; I had often done things that I had failed to recollect, but never before of such magnitude, of such ill-lit proportions, or such gravitas. I became more introspective, my eyes looking at the world around me without taking it in. I stumbled and fell. Nobody noticed.

Whenever I tried to call her again, the sound of the ringing phone would suck the air out of my empty apartment. I'd sit in the chair, legs over the side and head against my hands; another thing to be waiting for and no control over the process of killing the time. I didn't know where she lived. I didn't know where the Sycophant might be. There was no such thing as email because the Internet had been cut off, and I had no time for delving into the mysteries of where people reside, or how I might go about finding them, despite this being the information age, where everybody else is supposed to be persistently accessible and under twenty four hour scrutiny.

At work, I resigned myself once again to the shop floor, a piece of dog shit on the soul of humanity's shoe, organising and filing and trying to bring order to the piles of dirt, and the fading, out-dated products. I felt right at home with everybody else's garbage. It became an extension of my true self.

During these periods of fatigue and under the cloud of lethargy, my ability to see colours became increasingly heightened, like how I would pick up a Bruce Willis movie from the ominous morass of shelves and see streaks of green behind my eyes, or how I would brush my hand over something directed by Michael Bay and see great fields of yellow against purple horizons, as I waited for whatever music was playing to stop, so that I could shield my eyes from the fuzz of white behind peoples whispers, or the intermingled neuron browns of police horse hooves in the streets and the silver streaks of a MacDonald's door opening and closing with careless abandon.

Nobody had ridden my back for months. Though I'd been living in Sartre's hell of other people, I had somehow managed to carve out a niche for myself, a safety deposit box to live in, right out in front of them all, where by the barriers of politeness or sarcasm alone I had managed to distance myself and keep the world at arm's length. Everything I had worked at had been perfunctory; a fake smile from behind dead eyes as I handed the change on over to some slack-jawed patron, the loose alphabetising of stock in the filing shelves, correct but not perfect, nodding and agreeing with everything that management said despite an obvious disdain. Blah. Blah. The days continued.

But, in my new state, I could no longer keep on top of things. My head was too full of questions and I was too tired of waiting to keep up with the bullshit that was supposed to constitute daily life, by which I mean those things like making other people feel like they're more important than they really are, or by paying your taxes, comparing yourself to other people, telling yourself that everything you've done to lead you here was the only way that things could have been, and so you'll act accordingly, to fit in with the rest of these screw-ups and really try to make it work. That phrase: 'make it work', just means that you're finally willing to compromise. And I wasn't.

Walking the streets on an afternoon, I would see cats asleep upon sun-baked shards of grass, beneath the shades of trees, or on doorsteps; I would see dogs down by the canal, jumping free and into waters. That spontaneity of the animal world, true spontaneity, not the marketed pseudo, saturated version that equates to impulse buying, is what distinguishes beast from man. I would think to myself that somewhere along the line, sometime long ago, the human animal had lost touch with his animal purpose, perhaps when he had learned to feel guilty for its selfish crudeness, its gnashing teeth, the blood on its lips; when he had discovered his arsehole. Somewhere along the line, we had become detached from whatever it is that we were, or what we could be, and now we were doomed to walk the earth until we destroyed it, feeling lost and incomplete and unsure of what to do with ourselves.

Once again, the Supervisor reared his sweaty head, seeing that I had fallen, yet determined to push me further. When you're down and you're weak, it is human nature for the rest of the herd to see how far you are really willing to go. Perhaps this is because they feel that one day you may bring something back with you, or perhaps it is just because they are confused, believing that you are in this competition with them, this great game, whatever it is, and so they will try their bests to break you, to vanquish any promise of their being something more than *this*, because they are scared of what that means for themselves. Knowing that I neither cared nor wished to retaliate, he would peer over my shoulder and scrutinise, bark orders as though they were bullets, belittle me because he knew I felt bad enough about myself to take it, and then he'd beat me with sticks, kick mud in my eyes, and press my feet into hot coals whilst he told me I wasn't worth a damn thing.

When people feel that they are broken or defective, they will try their very bests to destroy the things around them that they consider to be less or more so. Misery loves company and the Venus de Milo wants to break your arms; it's the natural way of the world, because we all want to believe that there's nothing more than what we have managed to build for ourselves, even if it is without foundation or because we didn't really work at it and just let it fall into place. We get older and we trick ourselves into believing that we have done our very bests, even though we know in our hearts that, in most instances, this is simply not to be the case.

I took each punch as it came, because I did not consider my working life to be my real existence, just a temporary imitation of a lifestyle until I discovered my true, higher self; the 'Me' that knows purpose and that is capable of finding the divine in even the most mundane of his actions. And so, for this reason, I considered each deflection that I encountered, in relation to the once youthful ideal I once harboured of 'now', the age I had found myself at, to be just another fork in the road, another trial, another tribulation, another obstacle to be overcome, just like in the movies. Despite it all, I had a vision of how the future might be. And I told myself it was good, even though in relation to the past the chances were minimal. My vision was the carrot and I was my own donkey and, if I didn't keep plodding on in some form or another, I would be whipped and left to bleed by the side of the road.

People become depressed in today's society because anger has to be turned inwards, because it is no longer acceptable to display it outwardly, and so we fill ourselves with an overflowing reservoir of emotions that we can't hardly handle, and eventually this cripples us, leaving us to stand in the road as the cars come hurtling towards us and the drivers beep their horns.

My ego had found a way to convince itself that some things were more important than others and, if I just kept my faith in the promise of The Fat Man, of the answers, then I would be able to walk away from all these issues and to keep my dignity intact as I did so. There were people that began to confuse my apathy for stupidity, or to think that I were some tractable object to be pushed around, and because I would do what was needed of me, instead of having that 'fuck you' attitude that everybody else learned from MTV, or the movies, it seemed to them that I had no plans for my life, or that I was wasted and confused and down and out, like everybody else secretly believed themselves to be. But I wasn't. I sucked it all in like a sponge, and then I redirected the energy into my quest. None of them knew that they were watering the flower that I had planted in my belly, the ragged-edged orchid that feeds itself on its own tears upon an evening, and so I kept breathing and flowing and taking energy from one place and putting it into another, and then I knew that, when it was time, I would be ready to truly walk away from it all. To close the door.

And now, to add to my list of questions, '*How can she be pregnant?*', because I was certain that the doctors had told me that, because of the chemotherapy, my seed was on hiatus for at least another month or two, and I was certain that we had not slept together, even though I could remember her breasts beneath that shirt, and those hips up above the concrete of the school, and knowing that I had and still desired it.

My priorities were changing with each day that passed. Months ago this thing, 'life', had been purely about survival, but now the quest for the elixir had taken me down the sewer pipe, on an uncontrollable current that shat Fat Men in my eyes, and mysterious finger counters outside of theatres, and elusive strangers in better clothes than mine. And, now this: a phantom pregnancy that I somehow knew I would be prepared to take the blame for. It was all too much.

My circuits blew some more; colours I had never seen before and couldn't even describe in words if I had wanted to; a whirlpool of dirty paint water, an acrylic oil slick. In times like these, when there are too many ways to head deeper into the maze, you can only wait for signs, and so that was what I did, convinced that destiny was my saviour, because I had nothing else to look forward to and no other way out.

I loitered about the shop floor, pretending to sweep, though the broom was covered in dust; pretending to reorganise shelves, when I was just reading the blurbs on the backs of DVD boxes, hoping that some sign imbued would show me a way out of here. On lunch breaks, I would try and call her. The times she didn't hang up straight away, I would leave messages on her answer phone, my voice becoming more agitated each time I heard that *meep* sound. All the way from:

'Hey, it's me... Gimme a call.'

To:

'Pick up the fucking phone...'

But it was always the same and she never answered. I'd look down at the watch on my hand, at Mao's broken arms, counting the seconds between minutes, waiting for something to happen, instead of trying to make it.

Then, out of the blue, it occurred to me that if you are waiting for a sign to come then you will not receive one, because I had once heard some clap-trap about how people who want something are unlikely to get it. And so, I decided to pretend that everything was fine, that I was not waiting at all, but that I was doing.

And I hoped that by doing this, I would be able to trick whatever force it is that sends these signs to us mortals, these coincidences, these turns of phrase which we imbue with meaning, or these random acts which can suddenly change our whole lives, into sending me exactly what I needed, because I no longer had morals, and so only chaos could guide me through my life. And I was prepared to wait for infinity to conquer the wilderness of desolation. Regardless of the cost.

I got sick of making the phone calls. I refused to do it anymore. I told myself that I should respect myself, even if I didn't have a need to, and then I marched about the streets with an inflated and false sense of purpose, having converted myself to the Church of Me, a statue of myself as an object to be worshipped, resting on some tenuous pedestal, ready to break, but unable to do so for fear of the consequences.

Chapter 13

Everywhere I went I saw babies: hanging out in push chairs in front of shopping centres, being pushed around by track suit adorned parents who blew cigarette smoke in their dear little faces, or popped illegal pills and tablets, but refused to use bad language in front of them for fear of being seen as 'bad' parents. They'd keep coming into the shop, families like armies, selling toys or movies that they thought the kids wouldn't miss any more, explaining that this nice man behind the counter was going to give them some money for it now, that they didn't need it no more.

Little girls would parade around dressed in Alice costumes, growing up and stuck down the rabbit hole, and I'd get shot at with toy guns, space rays and wild west, and so I'd shoot back with my fingers whilst parents looked on at me warily, like I might be the next serial killer they'd been told to anticipate, or another stranger with illicit motives, the fabled enticer with puppies, or candy, or other objects from nursery rhymes. The kids would lick at the shelving units as their parents looked on oblivious, then they'd mess up the shit on the shelves, but it was ok, because they were primitive and young and that was what they were supposed to do as the embodiments of chaos itself.

I'd look down at my hands, my swollen veins and the scars across my wrists, the cracked white must of my fingers, products of time and consequence. Everybody around me had once upon a time been inside their mother's stomachs; it was a fact that everybody knew, but ever since spilling out had done nothing but try and avoid or deny. I hadn't spoken to my parents in years. I wondered how they were doing.

After work, I returned to the old theatre; I knew that it was important to my quest, but I wasn't sure why. With all of the other objects that I had been seeking out lost to the mist, a visit to the theatre seemed to be the only logical step to be taken; I went back once the sun had gone down, when the dusk had set in, because I didn't feel that I could deal with people in the daylight, not without my mask to wear, adlibbing the role of God's Shelf Stacker, knowing exactly what to say and when, on account of the role's boundaries and limitations. At night time, I didn't have to be afraid, because I could see that everybody else was, by the ways in which they kept their eyes to the ground, or wore their hoods up over their heads, and puffed out their chests. There would be talk in strange languages and as usual they would spit on the floor when they passed, but at night time it didn't seem to be such an act of degeneration, because this was a big city, and the moon was out and this was exactly how you would expect things to be. Darkness is supposed to bring out the worst in us.

It wasn't late, but the traffic was down. The town was in pieces, anyway, and there was nothing to do on an evening, because all the pubs had run out of money and shut their shutters, and all the buildings that were still able to stand without scaffolding housed shops, like the one that I had found myself chained to, or the pound shops, where everybody bought their Christmas presents, or the mini-supermarket, by the old stone stairs, where the kids hung out after dusk and threw beer bottles at passers-by; or the 'Museum of Culture' that hung above it all, like some huge, ironic punch line, because we all knew that there was no culture, unless dwelling on the past is what counts, and hating the present is what constitutes it, and fear of the future is what we are collectively entitled to look forward to.

I stood in the road as the traffic slunk past and hissed like steam emissions at the back of some CO2 factory in a layman perception of China. I saw yellows and greys, mist on mountain tops, heard an eagle scream. The Chavs peppered the night in groups of three or four, scowling as they broke the night in.

From where I was standing in the road, the ancient theatre seemed even more imposing than before. The clouds shifted past behind it as though a painted backdrop and, for a moment, I considered that this play I was taking part in had extended its boundaries and had taken me out of the realm of the sublunary or the mundane and into the strange. Indeed, by now the play had become a living thing, a breathing organic entity that I had little or no control over. In fact, I began to realise, I wasn't in a play at all; I was the one being played, and there was little I could do about it. I thought back to the last time I had been in this place, the words of The Counter:

'If you need to understand something, be it a building or a person or even a dream, you are best to see it from the inside.'

And so, for lack of any other options, I decided to take heed of his word.

On the other side of the road, tied to a lamppost outside the theatre, were the dead petal remnants of a flower wreath memorial to somebody who had been run over by a car. I headed on over to see if the fragrance had lingered despite the shrivelled decay of fugacity, but the smell was only fetid and rotten, and the petals had become viscid, as though our memories are to be short-lived anyway, and then they become tarnished with all the intricacies of what must follow.

Lingering as though in need of being forgotten, the buses passed me by as I stared at people on the back seats, as the racer boys would shout out of the windows of their daddy's cars, and occasionally people would grunt to try and shock me, but I wasn't scared anymore because I knew I had more to think about.

I headed around the side of the building and was greeted with more of the same: signs showing that security guards with torches in their hands and dogs by their sides were awaiting intruders, that there would be prosecutions and criminal records that may affect my future employability. Here, by the back of the building, the lights were empty and vapid; just myself and my shadow congregating with a collection of empty bins, cracked paving stones, and broken windows.

I looked up towards the roof, straining my neck. More weeds around the perimeter, silhouettes before the light of the moon, and the back of the dome roof that stood still intact from the front of the building, was crumbled and long since fallen. I climbed up on to the top of one of the large bins, despite the odour of empty staleness, and as I climbed up and onto it, my hands and my knees found themselves seeped in puddles of day old rain water, and so I wiped it into my face to cool it down, because I was feeling hot and nervous.

The building had died long ago, but I knew that there were still enough bricks remaining for us to build a relationship. From where I was standing, down the dead end of the alley, I could see the shaft of lights from the main highway in the distance, and still people shuffled past in groups, or by themselves, and still the cars hissed by, and I felt the colours of all the world's motion. I wondered how I could get up and into the building; I considered my options from this new vantage point, a few feet higher, and it seemed to me that if I could shift the bin a few feet or more down the alley, I would be able to climb up to one of the windows, and perhaps remove the grill that covered the glass. The rusting bin grated against the cracks in the floor as I got behind it; I looked to the street lights, fearful that I had piqued the unwanted attention of passers-by, but the noise just made people move faster and disappear into the night time.

As I climbed and smashed the window, shards of glass began to fall to the floor. They tinkled and shattered and scattered amongst the puddles on the ground, my heart fluttering, as though there was a bird stuck in my chest and wanting to escape, because I had seen those signs with the dogs and the guards, and I didn't perceive myself as being brave enough to face their wrath.

I wanted to run, but it was a dead end alley and this made my heart beat tenfold, and so I stared into the lights, at the entrance to the alley - intent, like a rat in a corner. I thought I heard sirens getting louder, coming towards me, ready to take me, and I imagined what it might be like for me in jail, with my health condition. Panicked, I climbed inside the bin, despite the smell, and I closed the lid as much I could whilst still being able to peek out, and I waited as the sound of that thing in my chest echo bounced from the chamber of the night.

It was only when I had become quite satisfied that the sirens had melted into nothing that I pulled myself out and back beneath the window. Nobody came. Nobody would. I thanked the apathy that had taken men's souls, because I was certain that somebody had heard the noise I had made, but I also knew that most likely they didn't care. I paused and breathed and recomposed myself, and then I set about removing the knives of remnant glass from the windowpane, shimmied up the wall and pulled myself through. I felt a chill through my spine, as I thought about the glass I might have forgotten, but slid through without a scratch. As I wiped myself down and looked around at the place I had found myself in, I began to wonder what it might mean.

I just knew I was getting closer.

Chapter 14

The palpable warmth of the odour bowled me over with the intensity of its colours as the cracked glass, and the shards beneath the window, pane glistened beneath the moon. As pallid streaks of light broke down and out across the musky chamber, they sent out pale undulations and shimmering reflections that dwindled like dying fire flies at the end of some long-forgotten summer. I began to shiver and then I yawned at the same time.

Finding myself staring into the darkness of an ensuing corridor, with an intensity and ill-directed focus that I had seldom before experienced, I began to forget about and lose all consciousness of my body. It was as though, for a solitary moment or two, I had become my mind alone and so, thus transported to the nonphysical realm, I felt strangely at peace within myself and my situation, as though finally I had managed to realign myself with the path of paths and to walk in tune with the gentle beat that epitomised destiny's marching song.

Taking comfort in these metaphysical rationalisations, I slowly came back to down to earth, returning once again to the dualist union of a mind and body, intertwined and ensnared within the limits of the physical realm. Trying to focus on my hands alone, I stared at them listlessly in the dark as I reflected upon mental causation and the mysteries of mind-body interaction, the nature of how we interact with the world around us, and the fact that one day these hands will turn to dust, be food for the worms, and thus controlled by none at all, besides the elements.

If I could focus on my thoughts alone, I told myself, if I could stay perfectly and totally still, then I could convince myself that I had been living out this moment for all of my eternity, that I had just been born perhaps, and that this moment could be the seed from which the rest of my life would sprout. Once again, I took deep, almost inebriated inhalations, then I looked around me, in what little light there was, as I tried to understand the purpose of the womb I had found myself in and the gifts that it might have to offer.

As far as I could tell, I had come through the window at the top of a stair case, situated between at least two other flights of stairs. I stopped to think for a few moments, to make up my mind about whether it would make more sense to climb or to fall, and in the resulting silence of my inactivity, I thought that I heard voices floating up towards me from down below.

Down in the darkness, as though calling to me from the unknown future, I could hear the distant sounds of some indistinct tune. Upon closer inspection, I managed to determine that the ghostly air was almost militaristic in its execution, as though some lamentable exhortation were being amplified, or somebody were trying to incite something. But what could it be? And why? Its incongruity seemed almost unholy to me.

I held my breath, in both fear and anticipation, still as an old rock, almost paralysed as rampant speculations and trepidations assailed my sense of self-worth. Perhaps it originated from the outside world, out beyond the night, where the real world unfolds and the people go about their business. But when I put my ears to the broken window, I realised that this simply couldn't be the case. For those few moments even the sirens seemed to have ceased and the wind had stopped its hum; the traffic had given up hissing and the boy racers were on strike.

No doubt about it, the muffled commotion and mysterious exhortation was rising up towards me from the blackness of the basement. But it simply couldn't be, could it? This building had been closed for close to a decade, maybe longer, left broken and falling to pieces. Perhaps it was the security guards, the ones that I had been warned about outside, on the signs, with the Alsatians. But why would they be listening to this unholy music? And at such a volume? At such an ungodly hour?

Too scared to go down and face the unknown, but too curious to head back out of the window and into the mundane reality of barcodes and self-abasement, I took my first tentative footstep up towards the top of the building. The feeling that I was about to learn something of great importance, something that were to change me forever, began to tug on my sense of purpose as though the strings upon a puppet. Volition was just a word, I told myself, just like everything else. Everything is predetermined. There is nothing that can be done about it. It is already done.

As I held on, amidst the dark, to the side of an old railing, wet and unwholesome with years of dirt and negligence, the sounds of the marching music escorted me the whole while. Becoming fainter, the higher I climbed, it felt as though the air were getting thinner. And so, as I forced myself to continue up the stairs, I felt my breath become laboured and my legs become heavy, which in turn enervated my mind and reduced my false sense of security and purpose. I began again to waver.

Though I had seen the building from the outside a hundred thousand times before, and knew that there couldn't be far for me to go, I had to keep telling myself that I must almost be at the top. And, even though I felt certain that there couldn't be much farther to go, I somehow managed to convince myself that it might take forever, as though I were somehow an incarnation of Sisyphus but the rock which I had to contend with resided within and weighed me down completely.

I clambered the next flight in a mild panic, feeling more comfortable with my surroundings now, but still shrouded and encapsulated within the utter isolation of the darkness. My confidence fell away from me like a snap of the fingers; I had to reach out in front of myself and grasp for the stairs. Broken and loose and infirm, I began to tremble, because I had visions of falling, down through each flight of stairs and into the jaws of whatever it was that was waiting for me down there. Down in the pit down by the stage.

Slowly, after an interminable period of doubt and insecurity there appeared out of the darkness a delicate slit of light, cast about the floor as though the thread fine line between life and death itself, as though the threshold between now and all that I could ever hope for.

Still trembling in the inexplicable grip of fear, this light seemed to me to be the wry smile of saviour itself. I headed towards it on my knees, slowly and pathetically amongst the mould and the damp on the floor, until eventually I was close enough to ascertain that the source of light was the crack beneath a door. I pushed it gently and it opened almost as though it had wanted to, as if it had been waiting for and expecting me. As if it had needed me.

Suddenly, I found myself bathed in a light so bright that I could hardly believe it, and I crawled out onto the roof of the building just as the sun began to rise. Despite the tenor of the morning sunlight, the whole concrete slab of the roof was permeated with subtle shades of grey that lent the morning a pathetic and lifeless quality that made me feel inexplicably nostalgic for times and places to which I had no connection. I sauntered around as though I owned the place but harboured a complete distaste for it all, analysing the details and the design of the building, marvelling at the hollow backs of the domes on the roof - though they can be described as that only as a technicality. Truth be told, the contours and domes of the building which seemed almost majestic when viewed from the front of the building were actually flat from back here and propped up with brittle, wooden beams. It was as though the building itself was some kind of stage or movie set, a two-dimensional illusion that had been erected outside of its own means.

As these feelings of disillusionment encroached upon my psyche, I made my way, bleary-eyed and yawning once again, to the far side of the roof to see if I could find a vantage point that would afford me sight of my cherished city. Between one of the domes and a corner section of the roof, I looked down and out at a world oblivious; at the boy racers revving their engines at the traffic lights; at the drunks stumbling about and shouting at each other; at the homeless begging for change; the hustle and bustle of another day beneath the stars.

I wondered if I would be able to see the Counter, because I felt like he might be watching me to see if I had learned my lesson, but I knew that I probably hadn't and, like the rest of us, he was no doubt just peddling profundity anyway. I sighed and wondered what the point of it all could possibly even be.

I scanned the whole horizon of the town that was holding my head under water. From this distance it looked more peaceful, through the eyes of objectivity that I was afforded because of my height. But isn't it true that everything look better from the distance? Our dreams? The things we think we want or need? Mountains, maybe even the moon? As I looked over the old prefab office block across the road, the one that I had set the camera up outside of that time, I directed my gaze to the remainder of the skyline, thinking about how this whole place is just a toy box in which to keep all of my problems, and promising myself that one day I would leave for good, having put away these childish things once and for all, proud and strong and determined in my quest to become a man.

And then, after I had caught a hold of my breath, turning back to the roof over the vista, I became overwhelmed with the sensation that I had climbed these stairs to become edified. Things will only last forever if you want them to, I thought. And because I was tired, I slunk down against the wall over which I had just been peering, tired and lost, but somehow convinced, without the slightest trace of evidence of my own future success. Breathing deeply and completely now, I noticed something glistening on the roof just in front of me; drawn to it like a magpie to some shimmering but worthless thing, I crawled in the grey dawn towards it and realised that it was a piece of a jigsaw puzzle.

Knowing immediately who it belonged to, I put it safe in the bottom of my pocket. Then, as I lay down serene beneath the moonlight, drifting into sleep as though slipping into another coma, I thought to myself that I should be ultimately satisfied, for the clue I had been waiting for had finally found me.

When I woke up it was cold and early and the light was still grey because the sun had not fully been able to rise. The concrete that covered the roof had taken in and stored away the freezing temperatures of the night, and so I woke up shivering slightly, curled up foetal, wondering where my life had gone and what I could do to get it back. I had fallen asleep with my face to the ground, my arm underneath my head for support, and yet somehow I had still managed to get concrete imprints on my cheeks from pressing them in against the floor. I could feel the indentations with my arms, like the valleys and contours in an aerial photograph. I had become a dried up planet, uninhabitable and desiccated.

During the night I had dreamed about Her, my love from the Old World. We were on a beach, one that I knew we had been to in waking life, just before the doctors had told me that I needed to go home. In the dream, we were walking along together, holding hands, on the sand, but as we walked I suddenly felt a loosening of my grasp, and then I started walking towards the ocean, as though I were somehow drawn to it. For a time, I felt as though my body had been possessed, because even though I knew that I was heading for trouble, I felt that I should just succumb to it, and so I let my body lead the way as my mind shut down.

As I headed towards the sea, she began to cry out my name. Over and over again, my name ringing out and along the stretch of the beach, beneath the moon. Next I knew, I was in the water, and there was an undercurrent, and it started to pull my legs under, and so slowly I slipped. She watched me from the shore, screaming. Then, I got the feeling, under the water, that the ocean was formed of her tears. And I could imagine her stood on the shore still crying, and then her tears formed a stream that seeped into the ocean, and now I was here, drowning in them. And then it went black, as though a great shadow had faded over me, or as though I had faded away, or fallen into nothing. Then there was peace. And I woke up.

I sat on the roof, wondering what I might do to get out of here. Then I remembered the jigsaw puzzle piece in my pocket, and so I checked that it was still there, and when it was I felt nothing but relief. It felt good because I felt that I were a little closer to my goal, and I knew that it would be impossible to fail, because if you just follow the signs you will be led to where you need to be.

Looking over the side of the roof, back between the pseudo-dome and the walls, I saw the city come to life, the morning buses taking the working classes to their places of business, the middle classes in their cars, locked away from the world, and the rich in different towns completely, even though they owned most of the buildings in this one. There is something about moments like these, standing aloof and with a detached gaze, where this very detachment allows you to feel a connection of some kind, because you are taking it all in at once, in exactly the way that it is happening. I watched and reflected and the sun eventually became brighter and it warmed the roof and so I didn't feel so cold anymore. I felt as if though I were witnessing the genesis of something grand, something new and important.

There was a synergy to it all, as though each disconnected person that I could see down there, were somehow working in union with each of the strangers that surrounded them, epiphenomenal, like in the ways that ants will build a society when they work together, but if you get one of them alone it will not have any idea what it is doing. Indeed, the whole town from up here seemed to be welcoming me, and so I decided that it was time for me to go back down. Down towards the traffic jams and the council flats, but first to work, where I was expected to be in an hour or two. I looked at Mao to tell me the time and he told me that I would have to be quick.

I wasn't sure whether leaving the building now would get me in trouble or not. It was more likely that I would be seen climbing through windows in the daylight, but perhaps such behaviour could be pardonable - there were worse things that had happened in this part of town, and besides, what choice did I have anyway? I brushed myself down with my hands, wiped the asbestos of my pants, and then headed back into the stairwell that had brought me here, hoping that the daylight would lend it a more affable sheen.

When I reached the top of the staircase it was certainly lighter outside, so much so that I could see the steps properly, and so I didn't need to worry quite so much about falling down into the stage pit. I headed back to the window that I had smashed to get in here, and when I reached it, I realised that the music had stopped. Instead there was only silence. The shards of glass sat motionless against the window base, the reflections within them as clear as muddy puddles. I looked down the pit of the stairs, down there, towards the stage or the cellar and into the darkness. Like the death of drowning in my dream, and without the music, it seemed to be an even more hostile place, cold and uncertain. I slunk back over to the window and put my head out to make sure that nobody was there.

Traffic hissing on the road again, people passing aimlessly; when it was safe, I began to make my way back home, when suddenly I realised something: the big bin that I had used as a platform for climbing up here in the first place had disappeared. Once again I felt that flutter in my chest, as though the bird had returned, and I felt truly this time that it might actually escape, that it would be able to rip its way through my skin and into the rest of the world so that it could sound the alarm and let them all know I was here. In my panic I looked out the window and thought about jumping, but I couldn't because it was too high of a fall.

The freight train ran through the front of my mind, a red-tinged fear, bile and disgust. Somebody must have seen me enter the building. I turned back into the womb of the theatre and thought that perhaps if I dare head down into the darkness I would be able to find another way out, one at ground level and so I started to move down the stairs.

Each step that I took brought me a little closer to myself, because until that moment I imagined that I could've at least pretended to be a man. But with each footstep, I began to feel that I was becoming weaker, as if whatever was down there sat waiting for me, and that it was waiting because it was ready to beat me. This sensation became so strong, so overpowering, that once again I lost the ability to move. And then I felt tears streaming down my face, thousands of them, warm and salty and flowing. I pulled myself up the creaking banister and turned back around. I took a running jump, and then I fell through the window and into a heap amongst the puddles of the alleyway.

Chapter 15

I hadn't been to the shop for days but it felt like more. The smell of MacDonald's breakfasts and that cheap coffee and the cigarette smoke on people's clothes got the better of me and, as I looked around at the junk on the floor and the ever disordered shelves, I became instantly and inextricably overwhelmed by the sensation that the end was near and there was nothing to be done about it. They looked at me like there must be something wrong with me, as though I was a walking abortion, or an aberration; a rip in the Mona Lisa.

'What happened to your leg?', One of Them asked me.

I tried to ignore him and just get on with signing my name on the sign in sheet, the sticky green book that waited to learn the deepest, darkest secrets of my pockets; I faked a concentration, so intense as to be almost religious, and then I diverted my eyes and pretended I hadn't heard him.

'Seriously', said Another, 'It looks fucked up.'

And then, next I knew, there was The Manager, solicitous for a change, instead of throwing all that acid in my face, down on the floor, looking at the rip in my jeans. He saw that my leg was rent and that parts of it were still bleeding. Then he looked up at me and he said:

'Jesus, you should get to the hospital.'

Because he refused to break eye contact, I had to gaze at the floor and count the pieces of gum that were stuck to it. Underneath one of the shelves I noticed a baby's dummy. It was covered in dust.

They stood for a few moments expecting some kind of response, but I didn't want to go to the doctor, because that would mean that I would have to explain what had happened and I didn't want to lie. I kept my mouth shut and hoped for the best.

Gradually, they returned to their work: opening up the tills, making their small talk conversations about the TV shows they'd seen. Telling jokes. It was like they were a real team. A unit.

I tried to give the impression that everything was exactly as it was supposed to be. Brushing my hand up against my back pocket to make sure that the jigsaw piece was still there, I meandered round behind the till in silence and began to count up my change. I thought about germs.

Whilst I was counting, the Supervisor came up to me.

'You're late', he said. Then he passed me a piece of paper, which said *Employee Performance Report* across the top of it. When I read what he had written down there was something about me being late for work by five minutes, even though I wasn't getting paid for another ten, and it said that I would sign this piece of paper at the bottom to show that I understood what a terrible human being I was and that I would never do it again.

I printed my name and then stuck my signature down next to it. In the space that asked for confirmation of my job title I wrote '*Nobody*' and then I passed it back to the Supervisor as I watched him strut back down to the other end of the shop. I sucked it all in like a sponge and, because it made me feel heavy and incomplete, I had to lean against the counter for a few beats and put my head against my hands. Then the doors opened and a throng of customers that had been hovering about outside with bags of junk under their arms started to pour in.

'Next!', I shouted at them.

Then another day just like any other began and the remainder of my life became a little shorter.

The rest of the day was a blur, a progression of beeps and barcodes and mindless badinage. Customers would come in and expect conversations and well-serviced smiles, and because when they looked at me they saw a by-product of 'the system', I was expected to rummage through that shit-heap of silver disks, as though my own volition had been defenestrated, and now I was just an empty shell to be told which two directions to bumble in between. Somehow society had forced me to act as though I were actually happy to be doing this, to interpret that grimace on my face as a smile, and to mistake the despair in my voice for the giddy intonations of enthusiasm and zeal.

Nobody could tell that I was one step away from screaming, yelling that I just wanted to get out of here and that I wanted all of this to end, so I could go back to being myself again and saunter through a life of ignorant bliss. I began to feel more than certain that if it wasn't for the other people, every interaction that I shared with them, serving to force the lid back on, I would've opened up right then and spilled my guts to the floor. I was ready to crumble, but I didn't know how.

To pass the time, I reflected upon suicide, not that I was seriously considering it, but it seemed to me that, even if I did want to end it all, other people would somehow find a way to make it difficult for me. Life would be easy if other people weren't involved, was the way I saw it, and if death was its binary opposite, then surely it could be much the same way. If life is meaningless, so might death be, I thought. So why worry about consequences? I knew I had the strength of will to carry it out: perhaps I'd dive beneath the wheels of a bus, or slit my wrists in the bath. It couldn't be that hard. No, the real hill to climb, I suppose, would be going ahead with it knowing what other people might think of you after it had been carried out, not thinking that they had mistreated you in some way or been negligent and overly hurtful, but that you were weak and useless and selfish, because you didn't think about how your death would make them feel, how it might make them feel guilty.

But isn't that the problem with suicide? That we the living don't want those that we have failed to try and find a way to escape from us? Or that we would rather those who are going through each day, as though it is a mountain to be climbed, continue with their struggles, even though they are fighting with all of their might, just because we are afraid to question ourselves? Of course, that is only if our acceptance is related to their reasons for wanting to opt out. Maybe some of them just consider death to be a better option, and they don't want to hurt anybody or make any statements with their termination of the contract. All they want is peace. And if it means that there are less miserable or fucked up people in the world, then so be it. Let them leave us behind. For surely death is only another meaningless reward anyway, another empty kiss on the cheek, so that they can say something nice about us, and use our passing to put their own lives into perspective before they forget about us completely.

It began to make sense to me that, from an evolutionary perspective, perhaps suicide is a tool, one that has been given to us as a kind of gift, so that if we wish to end this pain and this constant pressure that seems to be coming at us from around every corner, we are able to do so. An intelligent creature should be allowed to end its own life if it chooses to because, after all, who else's life is it? Yet, for some reason, the majority feel some kind of ownership over the lives of individuals, to the extent that a man who wants to kill himself is bound to the feelings and emotions of strangers.

But why can't our lives be our own? Won't we ever truly be allowed to do what we see fit with them? Must we worry even to the grave what people may be thinking of us? Suicide doesn't have to be a 'fuck you' or an escape or anything with any negativity at all. It could be as simple an act as flicking off the light switch, or turning the TV to a better channel. But we are too bound up in the morality of a dead God to respect each other's choices. Live and let live is just one of many options. We could die and let others get on with their own lives, instead of holding them all behind with our constant bickering and our whining and our complaints and our needy quests for attention and our neuroses. We could give instead of taking.

It occurred to me, standing there behind the counter, watching the drones teem about on their quests for their food or money, that there must be hundreds if not thousands of millions of us that would wish to forget about our lives if we could. Those of us that are sick of being trampled on, those that are tired of being told what to do. And it's not just because we no longer have God in our lives, or because we live in dark days, or that the end is nigh. It's because those of us at the bottom have become tired, tired of rummaging through bins like foxes in the night, sick of being judged because of our financial status, bored of having letters from the taxman or the BBC tell us that we risk going to court because we didn't pay up on time or we don't watch Television. And they won't even let us leave it all when we want to? People shouldn't need people as much as they do. We're all leeches and we're killing each other anyway, vanquishing whatever is good in those that surround us, and not letting them escape from our egos because we are too afraid to do so ourselves.

I considered the alternatives, ways of killing yourself without anybody ever knowing. Perhaps you could die in a traffic accident, or have a misadventure and fall off a mountain. That way you'd get what you wanted and nobody would have to feel bad for it.

Things like that must happen all the time.

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