

This Party

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For Zoë

20th September 1996 – The Signal Box

Benny

I'm listening to the Pulp song *Countdown* very loudly to drown out the bickering downstairs, but at this volume there's a loss of sound quality, and I wish I owned the track on CD. CDs are too expensive, though. Where am I supposed to find sixteen quid?

I taped the track from an album Alexa lent me. While it was an undoubtedly cool recommendation, it seems inappropriate that she'd have such an extensive knowledge of Pulp's back catalogue. She's exactly the kind of girl Jarvis Cocker is always singing about. Is she teasing me with this, or is she genuinely oblivious?

There are a lot of factors at play tonight. Will Alexa turn up to the party? Will I get into the club? I don't even know what occasion merited the hiring of a club, I just latched onto a conversation regarding a party tonight at The Signal Box.

Brian gave me a weird look when I enquired about the dress code, as if suspecting me of being too uncool to pass a bouncer's age inspection, but Dave just told me not to worry about my clothes and to meet them behind L.A. Bowl.

I've got my fake birthdate ready for the bouncer. August 16th 1977. This actually makes me nineteen, which is less credible than eighteen but also less of an immediately obvious lie. I'll fill that moment of doubt with the claim that I was born on the day that Elvis died.

After a shower and an unnecessary but invigorating shave, I fling open my wardrobe like I'm entering a saloon and contemplate my outfit. I select the inevitable black jeans and blue silk shirt, with a thin cotton t-shirt underneath to protect from sweat stains. I plug the aftershave bottle with my finger, flip it upside down, and apply a minimal amount

to my neck. I sculpt my hair into a side parting like Brett Anderson from Suede and centralise my belt buckle, before stepping into my dusty blue Kickers.

Moderately satisfied with my reflection, I count the shrapnel in my coin jar and empty the seven pounds ten into my jeans. To keep a fiver free for alcohol, I'll have to pass for fifteen on the train. (Fake birthdate – 21st April 1981. The day The Cure released *Faith*). I stick a timetable in my back pocket, don my leather jacket and head downstairs.

I while away the journey fantasising about Alexa, fairly sure that at this moment, or one close to it, she'll be naked and showering. I wonder what she'll wear tonight, and if we'll get a moment alone. For all I know she has no fucking idea how I feel about her, but we live in hope.

Passing the off licence, I notice it's the old guy behind the counter, so there's no chance of me getting served. I'll have to hope Dave has his brother's Sixth Form blazer with him. As I approach the rear of L.A. Bowl, he's there waiting, blazer in hand.

"Alright, mate," says Dave, fishing a lighter from the pocket of his ever-present tattered green waistcoat. "Now you're here, I'm off on a beer run. I'll call Alexa from the offy, see if she's coming." He puts on the blazer and pats me on the back. "You wanting vodka?"

"Yeah." I hand him five pound coins. "I guess I'll wait here. Where are the others?"

Dave gestures at a small building on the wasteland behind the bowling alley, and heads off in the opposite direction.

As I approach, I can see the moonlit silhouettes of Brian and Joanna, making out in folding chairs on the roof of the stone structure. Fuck knows what this crumbling ruin once was. Probably something to do with the abandoned railway, like an old tool shed or signal box.

Fuck.

I peer into the doorway. The floor is strewn with various drunken debris, empty cans and a discarded condom or two. There's even a needle.

I trudge moodily but carefully up the stairs leading to the roof, mini avalanches of crumbling brickwork cascading in my wake. Brian and Joanna cease their snogging and turn to face me.

"So this is the new happening venue, is it?" I accuse them.

Brian gives me the same weird look as earlier, followed by one of dawning realisation.

"Yes, this is Newton Abbott's latest trendy nightclub. As you can see we have an ample dancefloor and stylish seating amenities." He gestures to a road cone in the corner of the roof. "Your waiter will be along shortly with your drinks order."

I stifle a grin and perch on the cone, not ready to forgive them yet.

"Bit lax on the security though, eh? Looks like they'll let any old riff-raff in."

Joanna flicks a ring-pull at my head and flashes a smile that melts me.

"Glad you could make it to the party, Benny."

"What party?"

"This party."

"Tell me it's not just the four of us."

"Alexa might come," says Brian. "Martin and Emma said maybe. James said he'd come if he could be arsed."

"Fantastic."

I feel overdressed for the occasion, yet lacking in insulation, my leather and silk combo doing little to protect me from the vicious breeze. Brian's happy in a baseball cap and fleece, while Joanna is charitably wearing one of her many low cut, figure hugging dresses that never fail to

arouse a reaction in me. She's been going out with Brian since forever, so has never been a sexual option, but her cleavage is for everyone to enjoy.

Soon enough, Dave stomps up the steps with his plastic bag of booze. Joanna hops into Brian's lap, allowing Dave to claim the vacant chair. Dave empties the bag onto the rubble and rifles through the assorted cans and bottles.

"Your vodka," he says, handing me my half-bottle of Smirnoff and turning to Joanna. "And a Bacardi Breezer for the lady." He opens a can of Grolsch each for him and Brian.

We drink in silence for a while, Dave eventually picking up on my psychic waves of grumpiness.

"What's up with you?" he asks, lighting a fag and passing it to me.

"Nothing," I reply, accepting the cigarette. "This just isn't exactly how I visualised tonight."

"What were you expecting?"

"Benny thought the signal box was a new nightclub," says Brian, in-between mouthfuls of Joanna's face.

"Bad luck, mate." Dave lights a fag for himself. "Still, could be worse."

"Yeah," I sigh. "I was just hoping for something a little more..." I make an expansive gesture, stuck for a word, but get distracted by the view. You can see for miles. This probably also means that we can be seen for miles, but there's a certain arrogant charm in choosing such a prominent location for our underage drinking.

Dave gives me a meaningful look.

"So what you're saying," he says. "Is that you were looking for some action, but all you found were cigarettes and alcohol?"

"No."

Brian removes his tongue from Joanna's mouth and grins at Dave.

“Did Benny just say that he was looking for some action, but all he found was cigarettes and alcohol?”

“He did.”

“No.”

But it’s too late, and I’m treated to a twenty-minute acapella medley of Noel Gallagher’s greatest lyrical atrocities. After which, they loop back to *Cigarettes and Alcohol*.

“For fuck’s sake, we’ve already had this one.”

“Any requests?”

“Only that you stop singing fucking Oasis,” I tell Dave. “Failing that, *Cast No Shadow* is their one decent song.”

Dave and Brian take their cue and launch into the opening bars of Oasis’s uncharacteristically poignant tribute to Richard Ashcroft of The Verve. Dave sings lead while Brian harmonises. Joanna gives me a sympathetic smile.

I peer into the gloom beyond the edge of the signal box to confirm that we do indeed cast no shadow.

“Alexa said that if she’s not here by nine, then she won’t be coming,” announces Dave, before consulting his watch. “So I guess she won’t be coming.”

I instinctively cast a bitter glance at Joanna, lamenting the lack of single females. I steal a last look at her breasts before she zips up Brian’s fleece and possibly gives me a sly glance back. Brian kicks stones onto the train tracks while Dave stands and pisses over the opposite edge of the signal box.

I feel a bad mood beckoning me, which I’m loathe to give in to. Tonight has not been a sexual success, and my drought looks set to continue for the time being, but I’m not so soulless as to be oblivious to the welcome presence of good friends and alcohol. I’m tipsy from the vodka by this point, having drained a third of the bottle, and my mind

veers between the love of my friends and seeking metaphors in the train tracks that don't go anywhere.

I glance back towards the bowling alley and I'm suddenly overwhelmed by colour, the red and blue of the L.A. Bowl logo mixing with the pink neon of the Rafter's sign and the diffusion of yellow streetlight into the darker blue of the sky, anchored by the green-on-white duet of Joanna's eyes and a scattering of empty Grolsch cans.

Slightly dizzy, I attempt to stabilise my seating. My buttocks are aching from only being able to rest one at a time on the end of the road cone, so I flip it over and attempt to balance my weight across the circular hollow at its base. Inevitably, I end up on my arse, to sarcastic applause from Brian and Dave.

Joanna helps me up and the touch of female skin restores me, makes me invincible. I decide to rise above the brutal classroom race to lose your virginity, or at least convincingly claim to have done so. I know how to connect with women, and soon enough I'm bound to replicate my bond with Joanna with a single girl. My horniness remains unimpressed by this revelation, however, and these dual urges merge into one, like the nearby train tracks. Continuing the metaphor, I decide that my destination is obvious. A bed somewhere, containing Alexa.

But haven't we already established that the tracks don't go anywhere?

Dave jolts me from my reverie with a well aimed beer can to the temple. I respond with a weary smile.

Hours pass in a similar manner and it becomes apparent that we're not going to be joined by any last minute guests.

"I'm cold," shivers Joanna. "You two should give me your coats as well."

Dave replies with a silent middle finger. My muscles twitch with the instinctive impulse to donate my jacket.

“Bastards. Will you take me home, Brian?”

“Sure. Get off my lap, then. Give me a chance to get the feeling back in my legs.”

Joanna removes Brian’s cap and beats him playfully about the head with it.

“Get off.”

Brian and Joanna gather their belongings. Brian salutes us and stumbles drunkenly down the steps. Joanna kisses Dave and I on the cheek, then scampers after him.

I join Dave on the chairs, grateful for the weight off my feet.

“My arse is numb,” I tell him. Dave gives me a look, like he doesn’t even need to make the joke.

I stretch out my legs, light a cigarette and take another swig of vodka. Dave mirrors my movements with beer.

“Any music?” I ask. “Not Oasis.”

Dave fishes a walkman from his rucksack and hands me one of the headphones. A home-made compilation of Bob Dylan songs clicks on. We listen, drink and smoke, *I Shall Be Released* soundtracking the moment to perfection.

Not that Dave or I can lay claim to being particularly oppressed, but age can restrict a soul more than anything.

At least I got a kiss.

We sit there, staring at the skyline, imagining a sunset.

4th October 1997 – Lucy's 17th

Lucy

"Happy birthday!"

Alexa thrusts a card and a wrapped present at me, obviously a CD.

"Thanks, honey."

We hug in the doorway, before adjourning to my bedroom.

Alexa opens her bag and empties a ton of clothes onto my bed. She opens my wardrobe and turns to face me.

"Right," she says. "Choose your weapons."

I rifle through Alexa's assorted dresses, envious that few of them will fit me.

"Try the black one," she says, holding my red satin nightie against her body. "What about this? Would it strike the right tone?"

"I think the guys will be horny enough without you strutting round in my underwear. Try a strapless dress, you have amazing shoulders. Though we might end up with the same problem."

"Flattery will get you nowhere," grins Alexa. "They'll be after you and Suzie, as usual."

"Ha. Suzie, maybe. I'm not sure what anyone would want with a fat cow like me." I puff out my cheeks and make a piggy face. "I can't fit any of these."

"The black one, I told you." She throws the dress at me. "You'll look stunning."

I strip naked and wriggle into the dress, aware of Alexa's eyes on my body.

"See," she says. "Stunning. You can keep that one. I look horrible in it."

"I find that hard to believe."

I look at myself in the mirror. I look okay.

"Very you," says Alexa. "Stick with that one. I'll see how I get on with this gold strapless number."

Alexa takes off her jeans, then peels off her top and unhooks her bra. I find myself checking out her figure, until she lets the bra fall and I notice twin rows of fresh-looking scars on the undersides of her breasts.

"Alexa, what the fuck?"

She rolls her eyes but offers no verbal response.

"Seriously, what have you been doing to yourself?"

She sighs, no doubt preparing a sarcastically literal reply.

"I'm worried about you," I continue, before she has the chance. "Whatever you're going through, which by the way I wish you'd talk to me about, doing that's not going to make it any easier."

"No offence, Lucy honey, but I'm not sure I should take lessons in self-preservation from someone who once literally cut her nose to spite her face."

She gives me this simpering smile like a petulant schoolgirl.

"That was years ago."

"It was last year."

"I'm just concerned," I say, ignoring her. "Why do you feel the need to do that?"

"It's my party and I'll pry if I want to," sings Alexa. "Pry if I want to."

"You're a bitch, you know that?"

"You love me."

We come to an unspoken agreement that the growing epidemic of teenage self-harm is an issue for another day. Tonight is for celebrating.

I put on some discreet cotton knickers under the dress, deciding to remain braless. Maybe I can compete with Suzie. Alexa eventually settles on a green strappy top, black

skirt and fishnets. She joins me in front of the mirror, and we make eye contact with each other's reflections.

"You look gorgeous," she says.

"So do you."

I open the door and my Dad appears in the hallway, outwardly jovial but still scanning the house for breakables he might have omitted to lock away.

"Well," he says. "Don't you two look pretty?"

"Thanks, Mr Carter."

"You know, you can see the sea from my bedroom window," says Dad to Alexa. "But this is the highest above sea level that I've ever lived in my life. What do you think of that?"

"That's cool," she replies.

Dad clocks my eye roll and launches into his usual routine.

"You'll have to forgive me, Alexa," says Dad. "I'm afraid my daughter finds me dreadfully embarrassing."

My Dad makes such a big deal about not wanting to embarrass me that it is, well, you get the idea.

"I'm sure that's not true, Mr Carter."

"Mr Carter. That sounds so formal. Please, call me Sir."

I usher my Dad out of the house before Alexa's polite smile is tested to breaking point.

"Have a good party, honey," he shouts through the letterbox. "Don't break anything."

Alexa retrieves a second present from her bag. This one is bottle-shaped. I grin, and head to the kitchen for a corkscrew.

We drain the last of the bottle in time for Suzie's arrival, who replaces it with a fresh one. Suzie flashes me a predatory grin.

"So, are you on the pull tonight? You certainly look dressed to kill."

"Maybe. I haven't decided."

Suzie exhales a jet of smoke which blows her fringe to one side.

"Well, I certainly am. I'll let you have first choice though, it being your birthday and all."

"You're so kind. So, do you have your eye on someone?"

"Who's coming? Is Benny still sulking?"

I instinctively turn to Alexa.

"Did Benny say if he was coming?"

"He'll be here. I said I'd kick his arse if he didn't show."

"So he's talking to me again?"

"He'll be fine. He feels stupid after last time."

"That was my fault. I hope we can make up."

"You shouldn't feel guilty. It's not your fault he's having such a hard time."

"I'm the one who dumped him right after his parents split up, then turned up at his party with Dan. I've been a complete bitch."

Suzie has been following this exchange like a cat watching tennis.

"Enough," she says. "No ex talk, please. I only wanted to know who was coming."

"Dave, Brian, James, the usual," I tell her. "They all said they were."

"James, eh?" Suzie licks her lips, which seems to arouse a flicker of jealousy in Alexa. "Should be a good night, then."

There's a hammering at the door and we're joined by Brian and Joanna who stumble in, already tipsy. Joanna kisses my cheek and hands me a card, while Brian cheers

and gives me an overenthusiastic hug which causes my feet to leave the ground.

"Happy birthday, sexy." He twirls me and dumps me on the bed.

"Thanks guys. Help yourself to wine, or my brother left some beer in the fridge."

"Beer, beer, beer." Brian heads off to get some.

"Hey Lucy." Joanna joins me on the bed. "How does it feel to be seventeen?"

"I won't know until midnight."

The sound of Dave's brother's van backfiring outside announces the arrival of more guests. We watch through the window as Dave and Benny tumble from the back of the van and dust themselves down. They bicker about something as the van pulls away, gesticulating wildly, before Benny turns and chases the van down the road, hammering on the back door. The van pauses long enough for Benny to retrieve a bottle, then departs again.

Everyone silently watches this tableau unfold, until Benny and Dave approach the house, taking an age to ring the doorbell. Eventually, they signal for me to let them in, and follow me into my room. Benny meekly waves a card and a bottle of wine at me and puts them on my bedside table. Dave places a Bacardi Breezer on top of the card and grins at me.

"So, shall we get this party started?" says Dave, fishing rizlas from his pocket.

Having been force-fed several birthday spliffs by Dave, it takes me a while to register that more people have arrived. Smurf taxes the last of Dave's joint as Martin, Emma and James pull up chairs on the patio.

"Nice dress," says James, his gaze lingering on my cleavage. Suzie watches us through the kitchen window.

"Thank you. It's Alexa's."

The constant bickering over choice of music means that no album lasts more than two tracks, and a slow motion game of musical chairs take place as each guy at some point sacrifices his seat to replace the CD.

James ends up sitting next to me. He seems to zone out staring at my legs, before making guilty eye contact with me.

"Sorry. I didn't meant to stare." He brushes his fringe back.

"It's okay. I'll take it as a compliment."

He attempts a bashful smile, but I think he's too confident to pull it off. And rightly so.

Martin and Emma seem to pick up on our chemistry and head back into the house.

James looks into my eyes. He's edged his seat closer without me noticing.

"Hello."

His head swoops down towards mine. I remain motionless.

"Sorry, did I misread the situation?" he asks, frozen in mid-swoop.

"No, it's not that. I just can't do this tonight, with Benny here."

"Benny's inside talking to Alexa."

"I know, but we've only just broken up, and I've already rubbed his face in it once. Look, I'll give you my number. You can call me in the week, if you want to."

"Sure. I will."

But he seems distracted now, maybe because I've scuppered his chances of pulling tonight. I guess I'll wait and see if he calls.

"I'm getting another drink," he says. "Want anything?"

“No, I’m good.” I give him a sincere smile and walk down into the garden.

Dave and Smurf are crashed out against the side of the house. Smurf offers me another joint, but I wave it away.

“Are you having a good night?” asks Dave.

“Yeah, it’s alright.” Though as I say this, I realise part of me is disappointed. No, not disappointed. Just impatient. I wonder if it’s too late to kiss James.

Alexa’s hands slide around my waist and she blows a raspberry on the back of my neck.

“How you doing, girlie?”

“Wonderful.”

“Yeah? How’d you manage that?”

She slumps down between Dave and Smurf and clears a space for me to sit, but I feel the need to keep moving.

I walk down to the end of the garden and stand alone, craning my neck to make sense of the constellations above me. I experience a brief moment of subjective self-awareness, imagining what I must look like if viewed from the house. A girl, or maybe a woman, dew soaking the hem of her black evening dress, watching the heavens for a sign of her future. I hope I look pretty.

I head back towards the patio, stopping halfway and breathing in deeply. I need to crash out for a bit.

I lie down in the garden of the house I’ve lived in my whole life. Brian and Joanna are slumped under a nearby tree, sharing a two-litre bottle of cider. Happy days. Dave is dancing round the kitchen with Emma, while Martin and James compete for Suzie’s attention on the patio.

Benny wanders round the garden, swigging from a vodka bottle and smoking successive cigarettes while

surveying the other guests. Finally noticing me, he staggers over.

"I feel like I'm in a fucking teen movie," he says.

"It's good to see you, Benny."

He slumps down beside me.

"We're moving to Essex," he says. "The three of us, anyway. I haven't told anyone else yet."

"What? When?"

"In a month or so. We've got extended family there."

"Shit."

"Yeah."

"I'll miss you."

He gives me a slow look.

"Yeah," he says. "You too."

I lean up on my elbows and watch Brian and Joanna making out under their tree.

"Young love," says Benny.

"Don't be bitter. In two years time their careers will send them off in different directions, and they'll be having as hard a time as we have."

"They're applying to the same universities," says Benny. "There's no reason they can't stay together."

"But what if they don't get into the same ones? It could get very awkward."

"See," says Benny. "A fucking teen movie."

"Well, enjoy it while it lasts."

"I was. Then you fucking dumped me."

"For the thousandth time, I'm sorry I hurt you. But surely you can see that relationships at our age don't last? At least this way we're still friends. God knows how we'd have ended up if we'd had to face the uni issue, let alone a long-distance relationship."

"What, no-one ever married their childhood sweetheart?" he counters. "We could have made it work if we wanted to."

I keep quiet. No point rubbing salt in the wound.

He lies on his back, deflated, mouthing along with the Mansun song *Wide Open Space*. The kitchen stereo sounds muffled from here, but he probably has the lyrics memorised.

"Look," he says, when the track finishes. "It's your birthday. You're wonderful. I want you to have a good time."

"Give me a hug then, idiot."

"Fine, devil bitch from hell."

We settle into an affectionate embrace, his head on my shoulder. I experience a flicker of horniness but resolve to stay in control. Eventually, we loosen the embrace, our faces still close. He stares into my eyes with that familiar intensity.

"Fuck," he says, turning his head away as if in pain.

"What?"

"I need to go."

"What? Come on Benny, don't be like this."

"Look," he says, forcing himself to face me. "I'm not storming off. I just can't handle this right now. You're a goddess at the fucking peak of your beauty, and you're also my first love who recently dumped me. I know for a fact that you're oblivious to how gorgeous you look tonight, and being close to you right now is just making me sad and lonely and horny."

He stands up, kissing me on the forehead in the process.

"I hope you have an absolutely wonderful birthday, a wonderful year, and a wonderful life. I'll love you forever, and will hopefully speak to you soon."

He stumbles away, leaving me speechless and confused. I rest my head on the ground, looking up at the stars, and attempt to regain some serenity.

Then I notice my friends conspiring about something. I hear the word “midnight” followed by the word “bumps”, and before I can check my watch, their hands enclose around my limbs and lift me from the ground.

“The bumps.”

“Bumps.”

“No...”

“Bumps.”

“Bumps.”

Resistance is futile. My shoes are quickly discarded. My dress bunches round my waist as they hurl me towards the sky, and I feel grateful for my modest choice of underwear.

“ONE.”

I’m weightless for a second.

“TWO.”

I surrender to my fate and watch the manic, laughing faces surrounding me. Radiohead’s *High And Dry* blasts from the kitchen at full volume, no doubt Benny’s melodramatic parting shot. Brian and Joanna make eye contact across my flailing body, grinning from ear to ear.

“THREE.”

Smurf sticks his head through the upstairs bathroom window, and smiles down at me.

“FOUR.”

I can feel someone’s hand on my inner thigh.

“FIVE.”

Alexa tickles my feet.

“SIX.”

I know that I am never going to cut myself again. That is something I did when I was sixteen.

“SEVEN.”

I must not get into a relationship until I leave for university. I couldn't bear a repeat of the Benny situation.

"EIGHT."

Actually, this is starting to make me feel a bit sick.

"Guys..."

"NINE."

"I need to..."

"TEN."

"Bastards."

"ELEVEN."

I'm suddenly paranoid that my breasts will escape the dress.

"TWELVE."

Nearly over. Breathe deeply, keep it together.

"THIRTEEN."

I can no longer keep hold of my thoughts. Everything is spinning and surging.

"FOURTEEN."

A pleasant breeze on my legs.

"FIFTEEN."

I'm invincible.

"SIXTEEN."

I'm amazing.

"SEVENTEEN."

I am now seventeen years old.

"AND ONE FOR LUCK."

The stars get closer with the extra effort of my final launch. My gravity defying ascent peaks, and I fall towards my future.

23rd August 1997 – Smurf’s House

James

Her bra coming off is a relief; an achievement. I resist the urge to stare, instead concentrating on composing an appropriate response. This involves maintaining eye contact while running my fingers around the edges of her breasts until she closes her eyes and throws back her head.

Now I can examine her more closely, and I focus my attention on the invisible twin triangles that define the regions of female upper-body flesh only ever exposed in private. Her shoulders, midriff and cleavage are all aesthetically appealing, but these have been seen before by others less intimate than I.

Most of all, I savour the sight of her nipples, always covered by even the most revealing bikini and only ever publicly visible in silhouette.

I begin to get hard, though I can’t tell whether this is down to what I see, or the fact that I can see it.

Afterwards, I want to express my appreciation, but can’t decide on an appropriate label for what has just taken place. To refer to it as making love would seem presumptuous, even sarcastic. But to use the word fuck in its verb or noun form is perversely only acceptable in long-term relationships.

“Fuck” seems a little too honest, as not a great deal took place outside the physical coalition of our genitals, bar minimal foreplay. She had an orgasm, I think, but while I successfully massaged her clitoris, I know I was really just massaging my own ego.

I’ve made women come before, I think, but Emma was particularly vocal, leaving little room for doubt. Now I can join the smirking ranks of common room Casanovas

who cheer with empathy or derision upon reading FHM's latest sex dissection; '100 Things You Should Have Done In Bed', or more commonly, '100 Sex Disasters'.

Emma cuts short her post-coital writhing when a nearby door slams shut, jolting her into action. She scrambles into her clothes while watching me zip up my jeans.

We share a giggly kiss. I give Smurf's bed a token tidying, then head back to the party.

I slump on a sofa with Emma, surveying the other couples around me. Benny and Lucy bicker playfully in an armchair, while Brian and Joanna sit smoking weed with Dave and Smurf. Even Dave has his arm around an Irish girl called Rebecca who's only in town for summer. I think she may be related to Smurf somehow. She certainly looks stoned enough for this to be conceivable.

I wonder if any of my friends are sexually bored with each other, or if they're just happy to be having sex at all?

Emma drapes a territorial arm around my shoulder while Rebecca gives me the eye. I return a sly wink, which Dave interprets as being intended for him. He gives me an exaggerated one back. Idiot.

Smurf passes me a joint and I take a mighty puff, which loosens Emma's grip on me. I have no idea how I feel about this girl, but I'm physically irritable and can do without a clinger right now.

I'm in luck, as it's reaching that stage of the party when female guests tend to be collected by anxious parents, allowing the drunken male destruction to begin. The sound of Emma's dad's car horn sends her scampering to the door.

A hasty mass goodbye later, and I can stretch out on the sofa with my spliff.

I sort of miss her now that she's gone.

"That reminds me," says Lucy, disentangling herself from Benny and rising to leave. "I'll get my arse kicked if I'm not back soon. Benny darling, would you be a gentleman and walk me home?"

"Certainly, madam." Benny doffs an imaginary cap and stands, before immediately collapsing back on the sofa.

"Head rush."

"Come on, you." Lucy leads him away, waving to us with her free hand. "Thanks for having me, Smurf."

Smurf salutes her. Benny turns in the doorway.

"Don't go anywhere yet," he says. "I'll be right back when I've walked Lucy home."

"Sure, you will," says Dave, and I also have my doubts.

Shortly after, Joanna and Rebecca share a taxi to the station, leaving the four of us alone.

I look at Dave, Brian and Smurf.

They look back at me.

"So," I say. "The girls are gone. Time to start phase two?"

My mission suggestion is the clear winner. No more beer trophies for us. Street signs and flagpoles are for amateurs.

Tonight, we kidnap Reg.

We huddle beneath the trees outside the Scoutmaster's house. The lights are off, but Reg is in our sights.

We cautiously file into position, conscious of our crunchy gravel footsteps and the possibility of security lighting.

"James," whispers Brian. "What the fuck do you know about hotwiring a car?"

"We're not going to hotwire it, idiot. Grab a corner."

"Are you serious?"

"Trust me. It's lighter than it looks."

Smurf and I grab the front bumper, while Dave and Brian busy themselves with the back.

"Lift on three, OK?"

"One, two... hnngh."

Neil's beloved Mini rises slowly but surely from the ground. It strains every muscle in my body, but this is too funny. It has to be done.

I glance across at Smurf. This reminds me of the time we made Joanna levitate using only two fingers each. Smurf seems about to either scream in agony or burst out laughing.

Mouthing a shush, I nod my head towards the driveway. We creep slowly away, the weight of the car distributed evenly between us. The turning requires a bit of manoeuvring, but eventually we reach the road, and set the car down just out of sight of the house.

"We're not going to just leave it here, are we?" Dave asks me.

"Where do you suggest we take it? Neil will look out his window and Reg won't be there. That's enough to freak him out."

"If you say so," says Dave, leaning on the car and lighting a pre-rolled joint. "It'd be funnier to roll it down the hill, though."

"I'm sure it would, but that might involve crossing a certain legal line. Not all of us have resigned ourselves to a life in prison."

"You won't be wanting any of these illegal narcotics, then?" Dave waggles his spliff.

"A spliff is hardly fucking narcotics," says Smurf, swigging from a cider bottle he'd left by the kerb. "You'd be lucky to get arrested for that."

"The best stuff is legal, anyway," says Dave. "You've just got to know where to look."

Yes Dave, we all bow to your drugs expertise.

"Why is Neil's car called Reg?" asks Brian.

"Because it has registration plates?" I reply. "I can't remember exactly. I just know it was a really shit joke I regret having asked about."

A silence descends upon us as we reflect on this, punctuated by Dave's smoky exhalations. Mission accomplished, we troop back to Smurf's house.

Our relocation of Reg is already the stuff of legend by the time I reach Smurf's sofa and the half-smoked joint I left in the ashtray. I experience the story told from multiple perspectives, until its mileage inevitably diminishes, and there are no new ways to phrase the fact that we carried a car forty feet.

Still, the conversation will turn to girls soon enough. Anything other than having to admit that we're bored.

"Alexa is fucking fit," says Dave. Here we go.

"Guys," says Smurf, struggling to stand up then abandoning the attempt. "If we're going to compare women. I'd just like to say, with no disrespect to Brian, that we all know Joanna is fucking horny, but we shouldn't talk like that about mates' girlfriends."

Brian grins proudly.

"What about Lucy?" asks Dave.

"Benny's not here," replies Smurf sincerely. "Lucy's tits are amazing."

"What about Emma?" I ask.

"I'd shag her," says Dave, though this is more of a neutral statement than an endorsement.

"Emma's fit as well," says Brian, warming to the subject. "You did well tonight. She's a bit messed up, though."

"What do you mean?"

"Just that she's had a hard time."

"How?"

"Nothing," says Brian, seeming to regret bringing it up. "She's just had some bad experiences, that's all."

"What bad experiences?" I persist, not willing to let it go. "What happened to her?"

"Look, I don't know. It was just something Joanna said. She had a bad experience with a guy. She's over it now, though."

"You mean a bad break-up?" asks Smurf, sleepily

"No."

We fall silent. We all know what the missing word in the conversation is now, but no-one wants to make it a reality by saying it.

My head floods with thoughts and feelings relating to Emma. Sympathy versus apathy. Regret versus lust. Guilt versus fear.

I sink further into the sofa while thinking about the girl I had sex with tonight. She deserves better than me, that much I know. But what do I even want? I didn't know how I felt about her ten minutes ago, let alone now all these pathetic protective urges have kicked in.

I decide that what I want more than anything is sleep. It's been a long night and a lame party. I'm drunk, stoned and tired. Tomorrow, I'll call Emma. I'll probably play it cool, but hopefully at least she won't feel used.

I close my eyes and attempt to blot out reality, as I can already hear the clinking of fresh bottles and Smurf's Kula Shaker tape. I don't want to get sucked into another night of relentless drunken vandalism.

When I open my eyes in the morning, Smurf's living room is full of flagpoles and street signs.

27th September 1997 – Ness Beach

Alexa

I wish Dave would take those ridiculous fucking sunglasses off. It's already getting dark, and he's clearly only using them to steal surreptitious glances at my tits.

I guess I asked for it with the Wonderbra. I could do an ad for these things.

Wonderbras. Ensure your breasts receive constant attention from horny teenage boys, while covering even the most unsightly self-inflicted scars.

I shiver and fold my arms across my chest. Fuck these Autumn beach parties. Summer's over, the tourists have fled, and no amount of denial will make it any warmer.

James emerges from Smuggler's Tunnel with a bag of booze slung over his shoulder and I experience every emotion at once, lust and self-loathing the most prominent. He mumbles a vague greeting and sits on a rock next to Dave. I uncross my arms and thrust my chest forward but James doesn't so much as glance at me.

Defeated, I slink away, leaving them to their allocation of alcohol.

Martin stands ankle-deep in the sea with his trouser legs rolled up, wearing a handkerchief with tied corners on his head and a grumpy old man expression. This raises a smile, but I can already feel waves of depression lapping at my feet.

I must put a stop to these tidal metaphors if I ever want to make it as a lyricist.

Smoky shapes reveal themselves as Smurf, Brian and Joanna. Approaching them, I glance back towards the

rocks and see James open a bottle with his teeth and hand it to Emma. Sly bitch.

“Yo,” says Smurf. “No Benny tonight?”

“No,” I say. “He’s still avoiding Lucy.”

“Where is Lucy?” Brian squints towards the rocks. “I didn’t think she was here.”

“She isn’t. She’s avoiding Benny. And so the merry dance continues.”

“How are you, Alexa?” asks Joanna, with an undertone of patronising concern. “Everything OK?”

Joanna always seems to assume I’m depressed any time I wear a black item of clothing or complain when she sings along with Celine Dion songs. I may be depressed, but her assumptions still annoy me. We can’t all be gorgeous princesses, giggling our way through life.

“I’m wonderful, thanks for asking.”

Joanna giggles and sinks further into Brian’s arms. Brian looks pretty pleased with himself, as ever. Physically speaking, Joanna’s out of his league, but they’ve been dating since they were too young for that to be much of an issue.

Good luck to them, I guess.

Smurf offers me a joint, and again I have to remind him that I’ve given up. I’m quite paranoid enough without chemical assistance.

“More for me,” he says, then falls silent as we follow the progress of echoing female voices through the tunnel. Twin silhouettes appear on the beach, soon identifying themselves as Suzie and Amanda. They chat briefly with the guys on the rocks before heading down to join us.

“Emma seems to be getting on with James very well,” announces Suzie. I’m not sure if she’s trying to make me jealous, or if she fancies him too and is as resentful as I am.

“Lucky fucker,” says Smurf. “He can pull any girl he wants.” This hurts more. My breasts tingle and I find myself looking forward to the comfort of my razorblade.

God, I’m such a goth.

“Are you sure you’re OK?” asks Joanna, and this time her concern seems genuine.

“Yes!” I snap.

There’s an awkward pause, which Brian cuts short with a sarcastic “Ooooooooooh.”

“Quiet, you.”

“Alexa loves James,” he sings.

“Right!”

I pounce on Brian, knocking Joanna aside. I kneel on his chest and reach behind him, tickling his ribs.

“Fuck off!”

Amanda, ever the tomboy, joins the bundle, landing on top of me and crushing my body against Brian’s, Joanna’s right arm trapped between us.

“Help!” screams Brian. “I’m being raped by three women!”

“You wish,” giggles Joanna, joining in with the tickling.

Suzie sits down beside Smurf, who passes her the joint. They watch our writhing bodies in silence. Smurf slyly adjusts his crotch.

“Do you give up?” says Amanda, taking Brian’s hand and slapping him in the face with it.

“Yes!”

Brian wriggles free while the rest of us attempt to regain some composure. I stand and brush the sand from my clothes. Brian grins at me.

“Was that as good for you as it was for me?” he says.

“What’s that? You want to go for a swim?”

I chase Brian in circles for a while, losing motivation as I catch sight of Joanna watching us, giggling as always. It annoys me that she's so relaxed about me being physical with her boyfriend. How does she know I'm not a threat?

I sit down next to Suzie, breathless. My mood has completely crashed, just like that. I want to cry. I also want James to stride over and fuck me in front of everyone.

"Pass me that spliff," I tell Suzie.

The next guests to emerge from Smuggler's Tunnel are the drunken trio of Alex, Mark and Jamie. This fucks the male-female ratio and you can tell Dave's not happy about this. I continue ogling James. He's still said nothing to me other than to ask to borrow a lighter, which I carry with me for that very purpose.

I know I should be happy for Emma, especially after what happened to her. At least she has an excuse for being fucked up. She's not even officially going out with James, but I'm not going to delude myself into thinking this equates to any kind of hope.

Where is Emma? Surely she hasn't left already.

Curious, I approach James.

"Emma not staying?" I ask him, maintaining eye contact for as long as possible.

"No," he says, a hint of bitterness creeping into his tone. "She fucked off early."

There's now eight guys and three single women. My chances are improving.

"Is she OK?"

"Yeah. She's just got issues."

It irks me when guys are so dismissive, and I know I should stick up for my friend. My angel and demon begin their war dance on each shoulder.

"Yeah, some girls are weird like that."

Sorry, Emma. You'd do the same.

"I don't get her," says James, suddenly opening up to me for the first time ever.

Whatever you do, Alexa, don't fuck this up.

We sit facing each other on the sand.

"One minute we're getting on fine," he continues. "Then she starts getting all frigid on me."

"Well, I guess we all develop at different rates. Not all girls are ready for sex at this age."

I am such a bitch.

"But we already slept together."

This new development hits me like a kick in the head. All I can do is stare dumbly at James.

Dave appears, a cloud of weed smoke now separating James and I. Seconds ago, I would have killed Dave for this intrusion, but now I can only slump gratefully back against a rock as he passes his joint to James.

"Have you seen this?" Dave nods towards the shore.

Jamie is down to his boxer shorts, stumbling into the sea.

"COME ON!" he shouts. "Skinny dipping, let's go!"

"Get your kit off," calls Amanda. "We'll join you in a minute."

"Come on, you fuckers." Jamie waggles his bottle at us.

You can tell some of the guys are excited by the prospect of communal nudity, and I'd love to watch James strutting nude across the sand, but let's be honest. This is England, not an American college movie. No-one's getting naked tonight.

"Come on," Jamie gives a final, feeble rallying cry before falling over and sitting semi-submerged in the surf. He takes a swig from his bottle, then spits out salt water.

This brief distraction over, my brain refocuses on James's revelation and my mood plummets once more. I've

got to stop getting my hopes up about this guy, or I won't live to see seventeen.

"I'm all wet," says Jamie.

"That's the sea for you," says Dave, reclaiming his spliff from James and wandering over to chat to Amanda. An awkward silence ensues.

"Where are the other guys?" I finally ask James. "Martin and Smurf and that."

"Smurf's passed out behind that rock." I glance behind me to see smoke signals rise from beyond the boulder. "I think Martin and Alex have gone to get the stereo. Mark seems to be trying to pull Suzie."

We both turn to see Mark fiddling with Suzie's fringe. It's not apparent how successful this attempt at seduction is, but I'm glad another single girl is being occupied. I know I'm better looking than Amanda, and Joanna's off shagging Brian somewhere, so this could yet work out.

"So," I say, attempting an aura of mature seductiveness. "You and Emma?"

James looks at me strangely for a second, but I think Jamie's little chaotic interlude distracted him from my first reaction.

"Yeah, well, it was just the once. At Smurf's party."

I *knew* I should have gone to that party. Benny practically begged me to, but he always does that then spends the whole night wrapped up in Lucy. Well, he used to.

"Any good?"

"What?"

"Was she a good shag?" I ask, feigning jokiness but very serious about knowing the answer.

"Er, I guess," he says. He seems suspicious of a women talking to him in this way. "She seemed kind of inexperienced, but eager to please I guess."

Have I overplayed my hand? Would he talk this explicitly with someone he considered a future sexual prospect?

"Experience is important, I think," I say, again attempting maturity. Probably sounding more like a slut.

"Yeah," he says. "Well, all sex is good sex."

I lock eyes with him and attempt to create a moment. This lasts for less than a fraction of a second, as he's already distracted, looking over his shoulder in the direction of sounds emanating from the tunnel. An echoing cacophony of twangy acoustics creeps closer.

Martin appears first, a tinny rendition of the Space track *Female Of The Species* issuing from a boombox held atop his head. Alex brings up the rear, providing dissonant accompaniment on a battered guitar. The arrival of music triggers a cheer further down the beach.

James begins to follow them across the sand, our intimacy slipping away by the second.

"You should stay," I call. "We can dance." I offer up some groovy gyrations, but James just flashes me a weird look and heads towards the main group. The music fades with his departure, leaving me to my lonely gothic shuffle.

I hate myself so much.

Sinking ever lower, I troop after him.

Dave's got a campfire going, which he seems to think will impress me, and it is pretty cool I suppose. The warmth is certainly appreciated. Brian and Joanna snuggle together in post-coital bliss. Suzie and Mark fiddle with each other's hands. Amanda grins at the flames like a happy child while Jamie attempts to dry his socks.

Martin fiddles with the stereo, eventually stopping the tape at the Longpigs song *She Said*. It is a pretty good night, as September beach parties go. So why do I feel so shit?

"James," says Dave. "Tell Alexa about Smurf getting kicked out of Scouts."

I look at James, grateful for this freebie.

James looks a little weary of me, but an indulgent smile appears as he prepares to tell the story.

"Ok," he says. "At, er, Smurf's party. We were pissed as fuck, out on a mission. Basically we stole Neil's car."

"Neil's the Scoutmaster," interjects Brian.

"Yeah. We stole the Scoutmaster's car and hid it down the road. So obviously he'd find it soon enough. Anyway, the next week at Scouts, we're lined up, doing the usual assembly bollocks. And Neil looks at us one by one, then yells at the top of his voice 'WHO'S BEEN FUCKING WITH REG?'"

Brian and Dave laugh at the memory, and there's even some Smurfish giggling from behind a rock.

"So we're all trying to keep a straight face, and Smurf collapses in hysterics. Literally, he can't stop laughing for about twenty minutes. Neil's screaming at him at the top of his voice, and Smurf's just on the floor laughing his head off, gasping for breath. We thought he was going to die. It was hilarious."

Smurf's nearby giggling gets louder, triggering more laughter from the various faces around the fire. He leans up on the rock, and is clearly trying to repeat the phrase 'Who's been fucking with Reg?', but cannot get the words out for further hysterics. He gives up and disappears out of sight again.

It is very funny.

So why the fuck can't you crack a smile, Alexa, you miserable fucking bitch?

Jesus. What the fuck is going on with my mood? I need a walk.

I excuse myself and wander down the beach, calming myself with the sight of the Teignmouth skyline and the stars reflecting in the sea. There are many, many worse places to be in the world.

But something is wrong. I know I invest too much hope in stupid guys who don't give a shit about me, but my emotional reactions are still disproportionately extreme. Maybe I need help.

It's supposed to hurt, but not this much. The idea of suicide has been bubbling around my subconscious with uncomfortable frequency. It's such a horrible feeling, being surrounded by friends, wishing you were dead.

Think positively, Alexa. Think of something nice.

It's Lucy's seventeenth next week. It's an excuse to get her that Mazzy Star CD. I've been meaning to convert her.

Another fucking party. More mood swings to manage.

I look back at the campfire. Dave's telling a story now. I realise, with a warm mix of relief and intrigue, that my top priority is currently to get back to my friends before I miss the punchline.

The boat is quite a discovery. Years have clearly passed since it was last seaworthy, but its tarpaulin-covered deck makes a relatively luxurious bed for the night. I clamber aboard, and upon lying down immediately sink into the middle of the tarpaulin. It feels like sleeping on a trampoline.

Imagine my delight when James joins me. Too drunkenly to be of any romantic use, but I won't turn down a night pressed up against that body.

Imagine my subsequent annoyance when Dave joins us too. I'm now sandwiched between the two of them, unable to move my limbs.

“For fuck’s sake, guys.”

“Sorry, Alexa.” James leans over the edge of the boat, kicking me in the head in the process. “Yo, Alex, Martin. Get your arses up here. We need some people to balance out the sheet.”

I close my eyes and grit my teeth while Alex and Martin climb onto the boat, just about succeeding in stretching the tarpaulin level. I resolve just to sleep, and kick their arses in the morning.

A few minutes of silence pass, before Amanda comes staggering up to the boat.

“I’m going to be sick,” she says. “Jamie put a tyre on the fire.”

She crawls across each of us before establishing that there’s no more sleeping room, and hops down from the other side of the boat.

Then Smurf does the same thing. Except, rather than disembark, he elects to sleep across the feet of the five people already crammed onto the boat.

Instead of screaming, I channel a smile. My head, heart and body hurt. I’m dehydrated and lovesick, and I’ve got a horrible feeling that sun’s going to rise any minute and give our hangovers an early kick start.

But somehow, amidst all this, I’m happy to be alive.

9th April 2025 - Alexa's Funeral

Dave

I can't believe I'm late. Alexa would forgive me, no doubt even find it amusingly typical, but her friends might not be so understanding. I forget how this cactus juice slows everything down.

At least I don't have to deal with her family, who earlier today laid Alexa to rest at a private burial. I slightly resent this exclusion, but her father clearly spared no expense in hiring this place for Alexa's friends to pay their respects and "celebrate her life", as it said on the invitation. Alexa and her dad may not have agreed on much, but there was no way the old guy would see her will executed anything less than to the letter. Lawyers never retire.

So here we are. The Jamaican Room. An appropriately classy venue for Alexa's final farewell. Time to have it large. It's what she would have wanted.

I slide through the metal detector and swipe my I.D. card, a compliant smile masking my contempt for the process. I don't want to risk a search from the bouncer. The drugs I'm carrying may be legal, but try telling that to this fascist.

"Cheers, mate."

A gruff grunt invites me to progress to reception.

The Bee Gees song *Stayin' Alive* is playing on a radio behind the desk, which is ironic on about a million levels. I sign my name and head into the lobby, glancing down the length of the venue. There must be a couple of dozen people already here, but the space is so vast as to make it seem underpopulated.

Like any number of people could do this occasion justice.

A grand piano obscures my view of the dancefloor, on top of which floral tributes are propped against a black and white photographic portrait of Alexa. She smiles seductively at me.

ALEXA DIANA RAY

25TH December 1980 – 2ND April 2025

Various framed clippings adorn the walls. No obituaries, but plenty of old record reviews. A familiar one catches my eye.

N.M.E. - June 20th 2015

Download of the Week: Alexa Ray - Feline Dream
(Scar Records)

Just when you thought the folktronica revival was dead and buried, along comes this sultry, strutting slice of primal sexuality. One barely dares to imagine the obscene acts Alexa inflicted upon her guitar to produce these kind of sounds, but let's hope she's got a good lawyer - this track is almost illegally good, fusing gyrating stop-start rhythms with the rawest of animal melodies and, of course, that voice. Alexa certainly knows how to tease us, too. This song contains not one, not two, but three whole seconds of silence slap-bang in the middle of the song, before the chorus kicks back in and whips us all into another ecstatic frenzy. Single of the summer, maybe of all summers.

The article triggers an unwelcome realisation. Apart from the muffled disco beats audible from reception, there's no music to be heard.

Before I can question this travesty, Lucy, Vanessa and Lily stride towards me, momentarily distracting me from all else. Fucking hell, they look good. They must be in their mid-forties by now, but each of them appears a decade younger, maybe less. I glance at Alexa's portrait. Nothing keeps you looking youthful like death and cosmetics.

"Hi, Dave."

The three of them take turns to greet me in the European style. Six kisses later, I'm ready to submit to their every requirement.

"Listen," says Lucy. "We need your assistance with something."

"It's Benny," continues Vanessa, her concern for her husband now apparent in her eyes. "He's in some kind of trance. I've never seen him like this."

"He's over there in the corner booth," says Lily. "He hasn't moved or spoken in hours. He's hardly even blinked. He was like it when we got here. Can you talk to him?"

"He's supposed to be sorting the music," adds Lucy. "I tried to load some, but apparently the voicebox will only respond to Benny." She rolls her eyes. "Another of Alexa's requests."

I gaze at this doleful trio of age-defying vixens, doe-eyed and dressed to kill, and attempt to push thoughts of improbable group sex out of my juiced-up brain. I realise it's down to me to save the day.

"Alright, ladies," I say, immediately regretting sounding like a spiv. "Give me a while alone with him."

"Please," says Vanessa. "Just snap him out of it somehow. He'll hate himself forever if he spends the whole funeral in this state."

"I'll deal with it. You go get a drink, try to relax. I'll talk him round."

I'm rewarded with grateful smiles in triplicate. I head over to the corner booth and sit down opposite Benny.

Jesus fuck, he looks rough. They weren't lying about that. I almost feel guilty that my grief must seem so feeble by comparison.

Then again, I've got the remnants of a San Pedro cactus sloshing about in my system, postponing the emotional impact of Alexa's departure. Benny, on the other hand, looks like he's about to join her underground.

I wave my fingers in front of his face. Nothing.

I flick my lighter on and hold it under his chin, singeing his stubble.

"JESUS FUCKING CHRIST."

"Alright, mate?"

Dazed and confused, that's our Benny. He doesn't seem sure what to do, now he's broken his vow of silence.

"Come on, dude." I pat him on the shoulder. "Knock it off with the trance bullshit. We're here to celebrate."

He gives me the sulkiest look I've ever seen. Benny, the eternal teenager.

"I'm in shock," he says.

"We're all in shock, mate."

"You don't seem very fucking shocked."

"Trust me, I'm in as much denial as you are."

"Really? You mean you're not just doing your usual 'It's all good' shrugging-off-life's-problems bollocks?"

I look him in the eye.

"Mate," I say. "Look at where we are. It most definitely is not all good."

He seems to accept this.

"Of course I'm in shock," I tell him. "Only I ate a whole cactus for my tea, and my emotions aren't scheduled

to make contact with reality for another day or two. But I'll be feeling bad then, you can be sure of that."

"You mean you're fucked right now?"

"If there's one day in my life I'm getting fucked up, it's today."

"It's been more than one day though, eh? I'm surprised your body can still handle it."

"Mate, you're only as old as the women you feel," I tell him, as Lucy and Lily peer across from another booth. I reassure them with a subtle nod.

"Is Vanessa OK?" asks Benny.

"Yeah. Just worried about you, mate. The others are getting edgy for some music, though. I hear you're in charge of that."

"I can't handle that."

"Come on, dude. You've just got to sit in the DJ booth and say the name of the song you want."

"No, I mean if I hear any music my brain might explode."

"I'd steer clear of reception, then. You know what they were playing earlier?"

Benny sighs.

"What?"

I sing the familiar bassline to *Stayin' Alive*.

"Jesus fuck. What is that song, fifty years old?"

"Something like that. It still gets stuck in my head, though."

I drum the rhythm on the table.

"Fuck this shit," says Benny.

"Come on. Play some music. Do it for Alexa."

Benny shivers at the mention of her name, and momentarily threatens to slip into his trance again.

"I can't process it," he says.

"Me neither. Which is why," I say, at the point at which I'd dramatically light a cigarette if that were still a public option, "we need to let the musicians take care of it."

I permit Benny a lengthy silence.

"Fine," he eventually says. "Get me a drink first, though. And make it *fucking* strong."

I flick a peace sign at Lily and make a drinking motion. She seems to understand and hurries to the bar.

"Do you want one of these?" I ask Benny, retrieving a baggie of home-made capsules from my sock and emptying a couple onto the table.

"What are they?"

"Ground Hawaiian Baby Woodrose seeds mixed with ephedrine. You should try dancing on these fuckers."

"Growing old gracefully, eh?"

"It's called stamina, mate."

Lily delivers two treble-vodkas to the table and we exchange a wink.

I lock eyes with Benny and raise my glass.

"To Alexa," I say.

We down our drinks, mine washing down two of the pills.

"Now put some fucking music on."

Benny's first choice is *Sinnerman* by Nina Simone. This confuses a few guests, but I know the selection was based on the song's length. It gives Benny nine minutes to consider what track to play next. There's no record collection for him to rifle through, but he seems safe enough in the DJ booth, in a different kind of trance now. His brow furrows as he mentally assembles every possible configuration of this evening's playlist.

I wander onto the dancefloor. Vanessa appears and hugs me.

"Thanks, Dave," she says, nuzzling my shoulder. "I was getting really worried about him."

"No worries. You know how he is. Wasn't he like this when Dylan died? And Bowie?"

"It's hardly the same. You know how close him and Alexa were."

"Yeah, we all were," I tell her, hoping I haven't sounded too flippant. Behave yourself, Dave. Not everyone knows what drugs you're on.

"It's funny," says Vanessa, sipping a cocktail. "I only really thought of Alexa as someone I knew through Benny, a kind of a friend by proxy. But it's really affected me too."

"She was something else, all right."

"Hard to believe there won't be any more albums, either."

"Yeah, well you can guarantee sales of her back catalogue will soar. Tony'll be happy."

"Oh, don't. Have you seen him? He looked devastated."

Lily joins us.

"Hey Dave, sorry I didn't greet you properly earlier. I thought we'd better sort Mr DJ out before anything else."

"No worries, Lily. It's good to see you. You're looking stunning as ever."

Lily giggles and gives an impromptu twirl, then immediately seems embarrassed for having done so. Like most of the women here, she's opted for a black dress, but that's as sombre as it gets. I have to fight to maintain eye contact.

"Thanks," she says.

"So, are you and Benny working on another record?"

We glance towards the DJ booth. Benny mouths silent song titles, his expression blank.

"We're supposed to be," says Lily. "I think he might need a break from music for a while, though. Oh well, I've got some solo stuff that needs finishing."

"The demos Benny played me were sounding really good," says Vanessa. "I'm looking forward to hearing it when you've finished."

"Thanks," says Lily. "I'm no Alexa, though."

The three of us turn to contemplate Alexa's portrait.

"You can't compare yourselves," I tell Lily, not looking away from the photo. "You have completely different voices..."

But I'm miles away now. Lily and Vanessa seem to sense this and drift away.

Sinnerman fades, replaced by Bob Dylan's *Highlands*. Stop cheating with these long fucking songs, Benny.

I make eye contact with Alexa, her smile as mysterious as a million Mona Lisas.

I think about all the time I spent with this woman, and how she made you feel your friendship was like a legendary love affair. I think about all the parties we attended together, and how many times I made her laugh. I think about all the times we helped each other out, and what the fuck I'm supposed to do when those situations arise again.

I think about the time we fucked on the beach as teenagers, drifting off into a fusion of memory and fantasy. I don't know how long for, but *Highlands* is still playing by the time I snap out of it, so it can't be any longer than sixteen minutes.

The seeds are kicking in now, and there's a lightness to my gait. The guitar riff leads me round the dancefloor, which is filling with people, grooving if not yet dancing. *Highlands* segues into that intense Arabic hip-hop track that everyone was playing last year, the jagged rhythms carrying

me to a corner table where Lucy sips lethal-looking cocktails with Suzie and Carla. Assorted husbands down shots in a nearby booth.

"Well, well, the wanderer returns," says Suzie. We hug.

"Hey, sexy. Long time no see."

"Some funeral, eh? I literally don't know whether to laugh or cry."

I nod, confirming this sentiment.

"Hey Carla."

"Hey Dave. How's tricks?"

"They've been better. Sorry we had to meet again like this. You knew Alexa from uni, right?"

"Yeah, that's where I met all these guys. They've managed to hang onto their looks, though."

"Don't sell yourself short," I tell her, but it's true that Carla presents a slightly more realistic vision of how women in their mid-forties are supposed to look. She's still pretty, though. I'd shag her.

"I still can't believe it," she says. "A fucking asthma attack. I thought her dad sorted her a medibracelet?"

"He did," says Suzie. "That's no guarantee, though. Apparently the paramedics traced her minutes after her pulse stopped, but there was nothing they could do. You can't insure against death."

"We can't," spits Lucy. "Some can. Rich fuckers like Bill Gates and Richard Branson get to be cryonically frozen and revived by robots in some future paradise, while the rest of us have to choose between being buried or burnt."

"I'll take my chances with the afterlife," I tell her.

"This is a very pointless discussion," says Carla. "Alexa's gone."

"I'm sorry," says Lucy. "I didn't mean to be pointless."

“And I didn’t mean to be bitchy. We’re all drunk and grieving. Hardly the best combination.”

“Who are all these people, anyway?” asks Suzie. “Am I supposed to have heard of them?”

“Various hipster musician types,” says Lucy. “Alexa’s friends.”

“What does that make us, then?” asks Carla.

“Hey, I’m a chef,” I say. “A connoisseur of the true creative arts.”

Suzie rolls her eyes and sips from her straw.

“I saw that.”

Suzie sucks on her cocktail with a simpering smile straight out of a schoolgirl fantasy. The ephedrine’s making me horny and giggly. I feel like this party could be taking place at any point in the past three decades, excepting Alexa’s absence. Maybe this was what she had in mind.

We may now have kids who at this moment are probably getting drunk behind bowling alleys like we used to, but we still know how to have a good time.

Alexa. The girl who put the fun in funeral.

Benny’s gone into britpop mode, cranking the nostalgia factor up to maximum. I dance with Vanessa to a couple of Pulp and Suede songs before catching sight of Tony at the bar, and wander over to have a word.

“Good evening, David.”

Tony must be the only person in the world who calls me David.

“Good to see you, Tony. How are you holding up?”

Tony takes a deep breath and motions to the barman for another drink, and one for me.

“Vodka. Thanks.”

“I don’t know that I am holding up, to be honest, David mate,” says Tony. “I lost more than a client last week. Alexa was a true friend. A fucking diamond.”

He slams his glass down, spilling his shot. The barman replaces it with a fresh one.

"It should have been me," he says. "I'm an old fucker. I've had my fun."

"You've got a couple of good decades in you yet. Life expectancy's up to what, ninety?"

"Well, I don't know about good decades, but aye, ninety they reckon. Poor Alexa. She wasn't even halfway."

"It ain't what you do but the way that you do it, or some such bollocks, eh?"

Tony clinks his drink violently with mine, spilling it again, but the barman's efficiency is impeccable.

"Cheers, dude. Rock on."

"To the very end."

Benny plays *Time Travelling Man* by Den Pegg. The song's less than a decade old, but as eternal as Alexa's presence.

It's around three. I'm talking with Vanessa and Lily, trying not to stare at Lily's cleavage or Vanessa's shoulders in the green strapless dress she's wearing. I'm aware that my horniness is inappropriate, but know Alexa would again be both amused and understanding. I can feel a fizzy cocktail of alcohol, ephedrine, cactus juice and seed dust slide through my veins like the bubble in a spirit level each time I move a limb.

Their hair shines under intermittent spotlights. Glittery colours sparkle across Vanessa's stylish blonde crop and Lily's raven locks, rainbows of disco hues sliding across their skin, each rotation of light coinciding with a bass drum or synth riff.

Pure synaesthesia. Benny reckons he gets that without drugs.

Benny staggers down from the booth and rests his hand on Lily's shoulder, probably more for the purpose of balance than affection.

"Listen," he says. "There's an hour left. And I want to be playing to a full dancefloor, OK?"

"Fine. Come on guys and gals. Time to get busy."

Benny grabs Vanessa by the waist and they kiss passionately like drunken teenagers, before Benny has to scurry back to the DJ booth in time to request the next track.

Benny's clearly been saving the best tunes until last, and we're treated to an eclectic medley of modern-day obscurities and turn of the century classics.

They're all there. *Born Slippy. Do You Realise? Fuck U Forever. Subterranean Homesick Blues. Bastardised. No Country. Down In The Valley. Wicked And Weird.* Even *Epilogue*, one of Benny and Lily's tunes. You can tell Lily's initially self-conscious to be dancing along with her own vocals, but she soon closes her eyes and mouths the words to the euphoric chorus, a grin spreading across her face as the track peaks. Alexa would be proud.

Genres and decades collide as we dance like there's no tomorrow. My feet are on fire.

3:56. Time for one more tune before this place closes. No-one needs to wonder what Benny's final choice will be. I rotate on my heels, locking eyes with Lucy, Vanessa, Tony, Lily, Carla and finally Benny, looking misty-eyed and murderous in the DJ booth. We all know what that teasing squall of feedback leads to and our toes leave the ground as the first chord of *Feline Dream* stutters from the speakers.

Lily's a great dancer. This isn't surprising, as she's had plenty of practice adapting to strange rhythms from wrapping her voice around Benny's beats. Lucy still knows how to move too, those hips bringing back memories of

sexually charged grooving at teenage beach parties. Even Tony cuts a pretty sharp move for an old guy.

Fuck it, everyone's a great dancer when this song is playing. I haven't given a single thought to my own movements, but my feet know what to do. Vanessa glides by and we lock fingers and twirl. Suzie's laughing face spins into view. Everyone's ecstatic, united by Alexa's voice, as alive and powerful as ever.

The first batch of verses end and there's that teasing silence. We all freeze like jungle beasts ready to pounce, waiting for Alexa to give us permission to leap back into action.

One.

Two.

Three.

"...LIKE A FELINE DREAM, OH, LIKE FLICKERING ELECTRICS..."

The dancefloor explodes. Age and self-consciousness melt away as hips swivel in every direction. The bass and the beats and the lyrics and the chemicals in my body and the love of my friends combine to form a timeless testament to the beauty of one woman who I knew for thirty years and will love for many more.

Strobe-lit silhouettes shudder and strut like disco-loving panthers before we're returned to the relative restraint of the verse.

Blue bubbles of light bounce between us. Everyone's feet and lips are perfectly synchronised.

Alexa is everywhere.

We reach the silence at the end of the final verse and ready ourselves for the song's climax. Everyone on the dancefloor stands frozen and flickering, counting the seconds, waiting for the chorus to kick back in.

But it never does.

27th May 1998 - Caravan

Benny

"It's falling apart already," says Alexa.

"What is?" I ask.

"Our little world."

"We're still together, aren't we?"

"Yeah," she says. "Until the end of the week. Then we'll go back to Devon, and you'll stay here in Essex and forget all about us."

Nigel and Adam are pogoing cartoonishly to crap metal at the other end of the caravan, undermining the melodrama of our conversation.

I roll my eyes.

"I'm not gonna forget you," I tell Alexa.

"Yeah, right."

"Of course I'm not. What's got into you?"

"Nothing," she says. "I just miss you."

"I miss you too," I tell her.

"I miss you too," says Dave, in a sarcastic girly voice.

The track finishes and the pogoing ceases. I take the opportunity to change the music.

My Devon friends are slumped on mattresses by the door of the caravan, while their Essex counterparts congregate at the other end, near the bedroom.

"Someone's shagging in there," says Nigel, pressing his ear to the wall.

A few minutes later Brian and Joanna emerge, grinning guiltily.

Adam claps and cheers.

Brian takes a bow when he thinks Joanna isn't looking.

Seven people. The party is warming up.

Ed piles into the caravan with a crate of beer, tripping over his bass guitar strap in the process.

"Thanks for bringing that," I tell him. "But I don't think we're gonna get any recording done tonight."

"No worries," he says. "I was planning on getting pissed, anyway. Eric and Wes should be along later."

The door opens. To my delight, it's Melissa and Yvonne.

Melissa is technically a goth but she's got long blonde hair and a divine body so she remains desirable. Plus she always wears these plunging strappy tops that keep me fixated on her arms, shoulders and cleavage. Her face is beautiful too, if a little vandalised by crap piercings.

"Yo, bitches," she says, catching a can of beer thrown by Nigel and cracking it open. "What's happening?"

Alexa very pointedly raises an eyebrow.

I pour some strong vodka and oranges while Dave waxes lyrical about this new drug he's discovered on the internet.

"*Salvia divinorum*," he says, brandishing a bag of leaves and a small, sinister-looking cannister of grey crystals. "Trust me. This is the stuff."

"That's not that herbal high, hippy bullshit, is it?" asks Nigel.

"It's legal," says Dave, "but that's only because no fucker's heard of it. It's like taking acid, except without the eight-hour comedown."

"Bollocks."

Dave shrugs and loads his bong with leaves.

"Just a mild one for now," he says. "I'll save the extract for later."

After a mighty inhalation, Dave zones out, giggling to himself. I return my attention to Alexa.

"I see some things never change."

Alexa gives me a wry smile and links her arms with mine.

"Speaking of which, still no flexibility on the sleeping together?"

"Benny, dear. You don't want to shag me, you're just desperate to lose your virginity."

"Hey, I'm not a virgin any more, thank you very much."

"Oh! This is news. So which slutty Essex girl popped your cherry?"

"Who says it was an Essex girl?"

"Ooh, she's here tonight, isn't she?" Alexa whispers.

"No comment."

"Just say if it was someone who's in this caravan now."

"Fine. It was."

Alexa's eyes flit between Melissa and Yvonne, trying to decide on the most likely candidate.

Meanwhile, Nigel removes my Ben Folds Five CD from the stereo and frisbees it away. Luckily for him, Brian catches it unscratched.

"Jangly wank," sings Nigel, to the tune of the *Blankety Blank* theme song. "Jangly wank, jangly wank, jangly wank."

"What the fuck are you talking about, jangly?" I protest. "They don't even use guitars."

"Jangly wank," he says, putting on his Metallica CD. Adam accompanies the intro riff on air guitar, waving his curly mop of hair around. Melissa sways drunkenly.

"Do you honestly not realise how much this music sucks?" I ask them. "Just because it's loud, doesn't make it

good. You can play the Spice Girls at full volume if you like. The songs will still suck."

But they're lost to the world now, bobbing their heads and making that dumb fucking metal hand sign like caricatures of teenage delinquents.

"How's your band?" Alexa asks me.

"Pretty good. Our first EP will be out soon. We're gonna record three EPs, then put them together to make an album."

"Dude," says Nigel. "You can't call yourself a band if you don't have a drummer."

"Fuck drummers," I tell him. "Beats are the way forward."

"Beats are what we give to jangly indie-boy musicians," he says.

"Benny," says Dave. "Come on. Try some of this salvia."

I sigh wearily and motion for him to set me up a bong. Yvonne watches with pixieish fascination.

I'm not sure why I accept Dave's offer. I don't particularly want to hallucinate, but I obviously don't have strong enough feelings either way.

I place my finger over the hole, suck, release and inhale.

The carpet scrolls under my feet like in that Jamiroquai video. The Suede *Coming Up* poster vibrates with life.

Melissa's arms morph into grumpy snakes.

A spontaneous chasm opens up in the floor, dividing the caravan in two. Dave stands comfortably astride this canyon.

"Getting anything yet?" he asks.

"Yeah," I say. "I don't really like it."

"Just relax," says Dave. "Go with the flow."

I glance to my left. Alexa, Brian and Joanna huddle together, watching me. Alexa looks concerned.

"Take it easy, Benny," she says.

Alexa is surrounded by cartoon shapes, and this scares me because I don't want to lose her. What happens if she merges with the cartoons?

On the far side of the canyon, which is now a mile long, my Essex friends frolic demonically.

Then it wears off and everything returns to normal.

I rub my eyes.

"That was quick," I say.

"See," says Dave. "I told you it'd only last a few minutes. How'd you find it?"

"I don't like it," I tell him. "It just turned everything into a cartoon."

"Or maybe you saw things as they really are?"

"Yeah, I get the point. Reality is just an illusion, or a perception. I don't need drugs to prove that. If I pour red paint in my eyes, I'm sure it'll make everything look red."

"It's fun, though," says Dave. "Besides, you can use this stuff to aid in spiritual quests. Shamans use it."

Ed, who has been following this exchange, starts singing *Ebenezer Goode*.

I decide to investigate the bedroom, where Yvonne is crashed out under the covers. Lightweight.

"Hey Benny," she grins. "Good party."

"Yeah, it's OK. I don't recommend the salvia. You look like you're having fun."

"Mmm. I am."

"How much have you drunk?"

"Uh. I don't know," she giggles. "Some vodka. And some other stuff. Uh."

I notice the duvet moving in a strange way behind Yvonne, curly hair that isn't hers protruding from under the sheets.

"Yvonne, are you having sex right now?"

"Tee hee."

"Fantastic. Well, say hi to Adam for me."

I shun the opportunity for voyeurism, leaving them alone to desecrate the spot where I lost my virginity to Joanna.

"Get your arse over here, Benny," calls Alexa from a mattress. "These guys have got all year with you."

Dave is reeling from another salvia hit. Ed, Nigel and Melissa are demonstrating some kind of complicated drinking game to Brian and Joanna, so I take the opportunity for more time alone with Alexa.

"I've figured it out," she says as I join her on the mattress. "It was Yvonne, wasn't it? She seems the hippyish type you'd go for."

"What? No. I've never slept with Yvonne."

"Oh, Melissa then? Nice one."

"No, it wasn't her."

Alexa glances round the caravan as she processes this.

"Benny," she says. "Are you telling me you lost your virginity to Joanna?"

"Yes," I say. "Stop pestering me about it."

Naturally I'm enjoying this validation of myself as a sexual being, but I don't want Brian overhearing our conversation.

"When the hell did that happen?" asks Alexa.

"In February. She came to stay."

Alexa thinks about this.

"You mean that time she split up with Brian, and she said she was going to stay with her grandparents, she was really here with you?"

"Yeah."

"You sly fucker. I can't believe Joanna came to visit you before I did."

"Jealous, much?"

"Ha. You know I'm always jealous of Joanna. Don't kid yourself into thinking it has anything to do with sleeping with you."

"Methinks the lady doth protest too much."

"Right."

Alexa pounces on me and kneels on my chest, pinning my wrists to the mattress.

"Look," I say. "I gave you the chance to take my virginity. It's too late now."

A tickle fight erupts, the assorted wriggling and writhing not doing anything to temper my lust for this girl.

Our squealing rouses Dave from his chemical slumber. He leans up on his elbows and immediately begins constructing a giant spliff, leading me to wonder if that's his standard morning routine.

"Get a room, you too," he says.

"Someone's already in there," I reply, as Alexa jabs me in the ribs. "Ahahaha. Get off."

"Quiet, you."

"Benny," says Ed. "It's fucking freezing in here. Can you get some duvets or something?"

"Pussy," says Nigel.

I head back to the house.

I enter the living room and catch a glimpse of Joanna's thong-clad arse as she wriggles into her pyjamas.

"You just can't keep your clothes on, can you?"

She turns and flips me the finger.

"Fuck you, Benny."

"Is that an offer?"

She turns away and whips off her top, but the look that she gives me over her shoulder suggests that she might actually be willing to fuck me.

I stare at Joanna's naked back. She annoys the hell out of me and I'd quite like to punish her.

But it's not a moral option now that she's back with Brian. I content myself with a glimpse of side-breast as a fresh t-shirt descends.

Joanna follows me silently back to the caravan, an air of affectionate bitterness hovering between us. I return to Alexa's mattress while Joanna settles into Brian's arms, where she no doubt belongs forever. They lean against the bedroom door, probably waiting their turn.

"Howdy," says Alexa.

"You're right," I say. "It is weird that I slept with her."

"I told you," she says. "Our little world's imploding."

Adam and Yvonne stumble out of the bedroom. Joanna and Brian take their place.

"You know what's weirder? It was at the same time that Brian had his little fling with Lucy. Like we're seventies wife-swappers or something."

"I thought Lucy dumped you last summer," says Dave, lighting another ridiculously big joint.

"Yeah, she did. Cheers for reminding me. What I mean is, Lucy's my true love. Joanna's obviously Brian's. The difference is he managed to get back with her. It's still strange we switched partners like that."

"I thought I was your true love," says Alexa, before coughing violently. "Don't blow your fucking smoke at me, Dave."

I look at Alexa.

"I don't know what the fuck you are," I say.

"Thanks. Oh my god, what is she doing?"

I follow Alexa's eyeline to where Melissa is decorating her arms with a series of cigarette burns, while Nigel and Adam watched in open-mouthed fascination. Yvonne is sleepily oblivious.

"Jesus fuck, Melissa," I shout. "Do you have to do that here? What is wrong with you?"

She gives me a snarky look.

"It's just *skin*," she says. "Jesus, lighten up."

She takes a mangled Coke can and slices her forearms randomly with its jagged edges. Even the metalheads look disturbed by this.

"See," she says. "Just skin."

I'm about to either pass out or berate her further when I'm distracted by an intense bout of gasping and spluttering from Alexa. She says something incomprehensible.

"What is it?"

"Asthma attack."

"Oh shit. What do we do?"

I flap my arms uselessly.

"Relax, Benny," says Dave. "She just needs her inhaler."

He fishes it out of Alexa's bag and hands it to her. It seems to do the trick, but she's still struck by random bouts of spluttering in-between inhalations. I open the caravan door to let some air in.

Melissa bleeds quietly in the corner, seeming to resent this sudden lack of attention. Ed and Nigel, oblivious to the drama surrounding them, fight over a duvet. This display of jocular violence ends abruptly when Yvonne opens her eyes and vomits spectacularly over the centre of the duvet. The guys throw their ends away in disgust, spilling beer and Coke.

Adam seizes control of the stereo and puts Metallica on again.

It's at this moment that Eric and Wes, my other bandmates, appear nervously in the doorway of the caravan, trailing computer wires and microphone leads. They survey the scene before them.

"I guess we're not finishing the demo tonight," says Wes.

Eric tiptoes over the various mingled fluids and attempts to stash his cables in the bedroom. The door opens, then slams shut again. Eric turns to me.

"There's people shagging in there," he says, his cheeks reddening.

Dave lies in the centre of all this, puffing blissfully away on his joint.

I exchange a glance with Alexa, by now able to breathe, if not speak.

"You're right," I say. "It is all falling apart. I wish we could go back to last summer."

30th August 1997 – Street Party

Benny

My shoes are full of fucking stones and sand, so I'm hobbling and hopping after the guys while trying to remove it, and distracted by these two bikini-clad sunbathers who are also wearing sunglasses, so it's impossible to tell if they're watching me watch them or not.

Meanwhile, the mere experience of lust is another knife in my ribs with Lucy's name engraved on the handle.

"Guys," I shout. "Wait the fuck up."

Dave, Martin and Brian turn and wait impatiently for me to catch up. They're all wearing black sunglasses and serious expressions, and you can tell we've all seen *Reservoir Dogs* one too many times by this point.

"What's the fucking rush?" I protest. "Isn't someone going to the offy? I need alcohol."

"Relax, Benny," says Brian. "The bars are gonna be more packed than ever, tonight. It's the one day of the year we don't need to worry about getting served."

"I can't afford bar prices. I just want a bottle of vodka."

"Chill," says Brian. "Just get some on the ferry."

"What?"

"Just pick up some duty-frees on the ferry."

"What fucking ferry?"

"We're not taking the bridge across to Shaldon," says Brian. "We're gonna take the Teignmouth ferry."

"You're saying a big fucking ferry comes down this river, just for the sake of taking people to the other side, when they could just as easily cross the bridge?"

"Yeah."

"What the fuck is the point of that?"

"Because," Brian sighs wearily. "The ferry doesn't go straight across. It sails two miles out into international waters, so that everyone can buy duty-frees. Then it comes back and drops us at the other side of the river."

"I've never heard of that."

"It's true," says Dave.

"That's quite a scam they've got going."

"It's all legal," says Dave. "That's the beauty of international waters. The laws of the land don't apply."

"Fine," I say. "I might still need you to get the vodka, though, if they check ID."

"No worries," says Dave.

I fall into line, and we stride silently across the sand.

It's a hot day and the air is wet with the promise of tonight's street party. Sunburnt shoulders in strappy tops send hormones raging in all directions, every glimpse of female flesh taunting me with the echo of Lucy's body. I no longer have access to the world of bra straps and inner thighs, having been prick-teased to the verge of spontaneous combustion before being cast back out into virgin territory. Now I must start from scratch.

My only hope is to crack the seal on a Smirnoff bottle and hope that the heady vapours contained within will send me stumbling in the direction of some new romantic ideal, putting Lucy's divine beauty in perspective. Preferably through contrast. What's the opposite of Lucy's voluptuous, blonde innocence? A sultry, slender brunette?

I think of Alexa.

But no, she just wants to be fucking *friends*.

We've stopped. Why have we stopped?

Dave, Martin and Brian appear to be queuing for something by the shore.

"Guys, what are we doing?"

Martin gives me a sympathetic smile and points to a sign on the sand, as an old man in a rowboat pulls ashore.

The sign says *Teignmouth Ferry*.

"You're a cunt, Brian," is all I have to say about that.

Brian, Martin and Dave laugh uproariously.

Fuckers.

We pay the old guy a pound each and climb aboard. My grumpiness increases as we cross the river, as not only have I demonstrated my gullibility once again, but I'm still without a drink in my hand.

"What did you do last night?" says Dave to Brian, forming a makeshift sun-visor with his hands.

"I went clubbing," says Brian. "This new place. I don't know if you've heard of it? It's called The Signal Box. Behind L.A. Bowl."

I remove an extended middle finger from my jeans pocket and, feigning surprise, show it to Brian.

"Take it easy, Benny," says Dave. "I'll get you some vodka when we get to the other side."

Fair enough, then.

"Apparently this is the world's oldest ferry," says Martin. "Reckon this guy's been here from the start?"

I zone out watching the Shaldon riverbank get closer, trying to enjoy the weather and the scenery. A brown-haired female form sits on the sea wall, swinging her legs and smiling, fuelling my fantasies until this vague shape is close enough to reveal itself as Alexa.

She scampers down to greet us as the boat reaches the shore. She gives me a twirly hug, this public physical contact healing my ego, wounded from being the last remaining virgin in the group. Dave gets a hug too, and the five of us head in the direction of circus sounds coming from nearby streets.

I give Dave a fiver for vodka and sit on a bench with Alexa while the guys make alcohol arrangements. We watch a *Jurassic Park*-themed float glide by, surrounded by hyperactive children in dinosaur masks. *The One And Only* by Chesney Hawkes blares inexplicably from roof-mounted speakers.

"How's it going?" I ask Alexa, tearing myself away from this spectacle.

"Bleh," she says.

"Yeah, me too."

"What's up with you?"

"Oh, you know. Heartbreak, sex-deprivation, social isolation. The usual."

"I can always rely on you to put a cheery spin on things," she says.

The local Women's Institute group slides across our field of vision, making a mockery of the can-can.

"Timeless," says Alexa.

"You know," I say. "When I saw you from the boat, I didn't immediately recognise it was you. So I was planning to chat you up when I reached the shore."

"You can still chat me up," says Alexa.

"But you'd tell me to piss off."

"True. Though that reminds me, you know my dad's owl calls?"

"What?"

"Come on, I must have told you about them."

"Nope."

Alexa sighs.

"OK, you know where we live, there's all kinds of rare species of owl floating about? So for the past few months, my dad's spent every evening down the end of the garden, making these bird calls, and noting down a log of their responses."

"The owls talk back?"

"Yeah, well let me get to the point. So he's been making a log of these conversations with owls, then he's in the pub the other week and he gets talking to another local guy who's into this kind of thing."

"Right."

"So eventually they compare notes, and it turns out that they've been responding to each other's calls."

"What?"

"There weren't any owls. Just another guy down the end of his garden."

"Are you serious?"

"Pretty funny, huh? They were even taking the piss out of it on *Have I Got News For You* last night."

"Crazy stuff."

A pirate ship manned by bearded Spice Girls trundles past, amusing no-one.

"Right, you can stop that," says Alexa.

"What?"

"You know what. You're sitting there thinking about the owl story, and thinking about how you saw me from the boat but didn't recognise me, and trying to come up with some big unifying metaphor that you can use in a song."

"I'm not."

"Liar."

I sigh. How does this girl know me so well?

"Don't sulk with me," she says.

"I'm not," I tell her. "I'm just depressed."

"Why depressed?"

"Where do I start? How about the fact that we're perfect for each other, yet seemed trapped in this platonic charade?"

"Benny," she says. "I know you occasionally like to entertain the idea that you're in love with me. And believe me, it's flattering. But if I was your true love, you wouldn't

have been so happy to spend the last few months getting your end away with Lucy."

"I never got my end away."

"What about all the times I called round for you, only to find you half-naked and grinning while Lucy scrambled round for her clothes?"

"We never went all the way," I tell her.

"Right, I see. So despite spending several months in a sexual relationship with a girl who even I can see is fucking gorgeous, you're hung up on the fact that you're technically still a virgin?"

"I'm not sure if you're making me feel better, or making me feel more stupid," I tell Alexa.

"Relax, Benny," she says. "There's more to sex than penetration. You're doing fine. Lucy certainly seemed happy, anyway."

"Then why'd she dump me?"

"That's not for me to answer. I don't think it was anything to do with the sex, though."

"Yeah, she just didn't want to be with me. God, I sound so whiney."

"It's OK," says Alexa. "It's understandable. And hey, as long as you're maintaining a healthy lust for me, you don't need to worry about Lucy being the only girl you'll ever love."

I look at Alexa. The urge to rip open her shirt coincides with the realisation that she's absolutely right.

"Thanks," I say.

"No problem."

Perhaps subconsciously, she undoes a button.

"Anyway, enough of my teenage angst. What's been bothering you lately?"

The carnival seems to have petered out, save for the odd costumed straggler. The sky is darkening.

"Oh, just more angst," says Alexa. "Mainly other people's, though."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. Emma's been going through a lot. You think I'm dysfunctional? You should spend an hour on the phone with her."

"Right."

I don't feel entitled to pry.

"Yeah. I was up all night dealing with it. I'm so fucking tired now, I don't think I can stick around for long."

"That's a shame. I was hoping to party with you tonight."

"I'd only cramp your style," says Alexa. "In fact, I think I'm gonna head off now. If my dad's still in town, I can scrounge a lift. Oh, don't look so sad. You'll see me soon."

She stands up and puts on her cardigan. I stand too, anticipating a goodbye hug.

Alexa kisses me.

She grins when she sees my dumbfounded expression and sets off down the road, giving me a flirtatious glance over her shoulder.

Dave arrives.

"Your vodka, Sir," he says.

Well, OK then. Let's party.

Having transferred my vodka into an innocent looking water bottle, I share sips with Dave while heading through town.

In a beer garden on the opposite side of the street, Lucy is drinking with James and Emma.

She's wearing a red summer dress.

Her thighs are visible.

Her bare arms and shoulders glow in the setting sun.

She smiles and leans forward to look at something in Emma's magazine, displaying divine cleavage. James notices this too.

Dave clocks me staring and places a sympathetic hand on my shoulder.

"Dude," he says. "I'm gonna have a quick drink with James. If you want, go and join the others on the hill, and I'll meet you up there in a bit."

"Right. Good plan."

I tear my eyes away from Lucy and stagger up the street, alone.

Dramatic silhouettes point at each other on the hilltop. I trudge onwards and upwards.

Jesus. It's that prick Dan, and his sidekick Harry. They appear to be arguing with Martin and Brian about something. Dan's the aggressor (big fucking surprise there. Harry's just laughing) but backs off slightly as I approach, seeming to realise they're now outnumbered.

"Oh, got your fucking mates along to back you up, have you?" Dan spits.

I say nothing.

"Who's this cunt?" Dan approaches me and examines my face slowly. I stare intensely at the bridge of his nose, having read in FHM that this gives the impression of eye contact.

Dan staggers suddenly backwards, as if struck.

"Right," he says, pointing at my nose. "I'll remember you."

He walks up to Brian.

"And I'll remember you."

He approaches Martin.

"And I'll especially remember you, you cunt. Now get the fuck out of here."

"Fuck. Off. You. Prick." says Martin.

Dan looks stunned.

“Right!” he says, smashing his beer bottle against a rock and brandishing the jagged remains. “I’ll ask again! Get. The. Fuck. Out. Of. Here.”

Martin and Brian exchange glances, roll their eyes, and troop down the hill at their own pace. I follow them, not wanting to pay any further attention to that psycho Dan.

Brian has to leave to meet Joanna, so I sit in the square with Martin and we drink vodka while Martin tries to fill me in on what just happened.

“Fuck knows what that was about, mate,” says Martin. “Apparently Dan’s some ex of Emma’s, which Brian had a problem with. He started threatening Brian so I told him to fuck off.”

“People like that aren’t worth spending a second of your life on,” I tell Martin. “The only thing in the world they care about is being hard, or at least being seen to be hard. I don’t think they even have a sex drive. They just care about what other guys think of them.”

“It’s fucking gay,” says Martin.

“Yeah. Which’d be fine if they’d just admit it.”

“Oh fuck,” says Martin. “Here they come again. You might want to tone down the gay talk.”

I look up in time to see Dan approach us, doing that fucking chicken-necked wideboy strut that all psychos are experts at.

I stand. So does Martin.

Dan points at us, then turns and gives the nod to a gang of his mates. Harry, Ben, Nick, and two other hard-looking pricks I don’t know by name.

Martin flees.

Dan head-butts me on the forehead. Jesus fuck, that hurts.

His mates scramble over, confused now that their targets are divided. Someone gets me in a headlock.

I look up at Dan, a gorilla's arm wrapped round my neck.

"Leave him," says Dan. "He's not the one I have the problem with."

I feel the monkey's grip reluctantly loosen.

"Don't think you're getting away that easily, though," says Dan. "You're gonna help us find your mate."

"I don't know where the fuck he went," I say.

"Yeah," says Dan, "well you're gonna help us find him. Here's what you're gonna do. Walk through town. Slowly, mind. We're gonna stay ten feet behind you. Look for your mate, and signal us when you see him. If you give him a signal, or try to leg it, we'll kick the shit out of you."

I turn and look at the gang, all gristle and fangs, their facial expressions confirming readiness for violence.

I remind myself never to underestimate the creativity of a psychopath.

I walk slowly through town, as instructed, glancing into occasional doorways or down side alleys. I scan the crowd for familiar faces, not knowing what I'll do if I see Martin.

How the fuck am I going to get out of this one?

There's a certain irony in being such a public hostage, but I can hardly flag down a passer-by for help. It wouldn't be worth it. Dan and his psycho mates would only track me down again later, when I was alone.

Martin is nowhere to be seen. I resist the urge to peer sarcastically under dustbin lids and behind palm trees.

I start to dawdle as I near the edge of town, the Shaldon bridge now in view. I'm running out of places to pretend to look for Martin.

"Keep moving," says Dan.

A car drives past, the Pulp song *Mis-Shapes* playing on its stereo. Call it divine inspiration. I can outwit these fuckwits.

"Listen," I say to Dan. "I'm just as pissed off with him as you are. The cunt's supposed to be giving me a lift home. How am I supposed to get back to Torquay now?"

Dan grunts something in reply.

"Where is he getting picked up from?" asks Harry.

"What?"

"Your mate. I assume he doesn't have his own car. Where are his parents picking him up from?"

"Down by the bridge," I say, squinting at the horizon. "Shit, there he is!" I point at a distant silhouette. "The fucker had better not leave without me."

Dan, Harry, Nick, Ben and their two mates all sprint past me and away towards the bridge.

You stupid fucking cunts.

Of course, now there's the problem of getting back to Martin's house. The bridge is out of bounds, and the ferryman doesn't operate this late at night. I decide to solve this problem by sitting on a bench and drinking more vodka.

Brian and Joanna pass by, but relating my recent adventure to them reminds me that I'm too paranoid to stay out any longer. I have no wish to risk bumping into a humiliated and angry Dan. Following a manly handshake with Brian and a drunken hug with Joanna, I creep stealthily towards the bridge.

The gang appears to have dispersed, but I see Harry loitering on his own, still apparently looking for Martin. I latch onto the rear of a suburban family and cross the bridge unnoticed.

On my way back to Martin's house, I find Emma standing by the entrance to an alleyway, smoking a cigarette and sipping from a glass of wine.

"Hey, you," I say.

She smiles at me, but appears to be trying to block my view of the alley.

"I had an encounter with one of your exes tonight," I tell her.

"Speaking of exes," Emma whispers, nodding down the alley. "Lucy's down there pissing."

It's tempting to stay and humiliate her, but why would I want to humiliate someone I love? Flashing Emma a farewell grin, I move swiftly on.

My route takes me past Lucy's bedroom window, her presence apparently everywhere. The sight of her curtains is heartbreaking, and I can even make out the collage of Melody Maker cut-outs surrounding her bed.

Lucy's bed. Where I used to lie naked in her arms, happier than I could ever have imagined being.

The collage inspires a mental note to buy the new Pulp album on CD. Otherwise I'll be confronted with Lucy's handwriting on the tracklisting every time I listen to my cassette copy.

I hear female voices approach, and quickly scarpers, lest I be found staring into the bedroom window of an ex-girlfriend.

Typical. Martin's lights are out and the fucking back door is locked.

"Psst. Benny," comes a voice from the bushes.

"Martin?"

Martin is hiding amongst shrubbery in his own garden.

"What the hell are you doing?"

“My parents are still out. I’m waiting for them to come back and let me in.”

“Great.”

I join him in the dirt, and we finish off my vodka. I relate the story of my evening for the second time already.

“That’s pretty funny,” says Martin.

“Yeah, well you’re lucky you came straight home. Fuck knows what I’d have done if I’d seen you.”

“Pretended not to have, I hope.”

There’s the crunchy sound of tyres on gravel, and middle-aged merriment heading down the driveway. The security lights flick on, illuminating Martin and I in front of his parents.

“Well, well, well,” says Martin’s dad. “What on earth have you boys been up to?”

“Nothing much, dad,” says Martin, standing and brushing soil from his jeans. “How was Chris de Burgh?”

“Superb, as ever,” says Martin’s dad, before launching into a spontaneous acapella rendition of *Don’t Pay The Ferryman*.

“Boys. Honestly,” says Martin’s mum, smiling indulgently and steering the three of us into the house.

17th January 1997 – Nick’s House

Dan

“Hairspray,” says Nick. “Is there something we should know about you, mate?”

“Just fucking wait a minute,” says Harry. “Find me a lighter.”

Nick passes Harry a lighter, who then pops the cap on the hairspray and starts spraying it all over the kitchen wall in a weird pattern.

“Quick,” says Harry. “Turn the light off.”

Ben switches the light off. Harry holds the lighter near the wall and flicks it on.

The word CUNT appears briefly on the kitchen wall in foot-high flames.

Harry pisses himself laughing.

This cheers me up for about half a second before thoughts of the slut bitch return and I find myself feeling contempt for the immaturity of my mates. Harry might be a laugh but the idea that girls appreciate a sense of humour is fucking bollocks. Girls want a guy with a big dick, big muscles, big wallet, big car, a big fucking everything. Let’s set some scrawny, skint comedian loose in a jacuzzi full of FHM covergirls and see how the fuck he gets on.

Thing is, I have all of the above AND a fucking sense of humour, so what the fuck is slut bitch Miss Alison King’s excuse for wanting to “cool things off for a while”? What the fuck is that supposed to mean anyway? If you’re going to dump me, just fucking say so. I’ve got better things to do than sit and wonder what the fuck is going on in that bitch’s head.

All of which means some girls need to turn up at this party, and hurry the fuck up about it. There's one here already, a fucking horny little minx called Joanna, but she's got her dopey-looking boyfriend in tow and they've been stuck to each other since the moment they got here.

"Did Lisa say if she was fucking coming?" I ask Harry. "Or Sabrina?"

"Relax, Danny boy," he says, in that stupid fucking Irish accent he uses whenever he calls me Danny boy, which I fucking hate. "A bevy of fine fillies will be joining us shortly, to be sure."

Joanna giggles at this. I force a smile, so as not to look like too much of a humourless cunt.

The doorbell goes, so Nick disappears off to answer it, returning shortly with his arm around two foxy birds of the finest quality.

"Gentleman," he says, his voice twice as posh as it was ten minutes ago. "Allow me to introduce you to my two delightful companions. This is Emma." He gestures to the brunette on his left. "And this is Suzanne," he says, indicating the blonde. Dirty blonde, in every sense of the fucking word.

"It's Suzie, actually," says the blonde.

"My apologies, my apologies," says Nick. "*Suzie*, allow me to introduce you to Benjamin, Dirty Harry, Danny boy, Joanna and... Brian?" Joanna's dopey-looking boyfriend nods. "Brian. Excellent."

"Hey Suzie," says Joanna.

"Hey, Jo."

"Oh, so you two know each other?" says Nick, not willing to relinquish control of the conversation just yet. "What a delightfully small world."

Emma and I exchange a knowing glance at this, and although Suzie's the obvious one to go for, there's something

about Emma that does it for me. She's got this lop-sided fringe that partially obscures her left eye, so she seems to peek mischievously out from underneath it. And although she's probably the wrong side of sixteen, her tits are pretty fucking well developed.

I just about die when Emma takes off her coat and her nipples are visible through her black satin top. Emma it is, then.

We talk for a long fucking while, sharing the bottle of gin she's brought with her, and eventually we end up stoned in Nick's bedroom. That Joanna girl's here too, but she's passed out already, and Nick's driving Harry to the off-license. Ben invites Suzie and Brian into the kitchen for a game of cards, giving me a sly glance as he leaves me alone with Emma. Nice one, Ben.

Emma grins seductively at me from under her fringe. I smile back. Our moment has arrived.

I gather her into my arms, before throwing her effortlessly onto the bed and flipping her over. I savour the anticipation for a second before sliding up her skirt, exposing divine thighs and the cutest pink cotton panties I've ever seen. Unable to restrain myself any longer, I yank them down to her knees.

It doesn't matter how many time you wank over airbrushed bints in magazines, nothing can compare to the three-dimensional wonder of the perfect teenage arse. I almost just want to spend the whole night staring at it, but my body has other ideas. I firmly caress her arse with one hand while unzipping myself with the other. She wriggles and writhes beneath me, but I don't want her to change position. As much as I'd like to check out her tits, I don't like making eye contact during sex. It's creepy.

She starts making these frightened groaning noises, so I reassure her by holding her head gently against the pillow, muffling her moans and forcing her body to relax. I tease her pussy for a while with the end of my dick, but this just ends up teasing me, so I give in and thrust inside her.

Wow. I can actually feel the moment when her cherry pops. God, I love that sensation. I had no idea she was a virgin, but maybe this is one girl who actually is as innocent as she looks.

Well, not any more.

I have to resist staring constantly at her arse in order to stop myself from cumming too soon, but when I look at her face she's still doing this strange whimpering like some girls do when they get turned on. Each to their own, but it's not exactly the open-mouthed ecstatic bliss we're taught to expect from pornos, and it's a push to find it sexy.

I steal a guilty glance at Joanna, whose cleavage is partially visible from the position she's slumped in. This does the trick for a while, but then I notice her face. She looks like she's dead, which is not the kind of imagery I need right now.

Fuck it. Why do us guys always sacrifice our own pleasure and spend sex worrying about how long we're going to last? I return my focus to Emma's arse, and almost instantly feel an intense orgasm approaching.

The front door slams shut and I thrust harder and faster in order to be done before Harry sticks his stupid face round the door and becomes the unwitting focal point of my climax. Emma keeps mumbling the word "no", but in this stunned, grateful way, like she's never been fucked like this before. I guess she hasn't.

Finally, I cum, pure energy pumping out of me as everything in the world disappears except for the sight of Emma's firm, perfectly round arse.

Quick. Time to clean up. I zip myself into respectability and, ever the gentleman, slide Emma's skirt back down. I hate to cover up that arse, but I'm not sharing the sight of it with Harry or Nick.

Emma doesn't move, just lies there crying softly. Why the fuck do women get so emotional after sex?

I head back to the kitchen, where Nick's commentating on the poker game in progress between Ben, Suzie and Brian. Ben's kicking their arses. Brian's only got a couple of matchsticks left. Shame they weren't playing for money.

Ben spares them total humiliation by gathering up the matches and dealing a fresh game of Shithead between the six of us. Harry hands us all a beer from the crate he's just bought. Everyone's competing for Suzie's attention, but I already scored tonight while these losers were bickering about booze.

During our second game, Emma passes through the kitchen and lets herself out without a word. Girls are so weird.

Fuck knows how many games later, I'm drunk and tired and craving my bed. Harry offers to let me crash at his place, so I say bye to my mates, exchange a lingering farewell glance with Suzie, and head out into the cold.

Harry's a hyperactive fucker as usual, but I'm still stoked from scoring and can even forgive him the inevitable renditions of "Danny boy, the pipes are calling".

"So," says Harry. "How did you get on?"

"How'd you think? I shagged her."

Harry makes a *durr* face.

"Well, of course," he says. "I assumed that much. But what did you get out of her? Did she suck you off?"

"Of course," I say, doing a silly pelvic thrust and nearly slipping on the ice. "What girl could resist?"

Harry laughs at this.

"You should have got that Joanna bird in on the action," he says. "Perfect opportunity for a threesome."

"She was unconscious."

"Exactly," says Harry.

"You're a sick fucker sometimes, you know that?"

Harry laughs and lets me take a swig from his hip-flask. Whisky, and not the cheap stuff either. I swear this guy must spend all his money on booze. No wonder he's got nothing left to impress birds with.

We finally arrive at Harry's place and gather in the luxurious warmth of his bedroom.

"Can I use your internet?" I ask him.

"Sure. No looking at gay porn, though."

"Fuck off, bender. I just want to write an email."

"Be my guest."

I log into hotmail and compose a new message to Alison.

To: ally_pally78@hotmail.com

From: dann_the_mann@hotmail.com

dear slut bitch

just thought i'd write you a little letter to tell you what a slut bitch whoor you are

i already have a new ggirlfriend so you can go fuck yourself with your "cooling down period" i wouldn't go out with you again if you were the last

girl on the plannet and you begged me you fucking
whoor

hope you get aids and rot in hell

dan

“You all done?” says Harry. “I’m afraid my brother’s got one of his mates staying in the spare room, so you’ll have to make do with the floor.”

“Fuck that,” I tell him. “Can’t you kick him out?”

“He’s already asleep,” says Harry. “You kick him out.”

Fucking bollocks.

“Right,” I say. “I might as well fucking walk home then. Just gonna take a slash first.”

“Don’t let me stop you,” says Harry.

I head to the bathroom for a piss. There’s blood on my cock, which shocks me for a second. I contemplate wiping myself on Harry’s face towel, but that’s a bit low, so I clean myself up with damp toilet roll before flushing it and heading back out into the cold.

It’s at least a mile long walk and I’m completely sober by the time I get back to my house. The sight of my car reminds me that I’m a dick for not driving. Fuck worrying about drink driving, no-one I know has ever been caught. Apart from Ben that one time, but he was asking for it, swerving all over the road like a crazy fucker.

No-one’s home so I put on some loud techno and check my emails again. No replies yet. God, I hope I wasn’t too harsh in my message.

I load the Sent Messages page and read through the mail I sent to Alison. Jesus fucking Christ. I'm going to regret that in the morning.

31st December 2001 – Reunion

Lucy

Alexa rings the doorbell and Dave eventually answers. Rather than immediately ushering us in, however, he just stands in the doorway grinning at us.

“Dave,” says Suzie. “It’s fucking freezing out here. Let us in, and you can stare at my cleavage all you want.”

“I’ll hold you to that,” says Dave, wagging a wooden spoon at her. Alexa skips over the doorstep and gives Dave a hug. I squeeze past them into the warmth of the house.

James peers out from the bathroom and smiles at me, sporting a dressing gown and a shaving foam beard.

“I’ll be right with you,” he says, glancing nervously at Alexa and Suzie. I settle on the sofa as the bathroom door shuts.

“Can I get you ladies a drink?” asks Dave. “We have beer, beer, vodka or beer.”

The three of us request a vodka.

“Deary me,” says Dave, fetching the alcohol from the fridge. “What am I going to do with all this beer?”

“Is the bitch coming?” asks Alexa, much louder than necessary.

“I have no idea who you’re referring to,” says Dave.

“I think she means Joanna,” says Suzie.

“She’d better be coming,” says Dave, placing our drinks on the coffee table. “This is an old school reunion of the Torquay posse, and I expect all of the old crew to be here. And I don’t want to hear about who shagged who or who’s not talking to who.” He waggles his spoon again. “So you’d better all get on.”

Alexa raises her eyebrows as high as they’ll go.

"What about Benny?" I ask.

"Nah. The fucker's with his new bird in Essex."

"Dan?"

"I should hope not."

I sigh and stretch out my legs, which doesn't go unnoticed by Dave. Part of me fancies some nostalgia sex with an ex-boyfriend, while my sensible half is telling me to behave myself and return to uni with my self-esteem intact. There'll be plenty of horny students to choose from then, some of whom might be more of a long-term prospect.

As if on cue, James emerges from the bathroom, shaven and suited. I find myself wondering why we never got together during our schooldays. I guess he was busy enough complicating everybody else's sex lives. I take a sip of vodka and cross my legs. James gives me a roguish smile.

The doorbell rings.

If Brian holds any grudges, he's not showing it. He kisses me, Suzie and Alexa on the hand, gives James a warm handshake and engages in some ironic playful boxing with Dave, who bats him on the forehead with his spoon. Brian pretends to sulk, opens his mouth widely as if to say something, then heads to the fridge and starts rummaging for beer. Dave tops up our vodkas and puts on *Loaded* by Primal Scream.

Emma, Martin and Jamie are the next to arrive, and by now I'm beginning to lose track of the invisible criss-crossing matrix of sexual connections. I resolve to simply drink steadily and celebrate the new year in style.

Joanna's arrival turns many heads, though for entirely different reasons depending on gender. Her breasts are as prominently displayed as ever, but her appearance otherwise seems more sober than I recall. Her hair is straighter, and her white dress reaches her ankles, rather

than stopping mid-thigh. She greets everyone enthusiastically, then nervously approaches Alexa.

"Joanna!" says Alexa. "How the devil are you? I didn't recognise you without James's dick in your mouth."

And we're off.

Joanna joins Suzie and I on the sofa.

"Hey, Jo." I kiss her on each cheek.

"Good to see you, Luce. How's uni treating you?"

"Well. Though I'm slightly dreading the impending ejection into the real world."

"Aren't we all? Still, we've got a few months of youthful craziness left."

"How is it seeing Brian again?"

"Fine," she says. "We still get on. Not everyone holds onto the past forever." She casts a pitying glance at Alexa.

At this point I notice Emma slumped in the corner, her cheeks stained with mascara tears.

"Is she OK?" I ask Joanna.

"Yeah," she says. "She always gets like that at this time of year. Must be that seasonal adjustment thing."

Dave sidles up to me.

"Come to my bedroom," he says. "I want to show you something."

"Dave," I say. "Why the fuck is there a shed in your bedroom?"

"It's important to have some separation between the different areas in your life," he says. "Don't sleep where you work, don't shit where you eat, et cetera."

He removes a padlock and throws open the door theatrically. Eight weed plants stand proudly below an impressive array of lights.

"Just a little private project," he says. "Perhaps you'd care to join me in a sample."

"Why me? How do you even know I smoke?"

"You're a student," he says. "Students smoke."

"I'm not the only student here," I tell him, nevertheless accepting his offer by getting myself comfortable on the bed.

"Here's some I dried earlier," says Dave, opening a tin, releasing a sweet aroma into the air.

Half a joint later and I'm as stoned as I need to be, as I suspect was the intention. I've been left alone for some reason, though. Maybe Dave had to answer the door.

My mind has no room for such trivial details. Instead, I'm more interested in exploring the sensory activation of every one of my nerve endings. I writhe blissfully on the bed.

I know for a fact there's half a dozen horny guys in the next room who'd trample each other to death in the stampede to get to the sensual, sexually willing woman waiting for them in this bed, if only they knew I was here.

The door opens. It must be Dave returning.

"Well, hello there," says James.

Every single sensation feels so fucking good right now. I love the slight pain of my head against the headboard, the fact that I don't know where my knickers are, the air on my exposed hips, James's hands pinning my wrists to the bed, and most of all the feel of James inside me. He doesn't even really seem to be fucking me, rather caressing me from inside with his dick. No wonder he's so popular among our little group of friends.

The only regrettable sensation is the necessary vocal restraint due to our location. I have to bite my lip to keep myself from screaming and screaming and screaming with

the pure joy of physical pleasure. Though I can tell that this coquettish action is giving a little extra visual pleasure to James, which I'm perfectly happy to donate.

The door opens and I make eye contact with Alexa.

"Uh, sorry," she says. "I smelled weed."

I open my mouth to reply, but due to her timing my response comes out as a long, orgasmic moan. Alexa rolls her eyes and shuts the door.

Either triggered by my climax or the shock of being caught, James chooses this moment to cum inside me.

Bliss.

Seconds or minutes or hours later, Dave bursts into the room, his initial anger fading from his face as he catches sight of me with my dress still bunched round my waist, caressing my left leg with my right foot.

"Dude," he says to James with a slight grin, as I cover myself. "Your bed's for you to shag on. Mine's for me to shag on."

James makes a guilty face. Dave smiles at me, stares at my legs for a while, then leaves the room.

James raises his eyebrows at me and slaps his wrist.

I retrieve my underwear, peck James on the cheek and head back to the party. The weed is starting to wear off.

"So," says Dave, giving me this sleazy grin. "Any reflections on the past year before we move into a new one?"

"Not especially," I reply. "It's been pretty typical."

"How can you say that?" pipes up Jamie. "What about September the eleventh?"

"Fuck September the eleventh," says Dave. "People die every year."

"Not on that scale."

"Of course they fucking do. It just happened to be Americans this time, so it was televised."

"We're at war!" shrieks Jamie.

"Come on," says Brian. "It's hardly a proper war."

"What about the war on terrorism?" asks Martin.

"A war on terrorism is a fucking grammatical contradiction," says Dave. "You might as well have a war on war."

"We'll be next," says Jamie. "Trust me. Some modern day Guy Fawkes fucker will blow up the Millennium Dome."

"Well, that's alright," says Dave. "There won't be anyone in it."

"Oh, great," says Jamie. "Topical humour. We should get you on *Have I Got News For You*."

This prompts Alexa to tell her owl story again, before the conversation returns to Afghanistan.

I stay out of it. I don't do politics.

I need to use the bathroom, but the tub is full of people. Joanna, Suzie, Brian and Mark are standing in line, posing arm-in-arm while Smurf fiddles with his digital camera.

Alexa joins me, glaring daggers at Joanna.

"Alexa," says Joanna, ever the pacifist. "Come on in. I think there's room for you."

Alexa seems to interpret this as an insult, as she responds by flicking on the shower, instantly soaking Joanna.

Joanna shrieks but stays rooted to the spot as her dress becomes transparent. Smurf's camera flashes successively. Suzie and Brian scramble out of the bath.

Alexa storms out.

Joanna leaves the bathroom, not making the slightest attempt to dry herself off, eagerly trailed by the guys.

"What exactly is their issue?" I ask Suzie.

"You were there," she says.

"Yeah, well excuse me if I don't carry all that teenage baggage with me forever. I can barely remember half the people I went out with at school, let alone all these complicated grudges everyone's been holding onto since the last century."

Suzie sighs.

"Alexa was in love with James. Shortly after finding out about this, Joanna cheated on Brian with James. Brian dumped Joanna. James and Joanna started going out. Then James cheated on Joanna with me. Everyone broke up."

"Blimey."

"Yeah," says Suzie. "James is kind of a slut. But then, aren't we all?"

She winks at me and heads back into the living room.

Midnight comes and goes. Everyone cheers. A barrage of text messages from my uni friends arrive, all expressing similar sentiments from similarly drunk people at similar hometown reunion parties.

Brian kisses Joanna. James kisses me. Dave kisses Emma, which seems to cheer her up. They say saliva sticks around for six months. I wonder if it's the same for other bodily fluids. I want to sit everyone down in a circle, and use different coloured cotton threads to figure out the genetic connections between everyone at this party. See who ends up tied and tangled with who. Let's get to the bottom of this little incestuous circle of friends once and for all.

Alternatively, I want to get back to Bath and surround myself with my student friends again. They may not be any more mature than my old classmates, but at least there's not the pretence that any of this means anything. No-one deludes themselves into believing that convenient

geographical proximity equates to any kind of immortal group friendship that transcends time and space, which was obviously Dave's motivation for gathering us all together tonight.

Martin asks me what my resolutions are.

"The usual," I tell him. "Give up smoking. Less casual sex. Get as far away from all this teenage bullshit as possible."

Martin joins me in surveying the party scene. Joanna is still the centre of attention, wet dress clinging to her curves as she indulges the surrounding males with flirtatious giggling. Brian has his arm around her. Alexa sulks in the corner. Dave and James continue to drink. The first Ocean Colour Scene album is playing on the stereo.

"Don't knock it," says Martin. "What would you prefer? A nice, stable relationship. Dinner parties. Air albums on the stereo. Everyone talking about the fucking property ladder."

I watch James flirting with Joanna, and Smurf crawling towards the bathroom.

I look Martin in the eye. His acne scars have prevented him from shaving properly.

"Yeah," I tell him. "I think I probably would prefer that."

"Be careful what you wish for," he says.

? – ?

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No.

This isn't happening.

I refuse to accept this experience, and I refuse to accept my relation to it.

Battering rams of reality crunch into my brain but my skull is strong enough to withstand them.

Be strong.

This. Is. Not. Happening.

"But it *is* happening," says reality. "Denial is just a temporary emotional state. You can't simply choose to reject pain. It's a physical process which is occurring to your body."

"No it's not."

"Yes," says reality. "It really, really is."

My stomach convulses, pinballing pain throughout my skeleton.

I know I can resist this if I try hard enough.

Breathe deeply. Breathe out for twice as long as you breathe in.

Inhale through the nose. One. Two.

Pause.

Exhale through the mouth. One. Two. Three. Four.

Pause.

Visions of a Victorian fairground. A stocky, Queensbury Rules boxer brandishes a mallet above his head.

He brings the mallet down.

Bile ricochets up my throat, ringing the bell.

I open my mouth, but rather than the projectile pyrotechnics I'm expecting, pathetic globules of congealed acid drip from my lips.

Be strong. You can beat this.

Stay cool.

But it's hard to stay cool when the sun is a foot above your head.

I return my mind to my breathing. Discipline is important.

Everything is still for a second.

"Of course," says reality. "In cases of Chinese water torture, it's not the moment when the drop hits your forehead that triggers the agony, but the tension caused by anticipation of the next drop."

A ghost kicks me in the stomach.

"It's basic Archimedes," says reality. "The buoyant force is equal to the weight of the displaced fluid."

"I refuse to accept this," I reply.

"You have no choice," says reality.

I open my mouth again, and this time a significant portion of blobby discharge is released.

Progress.

I treat myself to a victory gulp of oxygen. My head deflates, and cracks against porcelain.

Motherfucking cocksucking cunt.

Why the fuck is this happening to me?

"I could provide you with an amusingly literal explanation at this point," says reality. "But something tells me you're not in the mood to appreciate it."

"Will you please fuck off," I reply.

"Don't tell reality to fuck off," says reality. "What do you think got you into this mess in the first place?"

I have an additional problem now. I want to destroy things, yet something is intercepting the signals between my brain and limbs.

My head lolls in loose ovals, but that's due to gravity rather than autonomy. Given the lack of energy

fuelling this movement, I wonder if I've inadvertently discovered the secret of perpetual motion.

"I wouldn't count on it," says reality. "Unless you think you've also stumbled across the gateway to eternal life."

There's a crumb of comfort in the realisation that this cannot last forever, but the idea of being tortured for the rest of my conscious existence serves only to fuel more impotent anger.

But anger has its uses. I may be impotent now, but one day I will rise from this carpeted grave and exact bloody revenge on all those who assisted my descent into this state.

I know that my heart was once home to the concept of compassion, and I must slay whoever deprived me of this.

"You're hardly the most fearsome of prospects," says reality.

"Fuck you."

"No," says reality. "This is me fucking you."

After several years spent psyching myself up for the attempt, I crank open my eyes a segment, allowing my brain access to a sliver of vision.

Holy fuck. The sun is now mere inches from my face.

"Please," I urge. "Make it less bright."

"What are you going to do for me?" asks reality.

"Anything. Anything, at all. I promise."

"Why should I take you at your word? It was your violation of your own word that led to this situation."

"I know. And right now I lack the mental capacity to address that paradox. But please let me know if there's any way I can redeem myself. I must escape this hell."

"I'll think about it," says reality.

Left alone, I gather my last remains of courage and attempt to summon a state of gratitude. Rather than bemoan

my physical agony, I shall cherish the recent moments of mental escape that these metaphysical distractions have allowed me.

I must have tempted fate, as my faith is immediately tested in the form of a fresh assault on my organs. Armies of invisible insects march across my skin, waging brutal war with no regard for the scars inflicted on the landscape. Who'd have thought an evil genius would be the first to perfect both nanotechnology and machine consciousness, simply for the purpose of torturing my body in new and exciting ways?

A 1920s biplane sputters across my crescent of vision, trailing a banner. The banner reads ARMITAGE SHANKS.

I know I've seen that phrase somewhere before.

Meanwhile, the insects, using some advanced form of swarm intelligence, launch localised attacks on my body's most delicate pressure points.

Where the fuck is this imagery coming from?

I scan my visual databanks and eventually locate a relevant image. A messy stack of issues of *New Scientist*, next to a toilet.

Well, at least now I know where I am.

When is it? I have no idea. But there is (mercifully) no music playing, meaning the party must be over.

Who am I?

I urinate, becoming momentarily aware of a penis.

I'm male. That's as far as I can narrow it down.

"Had enough?" asks reality.

"Yes. Please, make it stop. What can I do?"

"Patience is a virtue," says reality. "Practise it."

Instinct tells me I'm over the worst of it, but that doesn't reduce my suicidal impulses. Death would be preferable to another hour of periodic, empty retching and

perpetually doomed attempts not to pass out. Permanent unconsciousness would be welcome, but not these teasing, temporary nightmares.

Reality strokes my brow.

"You know that you're going to get through this," it says.

"I'm not even sure I want to."

"Nevertheless."

Days and nights pass, months fly off the calendar, seasons change and centuries unravel. None of which accelerates my perception of time one iota. Every millisecond lasts an eternity.

There must be things I love. There must be things that I care about other than pain reduction. But I have no access to them. I don't even know what they are.

I cry, softly.

Woodpeckers flock to my head.

I feel so very fucking shit.

"Look," says reality. "It's time for me to leave you for a while. You will recover, but you're on your own for the next part."

"Don't go."

"I thought you hated me."

"It's the pain I hate."

"Well, that will be with you for a while."

Electric eels tickle my feet.

"I don't ever want to feel this bad again. Whatever I did to get here, I promise never to repeat it."

"Don't cheapen this with those kinds of empty promises," says reality. "See how you feel after the detox."

"How long must I wait?"

"You have a long night ahead of you," says reality. "Your best bet is to surrender all control, and hope for benevolent hallucinations."

"I'll try."

"Don't try. Abandon all attempts at control. Accept the pain, and conserve your energy."

"It's not easy."

"Submitting to pain is the easiest thing in the world," says reality. "You just have to choose it."

"I don't want to be sick any more."

"Then sleep."

"I can't sleep."

"You have no choice."

I remove my chin from its porcelain rest and let gravity suck me closer to the carpet.

Another light arrives, putting the sun into gentle perspective.

It must be the moon.

I close my eyes and it could almost be dark.

"I'm going to leave now," says reality.

"OK."

"Goodnight."

Reality blows me a kiss and slips quietly out through the window.

It is very fucking far from a good night.

26th July 2011 – Aftershow

Den

Alexa looks me in the eye.

This gives me an erection capable of drilling undersea tunnels. Clare rubs her ass playfully against my crotch, claiming credit that isn't hers. She's distracted with her videophone as ever, preoccupied with filming the event and the thought of uploading it, rather than experiencing it with me.

Note to self: Stop meeting girlfriends on Myspace. However good they look on cam.

Alexa plucks absently at her guitar as the feedback-laden outro of *Prowl* fades from the speakers. She gives the impression of chewing gum even when she's not. Her jeans hang loosely from her hips.

One day I'm going to marry her.

"Uh, I think I've got time for one more song," says Alexa. "I'd like to thank Teenagers for supporting me tonight, and Jeff for doing the sound. Reliable as always."

A bearded roadie waves from behind a mixing desk.

"This is a new song. Uh, it's not finished yet, so bear with me. It's called *Feline Dream*."

A funky as fuck backing beat starts up. Alexa's hands carve jagged shapes in the air, her plectrum occasionally making fleeting contact with her guitar. The riff is awesome. Minimal and epic, teasing and seductive, all at once.

By the time the vocals start, I'm transfixed. Alexa's voice caresses me, teaches me things.

This is the best song I've ever heard.

Note to self: Masturbate while listening to this track through headphones.

Alexa glides to the end of the verse and although I've never heard the chorus before, I feel like I know exactly what's coming. I can hear it already, as surely as I know that it's my destiny to become this woman's lover.

Everything falls silent.

No. Come on. Don't tease me.

Alexa glares at Jeff the sound guy who looks panicked and stabs randomly at buttons.

An eternity passes, which probably only lasts a couple of seconds. Jeff tries another button. The backing track returns.

Alexa doesn't miss a beat. The chorus arrives like a tantrically delayed orgasm.

"Are you alright?" asks Clare. "You seem like, totally spaced."

"I'm great," I tell her. "That was amazing."

"It was OK," she says. "My battery cut out near the end, though. I didn't get all of that last song."

"Fuck the battery. We were here. We saw it."

"Jesus," says Clare. "Who shit on your pillow?"

"No-one shit on my pillow. I just always come to these things hoping to share some great music with you, and you always spend the whole time either fiddling with your videophone or texting someone. You never pay attention to the music."

"Right," she says. "The music is what you were paying attention to."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Oh, I wonder." Clare juts out her jaw and bounces from hip to hip – a crap impression of Alexa.

"Look," I say. "Let's not argue. We're having a good night. Let's try and get into the aftershow party."

"Why, so you can drool over Alexa Ray?"

Yes.

"No."

"No offence," she says. "But I think I'll leave you to it. Good luck getting in."

"Come on, don't storm off."

"I'm not storming off. I'm just not in the mood for you right now. I'll Myspace you."

She blows me a kiss and heads for the exit.

I turn to contemplate the backstage door, and the bouncer standing in front of it.

My initial approach is wordlessly rejected with a stern nod towards the *Aftershow Party - Passes Only* notice. I ask some random stragglers if they have a pass I could borrow, but this is futile. If they had a pass, they'd be backstage.

I'm about to give up hope when I notice Benny, the guy from Teenagers, chatting with a barmaid. I loiter nearby, not wanting to interrupt their conversation.

The barmaid notices me and smiles. Benny follows her eyeline and sees me waiting.

"Hey," he says. "How's it going?"

"Uh, good." I reply. "That was a great gig. I really enjoyed it."

"Cheers," says Benny. "That's good to know. Was it the first time you've heard us?"

"No. I have some of your stuff downloaded."

"Myspace, right?"

"Yeah, first of all. But I got some of the older stuff from your site."

"That's what I like to hear," says Benny. "What's your favourite track, or is that a cheesy question?"

He's not the one who should be worried about cheesy questions.

"Uh, I like *Naked Flame*."

"Wow. Our first single. I guess we'll never top that."

"No, I mean I like your new stuff too. That's just my favourite."

"Relax," says Benny. "I'm glad you like it. Can I get you a drink?"

"Uh, am I allowed?"

"Why wouldn't you be? You're eighteen, right?"

"Uh, yeah. I'll have a vodka and orange please."

Benny grins approvingly. The barmaid gives me a sly wink as she hands me my drink.

This is so cool.

The vodka hit gives me the courage I need to ask my next question.

"Can I ask you a favour?"

"Sure, what is it?" asks Benny. "I'd give you my autograph, but it's hard to sign mp3s."

"Is there any way you could get me backstage, so I could meet Alexa?"

Benny laughs.

"Ah, so it's Alexa you're the fan of. I might have guessed."

"No, I like Teenagers too. I'd just like to meet her."

"Listen," says Benny. "I remember what it was like, trying to blag my way backstage to meet bands. I'd give you my pass, but if I tried to get back there without it, I'd probably be arrested for suspected terrorism. Let me think."

A minute or so passes. The barmaid tops up my drink.

"Right," says Benny, reaching into his jacket. "Take this CD."

It's a copy of the Teenagers debut album, *Anthems For Doomed Youth*.

"I'll go backstage," says Benny. "You ask the door guy if you can get your CD signed. I'll take the CD, then hand it back to you with my pass inside, OK?"

"OK."

"Right. See you in a minute."

"Good luck," says the barmaid.

I approach the bouncer again.

"What now?" he asks.

"Uh, could you do me a massive favour and see if Benny from Teenagers would sign my CD?"

The bouncer looks like he's about to tell me to fuck off, but then the door opens a crack and Benny pops his head out.

"Oh, hey, did you want that signed?" asks Benny.
"What's your name, dude?"

"Den."

Benny opens the case and doodles a message on the inside cover. "Do you want me to get Lily to sign it as well?" he asks me.

"Yes please."

Benny winks at me and disappears backstage. The bouncer gives me an unfriendly stare.

The door opens again and Benny hands me back the CD.

"Here you go, dude."

"Thanks."

"No problem. See you later."

I walk towards the exit, making sure that I'm facing away from the bouncer when I open the CD case.

Two messages on the album artwork:

Den, Rock on! Benny Teenager

To Den, Hope to see you soon ;) Lily Reed

And there, on top of the CD, is the backstage pass.

I hang the pass round my neck and stride nonchalantly back towards the bouncer.

"Hi," I say. "Mind if I come in?"

He gives me a slow, evaluating look and I wonder if I'm about to be assaulted. But then a smile cracks his lips and he throws the door wide.

"Welcome backstage," he says.

Weed smoke is everywhere. What sounds like a hip-hop cover version of *Subterranean Homesick Blues* is playing on the stereo. Benny catches my eye from the sofa he's lounging on with his girlfriend.

She's gorgeous, seeming to encapsulate some mythical ideal of bohemian beauty from decades ago. I think of Clare, and how she looks exactly the same in real life as in her Photoshopped Myspace profile pic.

I look around. All the women backstage are gorgeous. But there's only one for me.

"Den," says Benny. "Glad you could join us. This is Vanessa."

"Hi."

"Nice to meet you, Den," grins Vanessa. "So you're like the young version of Benny?"

"Er, I guess."

I hand Benny back his pass. Benny and Vanessa giggle at some private joke.

There's an empty sofa opposite so I sit down. Lily from Teenagers slumps down beside me.

"Well, hello there. Is this our fan?" she asks Benny.

"One of many, I hope. Lily, Den. Den, Lily."

Lily shakes my hand and grins at me.

"Very pleased to meet you. Hope you enjoyed the gig."

"Yeah, it was great."

"Which bit did you like best?"

"Uh, it was all good."

I have to be careful here. Teenagers are a weird band. They used to be like a normal rock group, but now it's

just Benny and Lily. They only perform a few tracks together, otherwise alternating between Lily's solo acoustic songs and Benny's storytelling rap music.

"Spoken like a true diplomat," says Lily, exchanging a glance with Benny. "But Den. I'm told that you didn't come backstage just to meet me and Benny? Is there someone else you'd like to say hello to?"

I blush from head to toe.

"Alexa's just getting changed," says Vanessa, sparing my embarrassment. "She'll be out in a minute."

Benny passes me a joint. Lily gives me a disapproving but indulgent smile. I inhale deeply as the music changes to a psychedelic version of *Ballad Of A Thin Man*. (Is this a Dylan covers album? Must find out.)

I share a smile with Benny and Vanessa, and sink deeply into the sofa while waiting for Alexa.

She's standing above me.

Her hair is wet from a recent shower. She dries her forehead with the bottom of her t-shirt, giving me a divine glimpse of stomach.

"You must be Den," she says. "Move up."

I budge along as she sits beside me, but the sofa is small and I'm now squashed between Alexa and Lily. Lily momentarily turns away from her conversation as I press into her hip, flashing me a smile and absently placing her hand on my leg. Vanessa grins at me from the opposite sofa, seeming thrilled on my behalf. Benny looks as stoned as I am.

I turn to Alexa. Her face is inches from mine.

Grateful for the dim lighting, I feel my face reddening.

Alexa smiles at me.

"Hi," I say. "I'm a big fan."

"You don't look that big," she says. "Just kidding. It's very nice to meet you. Den, right?"

"Yeah."

"Cool. Dirty Den."

Is this a compliment or an insult?

Fuck it. Anything is a compliment coming from Alexa Ray.

"You did a good job getting back here," she says. "Obviously it's nice to mingle with fans, but you know what security's like these days."

"Uh, yeah. The terrorists and everything."

"Right. I'm safe with you though, Den," says Alexa. "You haven't smuggled any hidden weapons backstage to assault me with, have you?"

"Alexa, you're terrible," says Lily, her face now as close as Alexa's. "Leave the poor boy alone."

I can still feel Vanessa watching me. I hope my erection isn't prominent. I can't tell without looking down.

Alexa grins and fiddles absently with my fringe.

I wish Clare was here after all. No I don't – I wish I had a videophone of my own.

Come on, Den. This is your one chance. Act now, or regret it forever.

"Er, I hope you don't take this the wrong way," I say to Alexa. "But I have a massive crush on you."

"Aw, that's so cute," says Alexa, a wicked smile spreading across her face. "Why would I possibly take that the wrong way? Thank you."

She reacted well. Go for it.

"Can I kiss you?"

Alexa withdraws her face a little, but apparently to get a better look at me, rather than out of repulsion.

"Den," she says. "How old are you?"

"Uh, fifteen."

"Fifteen. You realise that I'm fifteen years older than you?"

"Yeah. But I can't do anything about that. I think I've fallen for you."

I think the others can overhear our conversation, but I can't let self-consciousness get the better of me now. Vanessa and Benny feign interest in the other side of the room. Lily sips from her wine, restraining a smile.

"Den, that's really sweet, but what do you realistically expect? You know we can't be lovers. It's illegal, if nothing else."

"True love waits," I say. "I'm not bullshitting you. And I don't just fancy you because you're famous."

"I'm hardly famous," says Alexa. "Internet famous, maybe. But I'm not worried about that, I just think you should be with someone your own age."

"Girls my age are so boring," I explain. "They don't have the same passion or soul for music. No-one else makes me feel like you."

Alexa bites her lip and looks momentarily like she might cry.

This is so surreal, to even be having this conversation with Alexa Ray. That she hasn't laughed me out of the venue is a miracle enough in itself.

"Den," she says. "I really see where you're coming from. Trust me. But you have to try to see this from my point of view as well."

Teenage disappointment wells up in me. I feel a lot of angsty songs coming on.

"So I'm going to make a deal with you," says Alexa. "If you can understand that it's impossible for me to date a fifteen year-old boy, and promise me that you won't take this rejection personally, or let it affect your passion for music... then I'll give you one kiss. How does that sound?"

Jesus fucking Christ.

“Uh, sure.”

Vanessa pretends not to watch as Alexa’s lips drift teasingly closer to mine, finally making delicious contact. I’m expecting a momentary peck, but I feel her tongue lightly caress my top lip and enter my mouth. I pray for this moment to last forever, and for my erection not to burst through the material of my trousers.

An orchestral version of *Hurricane* reaches its peak.

We snog for about fifteen seconds, before Alexa closes her mouth and slowly withdraws her face from mine.

She grins, wickedly.

“Remember,” she says. “A deal’s a deal.”

I say nothing.

“You never kissed me like that,” protests Benny, laughing. Vanessa climbs astride him and shuts him up with a kiss of her own. Lily gives me a look like I’ve just aged a decade in her eyes.

Alexa locks her gaze with mine once more.

“Do you write songs?” she asks me.

“Uh, yeah,” I eventually reply. “How did you know?”

“Just a hunch,” says Alexa. “Write one about me.”

I nod, dumbly.

“I will.”

8th March 2002 – Orgy

Martin

It is entirely obvious to me that this situation is too good to be true.

Yet what hallucinogen I've ingested, or what strange dream-state I inhabit is not apparent. For all intents and purposes, this is real.

It's clearly a sucker punch. Something will happen at the last moment to prevent or undermine this experience. If they actually go through with it, I'll eat my hat.

Scrap that – if they actually go through with it, I'll change my entire perspective on life. It may even restore my faith in a benevolent deity. I will never complain again, for whatever of life's lows I encounter, I will have tasted the most extreme of highs.

"Don't be offended," says Joanna. "But we've come up with some rules and boundaries, just so no-one gets uncomfortable in the situation."

"Right."

I can't even believe I will get to see them naked. I lusted after these girls throughout my teens, and watched while other guys effortlessly seduced them. I masturbated guiltily to blurry drunken photographs, and strained my brain attempting to visualise their nude bodies. I honestly don't believe I will ever possess this visual information.

"Firstly," says Joanna. "You can have full sex with me if you like, but not all the way with Emma."

"You can cum on me," says Emma, almost apologetically. "Just not in me."

"Right."

"Secondly," says Joanna. "You can be as rough as you like with me, but Emma doesn't like being restrained in any way."

"Right."

"Also," she continues. "My pussy can get very sensitive, so if I tell you to stop suddenly, I might need you to just hold still for a minute."

"Jo," says Emma. "I hate it when you use the word pussy."

"What word should I use? Vagina?"

"She's got a point," I interject. "There's no neutral word for female genitalia. Guys have cock, which sounds too obscene, and penis is overly medical. But dick is nice and neutral. Women only have either vagina, which is too medical, or pussy, which does sound kinda porno."

"Cock is the equivalent of cunt," says Joanna. "Pussy is the neutral word. Penis and vagina. Dick and pussy. Cock and cunt."

Emma visibly flinches with each use of the word cunt, while my inner schoolboy just wants to laugh at all the rude words.

"Fine," says Emma. "Use pussy."

"Fine," says Joanna. "I will. Yeah, so if my pussy gets too sensitive and I need you to stop for a minute, don't be offended. Just hold still and I'll be ready to go again in a minute."

"Right."

"I think that's it. Emma?"

"Yeah, that's it. Just be gentle."

"Of course."

"But not too gentle," says Joanna, winking at me.

The question of whether life can possibly be good enough to allow me to see Joanna and Emma naked takes an interesting twist with the appearance of a silk scarf. They take a corner each and blindfold me.

Following the sound of a match being struck, it gets a little darker. I can't see anything else beyond my blue silky haze. A peachy aroma reaches my nostrils.

I hear what I hope is the sound of clothes being removed.

A grape appears in my mouth.

My arms are lifted and my t-shirt is peeled away. I lean up on my hands to allow the removal of my jeans. One at a time, my socks disappear.

Fingers enter the waistband of my boxer shorts.

I swallow the grape.

My boxers are lifted up and over my erection, then down and discarded.

"Wait," says Emma. "Let me start the CD."

The opening bars of Pulp's *This Is Hardcore* kick in, which is either appropriately obscene or obscenely inappropriate.

A mouth encloses my dick.

I can't see anyone naked, but I'm still beginning to re-evaluate my atheism.

Four hands caress my body. Randomly planted kisses come and go. Teasing tastes of smooth skin graze my lips. They seem to know exactly what they're doing. I can't believe this is happening. My visual frustration aside, I'm in heaven.

Maybe hell is being fellated forever by a goddess who won't let you look at her.

Finally, a hand adjusts the silk knot at the back of my head. This is the moment. Either I die of a heart attack right now, or life truly is infinitely wonderful.

The blindfold unfurls and I open my eyes.

Joanna and Emma stand naked before me. They mirror each other's stance, arms folded under their breasts, grinning at me like I'm the focal point of some conspiracy of

goddesses. They stand patiently frozen while my eyes flick between them.

Joanna's breasts are as perfect as in my teenage fantasies, all the sexier for being real and exposed. Her body is an odyssey of perfectly placed curves. Golden curls cascade. Shoulders shimmer in candlelight. God is alive and active.

Emma still has that sexy fringe that partially obscures one eye, her nudity magnifying the sensuality of her face, which in turn complements her more petite but equally divine body. Her breasts are smaller than Joanna's, which suits her, as does the slightest outward curve of her belly, drawing my eyes to the perfect black triangle beneath.

This changes everything. This moment is occurring and already becoming part of the irreversible past. No-one can wipe my brain of this information. My inner optimist slays my inner pessimist.

They back onto the bed and lie down at opposing angles.

"Well," says Joanna. "What are you waiting for?"

I need to pace myself. Part of my brain is trying to instruct my body to simply masturbate furiously while staring at their breasts, so I stall for time by taking a handful of grapes and feeding them to Joanna and Emma, one at a time. They pluck them from my fingers with amphibious flicks of the tongue.

Joanna grabs my dick.

Things speed up.

Emma kisses me deeply while Joanna goes down on me.

This is the greatest sensation I have ever experienced.

I caress Emma's breasts, then Joanna's too with my spare hand, my brain almost overloading with sense-data.

I kiss Emma's neck. Joanna stops sucking me and kisses Emma. We manage to align our bodies in a row, all with one hand each between every other pair of legs.

The music is rampant electro, punctuated by our ecstatic gasping.

We caress each other's genitals while my eyes roam their bodies. I still can't believe this is happening.

Candlelight dances across our skin. My own body doesn't even look like too much of an insult to the presence of these goddesses.

Moans increase in frequency.

"FUCK ME," shouts Joanna.

I obey, hopping between her legs and sliding effortlessly inside her. Emma moves closer. Joanna and I continue to caress her. I locate and manipulate Emma's clitoris, instinct and what concentration isn't devoted to fucking Joanna allowing me to pleasure her at a similar rate.

"FUCK ME HARDER," shouts Joanna.

I do my best to oblige, my pelvis muscles getting the workout of a lifetime.

I have to resist staring constantly at her breasts in order to stop myself from cumming too soon. I glance at Emma, whose face is screwed up, presumably in pleasure rather than pain. My vision drifts down her body, her naked skin only accelerating the approach of my orgasm. I close my eyes for a while, aware of the ironic necessity to deprive myself of this visual information in order to prolong my access to it.

I continue to fuck Joanna, steadily yet hard, while doing my best to guide Emma to an orgasm of her own.

I can't keep this up for much longer, so I fuck even harder, and open my eyes to reveal their twin divinity once more. I won't be able to make Joanna cum before I do, but hopefully I can get her close enough for my orgasm to trigger hers.

I stare at Joanna's breasts. After a decade of being teased by her infinite wardrobe of low-cut tops and dresses, it's a dream come true that they're finally exposed in front of me.

Oh god.

Yes.

"STOP," shouts Emma.

Everything freezes, impending orgasms included.

"I CAN'T DO THIS."

I exchange a breathless glance with Joanna, before sliding tactfully out of her. Joanna puts a consoling arm around Emma.

"What is it, babes?"

"I can't do this. I can't do this."

"It's fine," says Joanna. "We can have a time out. What's the matter?"

Everything is quiet for a while.

"I was raped," says Emma.

Sexual pessimist rises from the grave. I cover my erection with a pillow.

"What? Oh my god. My baby."

Joanna hugs Emma.

"I'm so sorry," I say.

Emma bursts into tears.

"I'm sorry," she says. "I'm really, really sorry, Martin. I don't mean to fuck this up. I just, I can't deal with this right now."

"It's fine. Don't worry about it."

"We both wanted to make this like the perfect fantasy for you and now I've ruined it all."

My head spins, adjusts to the new mood.

"Emma, don't worry about it, please. It sounds like you have enough to be dealing with."

"My poor baby," says Joanna. "What happened?"

There's another long silence.

"You were there," says Emma quietly, not looking at anyone.

I exchange a confused glance with Joanna.

"What do you mean?" asks Joanna. "Who was there?"

"You were, Jo," says Emma. "You were passed out in the fucking corner."

"Emma honey, I'm afraid I don't know what you mean."

Emma sighs.

"Five years ago," she says. "That party full of older guys. You drank too much gin and passed out. Then everyone left me alone with this fucking guy and he raped me. Took my virginity."

"Honey, I'm so sorry, but I really don't remember."

"It doesn't matter."

"Of course it does."

Silences are increasing in length and frequency.

"I'm really fucking sorry, Emma," I say. "That's terrible. Have you managed to get over it, do you think?"

"Do I look like I'm over it? Freaking out in group sex scenarios. What the fuck? I never lost my virginity properly, I don't know what the fuck is happening now. I just feel like a slut."

"Don't say that," I reply. "You're amazing, and you didn't deserve such a shit thing to happen to you."

Joanna and I, perhaps acting on some telepathic urge, both embrace Emma.

I notice that we're still naked, which seems like a very abstract concept now.

"You will get over it," says Joanna. "Get some counselling, whatever help you need. It doesn't need to fuck up your life."

"Bit late for that," says Emma, starting to cry again. A tear trickles down my back.

"Come on," says Joanna. "We've all got our issues. At least you can probably count how many people you've slept with. If anyone's the slut, it's me."

"You're not a slut," says Emma.

"Why?" says Joanna. "I seem to fucking sleep with everyone we know."

A laugh penetrates Emma's tears.

Something strange is happening.

"This is weird," I say. "Ten minutes ago you both seemed like goddesses from another planet. Now it's like half of me can actually relate to you. The other half still can't understand what it's like to have too much sexual attention."

"What do you mean?" says Emma.

"Please don't take this the wrong way," I reply. "It has nothing to do with what happened to you. It's just obvious that sex is something that happens to you both whenever you want it..."

Wrong choice of phrase, idiot.

"...whenever you choose it, at least..."

What the fuck is wrong with you, Martin?

"Let me start again. You both have the option of having sex whenever you want. I've seen you with tons of different guys, in all the years I've been lusting after you. It never occurred to me you might have any sexual neuroses of your own. I thought once you'd learned how to pull, that was it. You'd completed the game, so to speak."

"I think Martin just called us both sluts," says Joanna.

"No! That's not what I meant."

"Relax, I'm kidding. But I'm afraid I'm not quite sure what you're getting at."

"Of course not. It's not an issue for you. I don't mean to eclipse what happened to you, Emma, it's just we all seem to be opening up to each other right now so what the hell..."

I take a deep breath.

"You have to understand," I say. "I've had years of watching you both go off with other guys, always feeling like the guy who never gets noticed. Joanna, I fancied you since whenever I met you, like most guys I'm sure. And since then you've slept with Brian, James, Benny, at least two of my college friends. You never paid me any attention, or at least not that kind of attention. Meanwhile I'd be masturbating, fantasising about you both and not even sure if I'm allowed to do that. Fuck it, I don't even know where I'm going with this."

"I don't mind if you fantasise about me," says Emma.

"Of course not," says Joanna. "It's flattering."

"I still don't really know what you're saying, though," says Emma. "I don't mean to be awkward."

"Nor do I. I'm very confused right now. Did I just have a threesome?"

"You did," said Emma. "Until I fucked it up."

"You didn't fuck it up. It's understandable you needed to stop. What was it, you felt threatened or something?"

"No," says Emma. "It was just weird being with Joanna and a guy at the same time. It brought back fucked up memories. I am over it, I think. It just reminded me of what happened at a time when I really didn't need that."

"That's understandable," I say. "I guess we should put some clothes on."

"I don't mind being naked with you," says Emma. "It's nice. I actually feel really close to you both right now."

Joanna grins and hugs us both again.

Her thigh brushes my dick, triggering an erection.

"Hello," says Joanna, grabbing me playfully. "Have you come out to play again?"

"I'm sorry if that's inappropriate," I say.

"Martin," says Joanna. "Where do you get all this sexual guilt from? It's fine to fantasise, and it's fine to be aroused in the presence of two naked women."

"It's not guilt," I say. "More like some strange kind of obsessive gratitude. I've been conditioned not to expect any sexual attention at all, so when it happens I go into this strange superstitious mode where I expect things to go wrong. Then when it does, I think it's my fault."

"Jesus," says Emma. "Give this guy an orgasm already."

"You don't mind?" says Joanna. "You can leave the room if you like."

"No, I'm fine," says Emma. "I'm not in the mood for any more touching tonight, but I'll happily stay and watch."

Joanna grins at me.

I can't say anything.

"Relax," says Joanna, leaning down and taking my dick in her mouth once more. "You'll feel better soon."

She makes wicked eye contact while teasing me with her tongue.

I look at Emma as Joanna's lips tighten, expecting a rush of guilt. Surely I shouldn't be turned on, given what we've just been talking about?

Emma smiles sweetly at me. I feel myself harden inside Joanna's mouth. Joanna moans appreciatively.

Is sex obscene?

I look at the bunches of grapes, the scented candles, the charmingly stencilled invitations to our "Orgy" and the assorted tubes of lubes and lotions we've yet to use. I look at the bed and the naked bodies of my beautiful friends.

I feel strangely childish. Innocent and uninhibited.

Pleasure wells up in me.

Each glance at Joanna or Emma's face brings me a stage closer to an orgasm that I know will change my perspective on sex forever.

Joanna's lips do something indescribable but infinitely appreciated.

"You look tense," says Emma, brushing her fringe from her eyes. "Let go."

I let go.

23rd April 2016 – Dinner Party

Lucy

“So, Mike,” says Carla. “I hear you’re on the pull tonight.”

“Not exactly,” says Mike, scratching the back of his neck and looking embarrassed. “I haven’t seen Ian in years, and I’m newly single, so Ian and Lucy said they’d introduce me to a couple of their friends.”

“What friends?” asks Gavin.

“Suzie and Joanna,” I tell him. “Old, old friends.”

The doorbell rings.

“Speak of the devils.”

I experience a rush of girlish glee as I buzz Suzie and Joanna in. They both look great, slimmer than me. We have a giggling group hug on the doorstep before ushering them into the dining room and making the introductions.

“Well, well,” says Carla. “It’s the terrible twosome. Suzie, Joanna, this is my husband Gavin, and Ian’s newly single friend Mike.”

“Great to meet you finally, Gavin,” says Joanna. “Good to see you, Mike.”

There follows a criss-crossing mesh of handshakes and unimportant conversations relating to the journey each person has taken in order to be here tonight.

Ian fetches the wine. Suzie drapes her jacket on the back of her chair. Joanna removes her arm and fiddles with an interior panel, which seems to fascinate Mike.

“I’m sorry,” says Mike, as Joanna notices this. “I didn’t mean to stare.”

“It’s fine,” says Joanna, clipping her limb back into place.

“Do you mind me asking what happened?”

"Guess where I was on the nineteenth of August," says Joanna.

"Fuck," says Mike. "I'm so sorry."

"It's alright," says Joanna.

A mournful silence descends on the table.

As much as I sympathise, it would be nice to have one dinner party where the conversation isn't dominated by terrorism.

Ian pours the wine, allowing us to move on. We all take small sips and make appreciative mumbling sounds.

It's a good Merlot. 2006 Vintage. This still strikes me as an absurdly futuristic date, despite the intervening decade.

"Where's Jenna, Luce?" asks Carla. "It's been a while since I've seen her."

"With a friend. Off in virtual land, probably. Don't ask."

"Problems?"

"Yeah. Don't ask."

Carla knows me well enough to take the second request seriously, if not the first. Ian claps his hands and returns to preparing the tapas.

"Smells good, mate," says Gavin. "I didn't know you had it in you."

"I know my way around a kitchen," says Ian, adding a splash of the Merlot to a sizzling pan of chorizo. "Lucy makes me cook once a week, so I've amassed quite a repertoire. I thought it was about time I tried my hand at entertaining."

I smile at my husband and take another sip of wine. Situations like this always make me question my contentment. Husband, daughter, dinner parties. Is this really what I want?

I glance at a photograph of Jenna, smiling shyly in school uniform.

Yes, this is what I want.

"You alright, Suze?" asks Joanna. "You look edgy."

Suzie grins mischievously.

"I was just wondering what Lucy and Ian's smoking policy was," she says.

"Go ahead," says Ian. "It'll be smoky enough in here anyway once I've finished with these peppers."

"Oh, thank fuck. I've been craving one all day, but it's pissing down out there and I haven't passed through a single public space where I could get away with it."

Suzie lights up, her first inhalation triggering something close to ecstasy.

"Don't even think about it," says Carla, responding to a telepathic message from Gavin. Gavin protests his innocence.

I feel a strange sense of expectation, maybe just from being around the girls again. Like there's no telling what crazy adventures this night has in store for us.

The food arrives.

For the first ten minutes of the meal, no-one communicates beyond satisfied gruntings. The food is so good, I feel a surge of lust for my husband. I exchange a glance of guilty indulgence with Joanna, who swallows a stuffed olive and closes her eyes for several seconds, moaning softly.

Ian tears open a ciabatta and grins at us all in turn.

"I take it from everyone's silence that the food is good," he says.

We all nod in the affirmative, lavishing him with enthusiastic praise upon finishing our current mouthfuls.

"Well, good," says Ian. "We aim to please."

We all return to our grazing.

"I appreciate your dedication to my cuisine," says Ian. "But is there any chance of some conversation?"

I swallow guiltily, washing down a chunk of roasted pepper with a sip of Merlot.

"Sorry. So Mike, what is it you do exactly?"

"Erm," says Mike. "It's not really appropriate dinner table conversation."

This inevitably arouses the interest of Joanna and Suzie.

"Do tell," says Joanna.

"He's got a point," says Ian, leaping to the defence of Mike, by now squirming a little. "Mike works for Jade Design. You know, they make *Fantasy Palace*."

"I see," I say to Mike. "So you're responsible for violating my thirteen year old daughter?"

Mike spits out Merlot.

Everyone turns to me.

"Relax, Mike," says Ian. "She's just kidding. Honey, you'd better explain what you mean, now that you've said that."

"I'm sorry, Mike," I say. "I didn't mean to freak you out. It's just, the problems I mentioned we were having with Jenna? Last week she comes bouncing into our bedroom all excited and says, 'Mum, I just lost my virginity to Eduardo'."

It's Carla's turn to look astonished.

"Who's Eduardo?" asks Joanna.

"Eduardo's a character in *Fantasy Palace*," says Ian, "which is a game that Mike's company make, if you can call it that."

"It's a total immersion sensory experience," says Mike.

"It's a fucking virtual reality headset hooked up to a dildo," says Ian. "Which, as much as I disapprove of it, is mildly preferable to my daughter's formative sexual experiences taking place with some diseased crackhead, or terrorist in training."

"It's not really meant for anyone under eighteen," says Mike.

"Right, Mike," says Ian. "We both waited until we were adults before we drank or watched a porno, did we?"

"Fair point," says Mike. "But I didn't invent the thing. I just work on the graphics, developing the female sprites."

"I see," says Carla. "So you're responsible for this airbrushed ideal of two-dimensional women we're bombarded with every day?"

"No," says Mike. "All our games are 3D. Besides, the sprites only look airbrushed because of technological limitations. Total reality is our aim."

Carla shakes her head. Gavin seems lost among his own thoughts.

"Do you reckon I'd make a good sprite?" asks Joanna, wiggling her fingers. "I'm already half bionic woman."

"For sure," says Mike. "You should come down to the studio. We could always use new models, and you definitely have the face and figure for it."

Joanna giggles. Suzie looks jealous.

I think I see where this is going.

"Lucy, darling," says Suzie, as Ian clears the plates. "What's your drugs policy, may I ask?"

"Go ahead," says Ian. "I'm about to skin up."

Suzie tips some crumpled paper pellets from a plastic baggie.

"MDMA," she says. "Anyone else?"

"No, thank you," says Carla, pointedly. Gavin doesn't need to decline.

"What is that?" asks Mike.

"Like ecstasy, but purer," says Suzie. "It's just the powder wrapped up in a rizla."

She swallows one with a glass of water. Mike looks tempted, but declines.

"Lucy, darling," says Ian, sitting down and getting out his weed gear. "Do you mind if I change the music? Just while I smoke this."

"Go ahead. Ian doesn't like me listening to CDs," I explain to Joanna.

"I just don't see the point," says Ian. "When we have the entire history of music at our fingertips, with a playlist for every possible mood."

"Sometimes it's nice to actually listen to a whole album," I reply.

"Bollocks," says Ian. "What is this we're listening to? The *Chillout Session* compilation, volume six hundred?"

"I said you could change the music, honey."

Ian flips the stereo onto mp3 mode and begins flicking through snippets of songs.

Why do I always end up with music geeks?

We carry our full bellies onto the sofas, and it's not long before the chemicals in Suzie's system trigger feline writhings and purrings. Mike seems happy to watch this. Joanna slumps next to Suzie, surrendering attention more willingly than I'm used to.

While her top is low cut as ever, she also seems less inclined to flaunt her body than at previous parties. I guess her fake appendage makes her understandably self-conscious, not that the prosthetic is obvious. Apparently she even retains ninety percent of the sensation. Technology baffles me.

Ian rolls another joint and puts an Oasis track on. I feel suddenly transported back in time twenty years. Only Carla's eternally middle-aged presence and Gavin's drab accompaniment keep me rooted in my mid-thirties. I feel

young and relatively sexy, even briefly tempted to sneak into Jenna's room and investigate Eduardo.

"Sex, drugs and rock and roll," says Ian, passing the joint to Mike and laughing loudly.

"Yes, well I think we've had enough of those things for tonight," says Carla. "We're going to head home. It was lovely seeing you again, Lucy. Thanks for the super dinner, Ian. Cheers for having us."

Carla fetches her coat. Gavin quickly borrows the joint from Mike and power-smokes an inch while Carla's back is turned. Ian sees them to the door.

"Bye, Carla. Take care, Gav."

I wave goodbye and stretch out on the sofa.

Suzie is sprawled opposite me, approaching bliss, her stomach showing. She's much slimmer than me. Mike seems to have zoned out staring at her, before snapping back to reality as the front door closes.

"Lucy," says Mike. "May I use your bathroom?"

"Of course. Upstairs, first on the left."

"Do you want to borrow my arm?" asks Joanna.

"What?"

"Nothing."

Joanna grins as Mike stumbles upstairs. Suzie is oblivious to us all. Ian busies himself making coffee, leaving Joanna and I relatively alone.

"Do you still keep in touch with Alexa?" I ask her.

"She hasn't spoken to me in over a decade," says Joanna. "I don't think she's planning on changing that. I guess I'll have to make do with bitchy lyrical references."

"Hmm. So, what do you think of Mike?"

"He's sweet," says Joanna. "Nice guy."

"You think you could date him? This was kind of a match-making mission."

"You wanted to set me up with him?"

"Either you or Suzie."

"Well, I think he's much more taken with her."

"Are you kidding me? Look at her."

"Exactly."

"Jesus, Jo. What happened to your legendary confidence?"

Joanna holds up her arm.

"Right."

"It's funny how being blown up makes you feel less sexy," she says.

We fall silent for a while.

"Well, I'm sure Mike's up for a date if you are," I eventually say. "Or you could always give it yet another go with Brian."

"I haven't seen him in a year," says Joanna. "I don't want him to see me like this."

"Jo, you can hardly tell. Really."

"He always used to tell me I had the most beautiful hands he'd ever seen."

Joanna bursts into tears.

And that's when it all falls apart. The myth of youth. The idea that we're all going to stay in touch and keep partying on a regular basis, and our bodies will stay young and firm and desirable. The hope that there's always time left to save the world and a new Rolling Stones album to look forward to.

It's all fucked. If it wasn't for this oasis of family life I've sealed myself into, I'd quit this whole fucking universe.

"Coffee," says Ian.

Mike returns from the bathroom.

My phone rings.

"Hey mum," says Jenna. "I'm gonna stay over at Kylie's, is that cool?"

"Sure, honey. Just don't get up to any mischief."

"Don't worry. We're just gonna play *Fantasy Palace*."

"Right."

My mind boggles as to what my baby girl is getting up to with her virtual lover, though I try to counteract my concern with the knowledge that if you'd offered me or Alexa a cyberslave as an alternative to dealing with teenage boys, we'd never have left the house.

Maybe things are OK. I can't keep up with this world.

Ian puts The Strokes on. I flashback to my uni years.

"I'm gonna go now, OK mum?"

"Right. Bye honey, have fun. I'll speak to you in the morning."

Jenna clicks off. Ian rolls another joint. Mike attempts to comfort Joanna. Suzie continues to writhe until she falls off the sofa, giggling.

I am thirty-five years old.

The world and my kitchen is a mess.

I spy a spare wrap of Suzie's ecstasy powder on the table.

The party is almost over. But not quite yet.

20th February 2007 – Carnivale

Brian

Our argument threatens to eclipse everything. Venice is reaching the climax of its celebration, yet we tear through its narrow corridors with only hatred on our minds. Masked ghouls are flattened against stone tenements by our chase, stilt-walking acrobats are toppled into canals and English speaking-tourists are offended by our most un-festive of language.

“I’M SO SICK OF YOUR FUCKING SHIT,” shouts Joanna, prompting an 18th Century clown to make a camp gesture of disapproval. It’s one way to experience the city.

Joanna scampers immediately away through the crowd, causing me to pause for breath before I can summon a vicious enough response.

“DON’T BLAME THIS ON ME, YOU FUCKING BITCH,” I scream, resuming my chase. A fire-eater glares at me.

Joanna ducks down a side alley. I follow, but I’m faced with a junction and no sign of her through the crowd. I turn left. Still no sign. The crowd is more thinly dispersed here, and it becomes apparent that I’ve lost her.

I turn down another alley, this one deserted, hoping that some time alone will take the edge off my murderous urges. But there’s a door at the end of the alley, and the door leads to a bar. So I enter the bar.

I order a beer as impolitely as possible and drink it in a darkened corner, wondering if it’s possible to squeeze any more grumpiness into my facial expression.

A smooth looking guy with a close-cropped beard that matches his black polo neck saunters up to me and studies my face.

"So," he asks. "What's her name?"

I'm about to question his question when I realise that he's correctly diagnosed me with a case of woman troubles. This is irritating, but there's only one answer.

"Joanna."

"Joanna. Ha. Of course. I knew a Joanna." He clinks his drink with mine. "Here's to Joanna."

I take a sip, which masks a reluctant smile. Unlike the manic hordes of people outside, his good cheer is infectious.

"I'm Luca," the guy says, extending a hand for me to shake.

"Brian."

"Good to know you, Brian," says Luca. "Sorry to hear about your woman troubles."

I've yet to say anything more than our names.

A nearby table vacates. Luca claims the chairs and motions for me to join him.

"So, Brian," he says. "Tell me about Joanna."

I take a deep breath.

"It's complicated," I say.

"No, it isn't," says Luca.

I'm starting to like this guy, despite myself.

I finish telling Luca about Joanna. He has been listening in silence, occasionally pausing me with a raised finger before returning with more drinks and motioning for me to continue.

"Well, that's it," I conclude.

"OK," says Luca, apparently deep in thought. "Do you mind if I ask some questions, and express some opinions?"

"Be my guest."

"OK. First of all, I notice you keep using this phrase *end up*. You keep talking about wanting to *end up* with

Joanna, but she can't seem to commit to you. Why is this so important to you?"

"Why is it so important? We've been together for nearly twelve years, on and off, and she still can't seem to decide if she wants me. I can't get any security. I'm terrified of losing her."

"Everyone loses their loved ones eventually, Brian," says Luca. "One of you has to die first."

"I know that," I reply. "But with any luck, that won't happen until we're seventy or eighty."

"And what then? One of you will still have to suffer the death of the other. There's no such thing as a happy ending. Happiness is what happens before the ending."

"What's your point?"

"That there is no security. Even if you were to get married, you'll never reach a stage where you don't have to worry about losing your lover."

"That's a pretty depressing outlook."

"It's not depressing, Brian. It couldn't be any other way. It forces you to embrace the moment. Eternity only exists in the past. Once a moment has passed, it can never be undone. So create as many wonderful moments as possible."

"Easier said than done."

"No, it isn't. Look, while you obviously love Joanna, it seems like your ego is tied up with how she feels about you. That's never a good thing. Of course you don't want her to leave you, but you need to maintain some independent self-esteem. If for no other reason than it'll help you appreciate what you have with her right now."

I laugh, exhaling smoke.

"You're right," I admit. "You're absolutely right. Embrace the moment. Appreciate the present. I get that. It's just hard, when you've been together for so long, yet without ever feeling like we're a proper couple."

"I used to be like that," says Luca. "I used to stress about whether or not a girl was *officially* my girlfriend. I'd be oblivious to the fact that beautiful women were offering me their companionship and their bodies. I'd get insecure if they couldn't promise me how long the relationship would continue for. I'm the opposite now. I live for the moments."

It's about time I got a round in. The barman smiles at my basic, hesitant Italian and hands me my beers. I return to Luca.

"Thanks, my man," he says. "Listen, don't feel bad about being neurotic. This is what women do to us. But remember. All those love songs you hear. Album upon album of heartfelt dedications to mysterious and fickle women. *Brown-Eyed Girl*. *Arrivederci Roma*. The whole of *Blood On The Tracks*. These songs were written by people who experienced love to its fullest, but do you think the girls in the songs were all *officially* in relationships with the songwriters? Were they nice and secure, do you think?"

Angie by The Rolling Stones clicks onto the jukebox. Luca grins, winks and raises his drink.

"Point taken."

"La donna non è capace di amicizia," says Luca. "Conosce solo l'amore."

"What does that mean?"

"The woman, she is not capable of friendship. She knows only love."

The bar continues to fill, and our bottles continue to empty. Luca's given me some reasons for optimism, but I'm not feeling any better in the short term.

"What is it now, buddy?" he asks, sensing this.

"I just miss her," I say. "I can't believe we had a row on our last night here. It's been such an amazing holiday up to now."

"Relax," says Luca. "She'll be along shortly."

"What? How do you know?"

"It's the last day of Carnivale," says Luca.
"Everyone ends up here."

I'm unconvinced, but I'm starting to learn that some things remain truer if you resist questioning them. Such denial will require a change of subject, however.

"So, anyway," I say. "What do you do, Luca?"

"This is what I do."

"What do you mean?"

"I party. I talk to people."

"Yeah, I know. I guess what I meant was, what's your job?"

"I know what you meant, and I chose not to answer you in that manner."

"Why?"

"Because I do not define myself by my job. And I do not want you to. If you're fortunate enough to encounter me at a party, then that experience should tell you all you need to know about me. These occasions are what is important. Information on what I do to survive in-between is of no relevance."

"OK, fair enough."

"Life is a party, Brian," says Luca, warming to the theme. "This is what I've been trying to teach you. Celebrate the now. And do not feel guilty about it, because without the pursuit of happiness, everything is meaningless anyway."

"Fine."

"Life, relationships, parties. It all ends, Brian. If we sit here in this bar long enough, the sun will come up and everyone will leave in search of food. That doesn't mean we shouldn't celebrate, does it?"

"No."

"So, embrace the moment. Embrace Joanna."

"I would, if I knew where the fuck she was."

"Who's that guilty looking *bella donna* standing behind you, then?"

I pause, again wanting to delay the irritation of Luca's correctness.

A familiar hand appears on my shoulder.

I turn, stand and kiss Joanna more passionately than I can remember.

Luca wasn't lying when he said that everyone ends up here on the last night of Carnivale. The gang of musicians who led Joanna to the bar begin unpacking instruments and sheet music. The jukebox is switched off. Joanna reaches into her handbag and dons a golden theatrical mask which obscures the top half of her face, accentuating her lips.

"I love you," she says, looking into my eyes.

"I love you too," I reply.

The band leap into action.

The music, a kind of rhythmic Jewish folk, starts slowly, before accelerating into a mass of orchestral disco, handclaps and celebratory cheers. It's like nothing I've heard before, yet as familiar as an old standard.

It's too loud for me and Joanna to talk. And so we dance.

As does everyone else. We're even joined on the dancefloor by a happy dog, triggering laughter each time it passes through a shimmying pair of legs.

Joanna is particularly enthusiastic, and fellow revellers form a circle around her, clapping in unison to encourage her random yet graceful jig. Luca catches my eye and grins like the happiest man on the planet. The crowd encloses us, and the occupants of the bar are as one, dancing, celebrating, the way it should be.

31st December 1999 – Manic Millennium

Emma

It seems infinitely strange to me that my therapist needed to explain to me exactly what obsessive compulsive disorder is. I previously had no idea any such condition existed. I've been clenching my muscles symmetrically and counting things in multiples of seven for as long as I can remember. According to Ray, this is an anxiety disorder brought on by a need to assert control over myself and my surroundings. Whatever.

I glance at my watch. It's 16:19:53, triggering another ritual. I stare at the digits for seven seconds until the minute ticks over to form a row of satisfying zeroes. How exactly is celebrating the millennium any different to this? If you ask me, the whole fucking country has OCD.

Alexa passes me another joint through the

Emma

Every time I tell my therapist that "I've been feeling pretty schizophrenic lately," he likes to remind me that while the word *schizophrenia* translates roughly from the original Greek as "a splitting of the mind", this is not to be confused with *multiple personality disorder*, and secondly that I do not have multiple personality disorder, despite a strong sense of emotional duality.

"Multiple personality disorder is a kind of amnesia," he told me last week. "The patient is able to repress traumatic memories through the fragmentation of the self in this manner."

"Yeah," I replied. "That's what I have."

"No, it's not," he said. "I'm sorry Emma, but if you did have multiple personalities, you wouldn't be aware of it. You'd only be able to communicate with

gap in the seats and I inhale deeply. My exhalation fills the carriage with sweet skunk smoke. There's certainly something compulsive about such brazen public drug-taking, but fuck it. If I spend the turn of the century in a police cell, it'd be entirely appropriate and no more than I deserve.

It's dark outside, meaning I can now see my reflection in the train's windows. I look at the fat slut staring dumbly back at me. I'm not sure I can take another century of that ugly fucking face. Maybe I should just get off at Bristol and throw myself off the Severn Bridge in tribute to Richey.

What the fuck does Paul see in me? I know he's going to want to have sex soon. I foolishly told him I'd never made love to anyone before, and now he thinks I'm a virgin. Instead, he's going to find out that I'm just a dumb whore who can't keep her knickers on after a couple of gin and tonics, and who will gladly sacrifice her

me from the perspective of one personality. I think what you're doing is using the idea as a kind of metaphor, to convey feelings of emotions pulling you in different directions, as it were."

"So it's like *Catch 22*, then. If I think I'm crazy, I can't be crazy?"

"You're not crazy, Emma, and you're certainly not schizophrenic. There's just still quite a gap between what you know and what you feel. Your knowledge of your own self-worth differs wildly with the messages you've received from the world, and that's what we're attempting to resolve. If it helps to conceptualise this idea as there being 'Two Emmas', then by all means do so, but please don't take it literally and start worrying about multiple personalities."

At which point we ran out of time.

Alexa passes me another joint through the gap in the seats and I inhale

innocence to any twat in the vicinity.

I am so fucking disgusting.

The smell of the weed does attract some attention, but not from the thankfully absent ticket inspector. A couple of townie pricks leer across at us.

"Mind if we steal a quick toke?" asks one.

"Sure," says Alexa, reclaiming the joint and passing it over.

"Cheers, doll. You off to the Manics?"

"Of course."

"Sweet. Us too. Can't wait."

Yeah, right. Like these wankers even know who Richey is.

We arrive at Cardiff. I stumble off the train, feeling even more fucked in the head than usual. Alexa and Suzie stagger after me in the direction of the Millennium Stadium. Excited fans roam the streets, while I project my self-hatred onto every last one of

deeply. My exhalation fills the carriage with sweet skunk smoke. I know we're taking a bit of a cheeky risk, but fuck it. It's the millennium. The one night in history when it feels like we could get away with anything.

The smell of the weed does attract some attention, but not from the thankfully absent ticket inspector. A couple of lads hopefully sniff the air and lean across from their seats.

"Mind if we steal a quick toke?" says one.

"Sure," says Alexa, reclaiming the joint and passing it over.

"Cheers, doll. You off to the Manics?"

"Of course."

"Sweet. Us too. Can't wait."

I feel a tingle of excitement. I can't wait either.

It's not until the train pulls into Cardiff that I realise how stoned I am. I float down onto the platform, Alexa and Suzie in

them.

It's not long before the gates open and I'm swept up in the procession of cattle which carries me inside the stadium. Cattle wearing eyeliner, pink feather boas and tiaras, but cattle nonetheless.

We meet by a sandwich stand, too stoned to make sense of either our surroundings or our vague mutterings to each other.

"How about you, Emma?" asks Suzie. "Any new year's resolutions?"

Don't ask me that, Suzie. I don't want to spoil your party by telling you I'm planning to kill myself.

I'd never be so selfish as to spoil the memories of this evening by doing it tonight, of course. I'll sneak away mid-January and drown myself when no-one's looking.

After watching a couple of shit support acts, I get rid of Alexa and Suzie and head off alone to the highest point in the stadium, where I proceed to get even

sleepy pursuit. The streets are already packed with revellers desperate to pack as much partying as possible into the last few hours of the century. The bars are all full to bursting point, so we head straight for the Millennium Stadium.

Due to our expert timing, we wait only a few minutes before the gates open and the security guards make futile attempts to steady the stampede of people heading into the stadium. The crowd carries us inside, our feet barely touching the ground, the three of us finally reuniting in front of a baguette stall.

Suzie and Alexa both grin at me, Alexa's eyes taking a while to focus.

"That was strong stuff," says Suzie.

"Yeah," says Alexa. "Man, I promised myself it wasn't necessary to get this fucked. I wanted to be all clear-headed, so I could focus on my resolutions."

"What resolutions?" asks Suzie.

"I'm not sure now,"

higher.

Despite my inner turmoil, I enjoy the joint, feeling strangely comforted by the sensation of solitude in a building containing sixty thousand people.

A respectable percentage of those people are old-school Manics fans. All of us lonely, together.

Their music got me through some dark times, but its healing powers are fading. Whereas the Manics once gave voice to the legions of abused and dispossessed teenage outsiders populating dead-end villages and small towns all over the British Isles, now they have only empty, populist anthems. Their spell has been diluted, and I fear they can no longer reach me.

More support bands come and go. They mean nothing to me.

Yet a small part of me is irrationally optimistic. Somehow, somewhere, Richey is still alive, and if he was planning a return, wouldn't tonight be the perfect night?

says Alexa. "Probably to stop getting so fucked."

"How about you, Emma? Any new year's resolutions?"

Don't ask me that, Suzie. There aren't the words to explain.

Following unremarkable sets by Patrick Jones and Shack, Suzie and Alexa decide that they want to go down the front for Feeder. I don't, so I arrange to meet them later before the Manics.

"Are you sure you'll be OK on your own?" asks Alexa.

"Sure."

"Right, we'll see you at the top of that row, as soon as the Super Furries have finished. Don't go anywhere," says Suzie.

"Right. Have fun."

Left alone, I climb over rows of chairs to the highest point in the stadium, where I sit down and roll a joint.

I follow Alexa and Suzie's distant progress until they merge with the crowd of sixty thousand other

It's a long shot. But it might be my only hope.

I'm jolted from my daydream by Alexa and Suzie screaming up at me to join them. Taking care not to fall (my survival instinct somehow overriding my suicidal urges once again), I climb down the steps and let them drag me deep into the crowd.

"I'm so excited," Suzie shouts in my face. For a minute I wonder if she thinks Richey's going to return too, before remembering that she's a *new* Manics fan and is probably just hoping that they'll play *A Design For Life*. Which, of course, they will.

Finally, the band stride onto the stage and the place erupts.

Only three band members are present. But it's still early.

"We are the Manic Street Preachers," shouts James Dean Bradfield, and it's hard not to feel thrilled. The thrill soon deflates as he

people preparing to party, and maybe even for a fresh start of their own.

The weed serves its purpose – hours pass quickly, and I'm soon met by Alexa and Suzie (who shout at me from thirty rows down, rather than attempting the climb). They drag me into the centre of the crowd and we barge as far forward as possible. We end up with a decent place, about twenty rows of people back from the barrier.

"I'm so excited," Suzie shouts in my face.

Finally, the band stride onto the stage and the place erupts.

James and Sean are clad in tasteful black shirts, while Nicky Wire wears a pink spraypainted 'Culture Slut' T-shirt with matching skirt and knee-high socks. A feather boa coils around his microphone stand. He looks insanely happy.

The first song they play is *You Stole The Sun From My Heart*, which is one

announces the opening song, however.

“You. Stole. The. Sun. From. My. Heart.”

That pathetic drum machine sample starts up, along with James’s weakest riff yet. Nicky’s sixth-form level lyrics soon add to my agony. I don’t know whether to kill myself now or simply lie down and sleep.

No chance of that, as the song finally fades and is replaced with a familiar sound.

“I hate purity, I hate goodness. I don’t want virtue to exist anywhere. I want the whole world corrupt...”

The sample from 1984 sends a shiver down my spine before the intro riff to *Faster* knocks me sideways. I can’t believe they’re playing this song now, in front of this many people. One of Richey’s finest lyrics, the title can be interpreted both as “faster than” and “one who fasts”, and is presumably the first (and only) song about anorexic superiority to hit the top twenty.

of their weaker recent singles and an odd choice of opener, but it gets the crowd pogoing and screaming along with the chorus. I wonder if it’s a red herring.

They play *Faster*.

This is an odd sensation.

While my inner punk is thrilled that such an unconventional song is being blasted out to a predominantly mainstream crowd such as this, and while I have many, many emotions and memories entwined with these lyrics, something occurs to me that never has before.

Faster is shit.

The lyrics are steeped in the dumb arrogance of the habitual self-abuser, the equivalent of an angry goth kid who acts superior to everyone else on the planet despite seeming so intensely unhappy. I’m ashamed to say I used to be that angry goth kid, but already I can feel that shell falling away. There is nothing beautiful about self-destruction. If there was, the

Even with Richey gone, just hearing the song being performed makes me feel like someone understands.

I offer Alexa a look of silent awe, but she shrugs and turns away. I guess the song's message of empowerment through self-abuse doesn't resonate with her as much as it once did.

Fucking hypocrite. Those scars on your tits may have healed, honey, but you'll always be a fuck-up like me.

I'm still reeling from the primal rendition of *Faster* when they play *Everything Must Go*, the title track of their first album since Richey's disappearance, one which the mainstream deemed inoffensive enough to accept. That album will always feel like a betrayal, yet the song is doing weird things to me tonight. As much as I've vowed to hate it forever, something about hearing sixty thousand people echo that chorus hits me right in the heart.

idea of beauty would be rendered meaningless.

I catch Alexa's eye, and we exchange dopey, stoned smiles.

"I thought you liked this one," says Suzie.

"I did."

I catch myself thinking something that would shame my inner old-school Manics fan to the core.

I don't need to voice this thought out loud. Suzie does it for me.

"I wish they'd play something off *Everything Must Go*," she says.

I grin and glance around at faces streaked with mascara tears, lips mouthing along with every word. Heartbroken goth girls still praying in vain for the return of their messiah. I sympathise, but I can't help thinking I'm above all this now. Richey is not coming back.

I wonder what percentage of goths are victims of sexual abuse, and feel myself suddenly surrounded by the combined

No. Fucking sell-outs. This is not what I want. I want Richey back. I refuse to move on.

The song ends. I feel myself torn, and at the mercy of the next song, knowing somehow that it will seal my fate forever. I can't handle even a second of suspense. What the fuck are they going to play next?

Tsunami.

Oh, you fuckers.

I don't know how to react to this.

On the one hand, the sitar-led rock-lite of this mediocre hit single is the very antithesis of everything the Manics used to stand for. I used to despise this track and the album that spawned it.

Until I found out what the song was about.

The Silent Twins.

I once had an English homework assignment to write 250 words on any subject that fascinated me. The challenge was not to exceed that word count. I still have my piece memorised.

agony of hundreds of lost souls.

Faster still retains some power, then.

The band play *Everything Must Go*.

Inevitably, it's perfect. How could it not be? It's the millennium, and this is no time for teenage cliques or reverse elitism. There's not a single person here that doesn't deserve a fresh start.

Thousands of fans echo the anthemic, hopeful chorus, all of us looking to the future without fear or regret, even if only for these few moments.

Everything must go, indeed. Already I can feel my former self falling away, along with reams of lame rationalisations for continuing to keep myself at the mercy of past pain. I know full well that I am not a disgusting slut. I'm not even that fat. Nobody deserves to be raped, and being raped no more robs you of your innocence than being murdered robs you of your soul.

Bad analogy? Sue

June and Jennifer Gibbons were identical twins born in 1963 to a military family in Barbados. They grew up in Wales, where speech impediments and playground racism made for a traumatic childhood. Eventually, they developed a private language and became selective mutes, communicating only with each other, their identities blending into a single entity.

As teens, following failed interventions by therapists, they were sent to separate boarding schools where each girl became catatonic without the company of her twin. Upon reuniting, they engaged in a joint withdrawal from the world once again, embarking on writing careers and penning several novels each. Perhaps frustrated by their lack of publishing success, the twins then began a life of crime, an eventual act of arson leading to their being committed to Broadmoor Hospital, where they remained for fourteen years. An intense course of non-voluntary medication eventually robbed

me.

And the band played *Tsunami*.

Alexa squeezes me round my waist, ejecting all breath from my body and causing me to zone out for a while thinking about old school projects and therapy sessions.

She must have starved part of my brain of oxygen, because a niggling self-hatred that was there a while ago isn't there any more, and as Suzie joins the group hug I realise that we're simply three girls enjoying the biggest party of our lives.

The head rush continues for several songs until right out of nowhere, the band decide to dive headfirst into a cover version of Chuck Berry's *Rock and Roll Music*. After exchanging a knowing glance with Alexa, we leap into the air and throw our bodies about like there's no tomorrow. Maybe there isn't.

Exhausted, sweaty, stoned, dirty and *happy*, we

them of their creative urges.

It is said that an unspoken pact existed between the two girls that upon the death of one of them, the other must resume a normal life and once again communicate with others. This evolved into the belief that one twin must sacrifice herself for the good of their other. Hours after being released from the psychiatric hospital, Jennifer died of a sudden inflammation of the heart in a case that baffled medical professionals.

As promised, June resumed a normal lifestyle and began to communicate once more with others, even contemplating a return to creative writing. She still lives in Wales.

The song ends and several others are played, but to me, the stadium is silent. I realise what all my thoughts of suicide have been leading to.

Ray was right. I do not have multiple personality disorder. But I do have two distinct halves, fighting for dominance of

continue to dance and let the rest of the set wash over us in a blur of anthemic melody. Even the teen-angst throwback *Of Walking Abortion* comes across as more of an affectionate tribute to overcoming earlier struggles than a celebration of depression.

Even if I've managed to let go of Richey, I hope he's alive, and I hope that he's happy. If only for the sake of the forlorn-looking goth girl beside me, staring sadly at the side of the stage and counting down the minutes until midnight.

"I think the bar got pretty busy during that one," says Nicky Wire, grinning from behind his green eyeliner. "We must have sold about eight million pints during that one."

By the time *Motorcycle Emptiness* fades out and the band leave the stage, I'm drained of all emotions and energy yet, like everyone else here, screaming for more.

But first, there's the matter of the millennium.

my soul. If that sounds epic and melodramatic, that's because it is. It's as epic as it gets. Good versus evil. Future versus past. I need to let go of all this bullshit emotional baggage, and accept what I know to be true.

I did not deserve to be raped.

And if it's hard to really *feel* that, then I need to find something else to feel. Something new.

"JUST GIVE ME SOME OF THAT ROCK AND ROLL MUSIC..."

What is happening?

The world dissolves. The Manics are covering Chuck Berry.

Two options present themselves.

a) I could hate the fact that the Manics are covering Chuck Berry. I could cling to my memories of Richey. Of cold, self-abusive nights spent listening to *The Holy Bible* and feeling validated by its puritanical destruction. I could spend another century kidding myself that self-

Suzie shrieks and drags Alexa and I into another group hug. Thousands of strangers exchange nervous, excited grins. Huge video screens display images of national and global celebration, eventually settling upon an image of Big Ben. I can't make out the words of the announcer, but we all know what this means.

I look into Suzie's eyes. She looks so happy, and I am happy about this. I expect she has no greater millennium resolution than to continue partying as hard as possible, and maybe there is no greater resolution than that.

I look into Alexa's eyes, our souls naked before each other.

"If you want to change your life, now's the time to do it," says her expression. "We've both been through a lot of shit, a lot of it self-inflicted, but we're beyond that now. The future is unwritten, so let's make it fucking cool."

The first chime of

harm is beautiful, or that anorexia equals empowerment. I could cling to my pain, and fuck up my relationship with Paul, or indeed any chance of experiencing real love.

b) I could love the fact that the Manics are covering Chuck Berry. I could let go. Let go of my pain, let go of Richey, let go of this obsessive need to control everything and learn to *feel* again. I could accept that Richey is dead, and embrace the possibility that maybe the Manics are better off without him. They seem happy now, and however much you might be able to admire the articulate rage of *The Holy Bible*, no-one should *want* to feel like that, and certainly not aspire to. Quite the opposite. Feelings like those should be rejected as soon as humanly possible.

This brain ain't big enough for the both of us.

I am with my two best friends watching the Manics cover Chuck Berry in front of sixty thousand people I take a deep breath.

Big Ben echoes round my soul, followed by the loudest cheer I've ever heard.

My tear ducts burst open and a thousand years of tears pour forth, flooding the stadium.

Alexa kisses me. This provokes a lewd cheer from a nearby tall dude, so Alexa kisses him too. Suzie, not wanting to miss out, kisses the tall dude and then Alexa. A guy with a big ginger beard gets in on the action by kissing me as well.

The final chime fades, followed by the loudest cheer I've ever heard.

Sixty thousand people wish every other one of those people a happy new year.

Auld Lang Syne starts up. I link arms with Alexa and Suzie and sing along at the top of my voice, despite knowing only a small percentage of the words.

"Guess what?" says Alexa.

"What?"

"It's the year two thousand."

I grab hold of a passing guitar riff, point it at my brain and blow myself away.

And so it is. Already, everything is different. I assume my flying car will be delivered in the morning. Meanwhile, I realise that I have been reborn.

This is going to take some getting used to.

30th October 1999 – The Jewish Kitchen

Benny

Primal Scream leave the stage, the double-whammy encore of *Loaded* and *Movin' On Up* still echoing in my ears and filling me with a sense of invincibility. I look around for Ed, but he's nowhere to be seen, having vanished during *Kowalski* only to reappear briefly on the VIP balcony, boogieing away before being escorted out of sight by a security guard.

I wade through the crowd, exchanging awed looks with strangers and keeping my eye out for possible routes backstage.

Ed appears on a staircase by the hall's entrance.

"Come with me," he says.

I follow him up to an unattended bar.

"Free drink," he says, fishing carrier bags from a drawer and tossing me some.

We commence filling the bags with plastic bottles of refrigerated Becks, until we have all that we can carry.

"Six bags each," says Ed, assessing our stash. "About a dozen bottles in each one. Should be a good party."

We take a deep breath and head back downstairs.

Our booty attracts a few jealous glances, but we affect an air of casual irritation and make it to the main exist unaccosted.

As we pass by a clutch of uninterested bouncers, I experience the same beautiful transition from fear to triumph as when gliding through Virgin Megastore's security barriers without triggering the alarm (electronic tags peeling easily away from limited edition gatefold albums that don't fit Virgin's standard security cases).

Ed, two feet ahead of me, is nearly home free. I glance down and notice a split appear in one of his carrier bags.

A bottle escapes, bounces twice and rolls along the floor, coming to rest under the foot of a security guard, whose full attention we now have.

"Alright, boys," he says, in an Italian accent that at any other time would be comical. "Did you pay for these drinks?"

"Bollocks," says Ed.

"No," I say. "Our mates did."

The security guard's walkie talkie crackles with static.

"They took everything," says a disembodied voice. "Hold onto them."

"It seems that this beer has not been paid for," says the security guard.

"Let us off, mate," says Ed, the full extent of his drunkenness only now becoming apparent. "We've got to get to the Jewish Kitchen."

"Shut up, Ed," I interject. "Look," I say, staring straight at the bridge of the bouncer's nose. "I know how this looks, and I know this is going to sound like bullshit, but we honestly didn't steal these."

"So who did steal them?"

"I don't really want to grass anyone up, but we were coming out of the gig when our two mates handed us the bags and said they'd bought a load of beer for a party we're going to, and that we should meet them there."

"And what are the names of your friends?"

"Er, Eric and Wes."

"I see."

"Come on, dude," says Ed. "Primal Scream, man. Primal fucking Scream." Ed does a kind of indie shuffle.

“Shut up, Ed. Look, I realise now that they obviously didn’t pay for the beer, and I admit it seemed a bit dodgy at the time. But I’m pretty drunk and didn’t question it. I honestly didn’t think we were stealing it. I’m not that pissed that I’d just walk out with all this beer and expect to not get caught.”

Ed starts singing the chorus of *Kill All Hippies*.

The security guard glares at Ed, fixes me with a contemplative gaze and scratches his goatee.

“Listen,” he says, in his musical Italian lilt which makes me feel like I’m negotiating with a mafia boss. “I could tell the management what you have told me, and they would simply say to phone the police.”

“Right,” I say, a solemn nod conveying that the gravitas of the situation has not escaped me.

“But,” he continues, “I don’t like the idea of arresting you two while your mates, who sound like they were more to blame, are at some party laughing it up while you’re stuck in a police cell.”

I nod again, this one communicating grateful appreciation of his fairness.

“So I’m going to let you go. But two things. Firstly, you should be very grateful to me that you don’t spend Christmas in prison. Secondly, you must never come here again.”

“What about Idlewild next month?” asks Ed. “I’ve already got my ticket. Can I come to that?”

The security guard doesn’t deem this worthy of a response.

“Do I make myself clear?” he asks me.

“Yes, completely,” I reply. “I’m really sorry about this. I know it was stupid, and I appreciate you not blaming us for it.”

“Right, then,” says the security guard. “Get out of here.”

We get out of there.
Fucking invincible.

Ed continues singing until we reach the car, where Eric and Wes are waiting for us.

"What took you so long?" asks Wes.

"We got caught stealing beer," says Ed. "Benny blamed it on you."

"Cheers."

"We've been banned from the venue," says Ed.

"Idiot. What about Idlewild?"

"I'll be there," says Ed. "I'll wear a disguise or something."

Eric drives us away as I fish around for booze under the seats. Thankfully there's no shortage of stolen alcohol, as we still have a few bottles of Glastonbury vodka left. I crack the seal on a bottle of Smirnoff and take a mighty swig.

Ed puts my Kings Of Infinite Space CD on the stereo and flips open the sunroof, an empty gesture at night but the breeze is exhilarating. I find myself enjoying the feeling of our band driving around at night with loud music blaring, having gotten away with minor crime.

"So where the fuck is the Jewish Kitchen?" asks Ed.

"No-one knows exactly," I reply. "Somewhere in the vicinity of campus. Everyone's supposed to gather in the square once the club shuts then presumably someone will show us the way."

"Are we gonna be there on time? What if they've already left?"

"We'll make it if Eric gets a move on."

We're already way too late but Eric seems determined that we can still make it, not letting up his speed as we veer recklessly around the roads surrounding Essex University. The CD ends and there's a disorientating silence

before my brain processes the fact that the car is now spinning completely out of control.

A front wheel hits something and I experience the sensation of being thrown over handlebars.

There's a moment of clarity. The car is upside down and in mid-air.

About to die, I have less than a second to settle on a single erotic image which will be burned onto my brain for eternity. In the absence of true love, it's all I have. I scan my memory for the female face which made this farce of a life worthwhile.

I think of Lucy emerging from a shower, clutching a towel to her chest with the shock of sudden exposure, her cheeks flushing with secret exhibitionism.

Then I remember how distant she became after our break-up. It's not her.

I visualise Joanna topless on a Mediterranean beach, flaunting her assets where she thinks no-one who knows her can see.

Then I recall how losing my virginity to her seemed to allow a previously unimaginable coldness to permeate our friendship, mocking our oft-repeated promises of enduring affection. It's not her either.

Shelley can go fuck herself.

Melissa? We nearly kissed once, but nothing more. She's still a good mate, and I know I'd kill for a glimpse of her bra strap, but I can't fantasise about her in any more detail than that. It's simply not realistic enough.

I guess my all too brief love life, while not lacking in drama, was not a particularly successful one. What about friendship? Can I let go of sex and simply be glad to have been alive for the company of good people?

Alexa winks at me as the car smashes into the ground.

There's some metallic rumbling, like we're surfing down a staircase on a dinner tray.

I open my eyes and check for injuries. Apparently intact, I undo my seatbelt and land on my head.

"Fuck," says Eric.

"Everyone alright?" Wes looks round at us, one by one.

"I think so," I reply. "Ed?"

"Yeah. I think we should get out though."

Eric tries to open the door but it sticks in the ground, so he's forced to roll down the window and slither out. Wes does the same on his side. I'm faced with the mechanism that flips the front seat forward to allow access to the back. It's trickier upside down. Eric reaches in and frees me.

"Fucking tyre burst," he says.

After a weary stagger to the roadside, we turn and contemplate the car. I wonder if it will explode. Instead, a lone firework fizzles sarcastically above it in the night sky. The car remains motionless in the field like a dead beetle.

"Fuck," says Eric. "I'm gonna have to ring my dad. You guys get the fuck out of here, or he'll know I was pissed."

"Where the fuck are we supposed to go?" asks Ed.

"We're not far from uni, you can walk home from here."

"For fuck's sake."

Ed heads back to the car and fishes out a couple of unbroken bottles of vodka. Wes shrugs, salutes us, and heads off in the direction of town.

I accidentally touch my head, and notice that I'm bleeding.

I have to make it to this party.

Ed and I crack open a fresh Smirnoff each and trudge despondently along the dual carriageway, hope of locating the Jewish Kitchen draining from us at a similar rate to the vodka from the bottles.

"Stop," I tell Ed. "I hear something."

"What?"

"A beat. Let me see if I can tell where it's coming from."

We freeze, and cock our ears to the sound of distant drums. A car glides past, dance music pumping from its stereo at full volume.

"Bollocks."

Ten steps later, I hear another beat, this one from beyond the woods.

"I think it's this way," I tell Ed.

"Stop getting my hopes up," he says. "Your head's bleeding, by the way."

"Listen, I can hear voices. It's this way."

I set off into the woods, Ed in grumbling pursuit.

The path through the woods is not as clear as I'd hoped, and I soon sustain several more cuts to the face courtesy of rampant bracken and vicious twigs. At one point Ed is rendered invisible by the random overgrowth, a soundtrack of inventive swearing and crackling vegetation the only indication of his proximity.

"There had better be some fucking girls at this party after all this shit," says Ed.

"As you'd know if you hadn't spent the first month of uni getting stoned in Walton," I reply, "you don't have to worry about that at student parties. The days of sitting in

some damp beach hut with three of your ex-girlfriends are over. Girls want sex just as much as we do. We've just been at the mercy of the random scattering of females in our hometowns. Uni is a whole other story."

"It had fucking better be. I'm getting cut up to fuck, here."

"We just nearly died, and you're worried about a few brambles?"

"If I get stung by a nettle, I'm out of here."

"Stop fucking moaning. We're nearly there. Listen."

The beat is now distinctly audible, as are voices of nearby revellers. Light trickles through the branches.

We press on.

The body of a girl lies motionless by the entrance to the woods, a gory chest wound glistening in the moonlight.

I approach her.

She blinks awake.

"Hey," she says. "Nice make-up."

I glance around. Zombies drift across my field of vision, some of them half-dancing to a musical backdrop of intense electro.

"Is this the Jewish Kitchen?" I ask her.

"Yeah, that is," she says, pointing at a nearby building. "Were you at the Halloween party?"

"No."

"Right," she says. "Well, nice to meet you."

The Jewish Kitchen reveals itself as a white wooden lakeside dwelling surrounded by willow trees. I head towards it, dodging stylishly dressed vampires and drunken werewolves, while Ed borrows a lighter from the dead girl. I stagger uncertainly towards the lake, blending effortlessly in with the zombies.

A cute Asian girl in a black catsuit and matching pointed ears rocks asymmetrically back and forth on a swing by the lake. I approach her, fear of rejection overshadowed by that of death, allowing me to inject unfamiliar levels of confidence into my eye contact.

"Want a push?" I venture.

"Sure."

I stand behind her and place my hands on her hips, a feeling of easy intimacy already established. I push her gently forward.

"Harder," she says.

I push her harder.

"What's your name?"

"Benny."

"I'm Aiko."

"Hi, Aiko."

"Push me higher."

I increase my thrust, my hands missing the contact with her midriff as her trajectory peaks, before gravity sucks her back into my grasp.

"You should be careful," she says. "Didn't you know it's bad luck for a black cat to cross your path?"

"I'll bear that in mind," I reply, stuck for a more flirtatious comeback.

"No offence," she says. "But you don't totally look like you've made the effort with your costume. What are you supposed to be, a victim of a particularly pathetic zombie? Or did some girl with nail extensions scratch you up?"

"I'm not wearing a costume. I was in a car crash."

Aiko lowers her feet and spins round to face me, the chains of the swing forming a cross above her head. It's only now, with such a close view of her moonlit olive skin, that I realise how beautiful she is.

"Fuck," she says. "Are you alright?"

Without waiting for an answer, she kisses me, placing her hands tenderly on my face and wrapping her legs around my waist.

"I'm sorry," she says, breaking the embrace. "That was inappropriate. I just felt a strange surge of concern for you."

"You don't need to apologise," I tell her. "But I'm fine. Just slightly shaken."

"My poor thing," she says. "I wish I could comfort you."

"Why can't you?"

"Don't get me wrong, I'm attracted to you," she says. "And not just because of your sexy scars. But I have a boyfriend. Well, sort of. It's complicated."

"Isn't it always?"

"Not like this. How can I put it? I was about to break up with him, when he took some bad ecstasy and spent a month in a coma. Now he's brain damaged. With a good chance of recovery, but not guaranteed."

"Fuck. I'm sorry to hear that."

"Yeah, well. That's my situation. I don't exactly know where that leaves me."

"Right."

"Do you think I'm supposed to be faithful?"

"That's hard for me to answer. I'm biased."

"Why?"

"Well, of course I find you attractive too. But I can't judge your situation. I don't want to fuck up your relationship."

"I told you I was about to break up with him anyway."

"There you go, then, I guess."

"Right," she says, taking my hand and hopping down from the swing. "Follow me."

Aiko leads me into the Jewish Kitchen, which appears twice as big on the inside as it does from the outside. The walls are covered with ceiling-high tarpaulins daubed in luminous Greek lettering, and the noise in here is more intense too. A cape-wearing DJ entertains a crowd of strobe-lit ghouls and demons, low cut tops and mini skirts equal in number to blood stains and slash wounds. Sex and death are everywhere.

Entering the building is reminiscent of the overwhelming sensation of arriving at the crowded venue just in time for the Primals to launch into *Swastika Eyes*. Already, that seems like years ago.

Aiko manoeuvres her way through the crowd, dragging me behind her, until we reach a fully-equipped bathroom. She locks the door behind us and pulls a light cord which fails to illuminate us, meaning we're only visible for half of every second via the glow of strobes through a frosted glass window.

"Come on," she says. "Let's get you cleaned up."

She peels off her catsuit, revealing a body that might be too beautiful to take were it not for the flickering darkness constantly eclipsing my attempts to focus on it. She leaves her cat's ears on.

I unbuckle my belt and kick off my shoes. Aiko pounces on me and tears off my jeans and t-shirt before hopping into the bath and turning on the shower. I remove my underwear and follow her, by which time she is soaking wet and bent over, hands grasping the base of the shower.

"Take me," she says.

The strobes increase in intensity and the presence of water fills me with the irrational fear of being electrocuted. Thankfully, my body is hornier than it has ever been. Equally miraculously, this situation seems to demand hard-and-fast sex rather the kind of tender love-making which I would not currently be capable of.

I place my hands on her hips, echoing our earlier moment on the swing, and enter her.

Her body begins to shudder as if she really is being electrocuted. I thrust faster than I knew I was capable of as the DJ cranks it up a notch and shafts of strobe seep under the door in time with the pounding beats. Aiko looks over her shoulder at me. We make eye contact, and somewhere amidst the overwhelming assaults on our senses we experience a moment of togetherness. Like a feline dream, the flickering electrics unite us.

The water turns viciously cold. We fuck to a screaming climax.

I think I enjoy it.

“Don’t be offended if I don’t spend the night with you,” says Aiko as she wriggles back into her catsuit. The strobes have calmed, replaced with a rotating rainbow of dim disco colours. “My parents are staying with me and I promised I’d be home by three. But I put my number in your phone, so I expect you to stay in touch.”

“Of course.”

I dry myself vaguely with my t-shirt and put my clothes back on.

“Tonight was wonderful,” she says. “But I want to spend some proper time with you soon. Just give me a chance to sort things out with Randal.”

“Sure.”

“You sure you’re OK? You still seem a little dazed.”

“Yeah, I’m fine. Just dazed. I’ll track down my flatmate, see how he’s getting on.”

“OK, well, I’m gonna head home then. Call me.”

She kisses me, inhales deeply and dons an expression of conspiratorial nonchalance before opening the bathroom door and striding back into the demonic disco outside.

I don't particularly want to face anyone, particularly strangers, though am curious to see to what jealous looks my eventual emergence from the bathroom attracts. After all, what's more life-affirming than the sexual respect of one's peers?

I spend a discreet minute tying my shoelaces before heading back in the direction of the beats.

"There you are," says Ed, spotting me on the swing. "You look fucked. And soaked."

"Yeah," I reply. "I feel fucked."

"Quite a night, eh?" he says. "Rock and roll."

Tonight has very been rock and roll. I try to latch onto this thought despite the fact that I want to cry, and am craving a warm bed with the intensity of a heroin addiction.

"Where's your vodka?" asks Ed. "Never mind, I've still got plenty."

Ed passes me his bottle. I take a swig of Smirnoff and watch a vampire paddling in the lake, trousers rolled up to his knees.

The sky caves in.

My stomach attempts to turn itself inside out.

I run back to the bathroom.

Collapsing in front of the mercifully vacant toilet, I unbuckle my belt and spend an hour being sick.

My vomiting eventually evolves into unproductive retching, at which point Ed locates me and drags me from the bathroom so that a girl he's pulled may use the toilet. My jeans fall down in the process, subjecting me to the mocking laughter of dancing demons who disperse from my new resting place in front of the DJ booth.

"Fucking freshers," I hear one of them say.

The dry heaves start up again, so I crawl back into the bathroom as Ed vacates the premises with his new bird.

Unwilling to contaminate the memory of my tryst with Aiko, I close my eyes and push the door shut, sealing myself into my ceramic tomb.

Ever thankful for small mercies, I offer thanks to the heavens for the fact that my body has no fluid left to eject, and clamber into the bath.

Somebody enters the bathroom to urinate. I pull my t-shirt over my head to respect their privacy.

Oblivion beckons me as my brain scrambles to process the life-affirming gig and my brush with the law and my near-death experience and the sex with a goddess and my public humiliation and the physical punishment inflicted on my body and I try to tell myself that it's just rock and roll.

But I know that this is all just distraction from the fact that there was something in that moment of electrical eye contact with Aiko that transcends all this. Tomorrow, however grateful I am for the luxury of clean clothes and a comfortable bed, I'm still going to have to deal with the very real fact that I have fallen helplessly in love once again.

Shortly before the darkness consumes me, I receive a text message from Alexa.

Where are you? it says.

Using my last remaining brainpower, I text back *I don't know* before my body admits defeat and my mind vacates the party.

19th August 2017 – Coombe Cellars

Alexa

I can't find my fucking tree, let alone our initials. I've come to accept that much of the coastal landscape has changed beyond recognition over the past two decades, but surely we're entitled to a few souvenirs of youth. James might currently bear no resemblance to the boy I fell in love with, but there was a time when he embodied my romantic ideal, and it hurts to lose the last physical remnant of that love.

Alone in the woods, I feel instinctive and feral. The urge to drop to my knees and crawl like a panther, growling at wildlife, is interrupted by my ringtone. This is the looped intro beat to the Teenagers song *Epilogue*, one of my favourite Benny and Lily compositions, but it still sounds out of place in this primal location and snaps me back to the world of humans and technology.

I accept the message and Tony's face appears.

"Alexa, honey," he says, cigarette smoke rising from off-screen. "The record company are up my arse about album number two. We're already a month past the deadline. They want to hear a demo, anything. Hit me back when you get this."

I swear loudly and this attracts the attention of a nearby lifeform. I hear the sounds of cracking twigs and urination.

"Alexa, is that you?"

"Hey, Dave. What's up?"

"Nothing. Just having a piss. Benny was asking where you'd got to."

"I'll be down in a minute."

"Did you find your tree?"

"No."

"Oh, well. You know what they say. If destroyed, still true."

"Right."

"I'll be getting a joint ready for you."

"Cheers."

I'm starting to feel silly standing alone in the forest, searching for carved declarations of teenage love. I'm not even sure what it would mean if I found the jagged engraving *AR 4 JM* surrounded by a spiky heart, but the longing won't leave me.

I slide down the leafy incline, hop the stream, and emerge back into the clearing.

Lily has her acoustic guitar out and is playing *Naked Flame*. Benny seems lost in the music. He's always telling me how Lily singing his words allows him to pretend the songs were written by someone else. This seems like an impossible luxury to me. I have to sing my own lyrics.

Of course, I have to write them first.

"How's the writer's block?" asks Lily upon sighting me, cutting her chorus short and snapping Benny out of his trance, who blinks a few times like a startled child and places his head in Vanessa's lap. "Did you find divine inspiration?"

"I couldn't even find my tree."

"Oh, I'm sorry," says Vanessa, accepting a joint from Dave.

"Why don't you just write about this place?" asks Benny.

"I think Keats beat you to it," says Dave.

"What do you mean?" I reply.

"Give me a second."

Dave flips open his phone and speaks the words "Keats Teignmouth" into the search engine. An ancient poem appears on the screen, which Dave begins to recite in the jerky, rhythmic style of a 1980's rapper.

*For there's Bishop's teign
And King's teign
And Coomb at the clear Teign head
Where close by the stream
You may have your cream
All spread upon barley bread.*

"That's fantastic," says Vanessa.
"Wait, there's more."

*There is Newton Marsh
With its spear grass harsh
A pleasant summer level
Where the maidens sweet
Of the Market Street
Do meet in the dusk to revel.*

"Dirty bastard," says Lily.
This raises a smile and I slump down by the
campfire.

"What's up, Alexa?" asks Benny. "Not still obsessing
over James? It's been twenty years, already. Time to move
on, maybe?"

I stick my tongue out at him and slide the shirt from
my shoulders, my strappy top more than sufficient to keep
me warm. I don't remember it ever being quite this hot here
at night.

"It's not James I'm sad about," I say. "More what he
symbolises. I'm thirty-six. You'd think I could have
managed at least one meaningful relationship by now."

"But you're Alexa Ray, seventh sexiest person in
rock," says Benny.

"In twenty-fifteen, yeah. According to the *N.M.E.*,
anyway. It's all very well a few indie boys having a crush on

me, but I'm looking for something a little deeper than groping a groupie."

Dave begins to whistle a familiar riff. Lily takes her cue and joins in on the guitar, while Benny and Vanessa harmonise. The song is *Young Folks* by Peter, Bjorn & John, another early twenty-first century classic. This version, however, is bastardised by Dave's obscene improvised lyrics relating to my alleged fetish for teenage boys. This mockery has been relentless ever since I kissed a young fan backstage at a gig once.

I show my raised middle finger to each of my friends in turn, but I can't keep the grin from my face.

"Speaking of James," says Dave, once the song concludes. "Benny, do you remember when we had to send him into the river to fetch our beer?"

"What's this?" asks Lily.

"Dave tied our beer to a rock and left it floating in the river to keep cool," says Benny. "But the tide came in, so we had to save James in to retrieve it. He wouldn't stop moaning about his white jeans being ruined."

"Why didn't he just take them off?" asks Vanessa.

"He was probably self-conscious with Alexa undressing him with her eyes," says Dave.

"I don't think I was there that night," I tell him.

"Yeah, you were. You kept disappearing off though. I think you were sulking with Joanna."

Benny sits upright at this mention of Joanna's name.

"Where the fuck is Joanna?" he asks. "I haven't seen her in over a year."

"Look her up," says Dave, tossing Benny his phone.

"Joanna Harrison, United Kingdom, thirty-six, research scientist, contact," says Benny into the search engine, before flipping through the faces that appear.

"Here she is," says Benny, hitting the call button. Benny sits next to Dave and points the cam at their faces in time for Joanna to answer.

Joanna's face appears and I fail to resist glancing at the screen. She seems like she's put on weight, but maybe that's just wishful thinking.

Benny and Dave cheer an incomprehensible greeting.

"What do you want, Benny?" replies Joanna.

"Well, that's no way to talk to an old friend. We're having a beach party at Coombe Cellars and we got thinking about you."

"Right."

"How's it going? It's been ages."

"I'm really not in the mood, Benny."

Dave makes rabbit ears with his fingers above Benny's head, but this fails to amuse Joanna either.

"What's wrong?" protests Benny. "Have I offended you?"

"Look, I really don't want to speak to you or Dave or anyone from the past. Don't call me again."

"Jesus. What have I done? I just wanted us all to get together."

"Stop trying to recreate the past, Benny."

Joanna clicks off.

"What the fuck?" asks Benny, to no-one in particular.

"Fickle wench," says Dave.

"Did you two have a falling out or something?", asks Lily

"No," says Benny. "I don't know what the fuck that was about. What does she mean, stop trying to recreate the past? I'm not here with you guys because of fucking nostalgia. I'm celebrating the fact that we're still here, not that we once were."

"People change," says Vanessa, placing a comforting hand on Benny's shoulder. "Maybe she's not the girl you remember."

"It hasn't been that fucking long," says Benny. "Don't get me wrong, I still have you guys and that's what matters. I just hate it when people delete themselves from your life like that."

I'm reluctant to get involved but something is occurring to me.

"What date is it today?" I ask Dave.

"August nineteenth," he says, checking his phone.

"Weren't there some bombings a couple of years ago today?"

"Shit. I think you might be right. I can't keep track of them any more."

"Fucking hell," says Benny. "Tell me I didn't just phone her up and harass her on the anniversary of her arm being blown off."

Lily and Vanessa don identical pained expressions.

"Jesus."

"How's Wayne?" I ask Vanessa, attempting a change of subject.

"He's fine. He's with Lisa until Saturday. I still feel guilty about leaving him, but Benny convinced me we're entitled to a couple of days off a month."

"Of course you are," says Lily. "I can't believe he's a year old already."

"Did Benny tell you?" asks Dave. "His first word was *bassline*."

"Only because Benny trained him like a parrot, leaving that fucking Danny Raymond track playing in his room all the time," says Vanessa.

"You should hear him," says Benny. "It's so cute. *Bassline*. I'm gonna sample him."

Vanessa and Benny exchange a loving glance. I don't begrudge them their happiness, but I'm still craving some of my own and can't shake the feeling that I'm running out of time. Even Dave, who in any other year would no doubt readily and enthusiastically offer his sexual services (if not quite the meaningful relationship I seek), is currently being tied in knots by an impossibly moody Frenchwoman called Adele whose messages he checks for constantly.

Lily is as romantically inscrutable as ever, but I'd be surprised if there wasn't a secret someone responsible for inspiring the desire and longing that fuel her vocals.

"Speaking of music," says Lily, putting down her guitar and warming her hands on the fire. "I think someone else can provide it now. Do the honours, Dave."

Dave sets his phone to shuffle mode and a playlist starts up. The first track is that *Time Travelling Man* song that I keep hearing on the radio. It's a great song (I need to find out who it's by) but it makes me sadder than I'm currently comfortable with, and I'm soon seeking another change of subject.

"That night James got his jeans soaked," says Benny. "Was that when those speed freaks started on Brian?"

"I think so," says Dave.

I remember that well enough. I'm not sure I've ever been so scared. Benny managed to calm me down, which he's always been good at, though since becoming a father he's been requiring me to return the favour on more than one occasion.

But the mention of James and his white jeans serves only to further fuel my yearning for some man I've yet to meet. I'm all hot and bothered for no-one in particular. No wonder I've got writer's block.

I wriggle out of my jeans and slip into a sarong, while Benny and Dave pretend not to watch. Vanessa and Lily are similarly skimpily dressed, so it's not like there's

any shortage of female flesh on display. Even Dave's wearing shorts. Benny is clad in a white cotton shirt and trousers, which at least shows greater concession to the climate than when he used to sit in the blazing heat of Shaldon beach in a leather jacket and black denim shirt.

It really is fucking hot though, the temperature hovering somewhere between luxurious and unnerving. Lily would no doubt elaborate on the mechanics of climate change if I asked her, but beyond ensuring my records are carbon efficient, I still like to inhabit a state of denial when it comes to the slow destruction of the planet.

"That night with the speed freaks," says Dave. "Was that when we got stranded here?"

"I think so," replies Benny.

"What's this?" asks Lily.

"We arrived in the afternoon," says Dave. "But by the time the party was over, the tide had come in. So we tried to fight our way through the forest, but there's no way through. So we got stuck here for the night. I wasn't complaining, though. I got to snuggle up to Suzie."

"I see," says Vanessa. "And what precautions have we taken to ensure that the same thing doesn't happen to us tonight?"

"Relax," says Benny. "There's a secret path, but we didn't discover that until a later party."

"Do you mean the path where I caught Brian and Joanna shagging that time?" asks Dave.

"Yeah."

"I don't think that's there any more, dude."

"What do you mean?"

"I don't know if you've noticed, but the tide is a lot higher than it used to be. Haven't you noticed how much smaller the beach is now?"

"I thought it just seemed that way because I'd got bigger," says Benny.

“Bless,” says Lily, patting Benny on the head. Vanessa offers Benny another loving glance, but he seems to be struggling to process something.

“You’re very quiet, Alexa Ray,” says Dave. “Do you have any objections to being stranded on the beach all night with us reprobates?”

“I guess not, Dave. You’ll have to promise to inspire me, though. Tony’s hassling me for the new album, and I’ve got fuck all to show for the last three months of recording sessions.”

“I thought it was more or less done?”

“The music, yeah. But there’s still no lyrics. I don’t think the record company will believe me if I tell them it’s supposed to be an instrumental.”

“Don’t worry,” says Dave. “Uncle Dave will help you articulate your emotions. What’s on your mind?”

“The usual,” I tell him. “Romantic failure. Teenage angst becoming increasingly undignified for a woman in her late thirties.”

“Were we ever this angsty as teenagers?” asks Benny. Even Dave raises an eyebrow at this.

“Are you kidding? You were the worst of all of us.”

Everyone shares a laugh at this, except for Benny, who sits processing his thoughts with a bemused smile.

Dave is right. I don’t think inspiration is going to be a problem. The record company might be hoping for another *Prowl*, with a lead single to rival *Feline Dream*, but what they’re going to get is an album whose entire lyrics were written by the light of a campfire while stranded on a beach with old friends, celebrating the twenty-year anniversary of a very similar party.

Which is something to celebrate in itself.

“Seriously?” says Benny. “The summer of ninety-seven was perfect, wasn’t it? I’m not just imagining it?”

I look at the firelight flickering across the faces of my friends and reach for Lily's guitar.

"Think harder," I tell Benny, with an insanely happy grin.

13th September 1997 – Benny's 17th

Benny

The house is empty. Usually this would be a dream come true, but now it only serves to reinforce Lucy's absence and that of my family. My loneliness complete, I put on *Long Gone* by Syd Barrett and lie with my arm dangling pathetically off the edge of my bed, waiting for Alexa.

She arrives sometime in the afternoon and we watch *Pulp Fiction*. It's the fifth time we've seen it, but I'm grateful for the distraction.

"I've decided," says Alexa, as the end credits roll. "This is my favourite film."

"Yeah?"

"Do you want to hear why?"

"I can't wait."

"It's because of what it has to say about death," she says.

I can barely muster the motivation to respond, but I wave a hand, prompting her to elaborate.

"I don't mean all the murders," says Alexa. "I'm talking about the way Vincent Vega dies halfway through the film, but because the events aren't shown chronologically, he's still alive at the end."

"What's so great about that?" I ask, but I think I know what she means.

"It's like, we know he meets a bloody end. But in the film of his life, or anyone's, that's not how he's remembered. The last thing we see is him leaving the diner looking all cool in his Bermuda shorts."

"Right."

"So even if I was to die alone, that wouldn't necessarily be the concluding point of the story. My real ending would have already happened."

"And what would that be?"

"I don't know. When I find love, I guess."

"Good luck with that," I reply, my audible bitterness triggering a sympathetic smile.

"Still cut up over Lucy, huh?"

"I want to die."

"Poor Benny. At least you're still friends. She said she's coming tonight."

"Great."

Dave is the first to arrive, straight from work, already half pissed and swigging from a bottle of pilfered cooking sherry. Joanna and Brian follow shortly after, their projected image of perfect couplehood the last thing I need right now. I hide in my room, allowing Alexa to keep the guests entertained, praying for some kind of sign of what I'm supposed to do.

I open my closet to retrieve a CD, and a jar of paracetamol falls out, which I instinctively catch in my hand. I intercept the urge to swallow them all by throwing the jar against the opposite wall. It bursts open and a shower of little white tablets rains down on me. I throw my arms wide and open my mouth, but fail to catch any.

I peer over the balcony, hastily withdrawing if anyone gets too close to the stairs.

Emma arrives, then Martin.

Then Lucy. Accompanied by a voice I recognise but can't place.

I look down.

Jesus fuck.

It's that cunt Dan who attacked me at the carnival. What the fuck is he doing here? More importantly, what the fuck is he doing with Lucy?

I return to my bed and force my muscles to relax in an attempt to control the violent urges rising from the darkest part of my soul.

Alexa appears in the doorway.

"Come on you," she says. "We're playing Mafioso."

"What the fuck is that cunt Dan doing here?"

"I know, I know. I'll have words with Lucy. But he seems to be behaving himself. Come down, Dave's ready to start."

"I'm not going anywhere."

"Get your arse downstairs," says Alexa, wrestling me from the bed.

I greet my friends as enthusiastically as possible upon entering the lounge, which isn't very. I pointedly ignore Dan, but can't resist a moment of eye contact during which he gives me this conspirative cocky smirk, like he's letting me get away with something.

Lucy gives me a weak smile, and this moment of contact melts me for the time being.

"I don't understand this fucking game," says Martin.

"One last time," says Dave. "You're all inhabitants of a Sicilian village, except for two of you, who are mafioso infiltrators. The object of the game is for the villagers to identify and kill the mafioso before the mafioso bump them all off. I play the role of God, who sees everything and guides you through the game."

"I still don't get it."

"Shut up," says Dave. "It'll all become clear once we've been through it once. Just follow my instructions and you'll figure it out. Now be quiet, and cease disrespecting your God."

"I think I'm becoming an atheist," says James to Joanna.

"Right, everyone close your eyes and go to sleep," says Dave the deity, turning down the dimmer switch to symbolise night. "I'm going to tap you all on the head. If I tap you once, it means you're a villager. If I tap you twice, you're a mafioso."

We close our eyes and wait for Dave to fumble his way around the room.

"That's not my head, Dave," says Brian, which gets a laugh.

Dave taps me twice on the head.

"Right," he says. "Now I need the two mafioso to open their eyes so they know who the other one is."

I open my eyes. Alexa looks back at me.

We both look at Dave then glance around the room. It's a strange moment, being omniscient in a room full of sleeping friends and enemies.

"Now if the two mafioso would return to sleep," says Dave, and we close our eyes again.

My eyelids get brighter as Dave turns the dimmer switch back up.

"And so the sun rises upon another beautiful morning in our Sicilian village, and everyone wakes up."

Everyone opens their eyes.

"OK," says Dave. "You know that two amongst you are mafioso infiltrators, now you must decide on a suspect to lynch by sundown."

"How the fuck are we supposed to figure that out?" asks Martin.

"Go with the flow," says Dave. "It's always a bit tricky on the first round, because there's no clues, but you'll get the hang of it."

"I think it's Brian," says Alexa.

"It's not me," says Brian.

"Ah, but you would say that."

"I say we kill Dave," says James.

"We'll have no blasphemy," says Dave. "Or I will smite thee."

"I definitely think it's Brian," says Alexa.

"I think it's Brian too," says Lucy. "He has a shifty grin."

"It's not me," says Brian.

"He always has a shifty grin," says Joanna.

Dan is sullen and silent. No doubt this world of friends enjoying non-violent fun together is entirely alien to him.

"I think it's Benny," says Emma.

"It's not me," I tell her, though I can barely be bothered to protest.

"It's Brian," says Martin. "I know it is."

"Right," says Dave. "Do we have a decision?"

Dave takes a vote. The villagers elect to kill Brian.

"Sorry, Brian," says Dave. "The masses have spoken. And so Brian is hung, drawn and quartered with a pitchfork stuck up his arse. So Brian, the question is, were you an innocent villager or a mafioso?"

"I was innocent, you fuckers," says Brian.

"I'm so sorry," says Joanna.

"It's too late now."

"Right," says Dave, dimming the light again. "The sun sets on our village, and everyone sleeps."

All eyes close.

"Except for the two mafioso, who will now come awake and decide on a villager to kill."

Alexa and I open our eyes again. Brian, now an omniscient but mute ghost, grins and gives us the finger.

I point at Emma, to stop her getting any more accusations in. Alexa nods, and we resume our pretend sleep. The sun rises again.

"And so," says Dave. "Everyone wakes from their sleep, only to discover in the village square, the naked body of Emma, brutally violated and quite, quite dead."

Emma looks distraught. Dan still maintains a moody silence.

"So there are still two mafioso amongst you," says Dave. "Who are you going to blame for Emma's tragic fate?"

"I think it's Benny," says Martin. "Emma was onto him, so that's why he wanted her dead."

"Dan's been very quiet," says James. "He hasn't said a word. I vote for him."

"It wasn't me," says Dan, with a strange quiver in his voice. "It's not me."

"I vote for Dan too," I say, which is rewarded with a violent glare.

"Anyone else for Dan?" asks Dave.

Apathy seizes the masses, who vote to lynch Dan out of a desire to progress the game.

"Sorry, mate," says Dave. "The people have spoken, and they have cut Dan's throat and dumped his body in the river. So the villagers sleep once again. The surviving ones, anyway. Ghosts are free to haunt the village."

A sleepy darkness descends.

"And if the two mafioso could please come alive."

Alexa and I awaken. This time, Emma and Dan can see us too. Dan seems about to complain, but Dave silences him with a raised finger to his mouth.

"And decide on which villager to kill tonight."

I look Dan in the eye and point at Lucy. Alexa rolls her eyes but nods her consent.

Sleep, then sunrise.

"I'm sorry Lucy," says Dave. "But you were found dead in your bed with a stake through your heart. A tragic waste."

"It's definitely Benny," says Martin.

"I told you it was Benny," says Emma.

"Shut up," I tell her. "Ghosts can't talk."

Everyone except for Alexa votes for me as the next lynching victim.

"Right," says Dave. "And so it came to pass that the body of my old friend Benny was found poisoned in his room, made to look like a suicide. At which point I can reveal that Benny was indeed a mafioso."

"I knew it," says Lucy. "Sneaky fucker."

"Congratulations, there's only one mafioso left, out of four villagers," says Dave. "So this next round is vital."

The last round is particularly tedious, Alexa protesting her innocence to Joanna, Martin and James. But as I'm now dead, I'm free to haunt the kitchen, where I head for another vodka.

When I return, Dan is running his hand up Lucy's thigh and whispering something into her ear. She giggles coquettishly in response.

I slam the kitchen door, removing them from my vision.

This causes the faulty handle to dislodge from its mounting, rendering the door locked until someone remembers the trick of inserting a pencil into the hole and rotating it to unlock the door.

The panic attack kicks in as the doorframe jiggles in time with someone's attempts to open the door.

I take the largest kitchen knife from the rack and stand brandishing it like Bruce Willis with his samurai sword in *Pulp Fiction*.

The radio is playing *Where Did Our Love Go?* by The Supremes, providing my Tarantino-addled mind with all the ironic juxtaposition my impending frenzy of violence requires.

The handle rotates. I flee via the back door.

I am sprinting down Davis Avenue with a knife.

If I run as fast as possible, I can slow down my brain's attempts to process what is happening.

It's no good. I am still sprinting down Davis Avenue with a knife.

If I can make it to the woods without being seen, I might have a chance to get myself together, destroy the evidence, and delete this sorry segment from my memory.

The streets are empty except for Suzie, who emerges from the Spar with some bottles in a bag and heads down Grenville Avenue, presumably in the direction of my party.

I crouch behind a bin, waiting for her to disappear from view.

I'm crouching behind a bin with a knife, watching one of my unsuspecting friends. In a matter of minutes, I've crossed the line from heartbroken teen to stalker/slasher/serial killer.

Suzie mercifully disappears. I leg it across the road with the knife behind my back, realising midway that it will now be visible to anyone in the Spar. I wave the knife frantically by my side, unable to decide which side of my body to hide it on.

I reach the woods and head immediately into a secret clearing. There's a huge expanse of impenetrable wasteland beyond a chain-link fence, and its into this that I hurl the knife, admiring its trajectory until it disappears from my life, now a danger only to clumsy wildlife.

Where does that leave me? Alone in the woods, my family gone, unable to return to a home where my true love is being molested by a psychopathic prick who seems to have made humiliating me his new vocation.

I lie down on the dirt and do the standard teenage thing of waiting for the ground to swallow me, knowing that it won't.

I open my eyes. It's dark now. I must have slept.
Alexa's face hovers above me.

"Benny, Benny, Benny," she says.

I don't respond.

Alexa crouches beside me but stays quiet.

The previously welcome silence is now unbearable. I
sit up.

"Aren't you going to say anything?" I ask her.

Alexa looks at me like a frightened woodland
creature. Her eyes are moist.

I sigh.

"What's wrong, Alexa?"

"I can't deal with this."

"Join the fucking club."

"Please, Benny."

"What? What do you want from me?"

"Just come home."

"If I do that, I'll kill Dan. Which is tempting, but I'd
hate to ruin the party."

"Dan was pissing everyone off. I think he'll have left
by now."

"With Lucy?"

"I don't know what to say to that."

"Just be honest."

"Probably. They were getting off with each other
until Dave had words. I'm sorry, Benny. You deserve
better."

"Fuck them. They deserve each other."

"Lucy's not like him. She just doesn't know what
she wants."

"I'm not coming back. I'm just gonna stay here and
summon the courage to kill myself."

This statement seems to physically wound Alexa,
who flinches and stares at the ground.

She begins to rock on her heels.

“OK, enough. I’m sorry Alexa,” I concede, as unsarcastically as possible. “I am not going to kill myself.”

“Please come home.”

I let out a sulky sigh and clamber to my feet, allowing Alexa to link her arm with mine and lead me out of the woods.

As we reach the entrance to Grenville Avenue, Lucy and Dan appear opposite us, arms linked in a mirror image of Alexa and I.

A cocky grin spreads across Dan’s face, like he’s actually glad to see me.

“Fucking drama queen,” says Dan.

“Fuck you, you fucking psychopathic cunt,” I reply.

Lucy gives me a pitying look and Dan smirks like he’s actually above this exchange. Then the smile falls from his face and his voice drops an octave.

“You’re lucky the girls are here, mate, or I’d kick the fucking shit of you.”

“That’s what you said last time, you fucking pussy. Not so hard without six of your mates to back you up, are you?”

“We’ll see,” says Dan, “we’ll see.”

Dan raises a fist as I walk past. I flinch, at the exact moment that Lucy and Alexa exchange a sympathetic glance.

Fuck Alexa. I’ll kill myself if I want.

Dave cheers my name as we arrive back at the house, but I’m in no mood for his joviality. I slump on the sofa. Emma gives me a hug, and while I’ve no idea what inspires this affection, I have none to offer her.

The party is clearly winding down. Martin and James are pissed and singing, while Brian and Joanna are occupied in their usual fashion. I can’t decide if I’m pleased

or angry that my emotional meltdown failed to dent their ability to have a good time.

Alexa puts *Pulp Fiction* on again. I watch for a while, before remembering that the sword scene will further cement the memory of the knife incident in my head, so I slip up to my bedroom and put on *Street Spirit (Fade Out)* by Radiohead. What else am I going to do? At least there's some crumb of comfort in the knowledge that there must be a few hundred other teenage boys scattered across the country, at this very moment mourning some romantic betrayal and probably listening to this very song.

I reach for my notebook and vow to at least get a song of my own out of this. But all I have is a title - *Naked Flame*. The lyrics won't come.

I want Lucy back.

Laughter rises from downstairs to taunt me.

My heart physically hurts. I've always been too squeamish to absorb the slightest amount of biological or medical information, but I can't believe I never realised the term *heartbroken* was to be interpreted literally. I hope it's not fatal.

I convince myself my duvet still smells of Lucy and wrap myself in its cotton promises.

I never knew it was possible to feel this bad. And now I know that I can't afford to ever feel this bad again.

26th October 2002 – Space Casino

Benny

“This is the new Teenagers single,” I mumble into the microphone. “We’ll be selling CDs for a quid later, so see me or Lily if you’d like a copy. It’s called *Naked Flame*.”

I start the track and make eye contact with Lily at the far end of the bar. She gazes coolly back at me.

I’m not entirely sure what I was thinking, enlisting Lily to sing the break-up song I wrote for her. Now it seems like she’s the one expressing those sentiments to me.

It’s too early for people to be dancing, but our track is more suitable for quiet grooving anyway. The clipped riffs and sparse beats sound better than ever on these huge speakers, and as Lily’s soulful voice echoes around the bar, triggering a few impressed glances, I notice Lily mouthing along with her own vocals.

We make eye contact again, and mime the chorus in unison.

*You are a naked flame
And now I have no doubt
Oh, you blew me away
Now I must blow you out*

As ever, my serenade backfires. This song was supposed to seduce her back into my arms, but now it just sounds like an acceptance of our split. What the fuck was I thinking?

A long-haired dude approaches the DJ booth and hands me a quid for a copy of the single, which is a minor consolation. As I hand him the CD, I take another look at the

cover. The photograph shows me and Lily posing in front of her self-timer with our arms around each other, perched on the edge of my bed.

The moment it was taken is burned eternally onto my memory. I'd never felt so close to anyone, and upon receiving the picture back from the developers, we both remarked on what a great couple we looked like. The photo came out better than expected - we look pretty, stylish and intimately entangled, and it seemed to confirm that we belonged together.

Our single fades and I follow it up with *I Can't Go To Sleep* by The Wu-Tang Clan and some Buck 65, which gets a few heads nodding but attracts only a lone groover onto the dancefloor. I play a couple of tracks by The Strokes and The Coral next, which lures some indie kids onto the dancefloor, and keep them there with Primal Scream's *Kill All Hippies*.

Having promised the late DJ to get everyone dancing by the end of my set, I drop *Hip Teens Don't Wear Blue Jeans* by The Frank Popp Ensemble, which sees virtually all students present vacate their chairs and rush to the dancefloor. Within the hour, I'll inevitably become murderously despondent at the sight of these very same kids dancing with equal enthusiasm to Limp Bizkit's *Rollin'*, but credit where it's due, everyone I've ever played it to loves this track.

As the song reaches its outro, Lily approaches the dancefloor with a drink in each hand, but can't find a route through the gyrating hips and flailing limbs that separate us.

I play *Just* by Radiohead, and the assembled students immediately drop to the floor, where they lay motionless in tribute to the song's video. This allows Lily to tiptoe over them and enter the DJ booth.

"People seem to like our song," she says, with a happiness I can't help but resent. "Would you do me a favour and play Rage next?"

"I've only got time for one more song. I was going to finish on *Dirge* by Death In Vegas. Get the smoke machine going and everything."

"You did that last time. Play *Rage*, for me?"

"Fine."

I fade *Just* and replace it with *Killing In The Name Of*. The dormant students rise like zombies from graves and begin jerking their bodies around the dancefloor. Lily joins them, grinning manically while dancing a kind of violent salsa.

The ridiculously bearded late DJ enters the booth and gives me an approving nod for my choice of tune as I hand him the headphones. My work done, I join Lily on the dancefloor for the song's climax.

We lock eyes, knowing what's coming, channelling all the emotions from our meeting and our relationship and the break-up and the complicated post-break-up sex and our eventual vow of platonic friendship.

The song peaks and we commence screaming "Fuck you, I won't do what you tell me" into each other's faces, while contorting our bodies in violent spasms and threatening kung-fu poses.

On the final line, we accidentally head butt each other and collapse onto the dancefloor.

Dazed and confused, we manage to stagger round the bar and offload a couple of dozen singles onto drunks and open-minded music fans. The twenty or so pound coins we obtain are spent immediately on further vodkas, until the onslaught of offensively dreary nu-metal gets too much and we're forced to vacate.

"I'm just popping to the computer lab," I tell Lily. "See you at the party?"

"Sure."

I haven't checked my mail in a while, but amongst the hundreds of ads for anti-depressants and animal porn is a message from Aiko.

Hey Benny boy,

I'm afraid you are not going to like what I have to say in this letter. This is so hard to tell you, but I cannot be friends with you any more. I know I am the one who broke up with you but I didn't realise it would be so hard to remain your friend.

It's hard enough seeing you with Lily but I am back with Randal now and we have such a long history together. It just complicates things so much when I see you and can't help but want to kiss you and hold you and do all the things we used to do together. It's not fair on Randal, and I do want to be with him.

I'm crying as I write this at the thought of not seeing you again, because I had a great time with you, but it's over now and we both need to move on.

I hope you won't hate me. I will always think good things about you.

Love,

Aiko

x x x

Before I have time to process this, my phone rings.

"Yo," says Dave.

"What's up?"

“What’s up, indeed. I am presently sitting in a tree outside my house, watching a squadron of pigs load my lovingly cultivated weed plants into their van.”

“Fuck.”

“Indeed. So it looks like I might have to come up to Essex and crash with you for a while, if that’s cool. Just until it blows over.”

“Sure.”

“Nice one. I’ll be there at some point over the weekend. I’m probably gonna have to hitch.”

“OK. Good luck.”

“Cheers, dude.”

Dave clicks off and I stare blankly at Aiko’s email, experiencing a dawning sense of heartbreak not felt since my teens. Not so much for the loss of Aiko, but for what she represents. She was my first lover mature enough to maintain a caring friendship after splitting up, and now that she’s gone the way of all the others, my future with Lily presents itself as a stark inevitability.

I know it will kill me if I lose her. You can only have your heart broken so many times.

I can’t remember what floor of Keynes Tower the party is on, but it shouldn’t be hard to figure out.

Sure enough, the sixth storey is the one with windows open and sounds of revelry emerging from within. I hit the lift, and emerge into a strange internal landscape.

The place is packed, the immediate sense of claustrophobia increased by duct-taped black bin-bags lining every wall and ceiling. These are covered in glow in the dark stars, and in the party’s dim disco lighting this astral panorama is actually fairly convincing.

“Welcome to the Space Casino,” announces Zack upon sighting me, with an extravagant welcoming gesture. (His name isn’t Zack, but he’s an American dude who

reminds me of Zack from *Saved By The Bell*, and I can never remember his real name). "There's roulette in the back room, or cocktails and joints can be purchased from the bar. Six quid for pure weed, or four quid mixed with tobacco like how you English lightweights like it."

"Right, thanks. Have you seen Lily?"

"She's in there... somewhere." Zack gestures unhelpfully towards the darkness and flounces off to greet other guests.

The lounge is too busy to access, due to the presence of a DJ with proper decks and a densely-packed crowd of dancers. The music, though fairly generic electro, has a certain soul and adds to the science-fictional atmosphere quite nicely.

I work my way around the corridors, stopping off for a spliff and a Harvey Wallbanger at the bar, which is actually just a desk in a bedroom doorway manned by Zack's sidekick Rupert. I can't see anyone I recognise, so keep going until I reach the final bedroom.

A beautiful girl stands behind a roulette table.

"Hello, there," says the croupier. "Care to make a bet?"

"I don't have any money left," I tell her. "I spent it all on vodka."

"Then what do you have to gamble?"

"I could give you a copy of my band's single."

"Hmm," she says. "OK. But without hearing it, I can't judge its value. What else do you have?"

"Only my soul."

"An intriguing proposition. I accept."

I'm not sure I like this. It feels too much like a scene from a film. Where are the other gamblers?

"Fine," I tell her, attempting to go with the flow. "But not roulette. Cards?"

"Sure," says the croupier. "Name your game."

"Blackjack."

"Blackjack it is."

"What do I get if I win? After all, I'm gambling my soul here."

"What would you like?"

"A kiss?"

She giggles but maintains her professionalism.

"Fine," she says. "I'll meet the stake of your soul with the promise of a kiss."

Is she even a real person? What is happening here?

I decide that whatever cards are dealt, I'll keep twisting until I have five cards. One each for Lucy, Joanna, Shelley, Aiko and Lily.

Twist. Twist. Twist.

Bust.

"I'm very sorry," says the croupier. "But you lost. Your soul is now mine to do as I please with."

"What do you have planned for it?"

"That's really none of your concern, now, is it? Away with you, now. Oh, and don't forget the song."

Bemused, I leave a copy of *Naked Flame* on the table and head back into the maze of star-spangled corridors.

I eventually locate Lily in the kitchen.

"Hey, stranger," she says. "Where did you get to?"

"I think I just gambled my soul away," I tell her.

"Silly boy. I sold a few more singles. Here."

She hands me a vodka, our assets evidently already having been liquidised.

"I'm feeling kind of claustrophobic in here," I tell Lily. "Can we go somewhere private?"

"Benny, I told you. No more sex."

At this moment I receive a text message from Alexa.

You're not going to believe this. Lucy is pregnant!!! Talk soon, Alexa xx

"Please," I tell Lily. "I just want some time alone with you."

"No. You know what always happens. We're supposed to be friends, remember?"

"Are you saying you're not tempted?"

"That's not the point, Benny. We tried being together. It didn't work. And now we need to get used to being friends."

"I can't help it. I'm just craving you so much."

"Listen, Benny. I think it might be best if we didn't see each other for a while."

Jesus fuck.

No.

Please.

I can't survive another heartbreak.

"Benny? Say something."

"I knew it. I knew it would end like this."

"Nothing is ending, Benny. I just think we need a little space from each other, to adjust to being friends."

"Right, just like every couple tries to stay friends, until it gets a bit complicated and then they never see each other again."

"Benny, I know you have issues with your family and worry about everyone abandoning you, but please listen to what I am saying. I just need some space for a while."

"Fine."

"You don't think I'd just cut you out of my life like that, do you? I thought we were close."

"So did I."

"Look, Benny. I know that if I don't make this very clear, you'll get sucked into this melodramatic world of songs and superstition and there'll be no reasoning with

you. So please listen to me very carefully. I am not breaking off our friendship. You mean too much to me for that. I just need some time away from you, before we see each other again. Is that understood?"

"Absolutely."

"Trust me, OK?"

What choice do I have? I'm at her mercy now.

As I head to the lift, eager to find a place of solitude to collapse into suicidal despair, a girl comes running after me and grabs me before the doors close.

It's the croupier.

"Hey," she says, breathless and flushed, in stark contrast to her earlier demeanour.

"What do you want?"

"I listened to your song," she replies. "It's really amazing. It's like, exactly how I felt when I broke up with my last boyfriend. Did you write it?"

"Yeah."

"Wow. Thank you for letting me hear it. I love it. And you both look so good on the cover."

"Thanks. I appreciate that."

"You look like you were born to be in a band together."

This idea takes a while to process.

"Anyway," she says. "You can have your soul back. I think you'll be needing it. Keep writing."

She kisses me on the lips then scampers back to the party.

I enter the lift and press the ground floor button, confused once again. Wasn't I about to go and wallow in depression?

Fuck that. I think I feel another song coming on.

16th December 1995 – Staff Do

Brian

Amy sits opposite me, a princess in a paper crown. Next to her is Donna, wearing a satin top with a plunging neckline that requires ninety percent of my brainpower to resist staring at for the entire night. I've spent over a hundred hours trapped in a cramped checkout booth with these twin goddesses, my libido kept in check by the desexualising Woolworths uniforms, and my inability to speak to them shielded by a constant barrage of grumpy Christmas shoppers, but now I'm on my own.

With each passing minute my silence cements my status as loser virgin while the alpha males of the group bide their time at the bar, needing little more than the occasional cheekily predatory glance across the room to communicate their sexual availability.

Worse still, while the double vodka that Graham slipped into my orange juice with a paternal wink is loosening my body and freeing up vital confidence, it's also making me horny, which fucks my concentration.

I fantasise an unlikely scenario in which Amy and Donna's mounting boredom results in them inviting me back to a house where parents are absent, the drinks cabinet is unlocked and the lack of swimwear to wear in the jacuzzi is not an issue.

At which point, Mrs Cake waddles into my field of vision, putting paid to my erotic imaginings with the image of a wilting flower accompanied by a flatulent trombone flourish.

Mrs Cake is a dome-shaped Scottish hen whose name isn't really Mrs Cake. It just looks like it should be. I'm destined to one day blurt out this transference in front of her and am already equipped with all manner of hunger-related

excuses for when that moment arrives.

"This buffet is very moreish," says Mrs Cake, to no-one in particular. "I think I'll have another slice of cake."

This causes me to burst out laughing. Amy and Donna break off from their conversation and look at me.

"What's so funny, Brian?" asks Donna, blessing me with a mile-wide smile, and it requires great mental effort to process her question, rather than simply zone out watching the exquisite movements of her lips and teeth.

"Oh, nothing," I reply with roguish nonchalance, attempting a relaxed ruffle of my hair but succeeding only in dislodging a green paper hat. "I was just laughing at Mrs Cake."

"Who's Mrs Cake?" asks Amy, and as this is possibly the greatest ratio of attention to beauty I've ever been on the receiving end of, I'm understandably slow in responding.

"Er. Oh, sorry. I meant Sandra."

"You call her Mrs Cake?" asks Donna, chewing on this information like it's a delicious morsel of goddess food. "That's so *naughty*."

Her pronunciation of this last word mercifully fails to cause my erection to burst through the mahogany table, sending roast chicken components flying into the elaborate headpieces of passing dignitaries.

From this conversational high point, the only way is down. It's therefore a minor miracle when Graham returns to the table with another drink for me.

"Get that down you, son," he says, plonking the glass down. "It'll put hairs on your chest."

While this reference to pre-pubescence doesn't do me any favours, it does helpfully inform the girls that there's alcohol in my drink. I take a manly swig and exhale with exaggerated satisfaction, at which point events take a decidedly sinister turn.

"Come on kids," says Graham, rubbing his hands together and not even attempting to avert his gaze from Donna's breasts. "It's time for party games."

I grab the final opportunity for female bonding by exchanging a weary eye-roll with Amy and Donna, but my fate has already been sealed.

In truth, it's not as bad as it could be. The youngsters apathetically accept early defeat in a game of musical chairs and hide at the back of the bar, allowing the older members of staff to act out their undignified mating rituals unthreatened by the presence of youthful beauty.

Secret Santa does the rounds. Numerous bottles of chocolate body paint are unwrapped and suggestively commented on.

Somehow, I am now sitting between Amy and Donna, the threat of a public erection neutered by the sight of an obscene party game involving balloons, bicycle pumps and a middle-aged conga line of alternating gender. This grotesque tableau is soundtracked by Whigfield's *Saturday Night*.

Graham gallops past, piggybacking Nancy, who whips him with a napkin like an excited jockey. Graham, almost choking on his own laughter, eventually dumps her onto a bar stool. He catches Donna's eye and points over his shoulder with his thumb.

"Fancy a ride, love?"

Donna rolls her eyes and turns to face me.

"So, Brian," she says. "I hardly know anything about you. Do you have a girlfriend?"

"Not at the moment, no."

"I find that hard to believe. A good looking guy like you."

I'm grateful for the disco lights concealing the reddening of my cheeks.

"Do you have your eye on anyone?" asks Donna, lighting a cigarette as Amy turns to join the conversation.

"What are you two talking about?" asks Amy.

"I was just asking Brian if there's anyone he fancies."

"Ooh, really. Do tell, Brian."

Fuck it. I'm drunk. Might as well go for it.

"Maybe," I say. "You both seem nice."

Amy giggles.

"That's sweet," says Donna, exhaling smoke and smiling. "But I meant is there anyone your own age?"

The hotel door swings shut behind me and I inhale the cold sea air. Wandering along the seafront, I spy a couple engaging in some moonlit canoodling. I hate them.

It's still early so I decide to take the scenic route back to Benny's house. Ye olde medieval village of Cockington might offer me some comforting solitude, and failing that, at least Benny's as frustrated as I am.

Inevitably, I get lost, and find myself once again staring at the thatched roof of the blacksmith's forge, unable to figure out how my route became circular.

I kill time convincing myself I've actually travelled back to the middle ages, ready to amass fascinating personal insights for an award-winning history project, until a car drives by and ruins the illusion.

Unwilling to surrender my fairytale fantasy, I head into the woods, away from intrusive technology and hopefully also from the medley of crap disco hits still ringing in my ears.

I discover a small picturesque lake, traversable by a rickety wooden walkway. Halfway across the walkway is a hexagonal jetty, shaded by willow trees.

In the centre of the jetty lies a beautiful girl in a white dress, apparently unconscious.

I kneel down beside my sleeping beauty and take a closer look. She has long golden curls and divine curves. Amy and Donna are distant memories.

I don't know what cruel spell rendered her dormant, but I do know what this situation requires.

I kiss the girl lightly on the lips.

She giggles and blinks awake.

"Hi," she says, with a smile, then a confused look as she fails to recognise me. "Who are you?"

"I'm Brian," I say, the reality of my violation only now dawning on me. "I'm sorry about that. I thought you were a fairytale princess and I couldn't resist."

She giggles again.

"That's sweet," she says. "God, I'm so drunk. Where am I?"

"Cockington."

"Right. My friends have obviously left me. Do you have the time? I'm supposed to be getting picked up at eleven."

"Half ten. So you've got plenty of time."

"Plenty of time," she says. "God, I'm so drunk. Drunk and horny."

She grabs my hand and places it on her breasts. Her dress is low cut, even more so than Donna's, but the contact with female skin is such a shock that my just hand hangs there, limp.

"What's wrong?" she asks. "Don't you like me?"

"Of course, but I'm not going to take advantage of you when you're pissed."

"Wow, you're so sweet. Most guys would have pounced on me."

"I'm not most guys."

This isn't intended to sound as smooth as it does. It's just a literal response.

“Well, Brian,” she says, leaning up on her elbows. “Do you think you can help me find my way? My dad’s picking me up from the top of Cockington Lane.”

“Of course.”

I help her to her feet, and the feeling of her body leaning close to mine almost makes me regret my sexual reticence. But I don’t want to trick anyone into sleeping with me. Maybe I can get her number, and attempt a meeting when we’re sober.

“Thanks,” she says, adjusting to the vertical plane.

“I’m Joanna, by the way.”

“Good to meet you. Come on, let’s get you home.”

She puts her arm around me and we walk together across the lake.

My navigational skills having magically returned, I’m rewarded with a long and luxurious walk to the top of Cockington Lane, during which I learn many things about Joanna.

I learn that she is a fan of Celine Dion, but that I shouldn’t stereotype her according to this musical choice as she also likes Blur and Sublime.

I learn that she cannot decide whether she wants to be a singer or a scientist.

I also learn tangentially that she is not a virgin, having made reference to an ex-lover who “only wanted me for sex”. She hastens to add that this doesn’t mean she doesn’t like sex.

Most significantly, I learn that Joanna is fed up with dating these kinds of guys, and that she is looking for someone more sensitive who appreciates her for who she is. Someone like me.

I don’t even have to ask for her number. She hands it to me on a slip of paper with a cartoon heart that has been self-consciously scrawled out, as her dad pulls up in his car

and gives me an approving nod for chaperoning his daughter.

She waves to me from the back window as the car departs and I mirror this gesture, gazing at the horizon for a good thirty seconds after she's disappeared from view. I take another look at the slip of paper, scrutinizing it for signs of mocking fabrication, then place the apparently genuine number very securely into my wallet.

Various thoughts compete for my attention. I can't wait to tell Benny. I can't wait for the privacy to masturbate. I can't wait to phone Joanna.

But the dominant thought is the instinctive knowledge that life will never be the same again.

24th June 1999 – First Day Of Glastonbury

Alexa

My first festival finds me alone in a crowd of one hundred thousand people. School's out for summer, but this year's heartbreak has only just started to kick in. I feel physically sick, and not just because of the bottle of 20/20 I've just emptied.

From speakers mounted on the roof of a burger van, Van Morrison begs his lover not to go to New Orleans.

Finally, Benny texts me to let me know they've arrived. I tell him I'm at the meeting point, and have been there for four fucking hours.

The song changes to *Camden Town* by Suggs. A guy in a jester's hat boogies past in a kind of cod-reggae strut, making enthusiastic eye contact with me and singing along with the words. I glare at him so hard that he slips backwards into a puddle.

It doesn't even raise a smile.

Benny eventually arrives with Dave and Ed in tow, all looking grumpy and exhausted.

"Benny is stupid," says Ed, giving me a brief wave. "Benny, tell Alexa why you're stupid."

Benny scowls at Ed then greets me with a minimal hug.

"We got over the fence OK," he says. "But then we got chased by security, and I dropped the bag with the tent and the alcohol in."

"And this means?"

"We don't have a tent or any alcohol."

"Well that sounds about fucking right."

"Blimey," says Benny. "What's up with you?"

"James," I tell him.

"Oh no," says Benny. "What's he done now?"

"He's with Joanna."

"Fuck."

Benny sits down and attempts to process this.

"I thought you knew," says Dave.

"I knew she'd split up with Brian," says Benny.

"This is news to me."

"Don't tell me you're still hung up on that slut," I say.

Benny doesn't respond, though as he broke up with Shelley less than a week ago, it's probably about now that he's reached the stage of romanticising former lovers.

"I hate to interrupt this fascinating discussion," says Ed. "But I'm about to run out of vodka, which may compromise my cheery demeanour."

"I was relying on you," I tell Benny. "I don't have any money. How much do you have?"

"None," says Benny. "Only my cashcard, but I think there's only nine quid in my account."

"Great. We might as well just go home."

"Now, now, children," says Dave. "We all got in, that's what counts. I'm sure we can find something to drink."

"We're here for four days," I say. "How the fuck are we supposed to last that long sober?"

"Relax," says Dave. "I've got a bit of weed to keep us going for the time being. Let's see what else we can find."

"The way I see it," says Benny, as Ed pauses to light a joint from the fire-breathing mouth of a mechanical horse, "our one hope is getting backstage."

"How are we supposed to do that? What about security?"

"We just go down to the main stage and hop over the fence," says Benny. "There's no stewards until the music starts tomorrow."

It seems an impossible plan, but I trudge after the guys and content myself with malevolently kicking beer-can-shaped effigies of Joanna's head across the grass.

The fence by the main stage is indeed unattended. The four of us clamber over with minimal attention. Once safely across, Dave ushers us into the shadow of a tourbus.

"Nearly there," says Ed. "Now we just need to blend into the crowd. The most important thing is, don't act like you're not supposed to be backstage."

"How?" I ask, still cynical. "We don't have passes."

"Just be cool," says Ed. "Act natural, like we don't need them."

Little Green Bag is audible as we stroll across the clearing into the backstage arena, sending the guys into an immediate swaggering parody of *Reservoir Dogs*. I ignore them, as it stopped being funny years ago.

My mood cautiously lifts a fraction as I realise that we've made it, and no-one seems to be paying us any attention. We enter the Select hospitality tent and I immediately spot several celebrities: Keith Allen, Craig Charles, Fatboy Slim, Zoë Ball. The boys seem unimpressed however, Benny and Ed complaining that backstage drinks are no longer complimentary.

We pass through the tent into a fenced-off area where John Peel and Steve Lamacq are DJing. *Teenage Kicks* is playing, which seems like a good omen, but the song quickly fades to assorted cheers and it becomes clear that we've missed the climax of their set.

Benny takes this opportunity to give a copy of the Teenagers album to John Peel, while Ed immediately strikes up a lengthy conversation about Colchester United with Steve Lamacq. It's a good job Emma's not arriving until tomorrow, or no doubt she'd be hassling him to tell her what it was like watching Richey carve 4 *REAL* into his arm.

Dave passes me a joint, mercifully interrupting a germinating urge for self-abuse. We stand for a while in smoky silence, surveying the scene around us. I admit I've got backstage fever. Things seem possible now that weren't twenty minutes ago.

Ed, no doubt euphoric at having encountered his indie idol, throws an inflatable chair at my head.

I don't smile, but nor do I drown him in a portaloos.

Further exploration yields some much needed sustenance, courtesy of a gigantic free buffet from which I help myself to a plate piled high with slices of watermelon, chicken legs, kettle chips and wine gums. Dave and Ed retrieve a bottle of wine each from a dustbin full of ice, while Benny constructs himself an elaborate burger.

We find some vacant sofas to eat upon, which Ed insists on rearranging to replicate the seating arrangements of his sixth form common room.

We munch for a while in silent satisfaction. Keith Allen wanders past at some point, and upon noticing me stops to scrutinise my face. Great, I've been caught, and now I'm going to get kicked out.

"Sorry, darling," he says. "I thought I recognised you for a minute. You're not a pop star, are you?"

"No, I'm not."

"Not yet," says Benny.

"When's the next Fat Les single coming out?" says Ed. "*Vindaloo* was fucking ages ago."

"Cheeky bastard," says Keith. "We've got one ready for the millennium. Listen to this."

While Keith sings us a poorly-memorised ditty about throwing a party when your parents are out of town, I can see Dave mentally preparing to ask Keith for drugs. I shake my head at him, knowing that Dave suspects we're in the presence of the dealer Keith played in *Trainspotting*.

Though it's a shame to ruin the illusion, as I'm just starting to have fun.

Keith eventually wanders off to serenade other festival-goers, and we finish our grub.

"Excellent stuff," says Ed from his armchair throne, wiping his mouth with a paper napkin. "But I need something to wash it down with. This wine is shit."

We move on.

We've soon explored the entirety of the backstage arena, and aside from a brief conversation with the drummer from Muse, who Dave and I met in Teignmouth when Muse were still supporting the likes of Rootjoose, there is no further excitement to be found.

Ed seems to have overcome his distaste for the wine. He falls over drunkenly, his head disappearing through the flaps of a catering tent. He lies there for a moment, before excitedly scrambling free.

"Guys," says Ed. "Get the fuck in here." He unbuttons another tent-flap and wriggles through. We shrug and dive after him like badgers into a burrow.

We arrive in a deserted kitchen tent, which isn't quite as exciting a discovery as I'd hoped for. Dave and Benny amuse themselves stuffing their pockets with bananas and sugar cubes while Ed stalks the perimeter, peering into cupboards.

"Before you ask," says Dave. "There's a banana in my pocket."

There's a strange frozen moment, and all eyes turn to Ed, who kneels peering under a tarpaulin covering a large object in the corner of the room, his expression indicating that he's having trouble processing what he can see.

"Guys," he eventually says. "Give me a hand getting this thing off."

Dave and Benny grab an end each of the tarpaulin and whisk it free, revealing its hidden treasure.

Many, many sealed boxes of Smirnoff vodka are now visible.

Benny flaps around excitedly while Dave rubs his hands together.

I'm then treated to an expletive-ridden tableau of Three Stooges style slapstick as Benny, Ed and Dave bumble around, attempting to gather as many boxes as possible into their arms, before they eventually notice my silent amusement and turn to glare at me in unison.

"Alexa, darling," says Dave. "Would you mind possibly giving us a fucking hand?"

While I'm cynical about getting away with this, and wary of being kicked out of the festival, I know there's no talking the guys out of this theft. We eventually decide that two boxes each is the optimum amount to carry, and manoeuvre them cautiously through the gap in the tent. They're fucking heavy, but it's just about do-able.

Eight boxes equals forty-eight bottles of vodka. That might just about be enough to purge thoughts of James and the slut from my broken heart.

We carry our cargo through the hospitality tent, adopting the irritably exhausted demeanours of manual labourers, and pass through un-noticed by oblivious indie celebrities and *N.M.E.* journalists.

It's a lot easier leaving the backstage area than it is getting in. The security guards even open the gate for us. One approaches me suspiciously, ready to relieve me of my booty, but I waggle a bottle of Pepper-flavoured Smirnoff at him, which he accepts with a gracious bow and waves us through.

"Much appreciated, doll," he says. "You've sorted me out, now if you need to get backstage again, just come through here when I'm on duty and I'll see you alright."

I mumble my thanks and stagger on, only just able to peer over the top of the boxes. Veering away from the crowd, we stack the boxes in an obscure copse and perch atop them, contemplating our next move.

"What now?" says Benny.

"You're going to have to phone Shelley," says Ed. "See if we can stash them in their tent."

"Fuck that," says Benny. "Things are way too awkward with her. I was hoping to avoid her."

"Phone Melissa, then. They're sharing a tent, anyway."

"Ditto. You do it."

"Fine."

Ed calls Melissa and the phrase "eight boxes of vodka" seems to convince her. We arrange to meet at their campsite.

We make it there miraculously unhindered. A couple of nosy strangers are rewarded with a free bottle and sent on their way. Once at the campsite, Dave and Ed begin filling Melissa's tent with the boxes, while Shelley divides her time between complaining about her stuff being trampled on and glaring at Benny.

They get them all in, but there's now no room for anything else in the tent.

"I appreciate the free alcohol," says Melissa, "but I hope you're planning on leaving us somewhere to sleep."

"Bear with us," says Dave, slicing open a box with a penknife. "Fucking hell," he adds.

"What?"

"Look at how the bottles are stacked. There's twelve in each one."

There's a moment of silent mental calculation. Shelley is first to arrive at the correct figure.

"Ninety-six," she says. "You guys have just stolen ninety-six bottles of vodka."

"Not a bad night's work," says Ed, opening a bottle. Dave, Benny and I do likewise.

"Help yourself, ladies," says Ed. "Just don't drink it all. We're off to find a tent."

We browse various stalls full of palatial tents and luxurious woollen bedclothes, but short of offering a trade for stolen alcohol, there's not much we can do.

"I've got it," says Dave.

"What?" asks Ed.

"Look at the machines they're using to swipe people's credit cards. They're not connected to anything."

"So?"

"So they can't check how much funds are in our accounts."

"It doesn't matter," says Benny. "I'm the only one with my card on me, and I can't afford to go overdrawn."

"So report it stolen," says Dave.

"What?"

"Phone up and report your card stolen. Then we buy what we want, and ditch the card. The bank won't charge you for any purchases made after you reported it."

A girl wanders past who resembles Joanna, arm in arm with a good looking boyfriend. Depressing reality threatens to intrude on my criminal escapades.

"But I'd still have to sign for them," says Benny. "They'd know it was me."

"Just do a crap drunken signature, so it looks like a fake," replies Dave. "If they ask for it again, do a good one on a separate slip of paper."

Benny looks set to protest further, then takes a swig of vodka, shrugs, and gets out his phone.

I can't believe it actually seems to work. We tour the stalls, and less than an hour later we're laden with various impulsive purchases, some more essential than others. Between us we're carrying a four-man tent, a one-man tent, four sleeping bags with inflatable pillows, a few blankets, a herb grinder and seven packs of rizlas, two inflatable chairs, three pairs of Nike trainers, a camping stove, a sheepskin rug and a large pink translucent bong.

Benny is wearing a new Manics t-shirt and Dave a ridiculous giant jester's hat.

"Might as well keep the card until Sunday," says Benny. "In case we need to eat again."

It takes a while to assemble the new tents and transfer the vodka into the smaller one, but the alcohol fuels our activity and we're soon sitting in our new luxury campsite while Dave loads a bong and Ed cooks up some of Melissa's beans. Shelley and Melissa have nearly finished their first bottle, and seem more tolerant of Benny's company now.

This all seems a little like a surreal dream, which is exactly what I need right now. I can't let myself think about what Joanna might be doing to James.

Dave, already on his second bottle of vodka, suggests further exploration. I'm feeling a bit paranoid from the bong hit, which isn't helped when I'm chased out of the cabaret tent by a Royal Mail postbox. Every time I look around, it roots itself to the spot, then resumes its pursuit as I attempt to flee.

I find myself alone and needing the toilet. I spy a portaloos at the top of a steep incline, but a troupe of Mexican

bandits are heading towards me, blocking my progress. I attempt nonchalant invisibility, for some reason terrified of being squirted with their water pistols, but at the moment our paths cross they are distracted by a passing pantomime cow, allowing me to pass by unsoaked.

I wake up. I appear to be perched on a bar-stool, while a green man-sized dog sniffs at my legs.

"It looks like Danny's sniffed out a volunteer," says a gameshow host on a nearby stage, as an image of my bewildered face appears on a giant screen behind him. "Get yourself up onto the stage, love. It's time to play *Fact Or Fantasy*."

Thankfully, Dave tracks me down at this point, guiding me down from the stool and giving the finger to a cameraman.

"Let's get out of here," he says. "This place is spinning me out."

"You scared her away, Danny," says the host. "Bad dog."

Dave steers me towards a nearby patch of trees, grounding me in reality until he inhales from a helium balloon and commences singing the chorus of *Stayin' Alive*. Benny and Ed wander past, cheering as they spot us. Benny has his sunglasses on and is sucking the flake from an ice cream cone, while Ed, now wearing a poncho and a sombrero, chomps on CD-sized cookies covered in Smarties.

It's all very silly, but it stops me from thinking about the slut.

We can't resist a queue for *Space Volleyball*, but keeping still allows me to sober up. Years worth of James-related fantasies flood my mind, filling me with jealousy and self-loathing. I know I won't even be able to masturbate

while thinking about him again, now that he's contaminated himself with the slut.

I don't hate James. He doesn't know how I feel about him. Joanna does.

I force more vodka down my throat.

We reach the front of the queue as Benny munches the last of his cone. We remove our shoes and leap onto the bouncy castle with childish abandon.

Space Volleyball is possibly the most fun I've ever had in my life. I team up with Benny, while Dave and Ed bounce opposite us, whacking a beach ball towards me with drunken incompetence. Ed does a forward flip, which I replicate, before launching myself into the inflatable barrier that serves as a volleyball net.

I float through the air as a nearby stereo plays the Beach Boys track *Disney Girls*. Everything is happening in slow motion. Dave trampolining in and out of sight. Ed projectile vomiting. Benny laughing. An angry attendant unravelling a hose.

I am flying.

We're soon kicked off the bouncy castle, and head back to the campsite, waking Shelley and Melissa with our drunken singing. They're slumped in the inflatable chairs, having evidently elected not to crawl into their tent to pass out.

I sit down with Benny on Dave's rug and the sudden impact of gravity somehow triggers a sinking sensation and subsequent mood crash.

Dave offers me a bong. I decline, so he takes it for himself, immediately collapsing afterwards.

I start to cry.

I lean on Benny's shoulder, while he holds me in silence for a while.

"Seriously, Alexa," Benny eventually says. "Isn't it about time you started making some music?"

"I've told you a hundred times, Benny. I can't write or sing."

"That's never stopped me."

"You can write," I reply, and he laughs at this.

"I mean it," he says. "You have no idea how therapeutic it is. What do you think motivates all the people we're going to be watching this weekend?"

"I'll consider it," I reply. "But it'll take a lot to inspire me."

"Tonight hasn't inspired you?"

"Well, yeah. But that's not the kind I mean. I need James. I need love."

"I'm sorry about James," says Benny. "But you will find love."

"I hope so."

"Of course you will," says Benny. "You're going to live a long and happy life, Alexa. With lots of love in it."

I would love for this to be true, but somehow I don't believe him.

18th November 2006 – K-Hole

Dave

“So,” says James. “Is this all we’re planning on doing tonight?”

“What?” says Ed.

“Sitting here and consuming chemicals until we pass out.”

“I don’t know about you,” says Ed. “But it’s all I was planning on doing.”

“You don’t want to go to town?”

“Fuck town,” says Ed. “There’s nothing going on, and it’s fucking freezing out.”

“No offence,” says James. “But I could do with interacting with somebody other than you and Dave for a few hours. Someone female, preferably.”

“So, you’re fed up of mine and Dave’s company, is that it?”

“I have nothing against your company,” says James. “But Dave hasn’t said anything in five hours, and you’re no female.”

“Suzie’ll be around later,” says Ed. “That do you?”

“Isn’t she with Smurf now?”

“I don’t know,” says Ed. “I can’t keep up.”

“I guess I’ll take my chances, then,” says James. “It is freezing out.”

“Anyway,” says Ed. “We’re celebrating.”

“What are we celebrating?”

“Martin proposing to Emma.”

“Shouldn’t we at least wait and see if she says yes?”

“She will.”

“It sounds like we might be about to find out,” says James, as somebody clatters through the front gate.

Martin bursts in and stands frozen in the doorway, presenting us with his poker face. Then he breaks into a grin and does a little celebratory dance.

"She fell for it, then?" says James.

Martin continues dancing.

"So? She said yes?"

"Well," says Martin. "There's some good news and some bad news."

"Just tell us what she said."

"The good news," says Martin, "is that she said yes."

"So what's the bad news?"

"I chickened out and just asked her to move in with me."

"Idiot," says James.

"I don't know, sounds like a smart move to me," says Ed. "If you live together and it works out, you'll end up married anyway. If it doesn't, the break-up won't be as messy."

"We're not going to split up. I just don't want to rush things," says Martin. "The ring will keep."

"This calls for a celebration," says Ed. "Martin, choose your weapons."

"What the fuck is all this shit on the table?" asks Martin. "Are these even drugs?"

"Drugs for every occasion," says Ed. "How fucked do you want to get?"

"What are my options?"

"Well," says Ed. "There's a tiny bit of coke, so I might be able to spare a little of that."

"I'm nearly done with these," says James, grinding a pestle into a mortar. "Ground Hawaiian Baby Woodrose seeds mixed with ephedrine. One of Dave's special recipes."

"I've got a couple of pills left," says Ed. "Or there's this Syrian Rue. But don't mix that with the pills, or you

might get serotonin syndrome and die. And we wouldn't want that."

"Right."

"There was some ketamine," says Ed. "But as you can probably tell, Dave hoovered up the last of that. But never mind, Smurf will be round soon with some 2CB and a bottle of absinthe."

"I'm sure Dave won't mind if you nick a couple of his amanita mushrooms," says James. "It is a special occasion, after all."

"What kind are those?"

"They're the ones the Viking berserkers took when they did all their raping and pillaging," says Ed.

"Right."

"Or there's a bit of Salvia," says James. "But I wouldn't recommend that if you don't have any acid experience. You could try the Yopo, that's a bit milder."

"Or some DMT," says Ed. "But that's about it, I'm afraid."

"Remind me what DMT is?"

"It's the chemical your brain floods with when you die," says Ed. "Don't ask me to explain its effects."

"This is all very tempting," says Martin. "But I was hoping for just a bit of a drink and a smoke. Don't you have any vodka or weed in?"

"There might be some vodka in the freezer," says James, getting up. "I'll have a look."

"You can't get any weed for love nor money," says Ed. "There's a major drought on. I blame the war on terror and all this heightened security bullshit."

"Fucking hell," says Martin. "I just wanted to get a bit of a buzz on. Do you have anything that won't induce a near-death experience?"

"I had a look in the freezer, but this was all I could find," says James, holding up a Tequila bottle full of black liquid.

"What the fuck is that?"

"Mushroom tea. I can't promise Alex didn't dissolve a couple of tabs of acid in it, though."

"For fuck's sake. Do you have any beer, or is that a stupid question?"

"Of course we've got beer," says James. "There's a dozen cans in the fridge."

"I'll have a beer, then," says Martin, sitting in the armchair opposite me and shaking his head.

"You alright there, Dave?" says Martin. "How you holding up there? You look a bit fucked, mate."

Hours pass.

"I'm going for a piss," says Martin, clambering to his feet and kicking over a couple of empty beer cans.

"Clumsy fucker," says Ed.

Several silent minutes later, Martin returns from the bathroom brandishing one of my weed plants.

"Look what I found," he says. "I thought you didn't have any weed."

"Take that thing away from me," says James. "Dave's threatened castration to anyone who touches it. It's his last one. He says it's not to be harvested until it's fully grown. You can imagine how torturous this is for us."

"Fuck that," says Martin. "He won't mind if I do a bit of pruning, surely?"

"On your head be it," says Ed. "I take absolutely no responsibility for the content of any joints that might happen to be passed my way."

"Dave," says Martin. "Speak now if you object me to clipping a few leaves from your plant, so that your good

friend Martin may celebrate his impending domestic harmony."

Martin cups his hand to his ear.

"No? You don't mind? Much appreciated, buddy."

Martin heads to the kitchen. There's a snipping sound, before he returns with a severed branch.

"You're a braver man than I," says Ed.

"Remember to put the bud under the grill for thirty seconds or so before trying to roll it," says James. "Keep an eye on it, though. Don't burn it."

The front gate clatters again.

James sits up in his seat as Suzie enters, then slumps back down as Smurf emerges behind her with his hands around her hips.

"Hey guys," they say in unison.

"Hey Martin," says Suzie. "Congratulations. Emma told me the good news."

"Yeah, nice one, dude," says Smurf. "Glad somebody's making an honest man of you."

"Cheers, guys," says Martin.

"You know what this means," says Smurf. "Stag night."

"We're not getting married," says Martin. "We're just moving in together."

"That's not what she told me," says Suzie.

Martin turns white.

"What did she say?"

"That you proposed and she said yes."

"Martin," says Ed. "Would you care to enlighten us on what actually happened?"

"I told you," says Martin. "I was going to propose, but I chickened out. So I just asked her to move in with me."

"What did you actually say?" asks Smurf.

"I don't know," says Martin. "I was nervous. I just said 'Will you spend your life with me?' or something."

"Dude," says James. "I'm pretty sure that's a proposal."

"No, it's not," says Martin. "It means 'Let's live together'. There was no mention of a wedding."

"Emma said you got down on one knee," says Suzie.

"Yeah, I did."

"Jesus fucking Christ, Martin," says James. "No offence, mate, but you really are a hopeless cunt sometimes."

"What?" says Martin.

"I hate to break this to you, mate," says Ed. "But it looks like you're engaged."

"Are you saying you didn't actually mean to propose?" asks Suzie.

"No, I did. I just didn't realise I'd gone through with it."

"Well, Emma certainly seems to think so."

"But I didn't even give her the ring."

"Yeah, she mentioned that."

"She was pissed off that I didn't give her a ring?"

"A bit disappointed, I think. Why didn't you wait until you could afford one?"

"I did get her a fucking ring," says Martin. "It's here in my pocket."

"Deary me," says Smurf, slumping down on the sofa next to me. "I don't know how you ever managed to get her into bed, let alone getting her to marry you without even proposing."

"I'm getting married," says Martin. "This is good. This is what I wanted."

"See?" says Ed. "Suzie, Smurf. This calls for a celebration. Do you have that absinthe?"

"No celebrating for me," says Suzie. "I have to spend tomorrow working on my dissertation. I'm being a good girl, until Christmas at least."

"Come on Suze," says Martin. "I just got engaged."

"I guess you did just get engaged," says Suzie, hovering over the table of drugs and wagging her fingers in anticipation. "What do you have to offer me?"

More hours pass.

Smurf hooks his laptop up to Ed's speakers and puts on *3am Eternal* by The KLF. Ed and James nod their heads. Martin giggles down the phone to Emma. Suzie looks into my eyes.

"Are you alright, Dave?" she asks. "You haven't said a word."

Ed mumbles something.

"What?" asks Suzie.

"Too much ketamine," says Ed.

Smurf skips the track to *Lost In The K-Hole* by The Chemical Brothers.

"I don't want to sound like a hypocrite," says Suzie. "But do you guys ever consider whether there might be more to life than getting fucked on vast amounts of drugs?"

"Don't you start," says Ed. "It's winter, and we're in England. What the fuck else are we supposed to do?"

"Only you can answer that."

"Well, this is my answer."

"I don't mean to preach," says Suzie. "I just always thought of drugs as something that you do when you're young and stuck in a small town with nothing to do. We do actually have the option of leaving now. We can go anywhere, and do anything."

"So why don't you?"

"I will do when I've finished my course. I just don't want to feel like I'm leaving all my friends behind to rot away on drugs in a dimly-lit room. Drugs should be for celebrating, surely, not part of your daily intake. But anyway, I'm sounding like your mother. I'll shut up."

"We are celebrating, but I take your point," says Ed. "However, I'll be a lot more receptive to it in summer. Right now, it's winter and it's fucking depressing. How am I supposed to maintain my serotonin levels naturally on two hours of daylight a day?"

"There's only a couple of hours daylight if you don't get up until mid-afternoon," says Suzie.

"I usually get my dose of sunlight before I sleep," says Ed. "But point taken."

"Everyone's fucking grumpy, lately," says James. "Maybe we should get out of this town."

"I haven't been here long enough to be fed up with it yet," says Ed. "Torquay beats Colchester, but if I'd lived here my whole life, I'm not sure I could handle it for much longer."

"You might be right," says Martin. "Me and Emma didn't actually discuss where we were going to live."

"Well, there'll always be a place for you here," says James. "Until you start using the phrase 'property ladder', that is."

"No chance of that," says Martin.

"I'm so fucked," says Suzie. "I can't believe I was lecturing you guys about drugs. Don't hate me."

"No chance of that," says Smurf, returning from the kitchen with another weed clipping. "Sorry about your plant, Dave," he adds. "But I've got to work at ten, and if I don't have a joint now, I'll never get to sleep."

Smurf rolls a joint and passes it round. One by one, James, Suzie, Ed, Smurf and Martin lapse from consciousness.

More hours pass.

The ketamine wears off in time for the sunrise. I stretch my legs and take in my surroundings. Everybody is asleep. There aren't many drugs left on the table.

The laptop is still playing, its infinite playlist having reached an early Underworld track whose ambient electronics and whispered vocals perfectly suit the delicate haze of our house, the resulting emotional reaction something of a novelty following eleven hours of disassociation.

I gather up what few weed leaves remain from the clippings and roll them into a joint, which I smoke on the back step. Nearby streetlights click off. Next door's cat writhes on the patio, seeking attention, responding to my luxurious belly-rub with appreciative purring. I need to spend some time in nature.

I head back to the living room, stopping off at a kitchen drawer for a permanent marker. My friends all look misleadingly innocent while asleep. I ogle Suzie for a while, then turn to Martin.

I decide to forgive Martin for harvesting my plant, in tribute to his inept but ultimately successful proposal. Martin snoozes on, unaware that he's just been handed his one Get-Out-Of-Jail-Free card.

I'm no so lenient with Smurf, who will shortly arrive at his Tesco checkout shift oblivious to the fact that he has CUNT scrawled on his forehead in permanent marker. Ed, who at least made a token attempt to protect the plant, is branded with a minimal Hitler moustache.

James is fortunate enough to blink awake just as I'm hovering above his face with the pen, contemplating what graffiti to vandalise his features with.

"Morning," he says, failing to register my intentions. "I see you're back in the land of the living. What time is it?"

"Time for a joint," I say. "If there's any weed left, that is."

"Yeah, sorry about that," says James. "We tried to stop Martin, but you know. You only get engaged once. Hopefully. Anyway, I've got a joint right here. I must have passed out before lighting it."

We smoke in silence as the morning establishes itself. The alarm on Smurf's phone goes off, causing him to rise like a sleepwalker and immediately head for the door. James clocks his facial graffiti, but I raise a threatening fist to prevent him from giving the game away.

The front door closing behind Smurf wakes Suzie, who graciously rises and makes us all coffee. We smoke another joint as we drink it, comparing our plans for the day and laughing at Ed snoring away, oblivious to his nazi moustache.

"Right," says Suzie, donning her sunglasses and bracing herself for the blinding light beyond the curtains. "Time to hit the library. Have a nice Sunday, boys."

James stretches out on the now-vacant sofa and dozes off again.

It's morning, and the day is full of potential. I'm tempted to spend the day sorting my life out, but no-one ever sorted their life out on a Sunday. My best bet is to get some proper rest, in preparation for a new week tomorrow.

Right now, it's time for bed.

5th June 2004 – The End Of The World Party

Benny

The eyeliner Melissa applied makes me look stupid, so I put my sunglasses on and contemplate my reflection in the vast bathroom mirror that Lily and I posed in front of for the cover of our *Bedrooms And Bars* single. *So Alive* by Love and Rockets kicks in, from *The Rules Of Attraction* soundtrack which I've been playing on loop for the past week, channelling the stylish sexual apathy of the characters in an attempt to give my pathetic life some cinematic validation.

I re-read the book of *The Rules Of Attraction* in my first year of university, finding it easy to relate to the simmering depression and drug-fuelled romantic entanglements of the protagonists, but was unable to convince myself that late nineties English student life could compare to the luxurious hedonism of New England liberal arts colleges in the eighties. This was the latest in a series of disappointments caused by unreasonable expectations of life engendered in me by various American movies and TV shows.

Life at an all-boys grammar school in Devon, it turns out, did not resemble the cheekily-flirtatious scamming and cheerleader-dating escapades promised to me by *Saved By The Bell*. Teenage beach parties failed to deliver the level of gratuitous nudity I'd come to expect as my heritage, and the last day of sixth-form was no *Dazed And Confused*. Instead, everything was too cynical and too British, while wrapped in too many clothes.

University life, however, while colder and slightly less pretty than its American cinematic counterpart, has provided much of the apathy, addictions and relentless sexual exploration I'd come to expect. There have been many debauched parties, and many girls to silence the voice of the

anxious teenage virgin inside us all, eternally desperate to convince ourselves that we are somebody who has sex, rather than somebody who doesn't.

By tomorrow, it will all be over. It's the last day of the final term of my fifth year of a three-year Philosophy degree, and I'm not ready for it to end.

It's not the real world that scares me. It's the thought of no longer being surrounded by women. Having survived my teens with only the handful of girls in my immediate social group to choose from, all of whom were eventually rendered unavailable in one way or another, university is a whole other world. I've met future girlfriends while paying nocturnal visits to a communal kitchen, formed relationships based on nothing more than residential proximity, and found myself involved in improbable group sex scenarios simply from being in the right place at the right time. The right place, incidentally, is university, and the right time is any time.

And while this physical and sometimes emotional validation helped distract me from a heart broken by Lucy, Aiko, and finally Lily (Joanna and Shelley merely helped things along), I've reached a point where confidence in my ability to occasionally seduce someone is no longer enough to sustain me. I need love. But Lily's in Mexico, and Lucy and Aiko are both married, which means my destiny is someone I've yet to meet.

And after tonight, my opportunities to meet women will return to teenage levels. Unless I plan on finding true love in a nightclub.

So here I am, standing in front of a mirror with my sunglasses on, in American college movie mode, channelling Bret Easton Ellis characters and praying for a happy ending to this era.

There are two good omens. Firstly, the actress Shannyn Sossamon, who played Lauren Hynde in *The Rules*

Of Attraction, looks a lot like Lily. It took me a while to get over my teenage infatuation with the fictional Lauren, but I did, and I can do the same with Lily.

Secondly, the party tonight is called *The End Of The World Party*, named after a centrepiece of both the book and the film. I don't know if this is a good or a bad sign, but it is definitely a sign, and I can forgive myself a little cinematic indulgence in the presence of this symmetry.

I have no choice but to go out with a bang. And while I have no money, debts of over £10,000 and a written demand from the bank to return my £100 cheque guarantee card, I also have two cheques left.

I leave Melissa to roll us some joints from the pillow-sized bag of weed on the sofa, and enlist the services of Ed and Dave to help me bring the shopping back from Tesco. After much slapstick and swearing, we eventually manoeuvre the two trolleys into the lounge and start unloading the goods onto the kitchen table. We assemble the bottles into a pleasing tableau, then take a step back to assess our stash.

"That's a lot of alcohol," says Ed.

He's right. We have a bottle each of Smirnoff, Southern Comfort, Tequila, Mescal, Aftershock, Gordon's Gin, Bacardi, Malibu and Tia Maria. There's about a dozen bottles of Smirnoff Mule, six cans of Fosters, five litres of orange juice, four novelty shot glasses and two pizzas.

Dave suggests we start on the tequila. I advise against this, claiming that tequila marks the point where the night heads steadily downhill into regrettable oblivion, and should be postponed as far as possible, but I'm outvoted, and shots are downed.

I'm immediately sick into the kitchen bin. This isn't a good sign.

I wash out the taste of vomit with a couple of Smirnoff Mules as Melissa passes me a joint rolled much stronger than I'm used to. Things are already getting hazy, and we've yet to leave the house.

Melissa is looking fucking hot, though. My attraction to her is increasingly annoying as she acquires more piercings and tattoos, which I object to on grounds of taste, but no fashionable vandalism can dent that goddess's body. But she's already been ruled out. We nearly kissed once, but then didn't, instead exchanging letters expressing the wisdom of choosing enduring friendship over a short-term sexual arrangement. Thanks to this, I have the validation of knowing that she would theoretically sleep with me, while remaining capable of platonic friendship.

"Stop looking at my tits," says Melissa. "And fix me a screwdriver."

Dave and Ed take sips from each bottle in turn, before sorting out their drug ration for the evening. I couldn't name half of the multicoloured pills and powders in Ed's box, and am always in awe of the hardiness of their constitutions. I don't know how their bodies survive it all.

Ed puts on *Fear And Loathing In Las Vegas* on the DVD player with the sound muted, seeming to regard it as an instructional video. I'm in no position to judge, however, as I load *The Rules Of Attraction* soundtrack onto my iPod and mix two litres of vodka and orange in empty lemonade bottles to last me the party.

We finish the last of the beers and Smirnoff Mules, pile a few bottles of spirits into Dave's rucksack, and lock up the house. Melissa sticks her tongue out at me, on top of which is the worm from the bottle of Mescal. She withdraws this into her mouth and swallows with a devilish flicker of eye contact.

There's no wicker man, but the entire ground floor of Keynes Tower is open to all, with speakers mounted in the windows of several bedrooms. A couple of dozen people dance on the grass outside, while others mingle and make merry. A few tuxedoed toffs knock croquet balls about, and there's even a girl in a bikini, smoking a joint through a cigarette holder while draped over an inflatable chair.

I see Zack opening a keg. The combination of this teen movie staple and an American accent is irresistible fuel for the cinematic illusion, so I set my iPod to play *Out Of The Races And Onto The Tracks* by The Rapture and channel the movements of the character Paul Denton as I stride across to greet Zack.

"Welcome to the end of the world party," announces Zack upon sighting me. "Post-apocalyptic fun for all the family. Help yourself to beer, and I'll help myself to some of your vodka, if you don't mind."

"Go ahead."

"Good stuff, Benny. Hey, I've got a couple of female friends from the States staying with me at the moment," he says. "They can't get enough of English accents. I'll introduce you when I see them."

"Nice one."

While this is promising, I realise that I have nothing further to say to Zack. This threatens to drag my mindset back into the shame of British social awkwardness, until I realise that there is no greater expression of faux-American angst than moody silence and eyes hidden by sunglasses. I stand absolutely still until Zack awkwardly stumbles away.

Fuck this. I should be dancing. I turn my iPod off and let the music of the party in. We're in fairly safe indie territory, only the occasional insertion of a relatively daring remix threatening to liven things up. But while the mental Americanisation of my college experience is well-

established, I draw the line at dancing to *Mr Brightside* by The Killers. You've got to maintain some standards.

I reunite with Dave and Ed and we down more miscellaneous alcohol while scouting for Melissa. This leads us to the lakeside near the Jewish Kitchen, where a smaller offshoot of the party is in progress.

Shuffling silhouettes orbit the stereo. Trip-hop beats and slide guitars. Cigarette fireflies.

The lake is beautiful. Someone is trying to start a fire.

I slump down on a blanket next to a girl in a green backless dress whose face is hidden from me. I'm pissed enough to assume that walking my fingers up her naked back is both socially acceptable and a good idea, and am rewarded with some flirtatious giggling and an electric flash of eye contact.

Her face burns itself onto my vision, yet when I turn away, I can't remember a single thing about what she looks like. This freaks me out, but some mild visual impairment is to be expected at this stage of the evening.

We make eye contact again. She is either blonde or brunette and has a dazzling smile.

"I'm bored," says the girl, with a thoughtful scrape of her front teeth over her bottom lip, in what sounds like a Scandinavian accent.

"I'm Benny," I reply.

She smiles.

"That famous English wit," she says, and the fact that I can't tell if she is being sarcastic or not is surprisingly arousing. "I'm Vanessa."

"Good to meet you."

I extend my hand.

"I was about to ask if you wanted to dance," she says.

Again, is that a simple statement of intent, or does she mean she was about to ask, until I made that crap joke?

"So let's dance," I reply, leaving no room for ambiguity. "But not here. I need volume."

We walk together back to the main party, hand in hand. I don't register who initiates this intimacy, but there's a palpable sense of loss when the stroll ends and our fingers separate.

The music now consists of pulsating throbs of dirty electro. It will do.

We leap into the gyrating throng, and simultaneously begin thrashing our bodies in every direction, replicating the movements of Nicolas Cage and Laura Dern's roadside dance freakout in *Wild At Heart*. The strobe lights dutifully kick in, and the next minute or hour is viewed as a polaroid slideshow of frozen smiles and flamboyant poses, flailing limbs mercifully avoiding violent collisions in favour of a spontaneously choreographed firework display of primal movements that celebrate our very essence, or project sexual attraction, or whatever the fuck it is we do when we dance.

The kiss occurs so quickly that it seems to take place between two flickers of strobe. But that one moment of infinite love blows my mind, bolsters my heart and exposes me to unprecedented levels of neuroses as I attempt to process what is happening.

Two things.

Firstly, I'm not stupid. I know that this is exactly what I was looking for, and all the more unrealistic because of it. It's the last day of university. I'm scared of the impending loneliness, and I clearly perceived tonight as my last chance to find someone to cling to in order to ease the

transition into the big bad world. I've only survived this long on my own by fusing my memories with those of American fictional characters who all ultimately find love, or at least sex. And knowing that I can only get away with such immature indulgence for one more night, I'm attempting to validate both my insanity and my loneliness by convincing myself that this is the moment it was all leading to.

Secondly, I think this is love at first sight.

We continue to dance, as I regard Vanessa with a mix of suspicion, anger and adoration. She smiles relentlessly back at me, eye contact unwavering throughout the elaborate contortions of our bodies, while I mentally berate myself for complicating my state of mind to such an extent that I can't trust the reality of true love when it arrives.

The strobes don't stop. I still can't focus on Vanessa's face, only the outline of her movements as she raises her hand to my face, removes my sunglasses, and kisses me again.

19th August 1997 – Wolves Hill

Alexa

The blade hovers above my breasts.

The phone rings.

“Party at Wolves Hill,” says Benny.

I stand on the roof of the shelter overlooking the cliffs. If you were going to kill yourself, this would be the place to do it. You’d need a flaming motorcycle, but that could probably be arranged. You’d have to speed the length of the headland and just keep going when you reached the cliffs, your trajectory carrying you over Ansteys Cove and into the blue beyond.

Dave’s head and arms appear over the edge of the roof, where he remains suspended and scrabbling for a while until I haul him up.

“Get a room, you too,” he says to Benny and Lucy, who pause only momentarily before resuming their consumption of each other’s faces.

Dave then spots Emma and Smurf, mirroring their drunken groping in the other corner of the roof.

“Oh well, when in Rome,” says Dave, preparing to embrace me. I freeze him with a raised palm, before pretending to rummage in my pocket for something. I retrieve and display my middle finger, regarding it with mock surprise.

“Everyone’s getting laid but me,” moans Dave.

“I’m not getting laid,” I reply.

“I can help you out with that,” says Dave.

“How can you even be thinking with your dick at the moment?” I ask. “Aren’t you stressed about results?”

“Not especially. When do we get them?”

"Tomorrow morning. Are you seriously telling me you didn't know that?"

"I didn't think it was for a while," says Dave. "We should stay up all night then, and go into school pissed."

"You think that'll soften the blow?"

"You'll be fine, Alexa," says Dave. "Exams don't mean shit anyway."

"Right," I reply. "This is just our future careers we're talking about."

"No-one gives a fuck about GCSEs," says Dave. "You're bound to get through to A-levels, so stop fucking worrying and roll me a joint."

Smurf's ears prick up at this command and he shuffles over, leaving Emma to lie on her back, looking up at the sky.

Benny and Lucy join our huddle and more bottles are opened while I fish through Dave's pockets for rizlas.

The sun sets, painting the sky with dramatic flourishes of pink and purple. The six of us sit with our legs dangling off the edge of the shelter, watching this tapestry unfold.

"If we were on *Friends*, I wonder which ones we'd be," says Benny. "I think I'd be Chandler."

"Shut up, Benny," says Dave.

James's voice echoes from below us and Dave peers over the roof to greet him. I feel a flutter of nervous excitement, my infatuation with James accelerating by the day. While Dave's drunken apathy is rarely reassuring, James exudes an appealing confidence that seems to neutralise danger and attract beauty. I don't know where this leaves me, other than alone with unrealistic guilty fantasies whenever stress lets my sex drive get a look in.

Having moved a bin on which to climb up onto the roof, James doesn't greet me directly, but sort of smiles in

my direction while talking to Dave. Suzie and Jamie follow shortly after, meaning we've got enough people for a moonlit game of mafioso. Dave is happy to reprise his role of deity, armed with an infinite array of inventive death sequences with which to kill us all off. I endure a few symbolic suicides, while the laughter, flirtatious banter and Jamie's copy of the Ocean Colour Scene b-sides album conspire to lift my mood. I realise that Dave is right. No-one gives a fuck about GCSEs.

Lucy and Suzie leave around midnight, assuring Benny that they have a safe ride home and that there's no need for him to walk them. Benny's mood crash is instantaneous.

"Are you alright, honey?" I ask, as he slumps beside me.

"Yeah," he says. "I think I got through that OK. I didn't seem too depressed, did I?"

"Benny, your parents only split up last week," I reply. "Lucy will understand if you're down for a while."

"I think you underestimate the patience of the teenage girl," he says. "What am I talking about? Of course you do."

"You shouldn't stress so much about Lucy," I tell him. "Just try to go with the flow."

"Right," says Benny. "I do actually want to spend my life with her, you know."

"Do you want me to say the obvious thing about how you're sixteen, and shouldn't really be thinking about that yet?"

"Not really. I guess I'm just an incurable romantic."

"You're an incurable something."

"You're right, anyway," says Benny. "Nothing lasts."

Dave crouches between us, filling our faces with weed smoke.

"Don't listen to her, mate," he says, showing Benny a small stone. "Devonian limestone, that is. That's been around for four hundred million years. Some things last."

Dave's point is undermined slightly when he can't resist kicking the stone over the cliffs, but Benny smiles, moonlight glints through raised bottles and everything seems alright.

It turns out we've all told our parents we're staying at each other's houses, so Dave's plan to stay awake all night goes ahead. Our numbers dwindle until just Dave, Benny, Emma and I remain on the roof of the shelter. We jump down to ground level and sit on the bench, darkness having now erased much of the majesty from the view. Benny still seems in a sombre mood, and soon enough the conversation turns to death.

"I'm not scared of dying," says Dave, for the four hundred millionth time. "I just don't want to be there when it happens."

Emma rolls her eyes and sticks rizlas together. Benny sips vodka.

"I know it sounds morbid," says Emma. "But somehow I know that I'm going to die by the end of the century."

"Me too," I reply. "But that's probably more because I can't imagine being alive in the twenty-first century. It sounds too science-fictional."

"It'll be the same old bollocks," says Dave.

"Not if Alexa and Emma aren't around," says Benny. "It won't be any fun without them."

"Just make sure you have a big party at my funeral," I say.

"Of course," says Benny. "Can I DJ?"

"I'm counting on it. Dave can do the catering, right Dave?"

"I'm sure I could rustle up some eggy bread."

"What songs would you want played at your funeral?" asks Benny.

"That's for the DJ to decide," I tell him. "What about you, Emma?"

"I don't know," says Emma. "Radiohead probably."

"No Manics?"

"No. I still haven't forgiven them."

"For what?" says Benny. "They're much better than they were, now they don't have that fucking anorexic self-abuser dragging them down."

Emma looks physically wounded.

"What the fuck do you know about self-abuse, Benny?" she retorts.

"Only that's it not something that should be celebrated. If they wrote songs about overcoming self-abuse, fine. Richey seemed to revel in it."

"Richey wrote amazing lyrics."

"They're not lyrics," says Benny.

Emma and Benny look like they're about to kill each other.

"I want *In The Summertime* by Mungo Jerry played at my funeral," says Dave, which diffuses the tension.

"Actually, me too," I reply. "Benny, make a note of that."

"See, Emma," says Benny, laughing. "Now those are lyrics. Anyway, it's always the blokes that die first. You should be the one DJing at my funeral, Alexa."

"Deal."

"Anyway, enough funeral talk," says Benny. "I'm depressed again now,"

"Poor lickle Benny," says Emma.

"It's alright," says Benny. "I've been working on a new song as a therapeutic outlet. It's called *He Is Suffering In The Summertime*."

"You're so funny."

"Now, now, children," says Dave, unscrewing the top on our last bottle of 20/20. "I propose a toast. Fuck GCSEs."

"Fuck GCSEs," we all echo, raising invisible glasses, before Dave passes the bottle round.

Around three in the morning, we take the scenic route back to town. We bump into Rebecca, Amanda, Mark and Alex on their way back to Mark's house after a night out, their little friendship group seeming momentarily like a parallel universe version of ours. We wish them well in their results, and arrange to meet for a drink on the school field in the morning.

Dave buys some munch from an all-night garage and we sit on the roof of an electricity shed with a yellow *Danger of Death* sign on the door, waiting for sunrise. Dave keeps me warm and passes me wine to sip from while Benny and Emma hover somewhere between flirtatious banter and bickering rivalry. I know Benny well enough to detect an undercurrent of bitterness about remaining a virgin while Emma is not, yet suspect he'd gain some perspective if he knew the extent of Emma's sexual anxieties.

Dave stubs out another joint and exhales thoughtfully. He seems a little sad, in that tipsy way that wine can lead to.

"What's up, sugar?" I enquire. "Exam stress finally getting to you?"

Dave gives a smoky laugh then turns to face me.

"No," he says. "I was just wondering whether we'll all still know each other in twenty years time."

"Of course we will."

"You say that," says Dave. "But my brother's off at university now, and he never keeps in touch with any of his friends from home. Life takes people in different directions."

"It's normal for people to drift off and do their own thing for a while," I reply, with wisdom I didn't know I had. "But the important people will always stick around."

"Yeah, I think so too," says Dave, seemingly convinced. "We should make some kind of pact."

"Like what?" asks Emma.

"I don't know," says Dave. "We should vow to all get together for another party, exactly twenty years from today."

"August the nineteenth, twenty-seventeen," says Benny. "I think I'm free that night."

"We should go to Coombe Cellars," says Emma. "James might have stopped moaning about his white jeans by then."

Maybe I'll even be over James by then. Who knows? All I want to do is find love before I die.

Hmm. That would make a pretty good song title. Maybe I should make use of that one before Benny nabs it.

The sun rises. It's beautiful, such is the nature of sunrises.

Emma puts her shades on. Benny stands as if to say something profound, then gets a head rush and slumps down again. Dave makes a disturbing noise intended to resemble a cockerel.

We hop down from our latest rooftop sanctuary and begin staggering very slowly towards the school.

Even though we're just here to collect results, I resent the imagery of the school gates intruding on my summer. The last dregs of wine take the edge off as we reach the paddock between the boys' and girls' schools. We spread Dave's massive coat on the grass to sit on, like guests at a badly-timed picnic, while Dave rolls a joint and repeats quotes from *Dazed And Confused*.

"Why is it called Wolves Hill, anyway?" asks Benny.
"I've never seen any wolves there."

"It's not," says Dave. "It's called Walls Hill."

"Really?"

"I'm afraid so," says Emma.

"Well, there goes another little piece of my innocence," says Benny.

"How you holding up there, Alexa?" asks Dave.
"Sleep deprivation not getting to you?"

"No."

"Still stressed about your results?"

"Strangely not."

"Good girl," says Dave. "Your future's not going to be shaped by your GCSE results."

I realise that now, but this merely reframes the anxiety rather than removes it. I know that I'm bound to get through to A-levels, and that I'm probably going to live to see the next century. But unless I can face my demons and stop being so insular and self-destructive, how the fuck am I ever going to find love before I die?

30th August 2026 – Last Day Of Reading

Dave

Whichever way you look at it, the choreography is impressive. I watch from my treetop as rows of uniformed pigs in riot gear lay into excessively pierced metalheads with truncheons and stun guns. Rampaging hordes of delinquents dismantle lighting rigs and set fire to portaloos as an absolute motherfucker of a storm rages above us all. The gaps between the lightning and thunder are getting shorter, drowning out the screams and explosions and the death metal blaring from invisible speakers.

A gas cannister is tossed onto a campfire, triggering a minor blast. An airborne explosive lands in the back seat of the Bacardi car, blowing its doors off. Random metalheads are zapped in retaliation. Roadies flee the scene, abandoning amps and scattering musical debris, much of which is immediately converted into makeshift weaponry.

The death metal fades into nothingness, and each warrior freezes as an insanely loud vinyl scratching noise occurs, before the opening riff to *Fight For Your Right* by the Beastie Boys drowns out the storm at the exact moment that lightning strikes an antenna on the roof of a catering tent. The metalheads renew their assault with fresh abandon, this morale boost fuelling some spectacularly-well timed attacks with tent poles wielded like kung-fu weaponry and clusters of metal pegs swung on the end of guy ropes. If you tune out the screams and the bloodshed, they could almost be dancing.

The catering tent is at the far side of the campsite, adjacent to the nearest exit road, and marks the point we need to reach. The music cuts short. I refocus on my mission.

Lightning strikes a nearby tree. I scuttle down from mine.

Benny and Ed look far from amused. I reassure them that we're safe for as long as we maintain our current position, which is knee-deep in a stream, hidden from the main campsite by a row of trees.

"This isn't fun," says Benny. "This isn't a bit of cheeky teenage rebellion. This is just fucking pointless violence."

"It's quite a scene," says Ed. "I've never seen so many angry people in one place."

Benny ducks as some fiery garbage flies towards us before landing harmlessly in the stream. Ed, who is leaning on a branch and trying to roll a joint, curses upon being splashed and searches for a dry rizla.

"What should I do about Vanessa?" asks Benny. "She could be watching this, thinking I'm one of those bodies on the campsite. But if I call her now, she'll see that I'm not safe and end up as scared as we are."

"Just leave her a voice message when we're somewhere quiet," says Ed. "I've already emailed Lisa. They're probably not watching, and just think we're pissed somewhere."

Benny sighs.

"I wouldn't mind if any of these fuckers actually gave a shit about the music," he says. "But this is just sexual frustration being played out on a mass scale."

Further down the stream, a toilet block explodes, igniting greenery. Ed drops his joint in the stream, takes a very deep breath, and retrieves another rizla.

"It's fucking scary," continues Benny. "I have a wife and a kid. I don't want any part of this bullshit."

"Me too," says Ed, "but try to fucking stay calm. We just need to lie low and plot our escape."

"How the fuck are we going to escape?" asks Benny. "It's war out there. Fucking cowboys and indians. Stun guns

versus tent-pole spears. It's only a matter of time before the pigs run out of metalheads to massacre and move onto us. We'll be either electrocuted or arrested. Probably both."

"Fucking relax," I tell him. "Give me a chance to think."

I shimmy back up the tree, to see what I can see. The pigs are now indiscriminately zapping unarmed bystanders before cuffing them and leaving them where they fall, while the more tooled-up metalheads bombard them with various missiles ranging from flaming toilet rolls to dismantled barbecue components. The metalheads are greater in number, but their assault is random and chaotic, while the two dozen pigs rotate, scatter and regroup in perfect formation.

I spy a small flaming tent, from which a pair of feet protrude. Utterly helpless from my position, I'm relieved when a pig and a metalhead poignantly join forces to haul the oblivious sleeper into the open air. Sighting no further clues, I clamber back down to ground level.

An object hurtles towards Ed's head, which he instinctively plucks from the air.

"What the fuck was that?" asks Benny.

Ed analyses the object in his hand.

"A fucking stun gun," he says. "Must belong to one of the pigs."

"If you hadn't caught that," says Benny, "and it landed in the water, wouldn't it have electrocuted us all?"

"It's not turned on," says Ed, fiddling with a switch and incinerating a nearby clutch of leaves. "Oh, maybe it is."

"Give that thing to me," I tell him, "before you kill us all."

Ed hands me the gun.

There's something I've always wanted to try with these things. It's not called the *Book Of Forbidden Knowledge* for nothing.

"I can't believe those fuckers had it turned up to ten," says Ed. "Isn't that illegal? I thought they were only non-lethal up to eight."

"These things won't kill you," I reply. "They can seriously fuck you up, though. Especially if you've got a head full of metal."

I engage the gun's safety mode and use my penknife to carefully remove a rectangle of plastic casing from above the dial. The dial can now rotate an extra segment.

"There," I say, brandishing my modified weapon. "Now it goes up to eleven, and we may actually be able to get the fuck out of here."

We kneel, hidden by foliage, at a point on the riverbank perpendicular to the path where the squadron of pigs periodically reform into two outward-facing rows.

I know this is fucked up, even by my standards. The drugs aren't enough to shield me from the impending insanity, but as every child of the Tarantino generation knows, the only truly effective way to desensitise yourself to excessive violence is through juxtaposition with a catchy pop soul tune that provokes an opposite emotional reaction.

Don't let me down, Benny.

I tune my earpod into Benny's frequency in time for the opening bars of *Miss You* by The Rolling Stones. My balaclava imposes a screen-shaped perimeter on my field of vision, as the pigs file back into position. I peer through overhanging leaves and aim my modified stun gun at the rear belt buckles of the two nearest pigs, who stand back to back with their own weapons raised.

The soulful funk of my soundtrack and the yearning in Mick Jagger's vocals fuel my determination to reach the other side of the campsite.

I fire my first bolt of white hot lightning.

The two pigs shudder on the spot before slumping forward in opposite directions, exposing the two behind them.

I charge forward, keeping my aim steady and my finger on the trigger.

Pigs fly to either side with the symmetry of synchronised swimmers, allowing me to sprint through the gap. Sensing Benny and Ed behind me, I keep running and firing until we're clear of their ranks, as cheering metalheads swarm towards the fallen brandishing tent poles.

The dumb, pun-generating James Bond part of my brain wants to crack a joke about feeling like a bacon sandwich, but I wisely conserve my breath for fleeing the scene, dodging flaming debris and hopping over slippery trash. It's exhausting stuff. Even the rain is hot.

Once clear of the campsite, we leg it towards one of the exit roads, hoping to hide behind a burnt-out ice-cream van, but find this space to be already occupied by three crouching metalheads in the process of assembling various electronic weapons. Having witnessed my electrifying performance, they offer me gruff congratulations and usher us on up the street.

I relax slightly, only now turning to check on my companions. In doing so, I catch sight of a distant security tower toppling onto rows of burning tents. The metalheads now seem to be outnumbering the pigs, though as both sides seem to be trying to stop short of actually committing murder, this battle could rage for some time.

I glance at Benny and Ed. We still have our balaclavas on, but their raised eyebrows express all that needs to be said.

The closer we get to the site exit, the calmer things are, and some people actually still seem to be partying, oblivious to the neighbouring carnage. We deem it safe to remove our balaclavas. The smell of bacon persists, however.

Twin pigs head towards us.

I force Benny and Ed to place their hands behind their backs, as if handcuffed, and frogmarch them past the uniformed officers, who I give a casual salute with my stun gun. They seem to fall for it, so presumably there are a few undercover piglets about.

Ed purchases a hot dog. We dance briefly to *Feline Dream* playing on the burger van's speakers, but during the mid-song silence we hear the sound of distant bullets being fired and decide to resume our escape.

I bin the stun gun before we reach the exit, each of us affecting a demeanour of dazed incomprehension as we stumble politely through the gate, the guard pigs eyeing us with disinterested suspicion.

We make it to the relatively deserted town centre, but my mounting paranoia isn't helped by witnessing intermittent chases and eventual zappings of fleeing metalheads. We maintain a low profile, but what bars remain open have locked their doors and there are few buildings in which to escape. I need to collapse somewhere, and the train station won't be open for hours.

"That was quite an adventure," says Benny. "But I seriously need to pass out."

"Looks like Hotel Barclays for us, then," says Ed, producing his bank card. "Just like old times."

Benny sighs as Ed swipes his card by the bank's entrance, allowing us access to the small lobby containing the cashpoints. A passing metalhead decides to join us, immediately passing out in a corner. Benny and Ed fold their coats into makeshift pillows and lie down on the rubber mat.

"Hey, sweetheart," says Benny into his phone, sounding suspiciously nonchalant. "We found somewhere to stay for the night. No need to worry. Love you, see you tomorrow."

He sends the message and closes his eyes. Ed fumbles for his hip flask and takes a lengthy swig.

"I can honestly say," says Ed. "That was the craziest Reading I've ever been to."

"Why do we always stick around til the last night?" asks Benny. "It's not as if we saw any decent bands tonight. You see what happens, if you listen to crap angry music?"

"You've got to keep partying til the end, dude," says Ed.

"I thought the secret was knowing when to stop?"

"It's not the first time we've risked incarceration for the sake of a crazy festival experience," I remind them. "I know tonight was a bit extreme, but we didn't create the situation, so there's no need to feel guilty. We're alright. You guys will be back with your families tomorrow."

"Yeah," says Benny. "Still. That was really fucked."

"That's life, though. There's always some dumb cunts fighting over nothing and getting in the way of a good time. You just have to keep on partying and try not to get caught in the crossfire."

Benny seems to accept the wisdom of this and relaxes slightly.

"I see you were listening in on me," he says, prodding his earpod. "I hope my soundtrack served you well."

"Of course. Can't go wrong with the Stones."

"I can't stop listening to that song," says Benny, "even though it just makes me miss Alexa more."

I don't really need to be thinking about Alexa right now, but I'm too full of drugs and adrenaline to resist the surge of angry yearning that this statement triggers.

It still haunts me that Alexa never found love. I used to think that maybe we were meant to be together, but as tended to happen with Alexa, our relationship settled naturally into a platonic friendship, albeit a frequently flirtatious one.

And now that she's dead, having never found what she was looking for, I can't help wondering if that was because we were destined to be together after all, and I was simply too stupid to take that idea seriously.

"Can you believe she never married?" asks Benny, reading my mind. "It's so unfair. All she wanted was to be loved, and not one fucker was worthy."

"What about all the people she inspired with her music?" asks Ed. "And her friendship with you guys? That's a kind of love, isn't it?"

"Yeah," says Benny. "But I'm not sure how long I can keep going with this idea that music and friendship transcend everything. Especially after the shit we witnessed tonight."

"What are you talking about?" I counter. "They're the only fucking things that enabled us to survive tonight."

"True," concedes Benny. "But I'm still fucking angry about Alexa."

"Me too," I assure him. "It's totally fucked. But you know that she'd want us to keep going in her honour. She'd come back as a ghost and kick our arses if we ever gave up."

"To Alexa," says Ed, drunkenly raising his hip flask and spilling whisky on himself. Benny echoes the sentiment and takes a sip, before passing the flask to me.

There's nothing else to say. I put my sunglasses on to shield my eyes from the fluorescent lighting, and contemplate that friendship and music are indeed what keep us alive. And if one of your number happens to leave the party early, it's up to you to pick up the slack and keep seeking laughter and love in tribute to them.

Benny and Ed start to doze off. I light a joint and rewind my earpod for an encore of *Miss You*, extending a defiant middle finger to the security camera pointing directly at me.

At some point during the night, the metalhead rolls over onto the pressure pad in the floor, causing the door to open and close, open and close, all night long.

10th September 2030 – Silent Disco

Benny

The sound of a thousand footsteps echo behind me as the barmaid fixes my drink and hands it to me with a flirtatious smile that can only be interpreted as patronising. She's too young to be a fan, either of my music or my middle-aged appearance. My hair is abundant as ever, and my weight has never been an issue, but cosmetic technology is accelerating at such a rate that the gap between the young and the old is ever-growing. If you could take a picture of me now and show it to my teenage self, I'd have been thrilled at the prospect of looking this good on my fiftieth birthday. The trouble is, I still look thirty years older than the barmaid.

But while there's no slowing the passage of time, the novelty of the silent disco never wears off. Everyone is dancing to a different tune, yet dancing together. Poetry in motion.

I click my earpod back on and load *Woke Up This Morning* by Alabama 3, the full album version with the spoken word intro. Dave catches sight of me mouthing along and tunes his frequency into mine. We boogie across the dancefloor to the others, Vanessa and Lily apparently in sync with each other while Ed does a kind of double-speed ska pogo, no doubt listening to the hardcore version of 99 *Red Balloons*.

The track fades. I tap my ring finger against my leg, tuning into Vanessa's frequency. She's dancing to a funky Spanish-language salsa track, and Lily's approving nod confirms that she is too. I mirror their movements for a while, before craving lyrics I can understand and clicking the earpod into remix mode.

A Buck 65 acapella keeps me anchored while I flick through six decades of beats and basslines. I loop the riff from *Subterranean Homesick Blues* with the beat from *Justified And Ancient* and fuse them with some keyboard stabs from Nick Cave's *Red Right Hand*. I mute the vocals, set the earpod to heartbeat mode and increase the speed of my dancing until my composition arrives at a pleasing tempo. I add some looped handclaps from *Sinnerman* and even amuse myself sampling the silence from *Feline Dream* in tribute to Alexa.

Now armed with a decent backing track, I overlay the rap from Atmosphere's *Party For The Fight To Write* and Lily's backing vocals from *Epilogue*, shortly before Lily eavesdrops on my soundtrack and gives me a knowing smile.

I dance closer to Vanessa, locking eyes with my true love and manoeuvring my limbs into the spaces left by hers just milliseconds ago. She tunes into my frequency and we groove to my remix until it fades and shuffle mode kicks back in with *Sinnerman*. This prompts us to get seriously down and dirty, the borderline-obscene gyrations of my wife's hips melting away the years and injecting me with a vital dose of young lust.

I swivel on the spot, somehow establishing a routine where after each ninety-degree rotation I find myself face to face with either Vanessa, Lily, Ed or Dave, who mirror my hand movements and mouth birthday congratulations upon each moment of eye contact. We're all dancing to the same tune now.

Layers of instruments fall away, and I find myself spotlit and surrounded by hundreds of synchronised tap-dancers, their echoing footsteps perfectly coinciding with *Sinnerman's* breakdown of rhythmic handclapping. I keep spinning, not wanting to break the symmetry. Lily throws her hands above her head and Dave guides her hips with his

hands. Ed and Vanessa mirror each other, conducting imaginary orchestras as the guitars, piano and vocals return and the track swells to a simmering climax.

Alone in the eye of the storm, I am ageless and eternal.

The song ends.

Unsure what to follow it with, I do something incredibly stupid. I flick past heartbeat, remix and shuffle modes and instead cue up a straightforward rendition of Alexa's final single, *All I Want To Do Is Find Love Before I Die*.

All is fine until I reach the chorus, at which point I catch a glimpse of Alexa's skeleton dancing opposite me.

I close my eyes and keep moving. This appears to be a private hallucination.

Just keep the rhythm. Left foot, right foot.

What the fuck do you know about the rate of human decomposition anyway, you fucking squeamish cunt? What makes you think that Alexa is already a shiny skeleton, picked clean and perfectly preserved?

It's only been five years. Maybe pieces of rotting brain still cling to her skull. Maybe maggots violate her body cavities at this very moment. Maybe that smile you loved so much is now nothing more than a dirty array of crushed teeth, and her eyes have merged with shit and soil and underground mucus and Alexa is dead and I am dying and Vanessa is dying and everyone is fucking dying in agonising slow motion and I want no part of this.

I push past Vanessa and Lily and find myself staggering across the dancefloor and puking on expensive shoes and bursting into the bathroom and kneeling in urine and vomiting again, this time onto shit-stained porcelain. My head lolls to one side under the weight of the nausea and I catch sight of a crushed spider on a wall tile which triggers another bout of furious retching.

Something snaps in my brain and I feel myself disintegrate.

This is hell.

I awaken briefly, but a demon stabs me in the throat with a cattle-prod and I lose it again.

Hours pass in total darkness.

"Well, that's it," I tell Vanessa, hugging the duvet to my knees. "The party's over."

Vanessa places a tray on the bedside table containing a small joint, some detox tea and a tiny speaker emanating soothing atonal muzak. She doesn't respond to my complaint.

"That's it, then," I persist. "I clearly can't hack it any more. I guess I'll just wait to die. At least my mid-life crisis is well-timed, bang on my half-century."

"You're not having a mid-life crisis," says Vanessa. "It was just a panic attack. You just need to rest now."

"It wasn't a panic attack. This was something else. Like a realisation of mortality."

I look at my hands. One day these hands will not exist.

"You've only just realised that we're mortal?"

"No, I'm used to the idea that our life ends one day. But tonight felt like I actually realised what that meant. Not just the end of the story but the death and disintegration of the body. One day, my body will either be burnt or buried. I can't handle that idea."

"So don't think about it," says Vanessa. "It's a long way off."

"I can't help it. I keep thinking about Alexa. I know it sounds weird, but I think I'd have actually preferred it if she was cremated. At least then I'd know she was out there in the breeze somewhere, rather than rotting underground."

"Why?" asks Vanessa. "Because cremation causes the body to disintegrate quicker? Without consciousness, what's the difference?"

I start to cry. My wife embraces me.

"I don't want to go clubbing any more," I tell her. "I'm too old."

"You're not too old," says Vanessa, "but you don't have to do anything you don't want to."

"I just can't handle it. The intensity of the emotions. All that fucking music. At least when I make my own music, the process is relatively controlled. I can't keep putting myself at the mercy of melodies. My heart can't handle it."

"Was it *Sinnerman*?" asks Vanessa. "Did it remind you of the funeral?"

Ignoring my wife, I leave the bedroom and head downstairs to my studio. Closing the soundproof door behind me, I grip Dave's baseball bat in both hands and destroy a dozen racks of priceless vinyl, before returning to the bedroom.

"Don't mention the funeral again," I tell Vanessa. "Don't mention death, or Alexa, or anything to do with human biology."

"Fine."

"I have nothing to celebrate. The party's over."

"Benny," says Vanessa. "Enough. There's always something to celebrate. What about this party?"

"What party?"

"This party," says Vanessa, waving her hands about. "Our life. Being alive. Being in love. Raising a family."

"What about it?"

"You know, celebrating isn't just something you do with old friends when you've got a drink in one hand and a joint in the other. Every time you open your eyes in the morning, it should be a celebration."

I say nothing.

"I know you've had a hard time getting over Alexa," says Vanessa. "I really understand that. But you don't need to give up on life because of it. That's the last thing Alexa would want. You have a loving wife and a genius son and you get to spend most of your time making music. Surely that's something to celebrate?"

"I know that, but why am I feeling so shit? I don't seem to get any wiser as I get older."

"Join the club," says Vanessa. "You're not doing too bad."

"Meh."

Vanessa undresses. Her body is still very much something to celebrate.

"I love you," she says.

"I love you too," I reply, and I mean it, but depression still beckons me. I can't believe my fiftieth birthday party was cut short by my pathetic morbidity. Whatever happened to rock and roll?

I light the joint and glance at the bedside clock. 1:54 am. I could still make it back to the club for an hour and a half of doomed denial.

Or I could put on a favourite album and lie in bed with my true love in my arms, celebrating.

10th September 2055 - Surprise Party

Alexa

The suspense is killing me.

I smoke three cigarettes, down another vodka and wave my hands through holograms of distant cities. Wayne replenishes my drink then continues compulsively adjusting the furniture and lighting.

"Please sit down," I tell him. "You're making me nervous."

Wayne sits opposite me.

"Wear the sash," he says.

"I'm not wearing the sash."

"Wear the sash," he says. "It'll be funny."

"I don't want to be funny, Wayne, I just want to get through this."

"Aren't you looking forward to it?"

"Of course, I'm just very nervous."

"Yeah," says Wayne. "I can't even imagine."

Wayne's wrist beeps.

"They're almost here," he says. "I'll beep you when we're ready to go."

Wayne scurries away. What the fuck am I supposed to do for twenty minutes?

I unfold my Dad's letter from my pocket and read it for the thousandth time in three weeks.

21.6.2027

Dear Alexa,

This is a very hard letter for me to write, as I do not know if or when you will ever read it. I can only pray

that it reaches you one day, and finds you in health and happiness.

Well, it looks like I got away with it. Even if they traced the funds now, the worst that could happen to me is house arrest, and to be honest I seldom venture far from these walls anyway. This arrangement suits me fine – your mother is an angel, and ensures I am well looked-after. She is the only company I need, though of course one can't help but harbour improbable dreams of a family reunion.

I pray that you will forgive the scale of the deception required to give you this chance of life. It was entirely necessary that you remained in the dark, lest my lack of discretion result in you being discovered too soon. By now, you are safe. There is nothing anybody can legally do to switch you off (how I loathe using that phrase in relation to my darling daughter) until your future Prince Charming arrives to break the spell.

My darling frozen angel, I send you love from the very bottom of my heart and hope and pray that one day you will awaken and find someone to love you in the way that you need.

Your ever loving,

Dad

PS. I spoke to your friends Benjamin and David recently. They sent me a compilation they have put together of your best songs (they even made a vinyl copy especially for your mother and I, which was rather sweet), but I have yet to listen to it.

I attempt to restrain the inevitable tears by distracting myself with an appropriately futuristic touchscreen panel in the tabletop. I point at a pleasing blue orb, which causes a miniature city to flicker and be replaced by a two-dimensional representation of the downstairs bar. A crowd of people surround the door, which opens to reveal the aged but instantly recognisable faces of Benny and Vanessa.

“SURPRISE,” chant the crowd as one. “HAPPY BIRTHDAY.”

Benny grins and does a little self-conscious wave as Vanessa hugs him and Wayne steps in with a handshake. I can't hear the details of their conversation, but Wayne seems to be introducing the guests. Benny smiles and greets various old friends, including Dave, who has not stopped laughing since I called him a fortnight ago. He'd better not give the game away.

I'm so entranced that I barely notice the time passing. My phone beeps.

“We're ready,” says a little red animated dog. “Come down.”

I take a very deep breath, check my reflection, give my dress a final adjustment and head downstairs.

I stand quietly in an alcove, out of sight of Benny but not out of earshot.

“Dad,” I hear Wayne say. “We've got a very special guest here to see you tonight.”

The other guests are quiet, evidently having been briefed in advance.

“Sounds intriguing,” says Benny. “It's not a stripper, is it?”

“No, it's not,” says Vanessa. “Behave.”

"It's an old friend," says Wayne. "Who you haven't seen in a long while."

This is my cue.

I step out into the lobby.

"Hello, Benny," I say.

Before Benny can respond, the chorus of *Feline Dream* kicks in at an ear-splitting level. I glare at Wayne, who lowers the volume.

Benny doesn't even blink.

"You know Alexa, I was always a fan of the silence in the middle of that song," he says. "But three seconds was sufficient. Three decades is a bit fucking excessive, don't you think?"

And with that, he turns away from me and orders a drink. I make eye contact with the bemused barmaid as she fixes Benny a vodka and orange. Vanessa, seeming to sense that something is wrong, motions for the guests to return to their mingling and give Benny some space.

This isn't going entirely as planned.

I approach Benny, who has seated himself in a side booth, without so much as looking back in my direction. He has a neat white beard and looks pretty healthy for someone who has just turned seventy-five.

"What's the matter?" I ask. "Aren't you pleased to see me?"

"Of course," says Benny. "It's just not the same."

"What do you mean?"

"We're all aging, and you're just frozen in time."

"I'm unfrozen now, Benny. I'll continue aging as normal."

Benny takes a sip of his drink, then looks blankly at me.

"What are you talking about?" he asks.

"I have to admit, I'm confused by your reaction," I say. "I thought you'd be happy to see me."

"I'm always fucking happy to see you, Alexa," says Benny. "Don't get me wrong. But these dreams stay with me for days afterwards, and I have to grieve all over again. It doesn't get any fucking easier."

Things click into place. I sit down opposite Benny, and take his hand in mine. A tear forms in his eye.

"Benny," I say, as tenderly as possible. "You're not dreaming. This is real."

Benny looks at me.

"Don't say that," he says. "I know this is me talking. You're not saying anything that isn't a product of my own imagination. You're not really here."

"Benny, I promise you that you're not dreaming. I'm really here."

"Fuck you," says Benny. "I'm sick of this shit. It makes me miss you too much. I'm waking up."

I decide to let this matter resolve itself. I lean back and light a cigarette while Benny scrunches up his eyes. For an old man, he does a pretty good impression of a bemused young boy.

Vanessa approaches the table. Up close, her elegance is all the more impressive. I hope I look that good when I'm in my seventies.

"How are you two getting on?" asks Vanessa. "Benny, are you alright?"

Benny grumbles something incomprehensible.

"What are you saying, honey?" asks Vanessa.

"Wake me up," grunts Benny. "Wake me up."

"You are awake, sweetheart."

Benny snaps open his eyes and addresses Vanessa.

"Honey, I don't know if you can hear me," he says. "But I've got sleep paralysis. Can you make a loud noise or something?"

Vanessa sits down beside me and takes Benny's hand.

"Sweetheart," she says, as Benny starts to hyperventilate. "Can you do me a favour and focus on your breathing? I know this is confusing, but I need you to stay calm. Just close your eyes, and focus on the sensations of your breath and the chair beneath you."

Vanessa holds Benny's hand while he calms himself down.

"Are you OK?" asks Vanessa, once Benny's breathing has returned to a normal level.

"Please," says Benny, his eyes still closed, "just explain what the fuck is going on."

"Right," says Vanessa. "I know this is a lot to take in, so try to bear with me. This isn't a dream. When Alexa died, her father had her cryonically frozen. Then Wayne paid for them to fix her as a birthday present to you."

Benny opens his eyes.

"I'm sorry, Alexa," adds Vanessa. "Is 'fixed' the politically correct term?"

"I have no idea," I reply. "Benny, it really is me."

Benny scrutinises my face.

"Explain it again," he says. "It sounds like bullshit."

"Do you want the short version or the long version?" I ask.

"The short version."

"My dad froze me. Your son paid to have me fixed."

Benny analyses my arms with a suspicious sneer.

"What's the long version?"

I light another cigarette. Now that Benny is calmer, I'm enjoying the moment of dramatic revelation.

"I don't know," I reply. "I was dead."

Several drinks and a couple of legal joints later, Benny is inching closer towards accepting the reality of the situation.

“Bear with me,” he says. “I will get there. But this is just too fucking much to take in, and I can’t force myself to believe it without understanding exactly what happened.”

“It’s fine,” I tell him. “Take your time.”

“How the fuck did they freeze you so quickly? You weren’t planning on the asthma attack, surely?”

“Remember that medibracelet my dad bought me? It wasn’t the standard kind. The cryomedics tracked me down within six minutes of my pulse stopping.”

“And what did they do? Without too much grisly medical detail, please.”

“They injected me with blue stuff and put me in a big fridge.”

“And that’s it? That’s supposed to explain this miracle? How the fuck did your dad pay for it in the first place?”

“He committed massive fraud. He risked everything, and got away with it. For long enough that I was safe, anyway. Don’t ask me how Wayne found me and fixed me. He expects me to relate to him because physically we’re roughly the same age, but we’re a generation apart. I don’t understand the things he tells me about computers.”

“Join the club,” says Benny. “He makes so much fucking money. It’s like he’s turned life into a videogame, and he seems to be winning.”

“Well, I’m not complaining.”

“Me neither,” says Benny. “Listen, Alexa. I realise that I don’t appear to be the picture of enthusiasm right now. That’s only because my brain would explode if I attempted to process this all at once, so I’m a bit emotionally numb right now. But you know that deep down, I’m

absolutely fucking mega-ecstatic to see you? You realise that, right?"

"Take your time, Benny. We have all the time in the world."

"You do," says Benny. "I just turned seventy-five."

"You don't look it."

"No," says Benny. "I'm probably about as healthy as a fifty-year old, by our standards. They have some pretty amazing vitamins nowadays. But that doesn't mean my life expectancy is the same. It could all go downhill at any moment."

"I'd better get the drinks in, then."

At that moment, Dave appears and plonks himself between us, carrying three glasses. He's a little scruffier than Benny, but still in respectable health. There's hope for us all.

"Alright, dudes," says Dave, placing a vodka in front of each of us. "The boys are back in town, then."

"You've already met up?" asks Benny.

"Yeah," says Dave. "Wayne didn't want Alexa to be overwhelmed by meeting everyone at once. You think this is trippy for us? Imagine what it's like for her."

"Fair enough," says Benny. "So, what do we do now?"

"Drink," says Dave, waggling his glass.

"Yeah," says Benny. "But in the long term? I can't help thinking of this as an opportunity."

"An opportunity for what?" asks Dave.

"I don't know," says Benny. "It's probably just me feeling guilty and undeserving of such a miracle, or maybe I just want to repay the universe. We should do some benefit concerts or something."

"I see your point, Benny," I tell him. "And we will do lots of wonderful things. But don't try to figure it all out tonight, because I will still be here when you wake up

tomorrow. I'm even staying with you and Vanessa. So for now, let's just celebrate your birthday, OK?"

"OK," says Benny, before turning to Dave. "But if this turns out to be a dream, I'm kicking your arse when I wake up. I don't care how old you are."

"Drink your drink and get on the dancefloor, you sippy tart," says Dave. "Let's show these youngsters how it's done."

Lily is DJing. She still looks stunning, and it's not until she plays a Nancy Sinatra track that I realise who she reminds me of. I dance all over the place, recognising few of the faces but infinitely grateful for human company. I'm still not fully readjusted, and the anxiety drugs don't do much for my sense of isolation. It's been great catching up with Dave this past week, but there's a peculiar, uniquely lonely sensation only experienced when old friends tell you what a great time they had at your funeral.

I keep dancing, but I'm no longer sure what for. Am I just a novel relic here for Benny's birthday amusement, or was I raised from the dead simply so I could be tortured with loneliness all over again? Emotions that have been dormant for over three decades return to me, reminding me how sad I felt in my last days. I was always utterly fucking useless at relationships, and while rebirth is always cause for celebration, there's no reason to expect that to change.

The beat goes on, and while I'm glad to be alive to experience music again, I know I'm at the mercy of the next song. Come on, Lily. Give me joy. Give me euphoria. Give me the romance I've been starved of. This defrosted girl can't take any more sadness.

I curse Lily's name as soon as the first familiar note sounds. Fingerpicked minor chords and plodding, mournful percussion are not what I need. I think I recognise this song

from somewhere, and I'm already in danger of overdosing on nostalgia.

But then there's a key change. I forgot about that bit. The verses begin, vocals pitched somewhere between youthful yearning and the wisdom of experience, sad but ultimately uplifting. Maybe Lily knows what she's doing after all.

Oh fuck.

That chorus.

Please, Lily. Have mercy. It's not fair to tease me like this.

The chorus seeps deep into my brain, triggering feelings that are entirely new.

Love.

Romantic love.

Somebody loves me.

I glance despairingly at Lily, but she just gives me this radiant smile and cranks the music up a notch. A tear forms in my eye. Lily blows me a kiss. Don't confuse me, Lily. You're married and I'm straight.

What is happening? Music should not be able to do this.

Somebody loves me now, but what happens when the song ends?

What the fuck is this song, anyway?

I rush over to Benny, who is dancing with Vanessa and Wayne.

"Benny, what song is this?"

"*Time Travelling Man*," says Benny, still slightly suspicious of my presence.

"Fuck. I haven't heard this in nearly four decades."

"I'm not surprised."

"Who sings it?"

"A very good friend of mine," says Benny. "Mr Den Pegg."

"You know him?"

"Yeah," says Benny. "He's over there talking to Lily."

I turn and locate him. A handsome, stylishly dressed man of about sixty approaches the DJ booth, jokingly complaining about Lily's choice of song.

I make eye contact with the handsome stranger. He falls silent, and stares at me.

I fall in love.

We walk towards each other, meeting halfway across the dancefloor.

"Alexa," he says, with a smile. "You took your time."

I love him and he loves me.

I can't believe this is happening. Now I see where Benny is coming from. Some things really seem too good to be true.

"Den?"

"I'm going to kiss you now, Alexa," says Den. He kisses me.

Den withdraws his face from mine, and I feel very, very young.

He takes my hands and squeezes them tightly and I am happy.

"It's funny," says Den, my true love. "The last time we kissed, you were fifteen years older than me. Now I'm fifteen years older than you. It's a good job I'm not so fussy about age difference in a relationship."

I blink and smile and I have nothing to say because my life is complete.

"I can't even imagine how much this is to take in," says Den. "But take your time. You have plenty of time."

I smile and then I start to cry.

"Don't cry," says Den. "I love you."

"I love you too," I reply, like a happy child.

I look across the dancefloor. Wayne is doing an ironic twist with an attractive woman in her thirties. Benny, Vanessa and Dave are dancing to *Too Good To Be True*, a Teenagers single from the early twenties. Lily withdraws to the rear of the DJ booth, still shy about hearing her own vocals, a smile of secret triumph visible on her lips.

"These are my friends," I say to Den.

"Yeah," he says, caressing the palm of my hand with his fingers. "They're my friends too."

The title of the song and the fact that I am alive and in love conspires to suggest that this is indeed all too good to be true.

But it is true. And nothing will ever fucking change that.

3rd March 2067 – Benny’s Funeral

Wayne

“Dad is dust,” I repeat. “He doesn’t exist anymore.”

“I know, honey,” says Sarah, squeezing my hand. “I know.”

I decide to keep quiet, each painfully obvious statement making me feel more like a child.

Sarah kisses me on the cheek and I sit still like a good boy.

The stage is empty except for a spotlit stool and a guitar. Alexa prowls across to the stool and arms herself with the guitar.

There’s a five-second blast of dissonant techno, before it cuts to sudden silence. It reminds me of that *Miss Lucifer* track Dad used to play me as a kid. Instead of kicking back in, however, the beat continues only through the rhythmic chugging on Alexa’s acoustic guitar.

“This is the final Teenagers single,” says Alexa. “Check your earpods, you should all have received it by now. It’s a bit of a country song. It’s called *If You DJ At My Funeral, I’ll DJ At Yours*.”

The title gets an affectionate laugh, and people are soon clapping along. The lyrics combine Dad’s trademark poetic wit with a poignant lightness of touch absent from his earlier work. I can imagine this song being played at a lot of funerals.

“Thank you,” says Alexa softly, as we applaud the final chorus. “I did consider duetting with a hologram of Benny, but thought that might be a bit spooky. But he did want me to show you this video.”

A lightscreen appears above Alexa. Dad stares quietly into the lens with an amused smirk until an off-screen signal prompts him to begin his speech.

"Hello," he says. "If you are watching this, then I am dead now."

Dave laughs.

"Sorry," says Dad. "I've just always wanted to say that. Anyway, er. Thanks for coming to my funeral. I don't really know how to do justice to everyone who has enriched my life, but I wanted to thank them regardless. You know who you are. If I've ever considered you a friend, then I thank you sincerely. Wayne, you're the best son anyone could hope for and you give the best birthday presents of all time. Keep it up, buddy. Sorry I wouldn't let you freeze me, but you know how I am with injections."

Alexa laughs at this.

"Vanessa, you're the greatest person who has ever existed and I will love you throughout eternity."

My mother sits still and silent.

"Dave, Lily, Den, behave yourselves at my funeral and enjoy the rest of the sixties. Alexa, thank you for everything. I hope you'll all still listen to my records occasionally. I don't know what else to say. I'll write you all letters, but I just wanted to say a few words face to face, as it were. Love you all. Cheers, bye."

There's some hesitant applause, as no-one appears to be sure whether or not applauding is appropriate.

"Thanks, Benny," says Alexa, somewhat shyly as if conscious of sounding like a news reporter being handed back the camera from a weatherman. "Right, one more song, before we get the party going. If anyone would like to join us, we'll be scattering Benny's ashes from Wolves Hill on Saturday, where we'll also be frisbeeing unsold vinyl copies of our single into the sea."

Dave lets out a croaky cheer as Alexa begins strumming her guitar.

"I dedicate this song to Benny and Vanessa," says Alexa. I look over to my mother who nods regally. "It's called *All I Want To Do Is Find Love Before I Die*."

I've heard this song a million times, and its lyrics, which consist of nothing more than the title repeated a hundred or so times, are engraved on my brain like a mantra. Dad frequently lectured me on its genius, and how the phrase "all I want to do" is one of the most beautifully ambiguous cornerstones of pop music, combining both heartfelt desperation and all-consuming desire.

Inevitably, tonight's performance of the song gets to me like no other. After a dozen or so repetitions of the lyric, guests begin to sing along. First Dave, then Den, then Lily and Sarah, followed by Aunt Andrea and Uncle Peter, Uncle Fredrik and then everybody, including my mother, is repeating that same phrase with total conviction. And while this is probably the saddest moment I've ever experienced, a collective truth emerges, which is that Dad did find love before he died. Mission accomplished. Rest in peace. What else is there to say?

I sit down next to Lily. She is a frail and fading widow and I do not know how much longer the vitamins can keep her going, but there is still beauty in her smile and music in her heart. My mother is the same age, though I am incapable of assessing her so objectively. She will live forever.

"Hello there, young man," says Lily. "How are you holding up?"

"I'm coping," I reply. "But I think I'm still in a certain amount of denial."

"That's to be expected," says Lily. "You know, your father was only recently pestering me to make another album. I refused, and he kept telling me about all these people he used to listen to that kept making great records

well into their seventies. Nancy Sinatra, Lee Hazlewood, Leonard Cohen, Bob Dylan. Even William Shatner. But that's one thing. I'm eighty-six. So we compromised and decided that Alexa could provide the vocals for the final Teenagers record. She has such a lovely voice."

"Yeah. I think Dad was really happy to work with her on a song."

"I'm not a Teenager anymore," says Lily.

Den approaches the table, kisses Lily gently on the hand and sits down beside us. Dave wheels over to join us as well.

"How's Mum?" I ask Den.

"She's fine, lad," says Den. "Sarah's looking after her. How about you?"

"Wayne's being very brave," says Lily.

"It's a sad day," says Den. "If it wasn't for your dad, I would never have met Alexa. He got me backstage to meet her."

Lily laughs at this.

"You were such a funny cute boy," says Lily, tweaking Den's cheek. "You still are."

Den is in his seventies. This is so disorientating.

Dave coughs and looks like he's about to speak, so we all turn to him. He silently raises his drink and nods to us each in turn, before downing it.

I know it's terrible of me, but part of me can't wait to go home with Sarah and spend some time with our own friends. I love these people, but I can't stop wondering how many more funerals I will have to attend in the next few years. It's definitely the end of an era.

I look at the sad faces of Lily, Den and Dave, then over at where Sarah is tenderly hugging my mother, flanked by Peter and Andrea.

Where is Alexa?

“DANCE MOTHERFUCKERS, D-D-DANCE”. This sudden sample causes Dave to spit out a mouthful of whisky from laughing and Lily to roll her eyes impishly at the profanity. Mum glances warily at Alexa then relaxes as a slow soul ballad from about a hundred years ago begins to play.

The thought of an empty dancefloor hits me in the heart, but somewhat miraculously people actually begin to climb to their feet. Lily claims me as hers, and we settle into a gentle waltz while Den gingerly manoeuvres my mother onto the dancefloor.

Alexa ups the tempo with the next song, *She Loves You* by The Beatles. Sarah approaches the dancefloor and trades Fredrik for me. Fredrik, undoubtedly the oldest swinger in town, places his hands on Lily’s hips and makes seductive eyebrow movements. Lily laughs dismissively but continues to dance with him, though they take regular rests.

“You’re doing so well,” says Sarah, wrapping her arms around me and looking into my eyes. “I’m so proud of you.”

I look at my wife. She looks particularly beautiful today, but the part of my brain that would usually process that fact and respond appropriately seems to have taken the day off. I let her hug me and take comfort in her scent and warmth.

Then Alexa plays *Loose Electric*, a hit single from the early thirties that was a favourite of Sarah and I when we were teenagers, oblivious to our entwined destiny. I lock eyes with my wife, both knowing what’s coming.

As the tribal percussion escalates into a firework display of ricocheting beats and treble-speed rockabilly riffs, our inhibitions leave us as I merge with Sarah into a single loose-limbed, obscenely-gyrating entity that might once have shocked the elderly guests present, but not tonight. Lily cheers and raises her glass, while Den claps along with the

song and Dave spins his wheelchair in circles. Alexa even does some live remixing of the track, literally keeping Sarah and I on our toes as we second-guess each other's movements and manage to time each hip swing and elbow flick to perfection.

My wife is so fucking hot.

As the song climaxes and I manage to stop short of doing the same, Alexa screams primally into the microphone, which I interpret as her letting us know that this party has only just started.

OK, so with a combined age of about a thousand, the guests never quite rise to the occasion of equalling Alexa's legendary funeral, but that can be forgiven. There was no shortage of soul or spirit, and I'm a lot more drunk and exhausted than I'd planned on being at Dad's funeral, so I don't have any complaints.

Apart from Dad being dead, that is. But we can deal with that later.

Alexa is smoking a cigarette on the balcony.

"Hey kiddo," she says. "You did well today."

"Thanks. You too. You were great. I wish Dad could have seen it."

"Yeah," says Alexa. "Nothing makes you feel older than your best friend dying of old age."

"You've got plenty of time left," I tell her. "I hope to still know you for a few decades yet."

"You'd better believe it. I promised Benny I'd keep an eye on you."

"Thanks. Can you help me keep an eye on Mum, too?"

"Of course. I love Vanessa. I know she's had a terrible loss, but she could still stick it out for another decade. I'll do my best to keep her entertained."

"Thank you."

"Any time. I owe you my life, Wayne. I'll do anything you ask of me."

"You don't owe me anything, but I appreciate it."

I sigh and sit down.

"Such a crazy day," I say. "Obviously I'm devastated, but Dad was happy. He spent his life making music and trying to help people, and got to spend fifty years with his true love. It's not like you can really complain about that."

"No," says Alexa.

"What about you? Any regrets? Apart from that time you died of an asthma attack, of course. But luckily I was around to sort that out."

Alexa punches me playfully on the arm.

"Nothing major," she says. "You know. Just a few old grudges I really should let go of."

"Yeah? Sounds juicy. Who do you hate?"

"It's not important."

"Tell me," I say. "Don't make me play the funeral card."

"Fine," she says. "This girl called Joanna. Well, she's hardly a girl anymore. I don't even know if she's still alive."

"What did she do?"

"Fucked this guy right after I told her I was in love with him."

"How long ago was this?"

Alexa exhales smoke.

"About seventy years."

"Right," I say. "Maybe time to forgive and forget, don't you think?"

"Never," says Alexa. "Well, maybe next century, if I live that long."

"You will," I reply, "but you should forgive her now. Have you really been hating her all this time?"

"I hated her right up until I died," says Alexa. "But since I met Den, I don't think I've even thought about her again until tonight."

"So forgive her."

"I can't, Wayne. She was my best friend and she betrayed me."

"You're happy. Joanna might be dead soon, if not already. And you just promised that you'd do anything I asked of you."

"Not that."

"Forgive her genuinely," I reply. "And we're even. If you do this for me, I'll consider it of equivalent value to me paying a vast sum of money to bring you back to life."

There is a very long silent moment, during which I wonder several times if Alexa is about to kill me.

Finally, she flicks her cigarette over the balcony, closes her eyes, then opens them again with a newfound serenity.

"OK," she says. "I've forgiven her."

17th July 1997 – Teen Grace

Joanna

The train pulls into Newton Abbott and I scamper across the road to Courteney Park, hoping to locate my friends among the crowd. I can't see anyone I recognise, but plenty of heads turn in my direction, and already I'm beginning to question the wisdom of dressing so minimally. Apart from my sneakers, my light blue summer dress is the only thing I'm wearing. This risks an excess of attention, but fuck it. The breeze on my skin feels too good to resist.

A nearby stall attracts my attention with a banner urging me to 'SAVE TEIGNGRACE'.

"Alright, love," says the dreadlocked guy behind the stall. "Come to help us save the river, have you?"

"What's this about?"

"Blimey, where have you been? You may have heard of a clay company called Watts Blake Bearne." He pauses to spit. "Who are hell-bent on diverting the paths of the Bovey and Teign rivers in order to expand their fucking quarry. The council are going along with it, despite the fact that it will completely fuck up the local environment, put the local residents at increased risk of flooding, not to mention the otters, badgers and cirl buntings who have grown rather attached to the area and will be evicted from their homes if we don't put a fucking stop to this."

"What's a cirl bunting?"

"The rarest bird in Britain, love. Or is that a teetotal Essex girl? It'll be even fucking rarer soon, anyway. So can I get your signature here?"

"Of course."

I sign the petition.

"Listen," he says. "A bunch of us are setting up a protest camp there. Treehouses, the lot. Swampy'll be there.

Tell your friends. Get as many people as you can to come and support us, otherwise no more river, and no more badgers."

"And no more buntings."

"Exactly."

I give the guy a goodbye smile, admiring his passion and commitment, and saunter across the park where I eventually spot Dave and Alexa moonwalking back and forth behind a bearded activist who is being interviewed by a television crew.

"Hey sexy," shouts Dave upon sighting me, causing the interview to be abandoned. "Come dance with us. We're on telly."

They scurry away from the cameraman's raised fist and over to me. I hug Alexa and give Dave a peck on the cheek.

"Hey guys. What are you up to?"

"We've got to save the badgers," says Dave.

"Right on."

"Where's the B man?" asks Alexa. "I'm not used to seeing you without him."

"Hush. I'm meeting him shortly. He's tagging along with Benny and Lucy."

"We should round up some others," says Dave.

"Meet you guys over at Teignrace?"

"Sure."

"Coolio," says Alexa. "See you shortly, honey. Don't forget the wine."

It's about time to meet Brian, so I sit on the bench in the corner of the park and wait for him. I've spent many hours on this bench, and consider it a kind of unofficial headquarters for our friendship group. Benny disagrees, preferring the one across the bridge by the signal box.

A train arrives and from it emerge Brian, Benny and Lucy, who wave in unison as they cross the road to meet me. Brian looks as hot as ever. Benny's still defying the climate with his leather jacket, and Lucy's in a red summer dress. It's almost as skimpy as mine, but visible bra-straps suggest greater modesty.

Brian hugs me and immediately tweaks my nipples, causing them to become erect and visible through the thin cotton of my dress. Immediately, I feel naked. Ever since I confessed occasional exhibitionist tendencies he's been finding new ways to publicly arouse me like this. I know I should get it under control, but I'm helpless. Right now half of me wants Brian to tear off my dress and fuck me in front of Benny and Lucy, while the other half is paralysed with embarrassment, scared to even turn around.

Brian forces me to turn around, however, and hugs me from behind, holding me in place. I feel Benny's eyes on my breasts and melt internally. Unwilling to concede defeat quite so readily, I reach behind me and squeeze Brian's dick as tightly as possible without it hurting. Let's see how he deals with a public erection.

"OK," says Lucy, seeming to pick up on our chemistry. "Shall we get going?"

Benny looks slightly grumpy. I don't think he's slept with Lucy yet. Hang in there, Benny.

The four of us walk over to Teigngrace at a leisurely pace, the town giving way to countryside, as we admire the sunset and dappled shadows when passing under trees. Benny and Lucy walk ahead, hand in hand. Brian has his arm around me. The cool air caresses my skin. I sip wine, and smile at the beauty that exists all around me.

Benny sits down by a non-specific patch of riverbank, prompting us to do the same.

"Are you sure this is the right place?" asks Lucy, as Benny swigs vodka.

"It's where we were last time," says Benny. "The others will have to pass through here either way."

I close my eyes and lie down on the floor. Brian strokes my arms and I writhe around like a cat, before realising that my legs are open. Without opening my eyes, I demurely cross my legs, hoping that I'm not torturing Benny too much.

Benny and Lucy start making out. Lucy looks happy. It's good to see.

Brian leans against a tree. I snuggle into him, allowing him to rest his hands between my thighs and slide a finger inside me. I cover his hands with his shirt and close my eyes again, taking a silent sip of wine and giving my full attention to every delicious bodily sensation. We're going to have to find somewhere private before too long.

The sound of distant drunkenness gets steadily closer, and the four of us look up expectantly as a large group of friends progress down the riverbank towards us, cheering various greetings.

"Beer ahoy," shouts Dave, dropping a crate of Fosters and immediately urinating on a nearby tree. Emma and Suzie both kiss me on the cheek and sit down. Brian's finger is still inside me. I attempt to eject him through careful muscle control, but he remains firmly in place and winks at me. I giggle foolishly.

"Not pissed already, are you Jo?" asks Emma. "Looks like I've got some catching up to do."

"She's just horny," says Suzie, opening a bottle of cider. "Fucking nymph."

"Who's a fucking nymph?" asks Dave, sitting next to Suzie and fishing weed paraphernalia from his pockets.

"Joanna is," says Emma.

"Joanna is what?" asks Benny, as him and Lucy join us.

"A nymph," says Suzie. "And a pervert. I can't believe you get turned on by having your feet tickled."

For fuck's sake, Suzie!

"Is that right?" asks Dave, removing one of my shoes. Benny begins unlacing the other. Brian remains still and silently grinning.

"No, guys, please..."

Dave holds my right foot firmly and blows on my toes, then scrapes his fingernails lightly up and down my soles. Benny tosses my left shoe away and flicks his fingertips all over my other foot.

Every nerve ending in my body becomes fully aroused. Meanwhile, I have never been so embarrassed.

Suzie, Lucy and Emma leer at my face to see whether or not I'm getting horny. Benny and Dave are pretending not to look up my dress.

"She's totally getting off on it," says Lucy. "You should stop, Benny, or I'll get jealous."

Brian moves his finger very slightly.

I am speechless.

I emerge from the woods with Brian, feeling much better. Dave has a little campfire going, from which he lights a giant joint. He cheers when he sees me. I blush for about the thousandth time today.

"Nice of you to join us," says Alexa.

I ignore her and sit down by the campfire. Dave gives Brian a look of envious indulgence.

"Look," says Martin, brandishing a French textbook. "The one that got away. This one escaped cremation at the last beach party."

He tosses the book onto the fire. Tiny fragments of vocabulary float away on the smoky breeze.

"What happened to the protest camp?" asks Dave. "Isn't it supposed to be around here?"

We all look around for signs of life.

"So," says Lucy to Benny, "you're sure this is the right place."

"This is the river," says Benny. "You see that long wet thing?"

"Is this the river Teign or Bovey?" I ask, but no-one seems to know. "Maybe the camp is at the other river."

"Never mind," says Dave. "We've got our own little protest camp right here. If anyone comes through here looking to pick a fight with a badger, they'll have me to deal with."

Everyone laughs, even Alexa. I love being here in this beautiful location laughing with my friends and I want to freeze this moment forever. It makes me sad that in a hundred years time, there'll be no-one around to remember nights like this.

There are some stepping stones across the river, the latest beautiful discovery in a perfect day. I hop back and forth, then stand perched on the middle stone looking up at the moon and the stars. The universe is awesome.

Dave spots me and jumps across to the next stone.

"Hello," I say.

"I'm afraid I can't let you past without the password," says Dave.

"What's the password?"

"It's classified."

"Let me past, you bastard."

"I'm afraid I can't do that, Joanna."

"Brian," I whine. "Dave won't let me past."

Brian looks up sleepily from the campfire.

"Push her in," says Brian.

"You're all bastards."

I would threaten Brian with sex-deprivation at this point, but wisely choose to avoid raising this subject, as it

would only trigger more snarky remarks from the virgins present.

I giggle and attempt to sneak onto Dave's stone when he's not looking, but I brush his leg and he spins round to push me back onto the middle stone.

"Password," says Dave.

"OK, let me think," I reply. "Is the password 'Dave likes shagging sheep'?"

Dave puts on a mock thoughtful expression, strokes his chin, then raises his hand to my cleavage. For a minute I think he's going to grope me, but instead he simply places his index finger on my breastbone and gives me a tiny push.

Unprepared for this loss of balance, I slip backwards off the stone and land fully immersed in the freezing river.

I don't know if Brian told Dave that cold water is another one of my turn-ons, but fucking hell.

I scramble to the surface and gasp for breath as everyone cheers from the riverbank.

"I'm sorry," says Dave. "That wasn't the password."

My dress is now virtually transparent. I remove my shoes and pad across to the campfire, aware of many male eyes on my body. Brian gives me this look like he's in total control of me and once again my insides melt at the thought of what will happen when we're next alone.

I hold my hair back and lean forward over the campfire, attempting to dry the front of my dress. Martin sniggers and puffs on a joint.

"Joanna," says Alexa. "You really are unbelievable."

"What?"

Alexa is my best friend, but she can sometimes make me feel like a slut.

"Nothing," says Alexa. "You know that I love you. It's just that, how can I put this? It's like you have no self-awareness."

"What do you mean?"

"You're totally sweet and everything, I'm just not sure you realise the effect you have on guys."

Martin feigns sudden interest in an ant crawling over his hand.

"Dave pushed me in," I reply. "It's not my fault I'm soaked."

"I know," says Alexa. "But I mean in general. You're a great person, and everyone loves you. But sometimes it's like, do you even realise what you are?"

Actually, Alexa, I know exactly what I am.

Do you?

20th September 2096 – Roundhay Garden Scene

Alexa

It's a beautiful day, and the deckchair beside me is empty. I briefly consider loading Den's ghost, but decide against it. There's a fine line between nostalgia and necrophilia.

Wayne returns to his seat with a fresh tray of cocktails.

"So," he says. "Have you decided?"

"No," I reply. "You?"

"Me neither. It's beyond tricky. I thought we were supposed to get wiser as we got older?"

"There are limits to human wisdom," I remind him. "Which makes me wonder if perhaps we shouldn't be fucking with eternity."

"I'm not saying I want to live forever," says Wayne. "I just want to keep my options open."

"Same thing," I reply. "Death means accepting that there are no more options, and being grateful for the time you've had. Besides, with the possibility of eternal life comes the risk of eternal torment. How do we know we can trust these companies? I don't want to wake up in a hundred years and find my nerve endings are being kept alive by mad scientists who torture me throughout infinity, eclipsing all my good memories. You've got to know when to leave the party, Wayne."

"Fine," says Wayne. "We'll just die, then."

"Don't sound so defeated. Sarah was your true love, right? You don't want to miss her for eternity, and you don't want to betray that love."

"I'd never be unfaithful to Sarah," says Wayne.

"What, even if you awoke in a lithe, thirty-year old body on the planet of the nymphomaniacs? Just enjoy the rest of this life, then go join Sarah in the next one."

"Fuck you," says Wayne. "You know for a fact there's no afterlife."

"How am I supposed to know that?"

"You were dead for six minutes, or three decades, depending on how you look at it. I'm sure you'd have mentioned any heavenly apparitions you encountered."

"Maybe the afterlife doesn't kick in until your brain is completely dead. I don't know."

"Now you're clutching at straws," says Wayne. "Death is the end, I'm pretty sure of that. But we don't have to die yet."

"We're not going to die yet," I reply. "But we will, sometime in the next decade, and I'm OK with that. If I'm lucky, I'll have lived in three centuries. I don't want to drag it out forever."

"What if we freeze just a little bit of our brains," says Wayne. "Then, if they finally figure out how to extract consciousness, they can put us in a new body."

"I told you, I haven't decided. But I'm not in any rush. If I die before signing the contract, then so be it."

"It's not that I'm scared of dying," says Wayne. "It's just that every time I resign myself to it, this little voice pops up and suggests that maybe I can keep the party going a little longer."

"We are keeping the party going a little longer. Just not forever. Enjoy it while it lasts."

"This doesn't feel like a party," says Wayne. "It feels like two old people sat on a beach."

I sip at my cocktail. Perfect.

"You only need two people to celebrate," I tell Wayne. "One, if you're a zen master. But two to do it properly."

"What are we celebrating?" asks Wayne.

"Oh, I don't know. How about everything we've experienced? How about you bringing me back from the dead? True love? All the great people we've known? All the money we've raised? How about we celebrate just fucking staying alive this long?"

Wayne grins and sucks from his straw.

"Nothing like hearing an old woman swear," he says.

"I like being a swearing old woman," I tell Wayne.

"I like all the vitamins in my cocktail, and I especially like these healthy cigarettes."

A naked couple stroll across the beach. The guy is bronzed, muscular, well-hung and semi-erect. The girl is equally stunning, her proportions deviating just enough from perfection to bolster her beauty with character. She gives his penis a playful squeeze and scampers into the sea. He growls humorously and chases after her.

"Anyway," says Wayne. "Before my impotence prompts an early suicide, I wanted to show you something."

Wayne plucks a tiny metal ball from his pocket and tosses it onto the sand. A hovering translucent screen appears, obscuring the horizon.

"What have you got?"

"My favourite film," says Wayne. "*Roundhay Garden Scene.*"

"Sounds good. I'm in the mood for a movie."

Wayne fiddles with his wrist. An ancient monochrome image appears of four smartly dressed Victorian people in the garden of a house. They walk around the garden, laughing. In less than three seconds, the film is over.

"Isn't it amazing?" asks Wayne.

"Not bad," I reply. "It took a while to get into, and it tailed off a bit towards the end, but other than that it was enormously entertaining."

"It's not about the entertainment value," says Wayne. "This was the first film ever recorded, filmed by Louis Le Prince in eighteen eighty-eight. Can you believe we just saw some people partying over two hundred years ago?"

"It looked like quite a party," I reply, but Wayne can tell from my smile that I'm now more impressed. "So what's your point, showing me that?"

"I don't know," he says. "There's just something about it. Blame my dad. I've always had this thing about revisiting the past, and seeing what there is to discover that might have escaped me first time around. That's why I want to go on living, I guess. So I can look back at this moment and enjoy aspects of it I'm currently oblivious to."

"You're your father's son, alright," I reply. "But you've got to pass on the baton. Let somebody else look back at this moment, and see what a great time we had, and be inspired by us to create their own reasons to celebrate."

"I know we live in the century of surveillance," says Wayne, "but I can't help thinking that any cameras in the vicinity are trained on those two, rather than us."

Wayne points to the young couple, who are now fucking ecstatically in the sea.

"Maybe so. Do you have a camera on you?"

"Bringing out your inner voyeur, are they? No wonder. When you grew up I suppose you could turn the guys on just by flashing your ankles."

"I'm not that old, Wayne. I wasn't around when they made that film."

"If you say so. Anyway, here's the cam."

Wayne hands me another metal ball which I toss behind me. It lands midway between our two deckchairs. I stroke the keyball in my armrest until a live image of Wayne and I appears on the hovering screen in front of us, the horizon our backdrop.

The sun sets. It never gets any less beautiful.

"How come the screen doesn't appear on the screen?" I ask. "How can the camera see through it?"

"Do you really want me to explain?" asks Wayne.

"Not really. You know, it wasn't until the start of this century that we even had digital cameras. All those beach parties in the late nineties – the last nineties - I hardly have any photographs of them. A few blurry snapshots, maybe."

"Let me try something," says Wayne, stroking his keyball and adjusting the contrast settings of our on-screen image. We now appear as silhouettes on either side of the frame, the sea view behind us reduced to a garish blur of blue and orange.

"Now give me a toast," says Wayne.

We clink drinks as Wayne presses something. The image freezes. The symmetrical silhouettes of our raised cocktail glasses now form the centrepiece of the picture. Wayne adds a caption: WISH YOU WERE HERE.

"Lovely."

"Who should I send our postcard to, Alexa?"

"I don't know. Whoever's on this beach a hundred years from today. Assuming there are any beaches left, that is."

"There'll always be beaches," says Wayne. "There just might not be much non-coastal land."

Wayne clicks the keyball and our holiday postcard folds itself into a paper plane, which shoots off dramatically into the sky.

"Nice touch."

"So," says Wayne. "Are we celebrating yet?"

"I'm always celebrating," I reply.

"I guess we'll have to content ourselves with a private party. Do you think anyone will get our postcard?"

"I should think so, if the servers survive that long."

"What do you think life will be like a hundred years from now?" asks Wayne. "I can't even conceive of it."

"So don't try to. Just trust that good will prevail. I'm still amazed we've nearly made it to the end of this century without blowing up the whole world."

"Touch wood," says Wayne, looking around for some wood to touch but finding none. "So what were you doing a hundred years ago today?"

"How am I supposed to remember that?"

"I'm sure we can figure it out. You would have been sixteen, right?"

"Fifteen. I turned sixteen on Christmas Day, ninety-six."

"Right. Dad would have been sixteen, because we just passed his birthday."

"So we would have just started our final year before sixth form."

"What can you remember about that time?"

"Nothing too specific."

"I have an idea."

Wayne strokes the keyball and a smaller screen appears in front of us, showing the UK Top 40 music charts for the week beginning 16th September 1996.

"Recognise any of these?"

I scroll down the list and stop at number thirty-seven.

"This one. Ben Folds Five - *Underground*. I remember buying that single for Benny."

"The plot thickens," says Wayne. "Can you remember when you bought it?"

"I first heard it when it charted on the Sunday evening, so I probably bought it the next morning. I used to skip history to see what new records were out."

"So you bought it on Monday the sixteenth?"

"That's what's most likely."

"And can you remember when you gave it to Dad?"

"No. It's too long ago, Wayne."

"Can you remember where you gave it to him?"

"No. At some party, probably."

"Think."

I sigh and let the dates and numbers fall away. I look at the image of the CD cover on the screen in front of me and try to visualise it in my hand.

It doesn't work. Memories of thousands of similar moments spent staring lovingly at record covers flock to my brain. I can't differentiate them.

Wayne strokes his keyball. *Underground* starts playing. The bouncy piano riff clarifies everything.

"I remember," I tell Wayne. "Behind L.A. Bowl in Newton Abbott."

"Do you remember when?"

"It would have been a Friday, probably."

"The same week you bought the single?"

"Most likely."

"That makes it the twentieth," says Wayne triumphantly. "So, one hundred years ago today, you were behind a bowling alley exchanging music with Dad."

Wayne loads Microsoft Earth.

"Where would you like to go today?" asks a pleasant female voice.

"L.A. Bowl, Newton Abbott, Devon, UK," says Wayne.

A satellite view of earth begins to zoom in with increasing speed. We penetrate the cloud cover and come to a halt about a hundred feet above the ground. The bowling alley sprawls beneath us.

"Is that it?" asks Wayne.

"I think so. I can't believe it's still there."

"People still bowl," says Wayne.

"Pan right."

Our viewpoint shifts over fifty feet.

Fuck.

"What is it?" asks Wayne, after a minute of silence.

"The signal box," I reply. "It's still there."

"What's that?"

"See that little square? It's an old railway building.

We used to get drunk on the roof of it."

"Nice."

"How can it possibly still be there?"

"Why wouldn't it be? There's tons of ancient buildings around. It's not like they need to knock old ones down to make room for new ones, when they can just stack them on top of each other. That club where we held your funerals - that had been there for ages even when you died, hadn't it?"

"Yeah, since the last century. But still. I can't believe what I'm seeing. It's like travelling in time."

"You should be used to that," says Wayne. "You've done your fair share."

I stare at the roof of the signal box and two things occur to me.

Firstly, I want to go back there and sit on the roof again.

Secondly, I do not want to die. I could extend my cryonics contract with a flick of the wrist.

"I'm getting another drink," says Wayne, getting up.

My hand hovers above the keyball.

Something moves on the screen.

Two figures are visible on the roof of the signal box, periodically raising a bottle to their faces.

A third figure approaches the signal box via a short stretch of abandoned railway track.

Wayne returns and hands me a cocktail.

"Looks like it's still a popular hangout spot," says Wayne. "There's nothing more beautiful than symmetry. We should go back there, given that there were no cameras in your day."

"We had cameras. Just not digital ones."

"Right. Ones where your whole family had to stand still for six hours while a guy with a sheet over his head fiddles with a huge box on a tripod. I'd rather see it first hand."

"Wayne," I say. "Who are those people?"

"I have no idea," says Wayne. "Want me to find out?"

"No. I think I know."

"It's not a past version of you, Alexa," says Wayne. "Before you start going down that road. Congratulations, your old high school hangout is still in use. I realise you can be overwhelmed by technology, but we still don't have cameras capable of time travel, I'm afraid."

"Shut up and let me fantasise."

Wayne smiles quietly and sips his drink. The third person climbs onto the roof of the signal box. Is that a CD in her hand?

Maybe I am ready to die.

20th September 1996 – The Signal Box

Benny

The bottle empties. The tape ends. Dave and I look at each other.

“What now?” I ask.

“I guess the party’s over,” says Dave. “You can crash at mine if you want.”

The thought of a lonely night in a strange bedroom fills me with a sense of defeat. I prepare to summon further grumpiness, but find myself distracted by a movement in the corner of my eye. I resist focusing on it immediately, not wanting to get my hopes up, but soon enough the shape of a female human approaching the signal box via the train tracks is unmistakable.

“Well, look who it is,” shouts Dave. “You took your time. We were just about to give up and go home.”

Alexa grins up at us and makes her way to the rear of the signal box, climbing the stairs to join us.

“Hey, stranger,” I say. “Good to see you. What’s been going on?”

“Present,” says Alexa, handing me a CD. “I heard this and thought of you.”

I look at the cover. *Underground* by Ben Folds Five. Sweet.

“Wow, thanks. The CD version and everything.”

“Yep,” says Alexa. “Extra b-sides.”

“What do I get?” asks Dave with a grin.

“You get the pleasure of my company,” says Alexa, sitting on Dave’s lap. “And you can have some of my vodka if you want.”

“You have vodka?” I enquire.

“Half a bottle,” she says, passing it round.

"The way I see it," slurs Dave, staggering backwards and kicking the road cone off the roof. "You've got the universe, and you've got the self. One perceives the other. And round it goes."

"What's your point?" asks Alexa.

"My point," says Dave. "My point, is that you've got the universe and the self, and one way or another these are in the same place. We haven't quite figured that out yet, but it's not important. My point is that there's still got to be something outside it all. What is the universe in? It doesn't matter if you're an atheist or fucking religious or whatever, there's still something containing us all."

"Like what?" asks Alexa.

"I have no fucking idea," says Dave. "That's my point. We don't know if it's good or bad, or what the fuck it is. You've just got to have faith that it's good. You've got to have faith. You've got to have faith, faith, faith."

Alexa and I exchange a weary glance as Dave's theory deteriorates into an awful George Michael impression.

"I prefer my theory," I tell Dave, interrupting his medley. "It's all about the music. Soundwaves never disappear. They just go bouncing around forever, right? So if I sing a song now, in a thousand years time someone will still hear it, if there are any people left."

"That doesn't contradict my theory," says Dave.

"Explain it to me again."

"Consciousness is a perception of the relation between the universe and the self," says Dave, his slurred speech undermining his vocabulary slightly. "No-one has any idea what contains the universe. Therefore, we should all get fucked and have a good time."

"I can't decide if I agree with you," says Alexa, "or if you're talking absolute shit."

"I'm talking absolute shit," says Dave. "That's my point."

"What's your point?"

"About the universe."

I shake my head and down more vodka to maintain the illusion of warmth. I'm overjoyed to see Alexa but this is an odd dynamic for flirting. I'm not sure exactly where I stand.

"It's so good to see you guys," says Alexa. "I've been dealing with Suzie's relationship woes all night, plus I've had the week from hell. I really need a friend."

I guess that answers my question.

Dave hugs Alexa and so do I, the moment of physical closeness seeming to reach me on some level beyond my sex drive. Maybe it's the simple joy of being able to comfort her, but I find myself actually doubting whether I want to risk this relationship with romantic complications.

Then again, Alexa and Joanna are pretty much the only girls I know. If neither of them are interested, I can only assume I'll be single forever.

"Is it cool to crash at yours, Dave?" asks Alexa. "Only I'm getting pretty tired and cold."

"No problem," says Dave. "I know a shortcut."

The shortcut is nothing of the sort. Over the course of the next hour, we find ourselves hacking through bracken, scaling the underside of a motorway bridge, creeping through a graveyard, stealing a couple of music magazines from a delivery bundle outside a newsagent, sword fighting with garden tools on a mulchy allotment and finally staggering through suburban streets until we reach Dave's front door.

"Right," says Dave. "Let me go ahead and check that my mum's asleep. You two be quiet."

Dave mashes his key noisily into the lock, creaks open the door and crashes up the stairs.

"David?" calls Dave's mum from upstairs. "David, is that you?"

Dave mumbles something in response. There's another crashing sound.

"David, you're swaying."

"I'm not swaying, I'm fine."

"You're swaying, David. You're too young to be living this kind of lifestyle."

This debate continues for a little while.

Having pacified his parent, Dave creeps back downstairs and ushers us up to his brother's room.

"No loud fucking," says Dave, closing the door on us. "My mum's right next door."

Alexa removes her jacket, peels off her t-shirt and gives me a flirtatious smile before sliding under the less-than-pristine duvet. The glimpse of her body is appreciated, but her jeans cancel out the bra in the sexual opportunity stakes. I get the feeling she's more interested in an epic friendship than a brief sexual dalliance, damn her.

Still, I'm only sixteen, and I'm about to get into bed with a woman in a bra. That's not bad for now. Plus, I very much like the idea of an epic friendship with Alexa.

I locate Dave's brother's walkman and press play, experiencing something close to bliss as the opening strains of Flowered Up's *Weekender* enter my head. I take off my jeans and climb into bed next to Alexa, placing one of the headphones in her right ear. The moment is so perfect that I can't even consider risking it with my sexual advances.

Alexa swings her left leg on top of me and kisses me on the cheek.

The song kicks in.

Alexa smiles and nuzzles into my shoulder.

I'm about to drift off to sleep when a thought occurs to me.

"What are we going to do tomorrow?" I ask her.
"It's Saturday."

Minutes pass.

"I don't know," she eventually mumbles in response. "I'm sure we'll think of something."