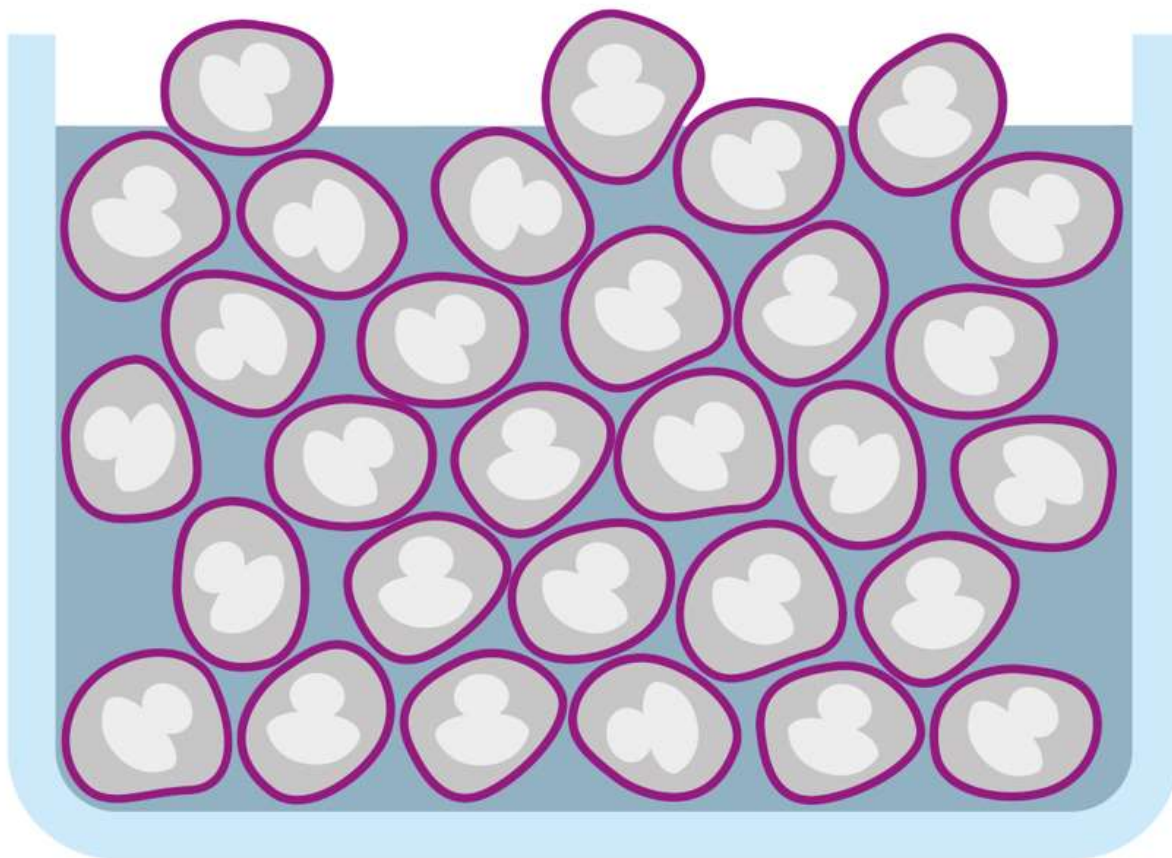




DEEP DIVES

JON BRYANT

CHAPTERS

1) Serena & Ayush (Newcastle)	1
2) Reece & Gillian (Mostly via conference calls)	32
3) Flo & Leon (Winsford)	67
4) Edwige & Flo (Strawberry Hill)	97
5) Dougall & Reece (Argyll & Bute)	128
6) Marek & Alice (Eastbourne to Worcester)	172
7) Gillian & Edwige (Rural Leicestershire)	205
8) Ayush & Marek (Ipswich)	231
9) Alice & Dougall (Eastbourne)	262
10) Leon & Serena (Dalston)	292
END CREDITS	307

For Shaheen

The web of our life is of a mingled yarn,
good and ill together.

All's Well That Ends Well,
William Shakespeare

one
Serena & Ayush

Thursday February 17th

'So, Ayush... do you think you can save my marriage?'

Ayush had only met Serena half an hour before and already his plans were torpedoed. Her question made clear this would not be the deep dive he'd been hoping for.

Her voice was breezy, but tinged with serious intent. He searched for the most convincing reply in his cappuccino foam, turning it over with a spoon.

'Do you and your husband still... love each other?' His momentary glance to the far wall of the café, with its block-mounted close-up of the Gallowgate End knocked on the wonk, coincided with the 'L' word. He was beginning to regret ever trying to appear emotionally intelligent via his online comments.

'I don't think that's the key any more,' she replied. 'The thing is, I need to work out where we took a wrong turn. Or, *if* we took a wrong turn. I think we probably did. If I could only see where and when it happened.' Serena blinked away some moisture. 'Everything is, well, fine really. I just so want things to feel like they did ten years ago, in the beginning.' She stared at Ayush urgently. 'I can't have this conversation with friends, we're like such a big gang. There'll be whispers, Owen will sense something's wrong. That's why I thought someone like you could help. Someone without any attachment, to talk things through. To kick the tyres, so to speak.'

Ayush struggled to keep up with her words. To discover so soon that lack of attachment was his most enticing attribute had knocked him off his stride. She wanted to meet 'someone like him', not actually him. His thoughts turned to dismay, but he needed to concentrate. What could he possibly say to this worldly soul that could ever make a difference, so apparently well-formed was her social structure, the fabric of which he had completely failed to discern from her Pebbletank feed.

When Serena and Owen got married, all warnings about being too young were brushed aside with fearless brio. In the early days she would lie awake, night after night, basking in anticipation of a shared revelry that would never end. Fairy lights in the garden, friends and laughter would fill their world and offset the drudgery of work a thousand times over. Now she looked forward to her own company and the messaging pings of potential new clients. Her husband had begun to annoy her. Somehow she had tuned in to his flaws. Like toothache, her irritation at his personal habits had entered the foreground, interfering with any sense of well-being fostered by his general level of goodness. The involuntary groans, the sniffing, the concentrated white spittle in the corner of his mouth. Now she lay awake after lights out, waiting for the sound of him picking his nose, or biting the skin around his fingernails, to start; when he was there that is, fortunately they had both started travelling for work again. She wanted to sleep but knew the scratching sounds, the smacking of lips would come. She wanted to ask 'what are you eating?' but knew that would be an irreversible step, he would never be able to look her in the eye again. He'd probably always done it, but she only noticed now some of the shine had gone from their relationship. A

mis-directed step had occurred somewhere along the road but she couldn't put her finger on the turning point.

Ayush tried to move his chair, but the space was too cramped. His puffer jacket pressed against the window, smearing condensation into droplets that scuttled to the floor. 'We really should hang that up,' Serena pleaded. 'That jacket is too lovely to spoil. Ooooh... Kenzo. Nice.' It had cost him a month's wages, an investment designed to catch her eye. Normally he would be stressed about keeping any valuable possessions safe from harm, but today he was determined to appear relaxed. He tried his best to do so, despite a lurking unease about the concentration of bodies around him; no one was sitting outside today. The peril faced by his jacket simply added to a list of worries that had to be suppressed.

'It's fine, it's fine, honestly.' He squeezed his knees further under the table again and picked up the thread. 'So this is why you put the deep dive option on your profile. You really just wanted some free counselling?'

'Ha ha... Yes. But I thought I better make it pot luck in case it put people off. If I'd described the experience as being to save my marriage, I thought no one would come! Well, maybe no one apart from creepy men.' Ayush smiled and looked into his coffee again, clenching his teeth. He wasn't sure how much to reveal about his disappointment. At least he was in the non-creepy camp.

'Don't worry, I'm happy with anything. Think of me as your biggest fan, I just love your posts. Your captions are so funny and your photos made me want to see Newcastle for myself. I've always lived down south, I assumed everything up here was all industrial and depressing. But you make this place look beautiful.'

'It really is Ayush, I love it here. Don't believe the stereotypes. There are many treats in store on our walk.'

Ayush had selected the regular option of curated experience: a walking tour with personal insights. Serena was his favourite on Pebbletank and her posts always appeared at the top of his feed. He had even started to delay his reactions, to appear less like a stalker. Once the whole Meet-Ups thing kicked off he couldn't believe his luck. He took a chance and ticked the deep dive extra, craving to know more about her life. The moment she accepted his request he punched the air, phone in hand, shouting for joy. A smile sprang to his face that refused to fade throughout the intervening days or during his journey north. That smile, however, started to wane about five minutes after their drinks arrived. Now there was Owen. This unwanted character had never been mentioned in any of her content. He was forced to conclude that her activity on social media was merely a sideline, in compensation for a decline in married bliss, rather than a window on her entire life joyously flung open.

'To be honest Serena, I'm surprised you were willing to host me.'

'Oh, I can just tell, you have a trustable energy,' she beamed. And I love the look of your recipes!' Ayush's posts were mostly architecture and historical oddities but he threw in the occasional one for foodies. He was delighted to discover that decision had taken hold, particularly because Serena was first to take the bait.

'I'm not used to this sort of thing,' he continued. 'To be honest, I feel lost nowadays. I preferred lockdown. Social distancing really suited me, it came as second nature. I could win Olympic medals in steering clear of people. Now though... life is supposed to be returning to so-called normal, but I've lost my

bearings. I can't find the old me, the one from before they made us stay at home. Mind you, that's probably a good thing!' Ayush realised he was dwelling on himself too much. 'It's funny how Pebbletank is making us... by *us* I mean everyone... it's making us start to explore these microconnections we have. I never thought I would find myself in this situation with someone like you... like a *real* person. Other people scare me.'

'Oh no! I hope I'm not too scary!'

'No, no...' Ayush was faltering again. 'You're lovely, I mean... you seem very nice. I wanted to see how this works and you were top of my list. Actually, I want to do the same thing. Have people come to me and show them the hidden secrets in my hometown, the things people normally miss. Not that people ever really go there, it's not exactly on the tourist trail.'

Serena nodded encouragingly without giving any indication of wanting to reciprocate the visit. Ayush silently breathed a sigh of relief at having avoided too much gushing or introspection.

'Come on then you, we should get going, we've got a whole toon to experience' said Serena, bouncing from her stool. Although Ayush was cursing his luck about the role she expected him to play the following day, he was enjoying the warmth of her welcome and the prospect of exploring somewhere new. They prised themselves from the café, fastened their coats to the neckline and began to walk. Serena was reasonably confident, given Ayush's eye for a building, that he would be thrilled by the sights of Grainger Town. Sure enough, his eyes came alive, scouring the architectural details. He was no scholar – he couldn't tell a pediment

from a portico – but he loved seeing the ambition, the determination to create spaces of such beauty and permanence. ‘It’s like Bath... or Edinburgh. It’s amazing.’ Serena felt a triumphant glow, glad that her temporary companion would gain something from his visit, even though the mutual payback from the whole exercise was somewhat in her favour.

By midday Ayush’s appetite for interesting townscapes was already well fed as they approached the castle. Serena’s voice became theatrical. ‘And now for one of my favourite things in the world.’ For a moment he feared the object of her passion lay inside the castle – some famous suit of armour, or important jewel of the North – so prepared himself to feign interest. But no, they pressed on, across the junction towards an unpromising iron portal that joined a run of railway arches, swallowing the road ahead. They entered the walkway of the High Level Bridge.

‘Blimey, this is dark.’ At first, Ayush questioned her sanity. Surely there were ugly structures like this in the shadows of every town – walkways and gantries that eyes rarely notice, invisible as beggars. But as they proceeded and the patterns of ironwork and view of the Tyne revealed themselves, he began to understand her reverence. The close spacing of the pillars and the rumble of trains above spoke of something primordial. A silence fell upon them. It was hard to put that first impression into words, the drama and weight of the surroundings spoke for themselves. On reaching midway, with the river and the rest of the city’s finery laid out below, Serena broke the spell and launched into tour guide mode.

'In its day, this was one of the engineering wonders of the world. It cost half a million pounds to build, a huge amount in those days, and was opened by Queen Victoria on September 28th 1849.' She paused to let these hefty facts sink in.

'This thing really pushed the boundaries of what could be achieved with the materials and know-how of the day. Of course, later they learned how to bridge wider spans with fewer supports, to reach further with more grace. But this was a game changer. It's like Britain's Saturn Five rocket, or the Burj Khalifa. And here it sits in the background, all beige and unassuming, still doing its job carrying road and rail to Gateshead after all this time. Meanwhile, all the tourists zoom around the A1 cooing about the bloody Angel of the North, completely oblivious.'

'And what a view,' said Ayush, seeking the perfect angle. Immediately he felt vibrations in his back pocket, as the notifications came. He realised this might happen the moment the words escaped, but he couldn't stop himself, bewitched into a well-trodden combination of sound and coordinates that his mobile eagerly detected. The prospect below would have been captured countless times before, but he figured the images would be new to most of his followers. Even without the smorgasbord of bridges and buildings, ancient and modern, draped across its contours, this would be a photo-worthy landscape. But he should have kept his mouth shut.

Serena continued. 'These pillars always make me think of tree roots. Like we're walking through the very roots of industrialisation, the very foundation of this country as an unstoppable super-power.'

Ayush lowered his camera and looked at her. 'Hmm. An unstoppable super-power forged from the natural resources you stole from every corner of the world, you

mean. You know the word *looting* was coined to describe the behaviour of British colonials? You were nothing more than gangsters on a global scale.’ Ayush arched his eyebrows and grinned. He was reciting the protestations of various uncles he recalled from childhood, not his own bugbears. He felt as British (and as impartial to history) as he assumed Serena did herself. His thoughts had been pricked by mention of Queen Victoria. Those same uncles would have cheered to see the Empress of India herself dumped into the water alongside Thomas Colston. Blood on her hands just the same, however many bridges she might once have anointed.

‘Gangsters... yes, I suppose we were.’ She was relieved to see no ill-intent in his eyes.

Ayush also felt the profound, almost religious atmosphere of the structure. ‘It reminds me of the cave temples I’ve seen in Maharashtra. The density of space, there’s something elemental about it, like the birthplace of a new spirit.’ He looked at her again, wanting to make eye contact, but she was staring at the metal beams. ‘I only visited India once, mind you, to see where my grandparents came from.’ Serena was relieved again, this time for his words. It meant she no longer needed to worry about asking the ‘where are you from’ question that always bubbled inside when meeting someone with any discernible sign of ethnicity to her Anglo-Saxon eyes. She wanted to know, but knew it was wrong to ask.



They stopped for lunch on the Gateshead side of the river, seeking respite from a dour February sky hardened to the misery caused by increasing hours of

daylight cold. The cruellest month, Serena and Ayush agreed. Where next? Serena arranged a cab for the next stage. The one place Ayush definitely wanted to see was the football ground and he was agog during its circumnavigation. No matches this week though. Serena had no interest in football but took delight in explaining the debate about placenames with possessive apostrophes. While she riffed on the cultural backdrop to Newcastle's sporting citadel being St James' and the royal London park St James's, Ayush was otherwise engaged, trying to imagine the sheer sense of place on a floodlit match day. Back on foot, they retraced some of their steps of the morning, fixing the visual impression for good. The walk concluded in a pub Serena had chosen especially, based on what she knew about Ayush's love of beer. It was also close to his hotel. When Ayush first realised the meet-up was on, his mind ran riot. Would he sleep in her spare room? Was she loaded, owning multiple apartments across the most sought-after locations in the city? Would he be lodging next door to hers? However, it soon became clear this experience would be at arm's length. His role was to travel to Newcastle, find somewhere to stay overnight, at some point spend a few hours listening to Serena describe her *situation* then provide telling observations in response. In this way, she might benefit from an alternative perspective on events that she'd trawled through in her mind time and again. He would benefit from meeting her in person and potentially doing a good deed. He also now had copious footage of buildings and vistas more eye-catching than he previously thought possible. His challenge was to be sparing with the posts once he got home and had time to sift. And not to grieve for losing the Serena of his imagination.

Later Ayush lay on the hotel bed, skimming through phone and camera. The day's auto-generated hashtags infuriated him. How stupid to mention the view out loud, in that location. So obvious. Looking at the profiles of those whose steps and utterances he'd duplicated, the extent of his carelessness became clear. He had stepped into a pool of numbskulls.

As the TV screen flickered soundlessly across the room, he reviewed his Pebbletank privacy settings. Once satisfied, he cast his devices aside and fumbled for the remote. 'When do they ever replace the batteries in these fucking things?' After several attempts, the Off button finally worked and within minutes Ayush was asleep, his mind dulled into submission after juggling so many thoughts throughout the day. Tomorrow was already drifting into memory. The day he'd pined for had gone, replaced by an exercise to endure, a marking of time before the inevitable return to solitude.

When Serena arrived home and plonked her keys in the ashtray by the door – a trophy from the hotel in Ravello where she and Owen had spent a seemingly perfect honeymoon – she was humming gleefully. An evening to herself after a successful day. Ayush was everything she'd hoped for. No flirting, no innuendo, intelligent and good hair. He had appreciated the tour just as she planned and gave every indication of understanding the mission for day two. It would probably come to nothing, but she was keen to leave no stone unturned in trying to set her marriage straight again. With any luck, his Indian heritage had instilled some alternative dimension of spiritual insight that would unlock the puzzle. She reheated something non-vegan from the freezer and wallowed for a while in rubbish TV. On going to bed, despite still enjoying the post-lockdown freedom of

being alone, she checked in with a message to her absent husband. 'Hey, you can stop fiddling with yourself now.' The wine, combined with optimism for tomorrow, had triggered an echo of affectionate feelings, plus a rare suggestive emoji.

'Christ, its like she's always watching me,' thought Owen, as the message snippet winked at him from the top of his phone. Like Ayush, he was also cocooned in a budget hotel, in his case between sessions of an extended site visit. Owen was a chartered surveyor, he spent half his time in Caterpillar boots and hard hat, poking around building sites and the rest in project meetings trying to explain health and safety standards to amoral property developers. A minute before, he had been surveying the body of @clarice.comely via live video, on his favourite subscription site. Having recently branched into interactive mode, his palms were extra sweaty with the embarrassment of trying to decide what to say. 'Do you like my breasts babe?' 'Oh yes... they're really awesome.' He felt such an idiot. Before he could dig himself any further into humiliation, the unexpected intervention from home came both as irritation and escape route. 'Ah... really sorry Clarice but something's come up, I have to go. Can we, er... can we, er...' 'Yeah, yeah, no worries babe, some other time yeah.' Clarice was off to bewitch another punter. Owen did like her breasts very much, primarily because they were not Serena's. He felt no disloyalty, he wasn't choosing one woman in preference to another. What he lusted for, what he craved, was variety.

Owen closed his eyes and tried to reduce his heart rate before picking up the phone again and responding to his wife. He was fairly convinced that Serena didn't know about his browsing habits while away from home. He tried hard to

hide his tracks. If a smidgeon of guilt entered his mind it was quickly snuffed out. His infidelities were victimless. He persuaded himself that Clarice and her ilk were fully in control of their situation and suffered no harm. It's not like they were trafficked into the role of virtual mistress against their will. She gave the impression of being very fond of him, he looked forward to the next opportunity for high-resolution perusal of her chest and would work on his dialogue. It didn't feel dirty, not like the massage joints he tried in the early days. Each time with Clarice helped erase the memory of those haunted girls' faces.

'Typical. Your mind always in the gutter!' Owen responded to Serena in kind, happy to go with the flow of her good humour, while taking care to avoid any of his most recently used emojis. He still enjoyed her company and often found himself wishing there could be an intermediate state between marriage and remaining good friends. Not exactly 'friends with benefits' more like 'friends with all the proven best bits included, interspersed by commitment-free periods apart and guilt-free orgasms in the company of others'.

'Tell me you weren't having a fiddle.'

He reattached the headset again and called her. 'I was just having a scratch, that's all.'

'A likely story, he he.'

They swapped a few more sweet nothings until Serena started to wish Owen's hands were nearer than the three hours' drive away by motorway.

'Shall we try the app again darling,' she said in her best seductive tone.

'OK, go for it.' Owen felt it was only fair, to offset his own recent encounter with online carnality.

Serena plugged the cable into her phone's charging port and positioned the appendage to her most sensitive cleft.

'I'm ready darling,' she purred.

Owen opened the app and started to make the thing buzz. By moving his finger on screen the frequency would rise and fall. Serena enjoyed the sensation but yearned for something more. It defeated the object if she had to move the thing around herself. Owen knew it was down to him to perform. He had dutifully read the instructions and watched the YouTube videos. He understood its sophistication, being capable of motion in the longitudinal, lateral and vertical axis – the roll, pitch and yaw. But he was struggling to press the buttons to optimal effect.

'Er... how does that feel?'

'It's good hun. Just a little more side-to-side...'

He knew the key manoeuvre required simultaneous pressing of the volume controls. 'Hang on... Oh shit... I think I just took a screenshot.'

The moment was gone. 'Never mind Owen, it still feels nice.' Like many times before, she took control of matters herself while pretending he had made the difference and granting him a suitable sequence of moans. Owen felt reassured that he still had the magic touch, despite the minor glitches. He checked the screenshots to make sure nothing incriminating had been captured. Serena felt sleepy now and they said their goodnights. In her drowsy state she pondered the

irony of her wanting him more when he wasn't lying beside her. It was not as if his body repulsed her. He was fit and she still enjoyed the sight of his cock, it was a good shape in all states of arousal and he didn't make it visible unnecessarily. Also she knew he could never be unfaithful to her. Not without her knowing anyway, he was incapable of hiding the truth. She preferred not to kiss with open mouths any more, in case any nose-excavated material remained stuck to his teeth, but nevertheless, sex was not the problem. She had told herself this many times and the same incantation tolled in her mind as she drifted into unconsciousness. Sex was not the problem.



Serena and Ayush reconvened the following morning. Sex was not the problem... and conveniently for Serena was therefore off the agenda for the day. She chose a quieter café this time, one with a greater tolerance of people passing the time of day while making only a limited number of actual purchases. She often wondered how they managed to stay in business and be so accommodating when customers treated the place like an extension of their front room, expecting jugs of tap water to be dispensed on request, without payment. They plunged into a sofa, rearranging the cushions to form a suitable boundary. It was large enough that they could half turn to face each other, while keeping an appropriate distance. The first question Ayush wanted to ask was a diversion from the issue in hand. 'I meant to ask... what do you do for a living Serena?' He had mapped out her life as much as he could from her posts, but wasn't going to miss this opportunity to fill in some of the hidden ground.

She contemplated skipping the truth so they could move on, but realised that would set the wrong tone. With a deep breath she embarked upon the answer. 'I'm what they call a niche content agent. I source interviewees with very specific agendas, mostly for TV and radio news.' Ayush nodded an 'OK' while smiling blankly back at her. She continued before he could find words for his incomprehension. 'For example, on this morning's BBC North East, there was an item about asbestosis, you might've seen it?' Again, no time to answer. 'Well... the angle of the story was to campaign on behalf of people suffering from asbestosis. Horrid, horrid disease. The main focus was people whose parents had worked at one particular factory that made heating equipment with asbestos components during the 1970s. There are outstanding compensation claims for poor souls long dead, but no-one accepts responsibility. So far, so awful. But there's more. A side issue related to people who worked on the demolition of the building twenty years later. The researchers wanted to find someone whose parent had worked on that demolition, at short notice. That's where I come in. I find people with niche issues: people with a grudge against the council because their child was maimed in a road accident caused by badly painted lane markings, people with allergies to crisps, that sort of thing.'

The local news had been on in Ayush's room, he liked hearing the regional accents of weather presenters. Like the voices of café staff, he always marvelled at the distinctive tones and wondered why they persisted in places only a short distance apart on the global scale. You can swap messages around the world with zero shift in vernacular, but travel more than two hundred miles in Britain and the altered soundscape can be disconcerting. It gave these trips an exotic feel. Apart

from the usual ablutions Ayush had spent most of the time before leaving the hotel peering through the restricted opening of his window. The view was unremarkable, a typical internal courtyard of skylights, vents and discarded dishcloths. He could just about see the ornate misty rooftops of the old city centre, between a gap in the wings of the hotel. One window in the opposite wing had curtains open and bedside light switched on. He waited as long as he could for the occupant to appear, for a scene to unfold, but nothing moved. The ability to watch from windows was something he missed.

'So, you're like an actor, you do voice-overs?'

'No, no... nothing like that,' replied Serena, wrinkling her brow. 'I source them. There are ways of finding the sufferers of rare misfortune, or spokespeople for uncommon causes. There are specialised directories and search tools. I find them and represent them. The darker the subject, the higher the fee. Have you ever wondered why, on every current affairs programme, whatever the debate, whatever the scandal, there's always an example on hand, to pull the heartstrings on either side of the argument. The world is so litigious and the media so obsessed with balance, eventually every cause in the world gets to have its say. They call me the queen of talking heads.'

'Blimey. I didn't realise that was even a thing. It sounds interesting. Mind you, I don't watch much current affairs stuff. To be honest, I find everything about the media so much up its own arse, stuck inside a bubble of its own making. Everyone making a fuss about nothing, when there are bigger things to worry about in the world.'

Serena wanted to agree, but also felt a veiled dig at her line of business, and she wanted this preamble over with. 'So Ayush, what about you, what keeps you off the streets?'

'Me? Oh, nothing so glamorous. I work in procurement at the borough council. They say I was *born to buy*.' Ayush chuckled ruefully. He guessed this was something of a conversation killer. 'Ah, I see. I bet you drive a hard bargain,' said Serena without conviction – she had a generally low opinion of civil servants. Although the amount of time she spent wondering about Ayush's life was only a fraction of that which he burned in the opposite direction, she had formed an image of something less conventional than local government. She enjoyed the way he saw the world through his pictures and found it hard to tally social media profile to career path. She told herself he must inhabit the more maverick end of the pen-pusher spectrum and that she hadn't made the wrong choice, despite wine being involved when accepting his meet-up request. Now it was time to find out.

'So Ayush, how should we go about this?' He allowed himself to look at her face properly and up close it looked unfeasibly small. Normally he would dismiss such looks as mousey or elfin. Her skin looked grey, but her vibrant eyes and sharply-defined crimson lips had him spellbound. Her eyebrows appeared like thin strips of animal fur, their tawny brown matching some of the streaks in her hair, but interpretation of which shade was natural had him flummoxed. If he was going to help her today he needed to fixate on the wall again, not her physical features. Unfortunately, this time he only had floral prints for distraction, rather than arty shots of a venerated football terrace.

'All I can think of is that I just, kind-of, interrogate you. I'm not trained in this kind of thing. I can only start by asking questions that seem logical to me.'

'OK, if you're happy to try, go for it. That's what I wanted really. You'll be coming at things from a different direction.'

'OK then... um... where to begin. You haven't really explained exactly what's wrong. You've basically drifted apart right?'

Drifted apart? Serena refused to accept they had followed such a clichéd pathway. There was something more specific, something that could be undone.

'I wouldn't say that exactly. We still have similar interests. We still, um... sleep together. Sex is not the problem.'

Ayush felt his face burn. He was desperate to avoid that line of conversation and was grateful she closed the door. Maybe a professional therapist would dig deeper, but Ayush was keeping his prurience firmly locked away.

'Um... OK. But something has changed?'

'Yes. It used to feel like Owen and me were bound together by an invisible but unbreakable thread. We used to revel in each other's triumphs but also instinctively knew when to give space without having to ask. We had a kind of combined life-force. Nowadays though, if I tell him one of my clients has landed a spot in prime-time, he says *that's good* in the same way he might react to the bins being collected on the right day. If I tell him I'm going out for a night with the girls, you can see the relief in his eyes. Being in my company makes him stressed, I can tell.'

'Is he afraid of you? Are you mean to him? Do you argue a lot?'

'No, I'm not mean to him, not that I'm aware. That's the thing, we hardly ever argue.'

'Hmm. Do you remember when you first noticed something wrong?'

Serena had dredged her memory for that answer before. 'It's so hard to say. I've narrowed it down to somewhere between 2014 and 2017. We went to Mauritius in 2014 and it was perfect, just like our honeymoon. That's the last date I can pinpoint when we were definitely hunky dory. The first time I knew the spark had gone was 2017. Take That were touring. He never even mentioned it, I thought that was odd.'

'Take That?'

'Yes. The Wonderland tour. He knew how much they meant to me. In the old days, one hundred percent, he would've surprised me with tickets.' She pinched thumb and forefinger together to emphasise the percentage. 'I ended up going anyway, with my mates. The O2.'

Now Ayush recalled some mention of stadium bands from her feed. He could make allowances; each to their own. This was no time to debate musical genres.

'I've never been. OK, so those are the boundary dates. You're saying the trigger event must've happened sometime in between?'

'Exactly.'

'Did anything major happen during that time? Moving house can be very stressful, have you always lived here together?'

'Well, I was born in Cardiff but came here for college and stayed. I loved the nightlife. That's how we met, Owen was part of the gang, we were always out

and having fun. Owen's job is based here, with my line of work I can be anywhere. We bought a house before we got married.'

With this background, Ayush wondered how she had such a neutral accent. Perhaps an affected telephone manner had rubbed off.

'Have you kept in touch with the same group of friends?'

Serena paused to think. 'Yeah, pretty much. We don't go larging it around the clubs any more, but still get together for barbecues and stuff. I suppose one or two have drifted away.'

Ayush was warming to his task. 'And there's never been any... playing away from home, so to speak? On either side?'

'Definitely not, no,' she replied without hesitation. 'Certainly not by me, I never even thought about it. I mean... where do adulterers even get the time? And I'm sure Owen has always been faithful. I can tell when he's lying. There's this unmistakable smile that shows on his face when he's telling porkies. He's a hopeless liar, he'd give himself away. No, Owen's never had an affair.'

Where to look next? Ayush needed to open up new territory. Serena and Owen never clashed about wanting kids – neither of them were keen. They had functioning relationships with each other's parents, they were both cat people, household chores were equally shared, tastes in TV and cinema afforded plenty of middle ground. Owen had turned to a plant-based diet more than she had, but it never caused friction. Like everyone else, the pandemic forced them to spend more time together, but with expectation levels already dimmed, they trundled through the lockdown years well enough. The construction industry kept going

and there was no reduction in demand for sob stories for Serena to populate. If anything, her business took an upturn. 'I've been super-busy all the way through. With everyone at home, the ratings war only became more intense. They all want the best return in ratings against outlay. People want to see victims and feel the outrage. Having said that, I always make sure my clients are genuine.' Serena's eyes briefly made contact, as if seeking endorsement.

The café was starting to fill. The adjacent sofa was claimed, breaking the integrity of their conference space. They wanted food but the waitress was overrun and by trying to attract her attention, Ayush had lost the thread. His focus drifted outside to the street and in the process a thought occurred.

'Serena, do you ever catch a bus?'



'A bus?' Serena looked at him askance.

'Yes, they're going past all the time.' Ayush could even see one of the stops through the window.

'I can't remember the last time I...'

'They look really empty. Why don't we grab a sandwich and go for a ride. I often do it when I want to explore somewhere, just get on a bus at random and follow the whole route. We can still talk.'

Serena's instinctive reaction was to dismiss the idea but there was something about the word 'random' that pierced her reluctance. After all, wasn't this the point of letting an outsider sift through her doings. To take a sideways look.

'Um... OK Ayush, let's do it.'

They bought some take-out from the counter and made their way to the stop. The wait time was accurately foretold by the shelter's digital display and soon they found themselves in the front seat, on the number 10's top deck. They had to shed layers in the face of excessive heat but at least the windows were free of condensation such that only knife scratches spoiled the view. The piles of clothing perched on their laps lent a sherpa-like appearance, but formed a handy base for their snacks. The only other passenger was buried under headphones, so their conversation could resume unchecked.

Ayush was pleased his suggestion had been embraced and hoped the movement would shake out some novel thoughts.

'Right. So, Serena... do you ever go out of your way to annoy him? Has he ever picked you up on a habit he dislikes? Maybe even something you make a point of still doing, out of spite?'

This was better. Maybe the bus was not such a bad idea after all.

'Good question.' Serena believed there were acceptable parameters within a marriage for deliberate irritation. Her toothpaste cap equivalent was probably linked to her driving. Owen had once complained about the number of times she let people in when queueing. Now, whenever the opportunity arose, she would give way even more often. He knew she was doing it, and she knew he knew. Owen took this on the chin, he felt bad for ever mentioning it. It was playful rather than malicious.

'I can think of examples, yes. But nothing serious enough.'

'OK.' They passed a sullen parade of shops – the holy trinity of tanning salon, tattoo parlour and vape store – plus a travel agent. 'How about holidays? Does he have some dream destination that you won't agree to?'

'No, not that I'm aware of. I'm probably more adventurous than he is, in that regard. He's not exactly a thrill seeker, more like thrill avoider.'

'Hmm... bit like me.' Ayush detected a frown, as if Serena was miffed by the comparison with her husband. She glanced down at her mobile, prompting another thought.

'Is Owen on social media? Is he bothered by how much time you spend on Pebbletank?'

'I don't spend that much...' It sounded like a snap. Serena paused to regroup.

'I honestly don't spend that much time. And Owen's not really interested. Which itself is more of a symptom of the problem, rather than the cause. I don't do much on my phone when we're together. I only check for comments when he goes to the loo.'

'Ah... OK, nothing there then. Serena, I hope you don't mind me asking but... has he ever caught you out in a lie?'

She looked ahead, towards a horizon of open plan estates. 'Well, we all tell white lies don't we? There was one time. I went to meet the girlfriend of one of his best mates once. She was facing the prospect of abortion - let's just say she was very, very much not supposed to be pregnant. She was desperate for someone to talk to and begged me not to tell. I spent the day with her, but told Owen I'd been to a client meeting out of town, obviously... that's the default reason for having your

phone switched off, right? I felt bad about it, but what else could I do. I think that's the occasion where my version of events deviated most from reality. When I most felt my voice waver when describing my day. But he didn't bat an eyelid.' Ayush could picture the scene. 'I guess that happens to all of us eventually. Like you say, white lies. Life can be a minefield, however good you try to be.'

The number 10 snaked through the suburbs. Ayush dredged every line of enquiry he could think of. There had been no case of a favourite shirt being singed on an ironing board. No slight against a favourite song. No stifled religious calling. No serial instances of being late for a rendezvous on either side. No extreme examples of gift disappointment or forgotten anniversaries. No hidden trinket from a former love found at the bottom of a drawer. Nothing. Despite their best efforts they could not unearth a clue to Serena's marital doldrums. The street lights were starting to make their presence felt and Ayush noticed the first signs of nervousness regarding the departure time of his train home, wishing he had given more thought to the bus's route. Serena said they would just call an Uber to the station from wherever they washed-up, when the time came. The road ahead had become a more substantial thoroughfare, heading out of town, dead straight, rising and falling with the terrain. More business premises appeared, the housing became more semi-detached and bay-windowed. Their minds were also steering in different directions and the discussion began to drift. Ayush was about to suggest bailing out at the next stop when he heard Serena exclaim.

'What the fuck...!'

An open space had appeared to the right, fronted by railings and barren trees. Serena leapt up, contorting across the opposite seats to see outside, fixed on a

slender figure following the pavement curve from their street towards the cemetery. The figure appeared to be carrying a package in both hands but it was only a fleeting view.

'What the fuck. That's him. That's Owen. What's he doing here, he's not due home until later tonight.' She reached for the stop button and scrambled her things together, heading for the stairs. Only once breathlessly rearranging her layers outside did she consider whether Ayush had managed to join her in alighting, with overnight case rattling in tow behind. He tripped on the kerb and a sharp pain in his knee now competed for attention with his total bafflement at what was happening.

'Look, Ayush... I'm really sorry but I have to follow him. Could you just wait here. If I'm not back in half an hour, get the Uber.'

'OK, will do.' His alarm about missing the train was replaced by a frisson of intrigue. He couldn't leave her just like that, all he had to lose was the money for rebooking the ticket. While he pondered his plans, Serena was already across the road and heading back towards the junction where Owen had been seen.

She had visited the crematorium and cemetery site several times before, but not for a few years. It was in her list of candidate locations for a longer alternative tour, being one of the most atmospheric corners of the city. But why her husband was paying a furtive visit now, on a gloomy midweek afternoon, was a complete mystery. She jogged in fits and starts until reaching a circular lawn in front of the cloistered archway that linked the chapel buildings. Paths to the burial grounds led away to each side, but no hint of Owen in any direction. In movies they always guess correctly, she thought optimistically, when choosing to turn left. She

scurried along the path knowing that she shouldn't be seen, yet having no real method of concealment apart from the fading light. Once a vista across the headstones opened up she veered towards a tree to scan the area. No luck. A path crossed at right angles and she realised a circuit round to the other half of the site was possible, passing behind the chapels and cloister. As more of the eastern part of the grounds came into view she saw him, head bowed over one memorial. Something about the location sparked a memory, as Serena hung back in the shadows. She couldn't approach him, how to explain her presence there? She watched as Owen left the scene, retreating towards the entrance, the last leg of the circuit. If she'd turned right in the first place, they would be face to face by now, so she was glad to have guessed wrong. She waited as long as she could bear before making her way to where he'd been standing. As she approached, the memory of an earlier calling became distinct. She recognised the plot, now adorned with a fresh bouquet, the package he had been carrying, resting against the headstone.

BELOVED WIFE AND MOTHER DOROTHY HAWTHORN 13.8.1948 8.7.2016

The dates were separated by a butterfly.

This was Dot. Owen was lodging with Dot when Serena first met him. She knew he was very fond of her and was upset when she died. They had both been to the funeral, but he hadn't mentioned Dot since and Serena had no idea he still visited her grave. A mystery partially solved. With a jolt, she remembered Ayush. Surely he must have gone by now but she dutifully returned to the bus stop, alert for signs of Owen or his car on the way. Her husband had vanished but Ayush was where she'd left him, now shivering in the dark.

'Oh God, I'm so sorry, I thought you would be on your way to the station.'

'I couldn't exactly leave you could I?' He hoped his motives appeared chivalrous, rather than merely inquisitive. 'Do you want to tell me what happened?'

'Where to start... Well, it certainly was Owen. I saw him standing by the grave of his former landlady, he laid new flowers. She died in 2016.'

'2016?' All day Ayush had been hunting down events from that time. They stared at each other for a while without speaking, but thinking the same thing.

'Yes. Quite. Fucking hell.' Serena zoned out momentarily before remembering where they were. 'Oh God Ayush, I really am sorry for messing you around. We should get going.'

In the cab on the way to the station she asked for one more intervention. 'Ayush, do you think I should confront him? Should I tell him what I saw and ask him to explain, or just try to pretend nothing happened?'

Ayush weighed the arguments in his mind. He had no insight to the absolute rights and wrongs. He gave the advice he felt most likely to result in him seeing her again. 'I think you should tell him. Otherwise you'll always be wondering.'

'Hmm... you're probably right. Thank you. You've been such a help today.'

When they reached the station her hurried goodbye stabbed him in the heart, but was understandable. Ayush tried to transfer his ticket to a later train but the lady behind the counter was in unforgiving mood. 'That's why they're cheaper pet. You need to catch the one you booked.' The Geordie accent only served to rile him now. He sat in the food court reflecting on events. The disappointment of discovering Serena's motive the previous day was his overriding emotion, but at

least the deep dive had delivered results. If he hadn't suggested the bus, Serena would still be unaware of her husband's clandestine behaviour. Ayush could not possibly grasp the implications of Owen visiting the grave of a former landlady, but whatever the reason might be, he assumed Serena would be more distraught about the lies than anything else. A level of deceit beyond her belief. He started to mull over what message to send, to extricate news of the final outcome. Now was not the time though, he had a long journey home in which to plan his next move.



When Serena returned home, the house was empty. Owen's ritual 'Leaving now' message had arrived at the usual time. He was playing things straight. Of course he would, he had no reason to change his tune. He would get home around 10.30 and behave the same as always. The night-time traffic on the motorway would be recounted, the state of veggie food at the services would be decried, but still he wouldn't be hungry. The ball was in her court, but how to explain that she'd seen him? Owen came through the door at the expected time and for once he was keen to join her in wine before bed. It had to be done now, the bottle was by her side.

'There you go love.'

'Thanks babe.' Owen put his feet on the ottoman, Serena curled hers beneath herself in the armchair, clinging to her glass of Malbec like a chalice.

The nature of the indiscretion was so unusual, she was unsure how angry to be. She felt enough compassion not to let him dig the hole deeper, so refrained from

open questions about his day. After all, she had her own details to hide, her own white lies to tell, so got straight to the point. He knew something was wrong when she called him by his name.

'Owen love, I know you weren't at work today. I saw you at the cemetery.'

He sat upright instantly and started to mouth a reply, then froze, his eyes filling with tears. Serena herself was starting to choke, scared about how this might end.

'I saw you love. I had to visit Martha this afternoon. You know, the girl that used to work for me. She needed advice about something personal. I drove over there and... and I happened to be passing... I saw you with the flowers.'

'Oh Christ.' Owen was otherwise speechless. He turned his head to all corners of the room, looking for salvation, anywhere apart from Serena's pleading face. He had determined she would never witness the depth of his grief about Dorothy; that she had was impossible to think about. He needed to limit the damage.

'I was just visiting Dot. I mean... Dot's grave. It's been a while since we...'

Serena was relieved to hear him admit the facts straight away, not wanting to reveal the full extent of her surveillance operation. Owen had offered the necessary detail, the fact she had watched him from behind a tree could safely be forgotten. She felt on stronger ground.

'It's been a while since we've been there, that's true. I didn't realise you still thought about her. But why didn't you tell me? Why lie about work? Why didn't you just come home, we could have gone together?'

The weight of his deception alone was too much to contain, regardless of the reasons behind it. Owen's tears bubbled to the surface.

'I'm sorry babe. I'm so, so sorry. I didn't mean to lie to you.'

Serena cried too but with restraint. Her mind was still churning as the layers of truth started to peel. Owen was sobbing in front of her but she held her position firm.

'This isn't making sense Owen. You could've told me. What else have you been lying about I wonder?'

'Nothing, nothing, I swear...'

'How many times have you lied? How many times have you pretended to be travelling back late from fictional meetings?'

Owen, still shaking and red-faced, was unable to reply. Why so much bluster, she wondered. After all, his only known misdemeanour was paying respects to a former acquaintance, she hadn't exactly caught him *in flagrante*. Serena struggled to rationalise the extent of his anguish.

'How many times Owen?'

He put his head in his hands and continued to weep. Serena thought back to the theme of her discussion with Ayush. A mis-step had occurred somewhere around 2016. Was this really the connection?

'My God, just exactly how much did Dot mean to you Owen? You were just her lodger. She was married. She must have been about 40 years older than you? I know she was sweet, I was fond of her too. That's when you and I first met, remember.'

'Just her lodger. That's right.' Owen had been pricked into a degree of composure at those words. His middle-distance stare, blurred with wetness, now pointed in Serena's direction.

'You haven't been the same person since she died have you love? I guess she was more like a Mum to you than I realised.'

'It wasn't like that...' Owen's voice tailed off again, lost in memories of the first time Dot had taken him in nearly fifteen years before.

Serena was getting angry again, frustrated at the lack of explanation. 'Don't tell me... You loved her. She seduced you. She seduced you and you were having an affair behind everyone's back?' She took a slug of wine with a flourish.

Owen became still. 'Don't be ridiculous. Of course we weren't.' He tried to dismiss her with a laugh and scoffed 'Don't be ridiculous' once more. He wanted to look outraged but an awkward smile of embarrassment broke out instead.

Serena sat open mouthed. She hadn't really meant it, she was just trying to trigger a reaction. Now it was her turn to be speechless. The ramifications of that look on his face rattled round her brain like pachinko balls. The pathway back from wherever they fell would be difficult to find. But at least she had her answer.

two

Reece & Gillian

Thursday March 3rd

'Who the hell is Debbie?' Helen's voice sounded more sneering than confrontational.

Every nerve cell in Reece's body stood to attention. Damn it! A schoolboy mistake. Senses gathered, for once the explanation was innocent.

'That'll be Debbie from the agency. They always try to take the contractors out for drinks once a year, to keep us all sweet. When we're actually allowed to go out, that is. She'll be doing the rounds.'

'I bet she will.'

Helen had been approximately Reece's girlfriend for nearly ten years. She was inured to his playing the field, it was impossible to keep up with his safety-in-numbers approach. She had seen the message flash on screen while he was in the bathroom – whether the name was a work colleague, or someone he'd met in a bar, was of little consequence. She assumed he had weighed up the benefits, risks and likelihood of sleeping with them all on first acquaintance and planned his tactics accordingly, for maximum return. His phone was always active. Throughout the night, while silent, its beam played on the ceiling to the rhythm of a lighthouse. The frequency had waned in recent times, allied to an overall reduction in his once Tiggerish enthusiasm for being a salesman. She still felt obliged to play her part when his messages fell into her hands first, to keep

him on his toes. But she was past caring which instance of Debbie this might actually be.

'Right, I see. Well... *Debbie from the agency* is asking if you're up for it on Tuesday night.' The message was short enough that Helen didn't need to tap to see the full text, thereby remaining on the right side of their unwritten code. It was fair game to look at the screen if he'd left his mobile unattended. To actively poke through the log of conversations, however, would be below the belt.

'OK, thanks. That's what she means. She's trying to get all the sales guys together at the Brew House.' Fortunately, on this occasion Reece was telling the truth. His error was in not renaming her 'xAgency Debbie', to nip any suspicion in the bud. Reece took pride in the careful cultivation of his contacts list. The prefix 'x' was for the least important, placing them lower down alphabetically, out of harms way from casual snooping. Work people were labelled into organisational groups. His known-about exes had a 'z', to prevent him seeing their names too often when scrolling, thus avoiding too many uncomfortable memories. Special code names were given to anyone truly confidential, in case suspect notifications were observed from the corner of an eye.

Helen herself had once been the most prized entry on the roll, the most tenaciously concealed. 'Electrician' was her short-lived nom de guerre before she ultimately replaced Reece Keegan's incumbent main squeeze. Thoughts of those days still made his pulse quicken, but the thrill of the calculated risk-taking involved in those early encounters could never be recaptured. Helen had gone through every stage from one-night stand, to secret lover, to partner, to woman scorned. She left him for a while, but chose the wrong one as her next

port-of-call. Many bruises later she came back and somehow they reached an accommodation. When Reece was not otherwise distracted, he still welcomed her company and the grounding influence of her earthy wisdom. His penthouse apartment overlooking Portishead marina was more complete when she was around. Helen had side projects of her own, but nowhere else felt more like home than here. Neither of them had aspirations to settle down in a more conventional sense and, when pressed, they might even admit to being best friends. The separate parts of their lives, private and shared, had formed into shapes and grown around each other into a viable compound form, curved together like resting seals. The tonic level of mutual friction simply kept their wheels turning.

'Will you go?'

'Yeah I expect so. The novelty of going out on the beer again does sound appealing. Even with those tossers. What I really want though, is an ice cold one, sitting by the pool in Barbados.'

'Oh my freaking god. Tell me about it. When the hell are we going to get on a plane again Reece?'

'We'll book something soon, promise.'

Reece meant what he said. His determination to meet commission targets was fuelled by an addiction to warmer climes and exotic watering holes. This was his reason for being, his hallmark.

'Whatever happened to *Reecey Boy On Tour* eh?' Helen continued to chide him.

'We're allowed to travel again now, you do know that?'

'I know, I know. But it doesn't feel right yet, not to me. The rest of the world hates us. The #ourhouse agenda and all that.'

His profile photo for @reeceyboy.ontour had been taken by Helen, snapped in an Ayia Napa bar on one of their first trips together. He liked to foster an image of hedonistic playboy on his social media accounts, while still clinging to the memory of a sleeker jaw-line and a forehead of jet black hair. They had taken to more long-haul destinations since those days, but Reece was finding the allure slow to recover in the wake of the pandemic. Helen was feeling it as strong as ever.

'Why do you think the rest of the world hates us so much?'

'Oh God, this country has made such an arse of itself lately. Shit-for-brains Brits whining *oh we need to go to Spain* when infection rates here were sky-high. Our idiot leaders gloating to the rest of the world about how much vaccine we had... and behaving like twats on the international stage in general. I bet they're glad Ukraine is taking attention away from how useless they are now. Oh, and let's not forget our scumbag hooligans at the Euros final. I honestly don't think we should expect other countries to welcome us with open arms. I wouldn't if I was them.'

'Bloody hell Reece, you've gotten so boring.' Helen was sulking now. She would rather have a ticket in her hand than a cast iron promise he was no longer sleeping around. 'I'll go on my freaking own.'

'We'll go, we will. I've just got a few things to sort out... some other things I want to do first.'

Helen could imagine what those things might be. Medical bills for one of his harem. Legal fees perhaps, he always had some tangles to fix. As it was, Reece did have new assignments in mind, but this time his motives were less tawdry than usual.



The following day Reece was up early. His rituals on waking were as grooved as a Swiss timepiece. Before the alarm could strike two notes, he tapped it off and was out of bed. He was not as agile as in his prime, however. Once, nimble as a cat, he would exit the bedroom and enter the shower without making a sound. Now the floor creaked as his more elevated centre of gravity caused a wobble, prompting muffled sounds of disapproval from under the duvet. His grooming routine resembled a preparation for war, a party piece for his own consumption, enacted with the panache of a Savoy barman. He only clung to his repertoire now through grim determination. Helen had pointed out, some time ago, 'don't forget your ears old man.' None of his shaving gadgets quite did the job in that regard, with failing eyesight the best he could do was poke around with clipper attachments until the snipping sounds seemed to die down. He rubbed his ears and neck vigorously with a face flannel hoping to remove any suspicious fragments of what was now mostly grey hair. Reece completed the job, satisfied that everything he could see was to the required level of handsome. The study doubled as a dressing room. Today warranted suit and tie but colour and texture were allowed, this was not a high-stakes mission. Although it was March, he opted for autumnal hues, the preceding weeks having been unnecessarily cold. Pastels could wait – he figured @goldilocks.hoptoad might approve.

Rendezvous at motorway service stations were so second nature to Reece, he was surprised that his deep dive guest wasn't more chipper about him offering to drive all the way to Leicester Forest for their first meeting. She lived in the rural East Midlands, it wasn't clear where, he thought she would appreciate neutral territory, close to her home. 'Oh, OK. Yes I can get a lift there. 11 is fine,' came the message response. The only other name attached to the @goldilocks.hoptoad profile was 'Gillian'. She appeared firmly in the camp of 'too pleased with their own quirkiness' that he traditionally despised. He couldn't get away from them. He had switched to Pebbletank when it first emerged, judging it to be the coolest place to be seen, but was distraught to see the happy-clappy cavalcade of crafters and creatives soon follow suit. Nevertheless, the deep dive initiative had created an opportunity not to miss. Gillian seemed very far removed from the type of person he expected to take his challenge but something about her steely attitude intrigued him. It didn't quite tally with her new age appearance though. He planned to arrive first and was confident she would recognise him from his own profile photo.

Reece occupied a table in the agreed franchise eatery, facing the main flow of people. Gillian arrived twenty minutes late, confirming his opinion that these people wouldn't know real work if it fell on their heads from a tree. As she craned her neck, trying to spot him, he waved while chuntering in annoyance under his breath. 'Goldilocks fucking Hoptoad. Why can't the stupid cow see me,' a subconscious disrespect and loathing for others that bubbled away, momentarily rising to the surface, hidden by a smile. She finally reached his table.

'Oh hello. Sorry, I wasn't sure it was you from the photo.'

'Gillian, good to meet you,' said Reece in grooved-mode again. He offered his hand and heightened his grin. 'I can assure you it's me.'

'Good to meet you too, um... maybe it's the sunglasses,' she replied, reluctantly wafting her hand into his grip.

Reece offered to buy her a coffee but she insisted on getting her own. She placed a crocheted bag full of notebooks on the seat opposite his and disappeared towards the baristas. Reece watched the interminable negotiation that ensued with rising agitation, but, as she wove through the tables back towards him with her tray, he focused on his heart rate and convinced himself to calm down. Let's start off on the right foot.

'So, Gillian, you must be wondering what this is all about? I'm really glad you requested this experience.'

'Oh, it's a perfect opportunity for me. It's going to help with the dissertation for my Masters degree no end. It's called, um... *The Road Warrior and gender bias: the role of testosterone in Information Technology Sales.*'

Reece took a moment to let that sink in. 'Goodness. How did you know I was in IT Sales?'

'Oh, from the comments on your posts, from your friends. I put two and two together. You're exactly what I was looking for.' In truth, Reece was the exact opposite of someone Gillian would choose to meet in normal circumstances. His profile popped up as a suggestion on Pebbletank, when she tried sorting from least likely to most likely to interact with, out of curiosity. Something about the

cocky smile drew her in and she started trawling through his posts. He was perfect.

For once, Reece felt like he was the one being pursued. Gillian had pale skin and dark ginger hair that hung in unruly, asymmetric clumps to the shoulders of her home-knit cardigan. He assumed it was her natural colour. She looked at him with tilted head and mischief in her eyes. He was struck by her directness, his prejudice assuming such confidence only came with an even complexion and sharp tailoring. His normal parameters were subverted, her figure was spare and boyish, there was nowhere for his habitually wandering eyes to stray. He shifted in his seat and adjusted his shirt front, feeling buttons pulled too tightly across his gut and the sensation of his own skin being exposed.

'To start with, I thought you were going to be some beer monster, sports fan, total wanker type. I mean really... *Reecey Boy On Tour*. But I guess you're not. Not totally anyway.' She smiled cheekily. 'I guess all that travel and partying is not exactly part of the day job?'

'Not the sunshine stuff, no. But I'm up and down England all the time, with the job. Virtually of course, in recent times. It's kicking off again now though. This place is like a second home.' His eyes part rolled and part pointed, to indicate their surroundings. 'By the way, good to know I'm not totally a wanker.'

'You're lockdown posts were quite funny. But this deep dive thing, it's fascinating. *Do your job for the day*. How is that even possible?'

'Oh I have a plan, I think it can work.'

'But why? What's in it for you?'

Reece had been thinking about the possibility even before the world turned upside down. He worked for a global technology company and specialised in selling all-encompassing, long-term IT solutions to large organisations. He was supposed to be a rain maker, a foot-in-the-door on a massive scale. He developed relationships with chief executives and schmoozed them to part company with enormous sums for a complete package of software licences, consultancy time and strategy formation. These relationships were living and breathing things. They needed constant tending, the contracts lasted multiple years and securing their renewal was as important as winning new business. All of his clients employed a charismatic and opinionated chief technology officer, whose role was to make decisions about which technology provider offered the best return on investment. And Reece was their bitch.

'To be honest Gillian, I'm fed up with this game. It's bullshit. The people I have to meet, the people that I have to suck up to. I'm starting to hate them, they're all the same. They're just out to make a mark, to be seen as the new broom.'

While Gillian was working on a masters degree on social science and human resources, she had no experience in the industry. She nodded encouragingly, making eye contact where possible, but needed him to explain more.

'A new broom, as in...'

'A new broom to sweep away everything that was done before. Getting any sizeable corporation to conclude that its existing IT platform is actually OK, actually doing a half-decent job, is practically impossible. They read all the blogs, they watch all the tech gurus on YouTube, strutting around on stage like stand-up comedians, or TV evangelists... or gods... and swallow the hype hook, line and

sinker. And they decide they need to change. There's always some new nirvana, wrapped in the latest trendy terminology – and it's nearly always just the emperor's new clothes. The Cloud, Big Data, Machine Learning. Whatever it may be, they are terrified of being seen to be behind the curve. Trouble is, they're just chasing rainbows. Nothing is ever really that new, only once in a generation. Berners-Lee has got a lot to answer for.'

'Is it getting harder to sell?' Gillian was wondering if Reece was on the edge of a breakdown, or maybe just lost the will to fight.

'Yes, it is. But I'm not giving up. I still have something to prove. To be honest, one factor does work in my favour. While they really, really want to kick me out, the cost of removing their existing technology, root and branch, is usually so great that they stick with us in the end. But there's always the bit where we dance around the handbags. They ponce about with their options papers and independent advisers, dragging me in for meetings at the drop of a hat. I'm just so bored with it all. So damn bored.'

'They stick with you in the end? It's like you have created a dependency, like a drug dealer?'

'Well, er... yes, you could look at it like that. Blimey Gillian, are you sure you haven't been doing this for years? By the way, I've got to ask... what did you say... *the role of testosterone?* What's testosterone got to do with it?'

'That's the premise of my paper, yes... and what you're describing sounds like a vindication to me. It sounds like an old boy's club. Are there many women doing your role?'

'Well, when I think about it... I guess the executive sales team are all guys.'

'What about the CTOs?'

'Um... I suppose yes, all the ones I deal with are male. Except Kyra at MyRailway. But then, well... she's just like one of the guys really.'

Gillian raised an eyebrow and stared knowingly, waiting for him to see the irony of his words. 'That's exactly the point of my thesis. Would different decisions be made if there was greater gender representation in these meetings.' She stopped herself from saying 'these meetings where you dance around the handbags' in case that blurred the issue.

'Well, Gillian. Maybe we're about find out,' he said, with a swagger. Her research may seek to undermine his entire career but at least the proposed meet-up might satisfy both their agendas.

'So, you want me to do your job for a day? You want me to help with some presentation slides?'

Reece had put the deep dive option on Pebbletank because he wanted to test a theory. He was convinced that the clients he worked with were such charlatans, such buffoons, that they could be fooled by talk of a phantom technology that didn't really exist, by a random person off the street. He wanted to demonstrate, beyond all doubt, the fakeness of the world he occupied. He wanted to feel the buzz again, one last hurrah before retiring and going to live on a yacht. From all the responses to his post, he put the names on post-its and Helen picked one blind. Reece really owed her one now, he had a feeling the choice of Gillian could be inspired.

'No Gillian. I want you to present them.'



'Have you gone completely mad? Have you lost your marbles, is this your Colonel Kurtz in Apocalypse Now moment?'

'Nope. I'm completely in control of my actions.' Reece grinned more warmly now.

'It's OK. I was thinking of jacking it in anyway. As long as the company doesn't find out, and I'm certainly not going to tell them. I'll make sure it doesn't come back on you. I bet you do presentations all the time at university.'

'Yes, of course, but this is different. I know about social science. I'm interested in new media and gaming and stuff. I'm interested in the human factors. But I'm far from being an IT expert.'

'That's the whole point. You'll be great. I can coach you.' Reece was now simmering with excitement. His plan was falling into place. Gillian was sceptical about the practicalities, but tantalised by the idea.

'How are you going to coach me?'

'I was thinking video calls to start with. Maybe a dress rehearsal the day before. I have a target in mind, that's actually nearby.'

Allied Grids was one of Reece's most important clients, a utilities conglomerate headquartered in the Midlands, that had once been in the public sector. Reece had based himself at Leicester Forest many times before, planning forays into the Allied Grids campus. Their CTO was Angus Bedwell, a recent youthful promotee who had replaced the long-serving Bob, one of Reece's most established connections. Bob had been deemed too old fashioned. Angus was bouncy and

meticulous but Reece regarded him as merely style over substance, moreover a style he found extremely annoying. 'Insists on wearing bootlace ties, the creep.' A meeting was planned at the end of the month to review a proposed contract extension. Reece had been forced into multiple re-writes for clarification and was spoiling for a fight.

'Tuesday March 29th, it's face to face. We can meet here if you like. I'll stay over in the hotel next door, we can practice there.' Reece now found himself veering towards another well-worn pathway, having had similar conversations with female colleagues many times before, when planning more nocturnal forays. For once, this time his intentions were entirely work-related. 'What do you think Gillian, are you in?'

The number of words her dissertation was behind target weighed heavily in Gillian's mind. Even though Reece's proposal still sounded crazy, it could be the boost she needed. A chance to be *in the room* was hard to turn down.

'Yes Reece. Count me in.'

'Fantastic!' He splayed out his hands, channelling Roy Scheider in *All That Jazz*, but stopped short of adding the 'It's showtime, folks!' dialogue. That was for other occasions.

'I've already done the slides and written a script,' Reece continued. 'Are you happy to do face-time once a week between now and then? You can practice the pitch and I'll cover any questions.'

'OK, OK... yes that should be fine.' Gillian was already feeling nervous and questioning her own sanity, but Reece's enthusiasm was unexpectedly infectious.

Predictably, his manner was too unctuous for her liking and she suspected he was no less fake than the other characters he described, but she was fired up by the possibilities ahead. With an outline plan in place their meeting concluded. Reece returned to his car alone, his offer to drive her home declined. That would be too much consort with the enemy for one day. Gillian was happy for their next engagement to be via webcam, 150 miles apart, it felt more normal.

Happy to be heading home much earlier than usual, Reece flew back to Bristol, Kings of Leon blaring. Goldilocks was most assuredly on fire. On reaching the flat, Helen was out. She had a string of part-time jobs and attended several classes. They both came and went to an indeterminate pattern that ebbed and flowed. They would no more swap expected home times than would birds on a wire. As soon as he was back in his jeans, he set to sending Gillian the slides and the first call invite. To his delight she responded straight away and said she'd be in touch once her first batch of questions took shape. They convened on their first conference call two days later.

'Before we start Reece, can I just ask... how will I even get inside the building?'

Reece was relieved to see that Gillian called herself Gillian on the call. Relieved that the Goldilocks thing was solely an affectation for Pebbletank, like his own profile name.

'Don't worry, there won't be a problem. The reception guys know me, I'll just introduce you as a new member of the team. It will just be me and you. But you'll do the talking once we're inside.'

'What about business cards... won't they expect to see my business card?'

'No-one really does that anymore. We'll just put your name on the first slide in the meeting, but remove it afterwards. Angus will do all his comms through me anyway. You'll be like a will-o'-the-wisp. After the meeting... pfft, you'll disappear. No disrespect but I doubt they will even mention it subsequently, they're so used to different people coming and going.'

'OK. I quite like the sound of that. Being a will-o'-the-wisp.'

'To be honest Gillian, this is why I've become disillusioned. The whole thing is so empty. The development of new software is just about making money. We know it and the customer knows it. But they have to keep upgrading to the next version, keep spending money. It's a racket.'

Gillian found herself agreeing with him. 'It's funny, I've often had the same thoughts. It really bugs me. Nothing about computers is permanent, let alone built with any kind of altruism... and I hate that we always have to *sign in* to everything?'

'Exactly. By now, computers should be constant, dependable things, like bridges or letter boxes. Not whining little Tamagotchis, needing to be fed. When I was a kid you pressed the button of your parents' TV and it came on. That was the extent of the interaction. With a computer you're bombarded with interminable messages. When I walk into a building I don't want a conversation... I don't want it asking me to be its mate, or whether I want its walls to be reinforced. I just want it to be a building. A solid, safe structure that is never going to fall down and never ask me a question. Software should be like buildings. But it's not.'

'Oh gosh, I couldn't agree more.' Gillian nodded and smiled with increasing surprise. Subliminally she always thought it was the likes of Reece that were to blame, but now here he was, with his fake tan and designer specs, playing back her own feelings. 'I get the impression stuff these days is deliberately built to fail, not built to last. I don't know how they... I mean, how you... how *you* have been getting away with it for so long.'

'It's amazing isn't it. Criminal in fact. The mindset is entirely cynical. I miss the days when innovation was driven by grand ideas. Grand visions for the advancement of mankind. The NASA space programme... OK, it led to non-stick pans and instant mash... but the original motive was about exploring the galaxy. Now we have the most incredible devices in our pockets, devices that would've been too far-fetched in Star Trek. High res cameras, ridiculous battery power, 5G networks... all these unthinkable advances. And why? Because everyone is brainwashed by the multinationals, raking in billions from upgrades and data traffic... just so we can post sunsets on social media, or swap footage of our private parts on WhatsApp.'

Gillian's smile turned into a grimace on the last point. She guessed he was speaking from experience, but had no intention of asking.

'Anyway,' said Reece, sheepishly. 'Back to the point. How are you getting on Gillian, is it making sense? I'm hoping the script explains what all the diagrams are about.'

'I think so. Mostly. Shall we give it a go?'

Gillian stepped through the slides, reading the script verbatim. Fifty-six tablets of wisdom, with as many graphics as he could muster. Thirty minutes passed and she was still not even halfway. She had sat on trains many times, peering over shoulders, trying to see what working commuters were up to. The bullet points and charts, the doublespeak headlines. It all looked so interchangeable. She'd done drama at school and wasn't afraid of the performance side of the challenge. But she needed more context, to know which bits to stress and which to skip. 'I'm taking too long aren't I?'

'Don't worry, you're doing really well. Especially for a first go. I'll prune the slides a bit, or maybe hide some of them. It depends what questions they ask. I'll work on them and send you an update, but honestly Gillian, it was great. Are you sure you have time for all this?'

'Yes, yes its fine. Its all for my course work anyway, that's what I'm supposed to be doing. Even if our project is a little... unconventional.'

Reece explained which points were the most important to get across, then they adjourned for the day. Towards the end of the call, with Reece in full coaching mode, Helen appeared, draping herself across the doorway of the study to watch. He could feel her presence and was smirking as he turned his chair to face her at the end.

'Oh Gillian, you're sooo freaking good Gillian,' Helen mimicked him, good naturedly, before turning like a vamp and creeping back to the living room. For once, Helen had been fully briefed on his activities and she could see from the screen Gillian wasn't his type. Reece pruned the PowerPoint before retreating to the kitchen to make dinner.

'Do you *want* to shag her though?' asked Helen later that evening, out of the blue.

'No, sweetheart. Not in the slightest. She's like a fourteen year old boy. A fourteen year old boy in a borrowed wig.'

'Ooh, miaow.'

Reece chuckled. 'Actually she's really cool. A really smart cookie, you chose your post-it very well.'



On their second call, Gillian made it to the end in 45 minutes.

'Getting there,' said Reece. 'Just need to try and let the pictures do some of the talking.'

'It's still too many slides,' she replied, briskly. 'All that stuff about predicted benefits. Is it really needed?'

'Ah, OK. Well, yes they need it for their business case and...'

'And the reference sites, those examples from other countries, there are too many and will they really care?'

'OK, I'll look at that... thanks Gillian.' Her assertiveness had Reece on the back foot. Any resentment he might feel about this waif-like creature telling him his own business was offset by the thrilling thought of her putting it to Angus in the same way. 'I'll do another revision, but still, really good for the second attempt. If you've got time now, I could do a run through myself?'

Now it was Reece's turn. He presented back to her and could see her taking notes in the corner of his screen.

'Thanks, that was useful.'

'Phew! I've only been doing it for twenty years.' Reece laughed, but Gillian merely looked thoughtful.

'So, I have a couple of questions about the jargon if that's OK?'

'Fire away.'

'I mean, everyone knows about *big data* right, you hear about it all the time. But why do Allied Grids need to do it? If *do* is even the right word... *use* big data... *have* big data?

'Good question. I guess it should be *use big data concepts*. But where Allied Grids say they need it, they don't. They'd be better off not thinking about big data at all. Don't get me wrong, big data is a thing. When you sit at home having a conversation about buying a new dishwasher, then the next day you start getting emails with adverts for dishwashers... because your conversation was actually recorded by your smart TV... that's a result of big data. Inferences made by trawling and combining the massive, massive tithe barns of information our beloved global multinationals capture from our daily actions, often without us knowing. The suggested new contacts you see on Pebbletank. That's from big data. Even if it's idiotic. Why would you, for example, ever want to connect with someone on social media who happens to have the same name as someone you once googled on your laptop? For what they're trying to do, Allied Grids do not need big data. Their problem is crap data. Their data is riddled with errors. What they need is armies of little old ladies, sitting at home, reading through their data and fixing it. If only there was a way of farming out chunks of corporate

information out to bored elderly people. They could spend their time spotting spelling mistakes, or updating postcodes in customer addresses, instead of doing crosswords or sudoku. Think of the mental health benefits. To actually contribute something, bridging the gap between business and citizens, rather than sitting silently alone, scratching away with a biro.'

'Little old ladies?' Gillian looked at him archly again, but with a twinkle in her eye. She wasn't seriously going to pick up on his casual sexism, not this time. She actually enjoyed the rant. He wasn't quite the embodiment of evil she had first assumed.

'Oh, you know what I mean. IT strategy should be completely rethought, with a human element. But it will never happen. Not with the likes of Angus in charge. We need to mention big data somewhere on the slides, in bold. It's the rules. It's still in the zeitgeist... just about anyway. There are certain buzzwords we have to include. But often, half the people in the room don't even know what they really mean, they just pretend to and nod sagely.'

'OK. I get it. There was one other thing... what's the *grout layer*?'

'Ah. That's not a thing. I made that up.'

'Made it up?'

'Yes, I want to include something that isn't real, to see if they notice.'

'Isn't that a bit risky?'

'Yeah... kind of. But it's the main point of what I'm trying to do.'

'If bootlace boy asks a question, I might defer to you.'

Satisfied good progress was being made, they parted ways. Gillian was exceeding all Reece's expectations. She had internalised his script and was starting to improvise. Despite the peculiar juxtaposition of watching this novice – what his Mum would've called a scrawny wee lass – delivering his words with aplomb, against the backdrop of crescent moons and woollen owls in her bedroom, he was feeling optimistic. The fact that she was suggesting changes herself was extraordinary. But would she be so composed on the day?

They held four more screen share sessions ahead of the big day. By the last practice run, every wrinkle seemed to be smoothed.

'It's great Gillian, you're looking at me straight in the eye. You're not looking at your notes at all.'

In fact Gillian had been looking at the webcam directly, to avoid Reece's eager face.

'Yes, it feels like I know it now. I might not understand it all, but I think I can do the spiel. The slides themselves act like prompts. The colours give me a headache mind you, but still...'

'OK, so... are you still up for the real thing?'

'Well, I've come this far. I haven't spent the last three weeks learning a load of corporate buzzword-bingo bullshit for nothing I hope! I've been reciting the function of the grout layer in my sleep.' They both laughed.

'Cool. Excellent. I am so impressed Gillian, I cannot tell you. Right, so... the meeting is still on as far as I can tell. I swapped emails with Angus's PA just yesterday. She has to inform reception whom to expect. I gave the name Gold, I

hope you don't mind. I had to say something and I wasn't sure about your surname. Can you be Gillian Gold?'

'Oh gosh. I didn't expect a pseudonym. That's a bit scary.'

'It's only for the day. Isn't it better than having them know your real name?'

'Um... I suppose so. Gillian Gold. Oh God. It's a bit of a leap from Gillian Micklewhite.'

'Gillian Gold will only ever exist for a day... living in name only, on a single slide and a temporary access pass. We can formally lay her to rest once the meeting is over.'

'Hmm... lets see. Perhaps she will take over my life.' Gillian and Reece laughed again. A flicker of warmth stirred under his ribcage.

'Let's call it a day then Ms Gold. I'll travel up on the Monday. Shall we meet in the same place as last time? The hotel does have a bar of sorts. They do pints of lager and hot dogs. That's about it.'

'The same place we met before will be fine. I'll get my friend to give me a lift again.'

'And we'll do another run through... maybe meet about three pm?'

'Okey dokey.' Gillian's positive body language contracted to a degree. Planning the mechanics of the meeting had changed the atmosphere. She wanted to trust Reece, but secretly wished for a change of heart at Allied Grids, to make the meeting online after all. The thought of joining him in his hotel room was giving her nausea. Pints of lager and hot dogs? 'Do they have any meeting rooms for hire? Or quiet areas?'

Reece sensed where her mind was going. Historically, in such a situation, he would plead innocence while continuing to plot. But now his emphasis was to make her feel comfortable. 'There's no business centre there unfortunately. But we should be fine where we were, we just need to have a final run through. I've seen people holding interviews in Subway enough times. We just need to break the comfort of doing it from home before entering the lion's den.'

'OK.' Gillian's face now looked small and pale on his screen, shrinking back towards her company of owls. 'I'll see you at the services then.' As she spoke, a dip in the network severed the transmission momentarily, but he got the gist.

'Yes Gillian, see you there.'

The screen froze again, Gillian's image remained fixed, looking sideways as if consulting with her bears. Reece closed the window anyway, he felt sure the niceties had been sufficiently conveyed. They were good to go.



Monday March 28th

Reece had slept badly, haunted by a recurring dream. Gillian was tied to her chair, her face locked in the same rictus pose from the video call. A giant toad toy sat on her lap, filling the foreground, croakily chanting '*who's been eating my porridge?*' on repeat. He woke several times, but the dream could not be banished. He ended up just lying awake, waiting for the light to come. Helen was sleeping soundly beside him, he spared her from the toad's intrusion. Once the night-time torment was over, he wanted to have breakfast on the balcony, to survey his kingdom from the battlements before setting off. However, a westerly

gale was rattling the windows so he stayed indoors. Helen was on hand as a sounding board.

'This is a momentous couple of days babe. I finally get to turn the tables.'

'What if they don't sign?' Helen wanted to be supportive but was worried about the chances of Reece losing his bonus.

'Whether they do or not... will be irrespective of whatever we say tomorrow. That's the whole point. It's all a farce.'

Reece hit the motorway network for the zillionth time. His car was like a tank and pretty much drove itself, on muscle memory. He knew there would be queues today and factored that into his leaving time. He sat behind the wheel, zen like, enjoying the silence despite the ferocious wind, watching the clouds race ahead. These journeys also felt like recurring dreams, the junctions and barriers floating by, observed subconsciously. To count the hours each time, to count the miles, would send you insane. Like old films, watched countless times, you just had to suspend all questioning thought until they reached the end. The traffic eased and Reece joined the clouds as they raced north east. His journey took an hour longer than was the par, but he was well accustomed to such variations. The hotel adjoined the service station like a hospital mortuary. It was still too early for checking in, but he chanced his arm.

'Kath, you're looking especially gorgeous today. Play your cards right, you might get lucky later.'

'Ha! In your dreams, lover boy. You know very well that check-in's at two.' Kath had handled many of Reece's previous visits and tolerated his ribaldry with good

grace. She wanted to enforce the rules but also knew some rooms were ready. Trade was still taking time to recover. 'I'll put you in 205. Do you want to borrow an iron?'

Borrow? He knew this place was a dump, but there had always been an iron in the room. Reece had considered staying at his favourite stately pile in the area – he dubbed it The Grange, having forgotten its real name – but concluded that this trip demanded the full authentic feel of budget hotel ordinary. He transferred the minimum amount of luggage from car to room. The carpet reeked of damp socks but was within expected parameters, there was no point asking to move. He was soon outside again heading for the designated meeting place, among ranks of plastic seats in the concourse suspended grimly above the M1's long-suffering tarmac. Gillian was late again, but less so. Despite his instincts, Reece contained himself once again to the straight-backed professional handshake rather than anything more huggy. His laptop was ready, they sat side-by-side and she stepped through the sequence again, this time against a backdrop of squawking children. She winced through the worst of the ambient noises. Reassured that nothing had gone awry since their last call, they shifted attention to the detail for the following day.

'Their office is twenty miles up the road from here. Are you sure you won't let me pick you up from home, on the way?' Reece was not trying to invade her private world, but was keen to remove the risk of her unseen friend causing delay. 'We need to leave by 10.'

'Here is fine. I'll be here early, don't worry.'

Reece looked at her imploringly, with a rueful smile. He wanted to persuade her but could see it was futile. 'OK then. Message me when you get here. Your friend is very accommodating. I must thank them.'

'No need, but yes, indeed she is. My housemate. It's really not that far away, she drops me on the southbound side, it's easier.'

'Right then. Here's to tomorrow,' said Reece. They dinked their empty cardboard cups.

In the morning, iron and board were wrestled through multiple sets of doors and brought to bear on Reece's best pale pink shirt. He acted out his routine again and Gillian's arrival message came on the dot.

'I'm outside now.'

They slalomed to his vehicle and got onboard. The mission had begun. She had never been inside an executive saloon before but wasn't inclined to comment, beyond how difficult it was to open such big doors in so little space. She had to contort herself to avoid getting dirt on her trouser hems. Reece was just glad that Helen had reminded him to do the full valet at the weekend. 'Spare the girl your fart smell, for goodness sake.' What would he do without her.

'You look great, Gillian.' And she did. An elegant navy suit hung perfectly from her slender frame, set off with white chinese-collar blouse.

'Thanks. The charity shop in the village is really good.'

Her hair was transformed. 'Looks like a double dutch braided bun, hun,' was Helen's guess, when Reece showed her the picture later. She looked like a Viking

warrior, albeit an unusually wiry one. Reece kept looking at her sideways as he drove.

'Is something wrong?' she asked.

'Nope. Nothing at all.' He couldn't see her nails, her fists were tightly clenched.

They reached the Allied Grids complex. The visitor spaces were mostly empty.

'Remind me... why are we doing this again?' Gillian asked nervously as they headed across the car park, face-first into the wind.

'Because you are going to prove, once and for all, that this whole shebang is a great big pile of bollocks. These contract negotiations are just a sham. Conducted by a bunch of self-important show boaters, bumping their chests together like bison, more concerned about their own image than the real impact of the choices they make. And you, Gillian my dear, are going to prick their bubble. If bison could have their own bubbles, that is.'

'If they did, it would get bloody well blown away today!'

Gillian's hair arrangement remained intact all the way to reception. Head security guard Sheila eyed the pair suspiciously as they struggled through the rotating door. But soon came recognition.

'Oh hello Reece! You're back again, like a bad penny.' Sheila was beaming.

'Allright Sheel, how are you doing?' he beamed back. Only the desk prevented a hug this time.

'I was wondering if we'd ever see you again.'

'I'd never leave you Sheel! Mind you, to tell the truth, if today goes badly GZK might be kicked out for good.'

'Oh no... up before the beak?'

'Yep.'

'Oh well. Good luck. Who's this then?' Sheila was already staring at Reece's companion. He made the introductions. It was too tempting not to poke fun.

'Nice to meet you Gillian. I hope he's behaving himself?' Her wide eyes were fixed on Reece for the second statement. Gillian was too nervous to engage in any kind of familiarity.

'Er... Yes, yes he is. Do I sign here?'

They filled in the passes and Sheila made a call. 'I've got Reece Keegan and a Gillian Gold from GZK, for a meeting with Angus. OK, see you in a mo.'

They sat on padded stools in an alcove next to the doorway while the local BBC news played on a screen in the corner. Trees had been blown over in the night. Eventually, Angus Bedwell's PA arrived to escort them to the meeting room. Gillian had brought her own laptop along, to look the part. It sat within Reece's spare briefcase, the handle of which she now gripped for dear life, as the butterflies started to swarm inside. She prayed for the lift not to reach the designated floor. But the PA's progress was relentless. 'You're in Derwent today. I'll just tell them you're here. Coffee or tea?'

In Bob's day there would have been pastries. Now there was nothing but water, but they were too on edge to care.

'You sit here, I'll connect the laptop to the projector,' said Reece, assuming control. 'Just try to relax.' Gillian looked at him feebly. Just as he was thinking of something reassuring to say, Angus and his sidekicks marched into the room.

Their leader now sported a neatly trimmed goatee and an embryonic pony tail, along with the tie and Cuban heels.

'Good to see you Reece. Thanks for coming. It's a relief to be doing this sort of thing in person again.' Angus sounded in a hurry, he sat down straight away, attention partly drawn to his tablet. 'And this must be Gillian...' Reece introduced Gillian as a pre-sales consultant, new to GZK. There was no time for small talk. Angus was keen to know her background, but more keen to get on with the grilling. Joining him on the Allied Grids side of the table were Colin Butters, chief finance officer and Wasim Bhakt, head of IT architecture. They elected not to follow Angus in dressing like a cowboy.

Once everyone was sat down, Reece set the scene while completing the projector connection. 'Thank you Angus for giving GZK the opportunity to present a revised proposal, based on your feedback from January. I'm going to let Gillian lead the discussion today, if I can just get the screen to work...' After several keyboard shortcuts and an awkward pause, the plasma screen kicked into life. The fateful slide appeared:

GZK Allied Grids 5 year extension proposal

Reece Keegan & Gillian Gold

March 29th

Reece handed Gillian the projector remote, willing it to behave. 'You need to...' 'Yep... got it.' Gillian had taught undergrads with the same equipment at her college many times. Reece needn't have worried.

'Good morning gentlemen.' As she stood, she scanned the faces and visualised her dissertation's closing comments. The butterflies began to disperse.

The three men smiled back at her hesitantly. They were expecting Reece, ready to lock horns. They were not ready for a slight-looking young woman with fire in her eyes. They arranged their devices and screens to form a barrier... and so they could type unseen.

'I'll describe the rationale behind our proposal and explain how GZK will deliver optimal benefits to Allied Grids.' Gillian was on her way and Reece could hardly breathe. She breezed the agenda and introduction. Embarking on the main content, she walked the room like an actress, finger pointing at the screen directly when required. From their seats, they couldn't see her badly bitten nails. Her practice at home to an army of toys had paid off. The background, the options analysis, the proposal, the diagrams, the costs, the benefits, the case studies, the summary... Gillian delivered the presentation to perfection, like a woman possessed. Reece almost peed himself with pride. Angus and Wasim were messaging surreptitiously. 'Who is she?' 'Can't find her. Not on LinkedIn.'

'Are there any questions?'

Wasim had made a few notes, which he quickly scanned. He had to ask something. 'There was one thing. You mentioned a *grout* layer?'

Reece was waiting for this. 'Yes, data grouting. It's a concept we're introducing, only for our key clients. It's a semantic layer that binds together your domains of business logic and integrates your core web services, making them interoperable.'

Wasim was desperately trying to google, to find evidence, but the results were drowned out by performance data for bathroom grout and filler. Reece guessed what he was doing.

'It's new. From our Labs. You'll really see the benefit.'

Wasim nodded uncertainly and returned to his notes. Before he could form another question, Angus came to life.

'Thanks very much Gillian. Great pitch.' However his sickly smile morphed into a frown and he looked towards Reece. 'One thing though. We seem to be missing something.' Reece looked at him blankly, so Angus continued, pleased with his own wordplay.

'Yes Reece, you've missed something. The er... particular pachyderm about the premises I'm referring to is... when we responded to your proposal back in January, we specifically asked for your thoughts on Blockchain. I'd like to understand how GZK intends to leverage Blockchain in the solution.'

Reece's blood turned to ice. He hadn't seen this in their proposal response, it must have been buried as a comment in the slides. He knew the soundbites about Blockchain, but hadn't got round to doing the internal training courses. Maybe subconsciously this was the reason he wanted to quit: one new technology too far. He was about to splutter something apologetically, but Gillian was still standing, hands on the back of her chair.

'Actually... we did give it some consideration. But our research suggests you're better off swimming against the tide with this one. All that capturing moments of trust in immutable chunks that verify each other. Effectively you end up with all

your transactional information stores reading out their entire contents to each other, in a perpetual loop. It would eventually become like a trance version of A Million Green Bottles, with multiple vocals overlaid, all your servers singing at once. Blockchain sounds very cool, very *disruptive*. But it doesn't deliver anything that can't be achieved by good data governance. And really drains the power... it 'll screw your carbon footprint.'

The Derwent room fell silent, apart from Colin's stifled chuckle at the carbon footprint remark. Reece did let out some wee, in the effort not to appear gobsmacked. Wasim averted his eyes when Angus tried to make contact. Angus look back down at his copy of the slides, looking for mention of Gillian's analysis. 'That's right,' said Reece, trying not to squeak. 'We don't see it as part of the solution.'

'OK, well... that's not exactly what we were expecting, but... thank you for sharing your thoughts. I think that's everything for now. Louise can show you out.' Angus puffed his cheeks and smoothed his hair back to the pony tail. 'We'll try to get back to you with a response as soon as we can.' With that, he was off, colleagues in tow. No time for small talk, no time to enquire about Bob. The meeting was done.

They were led back to reception, to hand in their passes. Gillian removed the paper slip bearing her superhero name, to keep as a souvenir. They walked back to the car, initially speechless, but Reece couldn't hold back for long.

'Legend.'

Gillian just laughed.

'You absolute legend. Where did all that come from?'

'I thought I should look it up. Cryptocurrency is used a lot in gaming. I wanted to have something up my sleeve.'

'But is it really true?'

'Oh I've no idea. I don't understand that much. I just wanted an answer, in case it came up.' She tilted her head again and grinned toothily, reaching for the car door.

'Absolute fucking legend, excuse my French.' Reece felt exultant. 'Lift home?'

'Yeah. Go on then.'

Gillian realised it would be churlish to say no. She girded herself for the stifling smell of air freshener, plus a more earthy undertone she couldn't quite place, and gave directions back to Robbingsley, her village. He let out a whistle at the expansive manicured lawns of the outskirts. No wonder the charity shop had so much designer wear. She lived in the centre, in a tiny stone terrace. On the way, they discussed next steps.

'That was superb Gillian, beyond my wildest dreams. Whatever happens now... it doesn't really matter. As for your future with GZK... I'm so sorry, you did such a brilliant job, but I'm afraid we're going to have to let you go.'

'Ha ha... no worries. The experience was great for me too. The *deep dive*. Swimming with sharks.'

'How's your testosterone level?'

'I think it's in check. I hope Angus and gang recover theirs. I'll send you a copy of the dissertation when it's done. No names of course, I won't reveal my sources.'

'Cool. Obviously I'll let you know the outcome with Allied Grids.'

'Good luck! I hope you win the business. You took such a risk... seriously, what was in it for you Reece?'

'I don't know... I just wanted to feel real again.'

Reece parked by the village green and moved round to open her door. 'Selfie?' Gillian rolled her eyes but gave in. 'I'll send it to you.' Neither of them would be posting it on Pebbletank. Gillian still saw Reece as the enemy but he at least now qualified as human.

'Cup of tea?'

'No it's OK, I better get going.'

Relieved, Gillian said 'Hang on' and ran to her house. She emerged seconds later with a small knitted toad. 'This is for you.'

She hoped he'd find it funny but it seemed to make him jump.

'Thanks Gillian. Amazing. I'll keep him on my desk.'

They shook hands once more and he allowed himself a pat on her elbow. 'Take care.' 'You take care.' Then he got back on the road, returning to a life that would never be the same again. He knew this was his last foray.



Wednesday March 30th. It took less than twenty four hours for Allied Grids to respond. They were happy to sign for another five years. Colin convinced the

board that GZK were the cheapest option. Angus threatened to resign but was appeased by promise of a Blockchain research project with an alternative supplier. Reece removed Gillian's name from the only copy of the slides and archived the file. The win had come within his target period and he started planning his retirement.

Epilogue

Three years later Wasim Bhakt was announced keynote speaker at the first International Data Grout Symposium in Kuala Lumpur. Neither Reece nor his toad would be credited with its invention when the Wikipedia page was written.

three

Flo & Leon

Wednesday April 6th

Leon Hastings was scanning the IMDB entry for *You What?* for the umpteenth time when Darren, his assistant, returned to the living room with mugs of tea. The room, which doubled as their podcast studio, overlooked a busy Victorian pub in Dalston, still festooned in Six Nations flags three weeks beyond the final match day.

'No new reviews then?' asked Darren, struggling to find space on the table between piles of lifestyle magazines and takeaway menus.

'I don't understand, man. Everyone watched it. I mean, everyone that *was* someone did.'

'Twenty years ago mate. No-one's going to write a review now. There wasn't any internet then anyway.'

'Um, yes there was. And what's that got to do with anything?'

'I've done you three already Leon, we can't keep making them up. You was only on for two years. 2000 to 2002 is ancient history. People move on. I ought to do you a bad one, from some middle class prick. Give you some cred.'

Leon turned his attention to the Pebbletank app, scanning the profiles of recent unfollows. 'What's with all these haters man?'

'Look, you can't please everyone. Think positive. You're back over 10k since I've been doing your feed.'

'Ten thousand Daz... Only ten thousand. How many has Vernon Kay got man?'

‘Don’t sweat about Vernon. He’s still on primetime. You’re... on the way back.’

Leon’s promising early career in youth TV nosedived after *You What?* was cancelled, at the peak of its popularity. He was caught on sound and vision proclaiming ‘Bono can suck my dick’ during a live broadcast, around tea time. It wasn’t clear why, or to whom, he had been impelled to make this statement, but the repercussions were swift and savage. The largest number of complaints Channel 4 ever received. The show was axed with instant effect and Leon was catapulted into oblivion. Drugs, rehab, drugs, rehab. Half a lifetime of penance later, for defaming a national institution, he mustered some semblance of self again. The forgotten star, re-emerging from the darkness. Everyone will be famous for fifteen minutes. But what happens next... in the cycle of fame, does everyone also get a revival? An afterlife of retro bankability, once all opprobrium and shame have faded? Leon was looking for his niche in the pantheon of z-listers and had recruited Darren to run his social media. The fact he needed help was a good sign, he’d reached a critical mass. The next stage would be having so many followers they could all be safely ignored.

Lockdown gave Leon a boost. With more opportunity to watch daytime TV, he saw what some of his contemporaries were up to. A boy band member he’d last seen in 2004 lying on the floor of Chinawhite blowing spit bubbles, with a congealed dusting of powder around his nose, was now fronting a programme about garden makeovers on HomePlus, cooing in a cod northern accent about railway sleepers and pampas grass. The pandemic helped Leon see a way forward. Once he’d finally plucked up courage for a reboot, he rebranded all his social media accounts. His initial objective was to respond to everyone – to like

every comment and reply to every message. However, the guilt caused by failing to find time soon became overwhelming, hence the need for Darren. A friend of a friend, Darren was a natural. He knew little of the world, his output was virtually free of cultural allusion, however he understood the ways of the Twitterverse and his ministrations on @thereal.leonhasto were fanning the flames of engagement. Leon was now looking through the comments on his posts.

'Daz... there are some here you haven't even liked.'

'Give me an example.'

'It says... *Chicken is the only talent here*, laughing emoji. On one of my food posts.'

'They're taking the piss Leon.'

'Why haven't you deleted it then?'

'That looks a bit hissy. We only delete the really offensive ones. Or anything mentioning Bono. Cheeky comments are allowed, it shows you have a sense of humour. But we don't *like* them.'

'Hmm... they should show more respect. Those lessons cost me a bomb.'

Leon's recent videos had attracted a minor cult following. He had branched out into cooking, hiring a private chef to help him look like an expert. The goal was an appearance on Celebrity MasterChef. Darren was sceptical, he thought it was a step too far, nevertheless they had made their pitch to the production company and were waiting for the verdict.

'I've got the angle Daz... I'm going to channel dad's Guyanese heritage, but with my own unique twist. It's like Indian, but with more fruit. And Guyanese chillies are the best in the world.'

'You're dad can't cook to save his life.'

'They don't need to know that.'

'But you don't even like spicy food.'

'I can't go on there and do fish fingers can I?'



Darren was more interested in cultivating publicity opportunities through connections on Pebbletank. During the peak of the pandemic, he searched for profiles aligned to worthy causes in the hope that Leon could be seen thanking the NHS and/or key workers in person, once all the restrictions were lifted. He sprinkled likes liberally and followed any relevant accounts that looked particularly flamboyant or media-friendly. The introduction of the deep dive option was timed perfectly. The concept almost felt like a natural evolution from household bubbles. An encouragement to reach out in a controlled way, to gradually get life back to normal, to re-grow a network, in a world where mass gatherings and overseas travel had become stigmatized. An exploration of inner space, in which the zeitgeist was more about greater understanding of each other rather than a need to be seen in far flung locations. The antithesis of those self-satisfied global citizen posts: the adventurers in red cagoules pointing at waterfalls in Iceland, the eulogies about street art in Valparaiso, the street food close-ups from whichever other location is on today's supposed bucket list of cool.

No wonder the virus spread like wildfire. Darren wanted Leon to appear *down with the people* while the moment was ripe. He set notifications for deep dive meet-up invites from his carefully honed selection of contacts and waited for a suitable opening to arise.

When @flo.desoozer was the first account to oblige, Darren was delighted. Florence de Souza appeared the ideal character to link up with. Her posts, from the Cheshire hospital where she worked, were always vibrant and uplifting. She would focus on the rainbows and acts of kindness, assuming everyone was aware of the reality of the nightmare and didn't need reminding. Flo's smile leapt off the screen. In a typical post she would be in the staff room at the end of a shift, giving thumbs up, with a caption pronouncing 'We got this!' or some such. Her meet-up invitation was described as 'Open the new wing', followed by a smiley. A hospital re-development sounded absolutely perfect. Darren imagined Leon shaking hands with local VIPs, rallying the spirits of sick children, spreading a message of renewed hope, etc... and responded instantly. Acting the role of Leon, he had commented on Flo's posts a few times with generic messages of support. Seeds Darren hoped would take root, despite Leon's misgivings. 'They don't look any more stretched than normal to me. Isn't the NHS always overloaded? You seriously think they're going to let me open a new part of it? Isn't that what Prince Edward's for?' Darren ignored him and was soon to be triumphant, later that afternoon.

'Yes mate! That Flo accepted. She wants you to go there, to Cheshire!'

'Cheshire? Is that anywhere near Manchester?' Leon was thinking ahead to the nightlife.

'I dunno, maybe. She's in a place called Winsford. It looks kind-of quiet.' Darren was already on StreetView.

Leon stared at Darren with disdain. 'Are you sure about this Dazza?'

'Yeah, this could go viral. She looks fun.'

Darren took to discussing the detail, ghost-writing Leon's messages to Flo.

'Hi Flo, really stoked you want me to do your opening.'

'Leon!! OMG so cool you want to come. U seen the pictures yeh... u know what this is really about?'

'Yeah, yeah... buzzin.'

'OK. If ur sure.'

Flo sent the address, the date was set for April 23rd.

'That must be her home address,' asked Leon a while later once his denial wore off. 'Why are we going to her house?'

'I guess we need to go with her, to get into the hospital,' replied Darren, pleased that his plan was falling into place. 'What's the worst that can happen?'

Leon let the question float and returned to his headset, to compile another playlist. He had a regular slot on local community radio and needed a new mix. He would worry about his civic duties in Winsford, Cheshire nearer the time.



On the appointed day, Darren steered Leon's second-hand Range Rover into the red-brick residential heartlands of Winsford, parking on the pavement outside Flo de Souza's house at eleven, exactly as arranged. They stayed in a nearby pub the night before and were both regretting their decision to pack a bottle of tequila

amongst their smalls. Flo greeted them like long lost orphans and shepherded them into her hall, flush with an aroma of fresh paint and sealant that added piquant notes to their mutual hangover. Through a gap in the kitchen doorway, Leon spied rows of glasses and bottles of pink prosecco. The after-party he guessed, hopefully they'd be on the road by then.

'Oh my God, Leon, amazing to see you. My best friend remembers you from the telly.'

'Nice, nice. So you didn't watch it then?

'Nah... I didn't watch much in those days, to tell you the truth. My friend Claire says you were the bee's knees though.'

'Nice, nice... by the way, this is Darren, he's like my wingman.' Darren gave a mini salute. He had briefed Leon thoroughly on all previous correspondence, to manage his expectations about the levels of adulation to expect. Each of them had different pre-conceived ideas about how many people were likely to know who Leon actually was.

You What? was like a kids' version of The Tube. It featured guests that would scare the living daylights out of Blue Peter-watching households. Leon was maverick in his presenting style, known for puncturing the egos of any performers that took themselves too seriously. He was knowledgeable about music, had wide-ranging taste and contributed significantly to *You What's* booking policy. Fans of the show loved him and tears were shed at his fall from grace. But it was a long time ago and his name was mostly forgotten now among the general public. Flo had certainly showed no sign of recognising Leon in response to the

initial feelers Darren put out on Pebbletank. However, after a few days she re-posted one of his comments and a small surge of new followers appeared, seemingly from Flo's own circle. An expansion of concentric ripples, exactly as planned, presumably thanks to excited interventions from Claire. Darren followed all the new connections back. When the deep dive request was landed he was surprised there wasn't more discussion about the mechanics of the day. Perhaps some confirmation of Leon's full name – he assumed there should be a plaque to commemorate the occasion, erected on a corridor wall. But Flo just seemed content with address and arrival time. Having made the effort to get there, Leon was keen to get things moving.

'Flo, lovely Flo... I am so honoured to be opening the new wing. Tell me... what time are we setting off? Will the press be there, do you think? Any local TV or radio?'

Flo erupted into a laugh that shook the parquet floor. Between hysterics she tried to set Leon straight. Her lilting Caribbean tone failed to ease the blow of her words.

'TV? Nooo Leon. There won't be no TV. Not for my patio.' Her laughter died down, seeing she was alone in merriment.

'Your patio?' said Leon, looking aghast. He turned towards Darren, who was wilting visibly like a salted snail. Leon mouthed the word 'patio' again in his direction.

'Patio?' Darren completed the circle. 'What do you mean *patio*. You said *wing*, I thought you meant hospital wing... a new children's ward or something?'

'Oh sweetie... I asked you... you saw the pictures yeah? You saw the plans? I posted them online.'

'I thought you meant the pictures of where you work. You're always in uniform and in the office, or whatever you call it. I thought you meant there.'

'Yes, but when I posted the meet-up I added a video of me telling all about it... I said to scroll across, to see the building work, the before and after. Calling it the new wing was just my little joke.'

Darren looked bereft. No wonder some of the Pebbletank comments expressed such surprise about Leon's attendance. He rarely had sound on, so missed Flo's verbal explanation completely. He thought it was just a regular post and hadn't bothered checking the additional photos. Leon placed an arm around his shoulder and moved him towards the door. 'Excuse us for a minute please Flo. Darren, can I have a word?' They stepped back outside onto Flo's front path, then sideways onto the lawn to avoid being heard with the front door on the latch. Overnight rain still dripped from the shrubs and a cold dampness seeped from the ground into their leather soles. Leon was whispering urgently.

'What the fuck Daz! I thought we were opening part of a hospital, not an area of paving slabs!'

'Me too, that's what I...'

'You idiot. You fucking idiot. We've come all this way for nothing. What are we going to do now?'

Darren was thinking on his feet. 'It's still good publicity. It'll make a great post... shows you don't mind a laugh and that.'

'I swear I'm going to...' Leon was shaking his right index finger directly in Darren's face but realised his anger had nowhere to go. The damage was done, if he made an exit now, the impression would be disastrous. He had to go along with it. He allowed himself one more whispered outburst... 'I judge you Darren, just know that... I judge you,' before tapping the door open again.

'Hi Flo, it's only us... we just needed to check our schedule for tomorrow... can we come back in?'

'Sure boys. Everything OK? You still on for this? I feel really bad if this isn't what you expected.'

'No, no... we're all good. Everything's cushty.'

'OK boys. Do you want to take your shoes off? I've got new carpets in the lounge as well. Come through, we can have a chat.'



Florence de Souza was born in Martinique in 1962. At the age of twenty, she migrated to England with her new husband, accompanied by his treasured alto saxophone. Henri was an accomplished player and soon fell in with a group of like-minded musicians, ultimately forming a calypso jazz band called Diamond Rocks that became a regular fixture in pubs and clubs of the area. In the early days Flo joined Diamond Rocks as a singer, but she quickly came to hate the smoky bar-room culture and began making excuses. Henri didn't mind, other candidate chanteuses were queuing up and he was happy to give them a go. Meanwhile he was building a successful business in restoring and selling antique furniture, his skill with the keys of a saxophone matched by his dextrous

carpentry and French polishing. His finesse in sealing a deal also became legendary.

As the reputation of Diamond Rocks for delivering a killer set became more widespread, the number of late night absences increased accordingly. Flo had begun a career in nursing and assumed an irregular working pattern of her own, but she was usually waiting alone in bed when Henri returned from a gig. On the first occasion that he brushed her aside, turning his back when offered the hand of arousal, Flo knew for sure he was being unfaithful. She could sense it and the same hand was never offered again. She was relieved that she no longer felt obliged to have intercourse with a man who was ever more uncaring and selfish. If he could turn his back, so could she. From that point on, Henri told himself he was also glad, vindicated for seeking pleasures elsewhere. His wife's body was beginning to leave him cold, she was putting on too much weight for his liking. He was tired of going through the motions with her and had the attention of younger models in the backing group to keep himself occupied. However, his adulterous advances did not always bear fruit.

They had enjoyed about two years of harmonious marriage before the ground shifted. Once Henri began to stray, Flo quickly became resigned to her situation. After all, it had been foretold by her mother. She found peace in herself but, before long, also found it hard to sleep while Henri was still out. She knew the ritual din of his homecoming would eventually emanate from below. A banging door, followed immediately by footsteps on the stairs, was a good sign. He was tired, sexually fulfilled and ready for bed. If he lingered awhile and the clink of glassware could be heard, he was hitting the rum to compensate for being

rejected. Rage inflamed by alcohol, and with other senses dimmed, he sometimes took to punching Flo through the duvet. He would kneel on his side of the bed and bear down on her, fists together like a blacksmith. To start with she fought back, but this enraged him more and she ended up with marks on her face too hard to hide. She concluded that by curling into a ball and staying quiet he would soon get bored and her uniform would cover the bruises. No-one needed to know. Henri's outbursts were intermittent, but frequent enough to for her to live in permanent fear. They never spoke about it but she guessed the upsurge in his controlling behaviour was his twisted way of handling the facts internally. By questioning everything she did, by criticising her appearance, she became the blameworthy victim. 'You're back late?' irrespective of her job's demands, on any occasion he was home first. 'Why don't you wear that dress for me?' if she ever planned an outing with girlfriends. Everything she did was interpreted as betrayal and her existence was worn down into a path of least resistance.

Flo raised three children virtually alone and threw all remaining energy into her healthcare work. She gave thanks when her hours kept her away from the firing line, but the moments of terror were never far away. The key rattling in the door. The sound still chilled her to this day, even though in latter years Henri's failing health weakened his powers. When he died of a heart attack in 2020 Flo breathed one gigantic sigh of relief. At the wake she opened up to Claire for the first time. 'I can get my life back on track now babe. The bad days are over. You know all those couples who have a great first ten years, then it all goes to hell in a handcart... well, I'm doing it the other way round, ha ha! My best years are ahead

and I won't be looking back. You know... he actually pushed me down the stairs once.'

Claire silently put her hand on Flo's shoulder, unable to process how anyone could come to terms with such abuse.

'Flo... hope you don't mind me asking, but... did you kill him?'

Flo looked calmly back at her friend, unfazed by the question. 'No dearie, I did not.' The lilt on the 'I' left some room for doubt as to exactly what happened though. Countless misdemeanours may have been shrouded in the statistics of 2020 to 2021. Henri's cause of death would forever be recorded as myocardial infarction; speculation about what provoked it never took hold. It was a good time to bury bad news.



Henri's death delivered Flo a windfall. His conduct may have become unconscionable at home but this did not spill over into business misdeeds. There was a lot of money in the bank. Their sons had moved away long ago, suspecting the abusive nature of their parents' relationship but never having to face it themselves. Flo assured them she was OK and that confronting him would only make matters worse for her. None of the family had any interest in taking over the business so it was sold, the proceeds becoming part of the estate. A year of legal wrangling later, the dust finally settled.

'I dread to think how long it would've been, if there'd been any dispute in the family,' Flo now found herself saying to Leon Hastings and his helper Darren, as

they sat in the lounge nursing mugs of tea like mystics with crystal balls. She had given them a redacted version of her life story, skirting around the darkest parts.

'What happened to the saxophone?' asked Leon, trying to show he was listening.

'Oh, that's somewhere safe babe.' Flo stared into her tea.

The money was spent revamping the family home and transforming the garden, in anticipation of Flo's imminent retirement. A conservatory extension now led out from the kitchen to a kidney-shaped outdoor living area lavishly stocked with furniture and heaters, all surrounded by authentic dry-stone wall and floodlights. Expensive herbaceous perennials sat in specially curated manure, poised for warmer weather to begin. The whole was festooned in bunting for the occasion, with ribbon tied across the conservatory door, as Flo waited for friends to arrive to celebrate the dawn of her new life. Initially she was overjoyed to discover a minor TV star was game enough to join the fun, but was now starting to wish he had read the small print. She certainly did not expect to be fielding questions about the true impact of the virus from someone who ought to know better.

'So the last couple of years were really bad then?' Leon asked her, flimsily.

'Yes Leon, they were.'

'Thing is, the papers have told so many lies about me, I don't trust anything they say.'

Flo had prayed she would never come face to face with a conspiracy theorist, for fear of losing her temper. Her own specialism was paediatrics but she'd seen enough on the front line in intensive care to hold the doubters in utter contempt. She'd witnessed enough poor souls suffocated to death by their own tissue, while

loved ones sat stranded at home, pleading for updates. Covid deniers were not welcome and Leon's words had her twitching at the trigger.

'I always wondered what these idiots thought.' Flo stopped short of saying 'idiots like you', she was giving Leon the benefit of the doubt for now. He was treading on thin ice though. 'What do these conspiracy idiots think anyone had to gain by pretending the pandemic was real? They are such fools. This world is messed-up, for sure... I know that better than anyone. But to think there could be some huge government-led deception, with people pretending to die, with us NHS staff all lying about it... and in the meantime so many people losing their jobs. Damn fools, they got no brain.'

Leon and Darren looked at each other sheepishly. They didn't seriously want to challenge Flo's words, but had discussed many times about the pointlessness of masks and how the pubs should have stayed open, although they'd never admit it.

'You been jabbed right?' Flo stared at them fiercely.

'Yes' came the answer from both. They chose not to add that they'd only done so because it was a mandatory requirement for entering MasterChef.

'Good. Don't get me started on those anti-vax fools. They must be wishing for small pox to return, to wipe out their children. They talk about brain-washing! They accuse the government of *brain-washing* the people to get jabbed. *Why would they do that?!* Every damn government in the world as well. As if they could plan all that and not screw it up. They can't even run their countries on a good day. I bet those fool anti-vax women are not so worried about pumping up

their faces with lip filler. Or rubbing their gums with shit they buy from random strangers, behind the toilets at a festival. And they dare talk about brain-washing. Fools.'

Darren was conscious that the whole purpose of them being there was to show support. He tried to bring the atmosphere back.

'You've really done an incredible job Flo. You and your mates. Me and Leon, we were out there clapping in the early days, with the saucepans and that. It feels such a long time ago now eh?'

'You're not kidding.' Flo snapped back. 'Everyone seems to think its over. But we still got cases. And there's so much catching-up to do. Folks that didn't follow up on cancers or other diseases that are much worse now than if they'd been treated at the time.'

'What you do is amazing. That's why we followed you. We wanted to come, to show how grateful we are.'

As Darren spoke, Leon did his best to smile in agreement. Flo was gradually recovering her humour. Her instincts were to doubt their sincerity yet here they were, sitting on her new sofa, their shoes in the hall, clutching her Denby china.

'Do you boys want something stronger?' Her tea was finished.

'It's never too soon' chirped Darren, glad that the storm was dying down. 'So, Flo... what's the plan for today?'

'Good question. Let me just get some drinks.' At that moment the doorbell rang.

'Ooooh that'll be Claire with the balloons.' Flo rocked herself forward, out of her cavernous armchair and scurried to the door doing a child's impression of a steam

train. Leon and Darren sat marking time, tapping their fingers nervously on their thighs as if waiting for the dentist. Eventually her voice called out. 'Hellooo. Leon, Darren, sweeties. Can you give me a hand?'

The hall was half-filled with peach and silver coloured balloons, with Flo stranded somewhere behind them. 'Can you help me move these next door babes?' Together they managed to squeeze the inflatables through the kitchen and into the conservatory.

'Now, let's see about the drinkies. Wine OK?'

'Yes, anything is fine' replied Darren, hoping to sound accommodating, when actually feeling so desperate that his words could be taken quite literally. The hair of the dog was very much needed.

Leon was whispering at him again. 'I hope she's not expecting us to do the catering as well, Daz.'

'You're the one who wants to be on MasterChef mate.'

Leon was about to point threateningly at him again when Flo returned with the glasses.

'So boys. The plan is this. People will start arriving at two. It's all very informal and I asked them to bring a bottle, so we won't run out of booze. Not with *my* friends we won't!' Flo's laugh resounded again. 'The food will get here soon as well. I should've asked... you got any dietary requirements?'

'Leon can't eat wheat. He's a celeriac.' Flo peered at Darren quizzically before Leon put him right.

'It's *coeliac* you plank. God Darren, why did I hire you? It's OK Flo, I doubt I'll eat much anyway, to be fair.'

'Don't worry, there'll be something gluten-free.' Flo's humour now appeared fully restored. 'I'll lay it out here, people will just help themselves. Would you mind just... mingling? I've told them all you're coming, they've seen your photo.'

'Don't they, er... oh. Yeah, course, that's fine.' Leon looked crestfallen that they needed a photo. Darren threw him a smirk.

'We'll do the honours with the ribbon quite early, before everyone gets too drunk. Say about four? Then we can spread outside. Claire's Graham is doing fireworks later. Fingers crossed it stays dry. Will you cut the ribbon and say a few words?'

'Yeah that's fine Flo. I'll put my thinking cap on.'

'Can I mingle too?' asked Darren.

'Yes of course babe. You mingle too. And take lots of photos.'

'But no more of these,' added Leon tapping Darren's glass. 'Don't forget you're driving us home, you wally.'



The influx of guests commenced promptly from two o'clock. This was not an event for affected lateness. Flo was a much loved friend and colleague and everyone was determined to make the day successful. From the rare occasions she was able to socialise when Henri was alive, her circle knew she could party. The majority were co-workers from the hospital and today felt like an appropriate time to slip the dogs and make merry.

Leon loitered in the hall. He had permission to put his shoes back on, being keen not to meet and greet in socks alone. Darren was not required to participate in Leon's schmoozing, so mostly sat on the stairs looking at his phone, waiting for photo opportunities. Flo was on hand to make the introductions.

'Hi Teresa babe! Come here. So happy you could come.'

Teresa – as with all other recipients of the welcome – responded in kind, with emphatic hugs and kisses, all hesitation cast aside. No more of that Tudor dance everyone had adopted in trying to establish, via the medium of upper body movement, who was willing to embrace and who was not for fear of transmission. It was, at last, an appropriate time and the outpouring of affection for Flo had a momentum of its own.

'And Trees... here he is. Here's Leon our star host for the day.' Flo indicated his presence with both hands splayed apart, like an orchestral conductor. She was starting to believe in his celebrity status. Leon just kept things simple, there was no need to play up to the role, just keep pressing the flesh and get the photos.

'Hi Teresa. Very nice to meet you. Great you could come.' As Leon spoke, Flo's smile was bursting at the seams, elated to have a co-host obedient to her wishes. His greetings were largely met with an air of wide-eyed amusement, rather than any star-struck deference.

When Claire and Graham arrived, the air unexpectedly became charged. Leon performed his duties as before and tried to make eye contact. But Graham just gave a perfunctory nod and disappeared towards the kitchen, telling Flo he was checking the fireworks. Claire let her hand linger. She too had clearly been on

the wine. Her head turned slightly as she said hello, in the manner of a wink without the eye closure, making her blonde bob sway. Claire was younger than Flo, more like Leon's own age, and her eyes zoned-in on his like a magnet. She leaned towards him, still holding hands.

'It's fantastic to meet you in real life Leon. It's... unreal.' The hall was filling up and Claire steered Leon towards a gap in the corner, under the stairs. 'I'd love to have some time with you to myself later. I know my way around Flo's house you know, it's quite... roomy.'

Leon knew the ropes, his old instincts kicked in. He may have been a cheeky chappie in his heyday but flirting with the fans was never his style.

'Nice, nice... Awesome to meet you Claire, awesome. Good to meet a real *You What?* fan. Hopefully this will be a great occasion for Flo, she's great isn't she? I really should go find her.' He squeezed Claire on the elbow and gave her a big smile, while extricating his hand. 'Need to get ready for the ribbon thing, you know. Catch you later.' Leon weaved his way between the bodies to the kitchen, struggling to process what just happened. A throwback to his days of fame. He guessed it was par for the course if his career really was going to resurface. The spoils of war. He made a mental note to ask Darren about the publicity mileage of never having molested an audience member.

Leon found Flo in the conservatory holding court with a small group balancing quiche slices, sandwiches and crumbed morsels of unspecified meat product on paper plates. Elbows were in, with space now at a premium. He tapped her on the arm.

'Flo, shall I cut the ribbon now? It's getting crowded yeah?'

'OK babe. Go for it. Everyone's mostly here. Scissors are over there, by the weedkiller.'

Once Leon had dragged Darren into position to capture the moment for posterity, Flo set forth above the hubbub. 'Listen up. Listen up everyone. Oh My Godddd! I cannot believe so many people are here, thank all you babes so much for coming. It's time! It's time! As you know we have a very special guest with us today to perform the ceremony. Can I ask you all to... Give. It. Up. For... the Real... Leon! Hastings!' Boozy cheers echoed through the house as Leon stepped forward, scissors held behind his back.

'Thank you Flo, nice, nice.' He waved down the lingering hoo-hah. 'I'd just like to say a big thank you to Florence for inviting me here today. It is an honour and privilege to be opening, um... the new wing!' The gathering cheered again, complicit in the in-joke, unaware that the speaker himself was only there by mistake. 'Seriously folks, since I've been connected to Flo on Pebbletank it's been inspirational to witness how she, and all of you, have managed over the last couple of years. I can only imagine how tough it's been. I really wanted to be here today, to show my support. Flo's a great lady and deserves to have *much* great times here, in this beautiful house. So, without any further ado... I'm delighted to name this patio... OPEN!' He snipped the ribbon at the second attempt and stumbled outside, propelled by a minor surge as the crowd spilled out from the conservatory. The afternoon sun pitched on the stonework and rays of warmth, both liquid and solar, suffused the throng.



Later, Leon was talking with Flo again, keen to know more about Diamond Rocks. Her rum punch was circulating nicely.

'Did they ever record anything?'

'No, no. But they were good babe, to tell you the truth. It wasn't all calypso and coconuts. We... I mean, they... played all different stuff with a Caribbean influence. Like, all the way from Harry Belafonte to Alton Ellis.'

'Alton Ellis?! Oh man. I put some of his songs on my latest playlist. It's on my phone, I must do it on the radio. I love him.'

'Oh babe, we can do better than that... put it on now!' She raised her glass in the air, then went looking for Graham. 'Graham babe, show me how to get the music going out here.' Graham had assumed the role of roadie for the day. He showed her again how to connect devices to the outdoor sound system. 'Boy it's a good job we got all the neighbours round so they can't complain,' she called out, to a smattering of distant consent. 'Crank it up boy!'

Leon's mix rose from the stonework and the patio became a dancefloor. The sequence eventually came round to one particular song, one of the Alton Ellis standards that Flo remembered most strongly from the Diamond Rocks days: Girl I've Got a Date. When its turn came during a live performance, Henri would always take the vocals. As the years went by, his intensity became more pronounced as he felt the words more strongly, as a declaration of his manhood. When Flo heard it breaking across her garden she was stirred into action.

'Start this one again. Start it again. I'm gonna reclaim this mother.' The song was restarted and Flo's voice rose to the heavens. Left fist raised aloft, right hand

posed on hip, she grooved around belting out her own lyrics, relishing the irony of reversed fortunes.

Boy I've got a date

And I mean just, I can't stay late, whoa ooh

No, I've been warning you, boy

No, no, no, boy, you just can't be my man

Take this from me

I'm just free, as free as the bee

Leon gazed at her in wonder. One of the best performances he had ever witnessed. He rushed to congratulate her but the next song, Rocksteady, kicked-in getting his own feet moving. This time they danced together, crooning in harmony as the crowd formed a circle, enraptured. Their rendition was far better than could reasonably be expected given the levels of inebriation. Graham was recording the action on his camera but Darren was nowhere to be seen.

Once exhaustion and Flo's dodgy back took centre stage, they retreated to the kitchen, panting. Leon looked around, taking in the designer layout and seductive appliances properly for the first time.

'This is really nice Flo. I could do some damage in here. Bash out the old Guyana pepperpot. Do some Leon magic with my tiger teeth chillies.'

'I'll give you a cook-off any time boy. You don't know who you're mixing with.'

'You just wait and see what happens, Flo, you just wait.' Leon was already picturing himself lifting the MasterChef trophy.

The sound of the doorbell cut through their mirth and Flo broke off to attend. Staring at her from the porch was a face recognised, but met for the first time.

'Eddie, Eddie... so glad you could make it!' Flo was topping up her lipstick with such regularity that the party had echoes of a Tarantino bloodbath. The latest victim was Edwige Hoeks, one of Flo's recent connections from Pebbletank. 'You've come all this way just to see me!'

'So sorry I'm late. The train from London broke down.'

'Oh nooo babe. You poor thing. I got to tell you... we already started.' Flo was wobbling slightly but was genuinely thrilled Edwige had made the effort to come. They had found each other as a consequence of Flo searching for the same kind of collectables Edwige happened to trade online. No transactions ensued, but they started swapping messages with abandon. In a short space of time Flo felt she trusted Edwige more than any other human being she'd ever met and instantly felt ashamed for being so tiddly on their first meeting.

'You've got some catching up to do Eddie.' Flo led her to the punch barrel, but Edwige was insistent on going straight outside.

'Let me see, let me see. I want to see the handiwork of your lovely Polish fellow.' Flo had talked in glowing terms about the person responsible for her construction work. 'He's from Worcester you know, it's a long way to travel but apparently he goes all over the country. He came highly recommended. His name is Marek, but he's completely English.' Edwige had been rather taken by Flo's descriptions of the work in progress and was itching to see the results. Once positioned on the paving, she tapped the ground joyously with her cane.

'And he took care of the beast for you?' Edwige had touching streaks of a French accent. 'He' was 'Eee', 'the' was 'zuh', somehow making her sound even more conspiratorial.

'Yes Eddie, he did, to tell you the truth.' Flo winked and glanced down at the slabs.

'Good, good. What every woman needs. A trustworthy builder.'

Leon still tagged along and observed this conversation with some alarm. Wheels started to turn in his mind but, before any sense took shape, a crackle of explosives sprang to life. The fireworks. Graham had communed with commercial display providers to outstanding effect. The whole thing ran on a timer and he was back behind the camera as his kaleidoscope of missiles shook the sky. Nearby residents would later describe it as the best show the town had seen in years. Leon called out for Darren across the craning necks, 'Daz, Daz... are you getting it?' but his voice was drowned out.

Once the final glittering flakes had fallen into darkness, a silence also fell, reminding Leon about his phone. He went inside to retrieve it, pressed play on the stuff previously loaded on the console and restored the sounds of revelry. This gave him a frisson of nostalgia: to control a dancefloor again, as he used to in days gone by. But there was no time for reflection, he wanted to leave and went looking for Darren, once more calling out his name. On reaching the hall, he found his wingman trotting down the stairs towards him. Leon sensed another movement above and he caught a glimpse of Claire on the landing, adjusting her blouse before she shrunk back into the shadows. Not for the first time, Leon was speechless at the idiocy. Darren continued his trajectory, seeking to remove

himself from the scene, but Leon caught up with him by the kitchen sink, water glass in hand.

'You have to be kidding me?'

'Well, you did tell me to keep out of the way. Don't worry, we kept it ninja, there was no-one else upstairs.'

'You were supposed to be filming the fireworks.'

'Claire said not to worry, she knew someone else would do a good job.'

'Yes. Her fucking husband, that's who. While you were doing a job on his wife.'

'They're not really still...'

'I don't fucking care what they are. You're in Flo's house! You set this whole thing up, then while I'm outside like an asshole, trying my best to be master of fucking ceremonies, you're upstairs, shagging her best friend in her own bedroom!'

'Er... actually it was the walk-in wardrobe. You should see it... '

'Not another word! We're getting out of here, let's just hope no-one did see you.'

Leon went looking for Flo once again. She was sitting on the wall, looking out across the floodlit lawn with Edwige by her side, deep in conversation. He had to stand in front of her to gain her attention.

'Flo, lovely Flo. I'm really sorry but we've got to get going now. Darren's got a long drive.' He had considered staying over for another night, to avoid such a late drive back to London, but any sympathy he felt for his idiot friend had vapourised on the staircase. They needed to get away as quickly as possible. Leon couldn't decide what he was more angry about: Darren's inability to keep his knob under wraps or the fact that their journey looked like being a complete waste of effort.

Flo looked at him with tired eyes. 'Oh babes. You leaving me?'

'Yes, sorry Flo. Listen, this has been an absolute blast. You're the best dance partner I've ever had. This was much more fun than opening a children's ward. Sorry about... well, you know. I'll post all about you once I get home.'

'Oh babes. Don't worry about none of that. I've had a banging time.' She put an arm round Edwige for support.

'That's great Flo. That's the most important thing.' Leon glanced around nervously, hoping not to see Graham. Fortunately, since the fireworks ended, he had joined a splinter group at the bottom of the garden in deep discussion about pond liner.

Leon turned back towards the house. Flo got to her feet and grabbed his arm, partly for support and partly to provide an escort.

'Can I ask you something Flo?' said Leon as they staggered along.

'Sure, of course you can. Anything babes.'

'Sorry, but I couldn't help hearing you and Eddie earlier. She mentioned something about a beast... I'm just wondering who the beast was?'

'You mean... *what* was the beast. I ended up hating that thing. That was the name Henri gave to his damn saxophone. The only thing he really cared about in the whole world. I mean... he was a really good player, he was, to tell you the truth. You can't take that away from him. But all he cared about was that damn beast. He looked after it more than he ever did me.'

'You said it was somewhere safe.'

'Oh it's safe babe, real safe. The builder man took care of it. It's lying in its case, surrounded by cement, round about underneath where we did Rocksteady. That was cool babe. You're a good singer yourself, you should be on TV.' Flo's laughter filled the house again.

'Well, like I said Flo... you just wait and see what happens.'

Leon's capacity for pleasant small talk was practically gone. He felt sad at the thought of not seeing Flo again, but it really, really was time to go. Darren was skulking in the hall. They said their final goodbyes and escaped. Now standing on the bottom step, Claire raised a glass and grinned at both of them as they turned towards the front door for the last time. Darren gave her a wave before Leon dragged him away, back to the Range Rover, in the manner of a citizen's arrest.

'Have you got everything?' Leon had the presence of mind for one last check, to make sure they hadn't left anything behind. Darren patted his pockets. 'Yep, phone, keys, wallet. Everything else is still in the boot. Oh shit.'

'Oh for Christ's sake, what have you lost?'

'Nothing.' Darren had key in hand, looking down at the car door. 'But look at this.' Leon joined him on the driver side. He had failed to appreciate in the morning just how much they were blocking the pavement. Flo's new fencing cast a shadow, obscuring the illumination from her garden, but the street lights were sufficient to reveal a message gouged into the metallic grey paintwork, presumably by an irate neighbour.

DON'T PARK HERE LONDON WANKERS

LOVE BONO he he

'Jeez. I bet it was even someone at the party. Drank Flo's rum, then decided to dis us. Northern assholes.' Leon was seething now, looking around to see if anyone had come to watch. But the street was deserted, it was past midnight.

'Come on Leon, let's get home.'

'What a complete and total cluster-fuck.' Leon bowed his head and retreated to the passenger seat, vowing revenge on unseen enemies.



Darren dropped Leon back at his flat at 3.30 am, then took himself home, weighing up the possibilities of seeing Claire again. They didn't speak for the whole journey. When Leon surfaced the next day he went straight to his playlists. He tried googling Diamond Rocks to no avail. But he beefed up his selection with more of the artists Flo had talked about and started planning what to say on his next show, to do it all justice. He deliberately ignored his phone for as long as he could. When he finally picked it up, there were six missed calls from Darren and a number of messages. He instantly tossed it aside. Two hours later, he looked again, to see more of the same. This time, one segment of text caught his eye, from the notifications at the top of the screen. A string of characters that mystifyingly included the term '30k'. Reluctantly he listened to the latest voice message Darren had left on WhatsApp.

'Leon, Leon, pleeease pick up. You're up to 30k followers. The video has gone mental.'

As things turned out, far from Claire bearing any grudge for Leon blowing her out, she had actively sought the footage from the camera of her spouse and

posted the videos on her Pebbletank feed at the earliest opportunity. She prompted Darren to look and he shared it straight away on Leon's feed, along with photos of Flo and some 'thank the NHS' soundbites.

'I did make her quite, er... happy, boss. Turned out well all round. Ended up with much better quality reels than any crap I could've captured,' Darren would later explain.

The one video that went especially viral was Flo and Leon's rendition of Rocksteady. It triggered a minor tremor of memes and downloads of the song from streaming platforms showed a considerable spike.

'See, you should've never doubted me. I told you it was a good idea,' crowed Darren once Leon started talking to him again.

'You've got me there Daz. I must agree, that was one awesome deep dive. To tell you the truth.' Leon was singing to himself as he chopped some chillies, rehearsing for his next step back up the ladder.

four

Edwige & Flo

Saturday April 24th

When Leon and Darren left the party, Flo watched them to their car, then sank back inside content and incredulous. She wondered what Leon had in store, this thing she should wait and see. Claire put an arm around her and kissed her cheek. 'Well... how unreal was that! You having a lovely time Floey?' Claire felt sure their friendship was so well shaped by the waves that her impulsive opportunism would be forgiven, whether or not she confessed her sins at a later date. She also felt sad that Flo would be retiring soon.

'Yes babe. What about you? I haven't really seen...'

'Oh I've been enjoying myself thoroughly.' Claire cut in before Flo could finish her question. 'And the night is young. I'm going to grab me some punch.' Flo saw her later, fixated on her phone, and wondered why her main party girl had not been more visible throughout the afternoon. Nevertheless, Flo's immediate concern was rescuing Edwige from the garden.

'Eddie, Eddie, we must get you into the warm.'

'It's my hip...my arthritis... just starting to seize up a little.' With Flo's help and the cane for balance, Edwige got to her feet. The temperature had dropped sharply since sundown and dew was falling, along with the number of revellers.

'Lets get you inside babe.'

With Edwige safely ensconced in the living room, Flo presided over the dying embers. By the time Graham and Claire confirmed themselves as the final

stragglers and Flo had waved from the front step for the last time, Edwige was fast asleep. Flo swaddled her in a blanket and crawled onto the sofa. Despite the exhaustion, her mind was too active for bed so she settled down to rewind the events of the day and bask in the promise of new memories; good memories to erase bad ones of the past. Furthermore, another adventure lay ahead, in cahoots with the crumpled lady whose nest of hennaed hair bobbed gently as she snored across the room.



Edwige and Flo had become good friends on Pebbletank, or at least, as close to being good friends as possible when the exchange is purely digital. They took to planning a meet-up like conspiring schoolgirls plotting another's downfall. Their paths crossed thanks to Flo's search for old rum signs to hang in her kitchen. Edwige mostly dealt in newly-made vintage chic but had a sideline in antique advertisements. She stocked something that looked ideal, for Rhum Vieux St Nicolas. Their bond was fixed by a mutual honesty that revealed itself over direct messages.

'It looks perfect.'

'It is a lovely image and very rare. But I have to say, the condition is not so great. Gone a bit rusty.' Edwige sent a clearer photo.

'Ohhh. What a shame. I was hoping for something less damaged.'

'Never mind. If I come across anything better I will let you know.'

Flo was struck by this lady's apparent unwillingness to deceive, it wasn't what she was used to. 'That is very kind of you.'

'Not at all, I always aim to please my customers. Mind you... if you ever catch me selling Live Laugh Love, shoot me!'

'Don't worry, I've already got one of those!'

Edwige did not respond straight away, so Flo filled the void. She had already faced down the Live Laugh Love backlash.

'I don't care what people say. It truly is my motto, the snobs can just go and do themselves.'

'Good for you! Can I call you Flo?'

'Yes of course babe.'

Edwige was delighted by the way Flo stuck up for her beliefs despite a prevailing consensus of ridicule, the kind of collective wisdom that erupts from nowhere, leaving well-meaning maxims ripped to shreds. Their messaging flourished from that point, becoming a continual conversation interrupted only by periods of real life. The number of touchpoints of common experience they shared was uncanny and the party provided an opportunity to meet in the flesh. However, it acted merely as a prelude. 'I'm too old and creaky for all that,' complained Edwige at Flo's entreaty to bring her dancing shoes. Flo was just glad she could make it in any form, it was another symbol of new beginnings. They arranged to spend a few days together since Flo had some time off work. Edwige had become so accustomed to closing her shop that she now locked the doors on a whim. She was intrigued learn more about Flo's deep dive.

'Oooh how exciting. Who knows who you might have, plunging in.'

'Steady on girl... No-one's gonna be plunging anywhere! Anyway, I don't have no hot tub.' At the time of the building work, Marek tried to persuade Flo to get one, but she held firm: 'They're just a fad. I'm not going to float around in bacteria like a fool. It's like those fish pedicures, suddenly they were the bee's knees. Where are all those damn garra rufa now?' 'Swimming with the angels, I should think,' came Marek's reply.

'Still, I love the idea of letting other people delve into your life though, to see what they find. You know, maybe when we meet it could be my own deep dive. I could do with someone raking through all my baggage one day. It might help solve a mystery.'

'A mystery... what's that babe?'

'I want to find my daughter.'



Edwige Hoeks began life in Chaudfontaine, a small spa town on the outskirts of Liege. She was the same age as Flo, they both hailed from a French-speaking homeland and both migrated to Britain at around the same time, only Edwige came alone. She came with a calling. She left her native country to study at the Wimbledon School of Art, pursuing a specialism in abstract lithography and collage. She was passionate about creating artworks that channelled the physical power of different materials rendered together in unusual combinations. She won her place with an installation of a beehive composed of fabric she had printed, cellophane and chicken wire. Edwige had to fight against her parents' wishes to make the move but so driven was she, they bowed to her will. Her art was based

on instinct rather than intricate technique and she was thrilled to discover a sympathetic culture of free-thinking within the Wimbledon staff. It felt like everyone was encouraged to follow their natural path, rather than conform to an absolute doctrine. The teachers were inspirational to all points of the compass. One that captured her imagination particularly was a sculptor called Leo Powling, who beguiled her with vivid descriptions of the great works and the essence of genius. 'You must drink from the roots of creativity with every touch,' he would declare, hands clenched as if holding clods of soil. Leo's classes took flights of fancy in which he encouraged his protégés to plough every experience into the moment of artistic expression. 'Your art must embody emotion, not sit there as mere decoration. It must be experienced in your balls, in your gut, in your chakras... not just the eyes,' he pleaded. Edwige would stay on after lessons, to watch him work. Within an hour of her first visit to Leo's houseboat, moored on the Thames at Twickenham, she was in love. This angular figure with darting eyes and musketeer beard, twelve years her senior, became her guiding light.

They became inseparable. Edwige was spellbound by the stories Leo would weave, of artists and musicians orbiting the scene of Eel Pie Island and the free festivals on Wimbledon Common in the late sixties. He had a history of taking students back to his floating boudoir, transported on these seductive tales, but something about the spiky Edwige was different. She bewitched him back. They pledged each other loyalty and she made her home on board The Lady Of. The boat became a hub for their circle of friends, acting as both salon and feeding station, for all manner of sustenance. When he acquired the converted Dutch barge, it was known as The Lady Of Shalott. Leo felt it bad luck to change the

name of a ship, in case its origin spirit was offended, however his loathing of the Pre-Raphaelites meant he could not possibly reside on a vessel bearing those words on the side. One of the few things he ever painted since his own art school days were the wood tar brushstrokes that obscured those last seven letters.

Edwige went on to pass her diplomas and spent a few years trying to crack the professional art world. Leo was happy to support her with his college income, but she also paid her way by running classes of her own, in yoga and meditation. By 1988, having tried for three years to build a reputation for her work, Edwige reluctantly concluded she was not going to become the next Barbara Hepworth and would be better off diverting her energies to a more stable career. She took a job helping out in a nearby gallery called The Grotto. Strictly speaking the gallery fell within the boundaries of Twickenham, but Strawberry Hill sounded more romantic so the owner used this as the address.

Edwige and Leo had nearly ten years as a devoted, loving couple, seamlessly blending their working lives with a continuum of parties, opening shows, gigs and travelling. They never saw the need to marry, both hating the idea of being tied to formal convention. She was, however, religious in her routine with the pill, there were too many experiences to savour together before any children need get in the way. Anyway, as time passed, Leo became increasingly interested in tantra and therefore so fixated on controlling sensations in different parts of his body, the chance of him ejaculating inside her became virtually nil. He also convinced himself that he could visualise the map of pleasure points around Edwige's own body, as if MRI scanning was his new super-power. She tolerated this drift towards metaphysical lovemaking on the grounds that her orgasms

remained Leo's top priority, however his delusional commentary on what she could feel, and where, was starting to annoy her and a disconnection was creeping in. As she learned more about potential side-effects from the elevated hormone levels associated with oral contraceptives, she got scared and stopped taking them – with Leo now so adept at mastering his bodily emissions she decided they could manage without. But a tension had entered her life and, by the end of the eighties, Edwige was beginning to doubt the wisdom of her choices for the first time. Life on The Lady Of was heading towards choppy waters.



Edwige related this account of her life to Flo over several mugs of tea in the morning after the patio event. No mood music was needed, no dramatic chords... Flo got the sense of where things were moving next, given Eddie's reference to a daughter.

'I think I can guess what happened next babe... how long did it take before Leo got you up the spout?'

'That was the trouble. It wasn't Leo. That's when everything really went wrong.'

In the Autumn of 1991 Edwige and Leo were invited to a house party by Anton Cribbins, a wealthy philanthropist and art collector who had just bought one of Leo's larger figurative pieces, without even questioning the asking price. Anton owned a portfolio of desirable real estate, including an expansive Georgian mansion in Oxfordshire, and made a habit of visiting student shows at his favoured art schools around the country, on the lookout for new talent to adorn them. On his most recent visit to Wimbledon he stumbled into Leo's cast bronze

Tightrope Walker III in a corridor, where it had balanced painstakingly for several years, almost making it topple. He had seen it before, but this time the pain caused by direct physical contact with its knobby surface brought the lightness of movement to his attention. He decided on the spot it belonged in his knot garden. Edwige and Leo held a weekend on The Lady Of to celebrate the sale and were later amused to accept Anton's invite. They joined other creators of items Anton had acquired, along with some of his multi-millionaire mates, for lavish consumption of wine and food accompanied by discussion sessions with the artists and tours of the grounds. On retiring to their room on Saturday night Edwige was feeling restive. The group conversation after dinner had come round to her work and lively debate was sparked by her description of thought process and method. Uncharacteristically, Leo made a couple of remarks that came across as sniffy. She knew he didn't mean it but was feeling sufficiently combative not to simply freewheel down towards bedtime.

'Did you have to say that?'

'Say what?'

'Oh please, you know very well. Was it so awful to hear people saying nice things about my knee-prints?' Edwige sometimes finished a work by crawling over it.

'All I said was... *the art of the random*. It wasn't meant as a criticism Eddie, it was tongue in cheek.'

Edwige wanted to poke fun at his philosophy of creative intent but the right words wouldn't come. All she could do was puff out her cheeks at length and stare into middle distance. At once, she was reminded that her father reacted in the same

way, when met by her determination to leave home. That realisation made a small part of her die inside, to think she had hit the same wall of frustration.

'Come on Eddie, you know I've always supported your work.'

'It makes me look like I'm still your pupil.'

'You're over-reacting Eddie, no-one took it like that.'

'Argh... Leo. You always think you know what other people are feeling. Merde alors... is that our own drinks cabinet!?''

In the corner of the antique-filled room stood a cherry wood Art Deco bar cabinet with pretty glass doors, supported on ball and claw feet. Edwige poured a couple of brandies, took a sip, then waltzed them back across the floor towards Leo.

'Do we really need that,' said Leo, looking unamused.

'Oh Leo. It's been ages since we had an old fashioned drunken fuck.'

Leo bristled. He thought their sex life had moved to a higher plane. 'We're not still into those are we?' For Leo the question was rhetorical but Edwige wished it remained open to debate. As he climbed into bed to read, she shrugged and waltzed a few more turns with the glasses, paying deference to the beautiful collection of objects that surrounded them. By the time she lay down beside him, he was dead to the world. Edwige sat up against her pillows, her mind racing. The treasures of the house were speaking to her so she decided to take another tour. Dressed only in oversized t-shirt, she inched herself from the room, grateful for the non-antique nature of the floorboards. A smell of cigar smoke still hung in the air of the landing, blending with vapours of beeswax. Edwige stepped lightly down the stairs, pausing to inspect each painting on the way. As she reached the

hall she detected movement coming from what Anton insisted on calling his drawing room. She moved across to spy through the partially open doorway and gave a small gasp at the sight of Anton, a South African potter called Ruth and one of Anton's men friends entwined nakedly on the floor. Ruth was in her fifties, with a shock of curly grey hair and the contrast between her staid demeanour during the day and her current state of abandon had Edwige dumbstruck. She felt no trace of attraction to the participants individually, but something about the sight of their uninhibited oneness sent her head spinning. From her restricted viewpoint, Edwige was unable to assimilate all their points of physical congress but she could clearly see Anton's hand around his friend's erection. As she strained to see more, the recipient of this embrace caught her eye and addressed her through the gap. 'Care to join us?' All logic told Edwige to retreat back to her room but, overwhelmed by temptation to join the carefree pattern of limbs, she stepped through the door.

Like a living sculpture, the formation of bodies adjusted in turns, to give and receive alternately as stone or wax. Once mutual lust was spent, the foursome drifted back to their allocated beds upstairs. Quaintly, the player who had invited Edwige into the room held her hand as they ascended, like a chivalrous knight of court. They exchanged a few parting whispers.

'I do love your accent... Edwige,' he said, relishing the shape of her name in his mouth.

'You must tell me... I missed it, who *are* you again?'

'Promise you won't laugh?'

'I promise.'

'My name is Roger.'

Edwige could only contain her giggling by pressing a hand to her mouth. 'It was nice to meet you Roger,' she finally managed to exhale, before shaking his hand and slinking back to Leo's side. All intoxication was gone by the time she had carefully arranged herself back into the bedclothes, to reflect upon what just happened. There was no sign of Leo waking, so Edwige allowed herself a frisson of relief – she had taken a risk, but it seemed she would escape any disastrous repercussions. Moreover, she now had a startling and unexpected sexual encounter in the memory bank, for which she forgave herself as being in the moment, one never to be repeated. She tried to clear her mind but all she could see was Roger's square-jawed confidence drawing her into the tryst and his approving eyes as she eventually straddled him. She had a feeling of recognition about his face but couldn't put a finger on why. Tiredness soon arrived, leaving shame and regret waiting in the wings until morning.

Edwige said nothing of this episode to Leo in the immediate aftermath. She was more candid when telling the story to Flo thirty-one years later, albeit with some softening of the detail. In particular, the foursome was reduced in number by two, and Roger had simply been looking for the kitchen, also unable to sleep.

'So... that's how it happened Flo. As you predicted... I became pregnant. And I knew it was Roger's baby. It wasn't one hundred percent guaranteed not to be Leo's... but I knew.'

'Oh my god babe. When did it all come to light?'

'Not that long after Mathilde was born. While I was carrying her, I knew. But afterwards, once I could see her... I *really* knew. And I knew I had to tell Leo.'

'How did that go?'

'He went crazy. He smashed up everything on the boat and threw us out. I tried to reason with him, to explain it was a one-off aberration, that I still loved him. He calmed down in his own time and we managed to find a way forward. I soon fell pregnant again, this time by Leo. Our son Ivan was born the following year, but things were never the same again. The spark went from his art and I gave up completely. I balanced raising the kids with working in the shop and also started teaching art history to adults at the local community college.'

'So he never forgave you?'

'Not really. I think he would have found it easier to accept if my encounter had somehow been more spiritual. He just thought it was tawdry. He said it sounded like a scene from a seventies porn film. Compounded by the fact that the protagonist was the owner of a Formula One team... you know, car racing. I later realised, that's where I recognised him from, I'd seen his picture in the papers.'

'Did Leo ever look for revenge?'

'No, no my dear. We tried to forget that weekend ever happened. I erased Roger completely. I never spoke to him again and he never knew about Mathilde.'



Edwige's visit to Flo was the first part of a planned exchange trip. Edwige did not want to miss the opening of the 'wing' and was keen to give Flo moral support, despite Cheshire being a long way to travel just for one day. The delay on her

journey had therefore been particularly unfortunate. In the afternoon of the following day they caught a train together back to London; destination Strawberry Hill. Edwige's deep dive was unofficial and essentially began the moment Flo's ended. Having changed at Crewe, they were now on the fast train to Euston. On first boarding they discovered a forty-something couple occupying the seats Edwige had reserved. Crisp packets, cake crumbs and empty cocktail cans littered the table and the couple were arguing about whether to have dinner before or after their showing of *Wicked* that evening. Edwige stood in the gangway alongside, resting forward against her cane and coughed.

'Excuse me, but these are my seats, I booked them,' she said waving her phone, the screen of which was now blank.

'Who do you think you are, stuck-up bitch,' scowled the female of the pair, instantly stung into fight mode. Her scarlet face glowered like an indignant macaque. Her partner flexed his shoulders with a sneer, to add 'Can't you sit somewhere else? Them there are free.' No-one was sitting on the other side of the table.

'But I booked these seats. It says... forward facing. I can't go backwards.'

The man sat back defiantly, oblivious to the pina colada stains on his sweatshirt that dented his aura of menace. He crossed his arms and declared 'Fookin ell' before the two squatters noticed Flo, looming by Edwige's side. She only had to look at them to swing the dynamic. 'We'd like our seats please babes.'

The couple blinked first. They theatrically relocated to the vacant space, all protest reduced to a half-hearted chunter. They soon continued to debate their

evening plans, the noise level gradually returning to its original peak, interrupted only by occasional contemptuous glances back at the two ladies who had claimed their territory. Edwige took a tissue from her bag to wipe clean a small portion of table, a place to rest her clasped hands as she continued her story. She tilted her head towards Flo and tried to pitch her voice so that no-one else could hear.

'I tried my best with the kids, you know. I guess motherhood did not come naturally to me, I tried to let them find their own way. I thought they were happy enough, even though we didn't have much money and it was an expensive area to live. Mathilde and Ivan did OK at school and had plenty of friends. They got into the usual scrapes, but nothing... you know, out of the ordinary. It happened when she was eighteen in... what was it... we must be talking 2010. It was then I found out... I guess my kids just didn't like me.'

In 2010 Edwige and family were living in a small terraced house in Teddington, purchased on the proceeds from selling The Lady Of. They decided the combination of small children and a tidal river with powerful currents was too much of a deadly cocktail. Early one summer evening, with the household all together, Edwige tried raising the subject of her mother, who was seriously ill in hospital back in Belgium.

'I really need to go. Please will one of you come with me?'

Leo was unmoved, he didn't want the hassle. 'Why are you suddenly so keen to go? You didn't when your dad was dying, what's so different now?'

Shocked by the lack of empathy, Edwige looked at him through reddening eyes: 'The kids were younger then. I didn't want to put them through it. Anyway, Mum

was still capable and was dealing with it. I spoke to her every day on the phone. Now she's dying herself and there's no-one else.'

Mathilde looked towards her brother, who mirrored her indifference, then spoke for both of them. 'Mum, it's Latitude. We've got tickets, they're like gold-dust.' 'That's nice... so you'd rather support Florence and the Machine than your own mother?'

Mathilde mouthed a Yes at Ivan, making him smirk. She thought it had gone unseen, but she was mistaken.

Edwige had never felt more isolated and hurt. She screamed at them 'You horrible people! How did I raise such selfish pigs?'

'Oh that's rich, coming from you Eddie,' said Leo, rising to the bait. He normally avoided bringing up the past when the kids were around, but their mother had struck a nerve. Grievances that had lain dormant for years bubbled to the surface. 'You're a fine one to talk about gratifying your own needs before thinking about the consequences.'

'How dare you! How dare you talk to me like that, you... bastard! You know Mathilde was a mistake!'

Those words haunted Edwige for the rest of her days. She hadn't intended to question the value of her daughter's existence, she was simply railing at a course of events that had brought division between herself and Leo and wrecked their idealistic way of life. But of course, it was not taken that way. The sense of outrage now passed to Mathilde. She was devastated by her mother's outburst and vowed never to speak to her again. She ran to her room and sat trembling

with fury, unable to muster a single word, ignoring all attempts at conciliation that came to the door. Mathilde had pictured running away many times before, she always felt misunderstood and unloved, her only true sense of belonging and happiness came in the company of friends. She had already thought through the practicalities, so when the time came, she was ready. It was just a matter of waiting for the perfect moment. She bided her time, as shouts and slammed doors rang through the house, but by four in the morning silence had reigned for over an hour. Her bags were packed and she was ready to strike. Certain that a clichéd attempt to tiptoe down the stairs without being heard by anyone in the house was doomed to fail, her chosen method was to bolt. With the element of surprise in her favour, she burst from her room and was through the front door in seconds. As she sped away, the uproar created in the process was irrelevant, she melted into the surrounding labyrinth of residential streets before Ivan or her parents had time to respond. She kept her circle of intimates private, she knew the night buses and had plenty of anonymous floors to sleep on. Mathilde disappeared from the family home like a deer into the forest. Apart from one notorious appearance on TV in 2019, her mother would never see her again.



'Et voilà... she was gone.' Silent tears formed beads amid her caked mascara. As the train careered south, Edwige was now leaning on her friends shoulder, their eyes angled upwards like cartoon lovers on a lakeside bench.

'Oh Eddie, that's so sad. And you've not been able to contact her since?'

'I never really knew what she was up to. She wouldn't tell me anything about her new life. She did send the occasional word through a friend, the occasional email.'

Just enough to keep me at bay. I knew she was alive but we were completely estranged and there was nothing I could do about it. That same year, everything broke down between me and Leo too. Luckily the flat above the shop became available to rent, so I've been there ever since. Ivan stayed in the house with his father. I see them... sometimes.'

'Oh Eddie.' Flo clamped Edwige's hands under one of her own, prompting another ignorant stare from across the table.

Before they reached Euston, Flo tried to give Edwige a break from reliving her heartbreak. She changed the subject back to the events of the previous day and the confusion that led to a minor noughties celebrity cutting a ribbon in her conservatory to raucous applause.

'At the end of the day, he was a darling, to tell you the truth. Once he got over the shock, ha ha, you should've seen his face when he realised what he was there for. It's all so weird, it only happened because of Pebbletank. I never really meant to join but the gang at work, it's all they ever talked about. I've ended up with lots of lovely feedback about my posts, but it's mostly just nonsense about what I'm up to.'

'I just dip in from time to time. I like seeing the random chain of images, maybe only the first two or three, I rarely scroll down further. Most of the accounts I follow are image makers that somehow catch my eye. Sometimes you see a lovely sequence juxtaposed, like a small plateful of amuse-bouche... just enough to refresh the mind. First thing today I had a purple sunbird, the backstreets of Liege and a stone willy from the Secret Museum in Naples.' Her continental tones made 'willy' sound like 'wheelie', making Flo smile.

'A stone willy?'

'Yes, a lovely big marble penis, in close-up on one of the statues. The kind of thing those plundering, idiot, Victorian philistines would have no doubt hidden or destroyed. Destroying art to save public decency, the hypocrites! As for you, Flo, you take some nice photos yourself.'

Flo took satisfaction that her own creative efforts had Edwige's approval, especially since she seemed so passionate. They were however both squarely in the Pebbletank-neutral demographic, a typical trait being the conviction they would unsubscribe in a heartbeat, but for a handful of connections they didn't want to lose.

'I love the sound of a secret museum.' Flo made mental notes to follow up on several treasures Edwige had revealed. 'That's what keeps me on the Tank, to tell you the truth, those little things you'd never find out about. I also like how it lets you filter out some of the rubbish. I'm glad you can switch off all the stupid videos people make of themselves, messing about... and all the damn selfies. If they ever get rid of those filters I will definitely be off babe.'

'All the world's a stage my dear,' said Edwige ruefully, in total accord. 'But, if you don't mind, I'm keeping your stupid performances off my phone. And the music, good grief! Is there a greater distance in the universe than that between one person's desire to add a song to a post, and another person's desire to hear it? Thank goodness you can mute them by default. Overall I like it though, it's the best of a bad bunch. I would never have met my Floey without it! And I love that you can design your own pebble.' Everyone's profile icon had a unique irregular shape.

'Your photos are beautiful Eddie. When you can be bothered to take one. Bet you've got one of those fancy cameras?'

'I have got one, yes. But it just sits in the cupboard, I'm afraid to start learning all its features in case I don't do it right. There aren't enough hours in the day, I just use the phone. Anyway, what's the point, people are only interested in sunsets, not rare artistic treasures.'

'I love the sunsets babe! I'll never tire of them... phone cameras really are amazing. I reckon they completely change the way we see things these days.'

'Yes, yes they do. Oh my, that reminds me of something Leo used to say... *You must learn to see. You need to see so hard that you can count the feathers of a flying bird.* Oh gosh, he used to take everything so seriously. Feel it in your chakras! Hah, I think my chakras are long gone, despite the HRT.'

Edwige ran out of steam for talking and switched her gaze through the window as the gentle curves of Hertfordshire flew by. The comforting swell of rural England soon gave way to retail parks, kebab shops and factory wastelands. The reverse side of the municipal scene, behind the concrete furniture where secrets are swept. As the train came to rest in the guts of Euston, Edwige and Flo were jolted back to the present. Instinctively they knew to let their fellow travellers depart before making a move. Edwige needed space and time to get her joints moving and they didn't want any parting abuse.

'Take a deep breath Flo. The London rush hour is pretty much back to its worst. We'll take our time and go with the flow... ha ha, go with the flow, Flo.'

Flo gave a big laugh and grabbed her friend by the arm as they plopped onto the platform.

'We could get a taxi, but the traffic will just be pants. We may as well suffer the Tube.'

'I'm sticking to you like glue babe.'

They squeezed themselves and their bags to Waterloo, bobbing along on the tide of humanity. The suburban train was also full but Edwige's walking stick was usually sufficient pointer for seats to be vacated by public-spirited commuters. Flo stood next to her, by the door and watched in awe as the spectacle of Battersea Power Station sailed past, as if newly-built, a temple of a national power doomed to fade. Edwige had seen it so many times it no longer warranted a glance. She loved the fact that Strawberry Hill, a placename from the pages of a children's book, had its own station. She liked to see it mentioned on the list of stops and felt a sense of satisfaction to be among those alighting once its name was called. By the time they stood outside its entrance in the cool evening sun, Edwige was exhausted, but her flat was close enough to reach with a two stop bus ride. On arriving at their final goal, the two ladies collapsed into chairs and each clapped their hands with delight. They had completed a journey and now had time to kick back, to lose themselves in companionship. A companionship that had been a long time coming.



True to the spirit of the experience, Edwige had planned a curated tour of her favourite spots in the neighbourhood. In the morning, after an extremely leisurely

lie-in, they set off on a walking excursion. Edwige did not want Flo to worry, so she made sure to administer her painkillers and anti-inflammatories behind closed doors. She was determined to last the course all the way to Turner's house. They took a bus into the busy heart of Twickenham, an unexceptional main drag like a thousand others across Greater London. Flo was struggling to see any attraction at this stage. She was also keeping half an eye out for signs of the rugby ground, she assumed the only place worth seeing, and was surprised that Edwige never mentioned it. Her guide was much more intent on diverting down a pedestrianised side street.

'This is what we want. Twickenham Church Street. Like the rabbit hole that takes Alice to Wonderland.' Flo made sure her raised eyebrows were kept to herself.

They entered a much more picturesque world of eateries and independent shops, eventually curving round past the church to the riverside. Flo noticed various business names making reference to Eel Pie, reminding her of Edwige's potted life history.

'Is this where your boat was parked?'

'No, no... that over there is Eel Pie Island, where Leo supposedly had many a wild night, rubbing shoulders with Mick Jagger and the like. But The Lady Of was downstream from here, towards Richmond Bridge. It was a lovely spot but we won't go that far today.'

Flo was surprised by the atmosphere, so different from the bland urban scene of ten minutes before, an entirely separate world. Edwige's eyes were alive as they

stood by a slipway, the river lapping the tarmac yards from their feet, the coastline of a city.

'It is exciting, these roads still flood when the tide is high, even though the Thames Barrier has taken some of the peril away. You still feel connected to the whole history of London, standing here. But come on, there is more to see.'

From narrow lanes, hidden from the water by brown brick walls, they found their way into the gardens of York House.

'This really is one of London's hidden gems,' said Edwige with the same unalloyed delight she'd felt on discovering this tiny maze of greenery and pools for the first time. 'And just look at this...' she exclaimed, as they crossed a footbridge to reveal sight of the Oceanides, an extravagant statuary of sea nymphs cavorting about the rock gardens, white marble now gleaming after recent restoration. 'So unexpected, so voluptuous, so innocent, so... utterly charming.' The thought had once occurred to Edwige that this wasn't the only ensemble of nudes to catch her imagination, out of the blue, but that was not something to dwell upon now.

'That is amazing babe.' Flo wasn't as deeply into the arts as Edwige might have wished, but she too was struck by this tableau scene that could have been lifted from the villas of Tuscany. 'I definitely want to post a photo!'

'Please my dear, don't do that. It would help me if you don't let people know where you are right now.'

'Er... OK babe, sure, whatever you say.' Flo was puzzled by the request but chose not to dig for an explanation.

All thoughts of the absent rugby ground were fully dispelled by the time they had taken in the glorious old White Swan pub at the end of Ferry Road, its walls still echoing with the laughter of boatmen from past generations. The peaceful scene, with views across the river to Ham, was far removed from Flo's mental picture before the tour began. There was more to come however, as the grounds of Orleans House made another agreeable detour before they reached the broad open spaces of Marble Hill Park, with its white dollhouse mansion in the middle. With April nearly gone, the warmth of afternoon sunshine was making them wilt. They stopped for an ice cream and found a park bench in the shade. Edwige had looked forward to this moment, she loved the psychogeography of Marble Hill.

'I'm going into tour guide mode now Flo. We're talking about that white box over there. It was built in the 1720s for the Countess of Suffolk, one Henrietta Howard. Now there's a lady with an eventful life. Her father was killed in a duel when she was just eight, her mum died four years later. Despite being married to someone else, she rose through society to become mistress of the Prince of Wales, later King George II. At the same time she was acting as the Princess of Wales's servant. Both parties seemed happy with the arrangement and Henrietta's husband was paid off, to turn a blind eye. Some years later, Henrietta herself was bestowed a huge fortune by the Prince when he ditched her for a younger alternative, by which time she was in her mid-thirties. She used the money to build this place, which became like an intellectual forum for the great thinkers of the age. She was famous for her wit... and for the parties she held here. A bit like me and Leo on The Lady back in the day, just over the trees there – the

parties bit anyway, ha ha. But she lasted to her late seventies, quite an achievement in those days.'

'Geez. We got nothing on that girl.'

'Yep. Imagine what the tabloids would've made of all that. It's so hard to picture that kind of gilded life happening here, looking at it today, the house surrounded by kids playing football and doing wheelies. This would've been one of the most exclusive parcels of land anywhere on the globe. Parked outside the squalor of the city, this was an exotic retreat, on a par with the Mustique of Princess Margaret, or the Mar-a-Lago of that loathsome Trump. But now, it's just a public park. Look at the map today, these little jewels by the river now completely engulfed by the sprawl of Hounslow and Hillingdon, and blitzed by the Heathrow flightpath. Henrietta and her house guests would be absolutely horrified.'

'Our lives just get buried in the end babe.'

'Very true, very true. Anyway... that's it my dear, I think I'm done. I was hoping to keep going, to see, um... never mind, it's just another house. I'm afraid JMW Turner will have to wait.'

'That's fine babe, that's fine. It's been a brilliant walk. I am feeling properly housed-up. It's been brilliant, and what a beautiful day.'

'It really is. If we just make it to the top of the park we'll find a bus stop.'



Back in the flat and revived, the conversation returned to Mathilde. Flo had been thinking about her friend's request not to post photos from the day.

'Babes, do you want me to try searching for her. Is that why you asked me to be careful about posting?'

'Yes Flo. That's what I was thinking. I'm sure she would have blocked me from any social media. I certainly can't find her on Pebbletank. I did wonder if you could try. If you tried to follow her, she would most likely look your latest posts. She might get spooked if they were from round here.'

'Hmm, yeah. You could be right. Listen, you said something about seeing her on TV. What was that all about?'

'Oh my, that was so peculiar. It was around 2019. I was watching the news and there was an item about climate change protests in Parliament Square. One group of girls had stripped off and daubed slogans on their chests. *Wake Up* or something like that. The reporter was trying to talk straight to the camera, but these girls were getting in picture, shouting. I couldn't really hear, but one thing for sure... one of them was Mathilde, I recognised her straight away.'

'Come to think of it, I remember that too. Lots of people shared the clip. The joke was on the reporter more than anything. She looked so embarrassed, she didn't know what to do, poor girl. I saw it. Can't remember the girls faces though babe, just the bouncing boobs.'

'Yes, that was it. It was definitely her. But that's all, it didn't give me any useful clues. Don't get me wrong, it was great to see her alive, she looked... healthy. Angry yes, but also healthy. Fighting for a cause, it actually made me feel good. But that yearning to find her, to try and explain myself, it never goes away. In fact it's getting stronger again now.'

'Well now Eddie, I'm no great expert on hacking or nothing like that. I just know the usual stuff about how to search for names and read through the comments people make. In fact I tried something similar once. I heard some celebrity was supporting the anti-vax movement, I couldn't believe it, I used to like her... she was an actress in one of the soaps. Anyway, I looked her up on Pebbletank, and sure enough, all her posts were banging on about freedom and how the pandemic was a scam. Stupid fool woman, I was gobsmacked. I looked down through all the hundreds of comments and everyone was on her side. It sent a chill down my spine. So many people all believing the same damn foolish nonsense.'

'I hope you left them to it dear and didn't get involved.'

'Weeeelll... there was one comment, saying that people on the news shown in intensive care were probably just actors. That made me so mad, I couldn't stop myself. I told them they were an idiot to think that way.'

'What happened, did they respond?'

'Yes, and it was really creepy. I just got a single line saying... *You're in the wrong place*. As if they were some cult, with their own border guards. A closed community of people sharing the same views, determined not to let reality in. I gave up then, there was no point saying more, none of those fools were going to listen. But anyway, maybe I can have more luck looking for Mathilde.'

'Everyone has their own reality my dear. But yes, let's hope you can scratch the surface.'

'I'll try babe. Things are never as simple as they look, I guess we all think our lives are more troublesome than others' appear to be. Maybe if I can't find her

directly, I can work out what communities she belongs to. Let's have a go. Starting with the obvious... she's called Mathilde Hoeks right?'

'No, no... Hoeks is my maiden name. Her name is Mathilde Powling.' Edwige spelt it out.

'OK, let's see. Hmm, nothing coming up. If I just do Mathilde there are loads, have a look, there might be some here that don't come up for you.'

Flo handed her phone across for Edwige to scroll through, but none of the profiles looked like possible candidates. 'May I?'

'Yes of course babe, go ahead.'

Edwige tried 'Powling' on its own, to no avail. Plenty of results but none with any chance of being her family, not even Leo or Ivan.

'Did she go by any other name... a nickname perhaps?'

'I could try Mattie, that's how she signed herself when she first learned to write. There must be thousands though.'

'Yes probably, but you never know. These social media things are spooky, the way they link things together. My location is switched on, maybe that will affect...'

Before Flo could finish, Edwige dropped the phone into her lap mid-scroll and put both hands to her mouth. 'Oh mon dieu,' she gasped. She picked up Flo's mobile again and passed it back. 'Look, look.'

'What babe?'

'She's there, she's there. That ugly sister one.' Several finger-spins down the screen, Edwige had spotted @earths.ugly.sister. The pebble icon was filled with

a crocheted image of the globe, but the associated name shouted at her from the screen.

'You mean this Mattie Bradley?'

'Yes, her real father's name was Bradley-Scott. Roger Bradley-Scott, she must have adopted his surname, well, part of it.'

'Bradley is quite a common name though. But if you're right, that means she knows all about it. And he must do as well.'

'Yes. Oh my.' Edwige was speechless for a while as the ramifications sunk in. Flo was thinking about next steps.

'It's a private account babe. I can try following her and see what happens.' Edwige looked at her, helpless with indecision, the fact that Mathilde might have linked up with her biological father shocked her to the core. Flo saw nothing to lose, so hit the Follow button anyway, before placing the phone on the coffee table with great solemnity, as if handling a runic tablet. 'And light the blue touch paper...' she added, as if any effect were needed.

'What happens now?' said Edwige, after some time.

'We wait.'

Flo set notifications to vibrate. They had been muted all day, she wanted to avoid distraction by the continued activity caused by Claire and Leon's posts about the party. She looked at the screen intermittently all evening but no sign of a response from Mattie. After food and more drowsy reminiscing, the two ladies went to bed. Flo took one last look before putting out the light, only to find herself performing the classic cartoon manoeuvre of rubbing her eyes in disbelief at the

sight that beheld her. Not only had @earth.ugly.sister accepted her request to follow, she had also liked all Flo's posts where Leon was visible. She must have been a fan. Flo thought about raising the roof there and then, but her friend looked so strained during the evening she decided to let her sleep and deliver a nice surprise in the morning.



When Edwige opened her eyes into the daylight, Flo was sitting on the end of her bed to break the good news. Flo explained what she'd been able to piece together. Mattie had started her account in 2019. There were not many posts and it was mostly about her activism. There was nothing in the captions or comments to indicate where she was living. One thing was striking though: Roger Bradley-Scott was one of her followers.

'So it *is* her!'

'Yes babe.' They searched for him from Edwige's account but he was invisible.

'But why would *he* block me as well?'

'Mattie must have asked him to. His account also only dates back to 2019, I guess he started under her influence. He hardly posts anything, just one or two professional-looking PR photos with F1 drivers.'

'This is all too much, Flo. It's great, what you've done, I can't thank you enough. But what to do next?' Edwige tried to sit up, but the pain in her hip made her flinch. 'Oh goddamn it! I need my medication.'

'Why don't you tell me what's going on babe? That ain't no arthritis.'

'You know what... I really can't take much more.' Years of unspoken sadness rose from deep within Edwige's heart and she began to sob. Flo simply sat with her, waiting for the waves to subside, as she had done with so many patients and bereaved relatives across the years.

'Talk to me Eddie.'

Edwige had been dealing with pain on her own for so long, avoiding the subject with Flo just came naturally. Now the spell was broken, the rest of her story was filled in. She had been diagnosed with ovarian cancer five years before, the timing being suspiciously coincident to the hormone replacement therapy she had undergone. The tumours did not respond to chemotherapy so she underwent the recommended surgery. Now her body was struggling to withstand the metastases that refused to be contained. She had stopped trying to picture where the cancer cells were, in which organ, she just managed the pain and prayed to the universe to save her. Another bout of chemo was due the following week.

'So... as you can see Flo, my decision to come off the pill paid off in every respect.' They laughed in a huddle of two and Eddie dried her tears. Flo imparted what wisdom she possessed relating to the medical situation but there was little she could do apart from cross the same fingers.

'I don't have much time Flo. That's why I need to find Mathilde.'

'I understand babe. Listen, we've found her now, I have made a connection. I could sound her out?'

'No, I don't think that would work. She'd be pissed off that you followed her with an ulterior motive. If only I could stand in front of her. If she saw me like this, I can't believe she would turn her back.'

'OK then. Maybe if we look through the comments again we might see something that shows where she's living.'

They both took turns to sift through Mattie's posts, getting increasingly frustrated, until Flo noticed a trend.

'Tell you the truth Eddie... one thing I've noticed. There's only one other account that has liked every single one of Mattie's posts.'

'Really?'

'Yep, really. They call themselves Goldilocks Hoptoad. Or Gillian if you prefer, which I do to be honest. And guess what... she's advertising a deep dive.'

'Ah mon dieu. Is that my chance? Maybe. If I can just get through the chemo.'

Edwige could see Gillian's account from her own. She was glad to see the smiling rosy face that peered out from the pebble, at the thought this girl might be her daughter's friend. The deep dive sounded intriguing: to take part in an experiment. What's the worst that could happen. She submitted her request and asked the Universe for one more favour: to allow this meeting with Goldilocks, in addition to a few more months alive.

five
Dougall & Reece

Sunday June 12th, 03:00

Reece was lying in bed, frustrated at his inability to sleep, not even to the extent of bad dreams. The alarm was due to sound at six and he needed more than zero hours for the day ahead. He longed to fall unconscious, but for reasons he couldn't fathom, his arms refused to arrange themselves into a comfortable position. He tried to picture where they normally lay when he was sleeping soundly but the right configuration was proving impossible to recreate. Once more he turned onto his side, this time to find himself spooning against Helen, with his left arm trapped awkwardly under his chest and right hand between her buttocks. In her own half-dozing state she gave an affirmative sound, as if inviting him to do more than leave the hand motionless. She became conscious enough to articulate a message, purely via the medium of muffled guttural noises and the angling of her hips, that she wanted to be pleased, without the need for any reciprocal exertion on her part. As it happened, Reece owed her. On the last three occasions of making love, he had climaxed first, leaving his partner high and dry. After the third successive instance, he was foolish enough to offer an explanation.

'Sorry Hels but sometimes... it's all or nothing. If I don't keep going it'll go limp anyway. One of us is better than none, don't you think? A bit like Sophie's Choice?'

She gave him the model of a sardonic stare and dismissed his defence with her favourite saying: 'Losing your touch old man.'

On this particular morning, being so distracted, he was happy to oblige. He wondered whether any blissful feelings he could elicit might telepathically transfer themselves back the other way and thereby cure his insomnia. After all, he had lost count of the number of times they found themselves thinking exactly the same thing when in close proximity, despite the absence of any conversation, so maybe the same effect might occur with carnal fulfilment. Reece obediently responded to her body language and his ministrations produced convincing signs of gratitude, without Helen being roused enough to speak. Ten minutes later, once the writhing had subsided, she was dead to the world again. However, Reece still found himself watching the patterns on the ceiling made by marina lights bouncing off the water, unable to switch off. This was clearly going to be another night for counting down the clock through to daybreak.

When the alarm went off, it was Reece's turn to groan. 'Argh, I'd just got off as well.'

'No change there then. Come on Sleeping Beauty, we've got planes to catch.'

Normally it was Helen that had to be dragged out of bed, but this morning she had a spring in her step. Finally she was off to the sun, but against her expectations Reece was not coming with her. When he secured the win with Allied Grids back in spring, she assumed they would have a holiday to celebrate and couldn't wait to spin the globe.

'Where's it going to be Reecey Boy?'

'It feels too soon to me Hels, sorry. I don't know... it still doesn't feel appropriate to go abroad. The thought of even looking at flights, especially while there's a war going on... I don't know, it's like I've got the yips or something.'

'You're kidding me right?'

'No, really. I can't picture stepping off a plane, rocking up to passport control and expecting foreigners to want us in their country. Everywhere hates the UK these days, thanks to the Tories. Anyway, there are things I want to do here. And another thing... what happens if you test positive just before?'

'Like I'll be testing, duh! We're all the same Reece. The Covid hype is over... and everyone in the world knows that all governments are wankers. We'll get the same welcome we always did, we're just *people*. People with money to spend, to keep their economies going. You said yourself, the jet trails are back in the sky.'

'I'm not ready Hels. I need something different, something more grounded. I've seen this deep dive in Scotland, this guy that takes amazing photos. He's offering a safari, from his home... it's a competition to shoot 100 things in a day... with a camera that is, not...'

'Fuck that for a game of soldiers.' Helen looked at him in sheer dismay. 'You can go yomping across The Trossachs on your own mate, I'm off to Lanzarote. I bet Andrea won't be such a pussy as you.' This was not the first time they had disagreed about where to take a vacation. But Helen and Reece could instinctively switch between shared and personal space without missing a beat – this clash about destinations was simply water off a duck's back, as far as their relationship was concerned.

So the plans for June were laid. Reece applied to join a deep dive based around something called the Portallan 100, as hosted by @doogey.earpey, one of the few nature photographers he followed. When the confirmation came, much to his delight, Helen booked a week in the Canary Islands. His flight to Glasgow left Bristol Airport on the same day as her Sangria Express. Once Reece was up, they packed a starkly contrasting set of items into their cases, flung them into the car and set off for the airport together, collecting Andrea on the way. Andrea and Helen both worked part-time in a coffee shop in Clifton and they saw themselves as sun-buddies. They had been away together several times – Reece was grateful that Helen had someone to keep her company and any concerns he might have about what they got up to vanished long ago. As for himself, he was surprised at his own yearning for a change of scene, in his own back yard. In reality, deep down, Reece was in two minds – he wanted the same as Helen, but having made such a point about #ourhouse he stubbornly stuck to his cause, even though the rest of the world was travelling again. Perhaps it was the influence of meeting Gillian. Thanks to spending time in her unaffected presence, perhaps he had tuned in to a more naturalistic vibe. Either way, the call of the wild was beckoning him northwards.



As Reece Keegan snoozed in the airspace over North Wales, Dougall Earp was squeezing himself between the white vans that had annoyingly become a fixture on the tarmac outside his flat, carrying groceries from the local convenience store. He lived above the premises of a pest control company that occupied the ground floor of adjoining houses a mile outside the village of Portallan, some way

south of Oban in Argyll and Bute. The vans' white and grey livery blended with the walls and tiles of the building, which stood by a private driveway raised above the main coast road via grassy bank and two-tier retaining wall. Across the road stretched expansive views of Loch Mucmhara and the mountains beyond, part of the labyrinth of vast marine inlets that perforate the west of Scotland so dramatically. As he turned the key to the ground level entrance, Dougall was reminded again that the slip of paper beside the doorbell needed to be replaced. The biro annotation 'Alasdair + Dougall' was almost illegible due to seepage of rain beneath the Perspex cover. He made a mental note to get around to it... next time. Dougall and Alasdair had been partners since University days, their eyes meeting over a petri dish of algae. Alasdair now worked for Scottish Forestry, whereas Dougall was unemployed, having recently resigned from his job with a private research company. The Portallan 100 would be a welcome diversion from trying to decide his next career move. Dougall was inclined towards a return to teaching, he had enjoyed giving tutorials in his post-graduate days and currently his greatest satisfaction came from sharing knowledge of the landscape through Pebbletank, in particular the interaction with people who wanted to learn something new. When he publicised the meet-up, he was looking for someone to take under his wing – a newbie, without any obvious signs of being a camera geek, who wanted to experience the Highlands and discover nature properly for the first time. He chose Reece simply because he appeared different to his regular followers and came across as genuine in the comments he posted. Dougall's feed was a mixture of the stunning local scenery and its teeming wildlife. He was only

really happy when hiking through the woods or across the glens, and was looking forward to the opportunity to introduce his guest to their treasures.

As Dougall entered the flat, Alasdair was at his desk reviewing a paper on bat boxes.

'I got the stuff Allie.'

'OK, that's good. Have you stocked up for your city slicker?'

'Aye... I got the multi-pack of protein bars.'

'Good lad. He probably expects to find street food stalls half-way round.'

'Nooo... I don't think so, he seems fairly sensible. He's supposed to pop by this afternoon, on route to Oban.'

Reece hired a car from Glasgow airport. On the map Portallan had not looked that far but, with the zig-zag road network, it was nearly mid-afternoon by the time he pulled up behind the pest control vans. His knocking could just about be heard upstairs.

'We need to do our names again Allie, I don't think he can see the doorbell.'
Dougall fetched Reece from the entrance and led him upstairs for an initial briefing over tea and digestives. Alasdair gave beams and pleasantries before returning to his work, while host and guest took to dining chairs alongside the flat's largest window. Reece placed his elbows on the laminated table top and absorbed the view.

'That is just amazing Dougall. So peaceful. You're lucky to live in such a beautiful place.'

'Yup, it's hard to beat.'

Dougall was a rangy fellow, with fleshy lips and a prominent Adam's apple. His skin was the colour of pith, topped by a clump of wiry brown hair, rigid as a doll. He looked hewn from the same fabric as the woodland Reece had been driving through for the last two hours.

'I can't tell you how much I'm looking forward to tomorrow. I've never done anything like it before.'

'Yup, it should be grand. I hope you're ready for a long day? I said to bring waterproofs and proper pair of boots?'

'Check! I've got the gear. And I've been on some practice walks in the Mendips, so my feet should be pre-blistered!'

'Cool beans. So, like I said... we've got to find a hundred species in the day. Mammals and birds only, bugs don't count. Amphibians and reptiles *do* count, but looking for them takes up too much time, although I guess we might step on a snake. The rules are within 24 hours but in practical terms we're talking daylight. The sun rises at four thirty.'

Reece gave Dougall an incredulous look. 'Ah, four thirty... I thought we were starting at six?'

'Yes that should be alright. No need to go crazy. The great thing is we can start from here. Portallan Forest has a car park and visitor centre, but it only opens at nine and the tracks all pass this way. Anyway, we're bound to fall over some of the easy birds on the doorstep.'

'Fantastic, I'll be ready.'

Reece returned to his car and continued up the coast to his hotel. By the time he reached, it was early evening and the first photos of Helen and Andrea supping cocktails had hit his phone. The yawning and sleeping emojis he sent by reply, to feign indifference, had a double meaning – early nights were normally anathema to him, but having only had twenty minutes on the plane in total since Saturday, he opted for bed as soon as he could manage. Once the room service tray was parked on the floor in the corridor, bearing remnants of an omelette and two glasses of wine, he muted his phone, drew the curtains and hunkered down.



Next morning, Reece made sure to park mostly on the grass, to avoid his southern-softie saloon becoming a target for the Verminators of Argyll vehicle fleet. He was changing into his boots as Dougall marched towards him in the early sunlight. An unfamiliar chill permeated the air, reminding Reece what happens when you don't fly south in June and he shivered as bare feet flirted with the ground.

'You should sit down to do that,' said Dougall, indicating the open car door.

'It's OK, I'm good.' Terrifying thoughts of being in the changing rooms at school flashed through Reece's mind, the last time he'd struggled with long socks and bootlaces while being watched by other boys. With the final loop tucked in, he stood upright as energetically as he dared given his porcelain knee joints, then clapped his hands together. 'Right then. Good to go.'

'Okay... marvellous. I've got some food and water in my backpack, have you er...'

'Yes, yes... I've brought a few things. Managed to find a deli in Bristol that makes their own Kendal mint cake.'

'Mint cake... grand. That's good for glucose, if not your teeth. So, Reece, let's just run through the day again. This is not a competition as such. We're not out there on the hills fighting against a bunch of other guys. You can do the 100 anytime. But we have to register on the website to say we've started, then log the sightings as we go. It doesn't matter if we lose the signal, it'll soon sync up, as long as the updates are recorded by midnight. There's no trophy at stake, it's just about getting our names on the roll of honour, it's just about pride. I'll take the photos, you have to act as witness – you have to submit your details, as the responsible referee. Apart from that it's all done on trust. In theory we can upload the photos as we go, but that can come later. We need a recognisable photo though, otherwise we get disqualified.'

'OK Dougall... all makes sense. And we've got to stay within the nature reserve?'

'The rules are... within a 5km radius of the visitor centre and no transport allowed, we have to walk. The area includes most of the forest, the top of Beinn Allan, a fair stretch of coastline and a reservoir inland. The photo locations get checked automatically and I've set up a geofence alarm.' Reece nodded sagely.

'How many times have you tried this before?'

'This will be my tenth proper attempt. The best I've done is ninety-six. A hundred would be grand. Ready to get going?'

'As ready as I'll ever be, let's do it.'

'Cool beans. Take these.'

Dougall handed Reece some binoculars, fiddled with his phone to launch their assault, then set off down the driveway. The action started immediately – as Dougall predicted, the obvious candidates, the low-hanging fruit, eagerly presented themselves. The first two even shared his accommodation... ‘They all count!’

- 1 House Martin
- 2 House Sparrow
- 3 Robin
- 4 Blackbird
- 5 Great Tit
- 6 Blue Tit
- 7 Wood Pigeon
- 8 Pied Wagtail

They crossed the road, striding towards the foreshore of the loch.

‘Tell me about your research Dougall. Why did you walk away, if you don’t mind me asking?’

‘Ach, that’s a bummer. It all goes back to my PhD. I was investigating the chemicals that plants release in response to tissue damage. Different plants release all sorts of different things when subject to mechanical stimuli like wind action, stems being cut or leaves being munched by a caterpillar. They could be toxins, to deter hungry insects, or enzymes to help develop new tissue, et cetera.

It's a big area of biological study. The trouble started when the food companies got interested. The company I worked for obtained a huge grant from a multinational with heavy commitments in the farming sector. That kicked-off a whole load of controversy with the animal rights movement, they said we were being paid to prove that eating plants was just as cruel as eating meat. None of that had anything to do with the actual research, but the genie escaped and no-one would listen. We ended up getting death threats – that's when I jacked it in.'

'Jesus. That sounds like a total nightmare. I'm so sorry, that's really sad... all that work wasted.'

'Yup, it was a bad time. Glad to get out.'

'It's probably insensitive of me to ask but... do plants actually feel pain?'

'It's not possible to answer that in a traditional sense, Reece, to be honest. Plants don't have a nervous system like animals do. They don't have recognisable pain receptor cells. But, who's to say they don't suffer? It's like asking whether man can understand the meaning of life, it's a completely different plane of existence. Is an earthworm capable of understanding the rules of rugby? I mean, you know... it's an unanswerable question.'

Reece fell quiet for a while, bogged down by the implications of Dougall's story. They found a gap in the wall on the shore-side of the road and a path led down to the water's rocky edge. The sun was yet to rise above the mountains behind them and the cold air felt like a solid, pressing the water into a silent tilting motion. The only sounds were the varied calls of seabirds and waterfowl echoing

off the stainless steel surface of the loch. A handful of birds were on hand to observe Dougall and Reece's first attempts to find firm footing on uneven ground. 'The loch is a fantastic place Reece. There's a great mixture here, we should get off to a good start. This section is a bit exposed, we'll find more in the bay near the village. But this water is fed from the Gulf Stream, so we often see things that wouldn't normally come this far north. Still, may as well get these guys while we're here, some things you see pretty much everywhere.'

9 Mallard

10 Shelduck

11 Herring Gull

12 Greylag Goose

13 Wigeon

'Aha, I wondered what wigeons looked like. I love the colours... that tawny brown and funky orange Mohican, what a combination.'

'Aye, they are handsome fellows.'

'Ah, now... I know this one. That black thing standing on the rock over there waving its wings. I know that's a cormorant, we see them from our flat.'

'Actually, that's a shag. Mind you, there is a cormorant over there in the distance.'

Dougall pointed in the opposite direction to the target of Reece's binoculars. A black-headed gull sat on the water in between, but Reece was done with voicing his own IDs.

- 14 Shag
- 15 Cormorant
- 16 Black-Headed Gull

'Let's get moving again, I think that's everything here,' said Dougall, conscious that they needed to keep moving to generate some body heat. As their blood started to flow, Reece was reminded that he had his own research to discuss.

'Ironically Dougall I've been pursuing some innovation of my own, since I retired.'

'Have you now? I'm intrigued.'

'So, I've got this idea. You know those variable message signs you see by the road. You know, for things like diversions, or upcoming events likely to cause congestion. Well, I reckon there's a market for a consumer version.'

'Um... OK. Sounds interesting. What would the applications be?'

'Well... you could use them at home, or in the car. Maybe it's just because I live in an area with lots of flats. There's this one guy across the marina who's had Christmas lights draped across his balcony all year. I'm dying to tell him to put them away, but how? I'm certainly not going round there to knock on his door. But a message sign would be perfect. 'Put your lights away!' It would come across as tongue-in-cheek. You could vary the font size, even have the message scrolling for really big text.'

Dougall laughed, he found the idea hilarious. 'It sounds like a very old-fashioned version of Twitter, only you carry your tweets around like a sandwich board.'

'Exactly!' Even though Dougall's voice had undercurrents of mockery, Reece was excited to find a supporter for a change and he launched into another example.

'How many times have you found yourself behind someone on the motorway and they've got their indicators on for no reason. You can tie yourself in knots trying to think of a hand gesture to communicate the problem, as you overtake. What do you need? A variable message sign, maybe even one capable of speech recognition. Or one that can show a reverse image, so they can read it in the rear-view mirror. A communication device for situations where the target cannot hear you and there's no online connection.'

'I see the point Reece, just not sure how I'd use it myself, to be honest, I'll have a think though. Maybe for twitchers so they can comment to each other without making a sound. Like for example... there's a pochard over there.' Dougall whispered the last five words with exaggerated emphasis, to emulate the effect of Reece's sign. Dougall had to physically point to bring Reece back into the moment.

'That duck over there, to the left of the swan... that's a pochard. They're less common up here than down south, especially in the summer. That's a good one, certainly not a banker. Oooh... and just to the right, there are two more good ones. A pair of divers and some teal. We're ahead of the game Reece.' Once Dougall had stopped clicking he rubbed his hands together, already anticipating success.

'Ducks make me laugh,' said Reece, chipping in some nature notes of his own. 'All serene, when they're sitting on a pond. But when you see them flying they

look so unhappy, as if they're desperate to get it over with. Ah, what about the swan, does that count?’

‘Oh, yes. I nearly forgot to bag it.’ Just for good measure, a rabbit bimbled into view among the weeds by the roadside.

17 Pochard

18 Red-Throated Diver

19 Teal

20 Mute Swan

21 Rabbit

As they pressed on towards the village, the landward gradients flattened and an expanse of shingle beach began to emerge. There was no harbour to speak of, the water remained aloof from the houses. The one structure to make direct contact with the lochside was the remnant of an iron age fort, perched on an outcrop rising above the shingle. Reece and Dougall scrambled to the top and paused to take stock of their refreshments. Dougall poured two small coffees from his flask and started the inventory.

‘I haven’t got tons of stuff. Alasdair is doing us a hotpot for later. I’ve just got these gels, some chocolate and this lot of six protein bars. It’s a multipack. We can share, all I’m saying is... I don’t want the coconut one. I can’t stand coconut.’

‘Yeargh! Me neither. I always hated Bounty bars... anything with coconut... disgusting.’

'Ah... well we might be fighting to avoid that one then. Maybe if we close our eyes and see who gets unlucky.'

'Um... OK. We can try. You go first.'

Dougall opened the pack, shut his eyes and snaffled out a bar between thumb and forefinger. 'Pecan and salted caramel, phew! Your go.'

Reece followed suit and was relieved to see the blueberry and apricot wrapping in his hand. They both lived to fight another day. Reece had bought a couple of cheese and onion pasties and a small packet of Hobnobs in WH Smiths at Glasgow Airport, to augment the artisan mint cake. He thought biscuits would be quieter than crisps and less likely to scare the birds. As they re-zipped their bags, Reece spotted movement in the water.

'Bloody hell! Is that an otter?'

Dougall quickly scanned the scene. The face in question had bobbed down below the surface just as he raised the lens, but soon reappeared a few metres away.

'Nooo... not an otter. But a great sighting. That's a harbour seal. Or common, if you prefer.'

The creature fixed them with eyes like polished coal, its handsome snout and whiskers catching the first rays of sunshine to breast the mountains. Between its jaws an eel was being casually chewed. Despite its mortal wounds, the eel still flicked its tail, vexed in equal measure by its predicament and the appalling table manners with which it was being devoured.

'Amazing,' said Reece. 'It looks so pleased with itself. Can we count the eel, is this like a double word score?'

'No, sadly not. The eel is a fish... very shortly a dead one. It doesn't count. Great to see a seal though, I didn't get one in my ninety-six, this puts us even further ahead of the game. The calm conditions are helping.'

22 Common Seal

'You know Reece, the habitats are so fertile here. If we keep looking we should see plenty.' Still seated on the fort, Dougall now entered a trance-like state, muttering to himself and snapping in all directions. Reece breathed in the surroundings for a while, thankful for an interlude of peace against the background of a world facing apocalypse. It was impossible to imagine the horrors confronting other people on the globe while soaking up this scene. He made a personal pledge to do something useful with his life, upon returning from this trip. For now though, his only spiritual direction was to stick with Dougall.

'Bingo. That's another nine. Come on Reece, time to move.' They descended from the rock and walked further round the beach, with more in the bag.

23 Bar-Tailed Godwit

24 Great Black-Backed Gull

25 Curlew

26 Common Guillemot

27 Black Guillemot

28 Oystercatcher

29 Arctic Tern

30 Little Grebe

31 Eider Duck

'Dougall, I've been meaning to ask you. Are there any egrets here? We see them fly across the marina sometimes, they look a bit incongruous to be honest, like a tropical bird that lost its way.'

'Good question. I have seen a little egret here, yes. But only a couple of times. We might see one today but it's unlikely. In a way you're lucky down south. All this mountain scenery is great, but sometimes I crave your mud. You should try your own safari one day, around the Somerset Levels.'

'Ha ha... yes I should, you'll have to come down.'

'I'd love to. You know, the fact that species like the little egret are becoming so at home in the UK is one of the strongest markers of climate change. We can talk about the meteorological statistics as much as we want, but the wildlife knows best.'

'Aha... I was going to ask your opinion on climate change deniers. They must drive you mad.'

'Oh for sure. Trouble is though... they've got a point. There *have* always been dramatic climate fluctuations through history. There's no doubting the current situation with increasing temperatures and melting icecaps. But it's not a done deal, to pin down exactly what we can do, to make any difference. So the nay-sayers have some factoids they can cling onto. A kernel of something they

can grow their fake news around, convincing themselves of their insight and wisdom.'

'A little knowledge is a dangerous thing.'

'Yes, quite. And from those seeds of little knowledge, cults of wrong-headed people grow. It's quite astonishing when you meet them, as if they've come from a parallel universe. I don't know how the message can be conveyed in a way to make the politicians take meaningful action. No government wants to be seen making its country less competitive. That's what it'll take, but economic suicide isn't a vote winner. Some countries need to not just stick their heads over the parapet, but jump off the damn thing, to take the lead. And they need to believe it's not too late. That the world is still worth fighting for.'

'Oh no. Now I remember why I was hesitant to ask you! This sounds like Putin's doomsday scenario. The mad fucker who questions why spare the world if that world does not contain Russia. The Russia of his perverted imagination that is, him and his bubble of deranged bumlickers.'

'Yup. It really does feel like the four horseman are not just saddled up, they're nearly upon us. But listen... we're not going to solve all that today. This is one of the reasons I love coming out here. Not to simply get away from it all, or bury my head in the sand. It's more about connecting with what's real. I wish everyone could get the opportunity to *be here*... to reboot and reset priorities.'

'The world would be a better place Dougall, no doubt about that.' Reece recognised another bird, but was losing confidence about saying anything. He just said 'Oh' and pointed.

'Oh wow, that's unusual.'

'Isn't that a Canada goose?'

'Yup.'

'But there's millions of them.'

'It's unusual to see one here, in the sea, on its own. That's another one I wasn't banking on.'

While discussing the apocalypse, the pair had followed the beach that arced from the fort to a small marshy outfall, revealing another new habitat. Some well camouflaged waders became visible, watched by an irascible gull. Dougall took purposefully to his camera again to gather up the spoils.

32 Canada Goose

33 Redshank

34 Ringed Plover

35 Lesser Black-Backed Gull

36 Common Sandpiper

37 Dunlin

Now Dougall checked his watch then swung the camera, sheathed in camouflage of its own, over his shoulder and picked up the pace. Reece had to jog to catch up with him.

'I think we've got as much as we can here, it's time to move inland.'

They scrambled past the fort again but this time climbed a path away from the water, back towards Portallan. When a bend in the main street opened up a longer view of the loch, Dougall swore mildly and hit the shutter a few more times – Reece looked out to sea and noticed a few more specks.

‘Man I nearly missed those critters. Ach, and a greenshank just landed near where we were standing just now.’

38 Black-Throated Diver

39 Razorbill

40 Common Gull

41 Greenshank

A lane branched off the road, past the side of the village store, before morphing into one of the tracks that ascended steeply into Portallan Forest. The whole area was a protected woodland and nature reserve with marked trails and organised family activities. Soon the place would be completely overrun once the school holidays started, but even on a Monday in June, Dougall knew the car park would fill up quickly so was keen to avoid the most popular routes. When they reached the gate, Dougall paused again.

‘Spots like this can often be best, around the edges of things. Like here, where the woods meet the back gardens. Let’s just wait for five minutes and see what comes.’

- 42 Carrion Crow
- 43 Stonechat
- 44 Reed Bunting
- 45 Meadow Pipit

'You're bringing me luck, Reece, what a threesome. Oh, and look there on the aerial. A mini-murmuration.'

- 46 Starling

They passed through the gate and began the trek uphill. The wooded slopes of Beinn Allan were steep, with paths hugging the contours in zig zags, seeking the easiest waypoint in each valley. Streams tumbled down the hillside, forming the occasional waterfall cloistered by foliage. While partly unseen, the rushing water was ever-present in the soundscape, rising and fading with the breaks in terrain. Reece was out-of-breath in no time.

'Don't worry, buddy. Keep going, you'll get your second wind.'

'Jeez... I thought Black Down was steep enough. It's great though. It's actually a privilege to be out here with you Dougall. Having seen all your photos over the last couple of years, it never occurred to me I would one day walk the same trails.'

'Why did you follow me?'

'I can't remember to be honest. I think I accidentally tapped on #sunset one time, one of my mates goes crazy with hashtags. And a photo by you was top of the grid.'

'Ach yeah, you have to slip in a few sunsets.'

'For some reason I was drawn to read your caption and I loved the writing. Your words actually connected with the location and captured the sense of place. I always used to find nature programmes on TV really boring, but there's something about your feed that caught my imagination. And I'm glad it did, even if I'm suffering for it now!'

'That's great to hear Reece. You'll be fine, you'll be fine... long way to go yet, it's mind over matter.'

As Reece panted through the first twenty minutes of the forest, a few woodland birds dutifully made their appearance. Within the first few metres a weasel bounded across the way, inches from their boots. It stopped to look back just long enough for Dougall to take a snap, lifting the camera with swashbuckling elan. They also stopped by a rotting stump which he knew to be favoured by bank voles, his favourite mammal, one of the musts of the day.

47 Dunnock

48 Weasel

49 Blackcap

50 Song Thrush

51 Greenfinch

- 52 Bank Vole
- 53 Chaffinch
- 54 Magpie
- 55 Chiffchaff

Reece was flagging badly by the time the incline eased into a small clearing.

'Oh... I was hoping this might be the top.'

'No, it's a false summit. There's another kilometre of trees, through there, then we're into moorland up to the cairn. Let's have a break.' They sat down on the trunk of a fallen pine.

'We're over halfway Reece.'

'Halfway as in...' queried Reece optimistically.

'Halfway to the challenge. We're up to fifty-five. I didn't mean in terms of distance, that's more like a third of the way. But pretty soon it will all be downhill. Have another bar, you go first this time.'

Reece searched blindly in the packet before triumphantly lifting yoghurt-coated hazelnuts to the sky.

'Yes! He escapes the coconut again.'

Dougall was equally jubilant with his peanut and dark chocolate – the object of their loathing remained in wait. As they nibbled their elevenses, crumbs of a different kind could be seen dropping from the canopy. Before Reece could get the source in view, Dougall had another photo. 'Cool beans. We had to get a squirrel.'

'I still can't see it. Is it a red or a grey?'

'Red. Luckily the greys haven't infiltrated here yet.'

'To be honest, I feel a bit sorry for the greys. Always portrayed as the bad guys... it's not their fault they're just better at being squirrels.'

'Hmm. Better at spreading disease. They give the reds squirrelpox, which only the greys are immune to, it's really sad. We're doing our best to keep them out, with trapping.'

'How do you selectively trap the grey ones?'

'We don't, the traps are live, we're just selective about which ones we let go and which ones get culled.'

'Ah. So matey up there could have been trapped and released many times?'

'Potentially, yes. But they do learn not to go in.'

'What about these woods, is their habitat secure?'

'Pretty much, yes. Forestry is a big deal here.'

'That's good. I like it here, I like the trees you know. I like the way the trees are. I've always wondered about the Amazon.'

'The Amazon?'

'Yeah, ever since I was a kid, I recall them saying how a piece of Amazon rain forest the size of Wales is lost every year. But that was ages ago... wouldn't it all have gone by now? That's a lot of Waleses. A lot of sheep. A lot of *iechyd da's*.'

Dougall laughed. 'It doesn't really work like that, there is regeneration. What scares me most is the loss of biodiversity, the loss of the *wild*. The planet really is dying. We need to do everything possible to protect that little guy up there.'



Dougall, Reece and the squirrel finished their snacks and continued on their respective ways. The path remained level for a while, circling an area of bog, and the mixed vegetation delivered a new assortment of life, including some first sightings of the day. Eventually their bearing turned southwards, towards the boundary between trees and moorland that outlined the plateau of Beinn Allan. They emerged into full sunlight, in the process startling a roe deer which instantly darted back to the shadows. Dougall carefully retraced his steps, to see if the deer was still lurking under cover. His silent tread bore the fruit of another capture and he stepped back towards Reece punching his fist. 'We're up to sixty-five now. The only trouble is, the closer we get, the fewer possibilities remain.'

- 57 Treecreeper
- 58 Wren
- 59 Bullfinch
- 60 Whitethroat
- 61 Great Spotted Woodpecker

62 Goldfinch

63 Long-Tailed Tit

64 Redstart

65 Roe Deer

The true summit now beckoned as the track dissolved into the barren upper slopes, giving freedom to roam in all directions. However, their course was set for the top of the mountain, a rounded peak with a cairn that had been extended to form a small enclosure. The views all around were spectacular, with Loch Mucmhara to the west, Loch Airgid to the south-east and a wider amphitheatre of mountains and seaways beyond. They could not have chosen a more perfect day and other hikers were starting to materialise across the moors.

‘I hope it doesn’t get too busy,’ Dougall said, looking concerned. ‘It’ll scare everything away.’

‘That rabbit certainly looks twitchy.’

‘Aha! Nice one bud... that’s a hare though, not a rabbit.’ Dougall bagged the hare just before it disappeared, adding to a new sequence of birds that seemed to be enjoying the sunshine. By the time they were entrenched under the cairn, the total had also reached new heights.

66 Hooded Crow

67 Linnet

68 Kestrel

- 69 Rook
- 70 Brown Hare
- 71 Jackdaw
- 72 Pheasant

'Do you think we'll see an eagle?' As Reece spoke the words he felt his phone vibrate. 'Oh my god... auto hashtags.'

'Ha ha, I'm not surprised. Everyone wants to see an eagle up here. It's definitely a possibility, especially with such good visibility, we've been dead lucky with the weather today. We should take some time out now.'

It was 1pm, the near midsummer heat was in full swing and the breeze was sticking to the lenient side of brisk. Dougall and Reece had adjusted their attire down from thermal tops to t-shirts, caps and sun cream. They opted for pasties and Hobnobs, delaying the protein bar denouement until later in the day.

'Apart from the flies – oh, and the lack of beer – I can't imagine anything better than this,' said Reece with a contented sigh. 'Tell me Dougall, I hope you don't mind me asking... are you and Alasdair married?'

'Nope, not yet. We'd like to, I guess I need to sort out my job first. He's going away for a couple of weeks later this year, I need to get myself sorted out by then. Can't spend my whole life having fun.'

'Oh, where's he off to?'

'Ha, funny you should ask. He's actually presenting at a session of the Truth Amnesty. In Mexico City.'

'Truth Amnesty? Um... I must have missed that memo.'

'You haven't heard about it? Oh right... well, the Truth Amnesty has been set up by the United Nations. I suppose they've got to find something to do, since they seem completely unable to stop wars, or genocide, or any of the other big-ticket items they were created to prevent. But anyway... It's an attempt to tackle fake news. There'll be representatives from a hundred bodies from around the world, the intention being to represent every single possible viewpoint that exists, anywhere. The list of organisations is something else: the National Rifle Association, the UFC, the Mormons, the BJP from India, the Masai, Hamas, petro-chemical companies, Greenpeace... and so on. If there is a unanimous vote, something gets officially badged as *true*. Obviously no religion has a cat in hell's chance of getting a 100% score, so no-one's bothering with any kind of God stuff.'

'Wow. I had no idea. What's Alasdair doing?'

'He's been invited to represent photosynthesis. That's one of the first candidate phenomena. He is pitching on behalf of photosynthesis, aiming to achieve an inviolable global consensus, that plants utilise sunlight, water and carbon dioxide to create carbohydrates and oxygen. In case there's any doubt. He's a recognised expert in the field.'

'But isn't that what science is for? Proving things to be true.'

'You'd think. But the number of scientific facts that one belief system or another finds fault with is quite unbelievable. It's like the whole human race has become special needs. The Amnesty is trying to establish a baseline of what *all* humans believe. Methinks they'll be too late to save us, mind.'

'Is he looking forward to going?'

'Not at all, but at least it'll be a unique experience, something to tell the grandkids... so to speak. Ironically, we could actually have those now, if the planet lasts long enough. We did worry about the diversity aspect, what with Allie being gay. When it was first mentioned as a possibility, we assumed the experts would be screened for acceptability by all participants and that the most bigoted members of the council might have a veto. But it was never mentioned, thankfully. Seems they have side-stepped diversity targets and are just treating everyone the same. Amazing huh?'

'These days, yes. Do you approve of them?'

'Targets? Um, kind-of. Obviously we want equality and you still find discrimination everywhere. But it does create problems. We had a situation at the university recently, where one particular lady outed herself a year before becoming elected chancellor. Two years later she married a sixteen-stone farmer with a beard, and now they've got three kids. The trouble wasn't the events themselves but the speculation and the sense of tokenism, it creates a bad energy. The sooner personal lives become *completely* irrelevant in the workplace the better.'

'Absolutely. It makes no difference to me. I only mentioned it because, you know... I met the two of you.'

'No worries, you're fine. I'll tell you what though... you were saying about eagles. Look over there.' Dougall pointed to the north towards a blob circling in the sky. Once his binoculars latched onto the soaring beast and Reece could assimilate the sheer scale of its frame, he was reduced to incoherence. Like part of a building

torn off in a gale, but wheeling so gracefully, the only apparent movement a ripple of wing feathers in the wind. Dougall had also spotted a red kite afloat on a separate holding pattern, allowing the relative size to be fully appreciated. By complete contrast, while Reece oohed and aahed about the eagle, a tiny skylark also sprang into the sky and Dougall spent a while trying unsuccessfully to capture all three birds in the same frame before making do with individual ones. Eventually the giant glided out of range, away towards Loch Airgid without flexing a muscle, and Reece regained the powers of language.

'Just incredible. What an awesome thing to behold, right here in this country. And people travel across the planet in search of wonder.'

'Yup, they are hard to beat.'

73 Red Kite

74 White-Tailed Eagle

75 Skylark

'We're three quarters of the way now Reece. This is more than I've had before, at the same stage. But we need the reservoir to come up trumps and I'm a bit concerned about the crowds now. It's in the balance, I'd say. We might have to do some waiting around.'

'No worries, whatever it takes.' Reece was still dumbfounded by seeing the eagle, which he had watched from a seated position on the stones. On rising to his feet, a sharp pain stung his right knee, making him howl. 'Argh.. god damn it, that

hurt.’ He put weight on the leg gingerly and hobbled on the spot. ‘No worries... I can walk it off.’ Reece got moving again, however his body could not withstand too many more stops.

‘Are you sure you’re OK fella? We could take a shorter route home and miss the reservoir.’

‘No way Dougall, we’re not stopping now. Wild horses and all that.’

‘There’s none of those, sadly.’

Portallan Forest wrapped around the peak of Beinn Allan on three sides and they bore west to re-join its dominion. The jolt of each downhill step shot through Reece’s leg, but he bit down and told himself to ignore the pain. It had worked with his feet on the Mendips, it would work again now. Before they hit the stand of trees for the second time, Dougall was pointing again. He had spotted hawks stealing between the branches, assassins alert for movement on the open ground.

‘There’s actually two types in there.’

Reece was struggling to see anything, until a black spectre burst into vision from the darkness. ‘Oooh, I see one.’

‘That’s not one of them. But good stuff, now we’ve got a raven too, surprisingly big aren’t they? Let’s have one last look around before we lose all this open space.’ Dougall patiently scanned the rim of the moorland, his measured sweep culminating with another catch. ‘I can see you fella, just your face and ears, but I know you’re there... gotcha! That’ll be enough for the ID.’

‘Does it matter if I don’t see what you see?’

‘Not really. But we should check the photos before we sign off later.’

76 Sparrowhawk

77 Hobby

78 Raven

79 Fox

'The track coils back down the hillside again, until it meets the lake. It's going to hurt Reece, the next stretch is as steep going down as this morning was going up.'

'I'll be fine, at least we're out of the sun,' replied Reece unconvincingly.

Reunited with greenery, the action started again. They were finding it difficult to remember which common species had already been accounted for, but distinctive looks made the next two easy.

80 Collared Dove

81 Jay

Twenty minutes passed without addition before Dougall abruptly halted, holding onto Reece's arm to help arrest his momentum, further effect coming from a shush.

'Don't move!'

Dougall engaged his optimum stealth mode, desperate not to betray their proximity.

'What is it?' whispered Reece, too loudly.

'Shhh... I think I saw antlers,' Dougall whispered back, in words barely audible.

They managed to creep forward a short distance to change their line of sight through the tangle of bark and bracken.

'Look there, down below!'

The pair stood like statues, hardly breathing, eyes fixed on russet-coloured patches of hide seen in teasing glimpses through the undergrowth.

'There are three. A stag, a hind and their calf. He's watching over them while they feed. I'll try to get a good head shot.'

Dougall took several minutes before ultimately achieving his goal, the sounds of the shutter causing the subjects' ears to twitch.

'That will do. I got one of the stag, it's unmistakable, but not complete. Can you smell them?'

Reece inhaled as quietly as he could. 'Oh my god, yes, there's definitely a musky smell. Amazing. There's something truly magical about them.'

'Yes indeed. Like an encounter with the primordial. They usually appear on the moors, but I guess this young family are worried by the visitors. That's another great one for the count.'

The deer could be heard scrambling away as soon as their trek restarted. The descent of the glen down to the reservoir took another forty-five minutes, with Reece pacing cautiously, seeking to avoid the larger stones in his path causing another contortion. He was focused so grimly on blanking out his discomfort, the conversation dried to nothing. Alone with his thoughts, Dougall became one with the elements tuning his radar to the orchestra of beaks and claws they were passing through. He tried to discern every scratch, scrape, chirrup and whirr. By reading the clues of where to look and when, Dougall managed to raise the tally further by the time they reached the valley floor.

83 Coal Tit

84 Field Mouse

85 Mistle Thrush

86 Stoat

87 Spotted Flycatcher

The maintained footway sank into an area of boggy ground at the head of the reservoir, which angled south-westwards, shaped like a chilli on the map. Dougall agonised about which course to take around the edge, wanting to minimise the suffering of his companion. He knew they had to rest, but while down on his haunches considering the plan, he noticed some hoofprints in the waterlogged soil.

‘Hey bud, how are you doing?’

'Not too bad. It's not getting any worse.'

'OK, well hang in there. The going is less rough from here. Hey, look at these prints.'

'Oh wow... would that be our deer?'

'Definitely deer. But too small for red. I think they must be sika, heading to the other side. That looks like their poo as well.' He looked up this time, scouring the slopes for movement in the branches.

'There we go, yep... just wait to see a face... yes! Got him.'

'You are a genius Dougall Earp. How on earth did you go from these imprints in the mud to that photo in 30 seconds.'

'You just kind-of tune in over time. Everything leaves a trace.'

'Tell me about it. Especially these days. Big Brother is watching *everything* now.'

'Ah yes, I see what you mean. Digital footprints. The virtual trail of pebbles.'

'Nothing we can do to turn the clock back I'm afraid. The only option is to take control of your own secrets. I'd rather have Big Brother watching me, than watching someone else thinking that person is me.'

'One thing for sure, those sika should look out, I'll have to report the sighting.'

'Oooh are they bad?'

'Yeah, unfortunately. They escaped from private parks years ago, they shouldn't really be here. They damage the trees and threaten the native population of reds through cross-breeding.'

'Oh no, does that mean we can't count them?'

'Nope, they count. I'll still report them though.'

88 Sika Deer

'Reece, we've only got twelve critters to go now, we're still ahead of the game but it does mean we need to spend time here. We need to linger a while and watch.'

They made their way to the small hide on the eastern side of the lake. One twitcher was already inside, who looked miffed to have his solitude broken. Reece and Dougall settled down on the benches, the former having to suppress a moan of pleasure as the weight came off his knee. There was nothing on show at first, but after a while a heron landed on the far side, its capacious wings ensuring the softest of landings, dropping vertically into the reedbed like an avian Mary Poppins. It soon adopted its slingshot pose, head cocked in freeze-frame, ready to spear any unsuspecting prey that took a wrong turn through the weeds. After an hour, nothing more came forward for muster. The fellow occupant of the hide packed up his gear and departed, grumbling under his breath as he opened the door, amplifying Dougall's anxiety.

'This doesn't look promising.'

'I don't care how long it takes. I've got some painkillers and I can have a snifter.' Reece patted his backpack, one of his bottles of water contained vodka and 7UP – the reveal was supposed to occur once they'd scored the ton. 'In fact I can have a kip.' He rested his head on the window ledge and closed his eyes, making

Dougall marvel at the man's ability to sleep in any position. By 8pm Dougall had resigned himself to failure after all. Only four types of waterfowl had obliged, plus a passing buzzard he expected to see much earlier in the day. Still six to go, but they were running out of options.

89 Grey Heron

90 Moorhen

91 Snipe

92 Buzzard

93 Goosander

94 Golden Plover

Dougall shook Reece on the shoulder, rousing him with a fright. At least a stiffness in neck and back now counterbalanced his other aches and pains. He flexed a few times, wincing, in an attempt to give the illusion of mobility. Dougall had to assist his exit from the hide and they continued with Reece propped up on his host's shoulder. Progress along the bank was tortuous due to the swamp-like conditions but, by the time they reached the dam, Reece was just about able to propel himself. A small, fast-flowing river issued from the foot of the manmade bank, with rocks on either side caught in the evening sun, glowing like amber. A pair of wheatears appeared, posing on the rocks like soap stars eager to be papped. A hundred metres further down, a dipper zipped into view, the contrast of its cocoa

and white illuminated to perfection, resembling a promo for a new type of M&S dessert.

'Oh wow, I think I've just met my favourite bird. And it does what it says on the tin... it's actually dipping,' said Reece, sounding in the early stages of delirium.

'Aye, I love them too, such smart fellows. I was banking on a dipper along here, I have to say. Oh my word...' Dougall's voice tailed off and he raised the camera again. 'Reece, you know that seal we saw earlier.'

'Er... yes?'

'You thought it was an otter.'

'Yeeesss.'

'Well... lookie here.' Dougall pointed to a wider section of the river downstream, patterned by eddies. 'Mum otter and a cub having fishing lessons.'

'No way!'

Dougall grabbed the photos and chuckled, all buoyancy restored. When a grey wagtail showed up to grace the air with its fly-catching gymnastics – in another colour combination to steal the heart – they were feeling home and hosed.

95 Wheatear

96 Dipper

97 Otter

98 Grey Wagtail

Then nothing for the next hour, along the increasingly eroded path. They inched between boulders, the crumbs of the mountain, as the yellow sun caramelised towards the horizon. Finally the landscape opened out to views of the sea, as the path left the river, branching west to follow the alignment of contours. They passed a disused pumping station, giving Dougall another hunch about potential company nearby. Reece leaned against a dry-stone wall while Dougall spied the scene, taking advantage of the viewfinder's adjustment to poor light conditions. A few minutes later, his instincts proved accurate again as an apparition of pale wings took shape from a hole in the wall. The nursery rhyme creature, with face and body surreally juxtaposed, flapped across a cobbled yard then away to the grassland below, close enough for Reece to feel the languid swoosh of its flight.

99 Barn Owl

One more to go. From behind the pumping station, the screech and hoot of tawny owls could be heard but they obstinately refused to break cover – the final capture was proving elusive. Before the concluding section of the route, down to the edge of the park and the main road, stood a group of abandoned cottages. Dougall and Reece slumped onto a flight of concrete steps at the side of one of the ruins, despondent and frustrated. The panorama across the bay where the two lochs joined was an extraordinary sight, with pink, apricot and turquoise sky, streaked by jet trails and flecks of cloud, all reflecting in a glassy sea. They sat against a backdrop that could have been a night-time film set, ripe for sinister events to unfold. From the gloom, Reece just about managed to string a sentence together.

'Are we done Doog? Can you take pictures in the dark?'

'Aye, I can. But I'm not sure if anything will show up now. Maybe a hedgehog.'

All hope was sliding away into the darkness, until an unexpected signal pierced the ether.

'Hey, what's that sound?' Reece was picking up some high-pitched squeals that brought back memories of childhood, a sound he used to hear on long summer evenings on the estate where he grew up, playing football until the kids couldn't see to kick. 'I haven't heard that for so long.'

'Oh my... the swifts are here! But how to get one on film.'

The calls got louder until the swooping bullets began to show themselves above the trees. The birds were getting closer and closer to the buildings. Dougall swung his upper body to and fro with the camera, trying to catch one in frame, but they were too fast. Reece watched on, hypnotised by the movement. Just as Dougall was about to give up, two of the swifts flew into a gap in the roof tiles. He trained the lens on the opening and waited, trying to control his shaking arms – this felt like the last chance. Upon sensing the tiniest flicker, he fired off a burst and prayed. He checked the LCD display, then roared with exultation so loudly the swifts would probably never return to that spot again.

'We did it Reece... just look at that tiny face. That's a lifer for me.'

100 Common Swift

'I can't believe it. We did it Doog! Congratulations man. If I could get up, I'd give you a kiss. Time to celebrate.' He extracted the vodka from his bag and raised a toast.

'I'll pass bud, I'm not one for booze.'

'Ah OK... protein bars then.'

Dougall extracted the pack again and reached inside.

'Ah! Sorry Reece, I must be on a roll. This one's cranberry and granola.'

'Argh! Nooo! I get the bullet.' On reluctantly fishing out the coconut and white chocolate, Reece rested his head on Dougall's shoulder in mock execution, then took another swig from his bottle.

'No disrespect Doog, but I'm not going to eat it.'

'No worries, we can leave it here for the birds. I better have a skim through the photos just to double check.'

'Okey dokey. I can't wait to see them all.'

Having scrolled to the top of the gallery Dougall set about the review and almost immediately let out a cry of disbelief.

'Oh no... don't say...'

'What's wrong?'

'I don't believe it. Look at this.'

Dougall handed Reece the camera to show him an image notably devoid of birdlife, apart from two curled-up feet and the merest blur of brown wing in the top-right corner.

'What's that?'

'That my friend, is our confounded robin. The easiest animal to photograph in Christendom and I missed the beggar. I am so, so sorry, I had no idea.'

The two men turned to face each other and as their eyes met, big smiles broke across their faces, before they collapsed into unrestrained laughter.

'Oh Doog, we got so close. That's fucking hilarious. Priceless. Just it's little feet, are you sure we can't use it.'

'Nooo. Those feet could be anything.'

'Oh well, I guess I better post this sunset on Pebbletank while we're here, it is rather stupendous.'

Reece extricated his phone and raised it to the horizon. While lining up the shot he noticed a splash of water at the bottom of the screen.

'Oooh... what was that?'

Dougall took the binoculars and looked out to sea. It was twilight but the prospect still shimmered in tones of sapphire blue.

'Oh you beauty.'

The camera was lifted again and Dougall began speaking an incantation.

'Come on baby... come on baby... you can do it. Come on... BAM!'

As he was preparing the final shot, a humpback whale was breaching the surface of the loch. Dougall needed the proof of a full silhouette. In that climactic moment the whale lifted into the air, twisting to expose one blade-like pectoral fin, before splashing back down into the deep. Dougall's image was definitive and breathtaking.

'One shot baby. One shot.'

'Absolutely Doog. Two is pussy.'

'That was a humpback, just passing through. You'll see that here once in a lifetime.'

'Will it count?'

'Yes bud, it'll count.'

six

Marek & Alice

Saturday July 16th

'Please tell me you haven't baked a cake?! God you're so embarrassing.' Christine Clay was shouting at her mother Alice down the phone. The imminent arrival of Marek Tomaszewski at the complex where Alice lived had taken months of careful planning. Christine had set her mother up with a Pebbletank account to keep her mind active and give her some company, given that she'd become the only surviving member of the first intake of residents, but the meet-up with Marek was Alice's choice. Christine was originally prompted to this course of action having become convinced of her mother's descent into senility when Alice swore at her for the first time in her life, at the age of eighty seven.

'I don't want to use the SODDING frame!'

Alice expressed the words through gritted teeth and eyes shut tight, as if she was passing through an impenetrable barrier of pain. The word 'sodding' had to be wrested from her soul, a lifelong dedication to being nice finally worn down by her daughter's hectoring tone.

'But Mum, why do you insist on using those bloody sticks! You're supposed to put the ends on the ground, not just wave them in front of you. You look like someone divining for water!'

Each of Alice's parents had left behind one walking stick and she hated throwing things away, so they remained permanently installed in the umbrella stand by her front door. In her late eighties she had to acknowledge a degree of infirmity

had crept in. Having fallen a couple of times, resulting in trips to A&E and the dreaded calling of Christine down to Eastbourne, she accepted the need for some kind of support, but was determined to make use of her existing possessions and not make any fuss. The aluminium frame that Christine had triumphantly delivered after the first accident sat unused in a corner of the spare bedroom. Alice had pleaded with her not to get one and patiently endured several years of exhortation to practice with the thing before exploding, a dam-burst of pent up frustration after years of being treated like an idiot.

'Her mind's gone, Julian, I'm telling you she's lost the plot.' Christine was talking to her husband hands-free on the drive back to Chigwell on the day of the swearing, back in 2019. 'It's so sad to see her like that. She's become so irritable, I bet it's Alzheimer's.'

Against her better judgement, Alice was rather taken by Pebbletank. Most of Christine's attempts to get her mother to use a computer had failed. A laptop sat on lace doilies on the dining table, used only for Solitaire and Googling answers to crossword clues, albeit as a last resort. 'What's the point, if the internet gives you the answers?' Alice would say, when chastised for being so old fashioned. Christine had given up trying to promote the benefits of online shopping within a couple of years of setting up the Wi-Fi, however the tablet smartphone proved a winner. She took on the chin her mother's reluctance to actually use the thing for calls, despite the preferred alternative being an ancient Nokia with thirty minute battery life and buttons too worn to identify the numbers for dialling. The fact that Alice got to grips with WhatsApp and Pebbletank was Christine's crowning

achievement and tending the @aliceclay.1931 account became her way of connecting her mother with the outside world.

'I'm going to find some accounts for you to follow Mum.'

'Oh dear. Do I have to pay anything?'

'No mother, don't be silly. It just means you control what you see. If you open the app, then scroll down, you get to see photos by people that share your interests, or photos of places you love. I'll find some accounts and hashtags for you to follow.'

'Oh goodness, I don't know anything about apps or hashtags.'

'Don't worry, you don't need to. I'll show you, it's easy. And you'll love seeing all the flowers and buildings... and anything to do with, er... Sussex.'

Christine's voice betrayed a tinge of resentment on speaking that county name. Her parents spent their married life in and around Chelmsford and her own emotional ties were bound firmly to that area, her birthplace. She had persuaded Julian they should locate themselves in the suburbs of northeast London in order to be nearby, so when Alice chose Eastbourne from the available newbuild options in the brochure, she was infuriated.

'Eastbourne?! Why Eastbourne?! It's miles away mother, why go all the way back there? I swear you're doing this deliberately to wind me up. You know the kids are settled here, we're living here because of you.'

'Oh Christine. I never asked you to live close to me, I can look after myself dear.'

'No you bloody well can't! If you could look after yourself, why are we looking at retirement homes?'

'The help is just there if you need it... and I will do one day, dear... but not now. It means I won't be a trouble to you. My roots are on the South Coast, it's where I feel at home. I miss the sea, I miss the Downs.'

'The Downs? Christ, you're just doing this to spite me.'

Prior to the walking frame incident, the Eastbourne discussion in 2006 had been their biggest ever row. A year later, having been a widow since 2002 following the death of her husband Geoffrey, Alice's wishes prevailed and she moved into Cedar Lodge. Despite being first on the waiting list, by the time the paperwork was sorted only ground floor flats were available, meaning that Alice missed out on a decent view. Accordingly she might have felt a bitterness of her own, since Julian was supposed to have everything in hand, but ultimately the compensation of having a terrace for her plants more than made amends. These traces of family discord persisted under the surface through the years, ready to bubble up whenever the past was raised – a case in point being Christine's curation of geographically relevant content for Alice's Pebbletank account, but here the grievances were kept in check.

'Right then Mum... now, you should see lots of photos of flowers, buildings and anything historical, especially stuff related to the Eastbourne area.'

'What about railways? Geoffrey would have liked that, can it do railways?'

'Er... yes Mum, it can *do* anything you like.' Christine made no attempt to conceal her rolling eyes while making a few more taps. 'And railways. Done. You know, it's worth reading what people have written underneath, I've tried to find accounts that add some interesting blurb under each picture.'

'Do I have to take selfies? I don't want to take selfies, I really don't like them. All those young women ruining their faces, looking like trout, I've seen them on TV. Whatever celebrity cooking programme, there's always one of them, pouting away. '

'Mum, don't be silly. Of course you don't have to take selfies. You don't have to post anything, you can just look at other people's stuff. I bet you'll never watch TV again once you've got the hang of it.'

Alice was as sceptical about Pebbletank as she was about all Christine's technology-related badgering to start with but, against all expectation, she quickly became addicted. She was astounded to see a stream of images that revisited the environs of her youth, summoned by a single tap on the screen. The churches in villages she had cycled through as a child, the hedgerows, the country lanes. One of the first things to catch her eye was a war memorial, commemorating lost airmen on a hilltop in the Sussex Weald, posted by someone called @marek.tomas.builds. He had added a beautifully written and touching account of the back story, which made Alice dig into more of his photos. Christine had followed him on her mother's behalf because he seemed particularly interested in architectural detail and she was delighted, not to mention amazed, when seeing just how many of his photos @aliceclay.1931 had liked when first checking up on progress. Delight turned to consternation early in 2022 though, when Alice sent a request to Marek to join him on a road trip.

'It's called a *deep dive*, dear. It's a new feature.'

The world had turned upside down in the last two years to such an extent that Christine thought there were no shocks left to experience, but here she was, listening to her mother explaining the intricacies of social media.

'Mother, have you gone completely mad? He's a builder. He's from Poland.'

'No dear, he was born in Wolverhampton.'

'How the hell do you know?'

'He told me. We write those little messages to each other.'

Christine dropped her phone, the Earth having truly tilted on its axis. Once she had caught up with Alice's messaging and chatted with Marek from her own account, she grudgingly concluded that the madness would have to stand. Any attempt to prohibit the venture might damage their relationship even further and Marek's words had sufficiently reassured he was probably no pervert or axe murderer. Nevertheless, she was driven to question her mother's sanity again, in conversation with her husband.

'Can you have a mid-life crisis in your nineties, Jools?'

'I don't see why not. Did she ever have one before, when normal people do?'

'Not that I noticed.'

'Well, there you go... maybe its always been on the back burner. Maybe this is a last hurrah... she wants to prove to us she's not a hopeless invalid.'

'God knows. She's lost her marbles, I do know that much.'



Marek parked his Peugeot Boxer van in one of the visitor bays at Cedar Lodge, relieved to discover how wide they were. He was concerned about having to use

a disabled space – seeing others doing the same was one of his pet hates, but sometimes he needed the room. The complex of sheltered living apartments opened in 2007, offering anyone over sixty an independent lifestyle, but with additional shared facilities for those inmates so inclined: a dining room, a TV lounge, a laundry, a mobility scooter store. Staff were on hand to deal with emergencies and there was a pull cord alarm in every room. However, anyone lucky enough to be self-sufficient could, by ignoring the disinfectant smell in the corridors, imagine they were living in any regular block of flats. A sliver of English Channel could just about be seen from two of the units on the top floor, thereby justifying the marketing claim about sea views.

‘That must’ve been one crraazee brainstorm session by the property developers,’ thought Marek as he surveyed the lawns surrounding the rain-blackened car park to see a single cedar tree, a remnant of the ornamental planting in the grounds of the mansion that once stood on the site. The mansion had been demolished and a new characterless brick edifice raised in its place – Marek tutted to himself at the sight of puddles in the corner of the tarmac. ‘Amateurs,’ he scoffed, this time out loud, before making his way to the entrance and typing Alice’s flat number into the panel. He shifted on his feet, reading the delay as a measure of his would-be passenger’s frailty. Eventually a buzzer sounded and the automatic doors opened. He signed in at the reception desk, eyed suspiciously by the duty manager, then followed the signs to the appointed door and pressed the bell. This time there was no delay. Alice’s face twinkled to see her newest friend standing outside in leather jacket, unshaven and red check bandana tied around his head.

He looked like the biker poet of his profile pebble, which she feared was just for show.

'You must be Marek,' she beamed.

'Morning Alice. Splendid to meet you.'

Alice ushered him through to the sitting room.

'I'll get some tea dear. Would you like a piece of cake? It's date and walnut.'

'Sounds great, yes please.'

Alice reminded Marek of one of his favourite elderly TV actresses but he couldn't place the name. White haired and skin like the back of old leaves, but eyes radiating the undimmed spirit of a girl.

'I've packed my bag Marek. I'm ready to leave whenever you like.'

'OK Alice. Let's recap on the plan, to make sure you're still happy. It's about a hundred and ninety miles, which would be about four and a half hours without stops. But I know we need stops.'

'Oh, yes please. But don't worry dear, I can, um... hold on until we find somewhere.'

'Perfect. I've already picked up the pineapples, if you remember.'

'Ah yes, of course. Are they very heavy?'

'They were not too bad actually. I've carried heavier. My hoist comes in very handy, as you will see.'

'Oh goodness. I'm fascinated.'

'We'll mostly take the fastest route. A27, M23, M25, M40. But we'll cut across country through the Cotswolds rather than going all the way to Birmingham, despite what the lady in the box says.'

Alice looked at him quizzically.

'The sat-nav Alice. I call her my lady.'

'Oh yes. Isn't it amazing what you can do nowadays. I hate going anywhere without Geoffrey's road atlas, but my daughter thinks I'm mad. Do you mind if I bring it along, I like to follow the route.'

'By all means Alice, by all means. My GPS isn't great anyway, the information is out of date.'

Alice loved to travel and desperately missed the journeys she took with her husband, in a series of much-cherished cars over the years. It wasn't the same with Christine. She insisted on blaring out loud music and the frosty atmosphere left Alice longing for arrival. With Geoffrey the transit itself was the charm, and Alice hoped Marek's road trip experience would recapture those feelings. They seemed to have so much in common and he came across as such a genuine person. He worked as a builder and landscape designer and had become very selective about the jobs he took on, being happy to travel all round the country as long as the customers gave out positive energy and the work had some kind of cultural resonance. He used Pebbletank meet-ups as a reverse form of hitch-hiking, seeking company for his journeys from the pool of followers he had accrued, on the assumption that their common ground would give ample fuel for conversation. He usually travelled alone but occasionally someone would be keen

to share his start and end points. He could've said Eastbourne to Timbuktu to Alice and she might have agreed. As it happens, he needed to transport a pair of ornamental stone pineapples from an architectural salvage store near Hastings back to his yard in Worcester, so the arrangement was made for Alice to accompany him. Christine would be waiting in a hotel at the Worcester end to ferry her back the next day.

'Alice, that was magnificent. The sponge was light as a feather.'

'Oh I'm so glad. Would you like to take the rest with you?'

Marek was trapped, saying No seemed an impossibility. Alice tidied up the crockery, put the leftover cake in one of her collection of empty ice cream cartons and finished packing her shopping bags. Once her coat was on she was ready to roll.



In planning the trip Alice reached a compromise with Christine. She agreed to use one stick and that she would hold Marek's arm with her other hand, when walking outside the van. Marek wheeled her overnight case and her two shopping bags were slung from an elbow. Marek had customised the van some time ago, replacing the standard two-passenger bench with a single captain seat. It was better for Jinty, she preferred a perch to herself on the times she joined him on board, and he didn't need space for workmates. The seat was ideal for Alice too, and he assured both mother and daughter that getting inside would not be a problem, despite the elevated cabin.

The pair huddled closer on stepping into the open, as an unseasonal squall of gusty drizzle enveloped them. They reached the van with Marek already worrying about the wisdom of their scheme. Alice had to rest her hand on the wing mirror, shoulders hunched, the damp air having triggered a coughing fit.

'Hang on Alice, I'll get you inside in a jiffy.'

He placed the bags in the back then lifted a ramp into position from the rear of the vehicle to the ground. After some clanking he re-emerged with a remote control device attached to something inside, via an extendable cable. As he worked the joystick a grinding sound could be heard and soon a bright yellow platform emerged, propelled on caterpillar tracks. He steered the contraption around the open doors and up towards where Alice was standing. 'Well I'll be jiggered,' she said, before placing her hand across her mouth. 'Am I going on that?'

'Yes, you are. We both are, don't worry it's perfectly safe.'

Marek manoeuvred Alice away from the passenger door, opened it wide then positioned the hoist as close to the cabin space as possible, with its arm appendage parallel to the side. It looked like a giant anglepoise lamp designed by the CBBC props department.

'Alice, if I just remove this bar, can you step up here...'

It was a relatively small step, onto a flat square plate with just about room for two. Marek joined her, re-engaged the safety barrier then started to work the controls. With a slight jump, the platform began to rise.

'Golly,' Alice said as she felt herself being lifted.

'Soon have you in.'

Marek raised the level until it was just below the floor of the cabin, then rotated the arm to move them further towards the threshold. A position was finally reached requiring the smallest step from their mechanical plinth into the seat.

'There you go Alice, like getting into a car. Just keep hold of my arm.'

'Goodness, how clever.' Alice was able to plant herself down directly, then swing her feet around under the dashboard.

'Ta da! See, I told you.'

'Oh it's so comfy, well done Marek. Oh, actually... do you mind if I have my bag? The one with the atlas.'

Marek rescued both shopping bags from the back and placed them on the floor between them. The well-thumbed pages of the atlas were fraying along the spiral bound edge and the most used ones were faded by sunlight. It was a toss-up between the atlas and the bags as to which had been preserved the longest.

'We got this when Geoffrey retired. We used it a lot in the early days.' Alice placed the atlas on her lap and opened the pages to show Eastbourne. Marek looked across and smiled.

'That looks like it's seen some mileage Alice. I guess you realise some of the roads we're going on today won't be in there.'

'Oh yes, I know. But I like following the route anyway... the place names, the rivers, the hills that we pass by.'

'Superb, superb... Right then... let the adventure begin. What a shame it's such a grey day.'

Marek reversed out of the space and headed back down the private drive to the main road. He was so used to the ever present voice of the sat-nav it never occurred to him to switch it off. The only time it was helpful today was in the first few miles, extricating themselves from the town, out onto the A27. The Downs were shrouded in mist and the windscreen wipers laboured against drizzle and spray. At one roundabout, Alice was looking anxiously at her maps.

'Oh.. don't we need to go straight on dear.'

Marek was taking the third exit, in obedience to the lady in the box.

'No Alice, I think our friend here is correct.'

'Oh dear. I guess she must know best.'

'Not always, but this time I think so.'

Alice eventually gave up trying to visualise the Polegate bypass in relation to the ancient squiggles on her knees and turned her attention to Marek. It felt good to be voyaging again, especially with the feel of companionship.

'I must say Marek, this is terrifically exciting, I've never been in a van before. Is your load quite safe in the back.'

'Oh yes, the pineapples are well strapped down. And there's a compartment for your case.'

'Oh that's good. You know, when I first saw your name, it brought back such memories.'

'Really!?'

'Oh yes. From the football. I remember it so clearly, Geoffrey and I loved to watch the football. Of course, in those days it was only England games and the FA Cup

Final that were ever shown live. It felt so important back then, like the whole country was watching. It's not the same now, everyone's watching something different.'

'You mean 1973? Jan Tomaszewski?'

'Yes that's it. I don't suppose... '

'Um, no. No relation. Not so I'm aware.'

'Ah, I see, what a pity. Well anyway... for a while, your name was on everyone's lips. Jan Tomaszewski broke the nation's heart but my goodness he played so well. I don't remember the score, just that England failed to qualify for something or other. I do remember that Brian Clough chappie calling him a clown and telling us to relax.'

'That was a famous night for sure. I was only eight at the time but, of course, I remember it. I got crucified in the playground at school the next day, my God! It was the World Cup. Alf Ramsey was sacked a few months later. You mustn't forget, the Poles love their football too and have their own stories of glorious failure.'

'Yes, I suppose so. It is interesting to hear what you say Marek. You sound so... so *English*. Are you Polish or English inside?'

'Oh, a bit of both. I was born here, my whole life has been spent here. My father didn't have much time for me, I barely knew him as a person, so I never had much cultural tradition handed down by word of mouth. Basically I feel English, but Poland is there inside my soul. Like the trace of wild in a domestic moggy, ha ha.'

Alice joined his laughter, she felt completely safe in his presence. Twenty minutes into the journey they reached a section of newly built road, in which a giant roundabout interchange had been spliced into the landscape, replacing a traffic light junction notorious for accidents. As far as the sat-nav was concerned, there was nothing to do but stay on a straight line, so when Marek steered the curves, the lady in the box gave two futile orders to take a U-turn, before giving up the ghost. The screen showed their vehicle traversing open fields with the annotation 'Unknown road' at the bottom of the screen.

'Oh look Marek, we're flying!' Alice clapped her hands in glee.



'I couldn't help noticing, Alice, it looked like you have a great vinyl collection.'

'Oh yes, we loved our music, we used to listen to records all the time, it's such a shame the turntable doesn't work anymore.'

'I noticed a couple of titles. Louis Armstrong. Oscar Peterson.'

'Yes, yes. Geoffrey loved his jazz. There are so many there. Dave Brubeck, Jacques Loussier, Stan Getz.'

'Oh wow. I wish I'd spent more time having a look. I used to have some of those. They ended up in a skip.'

'Oh my goodness. In a skip, what ever happened?'

'Don't you remember Alice, what it was like back around the late nineties? CDs and memory cards had taken over the world. I always used to say that vinyl sounded better, especially all the scratches. People in shops looked at me like I was mad, like the last of the old fogeys. I had so many old vinyl albums but

nothing to play them on, once *my* old hi-fi packed in... I tried to sell them but no-one was interested. The owners of second-hand record shops became a dying breed, like rag-and-bone men. In the end there was nothing to do but dump them in a skip. They'd be worth a small fortune now – I bet yours are too.'

'Ahh... maybe. But I could never part with them, nothing would match the sentimental value.'

'True... but you could start playing them again, you could get a new record player.'

'Oh I'm too old for that now, besides I always needed Geoffrey to put them on. By the way, do they still make record players, I thought they were extinct?'

'God, yes. It's the new latest thing. All the cool kids are into vinyl now, its crazy, the world turned full circle. Proper LPs have become objects of desire again, about twenty years after they were deemed obsolete.'

'Goodness, I had no idea. Have *you* bought a new one.'

'No, that's not for me, the moment has gone. Now it's just marketing nonsense, to make people buy more gadgets. It's ironic how big business can con the world into buying things, by cynically selling the notion that vinyl is good again. It's like those brand developers that brainwashed everyone into wanting cider in a glass filled with ice in the noughties. We think we're being cool and on trend when in fact we're just being manipulated. Only it's more subtle now... a covert spreading of whispers on social media making people think they've arrived at some fundamental truth themselves via reasoned societal consensus, rather than being lectured by a man in a suit. Like the mantra: *vinyl is king*. I went down in flames saying vinyl was king, back in the year 2000. But I was kidding myself and there's

no going back. They could put needle sounds and scratches into the mix if we *really* wanted them, but no-one makes money that way. I was wrong then and I still am, I'm sticking to my downloads now, come what may.'

'Oh Marek. What a shame you lost all your LPs. Such a waste.'

'Never mind, we still have the music.'

Once past Lewes the A27 begins a roller-coaster ride over the swooping hills that define the outskirts of Brighton and Hove. As they rose and fell in the mist, Marek checked whether Alice was warm enough, the temperature outside being unusually cool for July. Alice said she was fine and he didn't need to stop yet. He was being careful about speed but, on one upward incline, he was forced into overtaking a flat-bed lorry filled with cube-shaped Hippo bags full of rubble. The handles of the bags convulsed in the turbulent air, making them look like a gang of unruly cartoon aliens rounded up for bounty. The wiper speed increased through the spray and Marek let out a sigh, disappointed that his deep dive guest was not having the best of conditions.

'You must get lonely doing this all the time,' said Alice, detecting his mood.

'It's not too bad, I'm used to my own company. I spend more time on the jobs than I do on the road. But you're right Alice, I do welcome having someone to talk to, that's why I offer the meet-ups. Especially since becoming separated from my wife.'

'Oh I'm sorry, I didn't realise.'

'I don't talk about it much, it's all water under the bridge now. She left me a few years ago, her name was Jinty... that's short for Jintara. She came over here from Thailand.'

'Ohh... a Thai bride?' Alice's eyes were agog, she had read about the phenomenon in her magazines.

'Yes, she was indeed. I met her over there, the perfect cliché scenario... she was a waitress, twenty years younger than me, but we got on like a house on fire. Once we became, er... friendly... I tried to visit as often as I could. We ended up getting married and she came over here. As you probably know, it's a well-beaten path.'

'But it didn't last?'

'No. The trouble was, in the beginning that well-beaten path was simply a route to a better life over here. As a general rule, the brides were coming from a poor background and the bond was more spiritual than physical.' Marek halted at that point, and gave a mock cough. 'Well... obviously, you know... Thailand and everything. Of course, there was something physical, but the bonds we made were real. They didn't care about the age difference, they were just glad to meet men who adored them and treated them as equal.'

'So what went wrong dear?'

'Well, unfortunately the path is so well-beaten that a kind-of Thai widow subculture has developed over here. The women can collaborate, to share knowledge about immigration law and how to claim benefits. Where the motive to come here was once for a loving and stable relationship, as the years have

passed it's become more calculating in some cases. Perhaps I'm being unfair, it's probably down to me... but as soon as Jinty got indefinite leave to stay, her attitude toward me changed. The first wave of spare wives occurred when the husbands started dying. There's a second wave now, where husbands are being cast aside for younger men who haven't lost the energy to go partying.'

'Oh dear, Marek. And that's what happened to you?'

'Yes it did. She dumped me, got a lawyer and insisted on keeping the house. She even changed the locks. I didn't have the will to protest, by this point I just wanted a quiet life. We had a bit of fun while it lasted, but how it ended was upsetting.'

'I can imagine, you poor thing, that sounds awful. I must say, I feel so lucky to have had my time with Geoffrey, he was such a good man and we never had a bad word between us. Well, maybe things got difficult towards the end, but he wasn't himself then.'

Marek was merging onto the A23 as Alice spoke and he missed the inference of troubled times before her husband's death. Anyway, he was keen to steer their conversation further into history.

'Alice, I was hoping to catch up with you about the war.'

'Which war do you mean dear, the new one?'

'Hmm, good question. Who knew we'd be asking ourselves that in 2022. *Never again* they said. No, I mean the stuff you mentioned in your messages, about your experiences as a young girl.'

'Oh yes. It really is quite dreadful to think what those poor people are going through now. It was just the same here, all those years ago.'

'Did you really get shot at, Alice?'

'Yes, it's true. Only once mind you, we didn't make the same mistake again. We were playing hockey on the pitches at school when a German fighter flew over us, firing its guns. Miraculously, no-one was hurt. Presumably it was a Messerschmidt, but I don't know. Geoffrey was the one for plane-spotting.'

'That is such an extraordinary coincidence because my Dad must've flown in the same skies.'

'Ah yes, you said he was in the Polish Air Force.'

'Yes indeed, but based here of course and they worked alongside the RAF.'

'How did he get here?'

'Well, he was nineteen when war broke out and was just starting to learn to fly when Hitler invaded Poland. Like many of his peers, he escaped via Romania and France. Significant chunks of the original Polish Air Forces ended up here and, as more men came, more squadrons were created. Incidentally, for a while, the Polish 303 Squadron was the most successful fighter unit in the land, but of course the British government banned any mention of this fact in the press – they always like playing with the truth.'

'What happened to him Marek, how did he manage to survive?'

'It's difficult to say. His name was Grzegorz. I know that he belonged to 315 Squadron and flew from various sites around Britain including RAF Northolt. They started off with Spitfires, then Mustangs later in the war. He always told me he

had 10 proven kills but there's no evidence, and it doesn't quite fit with squadron records. He didn't like to talk about his wartime experiences. I know he was shot down over the south coast at one point but was rescued. He never spoke about his injuries but I could see the scar tissue on the outside. God knows what memories he held inside. I know he was a very brave man but sadly I cannot tell you his full story Alice.'

'I see, I see. I completely understand dear. There were so many untold stories at that time. Obviously, he stayed here after the war?'

'Yes, there was nothing to return to. From the frying pan into the fire, so to speak, Poland ended the war occupied by Russia. It is quite unbearable now, to see the same demonic powers at large in eastern Europe. The same kind of tinder box, only this time Ukraine takes the toll while world leaders prevaricate, desperate to avoid a domino effect, but mostly concerned about saving face with their electorates. It's like a world war two re-enactment, only with boundaries and flags slightly rearranged.'

'I must say, today's lot of prime-ministers are very good at talking, but never actually doing anything. They keep mentioning Churchill but they haven't actually done anything to stop what Russia's doing, not really. What did Churchill say... those who fail to learn from history are condemned to repeat it? Some of his present day admirers should think about that.'

'Well said Alice, I couldn't agree more. It was so sickening to see them, lining up to denounce Putin, having their fifteen minute phonecalls, then sitting on their hands. You can just imagine a sub-branch of the PR team in governments across the world, negotiating for access in the build-up to war. If some lunatic is going

to murder a million innocent people anyway, we may as well get whatever poll boosts are on offer.'

'Oh dear. I hope they've more gumption than that, Marek.'

'I honestly doubt it, Alice.'

'What I don't understand is how the Russian people allowed Putin to commit such evil.'

'It is mind-blowing isn't it. You'd think in the era of social media, where news spreads so virally, that public opinion would have stopped him in his tracks. Hitler's propaganda machine didn't have Facebook and Twitter to worry about. But I guess, the way online communities coagulate around one specific view of the world, they can be corralled together. Because everyone is so dependent on the internet, despots in Russia, China and India can simply control the masses by switching it off, or distorting the truth to enough gullible citizens they start to believe their own lies. Hats off to Putin, he played the long game, spreading his mischief. Trump, Brexit, twiddling the dials of global politics like your old amplifier, waiting for the optimal moment to strike. Fake news and the rise of ignorance responsible for a fresh million lives being destroyed. And they said *never again*.'

By now Alice had started to cry. Unthinkable memories long buried in the past were being stirred by Marek's outpouring.

'I'm sorry Alice, I should stop blathering on. I usually just rant this stuff to myself.'

'No, no, please don't apologise. What you're saying makes sense to me, it's just all so terribly sad. I thought the world was supposed to be better place now, a healed place. It's like these forces of evil are always there, waiting for an opportunity to overflow... like a sewer. Seeing the poor people in bomb shelters this year, in 2022. It's just too much.'

'Yes. It is too much. One day you are living in a world of nuance: a kaleidoscope mixture of viewpoints, specialisms, personalities, moods, ideas... the next day you're all squashed together into a bomb shelter, to base-level existence. Everything we stand for and care about, simply eradicated. We should have done more.'

'If only there was something we could have done to stop him. To be honest Marek, I found it hard to watch the news in the beginning. The poor reporters looked so out of their depth, not knowing how to react.'

'I know what you mean Alice. They weren't prepared. All they had in their memory bank was playing war games when they were little. Point your fingers and say *bang*. Or watching their kids play Fortnite, shooting people then doing a dance and building a shed. They were definitely out of their depth... and the editorial agenda came unstuck, there isn't so much room for balance and diversity when confronted by the full horror of war.'

'They do seem to spend an awful lot of effort, trying to give everyone a voice.'

'Yes! I hate it. It's like when a child does a painting and tries to mix every single colour on the palette. You just end up with mush. Give me experts. Give me journalists who have learned absolute truths from a rich and exacting life journey.'

Politicians are the same. They used to be ex-Spitfire pilots, now they're just ex-leaders of the student union, good at talking but without the slightest idea what to do.'

In putting the world to rights, Marek and Alice had progressed from M23, to M25 and onto the M40. It was definitely time for a break, so they pulled off at the first services. Fortunately the drizzle had stopped and the atmosphere was feeling less sodden as Marek worked the hoist to transfer Alice onto the ground. A small group of people gathered to watch the process and take videos.

'Oh dear, how embarrassing. I really am a nuisance.'

'Not at all, you are a star Alice. Welcome to the delights of Beaconsfield, let's get inside.'

Marek escorted his road trip buddy into the hub and they set about finding the toilets, amid the chaos of refugees from the highway pursuing their refreshments of choice.



Marek and Alice ate their sandwiches and crisps back in the van. Once rolling again, around the maze of painted lanes feeding back onto the northbound carriageway, Alice was struck by the local wildlife.

'What *are* those enormous birds?'

'Red kites. There's dozens of them along here. I guess you don't see them so much in Sussex?'

'Well, I never have. I had no idea there were so many, and they're so big!' She tried to get a better view while Marek steered the curves, before her neck started

to hurt. 'You know, this reminds me of trips with Geoffrey. We used to visit different parts of the country on little holidays and we'd remark about the subtle differences as you got further away from home. You start to see unfamiliar place names, the shape of them changes, you can tell you're somewhere new. That's why I like seeing the villages mentioned on the signs, then finding where they are on the map. And other things change, like the colour of the soil, or the style of buildings... or the birds. Even though this is such a small country we found it endlessly fascinating.'

'I do get what you're saying, Alice. The changes are gentle, but somehow reassuring that you're making progress. You must miss Geoffrey very much.'

Alice's eyes started to glisten again and she looked into middle distance. 'Oh yes, I miss him very much. It's hard to believe it's twenty years ago now, it feels like yesterday.'

'Your daughter seems very nice. I can tell how much she cares about you, she seems very protective.'

'Oh yes, Christine is very... protective towards me, I'm lucky to have such a good daughter.'

Marek expected to hear some supporting evidence, but none was forthcoming.

'She got you onto Pebbletank, as I understand it?'

'Yes, yes, she did. She worries about me so much, not having any contact with people. It's a long way for her to come and visit and I don't want to be a bother.'

'Well, I'm glad she did, otherwise we wouldn't be having this lovely chat.'

'That's very true... today has worked out so well, I'm having such a wonderful time. I do wish though... I do wish sometimes she would stop treating me like a child. She talks about me to that husband of hers in the third person, even when I'm in the room. And I daren't get upset about anything, she merely laughs it off as dementia. She just wants me to play the role of sweet old lady, sweet old grandma. But how is anyone supposed to feel, when you get to this age and practically all your friends are dead. Everyone that became my friend since I've been in Cedar Lodge has come and gone, I'm the only one left. It's like living through the heartbreak of wartime all over again. Just because you're ninety, it doesn't make you immune to the pain of losing a friend.'

'It must be very hard Alice. Mind you... you seem to have all your faculties to me... as good as ever, I bet!'

'Oh, I shouldn't complain, I'm not too bad, touch wood. But when you see all your neighbours dropping like flies, it's hard not to think you'll be next. For some inexplicable reason, we oldies are supposed to accept all this, as if it's our lot. Christine says I'm having a late-life crisis and thinks it's funny. Well why shouldn't I have one! Why shouldn't I get some credit for lasting this long without breaking down. People these days get so mollycoddled. Everyone seems to be anxious about something, or imploring the world to be kind. Oh gosh. They should try being ninety.'

'Hmm... I think there's a lot of lip service being paid to kindness when, deep down inside, people don't really mean it.'

'Oh dear. We are being very gloomy aren't we?'

'Yes, I suppose so. These last couple of years have definitely been a time for introspection. I guess that's why the #ourhouse agenda has emerged, as a kind of self-healing.'

'Ah yes... I've read about that. I think I must've been doing that all along... reflecting on why things are the way they are... and what we've done wrong in the past. That and all the staying at home, I'm certainly an old hand at that.'

'I guess you must be. I'm sure things like Pebbletank have helped us pull through. But, you know Alice, it's funny... Pebbletank is all about making connections, but sometimes it's really hard to judge how to behave. Folk want you to reach out, but when you do, you can feel your motives being questioned. To comment, or not to comment? Is it best to delay before liking a post, in case you appear too eager? Will someone feel offended if I don't like everything? It's just as much of a minefield as real life.'

'Oh, I hadn't really thought about it in that way. Christine has done all the following. I like what I see, if I can get my fingers to work and tap on the right thing.'

'Well, please be reassured, I am overjoyed that you like my posts, but will never be offended if you miss one.' Marek looked across and mimed the drawing of a smiley face. 'It's hard to gauge the right degree of mateyness. Just because you appreciate someone's photography doesn't make you bosom pals. There are so many different degrees of connectedness.'

'That's so interesting Marek. You put me in mind of Christine, that's why she's so keen on that WhatsApp thing. She always says she doesn't want to phone all the

time... and she's right, in my experience phonecalls often bring bad news. It always gives me butterflies in my tummy to hear it ring. So much better to send a one way message, that doesn't need a reply, just so you know we're all safe. Mind you, she would probably prefer to have CCTV installed and remove the need to talk to me altogether, if she had her way!'

'Does she ever text?'

'Oh no dear, I've never been able to get the hang of that, the buttons on my mobile phone are hopeless. That WhatsApp is much better.' Alice gave a look of self-satisfaction, as if she'd stated a deeply-held belief about cake recipes.

'I guess it's inevitable that we find it hard to adapt our ways of communication, as computers become more embedded in our lives. One example occurred to me a few days ago... I realised I wasn't sure, are you supposed to thank the staff in Tesco Express after using the self-checkout? Do they expect it, or do they think it's weird? It's better when they have to do age verification... at least that breaks the ice.'

'I don't like the self-checkout, I find it so confusing. Not that I go much anymore.'

'Do you still do all your own shopping Alice?'

'I just about manage, yes. If I need to go out, there's a store in walking distance... well, hobbling distance. I can just about manage for little things. Mostly though, Christine orders everything online for me, they deliver from the internet would you believe.'

Marek was aware that Alice was not challenging his own ability to believe, the question was probably meant for Geoffrey. They were off the motorway network

now and heading up the A44 towards Evesham. While Alice was taking great pleasure in counting the various pick-your-own fruit signs by the side of the road, Marek kept half an eye open for *Asparagus Next Left*, daubed in black paint on a piece of old board, always his favourite.

'I'm really having the most enjoyable time. It's so good to be up here, such a good vantage point,' Alice said

'Yes, you certainly see all sorts up here,' Marek replied, indulging a private chortle at the diverse forms of vehicular impropriety he'd witnessed over the years. 'I'll start looking out for another place to stop.'

Marek had somewhere in mind. He needed no cartographic aids to find The Chequered Flag, having stopped there so many times, it was permanently fixed in his mental map of the universe. It was a classic bikers' greasy spoon beyond Evesham, and he had a hunch Alice would find it exciting. The cloud-base had lifted, allowing the Malvern Hills to materialise through fog to the west. As if to order, a clump of louche two wheelers were parked outside the door and, at this venue, the crowd that assembled to watch Alice lowered from the cab were on hand to applaud rather than capture footage for posting. Marek guided Alice into the café where they enjoyed mugs of tea with scones and jam.

'I love it here.'

'It's all so new to me Marek, what jolly good fun.'

'I knew you'd like it. These places have changed though. Back in the day, the guys in here would've been less welcoming, most likely braying about farts and heavy metal, ears alert for a fight. Nowadays they're just as burly, but the air is

more refined. They're more likely to be overheard discussing their broadband contracts or their moisturising routines.'

'Goodness. The scones are scrumptious I must say, what a treat.'



The last leg to Worcester began. Seeing the Malverns reminded Marek of their earlier conversation.

'Hey Alice, you know what we were saying before about gentle changes in landscape. It strikes me there are a few exceptions, a few spots where the normal vernacular of the English countryside is interrupted. Outliers that punctuate the rolling fields in a way that always takes you by surprise. Well there's one for sure... the Malvern Hills. I guess the Cheddar Gorge also.'

Alice nodded and paused before making an additional suggestion of her own.

'Beachy Head?'

'Absolutely. Beachy Head.'

The final destination was Marek's yard near Worcester Shrub Hill. He had his own office, with room to sit down.

'I'll sort out the pineapples in the morning. Let me just send Christine a message, to say we're here.' She called back straight away and promised to be there in twenty minutes.

Alice sat on an ageing swivel chair with chunks out of the foam and scanned around the office. Her eyes rested on a saxophone in a case attached to one wall.

'That's impressive,' she said, pointing at the instrument.

'Ah. You spotted the Beast. Yes, it is indeed, a found treasure with an important history.'

'Do you play dear?'

'No, not at all, I'm utterly tuneless. But that belonged to the great Henri De Souza.'

Alice was looking quizzical again.

'He was a legend on the northwest club scene, absolute legend. He was amazing live. His band never recorded, they just kept on touring. I saw them a few times before his health failed.'

'I'm sorry Marek, but I haven't heard of him. Geoffrey might've done.'

'Alice, can you keep a secret?'

'Yes of course.'

'Well, I have a confession to make. I er... kind-of stole it from someone. I was doing a job for this lady who turned out to be Henri's widow... he died you see. Anyway, she asked me to bury it under the patio I was building for her. She said it was for sentimental reasons. To me, it seemed criminal, it's such a great relic. So I decided to keep it. She'll never know what's really underneath that concrete. Do you think badly of me?'

'Oh dear. That does sound quite extreme. But I suppose if she thinks its there, there's no harm. As long as she never finds out. Did you bury anything in its place?'

'Only my keys. The keys to the house I shared with Jinty. Keys to a lock that no longer exists. Promise not to tell?'

'Yes I promise. No-one's going to find me to ask, anyway.'

'Thank you Alice, I do feel bad. But look at it, it deserves to be seen.'

'Maybe I can take the opportunity to share a confession of my own?'

'Yes of course, but I can't imagine...'

'You see, I fear I've been a little bit unfaithful to Geoffrey in the last few years. I met someone else in Cedar Lodge who became, well... quite special.'

'Alice, that is not being unfaithful.'

'I'm not so sure, you see... I allowed him into my heart. Spending time together felt like being alive again, rather than just being an old fossil. His name was Alec. We had a golden six months before his light started to fade. Alec died last year. The roll-call of loss really is quite relentless. Of course it wouldn't be possible to have this conversation with Christine, she'd only laugh. I'm so glad to have this chance to tell someone... to tell you.'

Marek put his arm around her and she started to sob. After a few minutes her clouds lifted.

'Thank you Marek, you are a good man.'

'Well, I can tell you, not everyone would agree with that, but hey. Who we appear to be is a reflection of who we're with. You are a very good woman. And I can assure you, you have not been unfaithful.'

'It feels funny to hit your final straw at this age. Having come so far. It felt so unfair when Alec died.'

'Don't let this be your final straw Alice, you never know what's around the corner,' Marek said while patting her knee. Their eyes met in a smile just before the thrum of his Motorhead ringtone, which has been muted all day.

'Hi Christine, good, you're here. I'll bring you your mother.'

Marek helped Alice back outside to the yard. Christine was waiting by her car, but moved towards them to take her mother's arm.

'Has she had a good day,' Christine asked in Marek's direction.

'I think, if you ask her, she would say yes.'

'Well, Mother?'

'It's been a quite splendid experience. I feel so much better, I cannot tell you.'

Christine flashed a look towards Marek again, seeking confirmation that nothing untoward had happened.

'Your Mum was the best possible company Christine. My favourite meet-up ever. When you drive home tomorrow I suggest you let her navigate.'

seven

Gillian & Edwige

Monday August 8th

Gillian Micklewhite had every window open in the cottage in Robbinsley, attempting to tame the summer heat, as she planned her diary for the week. Her masters dissertation had caused a stir among the reviewers, they found the case studies hard to believe and asked her to double-check her sources – they thought it implausible that any senior executives could be as crass as she described. However, she stuck to her guns and was now immersed in another tranche of post-graduate study. She was investigating a potential method for corporate data quality improvement using volunteer effort from groups of lonely citizens with nothing else to do. This was essentially Reece's team of 'little old ladies' idea, but she was trying to work through the human factors of actually making it work, while also aiming to attract support from social care agencies. Reece was on board as a consultant and they'd had video call over the weekend.

'Hey Reece, how are you doing? It's too bloody hot here. Don't tell me, you're on your balcony.'

'Yeah, it's nice innit?' He removed his shades, took a sip from a highball and squinted back at the webcam. 'As it happens, I've been away bird watching.'

'I don't doubt that for a second Reece! Anyway, I just wanted to let you know how the idea is coming along. The more I think about it, the better it gets. It can be structured a bit like a quilting bee, only for data. We just need to give them a really simple tool, to help walk through each record. I honestly think we can trust

them to make changes manually – the spelling mistakes, the postcodes like you said. The whole process will be founded on their innate determination to get things right... to solve the puzzle.'

'Have you got a name for it yet?'

'The working title is Data Maintenance Optimisation Process, or D-MOP. It know it sounds too technical, but I like the connotations with mops and cleaning. Anyway, in my mind, what it really stands for is Data Mangling by Old People.'

'Love it.'

'It's like the absolute antithesis of hacking. A bunch of responsible people, uncynically doing right on behalf of society. It's what the world needs right now.'

'Yes, plus it really plays into the #ourhouse agenda – putting our own house in order. I'm so chuffed you're taking it forward Gillian. It reminds me of a human version of that SETI thing.'

'SETI?'

'Yes, you know, the search for extra-terrestrial intelligence when they tried to get every computer on the planet to join in, processing signals from outer space to spot anything that suggested alien life. Grid computing they called it... hah, there's another flash in the pan. What you're doing is like that, only turned on its head. Humans instead of computers, trying to spot signs of idiot-life, like people that don't know how to spell *Leicester*.'

'I'm chuffed too. Say, how's *your* invention coming along?'

'The sign thing? Yeah that's bobbing along. Dealing with patent lawyers is a nightmare. Getting there though. What's next with D-MOP?'

'I've got some guinea pigs turning up, to test drive the process. I've got a prototype app, but it needs a lot of refinement. I've got some people coming here, I advertised through Pebbletank, made it an experience like you did.'

'Wow, amazing Gillian. From tiny acorns eh? Good luck with all that. It looks nice and peaceful there.'

'Yes, my housemate is away. Not sure where she's gone to be honest, but she's like that. Anyway, I better get on. See you for now Reece.'

'Yep, bye, keep up the good work.'



The cottage sat in the middle of a short terraced row of Leicestershire stone in varying shades of grey, with brick window surrounds that glowed pink in the sunshine. The stones being cleaved to varying widths magnified the impression of solidity, as if some were being squeezed downwards by the weight of walls and roof. When the sun was high, the back of the house baked like a kiln, so Gillian was grateful her room was on the street side. She had been sharing the house, which Mattie owned, for a couple of years. Not exactly friends, they lived separate lives, but their interaction when both together was perfectly amicable. It had to be, given the cosy dimensions of the building. Mattie was often away, so Gillian decided the one-on-one workshop sessions she needed, to get feedback on her D-MOP project, could reasonably be conducted from home. If it didn't work out she might have to hire some office space. She felt the informal setting would be more conducive to engagement by her subjects and more pleasing as an experience, to compensate for luring them into her work via social media. A snug

country retreat should, in theory, have more appeal than a sterile meeting room at the university. Her main problem was arranging the schedule.

When Gillian first saw the request from Edwige Hoeks, back in April, her initial reaction was surprise. She did not appear an obvious candidate, however Edwige scored strongly on the questionnaire, came across as extremely committed in her messages and never once queried the travel costs. Gillian chided herself for picturing her data correction warriors as a band of stereotypical pensioner-types with slippers, teapots and tea cosies who spent their days watching snooker or reading murder mysteries. On scanning Edwige's posts, Gillian came to the conclusion this was a kindred bohemian spirit who would bring a sense of fun to the proceedings and the meet-up request was accepted. The confirmation message was welcomed with glee.

'That's wonderful news, Gillian, thank you. When were you thinking? I must be honest, I won't be able to make it for a few months, does that work for you?'

'Yes that's fine Edwige. I want to spread the sessions out through summer anyway.'

'Oh good. By the way, please call me Eddie, everyone does. This is all confidential I assume?'

'Oh yes, don't worry. Nothing we discuss goes beyond the two of us.'

'OK, that's great, thank you.'

Edwige wished she had changed the name on her account to something more commonplace. She worried that Gillian might share some of the more outlandish details of her deep dive correspondence with friends and colleagues. The whole

venture was predicated on a combination of factors: that Gillian knew Mattie well enough to open up a pathway to reunion, but not so well that they saw each other's messages. Edwige and Flo had discussed what tactics to deploy and concluded it was best to play things by ear, to let the communication flow naturally, while looking for openings to enquire about Gillian's circle. If no such opportunity presented itself, so be it, the next step would have to be taken when Edwige was with Gillian in person. There was enough evidence in the familiarity shown by Gillian's comments on Mattie's posts that they were more than just social media contacts, they appeared to have a rapport beyond the confines of Pebbletank. Edwige would explain her real motive once she and Gillian were face-to-face. All she had to do was make the trip.

'When the time comes, where will we meet?'

'I'm running the sessions at home. I live in a place called Robbingsley, it's a village north of Leicester.'

'Oh OK. Well, I really will try my best to make it.' Edwige was thinking more about her capacity to travel *anywhere* again, not specifically about Gillian's remoteness.

'Ha ha... it's quite civilised here, I promise you! The pub in the village has yummy bedrooms if you fancy treating yourself. There's not enough room to swing a cat in my house, so I can't put you up unfortunately. Just turn up whenever you like on the day and we'll walk through a series of test exercises. It's a bit like proof-reading the contents of a spreadsheet. You have to spot the errors and correct them, while I get to learn how easy the tool is to use... and whether the results are correct. No pressure!' A string of laughing emojis followed.

Edwige sent a few in return, then they agreed the date and time. If she was honest, she did not fully understand the point behind Gillian's research but she didn't really care, she just wanted to make some progress. She wondered whether Mattie lived in the same area. There was no sign of environmental extremism on Gillian's feed so they were not obviously joined by political belief. Similarly there was no sign that Mattie was involved in Gillian's professional work. Having established a foothold, Edwige shifted her prayers to hoping that nothing would queer the pitch over the subsequent three months and that she would be physically able to hit the streets of Robbinsley when August came around.



As her bedroom curtains flapped in the breeze, Gillian caught up with her schedule. Tuesday was the turn of Eddie, the slightly oddball lady who'd been marked with an asterisk to indicate an encounter most keenly awaited. It would be number six in the sequence of workshops, the previous five having been a mixed bag. One person had failed to turn up, another was so hopeless with the tablet on which they were running the app that the results were completely unusable. From the three completed experiments, the results were encouraging. The subjects had understood the instructions, made appropriate use of reference information – especially when validating residence details, which seemed to be the most popular task – and completed the required updates almost perfectly on a sample of one hundred fictional customer records. The obvious spelling mistakes were corrected, the postcodes that no longer existed were changed to the right ones, the duplicated records were sifted out and a log was created of all the changes. The outcome Gillian was most excited about however was the

satisfaction surveys that her testers had completed. All three said they felt a very high degree of satisfaction at having completed the tasks. Ten out of ten. This was the killer fact as far as she was concerned – the impact on people’s wellbeing was key. Any increased efficiency and quality of service gained by the organisations that provided their data was also a good thing, but the social care benefit was Gillian's main objective. Once she had proved the basics of how the app worked she would get to reason about the quilting bee dimension – how to turn the activity into something communal, so the participants could compare notes and gently compete.

Edwige had undergone two more rounds of chemotherapy since making the arrangements with Gillian. Her spirit was nearly broken and no amount of analgesics could now ease the pain that punished each part of her wilting frame. Her oncologist, Mr Lim, was breathtakingly matter-of-fact in his consultations, dispensing both negative and positive news in exactly the same flat tone, like a radio announcer giving the shipping forecast. In her last appointment, five days before, he described the latest outlook: ‘There’s a 40% chance you will survive the year. I think the next step is referral to hospice care.’ The words were spoken as if an alternative antibiotic was being proposed, to someone with a nagging ear infection. Mr Lim looked at her with the same insistent eyes as with all his previous adjustments to the plan, but Edwige was grateful to him for the absence of melodramatics, it suited her own state of mind. She was just glad to have enough life left to pursue her quest, at least for a while.

Flo had offered to accompany her on the journey, but Edwige was resolved to make it alone. She set herself to auto-pilot and launched into her routine for

starting another day. The meds, the stretching, the tortuous ablutions. If she had any family caring enough to tell, she would plead with them for euthanasia if ever reaching the point of being unable to dress herself. Once her punkish pitch-black wig was correctly positioned, and with her favourite white linen kaftan in full sail, Edwige descended the stairs at the arrival of her cab – long walks were no longer an option and she needed to preserve her energy. The Tube now felt like an insurmountable obstacle, so the taxi was booked all the way to St Pancras. One of the advantages of being terminally ill is freedom from the need to keep something back for a rainy day. Her rainy days were now in full spate and she splashed through them ignoring the holes in her boots. She had a clear picture in her mind of what her remaining cash was for and taxi rides were top of the list – the second one of the day would take her from Leicester Station to the pub Gillian had recommended. The Artful Fox was more boutique hotel than public house and Edwige gave thanks to her lucky stars for such a comfy bolthole, as she sat on the bed later that afternoon gathering her thoughts for the performance required the following day.

In the morning, in the absence of a realistic alternative, Edwige had to walk from the pub to Gillian's cottage. She made it without mishap, despite the abundance of hanging baskets that lined the way. Overnight rain meant a carpet of petals lay stuck to the pavement beneath her feet, the early dampness accentuating a humidity that had failed to clear. Edwige placed the steel tip of her cane carefully to avoid the fallen fuchsia heads, silently voicing an expletive with every step, the obscenities helping to temper the aches in her body and the fears in her head. She arrived at the specified time and could feel herself trembling in nervous

anticipation, unsure what might unfold once inside, like an echo from the unworldliness of childhood. She didn't have long to wait, barely seconds after ringing the bell Gillian pulled the door inwards, pressing close to its leading edge due to the limited space in the hallway.

'Hello Eddie. Lovely to meet you.' Half of Gillian's russet-coloured locks remained hidden by the door. Her smiles concealed alarm at the sight that beheld her. She had imagined Edwige to be feisty and sprightly-looking but was shocked by the frail and sallow figure standing outside on the cobbles.

Impatient to uncover some clues, Edwige had to restrain herself from peering into the spaces behind her host. 'It's lovely to meet you too Gillian,' she replied, ears alert for any extraneous sounds in the background.

'Come through, come through... we're going to be in here.' Gillian led Edwige into the tiny sitting room at the front of the house. A laptop and tablet computer sat on a small table between two armchairs. Edwige scanned the room looking for photographs but she couldn't see any sign of her daughter, at the same time getting a sense that no-one else was in the house. Once they were sitting down, each had their own separate plan for what needed to be said next.

'Right then, Eddie. Let me explain what I'd like you to do.'

'Please excuse me Gillian... before we start... can I say something?'

'Yes of course, anything.'

'Thank you my dear. Thank you. Um... you see, the thing is... there's a reason why I reached out to you in the first place.'

Gillian looked perplexed. 'I thought you wanted to take part in my study?'

'I really am very sorry my dear, I feel very embarrassed, but please hear me out. You see the thing is... I contacted you because I think you might be able to help me trace my daughter. I believe you might know her.'

'Your daughter?'

'Yes. Her name is Mathilde. She calls herself Mattie.'

Gillian was so shocked by the turn of events that she didn't have time to feel affronted. Beneath the surface she was seething that someone had used her and undermined her plans, but the unexpected request for help held her attention in the foreground. The only time Mattie had ever discussed her mother with Gillian, the words she used were: 'My mother is dead. At least, she's dead to me.' The cold look in her eyes ensured no further dissection of that statement, at the time. Now, with a sickly-looking woman sitting three feet away, begging for assistance in a disarming foreign accent, it was difficult for Gillian to organise her thoughts. An inner voice told her to protect Mattie's privacy above all else, but it was also impossible to ignore Edwige's imploring gaze.

'I do know someone called Mattie, yes. I assume you found this out from Pebbletank?'

'Yes. I really am very sorry.'

'Why didn't you contact her instead of me?'

'I would have done if I could. But it's not possible, she blocks me.'

'I have to say, I feel very uneasy about all this Edwige. I'm really not sure what to say at all.'

'I know, I know... I'm so sorry to do this to you... but it was the only way I could think of. I'm so desperate to talk to Mathilde. To talk to her before it's too late. You see... I am dying Gillian. I'm dying. The doctors say I only have a few more months.' Edwige thought she may as well play her trump card early, to maximise the chance of winning Gillian over. She started to weep, but her tears soon turned into a coughing fit. Gillian rushed to the kitchen for a glass of water and a box of tissues. By the time she returned, Edwige had composed herself and was sitting with hands clasped together on her lap.

'Gillian, please will you help me. Please tell me how I can see her. Or at least... tell me about her... anything you can. I mean her no harm, I swear.'

Gillian sat down again and paused to consider what to say. She knew immediately not to mention Mattie's comments about her mother being dead, but there were some key facts that seemed reasonable to impart.

'Well... first of all, this is Mattie's house. I'm just a lodger, I pay rent to live here.' Already, wheels were turning in Edwige's mind, wondering how her daughter could afford a property in a such a picture-postcard location.

'It's just me and her. I spend my time working either here or at the university. Mattie... well, she's Mattie. She's involved in a lot of campaigning and stuff and I'm never sure where she's going to be. When around, she's very generous with lifts, which is great for me because I don't have my own transport. We're kind-of mates but we're not in each other's pockets, if you know what I mean.'

'Thank you for telling me this Gillian.' Edwige's next question was the one she had been falling over herself to ask. 'Do you know where she is now?'

'No, sorry I don't. That's the peculiar thing. She disappeared last week and I'm not sure where she's gone.'



Edwige let out another cry of exasperation, to think she had come so close to catching up with her lost girl. All the mental wrangling spent successfully tracking down the place where she lived, only for her to remain still out of reach. Edwige collapsed back into the chair but tried her best to remain logical. Before trying to piece together Mathilde's movements, she had many other questions demanding her attention.

'Did Mattie ever mention me?'

Gillian shifted awkwardly in her chair before responding. 'To be honest Eddie, we never spoke much about family. I do know that her father bought this place for her.'

Talk of Mattie's father sent Edwige's brain spinning once more. She assumed Gillian was referring to Roger rather than Leo, based on her adoption of his name. She decided to skirt around any confusion that might arise from a full explanation of Mattie's parentage. 'You mean Roger?'

'Yes.'

'OK, OK... So Roger bought this house for Mattie. That makes sense. You see, unfortunately Gillian, Roger and I went our separate ways when Mattie was... well, when she was very young. And she ran away from me ten years ago, when she was eighteen. I said a terrible thing to her, which I regret to this day. I never expected such a depth of feeling though, that she would sever all ties with me. I

always loved her so very much, the thing I said was taken the wrong way.’ Gillian listened without knowing how to react. After a sip of water, Edwige continued.

‘Gillian, did she ever say anything about why she ran away?’

‘No Eddie, I’m sorry not to be more helpful. She never said anything about running away, or about her childhood. I’ve met her dad a couple of times but, knowing that you were... um... out of the picture, so to speak, I never really thought it right to ask.’

‘Ah, so you’ve met Roger.’

‘Yes, just twice. He’s been here, to check up on the property. He’s got a huge pile, somewhere not too far away from here. I’ve got his number, to call in an emergency, but I’ve never used it. I know Mattie chats with him sometimes.’

Edwige’s pulse was racing. The sound of Roger’s name took her back to the night of Anton’s drawing room, but she also wanted to understand what led Mattie to seek him out. It was difficult to decide where to go next.

‘Oh Gillian, I must apologise. This is a lot for me to take in. You know, I had no idea until recently that Mattie and her father were even on speaking terms. Something must’ve happened.’

‘All I know is that something changed for Mattie about three years ago. I assume you know that she’s heavily involved in climate change protests and that sort of thing. That’s why she’s often away, taking part in all manner of demos and marches et cetera. I do know there was one particular occasion in 2019, which got her into the news for a while. She was in Parliament Square and got caught on camera shouting her slogans while stripped to the waist, it caused quite a stir.’

'As it happens, I do remember that.' Edwige chuckled ruefully. 'That was the only time I've seen her since...'

'Yes, well... apparently one of the things she shouted was *kill the pigs*. Whatever your views might be, I would have thought that was fairly standard fare for any kind of civil disorder in recent times, but the trouble was... it was audible live on BBC News. It wasn't picked up by everyone, but enough people heard her to bring down a whole load of trouble. Because she was female and I guess also made worse because she was half naked at the time, it generated a terrible amount of trolling online. A torrent of really disgusting, vile comments, so she told me. Death threats... and worse. She closed down all her social media accounts and disappeared for a while. She resurfaced a few months later, and had kind-of rebranded herself. I think that's when she reconnected with her dad.'

Edwige listened in amazement, contemplating that she too had witnessed these events but been totally oblivious to the consequences.

'Ah mon dieu! I had no idea. So, Gillian my dear... do you know if she's away at another protest now?'

'I honestly don't know. Not that I'm aware of. I do know she went to meet some guy she'd met on Pebbletank a month or so ago... and she told me they planned to meet again sometime. She was definitely here last Monday, August the first, that's the last specific time I can pin her to. I haven't seen or heard from her since then, and the car's gone. But, like I say, this is not out of character. I don't think you should worry. I'll try messaging her if you like?'

'Well yes... that's a good idea. Maybe just to find out if she's OK. Don't say anything about me yet though. You know, it's a strange thing, but I had a dream about her last week. I dreamt that she was shouting, just like she was on the TV. She was covered in that paint and she was calling out to me. I tried to reach her but she vanished into the crowd... more and more people joining in, until all I could see was her hand stretching up as she jumped, trying to still be visible. But the more I tried, the more people came and the further away she drifted.'

Gillian was distracted on her mobile while Edwige was relating the dream. Initially she looked purposeful, while typing an innocent message to Mattie checking on her wellbeing. But by the time Edwige had finished, Gillian was frowning.

'Your dream sounds quite unsettling. Um... actually there is something a bit out of character here. I just sent Mattie a message by the way, but looking at her Pebbletank, she hasn't responded to anything for about a week. Her last post was Sunday thirty-first of July. People have made quite a few comments since then, but she hasn't replied to or liked any of them. That's unusual, she is normally very conscientious about responding to her followers. I'm sorry Eddie, I didn't think to check before, I've been so busy with work.'

Edwige felt more helpless than ever, floundering about what to suggest next. 'Please don't tell me she's in danger... not now.' Her words were not aimed directly at Gillian but her ability to steer events was failing and she was becoming increasingly dependent on her host for a solution. Gillian tapped her phone against her chin, striving to keep the ball rolling.

'Maybe Roger knows something, I'll try calling.' Gillian tried the number but there was no reply, so she left a voicemail. Twenty minutes of uncomfortable speculation later, the mobile rang.

'Hi Roger, thank you for calling me back.'

'No problem at all Gillian, what's up?' The faint sound of Roger's voice leaking into the room from the earpiece chilled Edwige to the bone.

'It's Mattie, I can't get hold of her. Have you heard from her recently?'

'No, I can't say I have. If you're worried I can come over.'

'Yes, that's probably a good idea.' As Gillian spoke she looked across at Edwige, whose eyes assented, albeit through layers of utter disbelief.

'I'll be there in an hour.'



When Roger arrived, Gillian conferred with him in the hall explaining the situation, not the least part being news of her unusual houseguest. Edwige could detect the level of surprise from where she was sitting, through the wall. Soon the same square-jawed figure from her memories squeezed through the door. Roger was well into his seventies now but the essence of his dashing nature was still preserved. How cruel that men can retain their appeal in a way that women cannot, Edwige thought to herself while composing herself to speak. Roger could tell from the yellowing in her eyes what was going on inside her body, he had seen it before in other friends. He leaned forward, placed his hands softly on her shoulders and kissed her on the forehead, before sitting down where Gillian had

been. His heart simmered with half-formed feelings for this lady he had known so well, for just a single hour.

'It is extraordinary and delightful to see you again Edwige. Although it would be better if the circumstances were different.'

'Yes Roger, I agree. I certainly never thought I would see you again after what happened. But the way things are... I so desperately want to see Mathilde again, to make amends.'

'Amends. Hmm... it's funny how our misdemeanours get lost in time. Perhaps it is the thing we shouldn't have done that is now the least of our crimes. What Mattie found more troublesome came from the aftershocks.'

'How did she find out Roger?'

'That's simple I'm afraid. As it turns out... after your split with Leo, he spilled the beans. He told Ivan the whole story, which eventually made its way to Mattie. And each of them, for presumably their own different reasons, decided to write you out of their lives. All I know is what Mattie has told me of course, I only have her version of events. I always suspected you had been... shall we say, misunderstood. But Mattie was desperate and made me promise to join the omerta. She was in a very dark place when she asked me for help, three years ago.'

Edwige was battling through tears again. 'What did she say about me?'

'She said that you told her you wished she'd never been born. Before that, she said you failed to show her affection and was never around for your children. I'm

sorry Edwige, I hate to say these things, but I'm just trying to help you understand her state of mind.'

'I did love them. I just wanted them to feel free to be themselves, to find their own way. I wish my parents had done the same for me.'

'She said you were dismissive of all the things she was interested in and always made her feel inadequate.'

'Oh my... did she say that.' Edwige broke off to recollect. 'I suppose I was worried about all the science fiction and fantasy stuff she was into. It all seemed so artless to me...'

'Hey listen, we shouldn't dwell on it now. Sometimes the way our kids feel about their lives just doesn't fit with what we've experienced ourselves. I don't believe you did anything wrong Edwige. You clearly do not deserve... well, everything that has happened to you. It's easy to make the mistake of bringing up kids in a way that corrects the things we missed from our own childhoods, rather than responding to their needs as individuals.' Roger's wisdom sounded as compelling to Edwige now as the magnetism he showed when they first met. She wanted to know where this wisdom came from, but this was not the time.

'I still cannot grasp why she ran away. She never indicated how unhappy she was before that night. Anyway... what about you. Have you forgiven me for not saying anything about her?'

'There's nothing to forgive Edwige. You did what you thought was right for your family at the time. If I'm brutally honest... it suited me, even though I was

unaware. But wow, what a big shock it was, when Mattie finally confronted me with the truth.'

'Confronted you? Oh my goodness, did she try to blackmail you?'

'No, no... nothing like that. Well, now you mention it... it would be possible to interpret her actions in that way, but I don't think that was her intention. It was more that she was desperate for help and she found a way to reach me. And I was... truly gobsmacked, I cannot lie. Of course, I could tell straight away her story was genuine. She told me what she knew about her conception, and how Leo had brought her up... so how could I be in any doubt, how else could she know those details. Plus there is a certain likeness, don't you think, poor girl.' Roger laughed grimly. Edwige felt an impulse to join in, but there was too much going on in her heart to compete with.

'I suppose she did promise not to go to the papers,' Roger continued. 'But it didn't sound like a threat, more like a reassurance. Even if the press had got hold of the story... *Multi-millionaire F1 boss with secret love child*... it wouldn't have exactly sunk my career, I wasn't married at the time and it's not as if I abandoned her. The fact that she once famously flashed her breasts on national television... I don't think even those headlines would have scared the sponsors away, in fact it might have had the opposite effect. No, it wasn't blackmail. Either way, I gave her the help she needed and in the process... I gained a daughter.'

'And now she's gone again. Roger, do you have any idea where she might be?'

'Sadly not. I wish I did. We didn't see that much of each other. It's not as if we had a lot in common and I'm not sure she really approved of me. You know, she

once told me, one of her guiding principles for life was never to trust anyone with deeply-held beliefs about motor sport, or anyone that watches Top Gear. No, she was not a big fan of my industry, she did not exactly see it as a beacon for equality, let alone environmental protection. I'm surprised she even wanted a car... I guess she sees that as a necessary evil, even an electric one.'

'But she took your name... partly anyway. That's how I found her, with a friend's help.'

'Ah, I see... I was wondering. Yes indeed, but again that was just part of a new beginning and it was the most obvious name to hand – she thought plain Bradley would be suitably anonymous. She remains a fiercely independent young woman, she wasn't pledging allegiance.'

With a delicate knock at the door, Gillian excused herself back into the room, bearing the tea she had taken as long as possible to make. She placed the mugs on coasters that occupied the few available spaces in the room and perched herself on a stool by the fireplace, before re-joining the detective work.

'Is there anything I can do?' By now Gillian had given up all hope of completing her D-MOP evaluation session with Edwige. She realised it was inappropriate to even mention it again – and better to abort than produce another set of rogue results. She was fully concentrated on trying to solve the puzzle of Mattie's whereabouts.

'There must be a logical explanation,' said Roger, more to himself than anyone else. 'There must be a trail to follow. What about Pebbletank?'

'Well, like I said, I know she met up with one of her Pebbletank contacts several weeks ago,' said Gillian. 'I don't know anything about who it was... she described him as *some guy*. I've been scouring through her posts just now, I can't see anything suspicious in the comments, or in the people she follows. The trouble is, whatever plans she made are probably buried in her direct messages, which we can't see.'

'Was she behaving differently at all, in the last few weeks?' Edwige asked.

'Nothing I can put my finger on,' replied Gillian instantly.

Roger took longer to dredge his memory before answering. 'The only thing that strikes me is she started talking about Shakespeare, out of the blue, a few weeks ago. Lord knows why.'

'Oh, that fits with me too,' said Gillian with renewed animation. 'Mattie was getting very interested in Shakespeare recently, we discussed him a few times. She was fascinated by the debate about whether he was a fraud. I remember her saying she supported the theory that he was the figurehead for some kind of collective. That the works were so all-encompassing, so perfect, so defining... it just seemed more likely to be a team of people, like writers on *The Simpsons* or *Friends*. It's not that he stole glory from others, rather that the history books must have their heroes. It didn't make him a fake. She would say that arguments about whether it was Shakespeare or Christopher Marlowe, or someone else... missed the point. No single person could have created all that... she likened it to the Marvel Universe. That was her point of reference, which probably explains why she suddenly got so enthusiastic about him.'

'My, my, this is all so hard to comprehend. She was always dead against Shakespeare, or anything to do with the classics, when she was younger,' said Edwige wistfully. 'Presumably to spite me, how ironic she would come to appreciate it now.' She looked distantly out to the garden before adding, 'Like the man himself said... *Oh what a tangled web we weave...*'

Roger and Gillian looked at each other for a moment, mutually resisting the urge to point out that the quote wasn't actually Shakespeare. None of this was helping though, so Roger tried to refocus.

'I doubt it was out of spite, Edwige. We all go through different phases. Personally I don't see how a recent passion for literature can be connected to her disappearance... unless she picked it up from this Pebbletank guy.'

'Not sure... I think it started beforehand,' said Gillian. 'I don't see how the pieces fit.'

The trio sat quietly for a while before Roger asked the next most obvious question.

'Gillian, have you looked in her room?'

'No, not yet. I was loathe to go in there, she is very strict about privacy. If you give me permission, I'll do it now.' It was not entirely clear whose permission was being requested, but Edwige and Roger both nodded in her direction, thus granting the search to be extended.

'Come on then, let's do it.'

The haste implied by Gillian's remark could not be matched by the athleticism of her collaborators. She climbed the stairs alone while Roger tagged along in slower

time. Edwige stayed in the sitting room almost paralysed with fear. The more she turned her thoughts over, stronger came the dread of discovering her dream had coincided with something terrible and real.



Gillian pushed open the door to Mattie's bedroom. The degree of untidiness looked normal and did not suggest Mattie had been in an exceptional frame of mind when departing. Her phone and laptop bag were missing, removing any chance of Gillian digging into her virtual world, for which she was relieved, even though it narrowed the possible lines of enquiry without getting the police involved. The prospect of having to call the police weighed heavily over the cottage. None of the occupants wanted to face the implications of taking that step, but it was beginning to look inevitable. Once Roger had caught up, neither he nor Gillian could spot anything in the room out of the ordinary. Then Gillian remembered the desk: a small bureau with folding door that formed part of a wall unit that Mattie had hacksawed into the gap between sloping ceiling and chimney breast. She reached out her hand to pull down the door. As the interior was revealed, three items fell from the vertical to lie facing upwards. One was a copy of *All's Well That Ends Well*. One was a ticket to a gig at the De Montfort Hall dated Sunday 7th August. One was a picture of Mattie, drawn in coloured pencil on a small square sheet of manila card.

Roger and Gillian stared at each other, then down at the desk again, conscious of being drawn into a deepening mystery. The most telling sign was the ticket, it showed that Mattie had intended to be home before Sunday and that something must be seriously wrong. It was definitely time to raise the alarm. They assumed

the book was insignificant, serving merely as evidence of her recent Shakespeare fad. Roger flipped through the pages but nothing fell out. The drawing was quite perplexing: it was beautifully drawn yet deceptively simple, capturing her firebrand soul with the minimum of strokes. Whoever the artist was must have known her very well, but there was no signature. In its place, beneath Mattie's image, an inscription that read: 'Be blessed with a long life'. Gillian held the card between thumb and forefinger, but she started to shake in terror, so placed it back on the desk.

They had seen enough TV thrillers to know the ropes from this point. They both had their wits about them – they recognised the moment had come not to touch anything further and that the next course of action was predestined. The only uncertainty was who would make the call. They retreated as carefully as they could and returned to the sitting room. Edwige blinked at them despairingly as they reappeared.

'Did you find anything?'

'Nothing to hint at where she is unfortunately,' Roger replied. 'But I'm afraid, Edwige, it does look like we need to tell someone. There's a concert ticket on her desk for Sunday just gone. She must have expected to be here on Sunday.'

'Oh my lord,' Edwige exclaimed in a whisper. She closed her eyes and tilted her head to the heavens, before girding herself for the next stage. 'I never imagined I would have to do this again. Who knew. I had to call the police before, back in 2010, to say she was gone. They were no use, they weren't interested. As soon as they worked out she was eighteen and staying with a friend, they walked away. What's different now?'

'Something's not right,' said Gillian.

'It wasn't then either. But I know what you mean dear. I suppose it's still 999?'

'Yes, I googled it.' Gillian had the official form of words. *'If you need to report someone missing, please call your local police on 101 or visit your nearest police station. If there are immediate welfare concerns, call 999.'*

'Immediate welfare concerns,' Edwige repeated. 'They never went away.' She extricated her mobile from her bag and made the call. The words 'my daughter is missing' felt like an incantation spoken countless times before. Edwige was functioning only on the basis of denial and the tears flowed again once she passed the phone to Gillian, to recount the precise details of where and when. Roger moved to the side of her chair and embraced her, prompting a pent-up tide of emotion to overflow to such an extent that he thought she might expire in his arms. The cascade of anguish ran its course until a sharp pain in her shoulder jagged Edwige back under control, a negative feedback loop to tease out the suffering. She looked around for shreds of optimism in the expressions of her companions, but all looked black as sin.

Gillian had come off the call. 'A detective will be here before 5, they say. You can both stay of course, I hope you will.'

Roger and Edwige murmured 'of course' in reply. While waiting, they each directed thoughts towards their last encounter with Mathilde and tried to visualise a sequence of events whereby she was safe from harm. Roger had her on an impulsive foreign trip, surrounded by rain forest, paddling a canoe with the creator of her portrait – which reminded him, they should look for her passport.

Edwige, on the other hand, was unable to see anything but Mathilde drowning in the sea of faces from her dream.

eight

Ayush & Marek

Friday September 16th

'Come on, give me a break Mo! I can go down Rymans at lunchtime and get them cheaper than that. There must be something you can do?'

Ayush was on his third call of the day, slouched into the adjustable chair that remained a fixture in his living room long after most of his colleagues had returned to the office. Disinterestedly toying with the cord of his earpiece, he looked like he could slither onto the floor at any moment. He had become so accustomed to rotating between bed, shower and laptop that the ability to make himself outwardly presentable, to once more mingle in the company of professionals, felt like a lost power. The stale air of the flat, like the fug of a whitewashed greenhouse, had fixed him in place.

A series of notifications was rattling his personal mobile but, seeing they were from Pebbletank, Ayush left them on the desk unanswered. Meanwhile, Marek was standing under the scaffolding at the front of his building, wondering why his host was being so unresponsive. After ten minutes of intermittent vibration, Ayush finally deigned to take a look.

'OMG. So sorry Marek. Completely forgot you were coming. Can I call you?'

'Sure.'

'Give me 2 mins.'

Ayush wound up his conversation with the intransigent Mo, then called Marek's number. Pleading for forgiveness, he suggested they meet in half an hour, at the

café across the car park from where Marek was standing. Next he sent an email to his boss apologising for the short notice but he needed the rest of Friday off due to a family emergency. He knew Gabrielle would not be bothered in the least, she was always telling him to take more leave and found his constant online status unnerving. He quickly changed his clothes, slapped himself in the face and tried to gather his thoughts. It was so long since he advertised his *Emerge from the Cocoon* deep dive he had forgotten all about it.

Fallout from the meet-up with Serena still clouded Ayush's mind. How stupid to believe she had feelings for him, just because she replied to his comments in such a cheerful way. He had played out so many scenarios in which the tiny threads that bound them might grow into something more profound. However, as it turned out, she only wanted his company as a sounding board and her emotions were exclusively tied to her creepy husband. Besotted daydreams of Serena had sustained him through countless lonely hours but when she said goodbye at the station, thanking him for his time in such a business-like way, those dreams were vapourised on the spot. He should never have idolised her to such an extent – in truth, he had idolised a letter-box view, not the real person. She might as well never have responded to him at all, just like all the rest. Sure, there had been a parting hug and peck on the cheek, but the haste with which she disappeared stabbed him like a knife to the heart.

Their interaction on Pebbletank tailed off to almost nothing, as Serena drifted away. Ayush tried to compose a follow-up message that demonstrated his compassion and insight regarding her situation with Owen. However, her reply was another cursory 'thank you' which ignored the points he had carefully

composed and gave no grounds for hope they would ever meet again. His mission north had failed and he sank back into his underground existence. Living in Ipswich brought him no luck finding meaningful friendship, he spent more time in his virtual worlds, either shooting spooks or crafting his image on Pebbletank, than he did mixing with other people. Ayush was genuinely interested in the history of the town and he did take pleasure from recording its curiosities. Nevertheless, he would struggle to deny that his editorial intent was anything other than to attract a certain kind of woman – intelligent, quiet, winsome, gagging for it – despite them so religiously shunning him in real life.

Ayush flirted with the idea of hosting tours of the area as a Pebbletank deep dive, however the mummification of his building had become such a defining part of his life, the ceremony of unbandaging felt like a stronger concept. He set the invitation in one of his more optimistic moments but, like a stone tossed into the well, it lay undisturbed, generating the same lack of response as all his other content. His sense of isolation was bad enough without the view from his windows being obscured for eighteen months. As the evenings became lighter he began to take long solo treks, the rhythm of his footsteps summoning memories of all his close encounters, those moments where affection and intimacy seemed within reach. Such moments were few and far between and replays of his excitement ahead of the Newcastle trip brought forth nothing but spiky tears.

Ayush began to reflect on what reasons remained for continuing his life. His parents wouldn't miss him, he'd always been the black sheep for choosing a career path they had not ordained and his more favoured siblings could fill in any gaps left behind. There was certainly no-one else to mourn his demise, lament

the senseless waste, or condemn him for being so selfish. It was entirely in his gift to weigh up the risks and benefits: why get out of bed every day, only to suffer guilt and disappointment in a never ending spiral? Soon enough his self-destructive musings coincided with a walk from which the Orwell Crossing could be seen, the airborne section of A14 that soars across the estuary on the eastern edge of town, gravity and concrete in perfect equilibrium. Ayush knew this was a notorious spot for tortured souls to release themselves from despair – and also that he was the prime demographic, for some reason a high proportion of the bodies that wash-up on the shore were young men of South Asian heritage. How hard could it be? A split second to take a high jump. The simple act of vaulting over a barrier, repeated so many times as a child when climbing fences with your mates. One, two, three... and leap. No great strength required and, if you timed it right, no witnesses either. Over in a flash, bringing a permanent cure for a miserable existence. No more fear, no more self-doubt, no more nights alone praying for sleep... how hard could it be.

On successive walks thereafter he ventured further towards its shadow, convincing himself this really was a doable act. The road launches itself across the river on each side via steep grassy embankments, reachable by footpaths surprisingly not closed to the public. On his first attempt, Ayush climbed up to the carriageway then stopped to admire the view, stalling to advance across the bridge in case his hesitancy raised suspicion. He could see that the embankment sloped down beneath the span very sharply, such that the transition from non-fatal to fatal drop occurred within a few yards. To get it right would require an unbroken stride, head down, all the way to the summit of the curve; to stop

and look would break the spell. For a suitably glorious exit, it had to be mid-channel – a forlorn plummet into tidal mud would be the final ignominy, so hitting the water was essential. In the small hours of Sunday 12th June, Ayush marshalled his resolve and set off for the outskirts. He yomped along deserted streets gaining confidence from the flat ground, building the momentum that would propel him to oblivion. Beyond the urban boundary, the clear pre-dawn sky illuminated the scene sufficiently for Ayush to find his access point and scramble up to the roadside, slipping a few times on the dewy grass. Even at such an early hour, the occasional container lorry thundered past, eager to make its swaps in the hurly-burly of Felixstowe. This time there was no stopping, he immediately joined the walkway and proceeded upwards, between kerb and parapet, past the Samaritans phone that gave reassurance he was the right place. One, two, three... and leap. How hard could it be.

Long before reaching the middle, he knew the expedition was futile. His determination to take the plunge dissolved with every step. He cursed the acuity of his 3D vision – even without peering over the side to look straight down, the vastness of open space beyond the parapet took charge of his senses through the corner of his eye. What felt like an absolute necessity to begin with had taken its true shape, as an impossibility. The act of deliberately making oneself fall 140 feet required another plane of detachment altogether – he would have to find another way to purge his demons.

Ayush continued towards the eastern bank, berating himself for a lack of physical courage while simultaneously revising his motives for being there. He quickly had to erase the thought of his failure even to stare into the abyss, let alone embrace

it. And what a remarkable morning it was, what incredible light, a kind he'd never seen. Some good might come from the day after all. The few passing drivers would've seen him at the apex of the structure's monumental arc, pointing his phone at the sunrise, impressed by the lengths some people go to get the perfect shot.



The Orwell Crossing sunrise became one of Ayush's most popular posts but still there were no takers for his meet-up, until one day in July the request came through from @marek.tomas.builds. Ayush recalled swapping a few comments with this Marek character, being the only follower to show any understanding of the cladding issue – of which Ayush had slipped in a few mentions, seeking to win some sympathy. Unfortunately, in the intervening weeks, he had lost track of time and felt genuinely embarrassed at his lack of preparedness when Marek arrived on his doorstep.

As Ayush bounded into the coffee shop where Marek was sitting, an eerie feeling of déjà vu tingled down his spine. The last time he'd been in a similar situation was the rendezvous with Serena in Newcastle, but this time Marek was the one destined for disappointment. Even though both eschewed the selfie, their mutual demeanour left no room for doubt as to who was whom.

'Hello, you must be Marek.'

'Ah, yes... good to meet you Ayush.'

'Blimey. You made it here. I cannot apologise enough for not being ready.'

'That's quite alright my friend. It must be a difficult time.'

Ayush and Marek followed each other because they both liked buildings. Marek was fascinated by Ayush's snippets about Ipswich, a place he knew little about, and was particularly intrigued by the shrink wrap. As a builder he understood its function, but this particular deployment was exceptional.

'So Marek, as you can see... the building is still covered up.'

'Yes indeed... it's hard to believe people are still living inside.'

'I can assure you, we are. It's been eighteen months now since it first happened. We knew about the scaffolding but the sheets appeared without warning. It creates a safe environment for the workers apparently... in all weathers.'

'Genius. I mean, it does help, for sure... when you're doing the work. But that kind of impermeable plastic is not meant for habitation when the work's under way, let alone for that length of time. It's more designed for empty shells, to protect the guys and also make the whole thing aesthetically pleasing... from the outside. They should've used a breathable version though. That opaque stuff is not meant as an option when people are *inside*.'

'Quite. They put bars across the windows too, so we can only open them slightly. After two summers of hell, as you can see a few residents have started to cut their own holes.'

The block of flats where Ayush lived was one of hundreds across the country found to have similar material in its walls to the flammable cladding responsible for the tragedy of Grenfell Tower. In the ensuing multi-billion pound programme of replacement work, many of the sites were wrapped in film, with little care given to the impact on occupants. In the same way that protests about dangerous

working practice raised by the poor souls of Grenfell were ignored before the fire, now it was the turn of citizens entombed by the reparation – not to mention all the leaseholders facing financial ruin due to off-loaded costs. Ayush mentioned the cladding in one of his messages to Serena, hoping she might be interested in his value as a topical victim, however it turned out her books were already full in that regard.

‘I don’t know how you stand it Ayush.’

‘It’s not been easy. But I live on my own and I spend a lot of time on my gadgets and stuff, you know. In normal times, the view is fantastic, it was the main attraction when I moved in... and I don’t want to lose it forever. The noise, the dust, the loss of privacy with workmen going past your windows all the time, have all been horrible. But somehow I want to stick it out to the bitter end now. One of the worst aspects is the druggies that have taken to clambering about the scaffold after dark. I woke up in the middle of the night once to see a guy shooting up right outside my bedroom window. On the fourteenth floor. They’re like an army of the dead.’

‘How awful, truly, you have my sympathy. But... it’s coming down right? That’s what the deep dive was for?’

‘Ah. Yes, we need to talk about that. I’m sorry Marek, but that’s been delayed. There have been so many delays, mostly due to arguments about who’s supposed to pay. The latest one is down to the government. Apparently the unwrapping has been included in a new Department of Health strategy for improving mental health. And there’s some kind of problem with the rollout of that strategy, the different departments are fighting over who gets the credit. There was supposed

to be an official ceremony, including a photo opportunity for the minister, but that's on the back burner now. We haven't been given a new date, meanwhile we carry on sitting in semi-darkness.'

'That's bloody typical of this government, what a bunch of idiots. And they wonder why no-one takes them seriously. They should get the culture department involved too, after all it could be a Christo art installation.'

'Sorry Marek, you've lost me there.'

'Oh, don't worry, ignore me. He was famous for wrapping buildings in a similar way, in the name of modern art. Apart from the holes, it could easily be one of his.'

'Oh, right. Nice. Well, anyway, the work hasn't finished, so I'm afraid you're not going to see anything today.' Ayush was keen to eliminate any suggestion of going inside, he hadn't had time to clear up.

'No worries, I understand. God knows how you've managed to cope with all this, on top of Covid. It's amazing how you seem to keep your spirits up on Pebbletank.'

'Yes, yes... that keeps me sane, ha ha. If nothing else, it's a diversion from the news, if we watched that all the time we really would go mad.'

'I like your philosophy Ayush. I suppose that's the only way to look at it. The realisation that other people in the world are having a worse time. And despite the idiotic waste of money being spent, righting wrongs with the buildings that never should have come to pass in the first place... at least they're being made safe. You know, the residents of Grenfell predicted what would happen. They

knew their renovation was being carried out appallingly badly and said it would only take a fire for their concern about standards to be taken seriously. No-one listened. The only thing that counts these days is short-term profit and loss. When things go wrong, the trail of responsibility disappears into its own smoke, just like Union Carbide in Bhopal. It is a sick world Ayush.'

'Tell me about it. Now then Marek, since you're here... what would you like to do?'

Ayush still drifted in and out of functioning behaviour. On a positive day he could muster the rationale for being human and his plan for taking visitors on a guided excursion was ever-present in the back of his mind. The adrenaline rush prompted by Marek's arrival gave him the stimulus to grab his notes before coming down to meet him. Although dark days were also ever-present, waiting to catch him unawares on any given morning, the chance to rehearse the process for potential future guests was too good an opportunity to miss. Marek seemed like a good sort – a little too crusty-looking for Ayush's liking but amiable enough – why not make the most of what remained of the day.

'What would I like to do. Hmm... to be honest Ayush, I half expected the cocoon-emerging would not be happening today. I've been tracking the local news online. I wanted to come down anyway, for a look around. I've parked my van for the day, I'm definitely up for some exploring.'

'OK then. And you're happy for me to show you round?'

'That would be grand.'

Ayush knew the only place to start was the docks. It is strangely easy to traverse the whole borough of Ipswich, yet bypass the frills of its waterfront altogether. The whole area is separated from the town centre by a defiant outpost of dereliction – the cluster of huge mouldering silos and warehouses that escaped demolition when the dockside redevelopment went bust – a solid, fuck-off reminder of the time when banks ran out of money in 2007. However, those intrepid enough to step through the decay are rewarded by an authentic marina setting that could have been cut-and-pasted from the Mediterranean.

‘It all makes sense now, Ayush. I have driven through before, but never quite been able to marry the impression from the ring-road with your stunning photos. This must be one of England’s best kept secrets.’

‘Yeah. It’s alright isn’t it. Shame about the cruddy bits, but still.’

‘Oh I love them especially. It helps one to imagine what this place was like in its heyday. It’s bigger than I thought.’

‘I suppose so. I guess that initial bit might be a deterrent to hooray-Henry types from London spoiling it all.’

The dog-leg expanse of water is buffered from the tide by a lock at its southernmost tip. They walked the east-west stretch, between a string of eateries and the floating pontoons of the harbour. A myriad of craft, from wooden sloop to glitzy gin palace, rolled gently on the water, while owners lurked in cabins pretending to hide. Finding an empty bench in the shade of one of the most exclusive residential developments, they decided to take a break. Ayush fished out his notes and assumed the role of courier.

'Right then. Are you ready?'

'Go for it Ayush.'

'OK, here goes. Ipswich is er... the oldest town in England.'

Much to Ayush's distraction, Marek had been reading up. 'Actually there's some debate about that. Colchester is the earliest recorded settlement, thanks to the Romans, and some people talk about Thatcham in Berkshire. But nowhere has existed as a distinct, populated collection of parishes longer than this place.'

'Cool. Good to know you've done some research, I'll have to make a note of all that, ha ha.' Ayush was suddenly floundering. 'What else have I got here... Oh yes, it's among the top six biggest entries in the Domesday Book and has twelve churches with original medieval foundations – only London, Bristol, York and Norwich have more.'

'That's a really good fact, those four cities make prestigious company.'

'Yes. The street network today would be recognisable to an Ipswicher... if that's a word... from the 12th Century. As someone recently said, Ipswich has good bones.'

'I gather the council wants to press for city status.'

'Yeah... to be honest, I hope Ipswich stays a town, that's more in tune with its down-to-earth nature.'

'Speaking of which, have you seen the street name over there?'

'Coprolite Street? Yes, I've got this as one of my early highlights. Coprolite. Fossilised dinosaur poo. That posh apartment block may not be wrapped in film

but I bet the residents would be upset seeing it marked on old OS maps as a Manure Manufactory.'

'Funny they didn't keep that name! Actually, there was masses of coprolite all round East Anglia, and this was the centre of the extraction industry. It was like high octane fertiliser thanks to the amount of phosphate.' Through his slight annoyance, Ayush took more notes as Marek continued. 'No wonder the football team are known as the Tractor Boys. Mind you, that's only a recent affectation.'

'I wasn't sure whether to include the football ground. I guess maybe an optional extra, for footie fans. Portman Road is a proper, traditional ground and there are some great facts associated with the club. Ipswich Town were league champions as recently as 1962. They were managed by both Alf Ramsey and Bobby Robson before going on to lead England. The atmosphere on match days must have been fantastic back then. Are you a fan Marek?'

'No, not really. I'm interested in how the stories and characters become woven into the culture of a place, but I don't like to watch much anymore. It's only about money these days.'

'OK, we'll skip that. The docks are really the key. There's been a trading post near the tidal limit of the Orwell since around the 7th Century. The Ipswich wet dock – which is what we're looking at now – was constructed in 1842. It was the UK's largest enclosed dock at the time, mainly for trade in wool and grain. This was no coincidence, Suffolk being such an agricultural area. It was also a major industrial site for malting, brewing and shipbuilding.'

'Great stuff Ayush. You know... sitting here, it's not so difficult to imagine what it would've looked like, just replace these shiny yachts in your mind's eye with old clippers and sailing barges, all covered in grime. The scale of it. You can still feel the ghost of all that activity, even though it's so peaceful now.'

'Cool. I'm glad you're appreciating the experience.' Ayush's smile was sincere but a nagging voice reminded him that Marek's blokeyness was not his real target audience. Nevertheless, ten minutes later they were sipping beer on the terrace of The Isaac Lord.



'Do you have a girlfriend Ayush?'

'Blimey. There's a question. Um, no, not at the moment. Or any moment for that matter.'

'Ah. I suppose it can't be easy to have people round for the time being.'

'Yes, that's right. That must be it.' Ayush gave an uncomfortable laugh, thinking how difficult circumstances can hide a multitude of sins. 'What about you Marek, are you also single?' He presumed the answer was yes, judging by his guest's laid back attitude.

'Yes, I am now.' Marek explained his situation with Jintara.

'Unbelievable. After you did all that for her.'

'Well, I didn't want her to feel any obligation. Better to end things if you're not happy. In retrospect it's hard to unravel though. In the beginning we were as happy as anything, the joy of finally being together all the time was like a dream. Waking up to see that gorgeous face of hers every morning, having someone to

hold at the end of every day, to hear her laughter. I was in dreamland. But nothing good ever lasts.'

'Do you know where things went wrong?' Ayush was feeling the *déjà vu* again.

'The trouble is, life isn't a dream. Every day, there's reality, we're just human beings and it's impossible to live up to the ideal that one projects at the beginning of a relationship. You start off believing everything that happens is good and life will forever be all smiles. But as soon as you let one tiny resentment into your feelings, it grows, like a blade of grass cracking the pavement. I think, with Jinty, it was the classic scenario of work turning things sour. In the early days she adjusted to whatever my plans were for the day. If I got home at three, or ten, it made no difference, she would beam lovingly and peace would reign. But... the very first time I caught her in a frown, it acted like a trip-wire. From that point on, I lost my confidence and became defensive on any occasion of telling her what time I'd be home. I was always looking for that frown – and I'd ask her what's wrong, and she'd say nothing, and then we'd start to argue. I suppose it all stemmed from a suspicion, deep down inside, that she didn't really want me. Thoughts become things. One minute you're instinctively referring to someone as *sweetie* in a text without thinking, the next minute you catch yourself, feeling like a fake.'

'Do you think we're programmed to be unhappy then?'

'Feels like. Except at times like this, eh.' Marek raised his glass. 'It does seem that we're always craving something we don't have. The grass is always greener, and all that. I often found myself wanting to wind back time. After a couple of years with Jinty, I started to want my independence back. I wanted time to

myself, I wanted peace of mind, I wanted space to work on my fitness... rather than constantly worrying about what someone else was thinking... and being over-run by stress and the urge to eat and drink. You spend your life agonising about what you do and don't have, wishing it was possible to pick and choose from a menu. You want independence but you also want rid of those lonely hopeless nights when nothing lies ahead but another day at work. But, you know what's the worst thing of all? We forget that our partners feel exactly the same. Somehow we go through life convinced that our own thoughts are deeper than anyone else's. That's where we come unstuck.'

'It sounds like you blame yourself for the marriage failing?'

'Probably I do. But when she turned on me, she was ruthless. She made the transition from injured party to woman on a mission in the blink of an eye. There's always a contingency plan on hand these days, another cab waiting on the rank. Perhaps we're all living a lie. Pretending to be kind on the surface, yet being a coiled spring of self-interest underneath.'

'Maybe we are. One of my problems is wanting to be liked. I guess we all yearn for that, but it's not something we have any control over. It's so frustrating. I'm sure there's a basic human need to see yourself as a good person, yet everyone you meet appears to disagree.'

'Ahh... that's what this is for,' said Marek, waving his beer glass again. 'I don't mean that by the way, this is not the answer to anything. It's a lot of fun reaching that conclusion though.'

'Oh yeah. What would life be without beer. I know it doesn't last, but I can't imagine life without alcoholic euphoria to look forward to. It seems the only way to recapture that state of anticipation and enjoyment we had as kids.'

'Yep. It's crazy though, why that buzz comes to mean so much, when we're basically poisoning ourselves. Ironically the self-help books, the ones that supposedly help you give up booze, also talk about returning to a child-like state, before the first lapse. About how to recapture that feeling before the first sip, when you still perceive alcohol to be foul.'

'Sadly, I think it's too late for that. Still, I guess it would be good to have more to look forward to than just the next drink. That's the only thing that keeps me going – the thought of the next pleasurable thing likely to happen. It's just so annoying that our minds fixate only on the next *bad* thing, the next thing to worry about. Life would be so much better with a pill to switch that thought off, that *next thing to worry about*. Strangely those particular things never seem to happen in the end, but still we worry anyway.'

'I hear you, Ayush. It's always the things we're not expecting that really fuck us over. Mind you, sometimes unexpected things make life better too, like the random sparks that happen through Pebbletank. Incidentally, have you thought of turning this into a pub crawl?'

'It did cross my mind. Say what you like about Ipswich, but it's got some ace pubs.'

The tour resumed with Ayush preparing to enter the Wolsey phase. They left the docks behind to contend with the wasteland of the inner ring road once more.

'This section is College Street. It is optimistically named. Before he fell from grace, Thomas Wolsey founded a Cardinal College in two places in England. One was in Oxford, the other was right here. In the fallout from the loss of his wealth and status, the former was salvaged and survived to become Christ Church. Unfortunately the latter was laid waste and crumbled to ruins. The only remaining fragment is that pathetic little archway over there, by St Peter's Church.'

'Oh dear, yes I see what you mean. Not exactly Hampton Court.' Ayush made another note.

'Incidentally, St Peter's would have been the college chapel. It's very historic in its own right, having once held a royal wedding. I must get the details of that, I know the missus was the king's daughter but I forget which one.' For once Marek was unable to fill in the details and Ayush was happy to continue. 'You will see lots of *Cardinal* and *Wolsey* stuff around here. Building names, street names, statues. The only thing missing is a pub called Wolseys.'

They freed themselves from the race track of the one-way system and entered St Peter's Street, for centuries the main drag between town and river. Its timber-framed construction throws shapes considered picturesque in places like Lavenham, but here they sit uncelebrated. Ayush reckoned on his guests being beguiled by the array of independent shops but Marek was more interested in photographing the window frames and gables. In St Nicholas Street he became particularly engrossed in a small sun-shaped plate attached to the wall of a hairdresser.

'Is that something I should take note of Marek?'

'Yes, it's a nice little feature. A firemark, I guess from the Sun Fire Office. It shows the owners' insurance was paid up, so they qualified to have any fires extinguished. Ironical, given what we were talking about earlier. Fancy another drink?'

They retired inside the next bar they came to and Marek returned to the subject of the firemark.

'They wouldn't have been much use during the Blitz.'

'No I suppose not.'

'Ayush, tell me, have you done much research on Ipswich during the war?'

'No, not really. I know the docks and factories were attacked but I haven't done the details. It's not really my bag.'

'Hmm. People forget. Now look what's happened, innocent civilians being bombed out of their houses this very year.' They both stared blankly into their pints before Marek got the bit between his teeth again.

'From what I understand, Norwich was targeted much more than Ipswich, as part of the Baedeker raids. I suppose that's one advantage of being missed off the tourist trail. You don't get bombed to smithereens so much, when things turn nasty.'

'Baedeker raids?'

'Oh... the Baedeker Guides were like the first ever tourist information books, listing the cultural highlights of Europe. The Luftwaffe used them to plot revenge on Britain following our raid on Lubeck in 1942. They wanted to crush morale by destroying our treasures.'

'Aha... so today's day-trippers see no more reason to visit Ipswich than the Luftwaffe did to drop bombs.'

'I suppose not. But Norwich was properly Blitzed.'

'I'm saying nothing. Mind you, interesting what you said about retaliation. I do think its funny how this country always tries to adopt the moral high ground. Why is everything here always so Great? Great British Railways. What a joke. People forget about our bombs. Our Dresden. Our great massacres of innocent civilians in all corners of the globe. Was what Hitler did to the Jews any worse than what the British did to West Africans through slavery? Yet somehow we're the good guys.'

Marek had no immediate answer. He had exercised similar thoughts himself, but now was preoccupied by the their joint use of 'our' and 'we' despite having very different lineage.

'You're right Ayush. We are very good at photoshopping the past. Others are less forgiving, it's very sad how this country has lost so much of its reputation lately. Brexit made us look so petty and small. Bonds forged in the spirit of eternal peace being compromised thanks to the pursuit of bogus national identity. And where has it taken us? Hopefully there can be time for reflection now and some new force for good can rise up from the ashes.'

Nothing more was said as they steadily drained their glasses. Before reaching the bottom, Ayush was struck by the feeling that this meeting was meant to be. The quirks of Pebbletank had brought them together, but it was almost like the same

consciousness had formed in their respective brains, despite the stark contrast in their background.

'You and me are like long-lost brothers.'

'Ha ha... maybe Ayush. I suppose that's the effect of social media. You follow people based around shared passions and there's something about the visual nature of Pebbletank... it reflects the way we see the world and we gravitate towards like-minded souls, with a few inexplicable outliers thrown into the mix. The community grows like the egg of a Venn diagram.'

'But not too big. If you follow too many, it's impossible to keep up.'

'Yes. But I think those eggs are self-forming... like a hive, or a coral... or something. You get to know everyone your contacts know until you reach a boundary. Because we like each other's posts it's no wonder we find common ground. It does make me worry though.'

'Worry about what?'

'About the fact that we're incapable of *experiencing* anything by ourselves anymore. We're incapable of enjoying the moment, we can't resist the urge to share. Before social media we just *enjoyed* things. When we encountered something truly magical for the first time... I don't know, like Kate Bush... we enjoyed them internally. Now we're like leaky buckets.'

'I'll take your word about Kate Bush.'

'You should. There are some things so unique and magnificent, it's impossible to imagine the world existing without. Like thoroughbred racehorses. Or Kate Bush. How mental would social media have gone, on seeing her first appearance on Top

of the Pops? Come to think of it, I suppose there is also voyeurism in what we do, it's part of the appeal. Mild-mannered stalking. We can watch what other people do, safely behind the net curtain.'

'I'll take your word for that too,' said Ayush, his eyes darting towards the TV screen.

They left the bar, Ayush leading the way. His commentary dried up as he pondered the urge to share.

'It must be selective.'

'What's that?'

'The urge to share. I have memories I couldn't share with anyone. As the saying goes, I will take them to my grave.'

'You're not the only one, I can assure you.'

'It's funny though, thinking about what we leave behind. I've often wondered, why do people save all their lives? Why is it deemed so important to leave some kind of legacy, to build something tangible, like ants or dung beetles. My fantasy is to depart this world the very second my last bean is spent.'

'Nice work if you can manage it, Ayush. But I guess, in the virtual world, it can be more about your imprint on society. You might articulate an original thought that sticks in a stranger's mind and gets passed on ad infinitum. Not about possessions, but about changing the world.'

'You mean like stuff going viral?'

'Yes I suppose so, but perhaps more permanent than that. It might be possible to leave a trace worth more than any amount of money you might save, or

property you might own, just from something you say or write. That might be a better legacy.'

'All I can think about is stuff I want to forget.'

'You could always try burying it.'



They ambled from St Nicholas Street to Falcon Street, from Dog's Head Street to St Stephens Lane. As they progressed into Dial Lane a curious figure in orange beanie hat, nursing a bottle of Desperados, scowled at them from a bench by the entrance to St Lawrence's Church. Even though they made no eye contact, he stood in challenge as they passed, 'Are you geezers looking for anything in particular?' Ayush and Marek fixed their gaze on the pavement and hurried onwards, anxious to avoid engagement. The fellow shouted 'Cunts!' in their direction before returning to the bench and his discourse with pigeons.

'Sadly there's quite a lot of that round here. Maybe I should skip this bit for my tour.'

'A very attractive tower though. It would be a shame, these flint-knapped churches are stunning.'

'Speaking of which... are you into God and shit, Marek?'

'Me, no not really. Oh merciful God. That reminds me, I started writing a book once. Well, more like a short story. I was going to call it *Oh Merciful God*. It came to me, thinking about the cruelty of life. They say God does everything for a reason, as justification for the fact the he – I'm sticking with *he* – allows bad things to happen. Did you ever invent games Ayush?'

'Games?'

'Yes, when you were a kid, did you ever invent new games to play by yourself.'

'Absolutely, yes, all the time.'

'Right, well... me too. Anyway, the story was about a little girl in Pakistan who invented the best game anyone had ever thought of. She worked out the rules and played it with her pet goat. She goes to bed one night, excitedly looking forward to showing her uncle the next day. Then she gets crushed to death in her sleep, when the family home is destroyed by an earthquake. The rules of the game die with her.'

'Blimey. That's a jolly tale.'

'Yes, sorry about that. I never quite finished it at the time. Odd that it came into my head just now. But it's that notion of God doing everything for a reason. So many kids get killed... what possible reason can there be? They don't get a chance to deserve their fate, let alone leave a legacy... their dreams are just squished. Kids in Syria, born into a life of terror that lasts only until their tenement gets hit by a missile. When someone explains the reason, I might give God the time of day. Until then, I'll just enjoy whatever architecture is still standing.'

'Cool. I'm glad I asked! OK Marek, in that case, you're going to like St Mary-le-Tower. Once we're past that and over the ring road again, we're in Christchurch Park. Which is lovely.'

Once they had perambulated the full extent of the town's mother church and zig-zagged their way into the park, the September sun impelled them to sit for a while on the grass.

'Good park Ayush, well done.'

'You're welcome. Don't worry, the best kept beer in England awaits.'

'Can't wait! Say, Ayush... you've got some kind of Asian background right?' Marek was losing his inhibitions.

'Yes indeed, well spotted. My parents are from India.'

'I shouldn't have asked, please, no offence. I was just wondering... do you ever get nonsense from people about being a terrorist and crap like that.'

'Yeah, sometimes.'

'I only ask because I get the same when people see my name. I've been treated like an outsider so many times.'

'That terrorist thing's a funny one though. They say one man's terrorist is another man's freedom fighter. There's definitely an alternative view of the world to be told, the heroism of the 9/11 bombers for example. You've got to admit, that was damn impressive – not a popular view I grant you. I'm not condoning it, of course, in fact I know someone whose brother was killed. But did anyone in the West actually stop to think... how much do they hate us? What does it take for another society to hate us that much, to go to those lengths? I never heard that narrative being aired. Don't we ever stop to think that our so-called values, our so-called democracy... sodding so-called western culture... which is mostly just soft porn and alcohol... don't we ever stop to think we might be wrong?'

'That, Ayush... is a very, very good question.'

'Thank you. I agree. Let's go to the pub.'

Marek continued the theme on their way uphill towards the side park gates, their pace almost slowed to a standstill.

'Talking of 9/11... the only alternative narrative you do get – apart from the obvious *all Muslims are suicide bombers* garbage – is about conspiracy theories rather than any form of introspection. And Ayush... don't get me started on conspiracy theories.'

'OK, I won't.'

'Too late. Conspiracy theories are all very well, but people seem to assume they'd be enacted with some kind of elite competence that never manifests itself in anything else governments do. If a government planned to fly passenger jets into the side of a skyscraper, does anyone really think they wouldn't fuck it up? If they tried to push Princess Di's car into the side of a tunnel using a Fiat Uno, would they really have done it so successfully? When do they ever do something well? They can't even follow a simple set of rules about not having parties during an epidemic... rules they made up themselves.'

'Yeah, you're right. The big dramatic events probably either occur by accident, or get carried out by ordinary people who've stewed in hatred for a lifetime... or a madman. Not as an action from a government sub-committee meeting.'

They reached the top of the rising ground and turned to look back, enjoying the early signs of autumn colour dusting the trees. Both men were breathing heavily.

'Bloody hell! I thought Suffolk was supposed to be flat?'

'Ha ha... no, Ipswich does have its lumps. Now, we go through this gate to reach our final destination, the high point of our quest, in more ways than one. As a general rule, the end of the tour will be The Woolie.'

The Woolpack is a gem. It bears the ambience and history of the best country pubs, a perfect rustic inn cast in a setting of sturdy red-brick town houses. The situation at the fork of two ancient arteries leading north of the town resembles a theatrical stage and to sit on the front terrace, basking in the glow of its 18th century brickwork, affords a timeless sensation. It would be an affront to discover its cellar did *not* give shelter to ghosts, or that the secret smuggler tunnels existed only in myth. Ayush and Marek chose their ales from the blackboard and settled into a picnic bench table.



'Ahh... this is the life. I could get used to this Ayush. I think your tour will be a winner, if you're giving up with the cocoon thing.'

'Cool. Yeah, that's probably not a good idea, I expect it will all come down when I'm least expecting. Glad you've enjoyed it.'

'I think I'll have to book into the Travelodge and extend my parking. I'm not going to drive home this evening.'

'OK cool. In theory you could bed down at mine, but... you know.' Ayush had no intention of letting that happen, the theory was strictly theoretical.

'No, don't worry, I'll get out of your hair. Who do you think will be next, have you got another deep diver lined up?'

'Not as such.'

They swapped notes about some of the followers they shared and Marek described the road trip with Alice.

'Sounds nice,' said Ayush. 'I don't think she's one of mine.'

'No, her daughter keeps a tight control. That's one part of the bubble that doesn't grow organically.'

'You certainly get some strange ones appearing as suggestions sometimes. Like the friend of a friend of a friend that takes you somewhere new. It *is* interesting how the bubble grows though. Those boundaries you mentioned before, forming a self-contained group, almost like a new country. It comes as quite a shock when you accidentally find yourself in a foreign one, if you go searching through the hashtags. It's hard to believe they exist. I guess partly because you can block people you disagree with, you become part of a virtual population, all with the same opinions... like a new nation but without physical borders.'

'Hmm... I wonder if Pebbletank wars will ever break out. I suppose geographic boundaries enclosing mixed populations, like Ukrainians and Russians for example, will always be a problem. Maybe virtual boundaries are what we should concentrate on now. A new type of politics?'

'Ha! That's something else the British cocked-up. Drawing boundaries on the map, in places they interfered with, before pissing off and leaving things worse than they were to start with. Not just the pink parts of the atlas, the parts where the dotted lines are in the wrong place. Or simply dead straight, from the point where the surveyors succumbed to dysentery, or got eaten by lions.'

'Who draws the boundaries now, eh? They said the Internet would be the death of geography. It didn't happen straight away, but it's happening now thanks to social media.'

'Do you think it's done more harm than good, Marek? The Internet that is.'

'Bloody hell, there's a question. In my view, it's probably neutral. But the negative shouts out, when we're supposed to be making progress as a race. I don't think humanity is making progress anymore. I think we're becoming more stupid. We're seeing the erosion of collective intelligence. We forget things, we've become incapable of remembering lessons of the past. The relentless momentum of fashion and what's currently *in* means we associate *Now* with *Best*. But I honestly think collective intelligence peaked some time ago, and we're now on a downward slope. This is how civilizations fail.'

'Blimey. We're on the collapse of civilization now! I think it must be my round.'

Ayush went inside for more Digby's Revenge IPA. He re-emerged into the sunshine to find Marek chatting with the next door table's Doberman.

'Aha, you've started to get friendly with the natives.'

'Ha ha... yes. Doesn't he look superb in this sunlight.'

'I guess. It's a great place for dogs. Just a shame there's so many kids as well, but you can't have everything. Anyway Marek, like you were saying... I always wondered why civilizations fell, like the Roman Empire for example. If they were so fucking good at conquering, building roads, the wine and shit... where did it all go wrong?'

'I don't know. Maybe it was down to similar things to what's happening now. Maybe everything becomes too comfortable, the politics too stuck in the middle ground. We get complacent, allowing upstarts like Nigel Farage to gain oxygen. We get lost in infantile nonsense and take our eye off the ball. The ravaging hordes are always at the gate, but we bury our heads and blame the media for bad news. Collective madness. Something like that probably.'

'Yeah, probably. It does feel like we're destined to mess everything up. However much we want to be good, we end up doing something wrong.' Ayush looked towards Marek, trying to judge his expression, but he was squinting into the sun too much for a reaction to be discerned.

'Have you been to the Imperial War Museum, Ayush?'

'Er... nope.'

'It's very much worth a visit – to be honest, I think a visit to the Holocaust exhibit should be compulsory for everyone, but anyway – when you go there, you'll see an intact V2 rocket. It's just astonishing. I know we see images of weaponry all the time nowadays, but because that really happened, they really were used... in the last generation, people were prepared to lob those things at each other. The V comes from the German word for vengeance, but still... it takes you to the very heart of evil – the willingness to commit terrible acts. What we humans are prepared to do to each other. We really don't know each other at all.'

For the first time Marek's level of bonhomie appeared to wane and he looked away, beckoning again to the dog. A chill entered the air. Ayush recognised the signs, the convivial mood of the afternoon was starting to shift, replaced by

dehydration and the edginess of a late-stage booze session. Their binge had run its course and they soon set off downhill, back to the town centre and a parting of the ways.

'Great stuff Ayush. You take care my friend. I hope you emerge soon.'

'Thanks Marek, who knows, one day I might emerge. Thanks for coming. Have a safe journey home.'

'Will do. And you be positive. You're one of the good guys.'

'I don't think...'

Ayush's reply was obliterated by Marek's bear hug. Marek pointed at him with a pistol gesture as he stepped backwards, then spun around unsteadily and disappeared in the direction of his van. Ayush trudged back towards his flat, descending the long tail of intoxication fade. Back inside, he was reunited with the detritus of his shortcomings: the wardrobe door that failed to close, a once worn puffer jacket being too fat to fit inside... and the clutter on his desk reminding him there were two days to survive before work started again. He stared helplessly at his phone, craving for the nerve to cut his own hole.

nine

Alice & Dougall

Thursday October 6th

Dougall Earp was hovering on the threshold of Wetherspoons at Victoria Station paralysed by indecision. On one hand, the lure of killing time with a Diet Coke and a view across the concourse from the upper level – as a rule he loathed the intimidating crush of London but took pleasure from the cathedral-like atmosphere of its railway termini. On the other, a pair of mouth-breathing lowlifes sipping Stella by the doorway were eying him with ill intent, their attention pricked by his choice of suede man-bag.

‘I think I’d like some booze please,’ sneered one of the pair, directly in Dougall’s direction. The words, while undercut with menace, were delivered in such perfect Lord Snootyesque cartoon toff caricature, Dougall’s urge to laugh almost overtook his agitation. The vocal performance belonged on the stage of old-time music hall. Nevertheless, he suppressed a smile, made sure to avoid eye contact and turned to trot downstairs. The younger of the two neanderthals cackled with laughter. ‘Oi mate, I’ll see you in the bogs!’ he called out, followed by more brainless guffaws.

‘Now I remember why I hate this place,’ said Dougall to himself, electing to wait out the time for his delayed service to Eastbourne at platform level. Heading south for a deep dive meet-up with Alice Clay, he had travelled from Oban to Euston the previous day and stayed overnight with an old university friend. The @aliceclay.1931 account was offering an experience described as *Meet My Plants*,

which was immediately attractive given Dougall's new direction. After the tense conclusion to the Portallan 100 adventure with Reece, his *Breaching Humpback at Dusk* photo went viral. It became one of the most shared wildlife images of the year, inspiring Dougall to have it minted as a non-fungible token. With Alasdair's encouragement, he decided to try his hand in the creative arts, combining photography with writing about the relationship between man and nature. His online conversations with Alice showed that the plants on her terrace had a string of sentimental associations and he was keen to learn more. Soon he would be on his way to Cedar Lodge, slugging from a re-filled water bottle, his quest for something fizzy yet free from single-use plastic having been aborted. With the clocks in Mexico City being six hours behind, it was too early to message directly with his partner, but there were posts from the Truth Amnesty to catch up on. They had nearly reached the unanimity required but were facing some last-ditch resistance from Scientology. Apparently a counter-movement was under way to get the Scientologists removed from the council as they were abstaining on everything unless a specific form of words could be found in *A History of Man*. The newly re-formed Vikings were waiting in the wings and Alasdair still clung to hope.

Christine had set the deep dive with reluctance, she felt her mother was getting carried away. However, Alice was so enraptured by the ride in Marek's van, she wanted to host something herself.

'For Christ's sake Mum, what can you offer as an experience that anyone will be remotely interested in!?'

'I've got my terrace.'

'Your terrace. Fantastic. What are we going to do, advertise a deep dive called *Meet My Plants?*' Christine laughed out loud, finding herself hilarious.

'Don't laugh dear, it's not that funny. Anyway... I don't see why not. Someone might be interested to hear their stories.' Alice thought about adding that some people also might want to listen to her in general, but held back.

'OK Mum, if that's what you really want. Let's hope the rush doesn't break Pebbletank altogether.' Christine was convinced it was pointless but if a request did arise, at least it would help her mother exercise her memory. As with her evaluation of Marek, she would be able to vet any applicants herself and the risks should be low. Julian and her friends accused her of cruelty, but she rebuffed all criticism, happy that her Mum had something else on the horizon to occupy her mind, even if no-one ever showed interest. When Dougall's application cropped-up, his enthusiasm blew her sideways as they swapped messages to seal the deal.

'I need to manage your expectations Dougall. She's very old and her memory is going.'

'That's fine. I'm most interested in people's deepest feelings, the things held in the core of our being. The things we carry the longest and where they are rooted.'

'OK, if you're sure. It's only a small terrace mind, not exactly Kew Gardens.'

'I've seen the photos. There are some characters there, I can tell.'

'OK. If you say so! I can try to come down myself.'

'No need, I swear your mum will be perfectly safe.'



Dougall arrived at Cedar Lodge just after two, facing another conundrum. A chink in his allegiance to public transport had formed thanks to a poor bus recommendation from the staff at Eastbourne Station. Once the yawning gap between his current location and the Cedar Lodge pushpin finally sank in, a thirty minute walk was entailed, adding to an already unfeasible amount of time spent in transit. However, to meet Alice on a Zoom call would have defeated the object. He called her flat from the door panel and waited for the buzzer. A grudging smile was forthcoming from behind the desk as he filled in the register, the Scottish tones of his 'good afternoon' taking Audrey from Lanark's normally cold exterior unawares.

'I'm here to meet Alice Clay.'

'Oh aye. Join the queue. Our Alice is quite the gadabout. She's in number 7.'

Alice welcomed him warmly at her door. 'It's so lovely to meet you. Should I call you Dougall... as in the dog?'

'Dougall, yes that's fine. Er, sorry Alice... what dog?'

'Oh you know, from the Magic Roundabout. I think he only had one L though.'

'Ach, OK... I must look that up Alice.'

'Yes you must dear, we all loved him. I'll get some tea. Would you like a piece of cake? It's only banana loaf I'm afraid, Christine got me far too many the last time she did the shopping.'

'That'll be grand Alice, thank you. I'll see how mine compares.'

'Oh, you bake too, how splendid!'

Soon they were dabbing crumbs from the square-shaped tea plates of a service Christine had imposed, the wedding present bone china being too chipped for decent company. Conscious of time, Dougall was about to steer the conversation towards the terrace when a muffled jingle took to the air, causing Alice to look confused.

'Alice, is that your phone?'

'Oh yes, that must be it. The WhatsApp thing, I expect it's my daughter, now where can it be?'

'I think it came from under...' Dougall pointed across the room and Alice lifted the cushion to reveal her tablet.

'Ah yes, found you. I still haven't got used to this thing.' She peered at the screen and tapped a few times. 'Yes, it's Christine.'

The message read 'Has he arrived yet?'

'Yes dear, we just had some cake.'

'Good grief,' followed by rolling eyes emoji. 'Does he seem OK?'

'Yes dear, he's very nicely dressed. You mustn't worry.'

Alice placed the tablet back on the cushion and returned attention to her guest.

'My daughter worries about me too much.'

'I gather she looks after your Pebbletank account.'

'Yes she does, she set it all up. I had the most splendid adventure you know. I went all the way to Worcestershire in the van of a Polish builder chap. He was lovely, I think I've made a friend for life.'

'Sounds epic Alice. It's a good idea isn't it, exploring our connections. As it happens, the reason I'm here today is all down to your philadelphus.'

'Really!'

'Yep. It's all down to Christine choosing that as your profile pic. I was scanning through new contact suggestions one day, looking for people to help me with my book, when your lovely philadelphus image appeared. It's one of my favourite shrubs, if you didn't have it on your profile pebble, I doubt we'd be connected.'

'Well I'll be blowed, what a coincidence. To be honest Dougall, I don't understand how it all works.'

'It's all a bit strange, I agree. After I connected, Christine went and liked a whole load of my posts. That's when I noticed your meet-up suggestion. I assume Christine has told you what we've been discussing. How I'm interested in uncovering stories that are linked in some way to our flora?'

'Yes, she did. It sounds fascinating I must say. We looked through your photos together, oh goodness, your whale one. Just amazing.'

'Ah yes... thank you, that was a special moment. That was from my own deep dive.'

'Christine tells me it's become famous?'

'Yes, it has rather. It's my first NFT. Non-fungible token that is, do you know about those?'

'Non *fungible* did you say?'

'Yes, that's right. I've only just learned about them myself.' Dougall discussed the subject with Reece when the prospect first emerged. Reece's explanation at

the time was unintelligible but he came back with a better one a few days later, which Dougall now tried to relay. 'It's not easy to explain. An NFT is a bit like the digital equivalent of an original painting.'

'I really don't understand all this digital stuff. Why can't we just get prints anymore, and have them in albums like real photos.'

'Well... you *can still* do that Alice. But on the NFT thing... think of my whale being like the original Mona Lisa hanging in The Louvre. You see copies of it everywhere, but mine is the original, only stored securely on a computer rather than in a gallery. It's a bit like that anyway. Not that I'm likening myself to Leonardo you understand, ha ha...'

Alice looked perplexed. 'We went to The Louvre once, Geoffrey and I. It was extremely hot, if I remember rightly.'

'Ach. Can't say I've been.'

'I'll never go again of course. I'd be lost without my photograph albums though, so many memories. You can't look back at them anymore, now that everything's on a computer, it's such a shame.'

'You can Alice, you can do the same thing, only...' Dougall realised he was heading down a blind alley and tried to pull back. 'Actually, I think it's gone too far the other way now. People want to share too much nowadays. We should probably spend more time enjoying the moment rather than recording it for some future period of reflection that doesn't ever come around. How much do people really want to see other people's albums anyway?'

By now Alice was staring at him, disbelief glinting in her eyes.

'Oh, no Alice, I didn't mean yours. I mean, I'd love to. But I guess we don't have time today.'

'No, probably not. I suppose we should get started.'



Alice got to her feet in stages then shuffled across the carpet, without her sticks, to stand by the patio door. The double lock device opened at the third attempt of turning key and handle in unison. It was one of those October days where the weather gets stuck in no man's land. Pulses of wind tugged at a mid-grey sky, the air was neither warm or cold, or anything else in between. Alice moved a dining chair from table to doorway and sat down, transferring a cardigan from the chair to herself in the process. She beckoned Dougall to go outside.

'Here it is Dougall. My pride and joy. Except it looks so tatty now with all these fallen leaves, it looks much nicer in the summer.'

Dougall stepped out onto the unspectacular square of paving. To the left of the doorway extended a perpendicular wall, with open beds cut into the paving. To the right, parallel to the opening, a further stretch of brickwork covered by trellis. The other two sides abutting the communal lawns of the complex were lined by containers of various shape and size. Beyond the strip of grass, a border of mature flowering shrubs surrounded the whole site. Dougall looked for the philadelphus but the only sign was a straggly bush with its few faded flowers reflecting the grey of the sky, starting to lose its leaves in the shared bed.

'Is that the philadelphus of your photo Alice?'

'Yes, it looks a bit sad now doesn't it. There were two to start with, until builders came along and destroyed the other one. They were too big to plant on the terrace, so the manager agreed to plant them over there. But they had to replace the drains, you see.'

'That's when it got damaged?'

'Yes. Their digger went right through it. That was about five years ago. They looked quite splendid in midsummer.'

'I bet they did. And presumably they mean something special to you?' Dougall looked at Alice expectantly.

'Well, we had them in Chelmsford you see. They were one of our favourites. When I came here they were too established to move, so I bought some new ones by mail order and the resident handyman planted them up.'

'That's great Alice, it's good to know you have support on hand. You feel looked after, I hope?'

'Oh yes, the staff are wonderful, I've always been very much at home here. It was a good move... the only downside has been the loss in value. Christine is very cross with me, did she tell you?'

'No, not at all. Why is she cross with you?'

'Oh these flats were quite expensive you know, to buy new that is. Plus there's the service charge of course. Would you believe, this cost £250,000 back in 2007. And now... well, one exactly the same sold at auction for £5,000 last month. The value has gone pffft! It seems no-one wants to invest in a second-hand retirement

properties, that's why they keep building new ones. We had no idea, there was no mention of anything like that in the brochure. Christine is very cross.'

'I can imagine.' Dougall could imagine very well. While aspiring to be less materialistic than Alice's daughter, even he felt the tremors of such a jaw-dropping loss of inheritance.

'I do love the philadelphus though. Such a bright cloud of white in high season, that's why Christine chose that image for me. Geoffrey always likened them to snowdrifts.'

'Yes, absolutely, I love them too. In fact, I stuck one of your Pebbletank photos.'

'Sticked?'

'Ach yes... sorry, that's the stupid term Pebbletank uses. When you save someone's post, they call it *sticked*, instead of *pinned* or *saved*... or even *stuck* for that matter.'

'Oh yuck. Whatever will they do next. Why can't they leave the English language alone?'

'Yeah, it's horrible isn't it. Progress eh? What's next Alice, how about these troughs?'

'Well, these ones to the right I brought with me from the house. Nothing remarkable there, I get new bedding plants every year. Those ones on the far edge, were bought for me by the property management company. Partly to compensate for the shrub they killed and partly to celebrate my tenth anniversary here. Such a lovely gesture. The bedding plants are all looking very sorry for themselves now Dougall, I feel guilty for letting you come so late in the season.'

'No worries at all, Alice. It must be full of colour at its best.'

'Yes it is. I'm lucky to have this plot, only a few of the flats have a terrace like this. It does help. At my age, when you're living alone, in constant pain, you need *something* to cheer you up.'

'Are you in pain all the time?'

'Yes dear, of course. I suppose it comes to us all in the end. When you first hit middle age and everything starts to fail, people find it comical. Your bad back, your bad knees. You start going *ooh* and *aah* all the time... and young people just laugh at you. But it never goes away. After that, it just gets worse and worse, as you get older and older... plus you hurt yourself each time you fall. We've got bruises, sprains, torn muscles. When I see those footballers rolling around... oh my word. Being this old means a life of pain. Some reward eh? And we're just expected to put up with it, no wonder we become irritable. If I didn't have my garden to look at, I really would go as mad as Christine thinks I already am.'

'So the flowers become your companions?'

'Yes. Everyone else either dies, or doesn't really care. Have you seen my olive tree?'

'Yes! It's superb. Where did that come from?'

'Oh, I'm not sure. Alec's family bought it for me.'

The olive tree stood in an expensive-looking earthenware pot that required two people to carry around the outside of the building. Alec's sons and daughters knew Alice had been a good friend in the latter years of his life, he spoke to them fondly about her. Initially, they assumed he was hallucinating about her

friendship, or dredging up memories of some distant teenage romance. But there was just enough time left, enough of a window in which he was able to express his feelings, for their closeness to be recorded. Just enough time before his mind went. In his final two years, Alec struggled to remember who Alice even was, her orbit being too near to recollect. She called him every day, but each time the conversation was the same: who are you, how are you, have you seen the news. He had lost the vital ingredients of what had transiently made them whole, but he knew her voice meant something. Their two fading lives had coalesced together into a single view, like a bird seen fleetingly through binoculars, for a portion of 2019. The only good thing about his rapid decline being that a state of detachment kicked-in before the frustrations of lockdown. He was already in a world of his own when everyone else's went haywire. While Alec remained cogent, he and Alice talked of holidays from their past and concluded they both must have visited the same taverna in Rhodes Town in the 1970's. The olive tree became a symbol of their bond, a fact that Alice did not even attempt to explain to her daughter. When Christine saw the tree she decided its benefactors must also be mad people and started to plot its removal to her own garden, much to Alice's disgust.

'Oh Dougall, it was such a shame. How Alec would have loved to see it for himself, if only he hadn't gone blind. Towards the end, you could hear the unfulfilled longing in his voice. He had forgotten the most recent strands of his life, he couldn't make sense of them. I became like a ghost to him, blurred with events from fifty years ago. All these thoughts come to mind whenever I look at that tree.'

'Thank you for sharing all this with me, Alice. I should've said, I hope you don't mind me recording your words.'

'No not at all dear. I won't tell Christine if you don't.'

'Grand, that's a deal.'



'Dougall, I wanted to ask you... Christine told me that you're interested in plants being intelligent, is that right?'

'That's what I was studying before I left my job, yes. Their senses.'

'How fascinating. Wasn't there something about that on David Attenborough earlier this year. What was it, The Green Planet? About how trees communicate with each other via fungus in the soil.'

'Yes that's right. There are many ways that trees communicate with each other, it's a fascinating subject. One way is through chemical relays between root, fungal filament and root. It really is true... trees connect to each other via underground webs of mycelia, for distributing water and nutrients. They can send messages about drought, disease and infestation by pests, which other trees respond to. The fungi also benefit from the exchange of goodness. It is quite incredible – a hidden aspect of how the natural world works we're only just beginning to understand.'

'Gracious me. Yes, I remember seeing it on TV.'

'Not only that... did you know that giraffes choose which acacia trees to nibble depending on the wind direction? When they start to munch, the acacia leaves send chemicals into the air that provide a signal to other trees of imminent

danger, which then respond by pumping toxins into their own leaves, to deter the giraffes. Hence the animals benefit from understanding the wind direction, to stop the trees whispering to each other. Plants know stuff Alice – and the animals know they know. I wouldn't mind betting your olive tree knows a thing or two we're yet to unravel.'

'Ha ha... yes, unless trees lose their marbles too.'

'They call it the wood-wide web. It *was* one of the things I was interested in. I'm not entirely sure they have their own social media though, I doubt they have the equivalent of phone cameras, or centralised cached servers accessible by every plant on the globe, but who knows.'

'I will take your word for it dear, that all sounds like gobbledegook to me, I'm afraid.'

'That's effectively what our Internet is like, Alice. Absolutely everyone connected with absolutely everyone else, irrespective of where you are... and everything we do being recorded. The ramifications of that are only just being worked out too. I know it feels like the Internet has been around forever, but some of the consequences of *everyone* being connected, via apps that are embedded into our everyday lives, are only just coming through. Say what you like about the pandemic but it was a fascinating experiment in social science.'

'Do you think so? To be honest, it was business as usual for me. I don't get out much anyway. I'm sure Christine was glad for a reason not to visit.'

'I'm sure that's not true. It was kind-of business as usual for me too, where we live is quite remote. Christine said that Pebbletank helped you pass some of the time?'

'Yes, I suppose it did, when there was nothing to watch on TV I would skim through the pictures.'

'I think lots of people did the same. What struck me was how the community came together. All that stuff in the beginning about flattening the curve. To be honest, when it all started, I think many of us instinctively felt the same as apparently our leaders did – certainly in your case, in Westminster, if the whistle-blowers can be believed – that we shouldn't over-react, that it would blow through like regular flu and the sooner we reached herd immunity the better. Then everything changed so quickly. The first stories about body bags and lockdown in Italy were so chilling. Back home, we read about your supermarkets here in England, running out of toilet paper and paracetamol and how folk were panicking. Then, somehow, advice on the *right things to do* seemed to spread online once everyone twigged what was really going on in the hospitals. The advice people shared was much more effective than any soundbites from politicians on TV.'

'Ah yes, all that singing Happy Birthday while washing your hands.'

'Yes, exactly. But I truly believe that the chatter on social media about staying home, et cetera ... somehow acted as pooled intelligence, like the viral spreading of common sense. I honestly think that saved the day.'

'Just as well. I don't think the government had a clue what to do.'

'No indeed. But to be fair, I doubt anyone could have done much better, it was all so unprecedented. True, there were scientific models that predicted how a pandemic would unfold, but listening to scientists doesn't win elections these days. More likely, the special advisers modelled the negative effect of people dying in ambulances outside A&E departments on the prime minister's legacy, and that's what prompted action. Not that the other parties are any better – my impression was that society as a whole accepted that the politicians were idiots, but pulled together to adopt the necessary behaviour anyway, in spite of them. And things like Pebbletank helped.'

'Christine did post something about my banana loaf, she even got me to take the photo. That was quite fun.'

'There you go. The nation kept its spirits up through the pandemic by sharing stories of banana bread – and you were part of it Alice. You were part of the meme.'

'I suppose I was, whatever one of those might be. You make it sound just like the trees Dougall.' Alice was beaming with delight.

'Everyone looking after each other. I guess it must have been the same during the war?'

'Oh goodness yes, we had to pull together in those days. Of course it was different then, we had no expectation of up-to-the-minute news like people do nowadays. We were so much more in the dark, in more ways than one. Orders would be sent, with advice on evacuation, how to build shelters and things like that... and we had to accept what we were told. Mind you, all the evidence we needed was

there, above our heads. We experienced what was happening with our own eyes and ears.'

'How old were you at that time Alice, if you don't mind me asking?'

'Of course not dear, I was born in 1931. So I was eight when it started and fourteen at the end. They say that children were one step removed from the reality, but it didn't feel like it. As I recall, the government had more respect than it does now, but it was more about the whole country standing shoulder-to-shoulder, there were higher forces at play. Good versus evil, I suppose. By the looks of it, Churchill was drunk most of the time.'

'These memories of yours are so important Alice. It's tragic to think how history has repeated itself in Ukraine this year, with people like yourself bridging the gap between the two conflicts.'

Alice fell silent and looked to her left, her gaze resting upon the autumnal remnants of an old-fashioned climbing rose that grew from a hole in the paving. It's leaves were discoloured and, while most remaining flower heads had gone to seed, a handful clung grimly to tissue-like petals.

'Is that Rosa Alba semi-plena?'

'I think so Dougall, I'm impressed. That's what it says in my notes anyway, I tried to gen up when Christine was planning all this. I keep notes on everything. It's supposed to be the original white rose of York, my father was born in Harrogate you see.'

'Supposed to be, yes. It's been around for a long time. Longer than you Alice!'

'Yes!' Alice clapped her hands together, excited by the thought of being outlived by at least one other thing. 'I wanted to have one of these, I'm so delighted it took, even though it's a bit scruffy. Mind you, it *should* like the soil here, after all my parents had one all those years ago. The house we lived in was closer to the seafront over there, this rose is the only thing I remember from the garden. I'm just disappointed in the fragrance, I remember it being so strong, but this one you can barely smell.'

'You are both survivors. Did you stay in Eastbourne throughout the war?'

'On and off. I was evacuated to Wales for a while, but plans kept changing. I do remember sitting in the shelter at night, in the freezing cold and damp of the garden, while bombs fell all around. The Luftwaffe had a habit of dumping their leftovers here, I guess the white cliffs made an obvious landmark. Our house never got hit and no-one in my family was killed or badly injured, but we knew so many who were. And you sit in the shelter wondering who's next, petrified about how it would feel to be struck. I could tell people today a thing or two about anxiety. We didn't have time to worry about our mental health, we just had to get on with it.'

Just get on with it. Dougall could remember his grandfather using the same words and resenting him for it. He resented the assumption that young people today should suffer the hang-ups of the older generation. That was their problem, don't take it out on us. Listening to Alice, he began to see the other side.

'Thinking about it Alice, effectively your whole age group must have been subject to post-traumatic stress, in today's parlance. Perhaps that's why so many kids in the sixties and seventies complained about their parents and rebelled – because

their parents were basically messed up, as a result of what they lived through.

Do you think that's fair?'

'Maybe Dougall, but humans are very adaptable. There are different kinds of pressure now, although I do wonder about some of the things people complain about today. Our priorities seem to be all wrong, there are people living in terrible pain every day, but some of the causes you see on TV... oh I don't know.' Alice was keen not to appear like a fogey, so stopped herself going further. 'What about you Dougall, did you rebel against your parents?'

'Ach, Alice... that is a story for another day. Let's just say, we don't speak much. They were not exactly super-keen on me spending my life looking at plant cells down a microscope, for one thing.'

'Oh dear, that's such a pity.'

'Yes, it is, but never mind, here we are. I'm very happy to be doing what I'm doing now. Speaking of which, getting back to yon rose here... do you do all the pruning?'

'I do what I can. Plus Christine and Julian do some tidying for me, when they visit. The rose and the clematis need a lot of dead-heading to keep on flowering.'

'That's the clematis on the other trellis I take it?'

'Yes absolutely. That one's Burma Star. Gorgeous purple blooms in spring and summer, all gone now of course. Oh dear, we should have timed this better! Maybe come again next year.'

'Aye, that would be grand. What do you think about when you see the clematis in flower?'

'Well, Christine bought that for me. She thinks I don't look after it properly, she always leaves the secateurs on this shelf by the door.'

'Aha, keeping them handy! Actually, we need to talk about secateurs.'

'Oooh, splendid. I'll make some more tea.'



Alice handed Dougall a fresh mug of Earl Grey without milk and he placed it and himself onto the wrought iron furniture set that wobbled on the patio. He surreptitiously planted a heel on the foot of the table to stop the tea from spilling. Alice returned to her seat just inside, archetypally snug in cardigan and slippers, intrigued to know what Dougall could possibly have to say about pruning devices.

'Now then Dougall, what did you want to talk about next?'

'Well... since you mentioned dead-heading. Funnily enough, it's relevant to the research I was doing, but I don't want to bore you Alice.'

'Not at all, I'm very interested.'

'OK then... towards the end of my studies, myself and some other teams were looking at the role of serotonin in plants. Most people think of serotonin in terms of its effects on the human brain, but it's also known to play a role in regeneration of plant tissue.' Alice looked at him eagerly, so Dougall felt confident to continue.

'We started to explore serotonin levels immediately after the removal of flower heads and some of the experiments seemed to show an initial drop, before the expected increase. We started to wonder if there was any link with the cause of mood swings in animals.'

Alice put her hand to her mouth. 'Oh no! Don't tell me pruning makes them sad?'

Dougall gave a nervous laugh. 'That's one possible extension of the theory, yes. We were asking the question: are plants really capable of feeling unhappy. In a way, it makes sense, they've gone through all the trouble of pollination only to have their potential babies exterminated. Imagine the psychological torture... if they feel at all, that is.'

Alice suddenly looked aghast.

'I'm so sorry Alice, please don't worry. This was all theoretical, we didn't prove anything.'

'To think that every time I've snipped, it caused them pain,' she replied, nearly in tears.

'It's probably nothing, truly. Funnily enough, an article was published in Scientific American referring to a Roald Dahl short story. *Have Botanists Proved the Sound Machine is Real?* The Sound Machine was a fictional device that recorded plants screaming, when severed by unsuspecting gardeners.'

'Well I'll be... now you mention it, I do actually remember that.'

'You do?!'

'Yes, of course. It was one of the Tales of the Unexpected. On ITV.'

'Oh wow... I didn't realise.'

'Oh yes, that was one of Geoffrey's favourites. Ha ha... he always got a bit frisky... you know, that dancing girl in the opening titles. He swore to me she was naked.'

It was Dougall's turn to look perplexed, the conversation having taken an unexpected turn. 'I had no idea. That's something else I need to look up.'

'Oh yes dear, you must. They don't make them like that anymore.'

Despite his puzzlement, Dougall was glad to see her spirits recover. 'I will, I'll make a note. But on the dead-heading, I don't think you need to worry, they certainly don't scream – and I doubt your clematis will ever be faced with clinical depression.'

'Oh, that's good.'

'Yes. Although I want to scream myself when I see people buying cut flowers these days. One simple change society could make, but it's like one of the last bastions of environmental non-awareness that peer pressure cannot reach. No-one is prepared to be first over the top – *I haven't bought you roses for Valentine's darling, because we need to save the planet* – it's simply never going to happen.'

Alice looked apprehensively across to the vase of chrysanthemums on her dining table and ventured to say how pretty they looked.

'I'm not denying they're pretty Alice. But all that unrecyclable wrapping, the roadsides are filling up. Has anyone ever asked to be commemorated in the form of a dirty polythene cone filled with dead stems? One of the simplest things we could stop doing, but still the supermarkets have them at the front, drawing us in like bees.'

'I suppose if you look at it like that.'

'Anyway, sorry Alice, I'll get down from my hobby horse. Back to your memories. You mentioned Geoffrey just now, I take it he was your husband.'

'Yes, my dear Geoffrey.'

'Are you OK to talk about him?'

'Yes, it's fine. He's been dead for twenty years now.'

'Is there anything particular in the garden that reminds you of him?'

'Oh, the hydrangea. I talk to him all the time.'

'You talk to the hydrangea?'

'Well yes. He's in there you see. We sprinkled his ashes around the hydrangeas, in the garden in Chelmsford. To start with, I expected to carry on living there, but I found it increasingly hard. In the end, I just knew... I had to get away from that house. We managed to re-pot this one, it looked the healthiest. Touch wood, it's lasted ever since, such hardy things. I like to think part of Geoffrey remains, somewhere in its make-up.'

'There could well be. Some atoms that originated in Geoffrey's body could still be there, within its stems, especially the woody parts.'

'Do you really think so?'

'Yes, it's a distinct possibility, if this one was growing where you spread the ashes?'

'Yes, it was. Oh, I do hope you're right Dougall. He was in the earth for five years before we dug it up.'

'It's almost certainly the case then. He is still with you.'

'How splendid, I always felt so. Of course, he would be with me anyway, he was such a dear man.'

'You must have loved him very much Alice. How long were you together?'

'Well... we got married in 1954 and he died in 2002. Forty eight years, we didn't quite reach our golden wedding. Not that there would've been much celebrating if we had, Geoffrey was unwell for quite a while.'

'Oh Alice, I am sorry to hear that. Can you tell me what happened?'

'It was the crash you see. He was never the same after that.'



Geoffrey Clay dedicated his life to two great passions: the railways and Alice Marlowe, the girl he fell in love with at the 1950 South of England Tennis Championships at Devonshire Park. They were both keen amateurs and attended every year. Fate brought them together when half of Geoffrey's ice cream landed in Alice's lap, as he filed between the ranks of spectator deckchairs. After the initial shriek, they soon became friends, then sweethearts. With their lives entwined, Geoffrey's career with British Rail eventually led them both to Essex and his promotions towards a peak of regional operations manager. They built a happy life in a detached newbuild on the edge of Chelmsford, Christine was born and their leisure hours were filled with music, garden and travel plans. Maps, guidebooks and package holiday brochures – Thomson, Cosmos, Horizon – would litter the floor, as they schemed their latest trip, at home or abroad.

By 1989, Geoffrey was two years from retirement and designs for a work-free future with Alice were in overdrive. They had their bucket list before the term was even invented and were already researching a potential move back to the Sussex of their youth. On the morning of Friday October 6th, Geoffrey popped into the office early, to check there were no issues with his area's major

re-signalling project before leaving for a few days off. Pete Laker, his deputy and duty manager for the day looked at him incredulously, imploring him to disappear and enjoy the holiday. Geoffrey and Alice had decided to squeeze in a week in Scotland, since he and his team had been working flat out for months and it was the last opportunity before Christmas.

When news of the crash came through mid-morning, Geoffrey and Alice were already on the A1(M) listening to Radio 2 in the car. A packed commuter train bound for Liverpool Street had ploughed into the back of another, similarly packed but stationary at a signal on the approach to Shenfield. Initial reports spoke bleakly of an unspecified number of casualties. Geoffrey pulled into the first available services, white as a sheet. Without saying a word, with eyes closed and engine running, he gripped the steering wheel for two minutes assimilating what the newsreader had announced and visualising the implications. A two minute long moment of receiving the blow, like a cricket ball to the head in ultra-slow motion. As soon as the initial shock was absorbed he gave Alice a prolonged, expressionless look then gathered himself to drive, exiting at the next junction to head back south. Geoffrey made straight for the operations centre. All he said to Alice as he left the car was: 'Get home safely love, I'll be back when I can.' He spent most of the next twenty-four hours at the collision site.

By the time the combination of emergency services, dumbstruck railway staff, local volunteers and walking-wounded passengers had cleared the bodies, and the subsequent hospital stays run their course, a total of forty people were dead and over three hundred injured. At the time, the qualification 'life-changing injuries' was not part of the vernacular. Nevertheless, many lives were changed.

The red signal that convinced the driver of the leading train to apply his brakes, against his deepest instincts, was proved to be the consequence of faulty wiring. One of the teams under Geoffrey's control had been working through the previous night, the latest in a seemingly never-ending sequence, having been on duty all seven days for ten weeks in a row. This kind of working practice had become routine, in order to meet the targets of the overall upgrade programme. All the workforce were under pressure and the inhumane hours were so institutionalised, at all levels, that the prospect of complaining upwards held Canute-like levels of futility.

Geoffrey was back at his desk at 6am on Monday 9th and would never know contentment again, as long as he lived. In the febrile aftermath, the engineers, supervisors and managers were desperate to hide their tracks and seek absolution for their actions in equal measure. There was an immediate internal investigation followed by an exhaustive public enquiry. Geoffrey and his colleagues knew that everything would come out, so the hand-wringing eventually died down, awaiting the full facts to be exposed, like schoolboys accepting communal retribution for misdemeanours clearly beyond the pale. The sheer scale of the tragedy was so overwhelming that any complaint about the repercussions was soon snuffed out. One year later, when the enquiry report was published fully dissecting the degree of culpability of the entire cast of characters, Geoffrey resigned. There was no judgement about whether his absence with leave was a failing. However, the analysis that different events may have unfolded if he'd been on duty was expertly laid out. He left his job and permanently stowed himself in the family home, thereafter a broken man. Fully composed, Alice retold

her version of this history to Dougall like a sage, repeating the sentences she had played in her head a thousand times.

'He couldn't shake the guilt of not being there, you see. But the poor man hadn't had a break for over a year. Pete and the team had nagged him to go. But it was no use, there was nothing we could say to bring him around. Of course, we all felt so dreadfully sad for the poor people that were killed, hurt or lost loved ones. But it broke the company too, those men were working so hard. Nothing was the same again, an entire community was lost.'



Dougall was listening in awed silence. When the tale came to rest he paused before finding something suitable to say. 'I can't get my head around how hard that must be Alice. To see someone you loved so much, crushed by such a freak incident.'

'Oh it was heart-breaking. And I swear he ultimately died of a broken heart. They say that's just sentimental rubbish, but I swear it's true. He never wanted to do anything after his resignation. He would spend days just sitting in the study, reading his copy of that damned report. All two hundred and fifty pages of it, over and over again. I burned it after his funeral.'

'You say he died in 2002. So that was twelve years after he stopped?'

'Yes, that's right. For twelve whole years he blamed himself. It was all down to a single loose connection that the engineer neglected to insulate, in the relay room controlling the signals. You should see the photographs, they're in the report, although I doubt you can find a copy now. Oh my, the wiring looked so

complicated. The supervisor responsible for that relay room was under Geoffrey's management and the inquiry suggested he might have been lax, knowing that his boss was away. Not that he *was* lax, but he might have been. It is very careful with its words, but Geoffrey couldn't bear the knowledge of all those relatives reading it and seeing *Mr Clay* mentioned as a possible contributory factor.'

'I should think that would play on the conscience of anyone.'

'He was a good man, Dougall, and he never drank, even in the midst of despair. He was always kind to me and Christine, she was definitely Daddy's girl – in fact I suspect she holds a grudge, thinking I should've done more to halt his decline. But I'm the only one that knows how badly he was affected, crying out at night, haunted by what he saw on the trackside that day. Geoffrey did not deserve what happened. Christine accused me of being disloyal, but I couldn't stay there in Chelmsford, the happy memories had gone and I could feel his pain hanging in the air. That's why I came here, bringing what was left of him with me. That pot over there is my most treasured item.'

'I completely understand why. Alice, it has been a genuine privilege to hear your stories, I cannot thank you enough.'

'Oh, you're most welcome, dear boy, I insist you come again. I hope this has been useful. What are you planning to do, write up my life story?'

'I'm not sure yet. Maybe I'll try some poetry. I really should come back to get some photos in the spring, when everything is flowering again.'

'Oh please do. Here's to lasting another year.'

'Aye Alice, here's to that.'

Dougall was reluctant to leave but it was starting to get colder and, having promised Christine not to wear her mother out, he was keen not to outstay his welcome. He parted ways with Alice, heroic survivor of serial events that were each too hard to bear, weather-beaten but enduring like an old oak. In perpetual suspension of disbelief, she returned to her business as usual, in the company of her garden, wondering whether this year's Pebbletank experiences would be her last. Dougall returned to the centre of town, this time via the correct bus stop. Every rattle, as the train back to London crossed a set of points, spoke of the safety challenge that was presumably now fully computerised. The next day, homeward bound towards Scotland, he listened back to the recording, picturing Alice's words being written across the fields and hills that passed. He wanted to find a way to do justice to her storytelling but it would need some time to test his ideas, once restored to the lochs and mountains. In seeking to feed those ideas, the journey gave him time to look up references to his newly-found knowledge: The Magic Roundabout, Roald Dahl's Tales of the Unexpected and the 1989 Shenfield Rail Disaster.

It did not take long to find an archived PDF of the full enquiry report, a scanned copy of paper pages showing the curve at the spine. The document was sweeping in ambition, laying out every fact in exquisite and dispassionate detail. Using traditional print methods, from the days before word processing and hyperlinks, the review was fully illustrated with photographs and diagrams. Photographs of the wires, the relay room, the signal box, the crash and the recovery. Diagrams of the rail network, the points, the circuits and the actual sketch of work carried out on the fateful day, a week before the crash, that was missed during

subsequent inspections: the dangling end that should not have been. Also included was the organisation chart showing Mr Clay and Mr Laker and the other players above and below in the chain, the full Shakespearean ensemble in a map of accountability. Each one had their own sub-section in Chapter 21: 'Where the responsibility lies'. The lessons were far-reaching, tied to individuals and the organisation as a whole. The subtext would be the cliché, an accident waiting to happen.

The driver of the moving train was killed in an instant. That same loose wire took twelve years to kill Geoffrey, the man whose essence Alice still preserved on her terrace. Dougall started to doubt he had the creative powers to tie all that together with tasteful images of hydrangea heads, becoming lost in thought about the randomness of existence. How a loose wire that should have been protected came into contact with the wrong circuit, purely by chance. And how such a simple wrong connection could have such catastrophic consequences.

ten

Leon & Serena

Tuesday November 22nd

Serena was twelve when *You What?* was axed from the schedule, a loss she found difficult to fathom. She thrived on Leon Hastings's conspiratorial asides to camera, she felt in on the joke, as if he was talking exclusively to her. When Leon committed his fatal *faux pas*, she was watching with her Mum, but the literal meaning of his words escaped her. In contrast, her mother was outraged and immediately changed channels, leaving Serena even more bewitched by her hero. How exciting that an overheard snippet could cause an adult to be so shocked, especially since it appeared to make fun of U2, her least favourite band. On hearing explanations for why her hero's show had been removed, she felt decidedly short-changed.

Echoes of those times came flooding back upon seeing Leon's deep dive notice, in which he invited applicants to help salvage his career, time-wasters being coarsely discouraged. He was one of the few actual celebrities Serena followed, she caught on at the very birth of his account and had been delighted to witness the mid-year flourish associated with his NHS party piece. The offer only appeared on his profile for a few days before being removed, which she took as a sign he was having second thoughts. That she found herself watching him squeeze-out tea bags in his Dalston kitchenette a few weeks later felt like a minor miracle. Most of her fan-girl excesses were purged at the front door, before he led her upstairs.

'I was surprised to see your invitation, to be honest Leon. I thought you were already making a comeback?'

'Yeah, me too. Mind you, I was on the sauce when I posted that. I took it down quickly, there was too much grief. Your response was the only one to look genuine, Serena. The message you wrote almost drew a tear, I have to say. The best review I've ever read, you should post that online!' Serena felt a glow of pride to see Leon's chuckling face, but assumed he didn't really mean it.

'I was your biggest fan. I'm pinching myself to believe this is actually happening.'

'Nice, nice. But, I'm nothing special, truly. This much we know. When you said you worked as a kind-of agent, I thought... why not.'

'Kind-of agent, yes. But not for recognisable personalities like you. I specialise.'

'Right, yeah, so you said... So tell me, is this your first deep dive?'

'No, I hosted one earlier this year. I had some random chap spend the day with me, to delve into my past. I needed a second eye to sort a few things out.'

'How did that work out, did he help?'

'Inadvertently, yes. Purely by accident, he found the way to the root of my problems. They haven't gone away, but at least I know what they are.'

Arguably, her problems were worse. From the moment Owen lost control of his facial expression, when Serena chanced upon the true significance of Dot in his memory bank, the remaining foundations of their partnership crumbled. He had just about managed to compartmentalise the fact of a physical relationship with a lady forty-two years his senior – albeit occasionally allowing himself to re-live the thrill when Dot first spied him masturbating, then offered a helping hand, an

eighteen-year-old's perfect fantasy straight from the pages of Escort. The guilt had been easy to manage at the time, there was never any chance of her husband finding out, his absences being so much like clockwork. There was more or less no overlap with Serena, his first *bona fide* girlfriend – indeed, Dot's encouragement was instrumental in Owen asking Serena out in the first place. There were no lies to start with, he just had to omit the heavy petting episodes when describing his time in digs and, in one important aspect, it was true to say he was still a virgin; Dot did like her toys. It was only ever going to be a temporary affair after all, Dorothy was simply filling her boredom while still having sexual energy to burn. That she was cut down by cancer four years after her final burst of passion, was disproportionately cruel. It meant any risk of disclosure was removed by the combined effects of cremation and interment, however Owen's need to pay respect brought about the genesis of his deception.

As Owen found himself increasingly committed to Serena, any historical guilt about unsaid past experiences soon dispersed. Furthermore, his grief on Dot's passing was easy to mask, he was allowed a show of emotion, the accepted wisdom being that she'd been like a mother during difficult times. It was a different matter when the urge came to spend a few minutes alone at her resting place. This was not something he could share with Serena, so he was compelled to tell her falsehoods for the first time ever. The statement itself was simple: 'I will be leaving at four', when the truth would have been two hours earlier. A simple white lie? Not really, it was deliberately misleading and he felt his soul tremble as he spoke the words, knowing that something else was true. Something else that was harmless, but complicated to explain. The dishonesty alone was

hard to live with, but his discomfort was compounded by the knowledge it was making him irritable, despite Serena having done nothing wrong. He was creating new outposts of an earlier lie and the timeframe was everything.

From that point on, Owen's demeanour changed. That he was going against one of his most dearly held principles, by being untruthful towards a woman he loved, started to eat him away. He had lost a trump card – the right to claim he'd never told a lie – so now had to skirt around that particular question, but more importantly part of his spark was lost forever. When Serena finally caught him in the act, once the initial shock subsided, he felt the relief of no longer having to keep secrets. His true feelings about Dorothy, so staunchly locked away, could come to the fore, enabling him to fully process his sadness for her suffering and grieve her loss. Nonetheless, once the air cleared, there was no improvement in the atmosphere of Owen and Serena's union. He lost even more of his spark, being convinced that Serena looked down on him. He became even less communicative and lost the motivation to exercise. When they started living as a couple, Owen went running every day, fitness becoming his religion. Since February, he would claim it was impossible to keep pushing, when the sense of someone being disappointed with you is gnawing away inside. However much you try to focus on positivity, your mind drags you down until eventually your legs give up before reaching halfway. He went through a phase of walking the middle section of his regular route, then sprinting the last hundred yards home in case the neighbours were watching. After just a few weeks he stopped trying altogether.

Serena too felt relief that the reason for Owen's distant behaviour was in the open. However, it did not restore the original zing of their life together. Their malaise was a chronic condition that could not be reversed, but at least she understood why. It was more comical than heinous that Owen had romped with his landlady, but he should have told her from the outset. She redirected her attention to finding more clients and stopped caring about the veracity of anything Owen said. Now, Serena had no intention of unburdening her woes onto Leon, she wanted to make the most of this audience with her guilty pleasure. She relayed a brief summary of her meet-up with Ayush, before concluding. 'So, as you can see, any objective I had to resolve the stagnation of my marriage was basically a complete failure.'

'Oh no, Serena, that's such a shame. What about this Ayush guy – cool name by the way – what about him, did you guys hit it off?'

'Yeah, we got on OK. He was almost too keen though. I think he was hoping for something more from the experience, God knows why. He started messaging me for a while afterwards. You know, I honestly think some people get more wrapped up with their microconnections on Pebbletank than they do with actual relationships. They read too much into things. Just because I'm chatty in my comments doesn't mean I want you to message me, it doesn't suddenly make me your best pal.'

'Yeah, I've been there. Sometimes they get carried away, it's scary.'

'Phew! Not just me then. Anyway Leon, enough of that... what's going on with you. I thought things were looking up after your firework party?'

'Yeah, well... so did I.' Leon walked to the window with his mug of tea and looked out, across to the pub already emblazoned with festive lights. 'I was supposed to be on primetime by now. Possibly the Christmas special.'



The Celebrity MasterChef production team were undecided about Leon's inclusion in the 2022 edition until the emergence of the Rocksteady video. The timing was perfect, he had been thrust back into the public eye just as they needed to announce the line-up. That the former presenter of *You What?* was on the way up, surfing a wave of re-engagement with the public, was a godsend, creating the impression they really had their finger on the pulse of the nation. Added to the facts of his colourful back-story and manifesto of Guyanese cuisine, the odds stacked up sufficiently for Leon to get the nod.

Leon and Darren partied hard when the list of successful candidates was announced, before booking another intensive sequence of tuition with the private chef. Flo was consulted regarding recipes and ingredients, while Leon decamped to his father, to see if he could bring a nostalgic tear to the eye through his cookery. His signature of spicy roast pork belly with pineapple fritters was practised relentlessly until he could cook it in his sleep, while he also rehearsed a series of alternative invention test scenarios. 'Bring it on, Dazza. Mushrooms, halloumi, Nutella, langoustines... whatever they throw at me, I'll have something up my sleeve.'

Filming for the opening round had already started when disaster struck. The Mail Online ran a feature on all the contestants and surfaced a tweet posted on Leon's account in 2016.

*I don't even wait. And when you're a star, they let
you do it. You can do anything. Grab 'em by the
pussy. @realDonaldTrump you da man #maga*

It was a direct quote and could be interpreted as support for the message, if one was incapable of detecting irony. Which, it transpired, the court of public opinion in 2022 precisely was. At least, in sufficient numbers for Leon to be accused of insensitivity and associating himself with Trump's sickening attitude to women. The article asked the question: should this man be allowed back on our screens? By asking the question, of course there was a divided response, but the volume of negative reactions gave the MasterChef team the jitters and they expelled him from the show.

'So they literally chucked you out, after they started filming?'

'Yes. I'm not sure who was more pissed, them or me. They'd already spent loads of money on promotion and had to do some reshoots. Gregg Wallace called me a knobhead. They replaced me with some footballer no one remembers, with delusions of charisma. To make things worse, he was an ex-Spurs player, I was absolutely fuming. I was on the verge of a book deal as well.'

'And that tweet was really you?'

'Yes, it was me, I must've read it in the news. I was probably drunk at the time. But still, I wasn't agreeing with him, for Christ's sake! I was calling him out for the sex-offending scumbag he is. You only had 140 characters to play with back then, there wasn't room to add any context. I just assumed people would know me well enough to trust where I was coming from. Apparently not. I was being ironic. That man is a turd.'

'To be honest, I'm surprised the researchers didn't find it earlier, if it was going to be a problem. Have you done a sift of your posts since then, it's probably a good idea, in case there's anything else lurking around. Mind you I expect all the outlets will have done a complete trawl by now, including any deleted ones. You'd be amazed what they can find.'

'Yes, I tried to do a sift, I tried to hide my tracks. Or at least, my guy Darren was supposed to. He used to be my social media assistant. When MasterChef kicked me out, I fired him.'

'Oh dear. You do have to be ultra-careful these days. One of my clients lost his job because he admitted to watching porn in a post on LinkedIn. All he was doing was listing things he had done once, that could be taken out of context if someone so chose. He had watched porn at least once in his life. He had stolen sweets as a kid. He had peed in the sink of his mother-in-law's bathroom. Basically he was making a mock confession to so-called past misdemeanours, the kind that apply to ninety percent of the population, as a plea for a less judgemental society. But they sacked him anyway, and there was no way back. There's a certain way you have to *be*, these days. We think we're a liberated society, but we're just as bad as the Puritans, only in different ways.'

'So, Serena... do you think you can help me?'

'I'd really love to Leon. My problem is, this is outside my normal type of assignment. The interests I represent are transient, by their very nature. They're only relevant for a short time, while very specific issues are under the spotlight. They burn themselves out, once the spotlight moves on they're spent, like... I don't know... like moths that live just for a single day.'

'Moths, yeah... nice.'

'My clients are put on the stand to illustrate one side of an argument. If that viewpoint becomes an established movement then charities are set up, the big boys move in and my job is done.'

'I see, I see... but what if I gave you a fixed-term contract, I could be like a side-line. You help me find the route back. Can't I be one of your niche victims? Guy unfairly branded by misunderstood tweets? Guy unfairly banned from TV twice in a lifetime?'

'The press and TV are not queueing up for that at the moment, to my knowledge, but I can put out feelers.'

'There you go! You see Serena, you *can* help me. I'm being denied my rights, they're stopping me being an influencer.'

'I suppose there *is* a lot of mileage in fighting back against the mainstream these days, just ask your friend Donald. Or Piers Morgan.'

'Hmm... I don't think those are parallels I'd choose, but I get where you're coming from.'

'You could start a crusade against unsubstantiated cancelling. The more I think about it... Yes, OK Leon, I think I can work with this. Give me a few days and I'll draft a strategy.'

'Nice. Epic in fact.'

Serena and Leon shook hands on their deal and spent the rest of the time available recalling favourite performances on *You What?* They settled on The White Stripes in 2001 as the closest moment to a mutual epiphany, when the

sheer bravado made anything seem possible. At that juncture, Serena was eleven and Leon was twenty two, both in their own way living their dreams through live music. Now, nineteen years later, they were joined in combat, seeking to subvert the foibles of modern culture in a different way. By 2pm Serena had to leave, in order to catch her train home from King's Cross, having gone for the off-peak fare. They said their farewells on his doorstep.

'Bye Serena, thanks for coming.'

'My pleasure Leon, I'll be in touch. Thanks for the deep dive, I loved it!'

'Nice, yeah... me too. Later.'

She waved at him like an enthusiastic eleven-year-old from the pavement, before raising her coat collar and setting off. Marching into the concourse at King's Cross she lasered-in on the information board as soon as it came into view, craning for that final verdict on whether today would be good throughout, or hold a sting in its tail. 'Damn!' she exclaimed, on seeing her chosen departure had, like Leon, been cancelled. With an extra thirty minutes to kill, she scanned the available eateries before spotting her usual option. As Serena entered Pret A Manger her eyes were drawn to a familiar figure sitting at a window table, scribbling into a notepad. The shock of black hair and padded burgundy jacket were unmistakable, the uncanny coincidence prompting a delayed reaction around her neck to the chill November air.

'Ayush, is that you?'

Ayush looked up from his sketch book and smiled. He'd been drawing on the brown-coloured card while waiting, which he now slid under his wallet before she had a chance to see her own likeness.

'Blimey Serena. What are the chances, huh. How are you doing?'

'I'm just on my way home, I had a client meeting. But how come you're...'

'Oh, I was just saying goodbye to a friend.'

Ayush knew exactly where she'd been and that Pret would be her preferred port-of-call, given the cancellation – the cancellation which was the icing on his cake. It's where Serena always went, he could tell from her postings of coffee cups. He still hung around on Pebbletank, but had stopped trying to be noticed or playing the algorithm to win approval through targeted hashtags and comments, like he used to. When they first met in Newcastle, Ayush had already worked out what she did for a living, but played dumb. That he misread her personal status drove him to distraction, however. Every time he looked back at that vital omission, he wanted to scream. Now he just tracked her movements, hoping for an encounter, hoping to find himself face-to-face again, like now as hesitation wrinkled her features.

'Do you mind if I sit here,' she said, feeling it the right thing to do, despite her unease. She knew Ayush was harmless enough.

'Please do.'

Serena returned with a drink and sat down at ninety degrees.

'Not that I'm stalking you or anything Ayush, ha ha... but I don't seem to have noticed much from you on Pebbletank lately.' Now she thought about it, it was

odd that he never posted anything from their tour of Newcastle. She hadn't bothered to look since then.

'No. Well, I'm getting a bit fed up with it, to be honest. It used to feel like being part of something, like being in a gang. Lately everyone has returned to the old ways. Endless posts of people going out, gurning with their mates. Everyone jetting off on holidays around the world and showing off about it. Kind of makes me sick.'

'Oh... Oh really, I hadn't noticed.'

'Yeah. It's changed. During Covid, it felt like we were meshed together. Now it's gone back to normal... everyone's gone back to their cliques.'

If Serena *had* cared to check Ayush's feed recently, she would have noticed he'd deleted all his posts and removed all his connections. All except one: herself. Ayush no longer worried about leaving a trail, he knew it was too late to row back. He was going to be found out, but would go down in pursuit of the one he craved the most.

'It's sad that it's lost its appeal to you Ayush. Say, were you sketching something just now? Can I see?'

'Hmm... OK.' Ayush carefully extracted the book and opened to a lower page, one of his other drawings, this time of an Ipswich pub.

'Wow, Ayush, that's really good. You didn't tell me you had hidden talents.'

'Well, I like to keep some things to myself.'

Serena wanted to see more but he quickly placed the pad back under cover. In doing so, his railcard fell from the table, bouncing from a stool onto her foot. She

reached down to rescue it and was struck by the full name of its owner: *Ayushman Kanetkar*.

'Ayushman. I didn't realise that was the full form of your name, how charming. Does it have a meaning?'

'Yep. It's a Sanskrit word, it means *blessed with a long life*.'

'That's really lovely. Hey, you should've done a picture of me.'

'I would like that very much. It wouldn't take me long.'



When @garbage.daydreamer posted the comment 'Wow that's beautiful, I must visit some day' against Ayush's Orwell sunrise, it was the height of summer. #orwell was the hook – not exactly mistaken identity, the river and author's pen name being consciously linked. The @garbage.daydreamer account was Mattie Bradley's side project, created as an outlet for her cultural interests, wanting something separate from her activism posts. Mattie had become obsessed with George Orwell after finding a copy of *Animal Farm* in her father's library and determined to learn as much as she could about him. That he was buried in Oxfordshire, within a pig's squeal of the house where she was conceived, added a certain lurid intrigue that she chose not to dwell upon.

The comment came as a beacon of light. Ayush stared at it for days before responding. He did everything in his powers to coax Mattie to visit and prove he could be trusted. She came to see the river and they walked the country park. There were no direct ties to Ipswich itself and she arranged her own excursion to Southwold where her idol had lived and worked. Nevertheless, she wanted to see

the Orwell Estuary, to understand the attachment. Ayush brushed up and tried to appear informed about local literary associations.

'They say Shakespeare would travel up here by boat, to perform plays in Ipswich, when London became too thick with the plague.'

'Wow, good knowledge. As it happens, I'm gobsmacked by the scenery, I had no idea this area was so attractive, no wonder our George liked it. He was a big fan of Shakespeare by the way.'

'Oh. That's handy.'

'Yeah. He stood up for him, he wrote an essay criticising comments made by Tolstoy. Apparently, Tolstoy wasn't so much a fan. He once said Shakespeare was only rated due to... *a sort of mass hypnosis or epidemic suggestion*. That's like comparing him to BTS. Or comparing his popularity to the suckers that fell for the Covid scam.'

'Blimey. Yeah.' Ayush had no idea what to believe anymore. He was glad Mattie was there, but wished she'd stop talking at times.

They passed a few hours with Ayush pulling out all the stops to create a good impression, but Mattie was quick to bring things to a close once they completed the circuit through the park, she had friends to meet. Ayush drew her picture quickly, resting on the sawn stump of a tree.

'Wow Ayush, that's actually incredible. Thank you.' She filed the picture inside her crocheted shoulder bag before waving at the inhabitants of a rusting van that had pulled up on the gravel parking area nearby.

'You're welcome. Maybe we could do something like this again?'

'Yeah. Maybe we could.'

Back in his flat, Ayush started to fester again. Why did she have to leave so early? What was she doing, mixing with those greebos? And why do people never do what you want, when you meet them in the flesh? When working the pencil, he'd taken perverse pleasure in capturing her sharp inky hair, her piercings, her feral gaze. But her face was not the same as the one in her profile photo. Resentment rose, allied to a growing sensation of having been duped. He tried to articulate this the next time they met, as tactfully as he could manage.

'Of course that's not me, it's Shirley Manson you fucking idiot.'

That's when he snapped, he was tired of the pretence.

END CREDITS

Deep Dives was written during the first three months of 2022. I spent the next six months trying to attract the interest of an agent, without success. Not feeling inclined to self-publish, I have posted it as a free download on pebbletank.com. Please let me know what you think.

I must thank my dear wife Shaheen for tolerating three months of chuntering. Thanks also to Karen, Nat and my family for proof-reading, plus Nicki for improving the look of my pebbles no end.

Any similarity between Pebbletank and Instagram is entirely coincidental. Until Pebbletank really does become the global social media platform *du jour*, people who know me on Instagram may recognise traces of themselves in this book, some more obvious than others. I hope no offence is taken. When it comes to casting the Netflix series I'll try to give you a say. Thank you all for your wit, creativity and companionship through very odd times.

Jon Bryant
October 2022