

WINTER FALL

daniel sage

'A thrilling debut that makes
you sit up and realise all this
may come to pass and more'
Jack de Yonge, *Zoetrope*



FALL CURVE

by

DANIEL SAGE

~ *Blackwood* ~

FALL CURVE

a novel

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Published by Blackwood Books

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A CPI catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 978-0-956-71931-7

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What are we,
the perfection of God
or the ambitions of fish?

Prologue

BLOOD isn't thicker than water, it is water. Red, nutritious water. And we are made of bags. Bags of water with bits in. And some brains, but not many—the world's too full of fools. There's no God, we say now, but that makes us dumber than when we thought there was, or that He cared for us. This shiny planet of dullards and bags. Shiny bright planet of dullards and bags, and lost wretched hags. And crazy men pitting their days against oblivion.

There's a marvellous spirit in our flesh. But are we like the termites who build elaborate nests? Or spiders, lonely and devouring? Or both and more besides? In the jungle wherever we look we see parts of us staring back. As a child, I used to love the animals and plants that were imperfect, the ones with damaged leaves or missing legs. They had no idea of their imperfections. They lived as best they could according to what they were. How I envied their naivety.

Now, I think oblivion is the most beautiful thing. Honest, endless, patient, loving even. It will take us all without a murmur, as many as we are, for ever. I think that is what light

is. Life may be the tunnel, the fallopian, dystopian tunnel, but oblivion is its beautiful light. Blessed be. Now I shan't mind growing old.

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PART I

1 Sujn and Raymond

AS SOON AS DR SUJN SPOKE, he knew he was making a mistake. Raymond didn't want to hear about problems or any reason why they couldn't go on. It's fear that makes you squirm, the doctor thought, and makes you wet yourself. 'It might be perspiration,' he said, 'yes.'

Raymond stood looking down at his slippers and fiddling with his belt cord. 'Hippocratic oaf, more like,' he said. His hair shone silver in the light from the desk lamp. 'You should be serving naan bread somewhere, suit you better. Which communist heap did you creep from, again, clutching your papers like a bloody Olympic torch? I'm not ready. You said it yourself. Not ready!'

Dr Sujn sank into his chair and followed Raymond's stare to the moccasins peeking from below his pyjamas. They matched

the rug. Red against beige. Sujn felt like splashing mud over them both. And the drapes. And the old lamps everywhere. The whole room was so fixed and unnatural. Yet it fixed him too, mute, in his place. If he hadn't known all the chemicals swarming in Raymond Rass's blood and their triggers, and even their names in Greek which he suddenly felt like reciting out loud, he'd have considered the old fool needed restraining. But he knew where the danger lay.

Raymond held his wrist out. 'Are you listening to a word I'm saying?' His watch hung an inch between the band and his yellowing skin. 'I'm not ready but there isn't much time, is that it?'

Dr Sujn said nothing. He studied Raymond propped against the wall, his jacket undone like some louche playboy. It was a grim posture. Even the cigar was a pose. Were Raymond to let the smoke into his lungs, Sujn knew for a fact he'd spend the next two days in an oxygen tent. It was amazing, he thought, how much Westerners spent on medicine. Always trying to pull one over nature. He unfolded his arms. It had been a long night.

‘What were you doing out there anyway,’ he said, ‘chugging around on that death-trap?’

‘The roses, it’s too hot for them,’ Raymond replied.

‘So you lay down next to them? Such compassion. You’re lucky we found you in time.’

‘Luck, is it?’ Raymond straightened his lapel. ‘I pay you enough for five physicians, never mind all those other spongers.’

‘Get tough, I thought you were saying at first,’ Sujn said. ‘Get tough. Like we’re in a film or something, *The Magnificent Two*, and it’s time to get tough. You’re sat in a bush all covered in earth and drooling, but we have to go and round up a posse.’ His head bobbed to one side. ‘Sorry, I know you meant get Jeff, of course.’

Sujn knew his jokes wouldn’t do him any favours. Raymond would be dead one way or another long before Sujn was old himself but he dreaded to think how many more times he was going to have to scrape him off the baseline and to make sure his organs all went ping and his backbone was still connected to his hip bone. Have some grace, man, he felt like saying. Have some fucking grace.

Raymond was eyeing him with a mixture of interest and suspicion as if inspecting a tub of winkles.

‘Your one task is to keep me going,’ he said. ‘That’s all, keep me going. “Bio-subsistence”, I believe you call it. I read your notes. It’s not that challenging. You don’t have to figure out the rest. Just be a damn doctor.’

Sujn found it hard to focus. Resignation settled on his shoulders and in his belly that was resting on his belt without any effort to hold it in.

Raymond pointed at the file poking from Sujn’s pocket. ‘What does it say in there, then, my old friend, what are those vile words? My liver’s shot, isn’t it? You should stop being evasive with me, we didn’t come this far to be cowards.’

‘It’s not so dramatic,’ Sujn said, ‘Raymond, please. Worst case we source another one to replace it. A&E is full of them. That’ll give six months, a year. Your anxiety will come and go, it’s natural. Let it go now, please.’

Raymond sat at the pearwood desk and folded his arms on the edge in front of him. ‘I thought the liver regenerates.’ He rubbed his eyes. ‘Isn’t it the organ that grows back, like a lizard’s tail. What’s different about mine?’

‘Nothing,’ Sujn said, ‘nothing is different. It’s prone to disease, dysfunction, age, along with all the others.’

‘No history in my family of them acting up. I don’t drink, I’m fit, more or less.’

‘All true,’ Sujn said, ‘all true. And in any event, you have so much support.’ He gestured at the long outbuilding visible through the window, housing Raymond’s medical facilities. There were sash windows all along this annex but high up, at shoulder height. Two at the end were lit, the others dark. In front, a row of clipped privet separated its wide gravel path from the rest of the yard.

Raymond started to respond but then closed his mouth.

‘I was hedging, yes,’ the doctor pressed on, ‘the liver does regenerate, yours has done its fair share, but it can’t renew faster than it breaks down.’

Raymond grunted. ‘I don’t like where this is leading. You’re suggesting it’s cumulative, that after a lifetime of...of what, being irritable?’ He hoisted his trousers. ‘Ach, I am what I am, and good. If it wasn’t this, something else would go. So what?’

‘I don’t disagree.’ Sujn’s smile solidified. He nodded his head and looked steadily at the man in front of him whom his

formal training told him was most likely insane. ‘Is there anything I can do?’ he said.

‘Yes.’ Raymond grinned. ‘Stop looking at me like I’m mad. There is much to do.’ He rang the bell on his desk. ‘Why must you always categorise everything? I see your little diagnostic brain going round.’

‘That’s a bit unkind.’

‘Well, you make it hard for me to care about you sometimes.’

The doors in the wall behind Sujn glided open, pulled from the other side by the white gloves of Cheung, Raymond’s assistant, who nodded at them to enter, then stood aside to reveal the library table set with tea. He busied about pouring cups. Raymond and Sujn sat opposite one another in tall Deco chairs. Sujn wondered if it was a ruse, if Raymond had deliberately interrupted their conversation to distract him. Though perhaps he was trying to distract himself. He’s afraid, Sujn realised, he’s afraid of death like never before, and afraid to let anyone know it. He hooked his arm over the back of the chair and relaxed a little, comforted their doctor-patient balance was restoring more equitably.

He had never fully understood what drove the old man to give up everything he held dear and focus only on himself instead. He was like a baby, turned back towards the cradle not by dementia but by his greed to hang on to life at any cost, sitting in his palatial nursery with its servants and statues and a car for each day of the week, gorging on the giant breast of his own ego.

Sujn looked across the table, noting the flare of nostrils, the bump of belly pushed against the edge, the raised eyebrows. Belligerence at rest, he thought. Or exhausted. He folded his hands in his lap, careful to lace the fingers together, palms upwards, to show he was being open and considerate. But he was tired too. It was hot in his corduroys, the first trousers to hand when his beeper had rung hours earlier and he'd barrelled down the corridor to Raymond's study, then to find the French doors open and the sorry scene outside. He was weary of the endless emergency that followed him and Raymond around like a dog. At least a dog would have some intuition, would step back once in a while, maybe cower even.

The illness Raymond's nephew Jonathan had contracted in the spring was still a key source of the old man's gloominess.

The illness and the boy both. For all his pride in positive thinking Raymond didn't seem able to move on. At least that was a normal reaction, Sujn thought. Jonathan wasn't meat; Raymond did genuinely love him.

When Cheung retired, Sujn decided to take the initiative. 'I'm so sorry about Jonathan,' he said, 'it is such a great pity. But I wish you weren't always thinking about him. It's been three months – I swear it's aged you ten times that. You're sad, of course, but for a trick of chance...' He studied Rass's temple, the horizontal creases and widow's peak stuck in a frown, the hair above thick in defiant waves. 'I seem to be the only one who believes he'll recover but I sincerely think it is possible. At the end of the day it's a virus we know how to treat or at least to make stable. Everyone has imperfections. "Let him live as God wills." Isn't that what you said? So that he is free in the world. My assessment is that he's going to recover and be okay and shall remain so for a very long time. But, "So what?" you say, "It's not enough", you say. Well then, if he doesn't recover and has to live out his days on medicines and hope, you still get to be a kindly uncle.'

And without laying him on a slab, Sujn wanted to add but he stopped himself. ‘He was never headstrong exactly, Jonathan, was he? Careless perhaps, wilful. Becoming infected was an accident. You did what you could.’

Raymond shook his head. ‘I feel so foolish.’ His voice was hoarse. He looked at Sujn as if warning him to forget he had said that. ‘Everything was fine. I’m not ready, why should I be? It’s one thing after another. First that stupid boy makes himself completely useless and now, by chance, I am nearly done for. Did I offend God? Is that what you’re thinking? And as for being scared – what difference to say so!’ He dashed his cup on the saucer. ‘Anyway, where is his brother, where is Jeff? Six thousand miles away. And what does he do? What is he like? I’ve hardly had any time to follow. I wanted to get to know him, you know I did. I don’t like this rushing one bit. I shall blame you as much as I have to.’

Sujn mugged in sympathy. He didn’t feel guilty at how low their scheming sank – it would only hamper their succeed if he did – but he wondered if he should be more compassionate. Jefferson was Raymond’s other “nephew”, stashed away in California like so much good wine. Unlike Raymond, Sujn had

been keeping up to date on him. An errant, callow youth, in his opinion, like they all were, but fit as a horse and happy and as sound a candidate as they could hope for. Let him return, he thought, poor lamb. He'll bring the life you need. Be good for the lad to have a place in the world, to have purpose. Family can give that.

'It's very difficult,' Sujn said, 'I understand. But we need perspective. The body deteriorates in unexpected ways. We need to keep all of you going for release to work. I'll do what I can and for now that is to stabilise you. We can adjust. It will work out.'

Raymond shot him a look of fury and despair that made the doctor's skin prickle. 'There is no more time.' He waved his hand abruptly. 'I need to see Jefferson now. Damn his brother, damn Jonathan. You will make arrangements.'

Sujn bowed his head.

Within thirty minutes he was again in his apartment in the park wing with a list of things to do that would keep him awake until morning. It felt good to be moving at last. His annoyance at Raymond's impatience melted away in the flow of actions. Jonathan had been the foolish one really, foolish and lucky at a

stroke. And now it would be for Jeff to see if he could stay ahead of the game. Sujn drummed his fingers on the paperweight that Raymond had given him the day he had moved into the house. Jasper quartz on a terracotta base engraved in roman letters. Fortune favours the deserving, it read. Raymond joked it would save him having to say it all the time. Sujn now knew how deserving Raymond believed himself to be. And also the sheer force of his self-regard, which his fears inflated to dazzling proportions. The boy didn't stand a chance. Uncle Ray would soon ensure his line passed on in the way he wanted it to. With little help from God whether He was offended or not. It favours the brave anyway, Sujn thought. Fortune favours the brave. But he didn't see how that would change anything.

2 Pacific Blue

JEFF CRACKED OFF THE SKIN FROM A LYCHEE and threw it in a bag he'd hung on the gunwale. It felt good to be out on the waves. The ocean sparkled sapphire below bright baby-blue sky. Streaks of cloud that were hardly moving, in reality miles above, raced along faster than the birds. He and Wick had rented a yacht out of Cobb Bay to head around the point to the reef which on the far, deepwater side reliably teemed with fish. They sailed out in high spirits, their little yellow sloop flying between the horizons on a steady breeze.

'I can take them or leave them,' Jeff declared, 'I'm not in a hurry. Life's long. Masturbation is okay, as my science prof used to insist.'

'Very wholesome.'

'It's not the number one essential, though, is it?'

'What is?'

‘I don’t know, friendship probably, right?’

‘Is this a special moment?’ Wick put his hand out. ‘No, scratch that. You’re gonna say they all are.’

‘They are.’

‘Well, you’re not the ugliest coot in the farmyard. A bit shy maybe but I wouldn’t worry.’

Jeff was only half listening. Wick’s mellow tones were eaten up by the dazzling space and sunshine around them. He thought getting it on was too much all-or-nothing. The girl chasers he saw in the neighbourhood left him queasy. So much brio deployed in the service of their genes. So much bullshit and fawning. Surely it was meant to be less predatory. He might draw close to someone, or someone might draw close to him, that’s all there was to it. It was all good, the eternal exchange of energy.

His last girlfriend, Lauren, had ended up saying he was sweet. Even at school he’d known that was a write-off. But he cherished it too. And they had stayed friends. He felt sure the right things would happen for him, whatever they may be. He hadn’t exactly had a normal life to date. It was okay if events worked out slowly or differently. As long as he was true to

himself, central casting would take care of the rest. He remembered a phrase Brother Kinim, the founder of Tyagarah, where he had grown up, had written in one of the Overcycles: ‘Love is a delusion that one person differs from another.’ Jeff never understood what that meant. Love is love, he thought, it just is. Plus it sounded like an argument for wishing less love in the world, not more, which was weird being totally against everything the people at Tyagarah professed to believe in.

Wick stood up, making the boat rock. ‘It’s the air, man,’ he said. He turned his palms upwards. ‘Something urgent is in the air. And in the water. And the sky. Look at the sky. Look at it. It’s telling us to spread that love, share our fine feelings.’

‘Very biblical.’ Jeff scooped up lychee husks that had fallen in the bottom. ‘I don’t do that though, do I, spread it all, share it all?’

‘You do,’ Wick laughed. ‘So do I. You’re a hippy, and I’m...’ He couldn’t find the words. ‘Point is, it promises a lot of happiness. Remember that. Mainstream is nothing. Be a hero. Be Clint or Bruce or whoever. There’s new frontiers to explore everywhere, in whatever reality you make in this abundant land.’

‘Praise be.’

‘I’m not kidding.’

Jeff liked that Wick didn’t judge him and he could be open. ‘I feel some of that, sure. Who doesn’t?’ He began working bait in one of the bags, kneading it and turning it to fit the hooks.

‘And other stuff.’

‘Like what?’

‘Stuff. It’s not necessarily me, voices more like, impulses. What was it Flicka used to say on Be-box? Be tall, trim and terrific. Who doesn’t want to be terrific? And while I’m at it, I’ll ooze cash and love like a legend and be famous and popular and all the rest of it. Handsome and respected.’ He paused. The list was endless. ‘It’s all illusion. Makes me glad of Tyagarah.’

‘You should be. Swanning about in the mountains, herding deer, drinking river water.’

‘Swans and deer every day.’

‘You’re different, man, and it throws it all in relief. I grew up in a cul-de-sac in Pin Alto. If mum hadn’t gone off they’d have made me do law, easy. It’s sowed in my bones.’

‘You still never saw a deer.’

They stopped for a “peace and contemplation” break, as Wick liked to call it, and let the anchor claw along the shale bottom. Wick lay sprawled in a long S, his legs seeming even longer when horizontal and poked over the side. He ceremoniously laid out a ready-roll on the bench while Jeff tied the line and dried his hands. Jeff picked the joint up, turning it in his fingers, then nodded at the Zippo sat on the rim next to Wick. Wick flicked it over in a silvery arc into Jeff’s hand.

‘Lucky,’ Jeff said.

‘Yeah, I’m always lucky, according to you.’

‘Well, you’re double lucky today. Greener the grass, purpler the haze.’

Wick let out a column of smoke. ‘I’m feeling it.’

‘But will your fish feel it, young Wick? You must consider the effects of your actions. It’s all connected.’ Jeff crossed his feet up on the seat. ‘Maybe that line’s sending your vibes down deep in the water. The roach you spring overboard maybe soon finds its way into the belly of a red mullet. Mellow mullet swimming in its cool blue world is overcome by well-being, its thinking grows expansive, the light on the water is strangely

musical. What's that ahead, what shape in its fishy mind does your bobbing hook take? It's the funniest thing it's ever seen.'

'It won't be able to shut its mouth on it if it's laughing.'

'The laughing passes, it gets hungry again.'

'Munchies!'

'Fishy munchies. Gimme some worm! That's what it's gonna do. See – lucky.'

They hauled the anchor in an even rhythm, slow now they'd settled into wave time. The wind had dropped and they tacked wide to follow the current as it swept out and around the head. Puddles within the water swirled with jetsam, mainly seaweed but here and there a twig or leaves, signs of the shore nearby. They made the turn to the inlet and found stiller water and busied themselves baiting hooks and dropping lines, quiet now, sweating. The sun was still hot though a breeze blew coolly in from the northwest.

'Easy, bro,' Jeff said, 'no rush.'

They sat fidgeting to get comfortable on the cramped wooden bench, sunk in the poised calm of hunters.

Within thirty minutes they caught seven fish – two parrot, two guppy and three coral wrasse.

‘Rass gets the wrasse, of course.’ Wick made their old joke.

The catch was stowed in the coolbox and they started back to open water for the return tide in, crossing past the rocky spurs of the cove, the sail full but not tugging. They had reached the corner of the last turn near to the deeper blue of the coastal shelf when Jeff saw a tiny dot detach from the view.

‘Something’s moving there.’ He held up an invisible telescope and twisted it into focus. ‘See?’

‘Aye, lad,’ Wick squawked. ‘Aft!’

It was too far to see what the object was, or whether it was small but near, or bigger and further away.

‘Pleasure boat,’ Wick said. ‘Tourists with too much dinero, out of Dern Quay, probably, looking for shark. If they don’t find any they’ll get drunk instead.’

‘Stoned mullets, drunken shark.’ Jeff stood with his feet planted either side of the bench, his arms out in a star shape. ‘It’s someone swimming towards us.’

The sun was high overhead and cast few shadows. A sandfly that had stayed with the boat since shore, buzzing about in circles, settled on Jeff’s hair.

‘I’m going in,’ he said.

He threw his singlet into the corner by the drinks box and dived over, disappearing for a few seconds and coming up on the other side. He swam with slow strokes away from the boat, at a right angle to whoever was coming towards them.

‘Wrong way,’ Wick called out.

Jeff looked at him silhouetted against the blue, all legs and arms. ‘Wait for me.’

Wick followed with his eyes but otherwise did not move.

Jeff struck out across the current in a rough crawl. Below the surface, the top three inches or so were warm, almost hot. Then, beneath, it got cooler in increments all the way to the seabed, which was at about five hundred feet. Only in January and February was it chilly. The tropical currents and blazing sunshine made for a perfect temperate ocean wilderness. Jeff opened his eyes under the water looking for fish movement and kept his crawl even so as not to cause alarm. Blue-silver sprats flickered below. From the bottom, seaweed reached up almost to the surface; it was easy to mistake for something alive and moving. Kelpfish hid in the fronds, their little front fins flapping furiously to stay in position as they searched for food.

Jeff's thoughts lay in wait too. Between bursts of pure freedom, where his limbs carving the water to propel him forward was all he felt, everyday worries loomed from the side like gropers.

He had to meet Mehul that evening, for one thing. Though his most friendly supplier to date, Jeff thought the guy a loser, always late, mumbling and unkempt. Jeff knew dealing grass was neither proper nor profitable in the long-term – his parents had been growers for as long as he could remember – but it gave him an easy life with plenty of swimming and running and socialising. Sometimes he was afraid to look into the distance in case it was all the same. And then what? He'd become some local bearded character everybody recognised but didn't talk to, another ageing Peter Pan on the boardwalk.

But whatever he thought about to make money either repelled him or seemed ridiculous. 'Maximise your passion,' they preached at Tyagarah. He had long since realised that the stuff of his passion – fishing, smoking, sports – was nowhere in the same league as realty or building or opening a shop, and that the purpose of passion wasn't to trade for dollars. In the Brother Kinim way, one was allowed to aim for both – spiritual and financial ambition shared enough attributes. The key was

living without guilt. Tyagarah attracted plenty of seekers chasing Nirvana, fleeing the present, and engaged all the while in some dodgy business or other. Few succeeded at genuinely marrying the two principles.

He had rent to pay, too, which nagged at him. Always a last-minute rush, this month's was due in two days. He was in a shared house splitting bills three ways, which was at least affordable compared to the studio he had before on Bush Grove with its legions of cockroaches scuttling behind the walls and cupboards. That place was depressing from the minute he'd walked in. It had been his first year outside Tyagarah and the sense of freedom was intoxicating. He'd get up early and busy about getting to know the neighbourhood. It was like doing everything fun for the first time and it enabled him to survive the pure grunge of the place, which he nicknamed The Grotto and never once had invited anyone to visit. Not even Wick, who had been his constant friend since they were twelve years old. He told Wick it was a phase, since the dirt wouldn't have bothered him, but truth was Jeff loved the dominion of his four small walls and its sanctuary.

Usually at Tyagarah he'd been too embarrassed to ask anyone over from outside. There was always so much to explain or avoid. Wick was a lone exception. He remembered when Wick's parents had stopped by the first time to visit a friend, abandoning their young boy to the drear of boredom with a book to read. Jeff was passing and invited him to the waterhole and that was that.

Next to Wick's neat suburbia, Tyagarah must have seemed pure wildness. And it was, for Jeff too, every day. Even now he often willed his mind back to travel again through its wonderland of lush surrounds and relaxed grown-ups who were always willing to share a story or teach him something useful. He'd wanted to leave badly and make his own life outside but he missed its familiar, quirky ways.

The people who lived there were preoccupied with building fanciful structures on their allotted land and some of the dwellings were truly strange and wondrous. There was one shaped like a book, another like a dome, another a bamboo thicket. Jeff's parent-pair had built a two-storey house resembling a caravan – to remind them, as he was told countless times, of their days on the road. It was only now he

saw how the imaginative abodes fitted the peculiar family clusters that inhabited them. In the local towns, they said the area regulators must be hypnotised or drugged whenever they came to visit, thus rendering them unable to notice the perilous structures.

Love and sex seemed to belong in a unique realm too, understood differently from the world at large; they were simpler, less problematic. Although the days were gone when you had to wear green and make love all the time, as the press had liked to puff about, there was still a prevalence of looser, open relationships, and Jeff often wondered if his own relative chasteness was a reaction to that. Sometimes he believed he had more in common with the Christians in town than the earnest devotees at home. But whenever he tried to talk about how he felt, his mouth would dry up and his hands would shake. He feared it wasn't acceptable. He'd go for long walks instead round and round the hills, weaving through the pines and casuarinas and looking down at the valley and the village spread out in its mess of curves and colours.

Suddenly in the water, below and to the left, a reef shark surged past his ankle, its tail wagging it forward very fast. Jeff

flinched. He'd encountered shark a few times. The reefers were no trouble – they patrolled a mile or so offshore hunting squid and shellfish. It was the bigger Makos and Great Whites that scared him. He'd twice found himself in the water near one. The key, as anyone standing safely on shore might explain, was not to resemble a wounded fish – no thrashing or jerky movements, no bleeding. He'd once been snorkelling for octopus when a large White had swum alongside about twenty feet off. Eight foot long, a burly, scarred mound. Jeff's body wanted to flee and thrash and jerk and whatever else to reach the boat two hundred feet away. But his mind issued a different edict and called for steady strokes, even breathing, calmness. His heart was beating so loudly in his ear he prayed the sound couldn't carry. It was eerie watching himself in the water with the heightened awareness of emergency and it felt beautiful, his panic enfolded by trust in the decision not to panic.

Jeff turned onto his back and kicked along squinting up at a jet trail. Behind, he could see Wick standing stooped over, inspecting something in the water, and then reach down and help someone climb in. Curious, Jeff thought, the boat was far from shore and there were no other boats in sight. Whoever

was swimming must be very fit, or reckless. Jeff pulled towards them in a slow breaststroke.

They were both standing in the boat now. It was a woman. She had on a red swimsuit. Her skin glistened, reflecting the sun and all the colours the sky and ocean could project onto her, in contrast to which Wick in his dry board shorts and faded t-shirt seemed almost otherworldly and delicate. Wick's teeth flashed. They were chatting. Jeff guessed she must be cute. His swimming pace picked up. Had it made him competitive? Was he anticipating the pleasure an attractive person is supposed to bring? All is a matter of awareness, Brother Kinim had written. Jeff dropped back to the pace he had before. He'd let Wick spin his charm. Women always reasoned there had to be more to him than his glib syllables, given his smiling eyes and regal posture.

On the boat they were laughing at something. The sound tinkled over, amplified. Jeff stopped a few feet off and put up his hand.

'Look, dude, a mermaid,' Wick said, beaming at the new sailor on board, who waved.

Her limbs were bronzed and toned. She looked down at Jeff and gave a singsong hello. Their gaze held for a long second. A sudden rush of feelings pulled at him: curiosity, hope, fear – all in fragments, unformed and hesitant, but compelling. Part of him went to shrug them away but his vision was imprinted.

‘I’m Serena,’ she said. It looked like she wanted to reach down for a handshake. She smiled again instead. Jeff loved her fruity English tone.

‘Jefferson.’ Beneath the surface of the water he had a large erection. ‘Jeff.’

‘I don’t have a short version,’ Serena said. ‘My sister called me Meeny, but that’s it. No one else came up with anything.’

‘Here for long?’

‘Two weeks,’ Serena and Wick replied at the same time.

‘I was visiting a friend in San Diego,’ she said. ‘Now I’m staying on maybe two weeks, then back home. London.’

‘Maybe?’

‘Well, I like it, so we’ll see.’ She twisted her hair, squeezing out the water.

Jeff’s penis gave a hardening twitch, as if wrestling for control of the conversation. He pictured her name backwards

in neon letters to distract himself: ANERES. And then his own name and Wick's, up on a hill like the Hollywood sign: NOSREFFEJ, KCIW.

Wick put out his arm. 'Grab on.'

'Thanks, I'm good.'

Jeff drummed his hands on the water and took in more of Serena. Her dark skin and hair were offset by her smile and red swimsuit and the sun behind. She seemed to Jeff slim and curvaceous at the same time. Full, apple-sized breasts pressed in a cleavage dotted with freckles. She looked at ease standing with one hand on the gunwale.

Jeff's first impression also included the notion that the universe really did assign meetings sometimes and that this was one of them.

'I was swimming too, obviously.' Serena pointed at the far outcrop. 'Emerald Beach, it's so pretty, there's a boardwalk and shops, everybody just lolling about. I had to go in the water, it was so hot, the sand was burning. I left my bag at the gym ring. But the current was too strong even a few yards out. The coastguard had put a sign up but I still didn't expect it. Every stroke I went that way, it pulled me this way. I wasn't scared, at

least. Swimmers show up on the radar, did you know that? They pick people up all the time. Anyway, I sort of relaxed then and bobbed along. Like a cork, or a bottle.’ She laughed. ‘A bottle with a message.’

‘A message, okay,’ Wick liked this, ‘what’s the news?’

‘Hmm, not sure.’ She put on a clown’s thinking-about-it face.

‘The news is,’ Jeff said, ‘would you like to come with us to get you back to shore?’ His voice tried for an English brogue. ‘We’ll be setting course soon. The wind is turning favourable.’ He winked to cap the sea-dog impression.

‘Terrible,’ Serena hooted, ‘sounds like you’re at the wrong speed.’

‘I had a hot potato in my mouth. Isn’t that how it’s supposed to go? The English talk with a hot potato in their mouth.’

‘Yeah,’ Wick said, ‘and the French have an onion up their ass.’

‘Oh, and the Americans, let’s see...’ Serena was enjoying herself. ‘Oh, I don’t know, but at least we can understand each other.’

‘Wick’s easy to understand, he always says the same thing.’

‘Do not,’ Wick said automatically.

‘Well, he told me he wasn’t swimming as he wanted to make sure the boat was alright.’

‘Wick! Is the boat alright? What if Serena’s a pirate, one of those Kalashnikov types? What if she’s planned this, watched us, waited, struck!’

‘Fine by me,’ Wick said.

Serena reached forward and grabbed Wick’s shoulder, moving in as if to pitch him overboard. He resisted easily.

‘In case you thought a search may have been in order,’ she said, bracing for retaliation. Then she turned and dived into the water making almost no splash and came up a moment later, grinning.

‘Not sure why I’m back in here, I was getting used to drying off.’

Her smile was etched in a wide sweep along her face. Jeff wondered if it was from nervousness – he’d been like that sometimes – though that was the last thing she seemed to be feeling. But her delight was evident in her eyes too, which shone and danced and looked at everything around her with

confident curiosity. She pulled herself back into the boat in a single slow movement, shrugging off Wick's offer of help.

'Yes, this is better,' she said, sitting down on the middle bench, 'I feel amazing, this is amazing. Give me sunshine.'

'You know, we have a law in California guaranteeing sunshine to people,' Jeff said.

Serena turned herself towards the drying rays. 'I'd vote for that.'

'Britain's just rain, isn't it?' Wick said.

Serena laughed. 'Better for the complexion.' Then she shook her head. 'It's got a bad reputation, but unfairly, I'd say.'

'Oh, unfairly.' Wick's eyes gleamed. 'Like sugar and spice and all things nice.'

'What?' Jeff cut in. 'You're behaving like a frog, all hopping about.'

'Dust and farts and bicycle parts.' Serena pushed her fringe back. 'That's boys.'

'Let me tell you,' Wick said, 'another law from our illustrious state. It is illegal to set a mousetrap without a hunting licence.'

‘One thing for it.’ Jeff made to reach into the stern for the water bottle but instead leaned into Wick’s hip and pushed him over the side. Wick flailed in, splashing noisily.

‘Is that true?’ Serena asked Jeff.

Jeff shrugged. ‘Probably.’

‘Thanks, man.’ Wick raked his hair out of his eyes, then spun onto his back. ‘Was feeling odd one out.’

‘No-one odder,’ Jeff said.

With the tide beginning to swell, they turned the little yacht across the current to the other side of the reef so that Serena could peer through the water at the halfmoons and rockfish flickering in and out of the coral.

‘Amazing,’ she said quietly.

‘Just going about their business,’ Jeff said, ‘they’re little miracles, aren’t they? With no idea that’s what they are.’

‘I like that.’ Serena rested her knee against Jeff’s.

They drifted in small circles, peering down at the rocks, before Wick said it was time to get back. ‘We can put the sail out,’ he said, ‘pick up some speed.’

Jeff leaned over to loosen the traveller. As they were swapping lines, making sure to tie the ends, a blast of wind buffeted the sail, snapping it out. The boom jerked from its clasp and swung across the bow. Serena later said she felt she was watching in slow motion. The fibreglass bar hit Jeff's head with a bright smack. He fell onto his knees to escape another swing but also because he was losing consciousness. He pulled himself up to force himself to revive but he was dazed. He looked puzzled. Blood was seeping in a thin trickle from a gash at the side of his forehead. Wick seized him and sat him upright while Serena searched for the medical kit hire boats have to keep by law. So Wick said. In the event there wasn't one and instead Serena used the edge of Jeff's t-shirt and, wetting it from the water bottle, cleaned around the cut. She was breathing heavily, wiping at her eyes to dry off the sweat.

'You okay?' Wick said. 'Is that making you squeamish?'

'A bit, but I'm okay. Thanks for asking.'

'Sense of humour failure,' Jeff said slowly. 'But this is good.'

'Welcome back,' Wick said. 'Siesta over.'

Jeff sat against the bench and waited for the stars to disappear in his head. He thought he'd been very uncool. He

replayed the moment trying to spot when his usual sure-footed boat self had become unglued by what he assumed was Serena's presence, but without success. She was now pressed close against him, her skin goose-bumped and soft like suede. He didn't want to look at her. He felt he was being too conspicuous. But his eyes roved anyway.

They headed to shore, tacking in tight curves. Serena sat at the front, her brow knitted, watching the wave swell ahead, always the same, always different. Surf skimmed the side of the hull, flashing white and bubbly, and throwing salty cooling spray onto their legs and arms. She kept turning round to look at Jeff, worried for him, though he said he was fine and his headache was minor.

Wick sat in the stern, trimming the sail. As soon as they reached the harbour and were tying up, he said a hurried goodbye and jumped onto his bike. He looked sheepish but he had to go to work, he said.

Jeff made a beeline for the bathroom cabin next to the office and shop. He knew his nose was about to pour out a hot scarlet river as it had so many times when he was a child. Serena

waited by the jetty. She had time, she said, she could go with Jeff to the doctor afterwards if he wanted.

Inside the cabin Jeff slid the lock, pulled off his top and put his arms each side of the basin. He drew his shoulders up and looked in the mirror. Okay, he told himself, it's okay. Blood began to drip down in soft splashes, swirling into the bowl, spattering the porcelain and tiles and mirror above. His chest was soon dotted like a red galaxy.

He tilted his head up, folded a sheet of tissue into a bung, and pushed it in until only the tip stuck out, then set the roll down, unwound a long sheet and began wiping at the mess.

At least this time the cause had been obvious. When he was a kid the bleeding could start for no reason at all with a few drops onto the floor or his shirt, becoming a deluge for which he had to find the nearest basin or edge of bush to gush into. 'Jeff's going geyser,' someone always managed to say in among the ready sympathies. There seemed nothing to do to prevent them, and little, the doctor said, to worry about. It was just inconvenient and dramatic, if fascinating for the young Jeff to wonder at.

When he opened the door, he felt immediately cheered at the sight of Serena and the sunset behind her. From where she stood on the quayside, her hair was outlined in an aura of orange sunbeams. ‘You look like an ad for chocolate or something.’

‘Wish I could say the same about you.’ She studied his face. ‘How are you feeling?’

Jeff wanted to reach out to her, to keep the moment from ending. ‘Can I give you a ride? I’ve got my car. Your stuff’s at Emerald, right?’

‘Yes, thank you. How about an ice-cream for the trip?’

They went into the shop and hunted in its floor-to-ceiling ice-box, picking out at the same time a Robinson Choc and Melon from the frosty mist.

‘If we pull the same note out I’ll be impressed,’ Serena said as they reached for their money at the checkout.

‘I only have coins. Boats and bills.’ He shook his head.

Serena fished out her purse. ‘Mine’s waterproof. Let me buy. You were kind enough to rescue me. I’d be halfway to Hawaii by now.’

They ambled outside to the car park on the far side of the jetties. The sun was settling onto the horizon, red and black and orange, throwing towards them a glittering carpet over the water as if beckoning them to walk there instead.

‘Beautiful,’ said Jeff, and the word hung in the air, listless and superfluous. He didn’t mind. He walked on. It could convey too little, and what was the point anyway? Serena was a girl and he found her attractive. The question didn’t enter his mind whether to take her or leave her, like he had said before to Wick. But it felt odd too, confounding, as if he didn’t want to like her. To like another was to lose oneself. Nothing good comes from rushing. And other familiar platitudes popped into his head which he didn’t much appreciate or even know where they came from. So he ignored them. He liked being with her. Just take it easy, he told himself.

He knew she was looking at him out of the corner of her eye even though when he turned her way she was already occupied elsewhere. It was a difficult look to fathom, partly measuring, partly exploring. He had read once how women have wider peripheral vision than men.

‘Yes, it’s beautiful,’ Serena said.

They laughed. Twice the superfluity. Hers also hung there but the echo closed up a loop.

‘Lucky not too melty now,’ Jeff nodded at her ice-cream, ‘it’s cooling down.’

Serena had whipped the second half of her cone into a helter-skelter groove of red and brown.

‘Delicious, first I’ve had.’

‘Lemon walnut’s good.’

‘Bet they reject some weird blends on the way.’

‘Pickle and Peach.’ Jeff clicked his fingers at the snazziness.

‘Rum and Parrot.’

A large pelican landed on the wharf post ahead of them, shuffled its wings and then stood still like a sentinel, one eye pointing down the quay on land, the other surveying the harbour for its supper. A bench was set opposite on the grass verge. Jeff was feeling dizzy.

‘I need to sit a minute,’ he said.

‘Sure,’ Serena took his elbow, ‘it’s the bang. I’m not surprised. You should take it easy. Let’s stop, give that bird some company.’

They sat and finished their ice-creams.

Jeff was soaring with the sugar and the day's strong sunshine and the knock. He lay back on the wooden slats and kicked his feet out in front of him.

'Very un-knobbly knees,' Serena observed.

He gave a thin smile.

'I don't feel so good.'

The pelican stretched its mouth open in an enormous yawn.

Jeff's head drooped onto his chest. 'You're nice,' he said. He closed his eyes and thought about the day, and about his expedition and Wick. They'd caught only small fish, it was true, but they had caught something big also. And they'd caught her without any bait. He felt woozy. The floor beneath his sandals shimmered. He saw the pelican suddenly swoop down, its mouth opening wider and wider, scooping them all inside together. Him and Serena and Wick, carrying them up and away, somewhere far away. He didn't feel afraid. It was dark and peaceful. He wanted to lay down and sleep and for everything to be alright.

'There, there,' he heard Serena say in the distance.

He struggled to speak but his head was throbbing so hard he could barely move.

Twisting in the seat he reached around into his back pocket. ‘Doctor.’ He pressed the wallet into Serena’s hand. ‘Can you drive?’

‘Of course.’ She took his arm and they made their way to the car, partners in a three-legged race.

‘Everything’s going to be alright.’ Serena angled him into the seat.

She started up and edged the car out onto the road, turning left inland towards the highway. The pelican watched them and yawned.

3 Dr Liam

JEFF WOKE UP FEELING HOT AND MUZZY. His back was dripping with sweat. The surroundings were angular and unexpected. He had been dreaming of something wild. Down on all fours like a wolf or a skunk rooting through brush and sniffing the air for his bearings but unable to make anything out. He was becoming anxious when he realised it was a dream. Then he remembered the boat and the boom and everything. He sat up. The plastic exam bed was sticky beneath him. He looked around carefully to check everything was in its place. On the wall opposite hung three posters. One showed a human body with its blood vessels: veins in blue, arteries in red, the capillaries black and narrowing off at the edges. Beside it a life-size portrait of a man rendered in 3-D was cut away to expose his organs and muscle tissue. The third poster showed a world map of health problems in different regions. It had lots of

statistics in boxes. The walls were painted orange, which Jeff always thought an odd touch, as if taking some seriousness away from the proceedings, though perhaps that was the intention. He knew the room well. He'd been there many times since his first visits as a child nearly twenty years before for his inoculations. Through the frosted glass door he could see Murray Liam, his doctor, shuffling about in the ante-office. Jeff looked down at his toes protruding from the paper towel at the end of the bed and wiggled them.

It felt comforting to be in the surgery surrounded by the rows of souvenirs and curios arranged on the shelves. The doctor liked to go “proper travelling” in his holidays, as he called it. ‘Like in the old days,’ he had once told Jeff, his eyebrows bouncing. ‘An expedition with itineraries and details, the different road. I want to be as free as I can and especially not fleeced at every turn.’

Three solemn African masks grouped above the dispensary safeguarded a sense of responsibility for the drugs inside. Perhaps Dr Liam had put them there specially. Jeff always found him full of jokes. Even after the earthquake when the clinic had literally fallen apart and everything in it not bolted to

something heavier had blown away or disappeared, the doctor's comment was: 'Thought that might happen, never have tortilla for breakfast.' And he had laughed as if it was really all quite funny, saying it over two or three times, his Australian accent growing thicker the more comic he tried to be. Later he told Jeff: 'If it isn't life-threatening, my view is, it's pretty much okay. You know the saying, worry's money on a bill you might never need to pay. So it's inconvenient, but that's all. Myself and the others here won't have much weekend for a while but there's something noble about building things, re-building them, even.' Jeff often remembered that conversation. There was a similar notion at Tyagarah where people liked to say, 'Thoughts can change the sky,' murmured solemnly, helpfully, a call to arms for meditation.

The door opened and the doctor bustled in, smiling. He was carrying a yellow folder and a plastic needle box.

'Feeling better?'

'Yes, thanks.' Jeff cleared his throat. 'Better.' He looked into the doctor's open gaze. 'Richter-scale headache is more accurate, like my head fell off and it's stuck on again now but not right.'

The doctor pressed the vertebrae at the top of Jeff's neck and inspected his brow, then smoothed a finger of cream along the purpling edges. 'Nice bump. Be outstanding tomorrow, I'd say, but the buzzing should have gone.' He wiped his hands and wrapped Jeff's arm to take his blood pressure.

Jeff's forehead throbbed. He could still feel the boom kiss and then thump him as it had swung across the bow, throwing him into the stern. He remembered fumbling for a handhold but finding none along the hull, and as he fell, Serena leaning over towards him. A smile had begun along her face, as if anticipating the boom's arc would miss, but the corners of her mouth were dipped down too, updating her expression with alarm as the true trajectory computed.

'May I ask what responsibility you're willing to admit, patient-doctor confidentiality and all, for this bash, which is fairly serious?'

'I'm not sure,' Jeff said, 'depends. Maybe it wasn't all my fault. Thirty-three per cent? There were three of us. Four including God. That'd make it twenty-five.'

The doctor raised one eyebrow.

‘Sorry, I don’t know what to say, it was an accident. The wind caught the boom. Then my head did. It all happened so fast. Before I knew it I was out.’

‘Pros wear helmets,’ Dr Liam said. ‘I know you’re not setting out to be a pro, but please wear some protection.’

Jeff made a face. ‘They look ridiculous. Is that commonsense cream you’re rubbing in? I’ll be more careful, promise.’

The doctor unwrapped Jeff’s arm, swabbed inside near the elbow and uncapped a needle. ‘Precaution,’ he said. ‘See everything’s okay in there.’

Jeff looked at his arm where the doctor was tapping up a vein but stayed quiet. He turned his attention to the body chart on the wall. It was crowded over with Latin names. Down the leg was the soleus, the plantaris, the grand adductor magnus and many others, like the roll call for a federation of alien planets. He felt the puncture and the needle slide in, and he wanted to go there, to the danger. But he bade himself look at the chart, to follow the ink lines. His imagination cartwheeled. What if real alien species had names like the Nose, the Knee, the great Elbow?

The doctor wiped again with a swab.

‘Another scratch. Small one. And that’s it for today.’

A tiny stab.

The blood box snapped shut. ‘All done. A bit barbaric, I’d agree with you there but it is the best way we know. I’ll send that off tomorrow, be back same day or next.’

He threw the sharps in the metal swing-bin, picked up the file from the cabinet and slid out a slim sheaf of papers.

‘Jeff, you know me, I’m pretty straightforward, say what I think.’ He paused. ‘When I can. Jeez, listen to me. Look, I have a letter here. It arrived the day before yesterday. You coming in here all of a sudden, you’ve saved Mary a call. I know it was in her diary to book you in. The letter’s about you. It’s exciting news. I won’t beat around the bush. Says you have a brother. A twin. In England. A twin brother.’

Jeff’s eyes opened wide. ‘What?’

The doctor pressed Jeff’s shoulder. ‘It’s a lot to take in, eh. Here, look, read for yourself.’

Jeff took the papers. The first was on stiff bond. His name was typed in full across the top: Jefferson Lee Rass. Below the header in small bold type, it read: *Consent to Inform*. There was a crest in the corner with a tree and a mountain drawn so as to

look embossed. Between them swam a sleek, green fish with one blue eye visible and its mouth slightly open. It was an austere-looking document. Jeff's heart was beating very fast. He read down the first page and the one following but took in only the gist of each paragraph.

Against their crisp thick paper, the sentences looked very black. The words buzzed at him with special meaning. He stood mesmerised by the solemnity, drawing on every ounce of attention to follow the strange information. He could sense Dr Liam watching. Whenever his reading faltered or he had to begin a line over again, somehow the doctor knew and interjected a comment trying to be helpful. For Jeff it made it all more surreal.

Stapled behind the first two pages was a letter from an agency in Britain introducing the situation in careful language as if addressing someone of twelve, even though they would have known exactly how old Jeff was. Dr Liam said they had decided to wait until now to fulfil the wishes of his mother.

‘But she’s dead.’

‘Well, yes, of course. But she was very precise in her will. There are extracts from it in one of the documents.’

Jeff thought of his parents at Tyagarah, Shivani and Seth. He wished he could rouse them from his memory to be there with him now. But they were a hundred miles away, out on a hillside counting stars, probably. What could they know about this? Did he have to tell them? He wasn't sure it mattered. He knew they loved him even if they always said their love for each other came first; plenty of people told him that was normal.

Jeff examined the other papers. There were three legal disclosures full of jargon and sub-clauses, comprising in all fourteen dense foolscap pages. He squinted down apprehensively.

'It says your rights were weighed up very carefully – there's a lot of legislation protecting you, as well as them – and the correct channels have been gone down. Read it later. Look at the back.'

'You've read it all, then?' Jeff said.

'Of course, it was addressed to me. They found out I was your doctor and chose the route by which I am authorised to make contact on their behalf. Et cetera. All I've done with this executive power is give it straight to you. It can be a shock to

learn something like this. A good shock perhaps, but still a shock.’

‘Is he an identical twin?’ Jeff wondered aloud. Then, ‘Does that make any difference?’

‘It doesn’t say.’ Dr Liam sat down in the black wooden swivel chair by the desk, working his pen between his first two fingers like a cigarette. ‘But statistically, most twins are not. As for the difference, well, there are almost as many schools of thought as there are studies into the matter. From my limited knowledge, I would say it’s a question of appearance rather than any deeper state of being. Nor are conjoined twins, that is, siblings that are physically melded together – Siamese twins – any more alike. They simply spend more time in each other’s company.’

This struck Jeff as a cruel but also amusing exaggeration of his own situation. He remembered a picture hanging in the mixed dining room at Tyagarah that he’d always liked. It was an orange sat amongst a box of apples. Above it was written, “Be yourself”. That orange meant a lot to him. Same shape and size as the apples around it, yet different. How could he have a brother? He felt dizzy and groped for the water cup he’d seen

on the bench. But he was intrigued. It was good too, surely. Amazing, in fact.

He tried to imagine what it would be like being joined to someone all the time, physically, part of a living knot. They'd soon get used to doing things the same as everyone else, he guessed, putting on three-sleeved shirts or whatever. Did they have special two-seater toilets? What about kissing, or jerking off? Or dancing even. Perhaps most didn't live that long. He'd seen stories in the papers with photos of gnarled, smiling children surrounded by surgeons. There never seemed to be any grown-ups. Flesh seemed suddenly so untrustworthy. He stretched his arm out and looked at his hand, turning it in front of him.

'My brother's hand may look exactly the same. You know, parts of him might be the same, whatever type he is. That's freaky. Everyone has a double somewhere, don't they? Probably a triple even, maybe loads more in China or India. Or Brazil.'

'If that's not a myth,' Dr Liam said, 'and maybe wishful thinking. People get lonely. A double seems plausible but I'm

not sure it's very likely. 'There are too many permutations in the genes.' He tamped down his pretend cigarette.

'What about versions, then? Not doubles exactly, but like, you know, versions? Could be a guy in Kenya who looks African and everything but yet he looks like me also, somehow. Could be. Or in Sweden. Don't you think?'

Dr Liam let Jeff talk on. He had put a mild sedative in with the second jab, which wasn't strictly ethical but he wanted the news to settle in smoothly. 'You're right,' he said, 'we don't know. Many people swear they've seen one. What do you think we should do about it?'

'About what?'

'The doubles.'

Jeff thought for a moment. 'Team up, play tricks! No, nothing at all, probably. It's just a phenomenon, isn't it? Like the Northern Lights. Or love at first sight. Must be hard to have a face for every single one of us. Seven billion faces. I'm surprised we don't look the same more often. Why does God go to so much trouble? Come on, doc, what's the medical view?'

Dr Liam drew his chair nearer to where Jeff was propped up on the exam bed and gave a short, listening hum. ‘Well,’ he began, then paused, not sure if Jeff really expected an answer.

‘I read about these bats once,’ Jeff said, ‘millions of them in a cave, flapping about and sleeping on the rock walls and everything, eating, shitting, all in the dark. Somehow they figured out how to recognise each other. So mothers could find their babies, the TV documentary guy said. Someone in the room watching it with me said it proved nature wasn’t communist, you know, otherwise it wouldn’t matter who was looking after whose baby. Or something.’ He looked at the floor.

The doctor put his fingertips together.

‘You know, Jeff, your brother is real. And he may look like you or he may not. But there will be many, many things you have in common. Even after a long time apart, brothers, sisters, most siblings share traits and ways of thinking. What they call the nature/nurture debate is the oldest discussion in the world. It’s going to be an interesting, and I think a very wonderful, experience for you to meet him. If you want to, that is. My duty

is to say you can choose not to, if that's your wish. Though knowing you, I don't think you'll want that.'

'Yeah, you're right,' Jeff said, 'it says I can go to London, doesn't it, paid for and everything. That could be enough fun, even if the rest is lame.'

'In my opinion,' the doctor's voice was silky and calming, 'it will all probably turn out just fine.'

Jeff felt numb. He thought he should be more agitated or excited but instead he was simply glad something was happening he had to take an interest in, that demanded him. But he was confused too, unsure what awaited him after the numbness subsided, and aware in the distance that probably nothing would be the same again. He looked up at Dr Liam's open face, which was a picture of reassurance. 'It's a bit fucking freaky, isn't it?'

Dr Liam slid his grip off along the chair arm, got up and went over to the bureau. 'It's a big surprise, yes.' He pulled open the bottom drawer and rummaged inside. 'You know,' he said over his shoulder, 'I lived in London for a while when I was studying. I was at Bart's. Had a residency there after I qualified. It was a wonderful time. Everything you hear about

medical students is true. There it was, anyway. In Australia, believe it or not, we were much more staid. Or I was. That's now...twenty four, nearly twenty five years ago. London is a great city, truly great. I'm tempted to come with you.' He sat back down. 'Can't find it. I had some photos. Must have put them away.'

Jeff drew together his scant knowledge of London. It seemed so slight and most of it clearly nonsense, the same as any kid around his way knew: the Olympic Games, of course, and then the king and all the history and quaintness and Old World charm, whatever that was, and red buses, and James Bond... Apart from a few films and the tourists he'd met he realised it was not a place he'd ever given much thought.

'They've got some hot babes.' He let the phrase slip off his tongue to see how it felt, which was, awkward. 'I met one today.'

'Serena, yes. I met her too.'

'She's nice, huh?'

Dr Liam grunted. 'Young and lively, and kind for bringing you here. She took a cab, said to say hi.'

‘We made a date, I think. Gave me her number anyhow. Is it true they always drink tea?’

‘Yep.’ Dr Liam gave a little grateful laugh. ‘Tea all the time. It’s a rather brilliant drink.’ He said it again, rolling the curves. ‘Brilliant.’

Jeff sat up on the exam bed and stretched his feet along the floor fishing for his shoes.

‘She got me doing an accent today. Nearly as bad as yours.’

‘I’m glad you have some pleasant things going on too. I want to suggest you take these away.’ He uncurled a finger at the sheaf of papers. ‘Take time to think about everything. See how you feel. Come and see me tomorrow or Tuesday. Just ring. Mary will fit you in.’

Jeff gave a quick nod and then frowned. ‘I feel questions bubbling up, so many, it’s like a noisy town hall meeting inside. I sort of know the answer to some. You know, overall, do I want this? Yes, my gut reaction is, yes. But then there’s all the details I’m not sure about. Fear of the unknown is the best fear, they’d say at Tyagarah, because you can find out about it. I guess I’m not involved in much else right now, am I?’ He stood by the steel basin and put his t-shirt on. ‘Bet you get this all the

time in here. Like finding out you're pregnant or something. I will make an appointment with Mary. I'd love to go running now. Would that be okay? Run home, clear my head. Can I? It's not far.'

The doctor shook his head. 'I'd prefer to let the swelling go down, and see what the tests say. I'm sure your brain is all safe and snug but I would like that confirmed. How about I phone for the result tomorrow and if it's nothing serious I'll leave you a message. Fair? Then you can run to your heart's content. Now I want you to drive home very carefully and take the back road. Okay?'

He ushered Jeff through the middle office to reception. It was dark and quiet. Jeff was used to seeing Mary at her desk presiding over half a dozen patients, mediating their delays, pointing out the latest magazines and leaflets to read. He had never been in there after hours before. Everything was so still and undisturbed. There were more posters, of people in everyday actions frozen as if awaiting their audience to return. In the far corner an elaborate, brightly-coloured children's game centre sat dull and shrunken in the gloom.

‘The world’s a stage,’ chimed Dr Liam, catching Jeff’s gaze. ‘A picture of innocence, isn’t it? That always strikes me. Night workers everywhere must see the world like this, stopped in its tracks waiting for the day to start over.’

One arm cuffing the back of Jeff’s neck, he flicked the latch and let the outside door swing open all the way flat against the porch wall. Night sounds rushed in: crickets; frogs from the pond out front and from the stream that passed behind the clinic towards the ocean; Doppler-shifting cars roaring like mechanical cats across the sand and bush from the interstate a mile off.

They said their goodbyes. Jeff thanked the doctor again for seeing him so late. He made a beeline for his car which he’d spotted in the corner of the driveway. There was a stash in the recess of the glove box. He needed to get inside and shut the door and be with himself, and maybe smoke it and maybe not, but to know it was there should his mind become overwhelmed by what he had learned and he wanted to buffer it with haze. He wasn’t used to days so laden with events and twists. Who could he turn to first? Himself? That was no answer. His guardians? They were only slimly attached to planet Earth. Plus

they had officially released him at his adulthood ceremony. He looked in the rearview mirror. The bump on his forehead seemed to glow in the dark.

The doctor's self-medication ritual was also a moment away – from the time it took to wave goodbye and close the door, walk to his office and open the drawer and pour himself a single malt that he would raise to his lips and swallow, burning its promise of relief down his throat. He pulled the blind down, glimpsing Jeff sat across the way in the dark, and let out a sigh. He was not so hard as he thought he was. Nor as his father, God rest him, his vigilant farmer father with his farmer's gait and leathery hands and piggy eyes, assumed he must be if made of the same stuff, if truly a son of his own granite line. Toughness comes from actions, his father would say, as if that were any spur to a boy. When difficult or dangerous jobs needed doing about the place he made sure the young Murray Liam was in on it. He had accepted the medical career his son later insisted upon partly because it was a job you did with a knife in your hand and some of the blades he'd seen in medical shows on the TV were extremely grim.

In some respects Dr Liam regarded himself a father figure to Jeff; one among many, he assumed. That seemed the way at Tyagarah. He'd been his doctor for a long while and in recent years something of a confidant. The boy's welfare was genuinely a source of interest and concern. The lad had a peculiar life; he offered what support he could. But in quieter moments the notion his ministrations were driven by kindness seemed grandiose nonsense. He was as greedy as the next, as foolish, as weak.

He remembered interviewing two 100-year old women once at medical school who shared the same birthday. To the invariable question on the secret of their long life, one had said, 'Eat mint every day', and the other, 'Tell people what they want to hear.' He always remembered this second wise pearl as justification for any lies he had to make. Tell people what they want to hear. Oil the world's wheels. To hell if it was going where you didn't want it to go.

He heard the car start up and crunch across the gravel to the road. The night fell still again, leaving the sound of his breathing and the softly rattling drugs fridge. He would catch a quick nap and then begin another day of bunions and gas. He

went over to the telephone. Was it late or early? Bugger it. He picked up and dialled.

‘It’s Liam. All good.’

4 Jonathan and Raymond

THROUGH THE WINDOW WAS CRISP SUNSHINE and breeze, no sign of cloud, the air fresh and summery. Birds flickered among their tree perches and rooftops. Along the street, the glossy posts and chains and house windows gleamed with reflected sunlight.

‘Mahesh, come here and look at this. It’s so beautiful.’ Jonathan swept his arm out as if revealing creation and waited for Mahesh. ‘Come on, gorgeous.’

Mahesh’s phone let out a sudden raucous screech.

‘What the fuck’s that?’

‘Gazelles,’ Mahesh said, ‘on loud. Don’t worry about it.’

‘They’re noisy fuckers.’

‘It should keep the lions at bay, only it doesn’t work – all that comes out of them in real life is a puffy little squeal.’

‘Puffy?’

‘Yeah, puffy, you know. Round.’

‘A round squeal.’

‘Yeah. It doesn’t really matter, does it.’ He kicked the phone away. ‘It’s random anyway. Flies is the best one. No idea how they recorded that...with a tiny microphone, I suppose. Did you know flies sound like they’re sneezing? That’s their mating call. Only another fly’d want them. It’s mad.’

‘Answer it, then.’

‘Nah, it’ll be work. And I’m not going in, not feeling well. I want to spend the day with you.’

‘Not an option, love, I’m afraid. Seeing uncle.’

‘Really? Shit.’

‘Come with.’

‘Oh yeah, and listen to old fart news and views and all the rest of it. I never know what he’s on about half the time. And he thinks I’m a drog.’

‘You are.’

‘Yeah, well why haven’t you fucked off by now?’

‘It’ll be fun. We’re going for lunch. You can eat crab or something.’

‘Pamby boy. I’ll think about it, alright? Now what am I supposed to be looking at here, exactly? It’s like one big geography field trip with you.’

Jonathan shrugged. ‘It’s gone now.’

‘Sure.’

‘No, really, it was great. But you missed it.’ Mahesh made to go but Jonathan tugged him back. ‘Now that you’re here. You’re always so warm, you’re like a natural radiator. Must be all the chilli.’

Jonathan’s cab arrived announced by a loud yawn from his phone.

‘That’s about right,’ said Mahesh. ‘I’m gonna dial you at lunch. Hope I get that. Make sure the volume’s up.’

‘I want you with me. Put your coat on.’

Mahesh shook his hair over his shoulders. ‘I’d rather watch water boil. Sorry, but seriously, I’ve got to get on too. Plays don’t act themselves. Have a nice time, remember to come home, say hello to uncle. And be good. Don’t order the most expensive dish unless you just can’t help it.’

‘Okay then, see you tonight,’ Jonathan said. ‘Verdi.’

‘Si, mia piccola ciliegia.’

Jonathan bounced down the front steps.

The driver, a lean old-timer, wound down the window.

‘Where to, Guv?’ He held the door open.

‘You’ve done this before.’

‘Once or twice.’

‘Shepherd’s Market, Mayfair,’ Jonathan said. ‘The White Room. Do you know it?’

The driver nodded, closed the door, and set the meter on. He shone a wrinkly smile back in the mirror.

Jonathan settled into the velour seat. He loved riding in taxis, and the older the better with all their rattles and swerves. With so many narrow streets and lanes London was like a giant plate of spaghetti. The younger drivers rode faster and more aggressively but two or three decades for the veterans lent a grand confidence to the proceedings. It was as if over time they absorbed the runs and points and details of every street and the timings of the traffic lights and probabilities for the most common events: when cars switch lanes as a gap opens up; how long buses wait for cars before barging back into the flow. The sum of myriad tiny calculations helped the cab weave and

slice along like an athlete. This driver looked to Jonathan as if he had been driving all his life.

The journey from Maida Vale to town was one Jonathan knew well. On a good day, a sunny day, he reckoned the parade of cityscape past the window was as rich as any of the world's wonders. London's red badge, its buses and post boxes and old abandoned telephones, flashed in contrast to the glorious tilt of green everywhere. The parks were canopied with thick foliage and shrubs, and populated between one another by rows of proud villas on the wider roads and neat, mostly now converted, Victorian terraces behind. In nearly every street was a stand of trees – ash, oak, birch, and chestnut, abandoned elm stumps, an occasional eucalyptus towering over from a garden, or a tall, grand plane – reminders all that where London now pulses a vast and ancient forest once existed, even if many of the species, like so many of its citizens, originated overseas.

Jonathan careered along in his rickety cocoon, its suspension half shot, wishing the journey would last. He looked forward to seeing his uncle but had reservations too and was caught between wanting to get there and not wanting to at all. The man sometimes made him feel he could do nothing right. And

more, that he would never do anything right, nor achieve more than being a scruffy wayward boy. Jonathan made matters worse for himself with his own busy imaginings. One bad word from another could lead to five times the criticism he aimed at himself. He wished it worked the other way round, that a good word would fill him with positivity and confidence. His uncle had a knack for making him feel blameworthy, even when it was about nothing. Mahesh said Raymond enjoyed pulling Jonathan's strings. Mahesh hated him for that very reason. But even now that Jonathan and Raymond had proper grown-up rows over grown-up topics, Jonathan didn't feel particularly rebellious towards his uncle. He might sit sullenly at the table every so often when they met for a meal or when he was invited over to the house, his mind streaming with hurt and invective, but he felt obliged to paint a smile on his face, to add some jauntiness to his manner. Since his mother had died Raymond had been there for him, and that was a fact. So he would be grateful. He would force himself to swallow his words, rein in his temper. Moreover, Raymond's hectoring was always about how Jonathan could improve his life, so the old man must have his good at heart. Jonathan felt it was his duty

to remember that. He smiled at his apprehension. How often had he had the same conversation with himself re-imagining all the hurt and complexity, and then had a nice time anyway?

His phone yawned again. He thought about swapping the tone for a sub-bass – inaudible to humans but nearby objects rattled and shook. It was the clinic checking up again. He touched the earpiece. Sujn’s secretary, an officious but not unkindly man, jabbered at him a terse update, which consisted, it seemed to Jonathan, of token chitchat: levels were all normal; Jonathan was fine; what a nice day; the doctor didn’t need to see him for at least two weeks, in other words, until it was time for a check-up. And he was to be sure to call them for any reason if he wanted to.

Jonathan started off affecting to be tired of their enquiries but it was an offhand approach that rarely got him anywhere. ‘I realise I won’t make the England team,’ he said, ‘but my three score and ten are safe, aren’t they, or is it fourscore and ten these days?’

He forced his nerves to quieten. He was grateful too. Yes, he was genuinely feeling fine. Yes, he’d see them in a fortnight.

He clicked off. Jeez, why couldn't he talk normally sometimes. It wasn't such a big deal. Viruses were everywhere. And he would make sure he didn't pass it on. What did they think he was?

He sat back and gazed through the half-open window, trailing his eyes over the sculpted details of the buildings. More people should look upwards, he thought. Horizons are here and now; vertices are for ever. He wished he'd put that in his essay. He could see his tutor nodding sagely: yes, how insightful, he'd agree, they are for ever. He opened the window of the cab all the way down, as much for fresh air as to let out his cloying thoughts. 'You've read too much,' Mahesh was fond of telling him, 'too much nonsense. I can't wait until you've finished all that study and you can just build buildings. I mean, that's why you signed up, right, to build a library not to live in one?' The car bumped along the top of Hyde Park and down Park Lane, which looked like Christmas even though it was several months away. His tummy rumbled, fixed on the promise of lunch.

The White Room was at the end of a small cul-de-sac of bright townhouses, the middle of three permitted business

premises there – the other two being the Coach and Pussycat, a public house, and a dry cleaners, Smyth’s, with a butler mannequin in the window. The White Room was a modest temple to food, in scale if not pretension, and distinguished itself from similar contenders by striving to make every element of dining there remarkable. Jonathan was given separate hangers for his raincoat and summer scarf and a small box for his phone. ‘If it rings, sir, we shall find you.’

He imagined bedrooms upstairs above the dining room to which after a sumptuous meal a waiter might carry you up and tuck you in.

A Brylcreemed maître d’ ushered him to a table in the corner at which his uncle, resplendent in a dove grey suit, was already sat fingering the rim of a tall glass of tonic water.

He made as if to stand but Jonathan waved him to stay seated. It was all courtesy. The side of the tablecloth was wrapped down over the wheels of his chair.

‘I know you want to say “Dear boy”,’ Jonathan said.

‘I do. You are – my dear boy.’

Jonathan sat down. Their table was positioned in the farthest corner of the room by a sash window that looked out onto a

wide, balconied house opposite. Beside it rose narrow blank space with leafy chunks of park behind. A striped awning reached outwards above the window barring any low sunbeams; below was a window box full of white tulips.

The waiter hovered as Jonathan ordered vodka and tonic and cashews, and then withdrew.

‘I’ve started, but it’s only the tonic.’ Raymond tapped the glass with his ring finger. ‘Doctor tells me to be more selective in my vices. Is that discreet? I ask you. Fools, everywhere fools.’

Raymond’s voice had a sharp, clipped tone Jonathan had rarely heard before. Raymond must have realised it was inappropriate somehow for he then sat up very straight in his chair.

‘No really, I’m fine. Composed, oui?’ He traced around his mouth with his fingers and along the moustache and beard which never quite disappeared however close he shaved. ‘It’s the little things that get to me, that accumulate. They’re like wasps. One is fine, swat it, deal with it, you know?’

Jonathan nodded, as much to agree as to jostle the space between them and change the subject. He glanced around at the other diners, then looked his uncle up and down.

‘Must be a special occasion.’

‘Indeed. You might have dressed a bit smarter.’

‘Are you serious?’

Raymond tilted his head back and emitted a low rasp of a chuckle.

Jonathan watched the gold glint along the insides of his mouth and the pink quivering pear of his epiglottis. ‘Look at that guy over there, he’s in a track suit.’

‘That “guy”, yes, well, he is the proprietor,’ Raymond said. ‘Next time I shall wear a track suit and you can wear the business suit.’ He extended his hand over the table. Jonathan shook it. They often made playful deals to break the ice between them. But without pause Raymond was on the attack.

‘If there is a next time,’ he muttered.

‘Please.’

‘Well, no-one else seems to have told you how to behave. Is it so much to ask? Oh, no, I must explore. That’s what you say to yourself, is it?’

Jonathan was relieved their conversation was more than a mere exchange of civilities but he didn't want to talk about his personal life in the restaurant. 'You're probably going to say "lifestyle choice" next,' he said, as if showing he understood his uncle's concerns would help.

'Indeed I might. It is a so-called lifestyle and you do have a choice, but to put the two together implies a brain I fear woefully absent.' Raymond dropped his hands onto the table and stared at his glass.

'A bit of experimentation I can understand,' he had said the last time they met, in the spring, 'lots of boys did it at school. And I know it's de rigueur these days to think nothing of it. I mean,' his voice lowered to a whisper, 'France may have a homosexual prime minister, but you have only to look to the Roman Empire. It was the end!'

Lack of coherence had only emphasised the point he was making, which was so simple and so commonly uttered Jonathan hadn't risen to it. He assumed things would blow over and certainly in their two or three phone conversations since, during which he was vigilant in hunting for tell-tale shades of meaning, he had detected nothing. Now, however,

there was a sea-change. Something unfathomable lay in his uncle's manner. He feared the man's intransigence was as much from bloody-mindedness as from any moral stance. But it felt worse, darker. Raymond would never approve of him. He had to let go of hoping otherwise.

An air of politeness informed their exchanges but it was not enough. By the time coffee was served, alongside mints and petit fours, a space was ring-fenced between them which had the effect on their conversation of a small black hole of silence. Any topic they broached or sentence they uttered steered away from the silence only to be tugged back in, as if forced, ordained, to confront what it was hiding. Jonathan seldom had occasion to doubt Raymond's underlying love for him, but now that required extra faith. He guessed Raymond was feeling something similar by how long it took him to formulate his words.

Jonathan was becoming annoyed. He'd always promised himself not to sweep issues under the carpet, to be clear and candid. He started thinking up diplomatic things to say to confront the thickening whitewash.

‘Okay,’ Raymond cut in, ‘okay, I’m sorry. I can see you squirming, my dear boy, and that is not my intention at all. It’s all my fault. I want to tell you something, yes, but something good, not bad. Please bear with me.’

Raymond’s words tumbled out over the white linen to where Jonathan sat captivated, listening hard to absorb the strange news of his faraway brother.

The whites and yellows and greys of the room blurred into a soft-focus backdrop. All he could hear were his uncle’s soft drone and the tinkle of glass and china and cutlery.

‘I shan’t encumber you with too many details,’ Raymond said, ‘it’s so unnecessary.’ He was eyeing Jonathan as a vet might eye a sick dog, prepared for the least sign of disturbance, content for it to remain placid.

‘You know,’ Raymond smoothed out his napkin, ‘you are as dear to me as anything or anyone in my life. The very last thing I would wish is for you to be alarmed, or concerned in any way. The news is joyous, if, perhaps, overdue.’ His face reddened, sprouting penny-sized blotches.

‘I hope you forgive my keeping it from you so long. If your mother had had her way I wouldn’t be saying anything to you

at all, she thought it better that way. She believed, though I absolutely did not agree with her, that you'd be happier growing up apart. You would be freer somehow. She had the strictest notions, you see, about all sorts of things. And one, one I couldn't shake her on, was this. We spent many an hour discussing it all, and often hotly. But I simply could not make her see that it was the wrong way to look at things entirely. Being a mother is about being present, not faraway, not a puppet master. Of course I knew she was sick,' he waved his hand in front of his head, 'but I believed it would be temporary. I never imagined that she had already decided...' He looked off into space for a moment, then back at Jonathan. 'She must have known full well before any of us that her coil was shuffling, or however it goes. I couldn't dissuade her. She was utterly determined. Do you know how many times we, you and I, have nearly had this conversation, how many times I've stood in my office holding the telephone receiver wanting to dial your number? But I didn't. What can I say? And now we are both men. We must look ahead, not back to where regrets lie. Equally, I have wanted to find Jeff and tell him everything too – Jeff, Jefferson, that's his name – but in the end, you see,

my promise was to your mother, and she bade me wait until you were 21. It was all I had left of her. It was the only way I could still show her I loved her. My crazy, beautiful sister.'

'But I'm 23.' It was a tiny grain of logic amid such pure information. 'I'm 23. I don't get it. Why didn't you tell me before, like she said?'

Raymond shone a thoughtful and sympathetic face across the table. 'I had to weigh up if it really was the right time. Your mother's wishes were more a guideline than an iron rule. It wasn't a very good year for you, was it, for such things? There was a lot on your mind already, what with your exams and everything.'

'Jesus.' Jonathan searched his uncle's face for something unfamiliar, something that might explain how he came to be presenting so twisted a message. And what had possessed his mother to be so overprotective? She had been sectioned, he knew that, after which she lasted only a few feeble months, but as far as he'd been aware her will had not been clear or valid.

'It's all a bit humiliating, really. Anything else you think I should know?'

‘Jonathan, I’m truly sorry. I hope one day you’ll see how hard it was for me not to tell you, and how glad I am to be able to now.’

‘Now what? Now I’m in a great place?’

‘Well, you’re not in a weak one. I don’t think so.’ A waiter wafted over. Raymond signalled for the bill. ‘I can see you are upset. Aggrieved even. And I understand that, I do.’

He rested his hand over Jonathan’s. It felt cool and dry, powdery almost. Jonathan looked at the stubby fingers with their brown liver dots and grey hairs. A slim copper band around the wrist jingled against the old gold and white watch on its leather strap.

‘Okay, okay,’ Jonathan said, ‘I’m sure you’re right. I’ve got to go too.’ He prayed for his phone to ring and rescue him, and for one of the absurd-looking penguin-attired waiters to hurry over and bend obsequiously towards him proffering his phone on its velvet-lined casket to answer. He wished Mahesh would ring from the landline and make the phone bray like a donkey in this artificial enclosure. It seemed to him, stripped of any desire to pretend for once, that he was in some upside-down zoo where the docile humans were fed until they could barely

move. He looked around at the pallid fat diners. Society makes us dumb, he thought. His food was lodged at the top of his stomach. He wanted to be sick.

Downstairs they made stilted, half-sincere farewells. Raymond was a model of compassion. Jonathan, in his own words to himself, felt fucking wound-up. He couldn't believe Raymond had thought it was okay not to tell him about this before. The onus was always on him to do the right thing, to be the good nephew. But this was of an entirely different order. It was a betrayal of any intimacy they had, a horrible, calculated deceit. And what else might there be that Raymond had decided not to tell him? How was he ever to trust him about anything? Why should he? He wanted to smash his face in.

The maître d' steered them decorously through the mirrored foyer and out onto the street where two pre-ordered cabs sat idling.

'Jesus.' Jonathan exhaled once his uncle's car had revved off, his uncle's head, arms and shoulders squashed round in the back window waving. He tried to entice back his peace of mind from wherever it had fled. The park glimmered from across

Park Lane, lush and inviting. He left his unused cab with a large tip and set off into the green.

5 Later

‘COME HERE, MY EXPENSIVE LITTLE FUCKED-UP ONE.’ Mahesh held out a large glass of Merlot.

‘Shh.’ Jonathan looked around at the clusters of drinkers lining the flock walls and leaning over the marble bar top.

‘Don’t worry, they can’t hear anything except themselves.’

The five-minute bell pinged. They joined in, in unison: ‘Please take your seats, the show will commence in five minutes.’

‘I say it every time I hear a bell now.’

Mahesh guided them away towards the balcony door. ‘Well there’s not many about any more, gone the way of the church.’

‘Gong the way,’ Jonathan said. The joke was lost amid the hubbub but he didn’t mind. He was grateful for the way Mahesh made him forget himself and everything so easily. ‘Verdi for ballet, eh?’ he said brightly. ‘Whatever next?’

‘Anything goes. My money’s on TV in space, if I had any money. Come on, let’s go and sit in the dark and have a snog like we used to.’

‘He can stay in the attic, I suppose.’

‘You’re cleaning it.’

‘Come on.’

They swallowed back the wine.

Settled inside the plush auditorium, as the curtain lifted, Jonathan’s head nodded onto his chest and he fell asleep.

He began to dream he was on a tall ladder, clinging to it in the middle of a vast, gloomy space. The ladder reached up and down as far as he could see but it was sturdy and didn’t bend or wave about. His legs ached and his neck was stiff from craning upwards. He knew he had to keep going, to keep climbing up the rungs, though he was desperate to stop. Was he climbing towards something or away from something? He couldn’t remember. It was a place of limbo, he was sure, and he was one of its inhabitants. He thought of an unbaptised infant, innocent and helpless like the frescoed attendants he’d seen at the

Botticelli exhibition in the summer. He felt scared, as if his stomach was full of petrol.

In the distance he made out another ladder. With sudden certainty he realised he wasn't alone in this strange place, and that, moreover, he was enmeshed somehow in a giant game of snakes and ladders, which meant, to his horror, that nearby was the one thing about which he was extremely phobic.

Even a picture of a snake was enough to make him scream. He had been to a therapist once but didn't finish the course. The remedy they proposed was simply too much: to seek out and actually touch one. A live one. Unfortunately, interrupting the sessions when his fears were mid-excitation boosted the speed with which his dread arose now whenever anything hissed or slithered, no matter if it was a human voice or a cartoon or a squirrel running along a tree bough.

In his dream, perversely, the fact he couldn't see any snakes fuelled his conviction they must be nearby and it set his heart pulsing.

His hands shook on the rungs, and its texture changed under his grip, softening, turning pliant. 'Become a horse instead, become a horse, please,' he prayed. 'Let me gallop or fly away.'

Do the most a horse can do. Fly away to safety.’ But the more he prayed, the more it seemed the ladder was determined to stay a snake. Why would it do the opposite of what I want, of what’s right? he thought. A tiny drop of kindness, that’s all it takes, the tiniest drop. Didn’t everyone have it somewhere? Didn’t every creature? He wanted to scream at the snake, and crush it or scare it off with his rage, yet he felt pathetic, as if all the power he could reach for was outside of him, and that he didn’t deserve it anyway.

He gave a low moan. Three or four hundred heads swivelled round, including some of the cast. Mahesh shook him awake, whispering sorry in different directions. Jonathan sat sunken in his seat, dazed to find himself not on his sofa or on a bus, places where he sometimes napped. His shirt was damp around his neck and under his arms. He reached into Mahesh’s inside pocket where he knew of a theatre night a pick-me-up could be found and pulled out the slim silver flask. He drained a third of it in one swig.

‘Derro,’ Mahesh whispered.

Strolling home along Rosebery Avenue after the show,

Jonathan took Mahesh's arm. 'It's good I had a bad dream,' he said, 'it feels right to get it out, let the brain do the walking. Like the Greeks and their harmony: everything for balance, in the self, in the house. You've got to follow the mind where it leads sometimes, don't you, wherever it is?'

Mahesh grunted. 'I don't argue with Greeks.'

Jonathan took Mahesh's wrist and twisted it, but with his hands barely touching the skin.

In bed later, alone with his thoughts, for all his reasoning and bravado Jonathan feared his dream returning. He took half a Mozanil and nuzzled into the duck down, claspng the duvet around him. Mahesh was already asleep, his breathing light and even in the stillness. Raymond was a funny bird, Jonathan thought, always giving and taking at the same time. He still had Mahesh's supportive rant in his ear: 'It's a post-Oprah world now, doesn't he realise. Share, share, share! But also, care, care, care!' Jonathan turned over towards him.

Other people's problems were always easy. A spoonful of advice. A bucketful. What counted, he guessed, was sympathy. He knew Mahesh cared, but that didn't mean he could see all the feelings Raymond's talk had brought up, the shape and

texture of them, or how deeply they had affected him. It was the buried, quiet beats of pain that worried him. They pulsed away below, an uneasy background. His old, long-accumulated processes of coping and survival resided in some veiled, lumpy inner cavity. As a child he'd often make a smile sit on his face – a badge of denial – while inside he would be hurting and afraid and angry, unable to ask about the truth of his foster life. He scavenged for hints, signs from the adults around him, but they were distracted and indifferent and made a virtue of being unavailable for such matters. Getting on with it was all. The practical approach. They didn't pick up his precocious sensitivity or how much he craved to hear about his real parents. When he grew older, he learned that children were often intuitive. It was grown-ups who couldn't handle truth so well.

Having little to compare to, he thought it was normal to be closed with his feelings, to bottle up what had no place. And as he went out into the world, the burden of his pain increased. He wasn't as chirpy as people in adverts said you were supposed to be. But simple, even-keel contentment, how about that? Surely people who were sorted didn't care, and felt just as

valid and secure. They could choose to be different if they wanted to, to change who they were. Why must he judge everything? He wondered if his new brother had similar doubts and fears. Did he also find life so unsteady? Jonathan's gut reaction was, no, it was unlikely. California, land of dreams. So, there would be one more face he couldn't read, that he couldn't persuade to see his way without revealing how vulnerable he was. He feared there wasn't anything good going to come from meeting this new brother, yet he couldn't run away. Even Mahesh was into the idea, and, surprisingly, at ease about their home being invaded.

His thoughts looped around, lulling him with their leaden downward interweaving, and he drifted to sleep.

Straightaway, he found himself clinging again to the long ladder. It was now swaying from side to side while morphing into a large bed sheet. The texture, previously wooden, became skin-like, smooth and cool. Though not scaly, he was pleased to note. He felt curious now instead of scared. He could see farther into the distance around him than before and it was

much brighter, as if whatever filled the space – for there was no obvious source of illumination – was phosphorescent.

‘I must climb,’ he said aloud. ‘It’s my calling.’

This felt very grandiose and made him jaunty. The rungs above him, meanwhile, were melding together to form what looked like a thatched roof.

Impatience and confusion displaced his newfound confidence as quickly as his fear was displaced earlier. He tossed a full turn in the bed, tangling his legs in the sheets. On the dresser the clock read 6:59. In the last pre-alarm minute, his eyelids flicked and bulged as his brain made a final bid for balance. He was drifting away from the ladder like a deep sea diver on a current. And the ladder, although still an edifice stretching infinitely up and down, resembled more than anything else, himself. He was looking at a giant facsimile of himself repeating endlessly into the sky, and it bore bizarre features: thatched hair and crooked pipe-like arms that twisted away, lengthening and changing colour like an old screensaver.

The birds tweeted from the clock, ready as ever to start a new day. Jonathan sat upright and opened his eyes expecting still to be confronted by his own warped reflection. In front of

him instead there sat a concerned and smiling Mahesh who held up one finger crossed with another on top in a sign for tea.

‘Yes please,’ Jonathan croaked.

He looked into Mahesh’s eyes, which were wide and sleepy and very brown – chocolate, Mahesh liked to describe them – and his whole body shivered off its nervous stiffness. He felt suddenly that everything would be okay. Fear made you ready. Everybody faced burdens and obstacles. Beneath Mahesh’s long lashes he saw pools of such reassurance and life that connected him deeply to another being who offered him love. Love will conquer all. Like it says in the bible. Like in all the songs and poems. Light over dark. Morning light, moonlight, electric light, even. Terror will always flee and scuttle.

His belly gave a small shudder.

‘I love you, you know,’ Mahesh stood at the door, ‘even though you’re a girl.’

Jonathan made to throw a pillow but Mahesh ducked out. He listened to the footsteps recede along the hall to the kitchen, then turned his face into the bedclothes and let the tears come.

6 Serena

SERENA HAD THE EVENING TO HERSELF in her little apartment, which was set in the grounds of a serviced hotel complex. There was a kitchenette with crockery and utensils and a laminate breakfast bar upon which she had laid out groceries and lit a tall candle that flickered companionship against the white walls. She slid open the glass balcony door and lit another candle and a citronella bar, then switched on the small radio by the coffee table, scanning the stations until she found some Bessie Smith. She liked the old blues singers; so sincere and dignified, and their urgent stories were about much more than most music. One unafraid voice weaving between the other louder players who were busy with their harmonies and beats, that one voice raising up life's troubles – dreams, yearnings, love sought or found or lost – all transcended by the sharp, sweet musicianship.

Every day of the past week had been full of sun and summer. Serena was exhausted. But instead of resting she was giddy with a sort of sheer excitement. She thought of Jeff, his eyes shining as they had the night they met up after their encounter in the ocean. It was only a week ago but it felt much longer, as if her hours and days didn't work properly anymore.

They had gone to sunset volleyball at a beach bar called "Wig" after the line of palms that stood behind it in an exuberant green fringe. The sun was its own diameter's height above the horizon, throwing giant stripes of orange and mauve towards the shore. Serena hadn't played volleyball before but she was soon busy chasing balls and striking them over the net. There were five or six players spaced out on each side, and the same number again stood at the edge watching and occasionally swapping places with someone on the court. It reminded her of grown-ups playing in a sandpit. Being at the beach made it all so simple and beautiful. Youthful – the word kept coming back to her. Not pretend youth, or made-up, wished-for youth, but the real unabashed fervour of young minds in young bodies in a bountiful setting.

It made her feel like an intruder. She wasn't judgemental about the people particularly, only curious. She wouldn't know what to fault them for anyway.

A little way off on a green verge two men were hunched over bongos, with another musician on a long string bow that he sawed with a smaller bow. They made a light, tripping beat to accompany some dancers writhing in front of them in slow turns and challenges.

Jeff was on the other side ranging like a lion behind the net, lobbing long balls from the back of the court and jumping up high so that he was suspended in mid air, often with time to flash Serena a grin before knocking the ball over or passing it to a team-mate. Serena's feet got used to the sand: it was hard to launch from but easy to land in. Her forearms glistened. She had played tennis once upon a time. Her co-ordination was rusty but sound.

One or two of the players took it more seriously than the others. Soon after her muscles were loosened and warmed, a long ball came flashing high over from the far corner. Serena tracked it, taking in the two team-mates on her left – one, a podgy Spanish-looking girl wearing a sleeveless T-shirt with a

gecko on the front, who until then had been neither friendly nor unfriendly towards Serena. The gecko girl's head flicked upwards and sideways as if calculating her chances for taking the shot. Serena thought the ball was clearly her own, moving right towards her. Her legs readied to jump and she flung upwards reaching out, stretching to the side. As her fingertips touched the ball a violent bash on her shoulder pitched her backwards onto the ground. The other girl had lunged across her, missed the ball but managed to swipe Serena out of the way. She said sorry quickly, half-heartedly, then tripped over to the far side of the court.

Serena lay with her head flat on the sand, squinting up at the unusual perspective. She could see knees, legs, colourful shirts, heads bobbing far above. Sand had gone into her mouth. She was content to leave it there. She didn't want to move. Jeff raced over and knelt down beside her. She was fine, but not in a hurry. The graze stung. She felt entitled to lie for as long as she wanted. What mattered their game? That rude girl should have known not to try it on with her. She smiled. She'd never been one for fighting.

The sky looked further away than usual. Everything moved slowly. Jeff walked off to have words with the girl and her boyfriend. None of them were monkeys, that seemed the gist of their talk. Phrases floated towards her over the hot sand: ‘small town...look at your arms...you’re the monkey...okay, okay...’ But they were not so tough, it seemed. She couldn’t imagine Jeff frequenting somewhere troublesome.

She propped up onto an elbow, straightening her neck, and spat the sand out as discreetly as she could. Now we’ve both been in the wars, she thought. She looked at her shoulder. It was red and sore. Behind, the ocean shimmered invitingly. She longed to run down and dive in, to cool off, and forget what was eating away at her inside. She feared she was losing herself at the very moment she wanted to be clear and resolute.

‘What’s your intention?’ she wished she’d asked the girl. It always seemed the best way to deflate a conflict. Avoid games, show interest, let someone air their grievance another way. She imagined the girl’s answer: ‘My intention? To have fun, knock you down, to flirt with your boyfriend, make mine jealous, to win, to play well, to look skilful, get respect, to take a break, live

a long life, to answer your silly English question. Oh no, forget that one. What's yours?'

Serena got up and brushed the sand off her arms and body and retied her hair. Jeff was back, giving off a mix of protectiveness and humour. She felt like kissing his ear, but then dug her toes into the warm sand and shook her muscles, looking forward instead to play resuming.

In the lounge room, Serena smiled remembering her confusion. She had felt lost, deliciously, treacherously lost. Jeff's features fascinated her. Their very ordinariness was beautiful. That he should take for granted the ease and plenty in which he lived impressed her. It was a quality of artless confidence she aspired to.

'What is your intention?' Jeff should have asked her. Her lies would stick in her craw. She imagined blushing and stuttering and then running off in coy dread.

The louder that one voice within her said 'No', the more control her body tried wresting for its own. And she was stuck between – she was her body too, of course, that bade the voice hush and countered it with greater and more present urgency.

We are centaurs, she thought, each astride a horse it is impossible to fall from.

She was determined to do what was right but she wanted to relax too, at least for the evening, and to be gentle and trustful with herself. Her shoulder still smarted when she touched it, though less so in the apartment's air-conditioned cool. She ran a finger over the bumpy red scab, and the other, smaller one on her elbow. In her white dressing-gown, the slim reflection in the glass doors resembled the inmate of some well-protected harem.

Her body was like a new hobby. It still felt so recent, this using it for pleasure. Feel good, look good. Yes, she thought, it's all good. I'm on holiday.

She padded to the bathroom with lazy strides and stood before the pedestal sluicing water into the basin, mixing the mud together for the mask she'd bought at the beautician's. She remembered when it was cucumber slices or raw steak for a fresh complexion, neither of which had ever appealed. The treatment was called "Dead Sea Miracle". A miracle indeed. She felt like a time traveller returning to a well-remembered place where on arrival everything was quite different, and all that

could account for the difference was the change in the traveller's perceptions. What was memory then, she wondered. A loop in our heads, an endless fictional loop trying to make sense of what happens? Based on fact but unverifiable, the work of emotions as much as anything, and wishes. She wondered what part she had in tinting her memories with what she wanted them to be. And did it matter? Stories were comforting and memory was always a story, even if it got it wrong now and then, fudging how well it told the truth. And then, later, disease ravaged it horribly. She had several acquaintances who were terrorised by Alzheimer's. That was on top of the forgetfulness that visited nearly everyone anyway. There wasn't enough space for every thought and impression in our long, sense-bombarded lives.

The hairs on her arms were standing erect now, the pores goose-bumped. She noticed they did that for no apparent reason sometimes. She remembered the consultant saying it didn't matter, many things that evolution built we no longer required. 'Our ascent from dim, vulnerable apes to this hardier species is amazing,' he had said, tugging his chin as if working his mouth open and closed. 'We've proliferated in billions and

with almost no natural enemies. Most of our survival systems are redundant.’ He liked to call himself “the gene genie”, the bumptious dickhead.

Serena burst out laughing into the mirror. It was a word she’d never used before in her life. What a strange term. Dickhead. Was the head supposed to be shaped like a dick? A penis. She repeated it aloud slowly in the echoey room, pe-nis, and then again. It was a nice word, she thought, soft, much softer, paradoxically, than the one for her sex. Or was it that you were supposed to think with one, which she knew meant to have the desire for sex above anything else? That was a feeling she did not wish to speculate upon, but she couldn’t see what was so wrong with it. It was honest, at least.

She was becoming confused. The clay now covered her face and neck and was drying tightly. She studied her grey-brown reflection, the pores wide and mottled, her eyes small pink circles. Her features were flat and hidden. It was a strange relief not to recognise herself. Being visible was exhausting; she wished she had a mask she could wear outside sometimes. She pictured herself in a head-covering like the ones some of the Muslim women in town wore, looking out through the slit

knowing no-one could see her. Was it stuffy inside? She pictured everyone else wearing one too, and found that frustrating.

In the mirror she looked like an old woman now from the desert, from North Africa perhaps, or further east. The mud was cracked in fine wrinkles, dark and parched, and her hair lay caked and wispy over the top. How easy it was to be someone else, she thought. We only ever looked out. And everyone else only looked out too.

But it was oddly calming being imprisoned in the mud. The radio was playing bebop now, pulsing and insistent, harsh horns that weaved their lines through the rhythm with messages of struggle and rapture. It was less restrained than the blues, less articulate even, to Serena's ear. She heard rage and fury, immediate raw energy loosing off bolts of virtuosic playing. She liked its forceful pace. She understood wanting to let go of such rage.

For years when she was a child she had a maid at home, Wendy Bowe, a jovial, matronly Trinidadian, who seemed to the young Serena the only happy black person in the world, certainly compared to the timid mislaid souls she sometimes

saw from the back of her father's car, huddled in thick coats, traipsing the alien cold pavements. Wendy didn't talk much about her life before, other than to sigh when the subject came up and once to tell Serena how she had indeed arrived on a ship full of black people from her island journeying to England for a better life.

‘This is a good life, yes, little one,’ she would tell Serena, as she bustled in and out of the rooms like a large ballerina, her laugh rumbling in her wake. She brewed strong coffee and sat in the kitchen while Serena asked questions, all sorts of questions, many of which Wendy said she couldn't remember the answer to and so would make up the answers. Serena could always tell straightaway when she was inventing answers but they were her favourite ones to hear because she knew they were specially made up for her and no-one else in the world would know them. She wished she was back there right now, sitting in the blue and white tiled room, safe beside Wendy's soft bulk. She wanted a torrent of questions to pour out of her, to swamp the floor and rise and rise in the room until she and Wendy were floating up near to the ceiling, and Wendy would

be smiling at her and talking non-stop, answering the questions in a matching torrent of love and stories and understanding.

She suddenly felt like crying. She missed that big grown-up woman and their simple time together. In all that made-up nonsense there lay more truthfulness than in the biggest encyclopaedia. She opened her mouth wide, splitting the mud in rough cracks along her cheeks.

She wanted to do something reckless. She looked at her nail polish, and the remover and buffer lined up on the counter in their lurid, smug bottles. She knew people sniffed them. Maybe she could try one. But which were effective? It wouldn't be all of them. She didn't know.

Her eyebrows raised in a cold frown. She wasn't going to do anything. She was a square really. Amid the hedonism of her new environment she was a tourist. She wrinkled her nose. What use being so hard? It was cautious, wise even. Sniffing solvents was daft.

But the moment wouldn't let her off so easily. Something lay coiled around, knotted inside her. Something she had hoped she wouldn't have to admit to herself, though she knew exactly what it was. And she also hoped she wouldn't have to admit

that however near to being free she was, or however giddy and tempted by the baubles of pleasure-seeking, it all rubbed against the grain of who she was and left her unmet and unsatisfied.

She heard the rage in the music full of nuances now, but at the centre there was still frustration that chimed with her own. She was unhappily locked into one life, one set of circumstances, connected so tightly to another, to others. It was never her own life. She was aware, it felt for the first time, of her complicity. She had been carried away, silently, cravenly even. And now she was overseas, not knowing what she was going to do next or whether the life that awaited her in London was the one she wanted after all.

She thought about the man she had left behind. Or was trying to leave behind, with his phone calls and interruptions and constant requests for more communication. How cynical and controlling he had become. Everything he did, he did for her, he said, for her and for him and for their life together.

But from the vantage of another continent and precious time alone she saw what a strangling attachment that was, and how its cost soared far beyond whatever contentment or ambition

she had hoped to gain. Finding Jeff attractive made her feel a lot better about leaving but confused and surprised her too. It was the last thing she had expected, and she didn't know if she could go back now at all. She didn't want any part of it. She was sick of everything, sick of the deceit, of the fear, of the power even. For the first time since she could remember she felt free to be who she was, who she had been before, lively and fresh-faced and kind-hearted, before any of this grief or guilt or threat of damnation.

She heard her mother's words, hoping to protect Serena from a cursed future but become themselves imprecations, lit signs to follow. Men whose eyebrows meet in the middle. Men whose names sound like violence. Men who grow obsessed but not with you. She had found a man with all three. And yet, and yet. Within her, power to begin again. It could be easy to forget him. Her buried faith gleamed faintly from deep inside. Jesus would never abandon her even if she had abandoned him. And Jeff was a better man. Jesus and Jeff.

Her thoughts tumbled crude and unformed amassing below her consciousness like sewage, dirt she couldn't refine or claim again for consideration lest sorrow was all they brought. She'd

half expected when she looked in the mirror to see a pinched hag staring back at her, the real face of her soul, like Dorian Gray's picture.

She was being melodramatic. She had to calm down. Her belly made a spasm, and then another. She hurried to the bathroom and leaned over the toilet bowl, retching out hot watery bile.

She mopped at her lips and rinsed her mouth from the cold tap, then took a beta-blocker tablet from the small bottle in her wash bag. It would help her to stay relaxed. Next to it in the bag sat the silver foil of caplets she had used in Jeff's ice-cream.

She walked back to the living room and perched on the sofa as if it was a chaise longue, leaning on one cushioned arm and letting her ankles hang over the other. The breeze from the open windows smelled of flowers and ocean. She was tired.

After the game they had mingled at the bar. Everybody seemed to know each other. The gecko girl had kept out of her way, but her boyfriend was pleasant, smiling readily when Serena passed. Jeff showed off different ways of doing high fives. 'One for friends, one for foes, one for business, one because you can't do it with your toes.' They looked the same

to Serena. The bar served rum cocktails and beers. Speakers tacked into the corners alternated rock tunes and spa beats. The bongo players had moved inside and were playing along quietly, almost to themselves.

She liked seeing Jeff at ease in the crowd. He was friendly and unselfconscious, if still a little pre-occupied with her scuffle. His eyes flicked about the room keeping tabs on the others.

‘I knew it was going to be alright,’ she said.

This amused Jeff. ‘Your enthusiasm surprised her.’

Serena laughed. ‘New doesn’t mean bad.’

‘I thought you did good.’

They went outside to the terrace of wood and cured palm leaves and leaned over the rail, looking out at the pale dunes and waves. The sky was brilliant with yellow and white stars.

‘Like tiny holes.’ Jeff edged closer. ‘Maybe someone’s peeping through at us.’

‘All they’ll see is pink and brown blobs milling about. In the dark.’

Their limbs crept closer. She remembered the moon behind them and the moths sitting on the deck lamp silhouetted in

perfect triangular symmetry. His kissing had been electric, his lips full and soft and thrilling, and her own kisses emanated from the middle of her, radiating in all directions before slipping out through her mouth.

She yielded gladly even as inside she so wanted to stop.

For all his earthy banter he was an innocent. He may know the seven steps to light, or whatever it was he liked to talk about sometimes, but he knew little of the darkness there. Serena had known other men who let their goodness shine in public – so easy to be on best behaviour when others are watching. But in their quiet moments, unguarded, they were different creatures entirely. For her, there was rarely a battle set so clearly. Good and evil weren't ranged opposite one another; they were mixed together, amalgamated into one reality.

Her conscience acted as an efficient chopper. Mistakes were okay. She trusted she was on the right side, on God's side, as her schooling had given her to believe. The endless mornings in chapel, afternoons reading, teachers everywhere pressing their kindly instruction and guidance. She had absorbed their musty catechism without much reflection.

Yet she did preserve the right to think for herself. The school's panelled corridors and numerous rooms and annexes had offered ideal nooks to secret herself away, if only for a few moments at a time, often with a book balanced open so no-one might disturb her, and where she was free to resist the extreme orderliness all around her. She hated how the system imposed itself, leaching away her privacy. Uniform just so, meals at the correct time, work, sport, play, letters, all governed by a calendar so mesh-tight and laden with command it made her ill.

Serena watered a private, different place with her dreams, and protected it with her inmost might, where her small resilient hopes and memories took shelter. Her grandmother's safe knee, the peace brought by learning, kindnesses she witnessed in people and marvelled at – these fascinated her more than any notion of serving Christ our Lord.

She saw this quality in Jeff. So what could she do later if things got out of hand? What could she say? Oh, like Mersault, it was the sun, the heat, the relentless heat, and the urgent salty sea.

The truth, she realised, was she didn't want to think about any of it. She'd spent half her life worrying on the future. She

wanted to give in to this freedom and to this undemanding joy, the other voice with its clear reasoning: seize the moment, accept its rightness. How strange love is, that it can drop like rain when least expected, when the sky seems clear. She remembered her Keats. Beauty and truth were the same. That was all she needed to know, and to follow, and feel tracing silkily over her skin. Well, why not enjoy what she really wanted to do? Jeff made her feel beautiful, and want to be beautiful. She wished his arms were wrapped around her.

She looked down at her flat belly. Her tan was browning to a light toast colour. Small horizontal lines formed as she bent forward and let her dressing gown fall open. She marvelled at the close cropping and flat rectangle of close-clipped hair. The surrounding skin was still white by comparison to her belly and thighs. It made it look vulnerable and special.

She walked to the bathroom and washed off the mud from her face, splashing on warm water as the mixture smeared and ran, coaxing it from her hair, and then rinsing her skin so it was clear and glowing.

It was another whole day almost until she could see him. The hours dragged as if chained. Then, again, she felt a wave of

lightness. What did it matter how long? Patience may not be a virtue any more but it was easier to practise. It felt easy being with him, easy and right, surely it was meant to be, in some twisted, perfect way. She wanted him there now, she wanted to feel his body, its every indent, to have his chest push against hers, and his swimmer's torso tightening next to her.

Lavender and bergamot burned in her nostrils from the oils she had lit in the burner. She held down the air in a still gasp. She hadn't meant to find him so charming. A friend had once told her that in affairs of love, smell was all. Invisible smells, unsmellable smells. They were the true source of attraction. But she couldn't see how something so moving could be solely chemical.

She turned over onto her front and the warmth of the bed melted into her cooled skin. She was drifting into a forgotten space where she was skin and flesh and nerves only, connected and unconnected to everything else. Her mind opened wide, melting, and then froze. No simple peace awaited her. Below, beside the void, despair made her turn into the pillow and bury her face. As if ironed of its daily knots, her stomach creased

now with a deeper involuntary spasm of gloom that curled her into a foetal ball.

7 At Jeff's

‘ENOUGH, I’M COMING! BE QUIET!’ The bell rang out along the corridor. Jeff slid down the banister, fifteen straight steps, and pulled the door open.

His three closest friends were standing in a greeting tableau half trick-or-treat, half nativity scene. Jermaine had a slab of beer to his chest which he shifted up onto his shoulder.

‘Which way, boss?’

Eve nudged him. ‘He doesn’t remember us.’

‘Give me a minute,’ Jeff said.

They barged past and bustled up the stairs to his room at the top of the house. It was only on the second floor but the building sat high up on Pilot Hill and the view was impressive. A lush tangle of tropical trees and bushes sloped down on the near side binding together the back yards and terracotta roofs; on the other side, a mile off towards the ocean, Dale Mall lay

squat and inviting, its tall mirrored sides glinting and shimmering from the lights downtown.

Jeff's room was upheaval. There was order in one corner, albeit provisional – boxes lined up, loosely folded clothes – but in the other it was chaos as if mid-cycle in a big washing machine with a throng of chattels and rubbish clumped together in piles. The room was large. Windows looked out on three sides. An assortment of frayed furniture was arranged in a clearing in the middle where the friends all sat down and busied themselves building joints and prepping the bong.

‘Vodka,’ Jermaine poured from a pint flask into the reservoir, ‘God’s all-purpose liquid. Cars run on it in Russia. And Sputniks, da!’ He ran out of Russian words. ‘Cops stopped me once – this is foolish, yes, I’m not advising it by a long call – after I’d downed a glass or two on my way out the house. It didn’t register on the breathalyser at all. Zero! I told them I’d had an emotional day to stop them wondering why they’d pulled me in the first place. Did they know? I couldn’t tell you. I felt fine.’ He took a swig and then passed the bottle. ‘No cough tomorrow, you’ll be able to sing in the morning because of me.’

Jeff tried to get the clock out of his head. For the past five days he had been suffering a countdown fever. Everything around him was more and more unreal. He would forget what he was doing or where he was supposed to be or if there was someone he had arranged to meet. It was more than impatience; he felt like he had already left this place and his journey was begun. It was bad for business. Despite a reputation to the contrary good dealers were reliable. ‘Be prompt and have good gear,’ Jay Lyle, the “uncle” who had first shown him how to make a buck from it, intoned every time they met.

Jeff knew he couldn’t get everything done in time before leaving. Some red-print bill would arrive he hadn’t paid or there’d be a friend he’d miss for a last catch-up. These were things that usually didn’t faze him. He was only away a short while; he had a return ticket to that effect – back inside of four weeks, he reckoned. But everyone told him how Europe was a gateway to adventure, that he’d be a fool not to stay on if he wanted to. The element of unknown nagged at him and threatened the precious motley securities on which his sense of safety in the world rested.

Wick had spent a whole summer in Europe two years before and was revelling in the role of personal travel consultant with an unending source of tips. Jeff didn't let this annoy him too much. He stopped listening after a while. He knew Wick wanted to be a part of his trip, and he would miss him.

Among his other friends only Jermaine had travelled to any degree – with his family spread over the Caribbean he visited often, sometimes venturing into Central and northern South America too: Mexico, Venezuela, Costa Rica. But he always talked about making a home in Jamaica, where his father lived. ‘The life is so plum there,’ he’d declare passionately, ‘you want to spend every day and wish it was the same day over and over. Y’know, like Groundhog Day in reverse. Big Bird Day or something. I’d grow my herb and pick up my guitar and just be happy, maybe have a little stall in the market.’ Jeff would nod along, agreeing it was a good dream, though he didn’t really see why it couldn’t be done in their own neighbourhood. Why go so far away to be happy? It made Jeff wistful when he looked at his own dreams that he couldn’t find any he was sure he wanted to come true.

Serena identified his fear with feminine precision. She laughed when he quietly admitted to feeling, as he put it, like a flower – ‘I bloom when the sun comes up, I wilt when it goes down’ – as if he had no say in his vitality.

‘Don’t give yourself such a hard time. Youth is precious. You don’t have to commit to anything, do you? We are the lucky ones.’

‘Yeah, I know – don’t worry, be happy.’

‘Lots of people don’t decide what to do until they’re older.’ She stubbed out his joint. ‘I’m no expert, but in my opinion a clear head is worth a camel full of wisdom.’

‘A camel? Yes, thanks. Are there many camels over there? Miss UK and Ireland and Wales. And those little Shetland Pony Islands.’

‘Isles. The Shetland Isles. Loads of camels, yes.’

The doorbell was ringing again, ceaselessly until he raced down and opened it to Tyree and Ellis, his two longest-standing business friends. Tyree was from Jamaica, so he said, though Jeff always thought he looked suspiciously fair-skinned and Hispanic. ‘Mexican papa.’ That’s how the mixed-race locals described the look. Ellis was from a commune too, much more

way out than Jeff's, an alienist sect based in Oregon that preached the Way of the New Homeworld, which was a distant planet the faithful would be delivered to at the time of the Final Calamity, as they called it. The way Ellis told it, it was one long episode of Star Trek except that they were regularly monitored by police on suspicion of interfering with their young ones, which was the one activity every self-respecting community on the West Coast carefully avoided.

As they started on the stairs, Tyree gestured at Ellis to go in front and let him walk up a way, then he steered Jeff back down the hall. He leaned in to Jeff's ear. 'Everything is smooth, man, it's fixed up. Serious. He's happy and he's gonna welcome you.'

Tyree was already something of a jack of bootleg trade and was eager to develop his entrepreneurial calling over the Atlantic. He had a cousin in London, Adé, who ran a group of chancers spiritedly inveigling their way into the resident drug supply. The prospect of overseas action excited Tyree; if he couldn't go himself he was pleased to send Jeff as his ambassador.

‘He’s cool with you now and everything, see. Though I’d say, if I was you, I’d keep on his good side. It’s Yardie culture over there, man. Not much pink skin.’ He laughed then put a diplomatic hand on Jeff’s shoulder. ‘You’ll be fine. You’re cool by nature, man. Don’t worry. He’s just a busy bee. He maybe wants some helper bees, see. There is a lot, a lot, of honey to be made. He has your flight number. He’ll find you.’

Jeff had been mulling over the matter of meeting Tyree’s cousin since the subject came up a few days earlier; there was something odd about the way Tyree had been so enthusiastic, insistent even, and now a bigger angle was apparent to explain it.

‘I’m not doing Restricteds.’

‘Yeah, it’s okay, don’t worry. He’s got a two-tier thing. Low-level for grass and shit, bit of whiz, whatever, but higher up it’s another game, and there’s different players. That’s what he told me. Anyway, let’s face it, you’re a new boy, Dealer Lite. You’ll probably be kept around for company. They’re gonna think you’re all street, being from over here.’ He smiled. ‘Don’t come back with gold teeth.’

Jeff was still cautious. ‘I’m not into any heavy action.’

‘I know, my bro, I hear you. Don’t like it, don’t do it. If I had a buck for all the things I don’t do... But serious, there is no pressure. Don’t like it, don’t do it. Easy.’

‘It’s a holiday job, that’s how I see it, so I hope you’re right. I’m doing it for a favour. Then you can take over. I’ve got a real job lined up for when I come back anyway, painting boats.’

‘Serious?’

‘I’m trying out at Archer’s Yard, prepping hulls for winter,’ Jeff said.

They hugged like they always did when concluding trade talk but with extra feeling on both sides.

‘I could be jealous, you know,’ Tyree said, solemn now. ‘I had a sister...have a sister. We were separated when we were three. Her father took her to Canada, of all places, and we haven’t seen each other since. We write and shit, there’s a lot of hope between the lines but it just lays there, you know, we’ll probably never get it together. I’ve told you this all before, right?’

Jeff nodded, then tilted his head back against the wall. ‘All I can say is, you never know, man. Where did this come from for me? Out of the bluest sky. You talking about that right now,

it's tinder, isn't it, your story becomes part of my story. That's how it goes. Am I not one wise mother-dude?'

Tyree was smiling. 'We're sharing, right?'

'Yeah.'

'Yes, man. Well, now share me a beer.'

They took the stairs slowly towards the hubbub of familiar voices reaching down from Jeff's room.

The six soon settled in a loose circle, smoking, chatting, getting up to change the music or fetch from the kitchen, and now and then throwing Jeff a question that made the others fall quiet. Jeff basked in the attention of being the soon departed. Going to London, meeting a new brother and other family members – he guessed there'd be more than the uncle and brother he'd learned about so far – these were exciting prospects, and he was trying to hold himself together as everything moved so quickly.

The group psychology accepted that his mission was generally a good thing. A mail from his brother a week earlier inviting him to stay at his house tipped the whole endeavour into a warmer zone and added the prospect for Jeff of a taste of family life, which he always felt he had missed out.

‘You worried there’s too much to catch up on?’ Ellis asked. ‘It might end up being more about what you do together while you’re there. I bet he’s just as freaked out.’

‘I’m not freaked out.’

‘Okay, he’s probably wondering, then, same as you. And getting excited to show you around. You know what I mean.’

‘What do you mean?’ Tyree said, to tease him.

‘Strikes me,’ Wick said, ‘there’s a thin line between surprise and shock or, you know, between a good surprise and a bad surprise, and a bad surprise and a shock. Can you have a good shock?’

‘You on Wall Street would be a shock,’ Tyree said. ‘Of the good variety, if it makes you happy.’

‘I could see that.’ Jermaine slapped Tyree’s hand, ‘he was always going that way.’

‘It wouldn’t be a shock if you knew about it before,’ Wick said.

‘Everything’s about change,’ Jeff said, ‘and how we handle it. I read about lottery winners once. Every year there’s a few that kill themselves. Win three million bucks and can’t cope. And there’s a lot more that win who get depressed. Doesn’t matter

how much for, it's not a million for the blues, ten for an overdose. But weirdly, after about a year, the depressed ones bounce back. Their bad feelings wear off. They feel the same as they did before they won. Same for people paralysed in an accident. A superbad shock but then after a year that person is the same person. Cup full, cup empty, whatever. Our essential spirit is unaffected in the long term – that's the message.'

Wick shook his head. 'That only works if you know how you're gonna be in the future, which you don't. Surprise is surprise, it's the same amount.'

'Maybe,' Tyree said.

'Maybe.' Ellis agreed.

Eve and Jermaine copied him. 'Maybe.'

The silliness warmed Jeff.

'It is a surprise, like my doc said, but a good one. A good one and a big one.'

'Chance events are a big deal,' Tyree said, 'but I have to say it's weird. The shock, the stress, all that. I thought we were the adaptable species, like that's our main thing, we should handle it, easy. I'm not talking about your situation here, bro.' He looked at Jeff. 'You know, talking general.'

‘Maybe people are bored,’ Five drawled. He lay on the floor with his head against a chair leg. ‘We want more order, more shapeliness, don’t we. Or we need more purpose, plain and simple.’

‘Put the thoughts together, man,’ Tyree said.

‘I get it and I don’t get it,’ Jeff spread his hands out. He didn’t want to talk about it any more. The theme was a Tyagarah perennial. The universe was infinitely geared but that didn’t mean it worked out everything that happens. There were forces that just made things fit, or seem to. Fate was malleable and prone to change. The topic was dramatised at community suppers: the clash of fate and will, by candlelight before a restless audience who chatted all the way through over their plates of rice and salad.

‘Okay, enough on that, then,’ Wick said. ‘But riddle me this. Does a person become gay or are they born gay?’

‘Either or both,’ Jermaine said, ‘and who cares!’

Jeff held up his hand. ‘Are you asking, young Wick – who I might as well tell you I thought was gay the whole first year I knew you – does that mean I might be gay as well as my brother?’

‘Not necessarily,’ Wick said, ‘he is English.’

‘He didn’t spell it out.’ Jeff picked up an envelope of photos from the floor and passed them round. ‘No clues there, really. It’s just the way he wrote “stay with us”. It was like he didn’t need to say it and didn’t need not to. Anyway, I’ve got a girlfriend.’

‘That happens all the time,’ Wick said. ‘It’s alright, you know, if you want to talk about it.’

‘Is Serena coming?’ Eve said. The shyest present, she brightened at the prospect of more female company.

Just then, the lights in the room flickered and went out. There was a dull thud that seemed to come from nowhere and where there had been a rich glow from the lamps in the room – each fondly collected by Jeff from the flea market – it was suddenly black.

Jeff, Tyree and Jermaine jumped up and went to look out of the windows.

‘Black as your mama.’

‘Same here.’ Jeff could make out the outline of the hill by the shine from the half moon and a dim spiral of car headlights.

Jermaine grunted. ‘State didn’t pay its bill again.’

‘The gas is on.’ Eve had gone over to the kitchenette.

‘Both off at once would be evil.’ Wick gave a stage-horror laugh.

‘I’ve got candles. We’ll reconvene in a New York minute.’ Jeff felt his way to the drawers and rummaged until he found some.

Jermaine was standing by the door blowing smoke rings. ‘Anyway, now you’re all black. Happy?’

‘Shhh,’ Eve said, ‘listen.’

They strained to hear the night-time sounds reaching in through the windows. Knowing it was dark everywhere made each note crisper and louder.

Jeff’s phone lit up on the rug and purred.

It was Serena. She had taken a cab to the foot of the hill, intent, she said, on walking up the rest of the way and enjoying the night air, but as soon as the cab sped off the lights had gone out.

‘I’m following the road. It’s actually not too bad, my eyes are adjusted already.’

‘Take you forty minutes.’

‘Less. I feel great. My heart’s going like a racer. I’ll be quick.’

She rang off.

She breathed in deeply, holding away the smells in her memory for another day. It didn't matter how long it took to get up to the house. They were in the space race anyway, she knew it, inhaling, holding it down, feeling free. She had tried some the weekend before for the first time, spluttering after every toke. She laughed at whatever anybody said and insisted on making chocolate pancakes. 'A perfect score,' Jeff said, 'you've the makings of a quality beach babe.'

The mantra of trying everything once had always seemed dangerous to her, and pointless. The world was clearly full of things not worth trying. She enjoyed the grass but didn't like having a fuzzy head the next day or finding herself staring through the window unwilling to move her eyes. Too much energy, not enough judgement, was how she viewed the people smoking it. They had a lot of fun, sure, and that was something she wanted too. Fun seemed an elixir, addictive in a positive way. But for all her reasoning, she was met by checks and pauses. Her mother's voice drifted in the background. 'Always take the straight and narrow', she used to say, or 'It's better to

be safe than sorry'. Or any of a dozen other frigid imperatives nearly every time she opened her mouth. The phrases fused together with a single Hydra-headed meaning: Be moderate, be careful, live within your means... On and on, a litany of rules to fend off turpitude.

Well, California didn't seem so bad, Serena thought. Was it wrong to be carefree? Did it have to mean going too far or compromising your values? She looked up at the sky. It didn't matter. The stars went on for ever. And if you stood on the farthest star and looked out in the same direction it too would show a sky of stars going on forever, to the farthest rim of the universe. She stopped. Across the road, a shadow moved. She turned to see a shape hurrying along, almost running, and then dart down an alleyway. She had noticed the narrow paths between the houses before, last time she visited. Her stride picked up. She tried to read house numbers but they were still vague. Her nerves tingled. She felt like a wild animal herself abroad in the dark, sniffing and sensing her way, fear watching over her. She walked into the middle of the road and continued up the hill briskly, trusting to her ears for cars approaching. From across the valley the highway rumbled, interspersed with

frogs chorusing from the waterways that still flowed with the last of the rains. And everywhere a rising cacophony of dog song began to fill the neighbourhood, hundreds of hounds barking at one another in the darkness.

Up at the house enthusiastic exit plans were in motion. Jermaine marshalled the others with hippy military directions while Wick searched the carpet for hash grains he had scattered when he knocked against the coffee table.

‘Eve – papers, lighters, candy.’ Eve gave a floppy salute. ‘Ellis – I dunno man, towels, a torch. It’s very dark, there’ll be no light pollution whatsoever.’

Wick straightened up. ‘Light. Not light pollution.’

‘No, man, light spoils the view. It’s light that pollutes the dark. There’s a beautiful sky out there.’

‘It illuminates the dark, with all that that means.’

‘Let there be good light, then, and bad light.’

‘And bad light pollutes?’

‘It’s only bad because you, Wick, don’t need it. But maybe someone else does.’

‘One fly’s ceiling is another fly’s floor.’

‘Wicka licka, please, a little less conversation, before you ruin my mind for good.’

‘Before I pollute your mind, you mean, or before I illuminate it.’

Jeff came running up the stairs.

‘It’s cool. He lent me the jeep, says he doesn’t need it until morning. And offered to give us a ride to the airport tomorrow, which is marvellous.’ The last word he enunciated straight from a cinema squadron leader pointing at a wall chart.

‘Man, you are going to love all that Brit shit, you’re a natural.’ Jermaine said. ‘And lucky at that. Serena by name, fiery by temperament I bet, if you don’t do the right thing and be nice.’

‘That’s the same for anyone.’ Eve checked the boys’ nonsense. ‘Any woman, any man.’

‘Well, Aries is classic fire,’ Ellis said, and then laughed. ‘But there’s good fire and bad fire, I guess. You’re Aquarius sun, right? Calming air, possibly, puts the basics in place: harmony, friendship, shared endeavour.’

‘Seriously,’ Wick said, ‘can we light a fire on the beach?’

‘Come on.’ Jeff herded them downstairs. ‘The sun’ll be up by the time you figure it out.’ He waved his torch beam around the doorway. ‘Let’s go.’

Serena saw them milling about the open-top jeep, organising themselves in the gloom.

‘Don’t leave without me,’ she called out.

‘Hey.’ Jeff started towards her.

They stopped together in front of a tall fan palm that blotted out the moon.

‘You smell nice,’ he said.

She smiled and breathed in deeply to show she was filling up on the sweet air too.

Jeff suddenly felt awkward. His desire lay within him peering out and roused, sensing her near. At times lately that was all he thought about.

‘Strong silent type.’ Serena took his arm. ‘It’s nice to see you. All set for tomorrow?’

‘Are you?’

‘I’m going anyway, it’s easy for me, wouldn’t you say?’

‘Ready and not ready is the real answer,’ Jeff said. ‘How can I be ready? But I feel pretty good. I’m glad you’ll be there too. It’s nice to share it with someone.’

‘You’re lucky.’

‘That’s what Wick says.’

‘Are you scared?’

‘Very.’ He shrugged. ‘Some.’

Serena laughed. ‘Changes, huh?’

They strolled to the car. Around them, the thick trees were silhouetted against the Milky Way. The jacaranda blossom was out. And there was frangipani too, its rich musk gathered under the low-slung branches. Below on the paving, the little yellow and white flowers lay scattered in hundreds.

Jeff began whistling the chorus of Rule Britannia. ‘Don’t ask,’ he said, ‘it’s a colonies thing.’

‘I’d join in but I can’t whistle.’

‘I’ll show you.’

‘Well maybe *won’t* then, it seems so undignified. For a lady, I mean.’

Ahead, the jeep started up. Wick was at the wheel. The others filed in along the back seat. The headlights flicked on,

sweeping a bright arc into the bushes opposite and catching a pair of eyes for a split second before they moved off.

‘Cat.’ Jeff put his arm around her shoulder.

They sat up front, Jeff in the middle and Serena by the window with her arm on the metal, the wind ruffling in her hair. It was warm out. The radio was up loud but muffled by body parts jammed in front of the speakers.

‘Be in the moment, right?’ Serena said into Jeff’s ear.

‘Where else is there?’

The jeep weaved along the streets on the far side of Pilot Hill, descending to the ocean. The eastern side was partly aglow. Some of the grid was restored. Windows flickered with lamps and candlelight. It was like driving through a pixie grotto. Serena and Jeff nestled against each other, their shoulders and arms alert with the job of being primary sensor as if they were kissing with their bodies, holding on where they could each time Wick abruptly slowed down, which was every time he thought he was at a crossroad.

They parked in the lot and filed in a close line along the sandy, wooden-runged walkway. A pair of fires blazed on the beach a hundred yards or so up towards the bluff.

‘We’re all one mind,’ Ellis said, as if to shake the disappointment they were not to enjoy the wilderness alone. It was a steady bet the cops were too busy to turn up and douse them.

‘We’re social animals,’ Wick said, ‘don’t fight it. If statesmen can read *l’Etranger*, then so can you.’

Ellis gave up. ‘Thanks. What are you saying?’

‘I think he means...’ Serena started in helpfully, but stopped.

‘He means give him a beer, from a six pack, then pass the other beers around.’ Jermaine resumed his useful bossiness.

‘We’ll catch up with you.’ Jeff took Serena’s arm and pulled her towards the water. ‘Come on, let’s see if the phosphor’s up. It’s beautiful.’

They walked along the surf line, the swell frothily soft and warm after the day’s heat.

‘I’ve had a wonderful time.’ Serena squeezed Jeff’s fingers. ‘Thank you. I didn’t expect to. I mean, you know when you’re prepared for one thing and then something else happens? In a good way. But still surprising. Or rather... well, yes, just surprising, I suppose. What I’m trying to say is, I’m glad things

turned out like they have. 'That's all really. It's not heavy, as they say around here, not at all.'

She glanced back at the city where a long moon shadow cast the hill in a sheet of dense blackness.

'I know this is an important moment for you. People often appear to help at those times, don't they?'

Jeff nodded. They stood on a hunk of driftwood facing the ocean.

'It could be,' he said, deciding to share a pet notion, 'it could be that there's like a giant orrery somewhere. You know, one of those old clockwork models that they used to make of the solar system, with all the planets and moons rotating around the sun. What if there was a gigantic one that worked for all the people who are alive, with billions of interconnected orbits, one for each of us, passing, crossing, everything?'

Serena hummed appreciatively. 'I like it.'

Jeff pushed his hands in his pockets. 'Thanks anyway, too.'

They fell silent and stood watching the swell, letting the quietness lengthen and expand inside of them and out, skimming over the waves towards Hawaii and Tokyo and

China and up into the limitless night skies. A peace seeped in, ushering them.

‘Come on,’ Jeff said softly, keeping the spell in place. He took her hand and started back to where they could see a new, third fire on the shore.

Part II

8 London Arrivals

JEFF WHIRRED HIS HOLDALL ALONG THE TRAVELATOR, eager to get to the baggage hall. He was worried he'd be late for Tyree's cousin, Adé, whom he had arranged to meet outside Arrivals. Nearly all the other passengers were standing to one side so it was easy to funnel along. Serena kept up gamely behind. She fancied the exercise, she said, after being cooped up in the plane for so long. Muzak pinged from speakers all along the route. Jeff snatched views where he could, outside the windows they passed, down the corridors snaking off to the left and right that housed other travelators leading to more aircraft gates and lounges.

Despite their rushing they soon found themselves jammed in a queue before passport control. Each person was made to pass into a semi-enclosed booth besides the immigration officer and then look squarely into an iris camera. Serena went through

first; she had entered a different, faster-moving channel for Euro citizens. Jeff gathered up his holdall and two duty free carriers and the gifts he had bought at the last minute for Jonathan and Mahesh at the airport mall, and found himself in a suddenly intimate and hushed mini-room handing his passport to the darkest-skinned Indian man he had ever seen. Abi Deep Dansingani, his nametag read.

‘Great name,’ Jeff said, then felt embarrassed, not sure if he was being rude. The man said nothing but allowed a flicker of a smile to absolve Jeff of any wrongdoing. ‘Sorry,’ Jeff said, ‘long flight.’

‘Not a problem.’ The man recited instructions for Jeff to face the camera and then punched keys on his console.

Jeff opened his eyes wide into the tiny glinting lens.

‘Says here your name is Raymond Rass,’ the officer said. He typed a few keys. ‘Raymond Willard Rass. Know him?’ Then he laughed, his eyes creased and twinkling, which Jeff thought at odds with the dour clinical surroundings. He didn’t know what to say, or if it was a problem or an obstacle to entry. It was his uncle’s name.

‘Happens sometimes,’ the officer said before Jeff could explain. ‘Your uncle, yes? It says so here, don’t worry about it.’ He asked some questions about Jeff’s visit and then signalled him to walk through. ‘I can look deeper into your eyes than that machine ever will.’ He tapped his name badge and laughed again, clearly relishing a fresh opportunity for a joke. ‘Enjoy your stay.’

Jeff picked up his bags and shuffled towards Serena who had reserved a spot by the carousel.

He wondered what they did with people who were refused entry, and if it ever got ugly in those little booths. Did they have a gun tucked under the desk, or a Taser? He’d seen a few dogs lolling about, sniffing bags, but they were mostly for bombs, he guessed, and drugs. The whole place seemed at once more lax about security than back home and yet somehow more rigorous too. He remembered the Brits had been dealing with terrorism for a few hundred years in one form or another. Perhaps it lent a world-weary swagger to their methods. The machine-gun toting police milling sternly about, on the other hand, looked the most formidable uniformed men he’d ever

seen, and made him want to get out of the building as fast as possible.

He stood by the carousel as it started up spewing bags through the rubber doors. They had checked in early at LA. Probably that meant their cases would come out last. He sat on a bench a few yards behind – Serena waved him away, she wanted to wait, she said.

He had never travelled outside of the US before. His only excursions out of state had been trips to seminars in Oregon with his elders group, and one time when he had sneaked off to New Orleans on a bus in a teenage slurry of anger and confusion over nothing in particular, only to be met at the other end after half a day; he had left his diary page open, clearly inviting someone to find him.

On the plane he offered Serena the window seat, but she let him sit there instead. He spent the journey with his nose pressed against the triplex glass. It was a wonder of the world. So much space cramming into his vision. He ordered gin and tonic. Usually he avoided spirits but he'd overheard two old ladies in the departure lounge declare it the only cocktail to drink in the air. Serena had one too, and then sat very upright

doing puzzles from a book and occasionally putting her hand under his blanket.

From the minute Serena had suggested they could go to London together – which was easy enough in one way since she already lived there – he had reserved a quiet cell in his thoughts in which he always addressed the same few simple questions. Visiting London focused his ideas about what he wanted for himself like nothing had been able to do since he had first left the hills for the coast three years before. It reframed many uncertainties he had accumulated about where he came from, where he belonged, where he might find his place in the world. He knew he was loading the topic with more than it could bear. Expectations, expectations, he chided himself. But he couldn't help it.

He wondered what exactly a normal family was, what they did, what they looked like. He wondered how many really did have symmetrical faces and one son and one daughter and a dog and a four-wheel drive like in so many adverts. No amount of asking around his friends provided a satisfactory answer. It seemed that this ideal was almost nowhere to be found and yet it was so pervasive. He wondered if the bitter slant of his view

was an overlap from the consensus at Tyagarah which didn't like to recognise much of what was seen as normal by the outside world. Normal was a dirty word, along with directive, formal, rulebook, protocol. Or so people liked to say. He knew it was mostly for appearance. Everybody needed rules. The family arrangements there had been fully sanctioned by local government bodies charged with monitoring what went on in their wards. And he had felt loved. Loved and supported and heard and nurtured. It was just that he also felt weird and unusual. So maybe that was exactly how normal was too.

He gazed at the luggage moving steadily past. Serena already had a trolley. As with many of the practical aspects of the journey, she appeared to know better than he what needed doing, and he was happy for her to show him. They loaded on the bags and manoeuvred the trolley together through the exit channels.

He had never seen so many different races in one place, it was like a mini United Nations with every type of skin and face shape and clothing – he couldn't even guess which continent some were from – and everywhere low, whispering, exotic voices. He felt humble being amid so many human tribes.

Serena loved the jet set environment, she said. It made her feel special, but in a particular way, for the miracle of it all. It amused her that so much effort went into the comfort of passengers. She had walked up and down the aisle for ages debating which film to see, but then had slept most of the night after dinner. Jeff was sure he'd seen her sneak a pill. When she awoke she was full of enthusiasm for everything around her. Jeff was glad of being distracted from his anxieties.

When he'd gone out with girls before he often felt gawky. But now, even though he looked up to Serena as graceful and wise, which was perhaps to do with her accent, he rarely felt he was about to say or do the wrong thing. His friend Eve once told him girls will happily put up with what boys say even if they don't like it much, at least for a while. Then one day, just one wrong word, one wrong word too many, and that'll be that. What she meant, she explained, was that a girl's heart is different to a boy's. Forgiving and forgiving for as long as it can, in the hope things will come right, if then a certain point is passed, if suddenly her bubble of feeling for him is punctured by the latest dumb phrases he cannot help but utter, her heart will spring shut, and can remain shut whatever pleading and

crying might issue from the boy as he tries to prise it open again. A guy often only realises he loves a girl the next day after she finishes with him, and by then it's too late. That had been their last conversation before saying goodbye at the beach.

He told her she was being severe.

'Yup, very.' She smiled. 'It's not always like that, I'm exaggerating. Girls love talking too. Talk it out, right? So there's plenty of chances to figure things out before it's too late. Plenty, plenty. Anyway, you'll be fine. She seems cool. Don't blow it.' She had laughed and clapped Jeff's arm. 'I'm kidding.'

Jeff didn't let Eve's advice scare him. She was encouraging him. She'd told him before many times he was a good catch. Anyway, Serena didn't strike him as one to let trouble brew. Sometimes she did go quiet, as if she had stumbled and fallen inside herself, but he always guessed that was her way of being private, of working out her thoughts.

He liked that she went out of her way to show him she cared about his meeting Jonathan. She was hungry for every detail and snippet of news as Jeff finalised arrangements for the trip, and made time to sniff out and talk about issues that might be worrying him. By anyone's measure he thought that was kind,

as kind as she'd been on the first day they met. He never felt she was being nosy. Besides, he didn't have many secrets.

The airport delivered them efficiently to the street and they loaded themselves and their luggage into Adé's shiny red car, which was drawn up in a bay with its lights flashing. The car was a Bonneville Supercharger, Adé informed them about eight times. He had shaken their hands very thoroughly and insisted on stowing their bags and packages himself so that nothing could move about while they drove.

'Come on, you must know it. Classic Yankee wheels. My mate runs a garage, all the classics, you can rent a different one every day. If you want, if you can.' He rubbed his fingers and thumb together.

'Before my time,' Jeff said.

'Yeah, right, you're what, ten?'

Jeff liked Adé. He was tall and confident and effusive, with foot-long dreads tied behind in a fat bunch. He brought to mind a Caribbean Artful Dodger, which was how Tyree had described him. So far Jeff felt safe enough. He was going along with it all to make a few hundred bucks, maybe see a side of

English life that was sure to be different from the other, family world he was entering.

He settled into the back seat, alert with the excitement of arrival and caffeine-boosted over-tiredness. Adé commented non-stop on the districts they were driving through, and banged the dashboard whenever he wanted to emphasise a point. By the time they had reached Central London, he had hit it half a dozen times.

‘Keep us awake if nothing else,’ Jeff whispered to Serena.

‘I’m telling you, it’s all Olympics fever, man.’ Adé looked at them in the mirror. ‘You have to drive five times round everywhere you want to go. Look at that. What is that?’

He was pointing at a three-storey block that comprised a hotel on top of a supermarket. The shop windows on the ground floor were filled with foodstuffs and household goods connected together in a mechanical display. Each part jostled the next to motion along a carefully arranged chain that ended back where it started in the far corner of the window before looping round again. Adé pulled the car up to the bumper of a jeep in front, stopped behind red traffic lights, and pointed at the window. Jeff peered at the bright arrangement of colours.

Nearly every item was branded with a sports motif. He nudged Serena.

There was discus thrower cereal, long jump jam, huge tins of a dog food called Bound with dogs on the label in athletic poses. Honey jars stacked alongside showed bees swimming neatly up and down their hive labels. Dietary and vitamin supplements all promised quick, brawny results. A mop and bucket was painted to resemble a curling brush and curling iron for curling suds over the kitchen floor. In the centre, unmoving, three tiers of washing powder served as a medal platform in bronze, silver and gold, for a great pile of toiletry goods printed over with national flags and slogans.

‘See what I’m saying? No way. What is the point rushing about, fiddling with sticks and that? Y’know, see how far you can throw something. Everybody can do what they want, that’s democracy, yes blud, but I’m not a fool nor is most people. And like in everything, there’s a few juicing plenty of money off the top, making it all spin around. I want some of that.’

He let out a breezy laugh that made Serena laugh too. Jeff watched her in the wing mirror.

‘Nothing go so,’ Adé added with a lilt, nodding at Jeff. ‘It’s a circus out there, my friend.’

Jeff was struggling to absorb the rush of metropolis on only two hours’ sleep. He gazed out of the window, drifting in and out of the conversations in the car.

He liked the subtleties of difference between home and here. There were fewer traffic signs on the roads for a start; new planning had done away with the kerbs and railings and many downtown precincts were now shared between all users. It reduced smashes or something, he’d read. He could see why. It was confusing and everybody slowed down. But a degree of magnanimity obtained too at busy crossings where vehicles and people watched each other carefully.

On the pavement, crowds of faces were a steady mix of black, white and Asian, less Hispanic than home but more Indian, more Middle Eastern. Shops promoted their wares in unfamiliar languages and scripts, Cyrillic and Arabic fonts in impossible curls sharing window space with eastern European phrases. He found the impenetrability of the words charming and forbidding at the same time.

The buildings were proud and ornate. Every block housed a mixture of styles; sheets of classical columns and windows with carved flourishes and ornamental balconies side by side with soaring modern, computer-wrought edifices of glass, metal and plastic.

‘Hey, is your phone set?’ Adé said. ‘See, I check all the details. You got to have e-roaming here, man, we don’t allow no riff-raff clog up the lines.’

Jeff patted his pocket. ‘I’ve got nerd friends as well as surfer ones.’

‘Check this,’ Adé flicked on the stereo. ‘Crunch sound.’ A deep bass rumble roared from the speakers and shook the seats.

Jeff nodded along, Serena’s head resting on his shoulder.

At the next junction, Adé pressed a button on the dash and the roof retracted into the back rim of the cabin.

‘Highest proportion of convertibles in the world, Britain,’ he announced. ‘Tcha, and everybody says it rains.’

The music and the breeze and this new fresh contact with the elements made Jeff feel less of an outsider. His heart was beating fast as he thought about soon arriving at Jonathan’s.

Nobody spoke much for the remainder of the journey. The summery streets glided by in green leafy shadows and slanting sunlight. After a longish straight road, Adé made a few short turns and then swung in through a narrow stone entrance onto a cobbled mews.

‘Listen, man,’ Adé said, his voice low, ‘you have a nice chillout tonight, enjoy, I know it’s special. We’ll speak tomorrow. It’s all happening here, my brother, you’ll see. This a very fine place for a holiday.’ He pulled up in front of a brightly painted garage, first in a line of six, by a tall, Victorian lamppost. ‘Nice,’ he said, looking around. He zipped up his top.

Serena pulled herself into the well between the front seats as if she wanted to get her goodbye over quickly with their hairy chauffeur.

Adé whipped round and brushed her cheek with his thumb. ‘See you, gorgeous. ‘Til next time.’ She pulled away but not before Adé had reached forward and planted a kiss on her lips.

‘Hey,’ Jeff said quietly.

‘Couldn’t help myself,’ Adé said. ‘That’s beauty, innit.’

‘It’s okay.’ Serena was poised again. ‘Cheeky,’ she said to Adé. She turned down Jeff’s collar. ‘Come on. No harm done. This is a big moment.’

Adé let them out two doors along from Jonathan’s house, where they stood with their bags in a heap and watched the car drive away.

‘Are you sure you want to know that man?’ Serena was tapping her shoe against her hold-all. ‘Rather cocky.’

‘All swagger probably. I told Tyree I’d meet him so I might as well. It’ll be fine, I’m sure.’ Jeff didn’t want to stop talking. It didn’t matter about what. He wanted the words to tumble out and enfold him and to still his hands from shaking.

‘Come on, then,’ Serena took his fingers in hers. ‘You’re so cold.’ She looked at him, her eyes wide. ‘What can we do? We’re early anyway. Tell me how you’re feeling.’

They stood beneath the lamppost, capped by the blooms from two hanging baskets which flowed down the sides in long purple and pink trails.

‘I’m glad to help your excitement find its proper place,’ Serena said. ‘Hope that doesn’t sound too mum-like. I admire your resolve, you know, and your optimism.’

‘Thank you,’ he said.

He put his hands in his pockets and rolled his shoulders. He was growing accustomed to the sudden flurries of nerves sweeping over him. It reminded him of being caught by storms when sailing. The wind could come up from nowhere, jangling every movable object and putting everyone on board into a panic. But the sail was always trimmed in time, and the gear stowed. Once he’d lost a towel. He smiled. A towel. Not such a big deal.

And now he would find a brother. This storm had brothers in it.

::o::

To read on, and follow the twisting fates of Jeff, Serena, Raymond and Jonathan, please visit danielsage.co.uk where you can buy a signed copy of the book and/or download the ebook in Kindle or Epub formats. Or visit Amazon.co.uk

I hope you enjoyed the read. All comments are gratefully invited.

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