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# In the Same Space

Matthew Blackman (BLCMAT001)

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the award of the degree of Masters of Arts in Creative Writing.

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## COMPULSORY DECLARATION

This work has not been previously submitted in whole, or in part, for the award of any degree. It is my own work. Each significant contribution to, and quotation in, this dissertation from the work or work of other people has been attributed, and has been cited and referenced.

Signature:

Date:

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# Book 1

University of Cape Town

Cheap black suit and shoes, his gelled brown hair cut short, he didn't look much different from the rest of them. So when I looked up from the *Metro*, and saw him standing in the caf behind Brian, he was just another figure drawn from the Job Centre; another person to give up in a week. He didn't last much longer than that week. But then neither did I.

Selling CDs door-to-door didn't pay much; one hundred and twenty pounds less tax and National Insurance. That left you with about ninety-one quid a week plus commission on what you sold; and one didn't sell much. If you went to the Benefits Office you could live. Not a great life, but better than some.

Brian came into the caf letting in the cold weather. He was over-weight and bald. He had made it clear to everybody that he was Irish, despite a thick North London accent. He was our line manager. He nodded at us, wiped the sweat off his forehead and got a Coke from the fridge. We met there every morning, just round the corner from Euston Station. We never said a lot to one another. I suppose there wasn't a hell of a lot to say about the job. The only time anything was really said was when Brian came with some new employee, waiting to be introduced to the music industry. I had stopped taking much notice of Brian and the new recruits. As I said, most of them didn't last and Brian hardly ever said anything he hadn't said before.

'Oright there Dar, I want you to look after this new lad for me. Show him the ropes. I want some sales today lads, Pete's boys are pulling away from us and I know how we'll

feel at the half year awards if that lot takes it from us.’ He put his hand on Phil’s shoulder and gave me a wink.

‘You working with us today Brian?’ Darren asked.

‘Can’t today, got loads of paper work at the office. Next week sometime maybe. You alright there for CDs are you? Got a consignment comin’ to us next week.’

‘Anything new Brian?’

‘Not sure, I’ll have to check on that.’

‘*Candle in the Wind* remixes Brian?’

‘Come on now Dar, nothing negative. We’ve got some quali’y stuff coming in in ‘bout two weeks. There’s a new Will Young house remix coming out, it’s a dead cert good seller.’ He kept looking at his watch. ‘Look I’ve gotta run, got a meetin’ at half nine. I can’t spend my time jawing with you lot all day. Gotta keep in tune, you know what I mean, every minute costs us. Dar, do me a favour mate, look after the new lad for today. And swing round to the office after, tell me how it went. Alright?’

‘Can’t, meeting the wife down East Ham after work.’

‘Okay, same time tomorrow morning then.’

‘Tomorrow’s Satu’day Brian.’

‘Look, I’ve got to get back.’ There seemed to be a slight change in his accent; there was something less North London about it. ‘The new lad’s name is Adrian. You just stick with Darren here today and I’ll speak to you later about it, alright? You’re alright there lads?’ he said turning to us. We nodded. ‘Excellent lads! I’ll see some of you la’er then for drinks at the office.’ He made a point of looking at his watch before he hurried out the door.

‘Yeah, yeah see you tomorrow Brian,’ Darren mumbled. ‘He fucking always does this, dun he? It’s his bloody job to train up the new lads. Why should I always have to do it when it’s his job? Fat lazy bald cunt. Sorry mate, no offence to you but Brian takes the piss sometimes. Sorry mate what was your name again? Adrian was it?’

‘No, it’s Adam.’

‘See, he can’t even get the lad’s name right! Look mate why don’t you just sit down for a minute, we’re nearly finished.’ I went back to finishing my beans and paging through the *Metro*.

‘Tell you why you have to train him up Dar,’ John looked up from his paper and pulled out cigarette; ‘it’s because you’re paid more than the rest of us.’

‘Less of it. You just stick to looking at page three and keep your mouth shut. I’m only paid more ‘cause I work twice as hard as you load of skivers. That’s why I’m paid more than you lot. I ain’t paid to do fat bastard’s job for him, ‘in I?’

We finished breakfast and went to the counter, paid our bills, picked up our bags and went out to work. Darren asked if I would look after Adam. He said he had something to do and didn’t want to drag the lad along. I didn’t mind. None of us were selling much and most days I spent reading in pubs or the parks. Looking after him would give me something to do.

He kept asking questions as we walked down North Gower Street. I wasn’t really listening. We walked passed a girl smoking a cigarette. She always seemed to be there, on the corner at the side of the office block, at about this time. After months of seeing her there I knew she had three pairs of shoes: a green pair with points, black boots with

high heels and some white trainers with straps that crossed over each other, instead of laces. Adam was speaking to me. 'Well is he?'

'Yip.'

'Really?'

'Sorry, what was the question?'

'Is Darren your boss then?'

'No. We just have to stop at the newsagent first, I need some fags.' Now that I thought about it, I wasn't really in the mood for training somebody up. I bought some cigarettes and a Coke, he bought the *Independent*.

'She was fit!'

'Who?'

'That woman standing behind us. She was fit.'

'Oh, I didn't notice.'

Walking down Euston Street, pushing through the people walking against us, I started the usual speech. I had been through it several times before. 'We sell those things in your bag to people who will buy them.'

'I thought it was only to industry people?'

'Have you seen the CD's? You don't see this stuff in HMV, and for a good reason. The real distributors don't have door-to-door salesmen in cheap suits wandering the streets with bags on their backs.'

'I thought specialised record shops and DJ's were our target market.'

'Sorry mate. Discount stores normally, depending on if the CD is cheap enough.'

‘Look I don’t care who we sell it to as long as I can get my money. Do we ever get to see any of the commission that Brian told me about? It’s one of the reasons I took the job.’

‘Not really.’

‘Oh, for fucks sake.’

‘Sometimes.’

‘How often?’

‘Difficult to say. But not often.’

‘I took this job to get into the music industry. I’m really really into my music. I do a bit of DJing. You should come when I do it next. Brian made it sound like you could go somewhere. But I kind of knew it was bullshit.’

‘I’m sure you could go somewhere. But I’m not sure it’s really somewhere you’d want to go.’

‘He told me about a director working for PolyGram who started here.’

‘Sounds like bullshit; but I suppose you never know.’

We waited till 9:30 at the ticket office at Euston to buy a zone one to six travelcard. Mega paid for that. It was the only perk of the job. We went down the escalators to the Northern Line.

‘Where are we going?’

‘I thought we’d go up to Archway and then down the Holloway Road.’

‘But the map they gave me says...’

‘Oh, get rid of that; we never use it.’

‘How long have you worked for Mega?’

‘About six months.’

We stood on the platform, looking at the electronic board, without speaking. Finally it flashed ‘train approaching’. When we got on, we had to push our way into the carriage. Adam stood somewhere behind my back, because I had to turn away from the woman standing in front of me; her breath smelt. I opened the coke. The sound of it was quite loud in the carriage. I washed the bitter taste of the beans and cigarettes down my throat and waited for Camden, where I knew a lot of people would get off. I leant over a woman sitting down and picked up a copy of the *Daily Star* that somebody had discarded behind the seats and looked at the sports pages till we got up to Archway. Every week it looked more and more like West Ham weren’t going to avoid the drop, despite the pundits claim that they had too many quality players to go down.

As we got on the escalator, up to the corner of Junction and Holloway, Adam started telling me about himself. He stood holding on to the left rail so he could look at me from the step below. A girl behind him, with fishnet black stockings and a dark suit, clicked in annoyance and he moved to let her pass. He was twenty-two and had travelled around Spain. He said he had been to university but he never said where or what he’d done. He had met an English girl in Barcelona; they were thinking of getting engaged. His dream was to save up enough money to buy a campsite in the south of France. Judging by what he said, it didn’t sound like his girlfriend shared the same vision. ‘She’ll change her mind,’ he said at least twice as we walked down Holloway Road. She was slightly older and she had a couple of degrees from Exeter University. He carried on talking about her until we entered a hardware store about three blocks down from the station. I didn’t like the sound of her.

‘What are we doing in here?’

‘I need to buy some screws.’

‘When are we going to start selling?’

‘When somebody wants to start buying.’

‘But you know I need to get going. I need the commission. It’s important to me.’

I shrugged and paid for the screws. As we walked out I stood in a puddle and felt water seep into my sock.

‘What do you need the screws for?’

‘My curtain fell down.’

‘Shouldn’t you buy that in your own time?’

‘No.’

After the first few hours Adam settled down. He was nice enough. He just expected more from his first job. He came back the next week which was unusual for most people; there was too much aimless walking around, too many rejections, too much time on public transport, and too little money. For the next week or so Adam often came along with me. We did a bit of Camden and Kentish Town together. We were meant to work alone but most of the others had a mate that they worked an area with. More often than not we’d just sit in a pub somewhere, as long as it was cheap. Sales were pretty slow. There was too much talk about the impending war around; consumer confidence was down.

We were in the Moon Underwater up Camden High Street. It was raining outside and that put paid to any idea we’d had of canvassing that day. We sat rolling cigarettes, smoking and drinking bitter at one quid eighty-five a pint.

'Soph's going to be upset with me, this is my last tenner and we're meant to be going to a movie tonight at the Prince Charles. Have you ever been there?'

'A few times.'

'It's well cheap. It's only about three quid for a film but I don't reckon I'll even have that, after we finish here.' I offered to lend him twenty pounds for the week. I had a bit on me. 'I'll take the money, only if you come to the film with Soph and me.'

He had been pushing me to meet his girlfriend the whole week. I hadn't liked the look of her when I had seen her two days before outside Camden Station. She looked and sounded like the kind of person I could live without. I tried to think up an excuse but he knew I wasn't doing anything; I agreed.

'Good, I really want you to meet Soph. You'll get on. I'm not sure I'll be working here for much longer; I got another job lined up. And I want you to meet her before I leave.'

'Oh, what's the job?'

'Travel company, you know those tour companies that take people around Europe? I applied to be a tour manager. Got another interview on Saturday. Don't tell Brian. I want to take my pay, tell him I'm coming in and then just not turn up. After the shit he told me. I can't believe this job, I mean what he told me was completely different.'

A lot of people talked like this. I never knew what to make of it. Sometimes they stayed for months and sometimes they left before they said they would. Adam was pretty certain he could make a success of his next job. I sat and listened to what he thought it was going to be like working round Europe, and how there was opportunity to rise in the company if you did well. He put his cigarette out in the ashtray, attracted the barman's

attention and ordered another round. The bar was empty except for two men in dark suits next to us at the bar. They were talking about the war. 'Why are we getting involved in this?'

'Saddam's evil. It's a war we're in now with these fucking terrorists and you're either with them or against them and if you're not against them then...'

'But Saddam's no threat to us. He's not even a terrorist.'

Adam turned pushing one of the pints on the bar towards me. 'America is doing this because of the oil.' I shrugged and relit my cigarette that had gone out. 'Doesn't it annoy you that we're just America's lap-dog?'

'Not really.'

'Anyway I hope he kicks our arses in Iraq. I mean I know we'll win but it would be nice to see the Americans taking a fucking hammering. Are you going to the peace march tomorrow? You can come with Soph and me if you want.'

'No, I'm not interested.' I wasn't into this whole anti-war thing. I didn't understand it. The emotions of it, I mean.

Adam went to the toilet and I went back to listening to the two men. 'He'll fucking gas them when they come in you mark my words mate and it's what those fucking colonising Americans deserve.'

'But America isn't colonising Iraq.'

'Of course they are. What do you think they are doing?'

I listened to them arguing until Adam came back. We sat for a while and were about halfway through the next drink when we saw Darren come into the pub with Phil. They were soaking wet from the rain. Phil didn't look happy. It wasn't unusual to meet them

here; we often went here for drinks. They put their bags down and ordered a drink at the far side of the bar, without noticing us. They stood and talked for a while until Darren saw us and came over. 'You skivin' lit'le toe rag. What the hell are you up to? Not working as usual. Don't let Brian catch you, otherwise you'll be out on your ear and there's nothing your posh little accent can do for you then.' It was all directed at Adam. Darren and I never really spoke to each other, other than to say hallo.

'Brian would never find us here. I'm surprised he can find his way to the bathroom.'

'Look mate, you know nothing about it.' Darren lowered his voice. 'He looks like a useless bastard but he's got a lot up North London. He runs a lot of shit out of there.'

'Brian couldn't run a bath.'

'Look mate you don't know the half of it. He's got loads of deals tied in with the Irish in Kilburn; and you don't mess with them, you know what I mean. If Brian takes a dislike to you you'll never work in this industry again. And you better believe it mate.'

'Oh bollocks. I've lived in Kilburn half my life and the only Irish that are left there are a few drunks in the Black Lion.'

'Well look at Little Lord Fauntleroy, developed a lot more lip since the first day, haven't we? Not the shy middle-class twat he was a few days ago? Quietly reading his big papers and all.'

'What are you talking about. I'm working-class mate, my dad's a carpenter.'

'Oh yeah? Well then where did you get that posh little accent from? And that university degree?'

'You don't know what you are talking about. I'm working-class through and through. Just 'cause I went to uni doesn't make me middle-class.'

Darren turned away and sat down with Phil at one of the tables. Adam got a call on his phone and walked to the other side of the room. By the looks of it, it must have been his girlfriend. I went over and sat with Darren and Phil.

‘That lad of yours, he’s middle-class, isn’t he?’

‘I suppose so.’

‘You’re middle-class aren’t you?’

‘Yeah.’

‘That lad’s full of shit.’

Darren rolled himself a cigarette. Phil started talking about the numbers his wife had chosen for the lottery. They had got three numbers and a bonus not so long ago. Phil was about ten years older than me; somewhere in his late thirties, early forties. He worked the door of his local pub during the weekends. He never said much except when he talked about his wife and work. His sack was on the chair next to him. It was old and frayed and had been stitched up by his wife countless times. I supposed it must have been his wife. His fingers were like huge sausages.

Adam came over and sat down. ‘So,’ Darren turned to me, ‘the Hammers are blowing bubbles at the bottom of the log.’

‘Yeah, they’re pretty rubbish at the moment.’

‘Who do you reckon is going to take the premiership?’ Darren looked like he was in the mood for a fight.

‘Ah, the Gunners will take it easy.’ Adam said.

‘Are you a Gooner?’

‘Always have been, mate, and always will be.’

‘Oh well, you might not be such a twat after all.’

Darren unbuttoned his shirt and showed Adam a tattoo of the Arsenal badge on his chest.

Phil wasn’t really interested in football. He looked at me, raised his eyebrows and began talking to me, leaving Adam and Darren to talk about Arsenal. ‘Nearly sold a whole lot of those new CD-cleaning gismos to some slapper down the Old Junction today.’

‘Oh yeah.’

‘The bloody fing broke when I was doin’ the demo for it. You know when you take the CD out after cleanin’ the thing. The inside bits just fell apart. I was well upset with it. When I told the silly tart it were the first time it had happened, she wasn’t having any of it.’ He paused; it looked as if he was replaying the scene over and over again in his mind. ‘That would have set me up for the week. She wanted twenty of them. I like ‘em though, they’re good aren’t they? Good little seller they are. What does Brain call them? ‘Impulse buys’ I think he said. I like ‘em, I might even buy one of ‘em myself at the end of the week. Nice little thing to have around the house. Good Christmas gift they are.’ He turned to Darren. ‘Hey Dar, these new things. Good little Christmas gift, aren’t they?’ Darren nodded and carried on arguing about who was the best holding mid-fielder in the Premiership.

‘Dar might very well get one from me this year for Christmas. Useless bastard bought me one of our CD’s last year.’ He gave me a wink but all of a sudden he became serious. ‘Did you see we got a letter from head office today? The wife gave us a bell to say the boss ain’t happy with our performance.’

‘What performance? I’m not a bloody race-car.’ Adam turned from talking about football. ‘We can only sell what people want to buy and they certainly don’t want to buy the shit *we* sell.’

‘Phil,’ Darren said, ‘For fucks sake mate, how long have you worked here? Come on mate, we get these kinds of letters all the time; don’t worry about it.’

Phil turned to me. ‘This one’s serious mate, it’s threatening dismissal. It’s not like the others. It’s fine for you to talk Dar, you’d be the last to get the sack. I’ve got a wife to think about. My position isn’t as stable as yours. Nick, this one could mean that you and me get the sack mate.’

I shrugged. Being dismissed from this place didn’t bother me. I had been saving money up so I could take some time and look for another job. At the moment it didn’t bother me if I stayed or got the sack. And, I suppose this kind of thing was bound to happen with all this war talk about.

‘Don’t worry about it Phil,’ Darren finally said. ‘I’ve been telling him the whole morning it’s just our annual letter to tell us we got to take our finger out. They can’t tell what’s happening on the beat like we can. We’ll know that they are going to sack us long before they know; it’s how this place works mate. As long as you don’t piss Brian off you’ll be alright.’

I opened the front door to the block I lived in. The mail had been shoved through the letter flap and was lying all over the mosaic entrance. I bent down and picked it up. I heard the noise of a loose tile click against the floor as it slipped out from between the letters. I picked it up, and put it in my pocket. I had about four of them now in my suit. I rubbed my thumb against some of the rough grouting that still stuck to it. I felt the other three. Two of them were almost free of the old coarse cement. I went through the letters and was surprised to see there were two for me. The one from work I knew about, the other had only my name on it, with no sign as to who had sent it. I thought it might be an advert. It wasn't. 'Oh fuck.' I had thought people like this wouldn't be able to find me. No one but work and the Benefits Office had my address. Even my bank had the address of a hostel I used to live in. The letter was from a debt collector about a payment I hadn't made on a mobile last year. I didn't even have the damn thing anymore. The note attached to the bill threatened, that if it wasn't paid within the month, they would come round and reclaim my possessions amounting to the debt. Well, they could try. I had a twenty pound second hand CD player and that was it. Even the small television in my room belonged to the landlord. I hated to think about it, but I knew I would have to use the money I had put away. So that would mean I'd have to stay in this job for a while longer. Well, it wasn't like I needed to move jobs yet anyway. As jobs went it wasn't bad. I suppose when debts like this catch up with one, you have to call time on them. I had been avoiding this payment for a while now. I had hoped that it

would simply go away. I didn't like the idea of debt collectors arriving at the flat. The landlord was suspicious of me anyway. I had no guarantor and it had been pretty hard getting this bed-sit without one.

I was standing in the hall, at the bottom of the stairs, thinking, when Goisha popped her head out the door of her room on the ground floor. She ran the building for the landlord; a man, who smoked cigars, called Captain Hambridge. What he was a captain of I never knew.

'Mr. Nick! Your rent due today yes? You know Capin Hamidge get very upset when you is late the last month.'

Goisha was Polish and the only times she ever made sense was when she was asking for the rent. Other than that she would speak in a language only known to her and her Spanish boyfriend. They seemed to be able to communicate in this peculiar arrangement of words, which I never had the ability of understanding fully.

I nodded at her. 'No problem, I'll come down with it in moment.' I knew that she never understood much of what I said. A simple nod or meaningless word would keep her away for a while. I often used the word 'casteridge' on her, which she accepted with smiles and nods. Once I was upstairs I was pretty safe. Goisha hardly ever came up the stairs to collect the rent. She claimed it was something to do with her hip. She would always say, 'My yip my yip,' and point at it, as if by looking I could somehow see the internal damage that lay there. What exactly was wrong always remained a mystery to me. Besides the furious pointing and the long descriptions in a language which, in parts, sounded like English, I never gathered what had caused the problem.

I made my way upstairs and thought to myself that if I could put off my rent payment for another day or so I would be, financially, in a much better position; particularly with this payment due to these debt collectors. The Housing Benefits cheque had gone into my account but my money from work would still be a day or so.

As I walked up to my bed-sit on the top floor, Ron was coming down. He was the only person I knew in the building, except for Goisha. We quite often used to chat, but unless you convinced him to go to the pub you had to stand in the passageway, constantly pushing the light switch that was on a timer, and listen to him talk about the deficiencies of the British postal system. He had worked for the Royal Mail for over forty years. Sometimes he could be quite interesting, but the smell in the passage of the world's cooking, mixed with that of cigarette smoke, always made me feel slightly ill.

'Off to the pub are we, Ron?'

'No, meeting a lady friend at a restaurant tonight, my lad.'

'Now Ron, I didn't realise you were romantically involved.'

'Oh yes, met her on the Internet and all.'

'Christ Ron, aren't you a bit long in the tooth to be doing things like that?'

'Well maybe, but my son up in Northampton set it up. Not my style, and I must say that I was dead against these computer things when they first arrived on the scene. But, now these contraptions are here to stay, one might as well use them to one's advantage. Anyway Nick, can't keep the aged waiting. One never knows how long we'll have together. Enjoy yourself young man.'

'See you Ron.'

I got into my room and had a smoke. I was glad to get rid of my tie and shoes. I didn't turn the light on because the curtain was still broken and the lights from the street outside made the room bright enough to see. I poured myself some vodka and looked in the fridge for something to mix it with, just an old bottle of milk; there was nothing to eat. In the background there was the beeping of the pedestrian traffic light for the deaf. I pushed play on the CD player. It was some CD I had got out of *The Observer* a few months ago. I can't remember why I bought *The Observer*; perhaps I had bought it for the CD. Anyway it had been lying in the CD player for months. I decided to get into bed; I didn't have any coins on me to put into my gas meter. The CD started skipping on track three, it always did that. There was a knock. I turned on the light, turned off the CD and opened the door. It was Goisha. She wanted the rent. Captain H. had obviously put the wind up her; although she could dish out the shit when it was needed, she was petrified of the Captain. He wasn't one to be messed around and, as I said, I didn't want to get on his bad side. The bed-sit was small and cheap, and I didn't want to lose it. It was right at the top of the building out of the way of everything.

'Oh yes. I was just coming down to give it to you.' I wrote her out the cheque and handed it over. She checked the amount and I knew that a volley of language was now going to be fired at me.

'That £290 in it Capin Hamidge very angry last month no pay rent on time, where you go out tonight, pub is cheap downstairs tonight, in it?' It was often difficult to decide which part of her sentence to answer. At close quarters I normally answered her by nodding and saying 'yes' followed by a kind of laugh.

She was wearing a top cut low at the back, a scarf, a pair of black bell-bottom jeans and some black slippers with white socks. Long unwashed brown hair hung about her round face. I think she was wearing her top back to front. Why would a top have pockets at the back?

'You have cigarette me Mr Nick? To me I leave downstairs.' I opened the box I had bought in the pub. Three orange filters stuck out. She took one. I noticed her fingernails were similar to mine; broken, uncut and slightly dirty. She sat down on the bed and lit up the cigarette. And then half reclined, with her elbow on the bed, head resting on her hand.

'It cold in room. Why not heater?' I shrugged. 'You in the business Mr Nick?'

'No, not really, I'm a salesman.'

'Wha'??'

'A salesman. I sell things.'

'You make many money?'

'No. Hardly any.'

I went and sat on the windowsill and carried on sipping the vodka. I didn't want to offer her any. There wasn't much left and I didn't have any money to buy another bottle until I got paid.

'Yes, you clever English boy you make many money then you make married with me we make beautiful babies.'

I laughed. 'Why not.'

'What you think yes?'

'Yeah sure.' She lay there looking at me. I couldn't think of any conversation.

‘Shi’ shi’ no Eduardo!’

She got up quickly and started doing her hair in the small mirror I had above the stove. ‘Eduardo, he come now, forget. He downstairs. He hate smoke.’ She looked for an ashtray in a panic. I indicated the sink. She stubbed it out, half smoked, on the aluminium and ran out the room and down the stairs.

I picked it up from the sink and relit it, and turned on the television. France had vetoed the resolution at the UN but it didn’t seem to matter. It looked like we were going to war anyway. I looked at the time. I needed to get going. I put my work clothes back on and walked down to Earls Court. I could see the black clouds, in the dark, coming up from Putney. I pulled my scarf hard around my neck and pushed my hands into the pockets of my coat.

It was very bright inside the station. I bumped into somebody coming out of one of the turnstiles and dropped my ticket. Somebody else stood on it, scrapping it against the grit on the station floor. I picked it up, brushed it off and put it in the machine. It beeped and rejected the ticket. I had to get one of the staff to open the gate.

The information board said there was train coming in two minutes. I stood and read one of the adverts on the other side of the rails. There was the usual faint smell of electrical burnout.

At the top of the escalators the lights were brighter than they had been down in the tube. I could see a few gaps in the crowd as I went through the turnstiles. I pushed past a group of people with backpacks. A man came up to me near the ticket dispensers and asked for my travel card. I ignored him and walked up the stairs. 'Fucking fuck.' I came out and walked across Charing Cross Road. It had been raining while I was down in the tube. The square was reflecting its lights off the wet cement paving. Hundreds of people were standing with umbrellas outside one of the cinemas. There was some premier on. I was meant to be meeting Adam in the Firkin pub next to Burger King. I walked in and looked around; he wasn't there. It took a while to get served but I got a pint and moved away from the crowd at the bar and stood near the door. It was hot and stuffy; I took my coat off. Occasionally I was aware of a smell of sewage. I wasn't sure where it was coming from, but every now and again it caught me. Adam walked in and I stopped him before he went further inside.

'Soph's just gone up to the Prince of Wales to go buy tickets. I hope you don't mind sub-titles.'

Adam went over to get a pint and stood in a crowd three-deep at the bar. I saw her come through the door, she was frowning. I recognised her from when I had seen her up in Camden. She looked around and I caught her eyes. She held my gaze for a second and then looked away. She spotted Adam at the bar. They had a short conversation and Adam came back without a drink. As they came over I had the feeling that I didn't want to spend the evening with her. She wasn't bad looking though. She had a slight gap

between her front teeth; not much of one, but enough to be noticeable. She was quite well put together in an unskinny kind of way, but not my cup of tea. At that moment I regretted having agreed to be here.

‘Are you Nick or Nicholas?’

‘Whatever you want.’

‘Okay Nicholas. I don’t like shortening people’s names until I’ve got to know them. I got tickets quite near the front. I hope you don’t mind, but I forgot my glasses at home.’

‘Come on Soph you know I hate sitting near the front.’

‘Well you and your friend can go and sit at the back if there’re seats, and I’ll sit in the front.’

‘I thought we’d agreed that my name’s Nicholas.’ She ignored the comment.

‘I don’t like this place, let’s go and have a drink somewhere else.’ I finished my pint. There was still time before the film began to find another pub. We walked up one of the alleyways, in the rain, into the back of Chinatown. Sophie offered me part of her umbrella. There wasn’t room. I said I didn’t mind the rain. The wet rubbish bags from the restaurants were lying, uncollected, on the pavements with blue and green coloured stickers with the words Borough of Westminster printed on them.

We ended up going to the Hogshead. I was glad to get out of the rain. Adam and Sophie went to sit at a high table surrounded by bar stools near the fire while I went to the bar and bought a round. The barmaid had a diamond drilled into one of her front teeth. I only had eight pounds in coins after that. I came back with the drinks and sat down.

‘Adam, are you looking at yourself in the mirror, or at the girl behind the bar?’

'In the mirror.'

'No you weren't. You were looking at that girl behind the bar.'

'Which girl behind the bar?'

'Shut up Adam! She looks a bit like Charlotte, don't you think?'

'Kind of, but she's not as fit as Charlotte.'

'You know sometimes I think you have a bit of a crush on her.'

'Oh bollocks.'

'Actually, you'd like Charlotte,' Sophie said turning to me.

'Oh yes, why's that?'

'She's trying to be an actress, good-looking in a way. Bit of a slapper. She'd probably like you. She likes the scruffy artistic types.'

'I'm not artistic. They threw me out of art class when I was ten.'

'Adam told me you read a lot.'

'Out of boredom; not a flair for the arts.'

'Anyway I'll set you up with Charlotte some time.'

'Cheers, but no thanks.'

'Why? Are you gay?'

'No, I just don't fancy being set up.'

'I think Charlotte might be a bit too clever for you anyway.'

'Well there you go. Darren once told me, though, that I was too clever for my own good.'

'Isn't he that Neanderthal you work with? That's hardly a gauge for intelligence.'

'Darren's not stupid.'

‘Why do you say that?’

‘He’s got lots of little deals on the side.’

‘How do you know?’ Adam said.

‘He took me round when I first started. I witnessed it.’

‘What kind of stuff does he get up to?’

‘Well, one time we went to this old second-hand bookstore down in Stratford. He didn’t want me to come in. He told me to wait outside. But it started raining, and I went in.’

‘What was he doing?’

‘I don’t know, he was in the office. But when he came out he was talking to this old man smoking a pipe, with a beard like a hedge and huge eyebrows. He was quite big but he had a high pitched effeminate voice. I wasn’t sure what they’d been doing, but they were in the office for a long time. I asked Darren what he had done in there. He said that he’d sold this ‘geezer’ some CDs.’

‘What’s so strange about that?’

‘Nothing I suppose, but he was selling our CDs to a second-hand bookshop that sold first editions and a leather-bound nineteenth-century German edition of Goethe’s *Faust*.’

‘So, what do you think they were doing?’

‘I’ve no idea. But the bookseller was camper than a row of tents. Not Darren’s type exactly. But they seemed to know each other quite well. And there were no signs of any receipts when we got back to the office at the end of the day.’

‘That’s weird. Soph, you’ve got to understand Darren’s not exactly the kind of person who hangs out with campy book collectors. I mean Darren’s a fucking thug. All he talks about is tits, fanny, and Arsenal.’

‘Sounds like he might be trying to repress his homosexuality.’

‘No way. Nick, what do you think? He can’t be gay.’

‘Suppose you never know. He did actually come out of the office looking like he had just run the four-minute mile.’

‘I thought Darren was married.’

‘So was Oscar Wilde.’

‘Yeah but...’

‘No, I don’t know. He’s not married though, he’s got a girlfriend, but that means nothing.’

Sophie changed the topic. ‘Have you ever tried to write or act? You seem like the kind of person who would do something like that.’

‘No, I’m not really clever enough.’

‘Well there are loads of stupid actors and writers out there. Perhaps you can be one of them.’

‘Well, one wouldn’t want to flood the market. I mean, there are very few mediocre door-to-door CD salesmen and, as you pointed out, there are already numerous stupid actors and writers.’

We finished up our drinks and made our way to the cinema. Sophie looked in her bag and gave me my ticket. I looked at the name of the film. It didn’t mean anything to me.

‘So, what’s this film about?’

‘Oh, pretty much the same thing as most of them, but in French.’ Sophie answered. ‘I know it’s a popular idea amongst the university graduates, particularly the ones I was at Uni with, that good films have to have an unhappy ending but I can’t stand films where the girl doesn’t get the guy in the end.’

‘That’s where Soph and I differ. I really hate Hollywood films. I want to watch a film where you begin two years down the line and then see how things really turn out.’

‘But that’s exactly where most films begin these days.’

‘What are you talking about Soph? No they don’t.’

‘Yes they do, they start with the doomed relationship two years down the line, and then move on to the new love interest. That’s how most of them work these days. You always see, at the beginning of every film, somebody at the end of either one or a series of doomed relationships. The only thing that you are never told is that the blossoming romance that you are watching is just another doomed relationship. In that way, I suppose, films these days do represent life; they just show the happy bits of what will soon probably become another failed relationship.’

‘So you mean that we’ll stop being happy at some point.’

‘Well, Adam, that depends on what you call happiness. There can be happiness without love.’

‘And love without happiness,’ I interjected. They ignored me.

‘So are you saying we won’t be in love in two years?’

‘Of course not.’ She went and kissed him on the lips. A taxi hooted loudly at me to get out of the road. Three girls in Burberry coats were sitting in the back. The one

turned her head and looked at us and then turned away. The taxi accelerated past flicking water up into the air.

‘Are you really saying that it will all be over in two years?’

‘Adam, stop it. I wasn’t talking about us.’

They looked at one another and kissed again. Adam turned to me: ‘What do you think of long-term relationships.’

‘I don’t have an opinion.’ Sophie was smiling at me. It was the first time I noticed her smile. ‘You should allow yourself to be set up on a date. Who knows, you might actually get an opinion then.’

‘Easier said than done.’

‘Why?’

‘Money.’

‘Not all women want money.’

‘And not all men want women.’

‘So, are you happy being alone?’

‘I suppose.’

‘Well.’ said Adam, ‘Look at Soph and me, we are a perfect couple and look, we don’t have money.’ They smiled and kissed one another again.

I went home after the film and found that there was enough time to catch the last round at the Courtfield. I stood and played the fruit machines for a while and lost two quid. I had no money to go to the Richmond. I felt like I could have done with one last pint.

The next week was pretty rough. Nobody was selling anything. I had to fake a few sales. You could do that to keep management off your back for a while. It was a matter of writing out a slip and putting in an order for some company that didn't exist and then cancelling the order a few days later. It meant that a sales slip went through on your name which often had the effect of keeping the heat off you. Of course if you didn't make a sale pretty soon after that it didn't really mean much. It was a way of buying time.

It was getting to the point where people might be fired and we knew it. Darren had told Brian to give Adam a written warning for not sticking to the designated areas. The fact that the company had a sales strategy with designated areas never really worried any of the salesmen. I certainly had never seriously looked at the highlighted areas on the map they had given me at my induction. Darren had actually told me to throw it away when I showed it to him on my first day. So the written warning was a bit of a joke. Darren said that it was not really the issue of sticking to his areas, but it was rather done to keep Adam in line with company procedures. What those were, was never made clear. The knives were out. I didn't want to expose my back. Times were not looking good and I needed the money.

It was the Friday three weeks after Adam had started. He was still angry about his written warning; I told him it was nothing, that I had got a few. They had a three strikes policy; three written warnings and you were out. But as I explained to Adam, I had already got three and nothing had happened. Darren must have had about six since I

started. The thing that worried me was that they normally came when times were good. I think they were done to keep us on our toes. But there had been a definite change in dynamics. Adam did have the Job Centre on his side, though. Mega got some kind of rebate from the government for employing people through the Job Centre; something to do with being an equal opportunities employer working within the community. So things might not be looking so bad for him. He was threatening to stay for longer just to annoy Darren.

We were having a company function at a pub near Finsbury Park that day. An awards thing to do with salesman of the month – a little farce the company liked playing out for motivational purposes. It was all in the name of what they called ‘team building advancement’. Adam and I had been canvassing around Turnpike Lane. There were a lot of shops run by Turks that used to buy from us. There was one guy who I often used to go to called Ali. He’d often buy a few CDs from me and he’d always offer me a cup of apple tea. He was a nice guy. A bit lonely I think. He had greeted me that day with ‘Sorry my friend’. I was a bit gutted. He was a guy I could rely on to buy something once a month, but not today. I had my cup of tea with him and then went and met Adam at the Weatherspoon Pub down the road. When I got there I saw him sitting at one of the tables with a smile on his face. He had made a decent sale. He had bought us some rolling tobacco and went and bought me a pint. Adam ordered a hamburger and I had a plate of chips. I noticed while eating them that my fingers had got pretty badly stained from smoking rolling tobacco. We didn’t go out again and canvass. There was a special on John Smiths for the week: one pound twenty a pint. So we stayed there until we decided to have a walk down to the pub we were meeting in for the awards ceremony.

The day had been clear, sunny and cold but by now the sun had gone down. When we walked past an electric box and I noticed that the poster I had seen a few times going down the road wasn't for a pop group as I had thought. It was a picture of one of the planes going into the World Trade Centre. I looked at the subtitle. It just said 'Heroes'.

'What do you think these people want?' Adam asked me as we walked past another one.

'I don't know. Compulsory beekeeping outfits for woman. I have no idea.'

'What the fuck are you talking about?'

'I have no idea why these guys are putting these posters up.'

'What posters? I'm talking about the CDs. What other kind of music do you think people would buy from us?'

'You're not suggesting what we sell is music?'

'What posters?' I pointed one out as we went past another one.

'Sometimes I think that if I could just speak to some of these guys they would understand. I mean I understand why they are doing it.'

'Do you?'

'Yes, of course, it's American foreign policy and Israel. Get rid of those evils and we will see an end to this. Look at France; they are leading the way. They just need to understand that we are on their side. I mean religious intolerance is a thing of the past surely. We just need to get rid of that idiot Bush. Don't you agree?'

'Not really.'

'Why not?'

'I just don't.'

‘But we’ve got to stop this fanatic lunatic Bush before he kills them and us. Get rid of Bush and Darren and the world would be a better place.’ He paused. ‘I swear I’m not putting up with that guy anymore.’

‘Darren’s harmless, just keep out of his way.’

When we got into the pub the awards had just begun. We got our free drinks at the bar and listened to Brian’s boss telling us we had to up sales and start ‘up selling’. In other words start flogging anything that wasn’t nailed down. When Darren won the salesman of the month Adam booed him. And he did it loud enough for most people in the pub to hear him.

‘What a fucking load of bullshit this whole thing is,’ Adam said quite loudly after the management had left and it was only the salesmen left at the bar. Most of us only came because there was a free bar for two hours. But a lot of people played it up, to impress the management. Some even went as far as to shout out the company’s ‘pay-off line’ as the area manager paid the bar tab. ‘A company in tune!’ or some rubbish like that.

‘You’re just jealous mate,’ Darren shouted across at Adam.

‘Jealous of what?’

‘The fact that I won.’

‘What a load of fucking bollocks. Do you really think I’m jealous of that little piss-pot award you’ve got there?’

‘Yeah, you can’t handle it that even though you were born with a silver spoon up your arse, you’re still fucking useless mate.’

‘My dad’s a carpenter for fucks sake. In what way does that make me born with a silver spoon up my arse? You’re fucking full of shit you know that.’

‘Shut it University Boy. See what all that education has done. You are still earning 120 quid a week. And you don’t even know how to get commission. You fuckin’ twat.’

‘Come on Darren leave him alone.’

‘Look Nick, don’t get involved in this one. You’re alright.’

‘Darren, leave him alone. He’s just young.’

‘Well he shouldn’t speak to me with that shitty up-his-arse attitude.’

Phil came over. ‘Leave it out Dar. And Adam, keep it shut or I’ll stick one of these fucking pint glasses down your gob.’ Everything calmed down.

I was at the bar ordering a round when it happened. I turned around and saw Darren lying on the floor between one of the tables and a bench. At first, I thought he had just fallen over or passed out. He’d been drinking pretty heavily since winning the award. But as I took my drinks off the bar and turned towards them I saw Phil punch Adam. He fell backwards against some of the tables and chairs behind him. The music was so loud it was like watching a silent movie. I put the drinks down and got in between them. Darren was still lying on the floor trying to get up. Whether his loss of balance was due to the punch or the drink it was hard to tell, but he couldn’t stand up without falling all over the place. I grabbed Adam and started to push him out of the pub. Phil was holding Darren back or just upright - either way it amounted to the same thing. Somebody clipped me on the back of the head. They must have been wearing a ring because something sliced a piece of skin out of it.

I was pushing Adam towards the doors. He was trying to push me back and yelling in my ear. But I was a lot bigger than him and probably a hell of a lot less drunk. I got

Adam out onto the street. He was holding his nose but he was kind of laughing. His nose was still bleeding and he was spitting the blood out onto the pavement.

‘What the fuck happened in there?’

‘You didn’t see it? Fuck, I can’t believe you didn’t see it. I battered him straight in the fucking face.’

‘Why?’

‘I’d had enough of him; and him having a go at me all the time. What a punch. Jesus, I’m sorry you missed it.’ He stopped and spat some more blood out. ‘Fuck, I think Phil’s broken my nose.’

I had a look at it and it didn’t look good. Phil came out of the doors. I saw that Darren was about to follow him but somebody inside pulled him back.

‘Get your friend out of here.’ Phil had a look at Adam’s nose but said nothing.

‘Why the fuck is Darren trying to get me fired?’

‘You’ve got a big mouth my lad and nobody likes it. Now Nick, get this cunt out of here. They are calling the police inside. Darren’s gone out the back.’

‘You know Phil he doesn’t have any right to be doing this to Adam.’

‘Look mate don’t you start on me. I’m telling you to get the fuck out of here and I don’t want to hear any more of this.’

‘Fuck off Phil. Don’t get like that with me.’

Phil suddenly wound up and swung a punch into my ribs. It felt like he had broken one of them. He knocked the breath out of me for a second.

‘Fuck’s sake!’

He turned away and I had a chance to hit him slap on the jaw, but the thought seemed stupid. It wasn't the fact that I wasn't sure that I could take him. I didn't care. Maybe with a lucky punch and the chance he gave me I could have had him. He was big and could hit like hell but he was also slow and he never really handled his drink very well. But I realised then that I liked him. I liked Phil and I knew didn't want to get into a fight with him. But I also knew that we would never really get on again. Some line had been drawn. Perhaps it had been drawn long ago. Phil turned and started going back into the pub. As he got to the door he turned and said: 'Sor...' but he didn't finish his word, he turned around and went inside.

I could see the flashing blue lights of a police van making its way up the road. I got Adam and got him to walk down the road with me. He looked pretty bad. I started to laugh at him but my ribs hurt when I laughed. We walked towards the tube station. Perhaps I couldn't have fought Phil; my ribs were terrible when I walked. I needed to sit down. We tried to go into a pub but we were thrown out. Adam said that we had just been mugged but the landlord didn't care.

'I don't care what the fuck has happened to the two of yous but you ain't coming into my pub bleeding like that. Go to the police if you've been mugged, don't come bleeding around here! You fuckin' 'aving a laugh.'

We ended up buying a bottle of vodka before catching the tube. The people we sat next to got up and sat somewhere else. Adam couldn't stop talking about his punch. It was pretty funny how badly Darren had taken it. Adam opened the vodka.

‘Fuck man Soph can’t see me like this. Can I sleep over at your place?’ We got out at Earls Courts and managed to buy some cans just before the off-licence near the station closed. We walked slowly up to my place.

‘Jesus fucking Christ! My nose hurts.’

I opened the door and in the dark I heard one of the little tiles being dislodged by my shoe as I stepped into the hall. I tried to pick it up. But my ribs stopped me from bending all the way down. I fell back and had to slowly push myself upright with my legs, sliding my back slowly upwards against the wall. ‘What the fuck are you doing?’

‘Adam, just pick that loose little tile up for me won’t you. It’s lying on the floor over there.’ I pushed in the timer switch for the light in the hall and he picked it up and gave it to me. As he came up, his nose started bleeding again. ‘Fuck. Why did you want it?’

‘I collect them.’

‘What for?’

‘Fuck knows, I just do.’

We got up the stairs and into my bed-sit, cleaned up Adam’s nose and got some ice out of my small freezer.

‘Soph’s going to kill me. She doesn’t approve of fighting and I suppose that’s my job at Mega gone.’

‘Yeah, I suppose so.’

‘But it was worth it just to see Darren go down like that. I’ve only ever been in one real fight before. What about you?’

‘A few.’

‘Did you win any?’

‘Not really. Most of them were draws I suppose.’

‘What are you going to do about a job now?’

‘I might just be able to hold onto mine.’

‘Why would you want to?’

‘I don’t have the money to look for another one.’

‘Why? Do you really want to carry on working there? I mean the job’s shit, the pay is shit, the people are shit. I’ve actually got that job lined up working for that travel company in Europe that I told you about.’

I was glad he had something else, but for the moment I had to hold on to what I had. We sat drinking and smoking. I needed to have something to eat. I looked in the cupboard and found some instant noodles. I put them in some water and turned the stove on. We sat talking about Darren for a while. There was a horrible smell of burning. The noodles were black. I threw them out.

We carried on talking until there was a knock at the door. I got up and opened it. Goisha was standing there in a tracksuit top, jeans and with a pair of trainers in her hands. Her make up was thick and smudged.

‘Mr Nick, music it too loud. My leg it hurts you make me come upstairs. There is blood in hallway it not is you Mr. Nick?’ She was almost making sense for once which meant that she must have just come in from drinking. Her English always seemed better after a few drinks. She looked in. ‘You have friend here?’

‘Yeah.’

She popped her head around the door. ‘English boyfriend yes?’ I wasn’t quite sure what she meant by that.

'Just a friend. That might be his blood in the hall.'

'You make a party?'

'No.'

'I like smoke. Can I come in Mr. Nick?'

'Sure.' I wanted to go and lie down again.

'But music down, Mr. Nick. You fight!'

'Yes, got into a bit of trouble earlier on.' Adam said.

'Oh no, you have ice Mr Nick?'

'Yes, and it's just Nick. Or if you want to call me Mr. Sunderland.'

Goisha put more ice on Adam's nose. They were sitting on my small couch; I was trying to find a comfortable way to lie on the bed. We carried on drinking and smoking. Goisha kept inspecting Adam's nose. I noticed at one point that she was straddling him. They were kissing. Adam had his hands on her arse. I fell asleep; I'm not sure when. I remember at one point Goisha was standing over me trying to wake me up. Her tracksuit top was unzipped. She wasn't wearing a bra. Her breasts were hanging out. God knows what she was doing. I think I must have passed out again.

When I woke up in the morning I was sure Adam wasn't there but I closed my eyes and opened them again and there he was, asleep on the couch. Goisha wasn't there any more. The morning was dark and grey and I could hear rain falling outside. I went back to sleep. I was tired, hung-over and my ribs hurt. Adam woke me up again at some point. I looked at him; his face was in a terrible mess. His eyes were blacked over, his nose and cheeks were a greyish colour and swollen.

'I better get back to Soph; she'll be worrying about me.' He looked at me and shook his head. 'Don't know what came over me last night.'

'Don't worry about it.'

'You won't tell? I mean, not that there's anything to tell.'

'Why should I? Besides I can't remember a bloody thing.' I looked at him. 'I don't think you'll have to tell Sophie about the fight though. Unless you tell her that I pushed you down the stairs.'

'I can trust you though, can't I?'

'Yeah of course.' We shook hands. 'Look, hope you don't mind but my ribs hurt too much, I don't think I can walk you out.'

I couldn't find my only pot to make a cup of tea. About half an hour later I found it in the bin. I managed to wash the burnt noodles out and put some water in it to make myself some tea. I took the mirror down from over the stove and looked at the side of my ribs. They were quite black and swollen. I think Phil must have been broken them.

# Book 2

University of Cape Town

I went to the Blackbird with Ron on Sunday. I never really went to the Blackbird, except when I was with Ron. I don't know why, it was a nicer pub than the rest of them. I was still feeling pretty rough but I thought a drink might help. We walked through the two doors into the pub, and went and sat near the window at one of the small square tables. Ron went and bought the drinks. My ribs hurt so much it seemed impossible to pull the chair close enough to the table. By the time he had come with the drinks I was sweating and shaking uncontrollably. I could hardly pick the glass up, but no one seemed to notice. Ron was talking to one of the locals; a middle-aged woman with a red blotch on her forehead, that never seemed stay in the same place. She was always in the Blackbird waiting for someone to buy her a drink.

They talked for a while but I wasn't following the conversation. After ten minutes I wasn't able to take it any more. The woman was talking to me, but all I could seem concentrate on was her red blotch; the words were impossible to distinguish from the background noise. I got up and left. I'm not sure where Ron had gone. The sky seemed to have a clouded ceiling that pulsed into a darker grey every time my left foot landed on the pavement. I thought of going to the hospital but it seemed like too much trouble. Sweat constantly ran off my hands and armpits and my eyelid wouldn't stop twitching. I got home, had some vodka and a smoke, and went to bed.

I didn't go to work for the next three days. We got paid hourly, so I lost three days pay. I had no desire to go back, but on Thursday I forced myself out of bed and caught the tube to Euston. When I got into the caf nobody said much, but I gathered that there

was still nobody buying. Adam had been fired. On Thursday and Friday I sat in the Crown and Anchor near Euston. It was too difficult to lug the bag around with my ribs like this. I played the fruit machines a couple of times and maybe came out a few quid ahead. I explained to the Czech girl, who worked behind the bar, how to play the machines. I didn't want to, but she kept asking.

I thought of phoning my father for some money, but I didn't feel up to it. It seemed like too much bother; all I needed was a new job. I went through the options. There was Adam's thing. But what would be the point. There were loads of jobs in London. And servicing people twenty-four hours a day didn't appeal. I thought of registering at a job agency. I had worked for a few some years ago. But waiting for a temp job to come around could take weeks. I needed something permanent, and quickly.

By Saturday I was feeling a lot better. I spent the morning in my room looking through the *Guardian* job section, to see what was going. There were a few things. One was a job down in Croydon working in magazine publisher's mailroom. It was a long way to travel but, compared to the rest of them, it seemed like a job that I could get without much trouble. I went down to the internet café on the corner and used my last credit there to email their HR department. I thought of e-mailing my father, but the computer failed to send my application twice, and by the time it had sent it, my credit had run out.

I got up and left and walked up to Earls Court Road to check the money in my bank account. There wasn't much there; enough for one more day of pubs and fast food and then it would have to be back to reading at home and supermarket specials. I walked into MacDonald's, ordered a Big Mac Meal and went to sit upstairs. A copy of the *Sun* was

lying on one of the tables. I paged through it but I didn't read much of it. There was a young couple sitting at the window. The guy was showing his girlfriend something on his mobile. She had prominent front teeth. Two Northern Irish girls, who I recognised from O'Neill's, were sitting two tables away. They were discussing what film they wanted to see that night. One of the employees was mopping the floor. I finished my meal and pushed the boxes and cup off the tray through the flap of the rubbish bin. The cup fell out onto the floor and the ice slid out across the tiles. The person with the mop gave a click of annoyance. 'Sorry.' I scooped the ice back into the cup; my rib still hurt a little. He came over and mopped up the watery Coke that remained on the floor. I slipped the *Sun* into my coat pocket and I went down the stairs and out onto the road. I turned left and then left again down Longridge, I walked past the Exhibition Centre and down to Brompton Cemetery. The daffodils were out; yellow against the dead background. I turned left and walked into O'Neill's. The one blonde Northern Irish girl from MacDonald's had got back and was serving behind the bar. I sat down with a Guinness and took out the *Sun*. There was nothing much there; West Ham were on a march to First Division football. I closed the paper and watched the small blonde clear the tables. 'Oright? Do you want another one?' She had a gravelly voice; sweet in a way.

'No thanks.' I left a pound on the table and I walked back to my flat. The mail was spread out on the floor. I picked it up and put the letters on the table. There was a note amongst them, written on the torn out page of a diary. It was from Adam. He and Sophie had been around earlier. He wanted to say goodbye. I went upstairs, lay down and I tried to read. I fell asleep for a few minutes, woke up and I went to see if Ron wanted to go to the pub. I knocked; there was no reply. I went back upstairs and looked at the address

that Adam had written down on his note. His flat wasn't far away, a half hour walk, perhaps.

I rang the bell for 54A. There was no answer. I waited a few minutes and rang again and then started back towards Cromwell Road. The clouds had got very dark and a slight drizzle began, followed by a downpour. I ran back to shelter in Adam's doorway and stood under the eaves, waiting for the rain to slack off. There was no point in walking home in this kind of rain. It was beginning to annoy me standing there but a few minutes later Adam and Sophie appeared at the gate. They were carrying shopping from Sainsbury's. They were soaked.

'Hello. Buy anything for me?'

'No, but we were thinking of buying a pit-bull to stop vagrants from sheltering in our doorway,' Sophie replied.

'God, I didn't realise they sold dogs in Sainsbury's. Is that next to their organic section?'

'You could help me carry these bags, instead of talking shit.'

I took the bags off Sophie and carried them up the flight of stairs. Adam opened the door at the top and we put the bags down in the kitchen. Sophie went straight into the bathroom. 'Sorry about that.'

'About what?'

'Sophie. I think she's a bit moody because I'm leaving and there's a, you know, women's issues going on. Got the painters in.'

'Oh.'

'What are you up to tonight?'

'Nothing.'

'Do you want to come to Soho with us?'

'Yeah alright.'

'That girl Charlotte is coming. You know, the one Sophie told you about.'

Their flat was a hell of a lot nicer than mine. It had been recently done up with new carpets and new couches. I hadn't been in a place like it in a while. There was a big white bookcase next to the TV stacked with books.

'Yours?'

'No, Soph's. She did English at Uni. She's always reading. Give me music any day.

Is there anything you've read there?'

'A few.'

'What did you do before selling CDs? You've never told me.'

'Oh bits and bobs.'

'Really? Ever travelled?'

'A bit.'

'Where?'

'Lived in South Africa for a while.'

'Oh yeah, what was that like?'

'Yeah alright.'

'Why did you leave?'

'Visa ran out. So, when do you start your job?'

'Tuesday. It's a good opportunity to improve my French and it means getting out of London. I'm sick of this place. I wish Soph would come along but she wants to get a job

here. It's also a good way of saving. They pay for your food and accommodation. Why don't you do it?'

I shrugged. 'Yeah maybe.'

We helped cook dinner and then left for Soho. The platform in the tube station was filled with people; the train had been delayed. 'Where do we have to get off?'

'Soph, I've live in London long enough to know where we are going.'

'I was just interested to see how we were getting there.'

'We make a change there and then just get off at Oxford Circus.'

'The tube map doesn't look much like London, does it?' She said.

'What do you mean?'

'Well, it looks so ordered and rational. It doesn't relate to the way London actually is. It's the most unorganised, confused, detached place I've ever been in.'

'Sophie you talk such bollocks sometimes, you know that?'

'Nick, do you understand what I'm saying?'

'In a way, but there are aspects of London that are like the underground.'

'Like what?'

'You need an access card to get into the ordered bits of it.'

'Now you're both talking bollocks.'

The train came into the station, one of the doors stopped in front of us. The carriage was quite crowded. A lot of young girls in short skirts, high heels and a lot of make-up, and lads with bright blue, orange and yellow shirts with spotted faces. One of them asked me for a cigarette. I gave him one. He wanted to pay me. The girls started laughing at him. 'Damon you twat you don't need to pay the man, he gave it to you.'

'I was just being polite, weren't I?'

Adam and Sophie stood holding hands. We got out at Oxford Circus and walked down through the narrow streets to the O Bar. It was full and we had to wait in the rain for the doorman to let us in. We got a table after a while when some people left and Sophie went to the bar and bought a round. We sat and chatted for a while until Charlotte turned up. She had somebody with her. Adam introduced us.

'Nick, this is Charlotte and, sorry what's your name?'

'.....'

'What?'

'.....'

'Oh yea. Nick this is .....

'What's his name?'

'Don't know, I couldn't fucking hear it. I mean he's totally fucked anyway. So is she.'

Charlotte sat down between Sophie and myself and her boyfriend sat opposite me. To begin with Charlotte only spoke to Sophie. I couldn't hear what they were talking about. The guy she had brought just sat and stared at her. Sophie said something about me and Charlotte turned and started speaking.

'So what do you do?'

'Not much.'

'Great conversationalist you've found here Soph.' She turned to Sophie and then after a while she turned back to me. 'Sorry, what was your name again?'

'Nick.'

'Well Nick I'm trolled.'

'Oh yeah?'

'Have you met my boyfriend?'

'We met, I never caught his name.'

'.....'

'So, what do you do when you're not trolled?'

'I act. What do you when you're not being a wanker?'

'It's difficult to say.'

'What?'

'I sell CDs.'

'So, let me get this straight, you're a CD salesman.'

'Correct.'

She started talking to Sophie and Adam, and her boyfriend finally shifted his eyes from her to me.

'So what do you do mate?'

'I sell CDs.'

'I work in IT support for Orange.'

'The colour?'

'The phone company.'

'Oh.'

'Amy, your friend doesn't know who Orange is.'

'Sophie.'

'What?'

'My name is Sophie.'

'Sorry Sophie, your friend doesn't know who Orange is.'

'I think he was joking.'

'What?'

It was difficult to hear what Adam, Sophie and Charlotte were talking about.

Charlotte's boyfriend sat with his eyes closed and his head resting on his hand. He got up and went to the bar and brought us all back a shot of something. It was difficult to tell what it was. There wasn't much in the shot-glass by the time I got to drink it. He smiled at me. 'Who do you support?'

'The claret and blues.'

'Who?'

'West Ham.'

'Arsenal through and through myself, all the way to the Premiership. Your lads are going down. Thought they'd do well this season, but no, they're going down.' I could hear his accent.

'Where are you from?'

'South Africa.'

'Where about?'

'Cape Town. Ever heard of it?'

'I used to live there.'

'Ja bru it's cool. Fucking home. I miss it. You should go there some time. With pounds bru it's cheap. I dig London though the vibe the English chicks...ja...I...'

He leant back. He didn't fall exactly, but he knocked the person carrying a drink behind him. One of the doormen came up to us and told us that he had to leave. We all had to leave. We went down to the O'Neill's on Wardour Street. We lost him on the way down. Sophie was walking next to me. I could smell her perfume. I hadn't noticed the smell of perfume in a long time. She turned to Charlotte and Adam behind us.

'Where's your boyfriend?'

'What?'

'The guy that you were with. He isn't with us any more.'

'Whatever.'

We got into O'Neill's and went up to the second floor. They wanted to dance. I sat on one of the bar stools next to the bar. Charlotte came and stood between my legs.

'I wish I could remember your name.'

'It doesn't matter.'

'What?'

She was soaking wet with sweat. She had stumbled a few times on the dance floor but this time she fell and didn't get up. I helped one of the doormen take her downstairs while Sophie called her a cab.

'She a friend of yours?'

'Not til tonight.'

'Pity, if she weren't so off her tits she might be worth it.'

We had to wait for the cab to arrive. She sat down on the pavement. A man came up to me and asked me if I had any money, he said he needed it to buy drugs and alcohol.

Adam had disappeared. Charlotte came up to me and leaned against my shoulder. The doorman winked at me.

When the cab came, we put her in. Sophie gave the cab driver the address.

‘Why don’t you go home with her? You’re in there mate,’ said the doorman as we finally got her in the cab. The cab driver looked a bit nervous when she got in his cab. ‘Don’t worry mate,’ I said, ‘she’s thrown it up already.’

When we went back into O’Neill’s we couldn’t find Adam. We looked for a while and then decided to stay in the place where we had left him.

‘So, what happened the night of the fight?’

‘What did Adam tell you?’

‘I’m asking you.’

‘Not much. Darren was being an idiot and Adam pretty much gave him what he was asking for. I hope that’s the story he told you?’

‘Nothing else happened?’

‘Not that I know of. Besides Phil breaking one of my ribs. Why do you ask?’

‘I’m just tired.’

‘Of what?’

‘Nothing.’

‘Do you want a drink?’ I bought her another Smirnoff Ice and we went and sat down.

‘What did you think of Charlotte?’

‘She’s alright, I suppose.’

‘Are we going to see each other when Adam’s away?’

‘As long as Adam’s alright with it.’

'My parents don't think Adam is right for me.'

'What's wrong with him?'

'He went to a bit of a shit Uni.'

'Oh.'

'Shit, I can't imagine what my parents would say if I went out with you.'

'Well, just as well you've got Adam then. But I suppose it's all a matter of degrees.'

She went very quiet. 'Are you alright?' I asked.

'Yeah fine, I've got to get out of here.'

She said she was going to the toilet but she didn't come back. I didn't feel like going home. I decided to go next door to Waxy O'Connor's. It was pretty much the same as O'Neill's but there was something less Plastic-Paddy about the place. The difference was incrementally minute though. I had been standing at the bar for about five or ten minutes when I realised that the person standing two people down from me was Adam.

'Nick mate, where did you go? I've been standing here waiting for you.'

'We weren't here, we were in O'Neill's.'

'What?'

'This is a different place to the one we were in.'

'I had to pay to get in here again after Charlotte left.'

'This is a different bar.'

'What? Where's Soph?'

'She went home.'

'I'm fucked. Let's go to Girls Girls Girls across the road.'

'I don't have any money.'

'It's on me.'

'Sorry mate he can't come in.'

'What?'

'He's too drunk?'

'What's happening?'

'Adam they won't let you in.'

'Why the fuck not?'

'You're too drunk.'

'Fuck it, I need to sit down.'

'You are sitting down.'

'Nick you're my best mate you know that? You know that night at your place I...'

'Yeah, don't worry about it. How much money do you have?' He put his hand in his pocket and then stopped.

'Take it out.'

'Fucking faggot.'

'Adam, just take your fucking wallet out. How much have you got?' He was beginning to annoy me.

'I haven't got one you know. We can't. I mean I'm not gay.'

'For fuck's sake Adam, how much money do you have?'

'Thieving pouf.'

'How much is in your wallet?'

'I don't have any money.'

'How are you getting home?'

'Walking.'

'We're in Soho you live in West Ken.'

'Nick, take me to a night bus.'

'Which one goes near your home?'

'There's one on Oxford Street.'

I lost him somewhere on the way up. He started to run; I didn't stop him. I wandered around Soho for a while. I didn't really know what direction I was walking in. I came back onto Wardour again quite by accident. I went back into the smaller alleyways and ended up at what seemed to be a Japanese reggae bar. There were lots of people with afros and dreadlocks. A guy was playing a metal didgeridoo while someone was mixing on turntables. I stood around at the bar for a while. Somebody came up to me and was speaking to me in some kind of foreign language. Or at least I couldn't make out what they were saying. The person gave me a beer and then disappeared. I necked it and left before they could find their way back.

It got light standing waiting on Oxford Street for the bus. The electronic advisor said that the bus would still be another five minutes but it was definitely standing in front of me. I don't remember how I got from High Street Ken to my flat, but I woke up on Sunday at about three in the afternoon on my couch with a hangover. I got into bed and stayed there the rest of the day. I knew I had spent too much money. The door bell rang once. I ignored it.

Adam had left for Europe. My money was getting pretty tight. Darren wasn't speaking to me. Phil only grunted when I sat next to him. But I had a job interview on Friday. There was no point taking a day off. I went to Euston as usual but instead of heading north after the caf, I went down to Croydon. It meant that at least I would get paid for the day.

Their building was the only one above four storeys in the area. It was still pretty old though. The aluminium framed door at the front of the building was locked. I rang the bell outside, but there was no answer. A few minutes later a man with a large knotted tie walked out and I managed to get to the door before it closed. There was a sign saying out of order on the blue narrow lift doors in the lobby. There was still nobody at the front desk. I looked on the board to see what floor the company was on. Just as I started up the stairs I heard the lift doors open and heard the sound of a man's shoes walking in the lobby. I walked up to the third floor. There were three doors on the landing; each a different kind and a different colour. I tried two; both were locked. The third had a round glass porthole with reinforcing wire inside the glass. A piece of paper had been stuck over it on the inside. I pushed; the door opened. There were lots of people moving around carrying papers and talking to one another. Above the three receptionists was the name of the company. They sat with hands free sets on their heads, staring at their computers. The inside of the office was a lot better than the building and the lift had suggested. I told them who I was and who I was there to meet. The one I spoke to was playing solitaire on her computer. I went and sat down on one of the chairs. The

receptionist couldn't get through to the person I was there to see. After about twenty minutes a fattish woman, wearing Chelsea FC earrings with broken veins on her nose and cheeks, came and collected me at the reception area.

'I don't think you were meant to come for your interview today, but seeing you're here, you might as well come in.'

'The email said Friday the fourteenth at ten.'

'Is today the fourteenth? My boss is busy at the moment so we'll have to wait for him.'

He was sitting in an office, sectioned off from the rest by glass walls, talking on the phone. He was laughing. He put the phone down and beckoned to us to come in.

'So, why have you come to the interview on the wrong day?'

'I didn't. The email said today at ten. I was here at ten. Perhaps there is an issue with the time but certainly not the date.'

'Well you better sit down then.'

He was smiling at me. His tie was skew. The interview seemed okay but four days later I got an email from the woman, with the Chelsea earrings, telling me that it had been tight but that I hadn't got the job. She said that I was too ambitious and that they wanted somebody a bit younger, somebody who was going to stay in the job for a long time.

The next Thursday Mega gave me the sack. It wasn't a surprise. It had been coming for a long time. They had given me two written warnings in the last two weeks. Brian told me outright that the three days I had been ill weren't going to be paid. If I wanted to argue I could take it up with a lawyer. I didn't know what I was going to do about my rent. Captain H wasn't the kind of landlord that would put up with this kind of thing.

On the way back to my flat there was a point's failure on the northern line. I had to get out at Mornington Crescent. I walked down to Tottenham Court Road and pushed into the hundreds of people waiting for buses and trying to get into the underground. I just wanted to get home.

I didn't know what I was going to do for money. I could take the TV down to Cash Converters, it wasn't mine but Goisha wouldn't miss it for a while. I don't think I would get very much for it though. I eventually got out at Earls Court station. I had run out of tobacco. I looked in my wallet at the ten pounds sitting there and thought I could just afford a 50g bag of Golden Virginia. I certainly couldn't get myself a drink. I turned onto the high street and went to the off-license run by a Turkish guy. It sold 50g of Golden Virginia under the counter for four pounds instead of eight. When I walked in, there was a new guy behind the till. I asked for 50g and he took it from the display behind the counter. 'That's eight pounds fifty pence mate.'

'No no, I want the one from under the counter.'

'What? No underthecounter!'

'Look mate, I always buy it from here. Where is Hashim? He always gives it to me from under the counter.'

'No! Hashim back to Turkey. Eight pounds fifty pence!'

I was too tired to have an argument. I thought of leaving it behind and walking out, but I pulled out the ten pounds and paid for it. Shit, I wondered how long it would be till I could buy anything other than instant noodles.

When I got to the front door of my building there was a woman was sitting on the steps. As I walked past her, she smiled at me. She had a gap in her teeth. I didn't feel

like smiling back. I wasn't in the mood. 'Nick!' I turned around and looked at her for a moment. 'Hello, what the hell are you doing here?'

'Well if that's the greeting I'm going to get, next time I won't come.'

'Sorry, I wasn't expecting anybody. I've had a bit of a bad time today.'

'Nicholas, what happened to you?'

'Sophia, I got the sack today. And I just got ripped off at the off-license.'

'Oh, well I had some good luck.'

'Oh yes, what's that?'

'I got a job as a secretary at an employment agency and...'

'Oh.'

'...and my parents sent me some money. I wanted to go out but I have no one else to do it with except you.'

'I'm not really in the mood for going out. What about your mate Charlotte?'

'Nope she's on holiday in South Africa, and I don't know anybody else near here, so it has to be you. Come on let's go out and have some dinner. I haven't been out for ages.'

'I don't have any money. I'm totally skint. I can't afford it.'

'It's on me I don't expect you to pay anything. I thought you knew you were going to get the sack the last time we talked.'

'Yeah, but it's always a shock when it finally happens.'

'What restaurant do you want to go to?'

'Well if you're paying, it's your choice.'

'Ask?'

'Too expensive. And they'd throw me out looking like this.'

'Change.'

'I never change for restaurants.'

'That's an enlightened attitude'

'Well, they never change for me.'

'That doesn't make sense.'

I shrugged.

'I'm in the mood for pizza. Come on Nicholas!'

We walked up High Street Ken and eventually agreed to go to Pizza Hut.

'So, what are you going to do, now you've been fired?'

'I don't know, maybe work in a pub for a while.'

'Why don't you come and sign up at the job agency I'm working at, it's on Oxford Street. I could probably make sure you got regular work.'

'Oh.'

'It's a pretty good deal. About eight quid an hour for most of the work. Can you type and use a computer?'

'Yeah.'

'How much money do you have now?'

'Not a lot.'

'I can lend you some, if you need it.'

'No, I'll survive.'

'Look, I just got some money from my parents and with this job I really don't need it. I really don't mind lending you some.'

'No thanks. I'll be okay.'

'I want you to take it.'

'No.'

'Why not?'

'Because I don't need it and I hardly know you.'

'You are being an idiot.'

'Maybe.'

'Be clever and take the money.'

'That was the first thing you ever said to me; that I wasn't clever.'

'I'm sorry, I can be a bit of a bitch sometimes. I want you to take the money to make up for it.'

'I can't.'

'Yes you can.'

'Sophia. Behave yourself.'

'Well if you are going to be like that then you can get fucked.' She was smiling at me.

'You need money to get fucked.'

'Well then why don't you take it?'

'Because, I don't want to get fucked.'

'I don't believe that for a second.'

The waiter came and took the order, poured the wine and spilt some on the plastic table cloth. Sophie wrote something in the wine, that I couldn't read, and then wiped it out.

‘Anyway, on Friday you must come out with me to the pub. I think we are going to a place called Mash. I’m sure there will be lots of good-looking girls for you.’

‘Thanks, I’ll see.’

‘I’ll buy you drinks, if that’s what you are worried about.’

I said that I would come when I had some money. She got up and went to the toilet. An old man with yellow skin at the table near the window was reading *The Telegraph*. Sophie came back.

‘What are you thinking about?’

‘Oh, I was just looking at the headline.’

‘Oh god, the war. You can’t get away from it. It’s everywhere.’

‘I didn’t buy the paper today. I didn’t realise they had started the bombing.’

‘Are you going to go to the peace march in Hyde Park on Sunday?’

‘No. I shouldn’t think so.’

‘So you agree with war then?’

‘Not really.’

‘Well I’m going to march. Why do we have to subject the Iraqi people to this war? Nobody should have to live under subjection by a foreign force.’

The topic of the war bored me. It was like travelling on the tube; it took hours and one never ended up very far from where one started. I got up and went to the toilet and by the time I got back Sophie had asked for the bill. She paid and we got up and stood outside on the pavement.

‘You must give me a call sometime. And if you want to borrow some money...’

‘I don’t have a phone.’

'I could give you the money to buy a phone.'

'Even if I had one, I couldn't afford the calls.'

She looked in her bag. 'I'll tell you what. Here's 50 p and you can give me a call on a payphone.'

She gave me a hug and kissed me on the cheek. We had to walk in opposite directions. Well, we didn't have to, but I wanted to. I watched her walk down High Street Kensington towards the tube. She didn't turn around.

I went into the Ram's Head and spent two pounds and the fifty pence on a bitter. I walked home afterwards and got into bed; the sheets were freezing. I just lay there for a lot of the night, halfway between sleep and being awake. I just couldn't get to sleep. I turned on the clock radio next to my bed. There was somebody talking about something. I didn't understand. Then I realised the ground troops had moved into Iraq. I got up and switched on the TV. They seemed to be cutting holes into the Iraqi troops all over the place. I sat up for most of the night watching the blocky jigsaw pictures of the reports from the embedded journalists on their satellite phones. I don't know when I fell asleep.

At about one in the afternoon the next day I went to Sophie's job agency and signed up with them. I saw Sophie sitting on the other side of the office. She smiled when she saw me. A woman called Jane gave me a few tests; typing, spelling, computer literacy. They were all fairly easy. I couldn't remember PowerPoint and some of the Excel stuff. But it wasn't that important. She asked what kind of work I wanted to do. I told her that I would take anything that paid money. She seemed quite nice but she warned me that there wasn't much work around at the moment. If work was going, she said that they would give me a call. I didn't have a number to give them. I said that my mobile had been stolen. She suggested that I call every week to check if there was anything going. I walked out and looked at Sophie. She didn't see me.

I had to walk home through Hyde Park; I had no money to catch a bus or the tube. As I made my way down Oxford Street, towards Marble Arch, I saw a sign in the window of a luggage shop advertising the position of a sales assistant. It was a quite a large shop. I walked in, and noticed the strong smell of new leather and polish. I went up to the counter in the middle of the shop where a smallish woman in her early twenties with nose stud was just about to finish serving a customer. When I asked her about the job she didn't seem to know what I was talking about. I took her to the window and showed her the sign. She called the manager. He came out and cautiously looked around the shop. She pointed me out. He came over and shook my hand and showed me into his office at the back.

'Well that was quick; I just put that sign up. Normally have to go through head office but we're kind of desperate. Just fired a guy for smoking something illegal on the job.

You don't smoke do you?'

'Only cigarettes.'

'Good. I mean not good but you know.' He laughed. He looked a bit nervous.

'Any criminal record?' His face went red.

'No.'

'Sorry, I have to ask that one. Had a guy in that got really offended at that question.

When we caught him, um, stealing, we found he had a record. Do you have any experience in sales?' I gave him the list of things I had done over the last few years.

And I gave him a copy of my CV that I had on me. 'Do you know anything about luggage?'

'I've used it in the past. But I've never sold it if that's what you mean.'

'Oh well, don't worry about that, it's not brain surgery or rocket science.' He glanced at my CV. 'Your CV looks good. Did you really go there?' He said pointing at something on my CV. 'And you've worked in all these places?'

'Yeah.'

'Okay, well, good. If you just take a seat outside I just want to check up on some of these references.'

While I sat outside in the small corridor I took out my tobacco to roll a cigarette. I pulled out what I thought were my rolling papers. It turned out to be three rolled up twenty quid notes. I thought somebody must have mistaken my tobacco for theirs and put it in by mistake. But where? Then I realised that I had left it on the table while I

was having dinner with Sophie. She must have put it in there when I went to the toilet. I didn't like the idea of her giving me money.

Anthony took a few minutes and then came out. He told me that I could start the following Monday if I wanted to. I took it. The pay wasn't great but it was a job in two weeks. He couldn't have checked my references very well; the one didn't live in England anymore and the other was Sophie. I had to wait eleven days before I started though.

I walked home through Hyde Park, through South Kensington and I went to the Sainsbury's on Cromwell Road. I bought twenty packets of instant noodles, three Sainsbury's brand boxes of fish fingers, at a pound each, some tuna, curry paste and two bottles of whiskey on special at two for the price of one. It all came to forty eight pounds.

Saturday was difficult. I went to the pub to watch football. But I was asked to leave when they saw me without a pint. I went to another pub and finished the game. I came home and knocked on Ron's door, there was no answer. I went up to my room and lay on the bed. I had a small glass of whiskey. I wanted to do something but it was difficult to think of what to do. Some random thoughts came into my head. There was a girl I had seen on the tube once. I never spoke to her but occasionally she came into my head.

On Sunday the war demonstrators came past my flat on their way to Hyde Park. I watched them for a while. There were a lot of anti-American/Bush slogans, a few were anti-Blair and there were the usual placards about oil and globalization. I read for a bit and had the TV on. I kept on thinking about money. My credit card had been cancelled about a year ago. And taking the TV down to Cash Converters might be a difficult thing to do. Fuck, this no money thing was getting to me already. I went and investigated the

padlock on the gas meter under the sink. It was one of those windup things from the sixties that had been modified to take the new coins. I stuck a pair of nail scissors into the lock and it opened. Goisha had only collected the coins twice since I'd been there. I took ten pounds out; that still left well over thirty pounds in there. I'd put the money back when I had it.

When the demonstrators had disappeared I went out and went for a walk. I walked past Sophie's place. I knew she was probably at the demonstration. I didn't ring the bell. I walked back up to Earls Court and went to the Hansom Cab.

There were a lot of anti-war demonstrators about; everybody was talking about the war. I bought a Guinness and took a paper from one of the racks and sat in the corner on a stool next to a small wooden shelf attached to the wall. I had a sip and lit a cigarette. A group of students were sitting at the table next to me. One of them came up to me and asked me if I had been to Hyde Park. I shook my head. 'You see,' he said turning to his friends, 'it's people like him that allow these killings to take place.' A man who had been sitting at a small table by himself shouted across at them.

'And it's people like you who allow people to be killed under oppressive regimes.'

'America kills who it wants to.'

'And Saddam didn't?'

'That's not the point.'

'At least Bush doesn't kill his own people.'

'What do you think 9/11 was? The US government knew about it, they let it happen so they could justify things like Iraq. It was the same with Pearl Harbour.'

'You don't know your history mate.'

'History is my major...'

I sat and listened for a while and then went back to the sports pages. West Ham could still technically stay up but it would take a miracle.

University of Cape Town

The next Monday was grey outside. I felt almost excited to get up and take my suit off the hook behind the door. I had ironed my shirt on the table the night before but it had creased while sitting on the back of the chair. It didn't matter; it would be hidden by my suit jacket. I got dressed, walked downstairs, looked at the mosaic as I opened the door and got out onto the pavement. I had not expected the air to be warm. My shoes made a familiar sound on the cement paving. But it was good to know I wasn't going up to Euston. There were bright green sprouts on the plane trees up Old Brompton Road. A pigeon near South Kensington tube station was eating a chicken leg; by the looks of it from Kentucky. I kicked out at it. It flew a few meters and then went back to it. I warned the bird that cannibalism was the enemy of progress and that eating our American allies wasn't going to solve anything. It was deaf to the advice.

I realised by the time I got up to Kensington Gardens that I was going to be late if I didn't catch the bus. I got on a number 10 after a few minutes wait and it went up to the corner of Oxford Street and Park Lane. The bus stopped in the traffic. It sat there for the next few minutes without moving. I jumped off the old Route Master and pushed my way through the crowds and through the thick throng outside Bond Street. I arrived at Gulliver's just before nine.

Nobody took much notice of me when I arrived. I stood and waited at the counter for the assistant manager. She had dark curly hair; probably dyed. I already knew her name was Jackie.

'Nick, it's normally customary for staff to use the staff entrance.'

‘Oh right. Where’s that?’

‘And it’s also normal for new employees to arrive at half eight and not nine o’clock.’

‘Anthony told me nine.’

‘He never says nine.’ I showed her the slip of paper he had given me. It said nine o’clock.

‘Oh god, in future don’t listen to him. Between you and me, he always gets things wrong. Next time, rather listen to me and we’ll get on famously. And anyway he’s only senior to me because he’s worked here a year longer than me.’

She went and rearranged some bags and told a few people to clean shelves and check their stock.

‘First you need a tour of the shop and then we’ll go through the products we sell. Go and put your coat in the back. And I better tell you this now; we don’t wear striped ties here. It’s company policy. It’s plain colours only.’

‘I wasn’t told.’

‘Well now I’m telling you. What is your experience in sales?’ I listed the various jobs I had done over the years. She didn’t seem impressed. After walking me round the shop she took me into the storeroom at the back and went through the ranges that they sold. She gave me a pen and paper so I could take notes. But I didn’t get the chance to take any. ‘This is Prada’s parachute-material range.’

‘Oh.’

‘Haven’t you heard of it?’

‘No, I don’t think so.’

‘God, you’ve got so much to learn.’

‘This is ballistic nylon; Samsonite’s polypropylene range; hand-stitched leather.’

‘I’ve heard of that.’

‘I don’t know how you are going to learn all of this. I mean I hope you know correct sales procedure. You know saying “look at this lovely bag I have to sell you” simply doesn’t work. It’s incorrect sales procedure and will not be tolerated in this store. The salesman’s role is to get the potential buyer to tell the salesman what they want and then for the salesman to demonstrate how the item fulfils customer needs. Once one has established an honest rapport with the client, only then can correct sales procedure be enacted.’

‘I had no idea sales could be so complicated.’

‘Well you better learn quickly or you’ll find yourself without a job.’

We went and had a coffee in the back together after the induction. I took some of the product catalogues and told her I would read up about them during my lunch.

‘So what are your plans? Gulliver’s is the biggest travel goods company in the south-east. Personally, and don’t tell anybody, but, I have a job lined up as a junior buyer at Selfridges.’

‘Is that good?’ She raised her eyebrow.

‘What do you think?’

She was called away by Anthony to do some work on the shop floor. Some of the other people came in and out and some of them introduced themselves. A guy called Stuart came in and shook hands with me.

‘So, you’ve met Miss Piggy. Well the worst is over, it’s only the customers that can get to you now. Don’t take any notice of her. If you’ve got a problem go to Anthony, he’s alright.’

After the coffee I was sent out onto the shop floor to polish knobs and dust shelves. A customer asked me a few questions and I found myself selling a bag. I found out later it was called a holdall and not a carry-bag as I had been calling it. It wasn’t that difficult.

At lunch I went to a sandwich bar with Stuart and a guy called Sean, who shared the same lunch break. Jackie was already sitting in there when we walked in. ‘What the fuck is she doing here?’ Stuart said quite loudly as we waited for the only available table to be cleared; it was next to Jackie’s. We sat talking about football and paging through the tabloids we had bought on the way up. Jackie kept her back turned to us. Sean turned to the front of the *Mirror* and looked up at Stuart.

‘Fucking hell, do you see the Americans killed sixty people in a market place yesterday?’

‘They’re also doing a pretty good job of killing us and themselves while they are at it.’

Jackie turned to Stuart. ‘I hope those American imperialists kill more of themselves. They are so incompetent. Did you see they killed all those people in the marketplace yesterday?’

‘Yeah, we were just talking about it,’ Sean answered.

‘The Americans have denied it though,’ I said.

‘Of course they would.’

I went back to reading a survey in the *Sun*. It claimed that 46% of meals consumed at home, in Britain, were eaten in solitude. Stuart carried on talking about the war.

‘If the Americans with all their high tech weaponry are killing themselves can you just imagine what the Iraqi’s must be doing? I mean, all those surface to air missiles that they seem to be firing at absolutely nothing, where the hell are they all landing? The Scuds that they are firing are landing all over the shop.’

‘Look Stuart, I bet you the Iraqi’s are far more competent than the Americans. Have you seen the Iraqi’s have stopped their advance 60 miles outside Baghdad? I think this is when the real war is going to begin.’

‘Soldiers have to rest at some point; there are lines of supply that have to be established.’

‘Look Stuart, I don’t think you know what you are talking about. The Iraqi’s would rather die for Saddam than allow the Americans to march into Baghdad.’

‘Look Jackie, you don’t know what the fuck you are talking about I was in the Royal Engineers for two years.’

‘You can’t speak to me like that.’

‘Like what.’

‘Using that language. I’m your boss.’

‘Whatever.’

Stuart got up and paid at the counter. I carried on reading the paper. Sean finished his sandwich, got up and left. I still had twenty minutes and half a wholegrain tuna mayonnaise bap to finish. I picked up the *Mirror* Sean had left on the table. I turned to

the back and read for the third time that day about Defoe's 83<sup>rd</sup> minute equaliser against Southampton.

'I'll give you some advice,' Jackie said joining me at the table. 'Stay clear of Stuart. Just because he works for a concession he thinks he can get a way with being disrespectful.'

I didn't understand what a concession was, but I nodded and went back to eating my sandwich and looking at the paper. I found out later that certain people who worked in the store didn't actually work for Gulliver's, but rather for a specific luggage company that sold its brand in the store.

'You better get back to work.'

'I thought I had ten minutes'

'I'm telling you, you better get back to work and you can't have a creased shirt like that in future.'

I got up, paid for my sandwich and walked slowly to the shop and had a cigarette outside the staff entrance.

Despite the new jargon it was pretty much the same as most sales jobs. There was really no difference. There was a lot of jargon but it wasn't that difficult once you got to know it. There were words like wheels, handles, frames, hard cases, soft cases, leather (patent or otherwise), gladstone bags, vanity cases, small holdalls, large holdalls, BA's hand-luggage specs, parachute material, ballistic nylon, nylon weaves, polyester-based fabrics, nylon and polyester blends, chrome-finished inter-locking NASA-specified heat-resistant computer bags.

The jargon was, in Jackie's words, good sales procedure and was part of the stores policy to fulfil customer needs. 'Customer needs', or what I found out later Stuart called 'customers calculated risk', was what this job was all about. It was alright. I almost started enjoying going to work for a while.

University of Cape Town

By the end of the month I was flat broke. I had only paid part of my rent with the money I had got from the Benefits Office. I had assured Captain Hambridge that I would be able to pay him back at the end of the month. He wasn't happy, but Ron had helped me smooth things out. Ron had been in the building for ten years and they knew each other quite well. He was about the only person I had anything to do with that month. He would ask me out for the occasional drink down at one pub or another. He paid without grumbling. He said he was happy for the company. The rest of the month I stayed in my flat and read, or watched the war or the news on the SARS epidemic.

We were sitting in The Richmond together on one of my days off, somewhere close to the end of the month. He was talking to me about something; I can't remember what. I was half-listening, half-watching the television behind him. There were some Iraqi soldiers on a bridge in Baghdad. A BBC journalist was standing next to them. He seemed more interested in fiddling with something in his ear, than about what was unfolding in front of him. The soldiers were firing into some reeds on the side of the river. Civilians, soldiers, cameramen and men carrying microphones were running around in circles, pointing, shouting and occasionally lying on the ground. A speedboat arrived. There was more firing into a new patch of reeds that one might have hidden an Easter egg in, with only a modicum of success. They started setting the reeds on fire. God knows what they were doing; the sound was turned down.

'Fucking hell, look what's going on down in Iraq.' Ron had been watching the other television behind me. 'Fucking hell, they're going to kill coalition soldiers in front of a

BBC journalist. I just don't understand the world no more.' The barman turned up the sound. The journalist said that somebody had seen pilots land in the area after being shot down. It was all unconfirmed. I didn't want to watch. I didn't want to see those poor bastards being killed.

Nothing happened. There was more shooting, more burning, more running up and down. The cameras of about five different journalists were trained on the river bank near the bridge. But nothing emerged out of the reeds. 'Fucking hell I wouldn't like to be them poor bastards,' Ron said, still watching the TV behind me.

'I can't imagine they'll make many friends there. Big cities can be unfriendly places.'

'Reminds me of the Blitz, all of this. I can't help but feel sorry for those poor Iraqi bastards in Baghdad. Still I'd prefer to live under Bush than Saddam.'

'Do you remember the Blitz?'

'I was moved out for the early part but I remember those fucking V1s and V2s coming over. Fucking horrible that was. I suppose it's about to happen again, with these fucking lunatics around. It's no different I suppose. All me life there has been the threat of bombs in London.' He swallowed the last of his pint. 'I spoke to that lady friend of yours the other day.'

'Sophie?'

'Who's Sophie?'

'Never mind. What lady friend?'

'The one from The Blackbird, the one who always asks about you.'

'The sixty-year-old.'

‘Come on, be fair, she’s only about fifty. She’s taken quite a shine to you.’

‘We’d both give each other heart attacks.’

‘She’s not bad. You could do with somebody you know. Okay, she might be a bit old for you. But you’re a young lad; you should find somebody.’

‘Yeah. Perhaps.’

‘No, I’m being serious mate - you can’t live off drink alone. If an old bastard like meself can get someone there’s no reason why a good-looking lad like yourself can’t.’

Ron bought me a pint and then went off to meet his lady friend. It was strange to see him smile each time he mentioned her name. I sat and waited to see what had happened about the pilots but nobody seemed to know. They lost interest and went back to the studio. I went home, went to bed and fell asleep at about half eight.

Work was pretty uneventful. I went out with Stuart and Sean once. They were alright. Stuart had been to a Poly and studied computers back in the eighties and then joined the army. He had actually got onto a decent little number here, working for a concession, selling some of the most expensive luggage on the market. He made an absolute fortune on commission. Sean was fresh out of Uni.

I was counting the days to payday. I had been walking to and from work and had borrowed some money off Ron to survive. By the end of the month I had used every scrap of goodwill, every free hand out and used all but fifty-two pence in my account. I owed Ron about ninety quid, Sophie the money she had given me and Goisha a few boxes of cigarettes and the money from the gas meter which was now about thirty pounds. Not to mention Captain H’s rent. I had lost a hell of a lot of weight. My two pairs of trousers just managed to hold onto my hips and I could feel them slipping down

further and further each morning. The thing that annoyed me most was that I couldn't go to the pub when I wanted to. But, other than that, I survived alright.

And, in the end, payday arrived. There was a lot of excitement at work. For me, it was just relief. They suggested going to a place called Mash on Friday. I remembered Sophie had mentioned it. For some reason the name had stuck in my mind. Perhaps it was something to do with the television programme I used to watch with my father. It had its own micro-brewery with a whole range of its own beers. It wasn't really my kind of place, with retro-leather couches and seventies lights on the ceiling, but it was alright for a drink.

When we got there it was packed with lots of people drinking cocktails. I bought myself some kind of beer for over three quid and was standing against one of the walls listening to Anthony and Jackie talking about work. I suppose I was kind of looking around at the various people. A lot of them were on mobiles. Everybody seemed to be talking more loudly than usual. Perhaps it was something to do with the fact that most of London had been paid that Thursday. I wasn't really listening to the conversation in front of me. I noticed Sophie. She was standing with a group of people in the other room. I was surprised when I saw her. I wasn't sure if I really wanted to go over. I knew I should; I did owe her sixty quid. She smiled at me and gave me a kiss. 'Hello. What are you doing here?'

'I got a job just down the road the day I came to your agency.'

'Oh god, I wonder why we haven't bumped into each other before, I'm in here all the time.'

'This is the first time I've been in here.'

'Oh, let me introduce you to the people I work with.' She went around calling peoples' names out.

'So, how's Adam?'

'What?'

'How is Adam?'

'Alright, become an assistant to the one of the managers in Paris.'

'Oh cool. Thank you for the money by the way. I owe you.' She was smiling at me.

'What?'

'The money, I owe you.'

'No problem, pay me back whenever.'

'I nearly used them as rolling papers.'

'What?' The music was too loud. I didn't feel like standing and shouting.

'Never mind.'

'You forgot about the fifty pence. You owe me a call.' I smiled. I stood in her circle for a while. A few people asked me what I did. I could hear the guy next to me mention Bush. The war had just ended the day before. I went up next to Sophie's ear.

'Sophie, I'm going to go back to the people I work with. It was nice seeing you. I'll get you that money sometime.'

'Okay. What are you doing this weekend?'

'Nothing.'

The guy who mentioned Bush attracted her attention. I didn't feel like standing there. I started to go back. She grabbed my arm as I turned.

'What about tea in the Holland Park tearooms on Saturday?'

‘Um, alright.’

‘About three?’

I nodded and I went back to the people from work. I saw her a few times out of the corner of my eye. She was standing having some kind of conversation with the guy who had mentioned Bush. I had another drink, which was about all I could afford, and went home. I decided to walk, although I suppose I did have money to take the tube. It had been a hot day and I could still feel the heat in the night. I walked down Park Lane past all the garages. I stopped at the Jaguar Garage. I saw in the window that my trousers were bunched up at the bottom of my legs; I pulled them up. God, I really needed to buy a belt and probably a new suit. I crossed the road and walked towards Hyde Park Corner, past the statue of Achilles lit up by a spotlight hidden under the plane trees. I remember the statue had always annoyed my mother. She had said it didn’t portray anything of that jealous petty aspect to his character. But, what’s petty about losing a woman to a friend. I walked down to Knightsbridge, Harrods and along the Old Brompton Road.

When I got back I opened the Housing Benefits pay slip that was waiting for me on the hallway floor. I tried to dislodge some of the tiles in the hall by tapping them with my shoe. But none came loose. They were still paying me based on the money from the job before. It meant that I had about forty quid extra. I had been hoping that that might be the case.

I was sitting outside at a round wooden table, drinking a lukewarm cup of tea that tasted like it had been brewed in a rusty barrel, when Sophie arrived. The sun was out but there was a cold wind blowing off the football fields. She had a copy of the *Guardian* tucked under her arm. She looked quite pretty with her blond hair clipped on the top of her head. She was wearing a short denim skirt with black stockings. Her cheeks looked slightly red and her eyes, behind her black-rimmed glasses, were watering.

‘Why the hell are you sitting out here? Surely it’s nicer inside?’

‘Not really.’

‘Why not?’

‘There is a waitress in there shouting orders.’

‘It’s too cold to be out here.’

‘It’s too noisy in there.’

‘The waitress can’t be that bad.’

‘It’s not just the waitress, it’s the plates and eight-year-olds and young couples with runny noses holding hands complaining to one another about the waitress.’

‘I hate sitting out in the cold.’

‘It’s summer. If you concentrate you can feel the sun.’

‘It’s not summer; it’s the end of spring.’

She slapped the paper down on the table.

‘This wasn’t my idea.’

‘It wasn’t mine either.’

‘If I’m going to sit out here you are going to have to give me a cigarette. And you’re going to have to light it for me.’

I laughed and lit her a cigarette. She started paging through the newspaper. The waitress came out and Sophie ordered a cup of hot chocolate.

‘God, I see what you mean about the waitress. She’s awful. What kind of clothes is she wearing?’

‘I was just thinking that she was rather attractive.’

‘Oh come on. She looks like a frog.’

‘She’s not that bad. I was thinking that I might ask her out for a drink.’

‘I thought you never asked girls out. I thought you didn’t fancy it.’

‘You can often be attracted by the things that repulse you.’

‘Well then, the waitress must be your ideal.’

‘How’s Adam by the way? I haven’t heard anything from him since he left.’

‘He’s alright. He emails, he phones constantly. It really becomes a pain to reply to him all the time.’

‘I thought that’s the kind of thing women liked.’

‘Not all woman.’ The conversation paused. I gave her another cigarette and lit it for her. ‘Look I’m sorry I’m in a bad mood.’

‘No, no need to apologise, its good entertainment, it’s like being an embedded journalist.’

‘Are you always going to take pot shots at me?’

‘You let off so much heat; it makes you an easy target. Don’t worry about it Sophie - it’s only friendly fire.’

She looked back down at her paper. I took the sport-section out. It was do or die for West Ham today. There was no way of watching the game though; I would have liked to have seen it. Win and we might stay up, lose and we were going down. Sophie and I sat pretty much in silence for the rest of the time looking through the paper. Eventually, she looked up from the weekend section. 'Do you ever go to exhibitions?'

'I used to, but I haven't been to one in ages.'

'Adam never goes with me. I was wondering if you wanted to come with me.'

'Depends what it is, but I'll agree to it in principle.'

'What are you doing after this?'

'I thought a call in at the pub might be in order. What are you up to?'

'The pub sounds good.'

We finished with the paper, paid the bill and walked through the park past some of the homeless people sitting in groups at some of the benches. We crossed over High Street Kensington and walked into the Hansom Cab.

'So, what's your job like?'

'Okay, not much to it really.'

'Lots of girls. I saw the one with the dark hair giving you the eye the other night.'

'What Jackie?'

'Sorry, I forgot you don't do girls.'

'No, she's just, um.'

'She's just um what?'

'You'd have to meet her.'

'Are you interested in her?'

‘Not really.’

‘Why not? She’s really pretty.’

‘You know,’ she said when we were standing at the bar waiting to order our drinks, ‘I don’t think you are half as reclusive and emotionally dead as you like to think you are. It just makes it easier for you, so you don’t have to face up to any kind of emotion.’

‘Maybe.’

‘I think you are just one of these people who just doesn’t want to get hurt. You’re basically a coward.’

‘Jesus, don’t get too close to the bone. I’ve lost too much weight in the last while already.’

‘Why don’t you go up and ask that waitress or this girl from work to go out with you. Would it really kill you to do that?’

‘No, but they’d be eternally grateful.’

‘Would they? How do you know that?’

‘Just guessing.’

‘Why don’t you ever try to do something?’

‘Like what?’

‘Write a book or try or go to an audition. Go to Uni. I mean what are you doing with your life?’

‘Nothing, as I’m sure somebody must have told you at university, is also something.’

‘God you are a tosser.’

‘I’m trying to earn money so I can look for a better job.’

‘So once you get money, what are you going to do?’

'I have to get the money first.'

'What do you want to do?'

'I've never fancied working in offices. I've done it before. I used to get lock-jaw from smiling all the time. But I suppose I'll end up in an office somewhere.'

'You don't have to smile.'

'I'd hate to find myself crawling up somebody's arse. I hate doing that. And it seems to me that it's either smile or to do the old retreat from Kabul.'

'What?'

'Crawl along the Khyber Pass. It's why sometimes I think I'm happier doing what I do.'

'I never thought you were one of these boring twats to go on about not joining the rat-race.'

'What? I'm neck deep in the rat-race. The only thing I really have against offices, besides the smiling, is that I don't like listening to HR departments telling me they are looking after my best interests when they are being paid by the MD to specifically not look after my best interests. Other than that I really couldn't give a shit.'

'So there is no anti rat-race cause you are silently suffering for. No war against social privilege that you are fighting against.'

'Jesus no.'

She laughed out loud for the first time. She was pretty when she laughed. 'I mean, I agree with you, things like privilege and corporate-speak are repulsive, but you just have to get over it. There are things like the war that you should protest against but you can't do anything about the rest of it.' The bell rang for closing-time and we got up and walked

towards Cromwell Road. It was cold outside and it had been raining. The roads were wet, the trees dripping; the cars were noisily throwing up spray from the small puddles. My head was spinning slightly. We had been in the pub since five o'clock.

'I need another cigarette,' she said.

'I only have one left. We'll have to halve it.'

She slipped her arm into mine as we walked.

'Well,' she said.

'Well,' I said.

'Aren't you going to do something?'

'What? About my job?'

She leant forward, took the cigarette out of my mouth, and we kissed. It was a bloody stupid thing to do.

University of Cape Town

# Book 3

University of Cape Town

I got up and put my clothes on and walked to the nearest tube station. I spent most of the day in the storeroom sorting out stock. Jackie checked on me a few times. Anthony came in at one point and told me that he wanted me on the shop floor, but Jackie had given me too many things to do.

West Ham had gone down. It meant at least a season, but probably more, of First Division football. A last minute equaliser by Di Canio, against Birmingham City, had only meant a draw, which wasn't enough to stay up. That would be the last goal he'd score for us. Some supporters were saying that, at least now, we had a chance of winning some silverware. That wasn't much of a consolation. I took the last Samsonite hard case with brown leather trim and slipped it into the only available space on the metal rack. 'Well!' I hadn't heard Jackie come in. 'You've been a good little worker-bee today, haven't you?' I ticked the last box on the stock list and hung the clipboard on the nail behind the door. 'By the way I've put you onto cashing up with me today, because Manisha has to go somewhere straight after work.'

I sat next to her in the office counting the tills and cross-checking the readouts. We didn't say anything to each other. She watched me adding up the numbers. She kept sighing and tapping her pen on the desk.

'Come on! I wish you'd use a calculator.'

'Thirty-three pounds and fifty-two pence short.'

'That can't be right!' I shrugged. 'Add it up again.' I did it again and got the same answer.

‘Right, well, we’ll have to do it with a calculator now. I really hate it when you add it up like that. From now on you are going to have to use a calculator. I mean if you can’t get it right, you can’t get it right. That’s why we have these things, you know.’ I called out the numbers and she put them into the calculator. ‘Hmm.’ She looked at the final total. ‘We’ll have to do a cash check in the morning.’ She put the slip in the cash bag. ‘So,’ she said, bending down to put the money into the safe. ‘Did you get lucky last night?’

‘What?’

‘Well, you’ve been smiling all day.’

‘Really?’

‘Stuart put twenty quid on it. Sean said you didn’t do things like that. Well, did you?’

‘I don’t know. Depends what you mean.’

‘Well, if I have to spell it out. Did you get shagged last night?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘What do you mean you don’t know? Yes or no.’

‘Ah.’

‘So you did.’

She looked disgusted. She sniggered and walked off to set the alarm. When we got out the door she turned without saying goodbye. When I said goodbye, she just grunted. I thought of going to see Sophie at her office but I decided against it. She would have probably left already anyway.

It was light enough these days to walk home, through Hyde Park. The sun had been out the whole day and it was still warm walking home. It was only beginning to get dark

as I crossed the road over the Serpentine into Kensington Gardens. I turned north, for some reason, into the park and I walked up to the statue of Peter Pan. I hadn't been there for about twenty years. My father had a picture of my mother and me standing next to it. It had always stood on the table in the hallway in one of those plastic moulded picture frames from the eighties. I often wondered if I could actually remember being there, or if I had just placed myself there, because of the picture. It was getting pretty chilly and dark by the time I got to it. The park was closing in fifteen minutes and the sun was setting behind the steeple of a church in the distance. There were a few people around but most were making their way out towards the gates. I stood in front of it, looking at the fairies and rabbits twirled around the base. I was alone for a few minutes. I tried to think if I could remember my mother standing next to me. But I was only able to remember the image of her in the photograph. I walked around the statue and ran my fingers over a twisting bronze fairy. It had retained some of the heat of the day but when I held one of the rabbit's ears the bronze went cold. My eyes started watering in the evening wind.

I saw somebody and looked up. There was a woman standing there with her child. She asked me to take a photograph for her. She was an American. I held the camera and pressed the button.

She thanked me and walked towards the northern exit of the gardens. I sat on a bench to the left of the statue. I thought about last night, and lay down. I pulled my suit jacket around me and lay there looking up at the sky and then closed my eyes.

'Hey there!' I got up. It was the American woman.

'Are you lost?'

'A little, I'm not sure. What direction is Kensington High Street?'

'Oh, it's down there.'

'Oh right.' She looked uncertain.

'Look, I'm about to walk in that direction. If you follow me, I'll show you.'

'Sure, thanks, that's very kind of you.' I wasn't in the mood for conversation. I walked slightly in front of her. But after a while she caught up the pace and walked beside me. 'I'm no good with directions. I really am one of those nightmare American tourists who just can't look after themselves. Gosh, I just find London so confusing. Beautiful but confusing.'

'Do you find it beautiful?'

'What, you don't like it here?'

'I suppose there are worse places.'

'Oh my god, this place is so amazing. It's just so beautiful. I mean look at the steeple over there and those reddening clouds. I mean, you just don't get picturesque scenes like that where I'm from. You don't realise how lucky you are coming from a place like this.'

Her little girl remained quiet and hid behind her mother's leg. She was wearing tiny blue leather shoes. I smiled at her. She looked unsure of me. Her mother chatted on about her experiences in London. The galleries she had been to and the restaurants she had eaten in. 'What's your favourite restaurant. I want to discover places outside of the tourist guidebooks. And my husband never wants to go to small restaurants or pubs.'

'I don't really go to restaurants, but I can tell you about pubs.'

'What? You never go to restaurants?'

'Not really.'

'I'm sure you must take your girlfriend out to places...I'm sorry do you have a girlfriend? Have I said something wrong? Oh my god, I just don't understand you English. I've been married to one for nine years but I still don't understand you.'

'No no, I don't have a girlfriend that's all.'

'What? A handsome guy like you? I don't believe it. You English are so funny, you just can't take compliments. I don't understand why not, I mean you've got such a beautiful country, with history and art and literature. I'm sure you must have got loads of compliments over the years. Why haven't you learnt to deal with them?'

'Something to do with embarrassment, I suppose.'

'Why?'

'Post-colonial depression? A guilty national pride? A stunted emotional life? I have no idea.'

'I was told by somebody that it's a reaction to the intellectual and political dishonesty of the past hundred years, and also something to do with the malaise of religion over here. He said that it's made English people distrust the spoken word.'

'I think that's giving us too much credit. I think that it's just cultural. The French eat frogs, we can't take compliments.'

'That's really interesting...Sorry that wasn't meant as a compliment, it was just an aside. So, I want to get to Hammersmith from here. What's the easiest way to get there?'

'Oh, when we get onto the high street you just need to take the Number 10.'

'What's that?'

'A bus down to Hammersmith. I'm taking it too.'

As we got onto High Street Kensington and crossed the road a number 10 stopped in front of us. We got on the bus together. Somebody made room for her to sit down, I stood next to her. She sat with her child on her lap. It was still hot inside the bus. As it swung around the corner, somebody pushed me into her. I had to hold onto the stainless steel pole to stop myself from landing on her lap. Her child started crying. The man sitting next to her grunted and turned to look out the window. 'I've got to get off now. You just take this bus to the end, and that's Hammersmith.'

'Well thank you so much for helping me. I would have been lost without you. And it was really interesting talking to you as well. Perhaps we can have lunch sometime? Here's my card. I've just moved to London and I don't really know anybody.' She slipped her card into my hand as I got off the bus. I was going to tell her that I had a girlfriend but I realised that I had already told her that I didn't. I'm not sure why I thought of saying that; she was married after all. I looked at the card as I turned into Earls Court Road. Dr Ashleigh Stein University College Hospital. As I walked past a bin I thought of throwing it in, but I put it back in my pocket.

I checked the mail on the table when I got back, walked up the stairs and knocked on Ron's door.

'Hey Ron, fancy a drink?'

'Meeting me lady friend, but I think we might just have time to get in a short down the Courtfield. Just need to finish shaving and I'll meet you down there. See you in a minute young man.'

I walked down to the Courtfield and ordered a drink from the blonde behind the bar. Ron came in, a few minutes later, wearing a sports jacket, checked shirt and tie. He ordered a whiskey and ice and sat down.

‘A lady friend of yours was round looking for you a few hours ago. Looked like the same girl who was around with some lad a few months ago.’

‘Oh right.’

‘She’s a pretty little thing that one.’

‘Yeah, she’s alright.’

‘Never seen you with a girl before. You’re not that way, are you?’

‘No, not that I know of.’

‘Sorry, I don’t mean to pry or nothing. But just seems a bit odd, a big, good-looking lad like you without a girl.’

‘Just haven’t met the right one yet, I suppose.’

‘How old are you anyway?’

‘Twenty-eight.’

‘About time you got looking then, i’n it?’

‘Yeah, I suppose.’

‘Got a granddaughter up in Northampton. Twenty-three I think she is. Coming down to London fairly soon. Good-looking, not as well educated as you, I wouldn’t suppose. But a clever little thing in her own way. At college doing something to do with computers I think it is. You could come round when she’s round if you like.’

‘Thanks Ron. I’ll do that.’

‘You’re a good lad Nick. Sitting drinking with an old fool like meself. Anyway I’ll leave you with this young lass behind the bar.’ He gave the girl a wink and got up and left. When he had gone I finished my drink and decided to go down to Sophie’s flat. The time was about half nine by the time I got there. I rang the bell, but there was no answer. I wrote ‘came rang left Nicholas’ on an unfolded cigarette packet and put it in the letter box, and walked home.

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It was three minutes past two o'clock on Thursday. That much I knew for certain. I had been watching the progress of the clock on one of the pillars behind the tills, while helping a customer. He was refusing to like anything I showed him. Too small; too big; not enough side pockets; he didn't like the colour of the zips; too black; he didn't want a hard case and he didn't like the idea of soft cases. He remembered a bag they used to make in France in the 1970's; it looked like a trunk. He didn't want that either, he just wanted to know whether they still made them. They were good bags. I suggested to him that he might want to look at the range at Selfridges. He didn't like Selfridges; better than Harrods but still no bloody good. Gulliver's had always been better. There was nothing more I could say to him. He wandered off and looked at our ranges for the third time.

'Hullo, I'm looking for a case.'

'You couldn't be a bit more specific could you?'

'I want a case with a handle. But not too black.'

'I think we've got one of those in stock. Hold on, let me see. Yes here it is.'

'No, that's not what I'm looking for at all!'

'Yes it is!'

'What kind of a salesman are you? I thought the customer was always right?'

'Not in this case.'

'But this case doesn't suit me.'

'You seem to have a lot of psychological baggage. Look here, this the one you want, I can tell these things. I've been in luggage for years. I only got out the other day.'

'Can it be carried on?'

I smiled at her. 'I came round to your place the other day.'

'Yeah, I got the message. We have mobiles these days, you know that?'

'Mobiles, cigarette boxes. The technology is pretty similar, I mean, they both result in cancer if you overuse them.'

'Do you want to go for a drink after work?'

'Okay. Where? Mash?'

'I was thinking more of a little Spanish bar called Bradley's near Tottenham Court Tube?'

I knew the place quite well; it was at the other end of Oxford Street. I turned up the little road it was on and walked through the door and down the curving cement staircase into the basement. Sophie was already there, sitting on the small couch at the back smoking and drinking a pint. She was looking through a magazine.

'What you looking at?'

'Oh, the lead singer of Cold Play is talking about the war in Iraq.'

'Nothing good I suppose?'

'You really did support the war, didn't you?'

'Not really.'

'Well, why didn't you go to the peace marches?'

'Why bother.'

‘Because killing people isn’t right. We were trying to stop the murder of innocent people.’

‘Were you?’

‘Yes. Christ, I mean even if you don’t care about the Iraqis, aren’t you frightened that terrorism will come to London because of it?’

‘London would probably be a better place if someone came and bombed us again. I’m tired of reading about David Beckham’s new haircut.’

‘But you are always reading about football.’

‘Football, not haircuts. But you’re right; there’s not much of a difference. They are both escapism, I suppose. Why discredit one and not the other. But then so is marching for...’

‘Doesn’t it scare you when you are down in the tubes? That it’s so easy for terrorists to attack them?’

‘Sometimes. I try not to think about it. If it happens, it happens I suppose.’

She closed her magazine and put it in her bag. ‘You were having quite a battle with old matey in the shop today.’

‘That kind of thing happens sometimes. Once you’ve hit them with the shock and awe of size, label and material strength, there’s not really a hell of a lot you can do.’

‘I had an interview at Orion today; it went quite well. And I’ve got one coming up at Penguin on Thursday.’

‘I never knew that you wanted to get into publishing. My...’

'That's why I stayed in London. That's why Adam and I...Oh never mind. Come on let's go down to The Pelican for one more and then I've got to go; I'm meeting my brother for dinner at his place in Bloomsbury.'

We walked the short distance down to Soho Square. There was only one seat left at the bar which Sophie sat on while I stood, looking out towards the door. I recognised somebody walk in. She gave me a half smile but then turned away. I didn't try to greet her when she walked past me to go downstairs. Somebody patted me on the shoulder.

'Nick!'

'Hello, James. I see you're still drinking in here are you?' We shook hands.

'Well, you know, old habits die hard.'

'I thought I saw Gwen walk in.'

'Yeah, she said you were up here.'

Sophie got up and I introduced them. She shook his hand and then went to the toilet.

'So, what are you up to these days? I haven't heard from you in ages.'

'Not much. I see you are doing some writing for the *Independent*.'

'Yeah. Seems like a long time ago since we worked together. How's your father these days?'

'Alright, I think. I haven't really seen him.'

'He's still working at Penguin?'

'Yeah.'

'I better get back; I'm out with my editor. Have you got a number?'

'No.'

'I've got a card somewhere.' He pulled out a silver cardholder with several cards in the clip and gave me one. 'Give me a call sometime; we'll go out for a drink.' We shook hands, and he went downstairs.

'Who was that?'

'Just someone I used to know.'

'He looks familiar? What does he do?'

'I'm not really sure.'

'What are you doing on Saturday?'

'I've got the day off.'

'Do you want to go up to Hampstead Heath? I'm meeting some of the people from work up there in the afternoon. Shit, I really better get going; my brother hates it when I'm late.'

We organised to go up to Hampstead in the morning. She finished her drink, got up and kissed me on the cheek. James left and asked me if I wanted to go out with them to a club. I told him I was meeting somebody.

I woke up at seven o'clock on Saturday with the sun shining outside the curtains I had just fixed. I had started to sweat underneath my blankets. I threw them off and picked up a book that was sitting open on the floor. I turned on the lamp, read and lit a cigarette. Sophie said she was coming round at ten, but I had a feeling that she wasn't going to turn up.

I could hear the noises of children and people and black cabs driving outside. I got up after a while and sat on my windowsill and read in the sunlight. I turned on the radio. A rap up of the week's news was on. There had been a terrorist attack in Saudi Arabia. Clare Short had resigned from the government. They mentioned something about Chechnya that I didn't catch. I turned it off and went and had a shower.

I sat down in my towel at the small dining room table and poured myself a vodka. At about nine I got dressed and I went out and bought the *Sun* and some tobacco. When I got back I sat on the steps outside and paged through the sports section. There wasn't much there, except a small bit about the cricket. I turned to the front.

'Hello, ready to go? You know we arranged to go to Hampstead Heath, right?'

She was standing at the bottom of the steps in green combat trousers, black slip slops, a black strap top and big dark sunglasses. Her hair was clipped on the top of her head and the straps of her bikini were tied around the back of her neck. She had a small backpack and was carrying a Sainsbury's bag.

'Yeah, I was sitting here waiting for you.'

'Have you got a costume? We can swim in the pools up there. Brilliant day, isn't it?'

It was hot in the tubes. Most people were in shorts; some were in suits. There was even the smell of sun cream. We got to Embankment and then took the Northern Line up to Hampstead. Thousands of people were on the heath; holding hands, walking dogs, flying kites, playing with children. We stopped at the top of Parliament Hill and looked across the city. It was covered in a heat haze. There was almost no movement in the air.

We stood there for a while and then walked down the hill away from the city and lay down on the newly cut grass. I could feel the itchy prickles of sweat developing on my back and the heat of the sun burning my cheeks. We lay pretty close to one another without actually touching. I could smell the sun cream on her mingling with the perfume she normally wore. I drifted in and out of sleep for a while. She woke me up. 'When was the last time you had a girlfriend?'

'Oh, about three four years ago.'

'Really. What have you been doing?'

'Not much.'

'No sex for four years?'

'Well. Almost.'

'How do you survive?'

'I sleep with my friend's girlfriends.'

'Fuck you're a wanker.' She went back to reading her book and I closed my eyes.

She woke me again.

'Talk to me.'

'About what?'

'Yourself, that's always an easy one.'

'It sets off my narcolepsy.'

'Come on stop being lame. Mr. Sunderland, tell about your childhood.'

'I had three dogs, two parents and a friend.'

'Come on be serious. Tell me something.'

'Okay two dogs. But the next door neighbour's used to come over quite a lot through a hole in the fence.'

'No, come on.'

'You start, I'll finish.'

'My brother and I had a dog called Art. He was an Alsatian. When we were small we used to pretend he was a pony and take him for rides around the garden. He was a really beautiful dog. I miss him sometimes.'

'What does your brother do?'

'He used to play rugby for Bath. But he broke his knee in a really bad tackle. Now he runs a small IT company.' We lay there chatting about her family. An uncle who should have been in prison; her mother who liked tennis; her father who was a lawyer and had been to the Himalayas. She sat up and unpacked the lunch she had brought. We ate some cheese and bread with olives and drank wine. There were hundreds of people lying down around us on the heath. 'I wonder if they are all dead.' Sophie said looking across at the people lying around us. There wasn't a single person standing.

'Throw a stone at those two and see what happens.' I placed a little stone I had been playing with on her stomach. 'See what your lack of motivation has done for us?'

'Why have we survived?'

'The combination of olives, cheese and wine.'

‘So, what do we do now?’

‘I suppose we’ll have to go down and take the Queen’s dogs for a walk, because clearly the dogs have managed to survive,’ she said as a dog came up and sniffed at us.

‘You can do that, I am going to get the Happy Meals at MacDonald’s’

‘Jesus, you have no imagination.’

‘And you - are just not practical.’

‘Damn it, look, that guy just scratched his nose.’

‘Oh well, it was a nice thought.’ I took out my book.

‘You know Adam is coming back next week.’

‘Oh.’

‘I’m not sure what to do about him.’ I shrugged. ‘Adam’s lost without me. I feel guilty. That’s what annoys me, it’s going to be so difficult breaking up with him. I don’t think Adam could live without a girlfriend.’

‘It’s not that difficult.’

‘Are you happy being without someone?’

‘I haven’t really thought about it in a while.’

A few minutes passed. I think I fell asleep again. It could have only been for a few minutes. ‘Come let’s go for a swim.’ She was standing over me with everything packed up and her towel in her hand.

I dived into the water from the platform. Sophie sat on the jetty and put her toe into the tepid top layer of brownish water and then slipped in. The pond was quite crowded. She was holding onto one of the lifesaving rings that were anchored out in the middle. I swam up to her and put my hands on her shoulders. She tried to slip under the water and

swim away but I grabbed her ankle. She twisted and pushed my hand off with her other foot and laughed at me. She was a good swimmer. I got out of the water behind her on the ladder onto the jetty. She turned around and smiled. She held onto the railings when she was at the top and tried to push me back into the water with her foot.

‘You’re gonna have to leave the pool area.’ There was a lifeguard standing in front of me.

‘We’re leaving.’

‘You have to leave now! You can’t mess around like that here. Didn’t you read the sign?’ Another one was blocking Sophie’s exit.

‘Sorry Miss, you can’t go to the changing rooms.’

‘Why not? I’m sorry it was only a joke. I didn’t even push him in.’

‘Mate you have to leave now.’ The one said to me.

‘Sure, I’m just going to get changed.’

‘Look mate, don’t you start with us or we’ll have The Old Bill down here.’

‘What the fuck are you talking about? I’m not starting with you.’

‘Mate, you have to leave now.’

‘I’m getting changed first.’ A third one came and joined them. The one who was standing in front of Sophie tried to take my bag.

‘I have the authority to take you out of here.’

‘No you don’t.’

‘You don’t know the law.’

‘That’s where you’re wrong.’

‘Look mate, don’t cause shit with me.’

'I'm not causing shit with you. I've worked as a doorman and I know what you can do.'

'Is that a threat?'

'You can take it whatever way you want to, but I'm getting changed and there's nothing you can do about it.'

'That means I'm calling the police.'

'Well, you can call them while I get changed.'

The one followed me to the changing rooms and stood watching me while I had a shower and got dressed. I waited for Sophie to come out of the women's changing room. We had to walk past the lifeguard's hut on the way out. 'And don't you come back.' One of them shouted. As we got out the gate, a policeman was getting off his bike.

'I'm going to go and speak to him.'

'Just leave it.'

'It's bollocks the way they treated us.'

I took Sophie by the hand and gave her a wink. She smiled at me. The policeman went through the gate.

'Have you really worked as a doorman?'

'A few years ago. Should we go for a walk up to Kenwood House?'

We walked up through a little wooded area and then crossed the fields and went over a little stream. When we got to the large white mansion we wandered around inside and looked at the paintings. I could feel the stickiness of the pond still on my skin. It was cool in the house, and I was standing in front of a self-portrait by Rembrandt when

Sophie came up and slipped her hand into mine. 'Why do you think he looks so miserable?' Sophie said after looking at it for a while.

'Because the prices of beer and cigarettes went up, and the tubes were a nightmare getting home.'

'Actually, he looks more constipated than miserable, don't you think?' The woman next to us told us to be quiet. We walked out. A car drove up to us on the gravel outside. 'It's strange how that sound is something you associate with prosperity?' Sophie said turning to me and putting her sunglasses back onto her nose.

'What sound?'

'The sound of tires on gravel. I think it's because in films it's always the sound of cars driving up to country houses.'

'So you mean privilege, rather than prosperity.'

'It wasn't meant as a socio-political statement.'

'I take it then your parents have a gravel driveway?'

'They don't as a matter of fact. We're just a middle-class family. It's more a small brick entrance into a garage.'

She was smiling at me.

'What kind of driveway do your parents have?'

'I don't think there is much of a driveway.'

We started to walk back across the Heath. The sun was still out but the heat wasn't there anymore. As we crossed the tarred walkway over the ponds Sophie gave a small wave at the lifeguard standing on the jetty, in his red tracksuit top. Whether he saw Sophie, it was difficult to say.

‘You know what I forgot to do? Is to phone my friend Jo. Jesus, I was meant to phone her hours ago.’

Jo, it turned out, was in the Freemason’s Arms just off the Heath. It was quite crowded and hot inside the pub. I stood and waited to get served while Sophie went to look for her workmates in the beer garden. Everybody at the bar seemed annoyed.

An argument had started between the one barman and an oldish man at the front of the queue. Several of the staff got involved. Eventually another barman got round to serving me. I paid and walked out into the beer garden and saw Sophie sitting and chatting with a large group of people around two tables. When I sat down the guy sitting next to me asked me what I did. ‘We were just talking about career development and personal attainable goals.’

‘Oh right.’

‘Where do you see yourself in ten years?’

‘God, I don’t think I do see myself.’

‘Have you ever read Stephen Covey’s *Seven Habits for Highly Effective People*? It will change your life. You should read it. I’m reading it at the moment for the second time. You have to have attainable goals. You are exactly the kind of person who should read it.’

‘Oh right.’

‘What you have to do is set goals for yourself. I mean, they can be really small to begin with. Like in your job; sell x number of bags a week. And then move on from there.’

‘Oh right.’

‘This isn’t mumbo-jumbo like some of those other self-help books. This is about formulating positive life habits.’

‘I thought those books were all about how to make money.’

‘Not really, that’s a myth. Happiness is not about making money. I mean you *can* be happy selling luggage, that’s what’s so important to understand.’

‘I read somewhere in one of these things that the only way to make money is to write a book about how to make money.’

He smiled at me and turned to listen to what the general conversation around the table was about. I sat listening to Sophie talking to Jo about films. At about eight, most of them decided to go to a club somewhere above the high street but Sophie and I stayed there and had dinner. ‘I saw Tom got his claws into you for a while.’

‘Yeah, he gave me a bit of a working over about being an effective person.’

‘God, he talks such bollocks about those fucking self-help books.’

‘He meant well.’

‘Yeah, I know. But it’s mindless.’

‘Well twenty years ago it was ground-breaking and a “new way of looking at things.”’

‘But it wasn’t new.’

‘Yeah. What worries me is that now those books are just accepted as if there they are oracles of an *a priori* knowledge.’

‘How do you know what *a priori* means?’

‘Oh, I read about it in a book called *Philosophy for Highly Effective People*.’

Somebody came out and called last orders. The night was still quite warm and the tubes still had the hot stuffiness of the day in them. Sophie fell asleep on my shoulder on the way back. I could feel her hot sunburnt cheek through my t-shirt and her warm breath on my neck. I tried to read but I found it difficult to follow what I was reading; I was tired.

When we got back to her place the flat was still warm. She opened the door and put her stuff down in the lounge and opened some windows. 'Let's go and have a shower. I feel sticky.' She took my hand and pulled me towards the bathroom. I slipped her top over her head and pulled the bow holding her bikini. As I went to kiss her, I saw myself smiling in the mirror.

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Money had been missing from the tills again. Jackie had started checking them during the day. Anthony had taken us into the office one by one for a chat about till procedures. But it didn't stop the problem. Jackie often put me in the storeroom to sort out stock. Anthony, on the other hand, always wanted me selling on the shop floor.

I had been put in the storeroom to do the day's delivery that had come in that morning from both Samsonite and Delsey. At some point I realized that I had mixed up some of the Samsonite ballistic nylon range with ordinary nylon one. Jackie came in and stood at the door for a while, watching me. 'Are you sure you've got that sorted out now?'

'Pretty much.'

'You better be. I'm going to check later this afternoon. By the way there's somebody waiting for you outside.'

'Oh?'

'It's some woman.'

'What does she look like?'

'I'm not your secretary, I'm your boss.'

I didn't see anybody I recognised when I got out onto the shop floor. There was a woman standing in my section.

'Hello, Nick?' At first I had no idea who she was. 'Do you remember me? You met me in...'

'Yes, yes I remember. In Kensington Gardens.'

'My name's...'

'Ashleigh. I remember. But, how did you know I worked here?'

'Aah!' She grinned at me. 'Do you wanna have lunch? Because I'll tell you then.'

'Yeah, okay.'

Ashleigh was already seated and looking at the menu when I got to the restaurant in Soho. I checked my wallet before walking in - to see if I could at least cover my meal. I wasn't sure what she meant when she invited me.

'I'm glad you could make it.'

'No it was...'

'Sorry, was that too close to a compliment?'

'No, I was just worried about intellectual dishonesty.'

'What do you want to drink?'

'A beer would be good.'

'God, I always forget that you Brits drink during your lunch. Only people who are trailer trash do that in America.'

'Yeah, it's pretty much the same over here.'

She smiled. The waiter came around.

'Yes, I'll have a glass of red wine, seeing as we are drinking. Yes, house would be just fine and my friend here will have a beer.'

'How did you find out my name and where I worked?'

'Oh you know, ESP.'

'So, you Americans really do deserve to rule the world. Perhaps they should employ you to discover those weapons of mass destruction they're having such trouble finding.'

'Isn't it just terrible? Bush is really making it difficult to be an American.'

‘And pretty difficult to be an Iraqi as well.’

‘Isn’t it terrible?’

‘I can’t imagine it was much fun under Saddam either. How did you know where I worked?’

‘You were wearing your name badge on your jacket in the park. It’s my day off and I was just walking down Oxford Street and saw the name of your shop. So thought I would pop in and see if you worked there. I thought it might be nice.’

‘Well, yeah.’

‘Sorry was that a compliment?’

It was interesting sitting chatting to her. She had come over to England with her husband, who was from London. She had previously worked at Berkley before coming over and working in the oncology department at UCH. She insisted on paying for everything. It was just as well, I only had enough money to pay for my share and that would have left me broke for the next week or so.

‘Sorry? I don’t understand why I am being charged for a bottle of wine? Because I only had a glass.’ The waiter took the bill back without saying a word. He came back.

‘Why are there two glasses now?’

‘What?’ He looked at the bill and walked away. ‘Fucking American.’ It was a whisper but we could hear it pretty clearly.

‘I suppose that’s what Bush has done to us.’

‘I don’t think you can blame xenophobia on Bush.’

‘Do you think it’s xenophobia?’

‘Pretty much.’

‘Why do you say that?’

‘That shit’s always been around. I mean even Dr Johnson said: “I am willing to love all mankind except an American.”’

‘But still, I must say, that I don’t feel very happy being an American sometimes.’

‘That’s one step away from not being able to take compliments.’

She smiled. ‘You must come to a party I’m having at my house. My husband’s friends are such, um. What do you English call them? Pompous bores.’

‘I’m not sure.’

‘Come on, you must come. I need somebody to talk to who isn’t going to talk to me about how wonderful the English are and the evil the Americans are doing in the world. Please come.’ She wrote down her address and the date of the party on the back of one of her cards.

I slipped into the staff entrance half an hour late. Jackie was waiting for me there. ‘So what’s your excuse?’ I didn’t feel like answering.

‘Right for the rest of the week you’ll only get half-hour lunch breaks. In fact, you’ll get half-hour lunch breaks until you can show me that you can be responsible. Do you understand?’

‘I sure do.’

‘Look if you are going to be cheeky I’ll take away your tea breaks as well.’

I walked out onto the shop floor. She followed me. I walked up to a customer and started serving him. At the end of the day Jackie handed me an envelope.

‘I would read that if I was you.’ I put it in my suit pocket. ‘How much did you sell today?’

'I'm not really sure.'

I had to stay after work and do the end of the day cashing up with her.

'There's no money missing. You don't know how serious this is. This is the first day you've made a lot of sales and there's been no money missing.'

We set the alarm, locked up and started to walk up to The Phoenix, where the rest of the people from work were meeting for a drink. She seemed to be determined to walk quicker than me. After a while it got silly and she slowed down. She looked at me; her eyes were almost too big for her face. I suppose there was no doubt that she was good-looking. 'So, are you going to stay at Gulliver's for long?'

'Yeah, I suppose.'

'Have you thought about advancing in the company?'

'Not really.'

'You just don't know how much work and dedication goes into a job like mine. Anthony really struggles with it sometimes. One thing you'll have to do if you really want to be part of the Gulliver's ethos is work on your person to person skills ratio.'

'It's a ratio?'

'You are so naive.'

'No, I just don't understand what that means.'

'I mean Anthony and I have been on so many training courses together. Anthony struggles; I find it a lot easier. I just think I'm far more of a people's person than he is.'

'What happened about the job at Selfridges?'

'Oh, I'm pretty sure I've got it.'

When we got to the pub I stood talking to some of the others about luggage. Most people left at about nine and at the end it was only Anthony and me sitting at last orders.

‘Sorry about today,’ he said. I wasn’t sure what he meant, but I said that it was no problem.

‘I hope we can get over these problems. I really want you on the staff. You sell well. I was thinking of having you put on a manager’s training course. But now we’ll have to see.’

‘Oh.’

‘We’ll have to talk in a few months down the line. You shouldn’t discount it you know. I really hope you are not too upset about today.’ He was slurring his words slightly.

‘No.’

‘It’s really difficult being a manager sometimes.’

‘I’m sure.’

‘There’s just so much work to do and so many people to please.’

‘Yeah, I suppose it’s tough.’

‘You have no idea. The only thing that gets me through, sometimes, is the love of God. Do you believe in God, Nicholas?’

‘Not really.’

‘Why not?’

‘Ah, I just don’t.’

‘No, really, why not?’

‘Because he stopped believing in what I could do for him.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Nothing, it was only a joke.’

‘You know God can be a great comfort sometimes. To feel the love of God is a powerful thing. I’ve often thought of becoming a minister.’

‘Oh.’

‘But sometimes I don’t feel like I have the compassion to protect the staff. To protect you from even the simplest sin.’

‘I don’t really know much about it.’

‘Take today, for instance. I sometimes simply don’t have the strength to stand up for myself. Especially when faced with sex. Satan has an influence in everything.’

‘For Christ sake!’

Any minute from now he would start talking about *Lord of the Rings*, which I knew I wouldn’t be able to take. I got up and went to the toilet. When I got back the Irish doorman came and told us we had to leave. Anthony was unstable when he got up. ‘I just don’t know what I’m going to do without Jackie.’ He wanted to walk with me. We got onto Oxford Street and I hailed a taxi for him but he didn’t want to get in. ‘I’m your mate you know that?’

‘Yes. Now, Anthony, get in the taxi.’

‘I want to walk with you.’

‘Jesus, get in the fucking taxi.’

I wasn’t expecting this kind of shit from him. Tears were coming out of his eyes. He put his arm around me. I opened the door and pushed him into the taxi. He kept trying to hold onto me. I pulled myself away from him and closed the door.

'Is he alright, mate?' The taxi driver was looking at me through the passenger window.

'Fuck knows, he's had a bit but I think he should be alright. He works in that place over there; Gulliver's. If he gives you any trouble just charge it to him, he's the manager there.'

Anthony was lying on the back seat when the taxi drove off. I walked to the bus stop. I remembered the envelope Jackie had given me. I opened it and found that I had received a written warning, and that my probationary period had been extended from two months to four. That meant that I would stay on a lower pay for the next few months. It didn't really bother me, as long as I didn't get another. I threw it in the bin.

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Anthony was off ill the next day and Jackie spent most of it watching over me while I worked. I just tried to ignore it. When it got quiet she came up to me and started to talk to me about sales procedure. I nodded a lot but I wasn't really listening. She was saying the same thing she always talked to me about. How presentation of the bag was to be done from the side and not the front. I didn't really mind her being around me as long as I didn't have to listen.

'And by the way, I noticed that your area in the storeroom needs to be packed in a different way. The way it is now, makes it difficult for Manisha to reach her stock. I've got some time in the afternoon, so I'll help you organise it.'

I stood in my section for the rest of the morning looking at the clock on the wall, waiting for the small hand to get round to one. Finally, I went to lunch with Stuart. It was another hot day and we bought sandwiches and went up to sit on the benches in the shade under the plane trees in Portman Square, just north of Oxford Street.

'She's flirtin' with you know that?'

'If that's flirting, I don't want to encounter her being a pain in the arse.'

'She's definitely flirting with you. She doesn't pay us any attention. I mean she's a bitch to us but she doesn't show us attention.'

'She gave me a written warning yesterday.'

'That's her way of showing she likes you.'

'No, I think it's just a power thing.'

'Have you ever seen how hard she is on Anthony?'

'What, she likes Anthony too?'

Stuart raised his eyebrow and looked at me. 'Not likes, shags.'

'How do you know that?'

'Common knowledge, mate. Been going on for months.'

'Is she Christian as well?'

'So you've had the religious discussion have you?'

'Oh yes.'

'What last night? I could see by the state of him that it was all going to end in tears.

What happened?'

'Fuck knows. He was putting his arm around me, talking about god.'

'So, he's making a pass at you as well. So, you've got both managers after you. You lucky sod.'

'Do you think he's gay?'

'Of course he is, mate.'

'Well, why is he shagging Jackie?'

'He's lost behind his mothers trousers in the closet. Besides, personality-wise, Jackie is the closest thing to a male we've got besides you and me.'

'How does that fit in with his religion?'

'Fuck knows, but it says a lot about Jackie's.'

'What do you mean?'

'Well, it's an act of extreme Christianity for a fit girl like her to be going to bed with that weedy little pillow-biter.'

'Do you think?'

‘Come on, don’t fuck around. He’s on about thirty grand a year and the man lives with his parents. But I’ll tell you something, there is something strange going on. Things just ain’t adding up anymore the way they used to. I reckon somebody’s got their hand in the till. And I wouldn’t be surprised if Anthony catches them. He knows how to work a thing or two. All I’m saying is, be careful.’

‘What, you think it’s me?’

‘I say nothing. Only that twice it’s been yours that has caused the problem. If it’s not you somebody’s trying to make it look like you. And that’s all I’m saying.’

‘Are you being serious?’

‘You just watch yourself and keep you’re nose clean. Anthony’s no fool you know. A left-footer, but no fool.’

I bought myself some cans of beer for the walk home after work. There was an envelope lying on the table for me when I got there. It had Sophie’s Agency logo printed on it. I tried to kick a tile loose. Goisha came out of her room and asked me what I was doing. I mumbled ‘casteridge’ and then pointed at the corner of the door. She went back into her room, satisfied that there was some reason for the disturbance. I walked up the stairs and opened the envelope. The lights were out in the passageway so I only could make out what was written when I got in my door.

*Dearest Mr. Sunderland*

*I hope this finds you in good health? This heat is quite sick-making and making work rather beastly.*

*Just a note to say I would be most delighted if you would join me at the Spanish Bar.  
Drinking shall commence at the hour of six-thirty in the PM on Monday. It would be  
rather tiresome if you did not join me there.*

*Much love without affection.*

*Miss Sophie Hitchens*

University of Cape Town

When I arrived shortly after half-past six Sophie was sitting downstairs at the bar smoking a cigarette.

‘Good evening Hitchens.’

‘And who might you be?’

‘Well, I’m not Cardinal Woolsey.’

‘What a shame.’ She smiled and kissed me. ‘I was thinking we could have a drink and then go down to The National Film Theatre and see a film? There’s a Westerns festival on at the moment.’

‘I don’t think I have enough money.’

‘Come on, it’s only ten quid.’

‘I’ve only got about twelve till payday tomorrow.’

‘Don’t worry I’ll get you drinks and we can walk down.’

‘What’s showing?’

‘I think it’s *The Magnificent Seven*.’

On the way down Charing Cross Road we looked around in some of the second-hand bookshops. As we came out of the last one she slipped a book into my jacket pocket.

‘That’s for you.’

It started to drizzle as we got to Trafalgar Square. As we walked over the bridge we stopped and looked down the Thames. Lights were flickering in the water, St Paul’s and one of the new buildings stood out against the twilight. Sophie looked at her watch.

‘Come on, we are going to be late.’

We ran across the last part of the bridge and made it to the ticket office a few minutes late. We got into the film just as it begun.

Sophie bought me a pint of Guinness after the film and we sat at the tables outside, under the bridge. It was cold and Sophie came and sat next to me.

‘So, what did you think of the film?’ She asked.

‘I’ve seen it quite often. My mother and I used to watch it.’

‘You remind me a little of Yul Brynner.’

‘Don’t be ridiculous. I never wear all black.’

‘Actually, Steve McQueen was a bit closer I suppose. A drifter with a sense of humour and a certain almost melancholic reticence.’ She was smiling at me.

‘An absurdity. I’m not a drifter; I’ve had one residential address in the last two years.’

‘Come to think of it, your sense of humour isn’t much to shout about. I told you that I had an interview coming up at Penguin, didn’t I?’

‘I was thinking about that. Have you heard from them? Because...’

‘Yeah, I got it. I start as an assistant editor. Can you believe it?’

‘It’s pretty difficult getting a job there.’

‘I know, but my uncle knows one of the editors. A bit of a cheat I suppose, but I’ve got a bit of experience from working on a journal at Uni.’

‘What’s cheating about it?’

‘Well, you know, nepotism and all that crap. What are you going to do about finding a job?’

‘I don’t think I can at the moment.’

‘Surely you don’t want to be a luggage salesman all your life?’ I shrugged. ‘Why don’t you ever talk about what you want to do? Do you know what your problem is?’

‘One thing I don’t need is somebody telling me what my problems are.’

‘Ok Yul, but your problem is that you have no dreams. Even Steve McQueen had dreams.’

‘But they were the children of an idle brain.’

‘Jesus, do I have to have a conversation with Yul Brynner?’

‘I could become a farmer. You might be good at manuring fields.’

‘No, I’ve always hated Wellingtons. The manuring I could do. But wearing Wellingtons to shopping centres always struck me as a mistake. Perhaps it’s better for you just to stay as Yul.’

‘But remember: the cowboys didn’t win, only the farmers won.’

‘True. There is some truth in that you know, jokes aside. The farmers had direction; Yul just drifted from job to job.’ She looked at her watch. ‘Shit, I need to get home.’

I got up with her and we walked up towards Waterloo Station. The rain was still a fine filtering.

‘You can’t come home with me...Adam’s still there.’

‘Oh.’

‘He leaves the day after tomorrow.’

‘I thought he’d left.’

‘Nope.’

She held my hand and kissed me.

‘Goodbye, Yul.’

‘Adios.’

I watched her walk up the road and then turned and started across the bridge. I stopped halfway across. It was quiet, except for a man playing a flute somewhere on the other side and the water flowing around the supports of the bridge. I stood there for a while, watching the water flowing underneath me. A barge, with its cabin light on, was coming down the river. I couldn't see what was in it; it looked like coal. But I suppose they don't transport coal up and down the Thames anymore. A man on the barge was standing outside the cabin smoking a cigarette, looking at the Houses of Parliament. He threw his cigarette in the river and went back into the cab. The barge disappeared under the bridge. I stood there for a while looking at Westminster. I remembered there was a sketch, in a book of poetry I'd had at school, of the Houses of Parliament burning down. It was next to Blake's Jerusalem I think. An Australian couple walked passed me on the bridge. I looked back across London. Satanic mills around these days: none. But I suppose there were quite a few drifters about.

I walked up through Charing Cross Station. People were standing, looking up at the information boards. I looked past pubs on the way up Charing Cross Road; they were all closing and people were going home in groups. I stood at the bus stop with a couple. He was resting up against the bus stop; she was facing him standing between his legs. Their mouths were close to one another's ears. They seemed to be whispering an argument. I got on the bus and went upstairs. I notice that two people up there were reading the same book: *Stupid White Men*.

Three times now there had been substantial amounts of money missing from my till. I had started watching the others who shared it with me. Jackie had warned the staff that we were accountable for the money when it went missing. Today we had counted the till I had used, several times, and two-hundred pounds were not there.

Jackie had locked the two doors of the shop and said that the money had to turn up or nobody was leaving. Anthony had left earlier in the day and there was talk of phoning him, but Jackie wouldn't allow it. We had been in there for half an hour and nothing had come to light. It meant that I couldn't meet Sophie down at the V&A Museum. There was some exhibition on and we had arranged to meet here at half past six. I phoned her, but her phone was off. I didn't leave a message. She must have gone into the exhibition without me. Jackie wanted to have a bag and wallet search. Some of the staff objected, saying that they hadn't used the till. People were arguing but Stuart and I kept out of it. Somebody - I never found out who - put forward the idea that, as a last resort, the safe in the office should be checked. And apparently when Jackie opened the safe, there it was; two-hundred pounds in ten and twenty quid notes. How they had got in there nobody knew. It was a bit of a relief because that counted me out of the equation. I had absolutely no access to the office, let alone the safe.

When we were let out there was still some discussion about what had happened. They all wanted to go to the pub to talk about it, but I walked to Bond Street to catch the tube to South Kensington.

By the time I got to the V&A exhibition Sophie wasn't there. I walked around the rest of the museum looking at the pieces that I knew were her favourites; we had been there a few times before in the last few weeks. Finally I went to the statue of Balzac which I knew was the last place she went to before leaving. She wasn't there.

I went to the pub we normally drank in. She wasn't there. I sat near the door and had a few pints and then went home to bed. It was about three in the morning when the bell went to my room. It rang and rang. I ignored it until it rang for so long that I got up and went downstairs. When I opened the front door Sophie was sitting there on the steps leaning against the railings. 'Sophie, what the hell are you doing?'

'I've come to see you?'

'Do you know what time it is?'

'Two o'clock.'

'It's three.'

'You never came?'

'Sophie, I phoned you.'

'You never came. You had something better to do and you never came.'

She put her head against the railings. There was a solid wall of drink on her. I got her up to my room and sat her down on the couch and made her a cup of coffee.

'Why didn't you come? Why didn't you leave a message? Why don't you have a mobile like everybody else?'

'Come on Sophie.'

'Why Nick? Don't you want more money?'

'I suppose.'

'Why do you live like this?'

'It just happened.'

'Did you ever want to do something?'

'I don't know Soph.'

'That's the first time you've called me Soph.'

'You need to get to bed.'

'You always call me Sophie.'

'Come on Sophia. To bed.'

'Adam's back for a week on Monday.'

'I know.'

I helped her get undressed and put her into bed. Thank god the next day was Sunday.

I sat in the dark for a while, on the couch, and had a cigarette.

When she woke up in the morning she was confused about how she had got to my flat. She couldn't remember ringing the bell or coming in, or the conversation we'd had. We lay in bed for most of the day. I left her there in the afternoon while I went to do my laundry on Earls Court Road. When I came back she was asleep. I sat and smoked and read and watched her lying there. The sun was out again, it was warm in the flat. I went down and bought some food and cooked her dinner. We went to the pub at about nine and then I walked her to her flat.

# Book 4

University of Cape Town

I ended up going to Ashleigh's party the next Saturday. She lived in a house near the Thames between Hammersmith and Fulham. As I walked from the front gate to the door I noticed that the curtains weren't drawn. I could see people standing inside the lounge in suits and black tie drinking glasses of wine. I looked at the hole in my grey jumper and my faded jeans and old trainers. I thought to myself that seeing as I had got on this horse, I might as well ride it into town. I walked up the steps and rang the bell. A bald man in black tie opened the door.

'Hello.'

'Hello, I'm Nicholas. I'm a friend of Ashleigh's.'

'Oh yes? Well, then come in. My name is John. I'm Ashleigh's husband. Do you work with her?'

'No, I, um, helped her out in Kensington Gardens once.'

'Oh really? Anyway, come in and help yourself to a drink. There's Ashleigh, perhaps she can introduce you to the rest of these people.'

She was standing in the middle of the lounge with a glass of punch, in a black cocktail dress. Her hair was down. She looked a lot younger. I noticed how attractive she was. She saw me out of the corner of her eye and, turning away from the people she was talking to, she greeted me with a kiss on the cheek.

'Sorry, I didn't realise it was formal.'

'Sorry, I probably didn't tell you. It was my husband's idea. He loves wearing tuxedos. Don't worry about it, you look great. I'm glad you could make it.' She

introduced me to some people. Most of the people at the party were in their forties and fifties. I noticed that there were two women about my age near the drinks table.

Ashleigh went to answer the door and I sat down, with a glass of wine, on one of the couches. A large man in his fifties was sitting at the other end. I noticed that we were both looking at the two younger women. He turned to me. 'That's my wife over there.' He said pointing at the one with blonde hair. 'Beautiful, isn't she? How did you happen to be invited?'

'I helped Ashleigh get out of Kensington Gardens.'

'What? She was lost? Silly American. I'm John's business partner. We were best friends at varsity. Pity he had to marry an American.'

'My mother's parents were American.'

'My condolences.'

'What business are you and John in?'

'Communications. What do you do?'

'I sell luggage for Gulliver's.'

'Any money in that?'

'I work on the shop floor.'

'How old are you?'

'Twenty-eight.'

'Bit old to be selling luggage at your age. No education I suppose?'

'What uni were you at with John?'

'Balliol. Do you know what that is?'

'Yes.'

‘What?’

‘A university?’

‘A college at Oxford.’

‘Oh really, what did you study.’

‘I read history.’

‘I’ve read some history myself.’

He got up to fetch himself a drink and Ashleigh sat down next to me. ‘So you’ve met Bertram then, have you?’

‘Is that his name?’

‘Not really, I just call him that to piss him off. His name’s Peter.’

‘You don’t get on with him then?’

‘Christ no, he never stops talking about Oxford and his days on the cricket field.’

‘Yeah, I got some of that already.’

‘He’s never been a fan of me.’

‘He doesn’t seem to be particularly keen on Americans.’

‘Yeah.’

‘I wouldn’t let it bother you, it’s all some form of jealousy.’

‘Yeah, I’m beginning to think it doesn’t matter what your politics are over here, I’m just American. And that’s indictment enough. It’s a pretty unfriendly place this London of yours.’

‘I did warn you.’

She smiled at me and we carried on chatting for a little while. She got up at some point and spoke to some of the other guests. I noticed that Peter and Ashleigh's husband spent most of the night talking to Peter's wife and her brunette friend.

I was standing waiting for somebody to finish in the bathroom. The young brunette stood behind me typing a text message into her phone. The door opened and she pushed in as I went forward. 'Sorry,' she said, without looking at me and closing the door in my face.

I left at about one. Ashleigh kissed me goodbye and thanked me for coming. Her husband wasn't around. I walked down the street and went down the road I thought I had come along. After a while I realised that I was lost. When I had come I had used a map that I had printed from the internet, but it wasn't in my pocket anymore. I walked without much of an idea as to where I was going. Eventually, I got onto a night bus. I didn't bother asking the driver what route it was taking; it seemed to be heading up towards Earls Court. I suppose I must have fallen asleep, because when I opened my eyes, and looked at some of the buildings, on the road we were travelling on, I realised that I was up somewhere near West Hampstead. It was nearly three in the morning when I got off. I sat at the bus stop for a while waiting for a bus in the opposite direction. Nothing appeared. I knew the area quite well. I decided to walk up to Hampstead Heath. When I got up to Parliament Hill I sat on a bench and watched the sun rise. A homeless man with some dogs came and asked me for money. I told him I had nothing. He walked off grumbling. It was quiet up there, except for the birds. I lay down on the bench and fell asleep.

I woke up on Saturday with Sophie lying next to me. I think they were giving me Saturdays off these days because it was the day that most of the money was made and I suppose there was more of an opportunity to steal. 'Come on you lazy bastard get up. We're going to Hastings. Remember?' She was already showered and dressed.

'Oh god. It's too dangerous down there with all those Normans about. I think we should just stay in bed.'

'The battle took place at Battle which is about twenty kilometres away from Hastings, so there is no need to worry. Now, get up you lazy bastard.'

'So, you mean the battle of Hastings should have been called the battle of Battle?'

'I'm ignoring you 'til you get up.'

I got up and had a shower and I put on some shorts and a t-shirt and picked up my bag that I had packed the night before. We caught a tube to Charing Cross and bought tickets for the train down to Hastings. Sophie's parents owned a house there. She had warned me that her brother might be staying in it, but that it wouldn't be a problem if he was.

The train was quite full and we were lucky to get two seats next to one another. I hadn't been out of London for years. It was strange to be leaving the city. I hadn't seen the countryside in a long time. I had forgotten how good it could be to leave London. Sophie sat close up next to me, reading a book. Occasionally, I read the book she had given me, Orwell's *Keep the Aspidistra Flying*, but most of the time I just sat there staring out the window looking at the countryside. Sophie put her book down on her lap.

'I've been meaning to tell you. There's a man with the surname Sunderland who's the head of marketing at Penguin. He actually looks a bit like you.'

'Oh yeah, that's my father.'

'Why didn't you tell me that your father worked at Penguin?'

'I was going to tell you when you were applying. After you got the job there didn't seem like much of a reason to tell you.'

'What? The fact that I'm working in the same company as your dad?'

'I don't really have much contact with him.'

'Oh, why not?'

'Don't know, we just don't.'

'Why the secret?'

'No secret. I just don't have much to do with him that's all. I wouldn't have thought you would come across him.'

'He is a director, of course I would come across him. What I don't get is, I mean... can't he get you a job doing something better than you are doing at the moment?'

'I haven't spoken to him in years.'

'A family feud?'

'No, we just haven't spoken.'

'How can you not speak to your father for years and not know why?'

'People grow apart.'

I went back to looking out the window. I hadn't thought about my father in a while. It was strange to think that Sophie knew him. I couldn't really tell her why I had never called him. I didn't know myself.

As we came into Hastings Station she phoned the house. Her brother answered and she asked him to come down and pick us up from the station. He arrived in a newish Golf. As we shook hands he gave me a strange look. We put our bags in the boot. I sat in the back and they chatted about their parents. Their house was a small renovated fisherman's cottage. It had the same damp musty smell about it that my grandparent's house had had, down in Devon.

'Dan, what's happened to Lisa?'

'We've kind of split. That's why I'm down here. How is Adam? Or shouldn't I be asking that question?'

'Oh god, I'll tell you sometime.'

We went down to the beach and had fish and chips for lunch. It was a long time since I had been to a beach. We sat on deck chairs, on the shingles, reading.

'I don't understand you Nick. I can't get over the fact that your father is a director of Penguin and you are...'

'Selling luggage?'

'Yes, your family must be quite well off.'

'I suppose.'

'One of these days you are going to tell me about yourself.'

'There is nothing to tell.'

'Yes there is.'

'How long have you had a place down here?'

'You have a genius for evasion, you know that?'

'It's not evasion. Everything has to be about emotions these days and finding a scapegoat. Why talk about it? I know what happened. Why does anybody else need to?' I mean, I bet Nelson didn't sit boring the other midshipman to tears with heartfelt confessions about how his father had psychologically messed his life up by sending him to the navy. People arrive at places because of who they are and how they react to the life around them. Why apportion blame?'

'Sometimes Nick, I feel like I'm going out with Jesuit priest who has taken a vow of silence.'

'You're too old to be having sex with a catholic priest.'

'God! Nicholas!' She smiled at me.

We went for a walk down along the sea later on in the afternoon. We stopped a few times to swim. The sea was almost turquoise. I had never seen it that colour in England before. We sat together on the shingles. There weren't many people around. We had a smoke and watched the sea and read. I lay down and could feel the stones digging into my back but I was too tired to sit. When I woke up the pain in my back and shoulders was so bad I could hardly move. I rolled over and groaned for a while, trying to get the blood circulating through my arms again. Sophie wasn't there. I looked around and saw her standing in the waves. It was the first time it really struck me, that she was Adam's girlfriend. I wondered how long we could really carry on pretending to forget about Adam. I was happy to do it. But was that realistic? She came back and kissed me on the forehead.

'Have a good sleep then?'

'Not really. I'm pretty sure people who went through the Inquisition felt better.'

She sat down and played with some of the stones at her feet.

‘Nick.’

‘Yes.’

‘Can I ask you something?’

‘Okay.’

‘Why do you never ask me about Adam?’

‘I was just thinking about that now.’

‘And?’

‘Well, I mean that’s really up to you.’

‘Do you think it’s that easy?’

‘Pretty much.’

‘I wish it was.’

‘I wish rain were beer.’

‘What?’

‘Nothing.’

‘But Nick, you see...’

‘Sophie! I don’t really want to hear about it. All I want to hear is your decision. How you come to it, is your issue.’

‘So, if I go back to Adam, you’ll accept it.’

‘What else can I do?’

We didn’t say anything to each other until we got back to the cottage.

In the evening we went out with her brother to a pub in an old wooden building down the road. I told him that I remembered him playing rugby for Bath a season or two ago. After that we mainly talked about sport. Sophie started getting annoyed.

At closing time Dan went home. Sophie and I walked to the centre of town and went to one of the few clubs there. She chatted and laughed for most of the night. I just stood and listened; she was very sunburnt. I don't really remember much else about the club. After that we went for a walk on the beach. When we sat down the stones were still warm. 'I think I'm falling for you Nicholas.' I kissed her and felt my hand along her sunburnt legs. The waves were pushing up against the shingles.

In the morning Dan asked me if I wanted to join him and some of his mates for a kick about in the afternoon. Sophie and I wandered around in the morning together, looking about in the little second-hand shops. There was a cold mist coming off the sea. We had lunch at one of the pubs. As we walked back to the house the mist began to clear. Sophie stayed there while Dan and I went to play football; she said she had some work to do.

I was pretty unfit and my team lost the game 8-7. Afterwards we sat outside a pub in the sun, had a few beers and talked about football and the South African cricket tour. The others left and Dan went and bought another round. 'So what do you do?'

'I sell luggage at the moment.'

'Oh right. Who do you do that for?'

'A company called Gulliver's, but I really need to find something else.'

'I don't mean to pry but what's going on with you and my sister.'

'I don't think that's something I can answer. I think you'll have to ask her that.'

We stayed for a while after that and then walked home through the narrow alleyways. I could hear people talking in their houses to one another and there were the smells of dinners being prepared. It felt like Christmas day in London.

When we got back to the house Sophie wasn't there. I sat around for a while. There was no sign of her. I tried phoning her a few times but there was no answer. Dan offered to give me a lift to the station. But I wanted to take a walk anyway. I got my stuff together and shook hands with him.

'It was nice meeting you,' he said as I left. 'I don't know what's happened to Sophie. But I wouldn't worry; she does these kinds of things sometimes.'

University of Cape Town

Both Jackie and Anthony were off on Monday. There weren't many people buying. Normally we would have been out polishing knobs but, because Stuart was the most senior member of staff, we had a pretty relaxing day. He warned me again that money had gone missing and that my name had come up. Nothing went missing that day. I phoned Sophie at work. She seemed a bit annoyed with me but she said nothing. 'What happened yesterday?'

'Oh, never mind, I needed some work that I left at home and I didn't feel like writing a note. Do you want to meet up after work?'

I met her at Bradley's that evening and after a few drinks we went to Chinatown. It was raining and we ducked into the first restaurant we walked past. We sat down at a table near the door. Sophie had been looking at me the whole time in a strange way. 'So, did you finish the book I gave you?'

'Yeah.'

'What did you think?'

'I liked it.'

'Did it ring any bells?'

'I suppose.'

'What about their relationship?'

'It's a bit different.'

'In what way?'

‘Well you have a boyfriend. In the book it was really about his refusal to sell out, his lack of money and his lack of self-worth.’

‘Don’t you think those might be some of the issues in ours?’

‘No, because first of all, I’ve sold out. I sell luggage for Christ sake. He had an ambition of some kind that doesn’t relate to me. Second of all, it’s not about money, it’s more about motivation.’

‘So, if you can see that, why aren’t you doing something about it?’

‘I am.’

‘Are you? Adam’s back next week, you know that. I don’t know what to do.’

The waitress came up and we ordered. She remained standing at the table looking at me with the note pad in her hand. ‘That’s only ten pounds. You have to spend fifteen pounds on food at this restaurant.’

‘What?’

‘Look.’ She pointed to the bottom of the menu. There was a notice saying that you had to spend at least fifteen pounds on food. I wasn’t planning on spending any more money but I was forced to order a starter of spring rolls. ‘That’s ridiculous. I’ve never been to a restaurant like this before.’

‘Look, what am I going to do with Adam?’

‘It’s really not for me to say. I mean what can I say about it?’

‘Well, you know you are in this as well, or hadn’t you noticed?’

‘Sophie, it’s your decision.’

‘Well, how would you feel about it if I broke up with him? What would that mean to you?’

'I don't see how I enter into this. You are going out with him. If you want to break it off, then break it off.'

'What will happen to us?'

'Well that's up to you. I don't have any say in this.'

'Would you ever think of marrying me?'

'Oh god, I...'

I had never thought of getting married before. We finished our meal and walked out onto the wet cobbles of the main street in Chinatown. I noticed an umbrella lying in one of the dustbins; its broken silver skeleton stuck out, its torn leopard print material hung over the edge of the bin. Sophie wanted to go for a drink.

'I can't. I don't have the money.'

'Don't be stupid, I'll pay.'

'You always pay. Perhaps it's better if we meet up again when I have some money.'

'For Christ's sake Nick, I'll buy it.'

We went to a small pub on the corner called Waxy's Little Sister. We sat upstairs on some leather couches. I felt cold and wet.

'Do you remember that night across the road?' She said.

'What, with your mate Charlotte?'

'Yes. I nearly kissed you that night.'

After the drink we went home together. We didn't talk much on the way to her place. I got up early for work the next day. When I left she was still asleep.

Jackie had got the job at Selfridges but she had to work out her month's notice. Anthony was spending a lot of time in the office these days and left the running of the shop floor to Jackie. He came out occasionally to do till checks. He always seemed to be sweating and having small arguments with Jackie in the office. We had been informed that the security cameras had been positioned to video the tills rather than the shop floor. Sean came up to me at the end of the day and asked me to have a drink with him at The Wheatsheaf. We normally drank with Stuart but he had taken the afternoon off. As we walked out of the store Sean started talking.

'We are meeting Stuart up there. I hope you don't mind but we've got something to talk to you about.'

'Oh yes, what's that?'

'You know they are investigating you for all this missing money?'

I shrugged. 'I'm not surprised.' Jackie had been on my case pretty hard in the last few days. She was doing all kinds of checks on me every time I moved. She had made it fairly obvious.

We walked into The Wheatsheaf and saw Stuart sitting in the corner at the back. 'Sit down we need to talk to you about something.'

'This is all a bit cloak and dagger, isn't it?'

'We know who it is.' Sean was excited and was looking around to see if there was anybody in the pub that we knew.

'Oh really. Who's that?'

‘Calm down Sean. Not all at once mate.’ Stuart was calm.

‘Look, we really thought it was you. Fuck it really looked like it was you, but certain things didn’t add up,’ Sean started saying.

‘Like what.’

‘Why did Anthony hire you?’

‘Why wouldn’t he hire me?’

‘Did he check your references?’

‘I don’t think so, but who checks references anyway?’

‘He’s not meant to hire people off the street. He’s meant to go through head office. But he could tell head office that he was desperate and that he made a mistake in hiring you. There was something on your CV that made him think that he could use you. Do you know what it was?’

‘No idea.’

‘Come on, there must have been some lie or something that looked like a lie.’

‘My university degree perhaps?’

‘What’s wrong with it?’

‘It looks a bit strange on my CV.’

‘Has he ever talked to you about it?’

‘Not really. What’s going on?’

‘Well.’ Stuart took over the conversation. ‘The money. Well it’s them two. Anthony and her. And they are trying to pin it on you mate.’

‘Why would they want to do that?’

‘They can get you fired and pocket the money. I mean, they know that our place is far too small to be moving the money they are moving, it’s going to be seen pretty soon. So they pin it on you, fire you and the problem is solved. Once you are fired no more money goes missing and they’ve pocketed five grand. Nice one.’ Stuart looked pretty pleased with himself. ‘But they are being stupid, because you need an access card to the system to be doing what they are doing.’

‘What does that do?’

‘Exactly! You haven’t worked here long enough to know how to use one. You see, sometimes they are taking money out of the till, but other times they are actually going into the system and changing the inventory. And when Anthony takes stuff off, I just put the stock back on. He’s had the fright of his life the last two mornings when he found the system back the way it was and with it showing what he had taken off.’

‘What does that mean?’

‘It means he’s missing money but not from the till and head office will see it.’

‘Jesus.’ Sean interrupted, ‘he got into a real panic this morning. Did you see how he had to leave half way through the day?’

‘Head office don’t notice,’ Stuart carried on, ‘when he deletes stock and pockets the money but the distributors will. The thing that both Anthony and Jackie haven’t realised is, that I’ve worked on both sides of this rat run. I know how the access card works and I know how the distributors work. The thing that I haven’t figured out is why he hasn’t told Jackie about what’s happening to the system. Because the strange thing is that Jackie’s knows that I know how to change the inventory with the access card. If she told him that he would put it together pretty quickly and the game would be up.’

'How does she know that?'

'She fucked up once on Anthony's day off and I helped her to delete it.'

'Aren't you worried about getting caught.'

'Look even if they do I still hold the trump card.'

'What's that?'

'Trade secret mate,' he said tapping his nose with his finger.

'Won't they be after you if they find out though?'

'The trump card trumps anything they can throw at me, and anyway, what can they do to me? I don't work for Gulliver's, I work for Tumi. And secondly there's nothing they can do to me that I can't do back to them. I know the system better than they do. Even if they fire me from the shop I'll move somewhere else and I can have them caught at any minute.'

'Why don't you do it then?'

'I'm enjoying the game at the moment. It's great watching them sweat it out.'

'What does this mean for me?'

'They won't be able to come near you. When they mess with your stock I just put it back to the way it was. So, then they can't take the money out of the tills without it being noticed. With Jackie checking the tills the way she is, there's no way you can get caught. It's her fucking the whole thing up for them, not you or me. That's what I don't get, they aren't communicating very well.'

'I can't lose this job at the moment. I have no backup.'

‘Look, don’t worry, you don’t have access to any of the other stuff, so you’ll be fine as long as you don’t do anything stupid. They might get you on disciplinary stuff with a little suggestion of fraud. But they can’t put it on your record if they can’t prove it.’

‘Stuart, look I’m telling you, I can’t afford to lose this job.’

‘Look, don’t worry you are not going to lose your job, I will make sure of that. Anyway, watch out for tomorrow’s installment when I change the stock list tomorrow morning. All shit’s going to break loose tomorrow.’

‘I thought they were Christian?’

‘They’re the worst of them, that fundamentalist lot. Bent as a ten-bob piece they are.’

‘So, you were wrong about Jackie having crush on me.’

‘Yeah, sorry about that. I was a bit slow to realise what was going on.’

‘If you know the system so well, why don’t do some pilfering yourself?’

He gave me a knowing wink. ‘You can’t really do too much of it. You’ll get caught.

That’s why the system is there, to stop these kinds of things. If you get somebody on the system who understands it, they’ll catch you ninety-nine out of a hundred times.

Anthony doesn’t realise that yet. He’s only just started to work it. In a way it’s a slightly juvenile attempt what he’s doing.’

After the pub I was late meeting Sophie at her place. When I got there she had already cooked supper and was watching TV. We had dinner and I told her what had been going on at work.

‘Who’s Ashleigh Stein?’

‘Who?’

‘Ashleigh Stein?’

'Oh, some American woman I helped out in Kensington gardens. She took me out to lunch one day to say thanks and I went to a party of hers when Adam was here.'

'I found her card on the floor.'

'She gave it to me and I put it in my pocket.'

'I thought there might be something wrong with you. Why do you keep her card?'

'Why shouldn't I keep it?'

'Oh, I see.'

'Sophie, don't be absurd.'

'Why is it absurd?'

'First of all because she's a married woman with a child and secondly...'

'And secondly what? Look, you are free to do whatever you want to do. If you want to go off with some fifty-year-old hag then you can do it.'

'Good, I should bloody well hope so.'

'I was only joking; there is no need to get so defensive.'

We finished the dishes and went to bed. We lay there and watched TV until about twelve. She rolled over and kissed me.

'I was only joking you know.'

The next morning Anthony was complaining about feeling ill. I had only half believed Stuart the night before. But there *was* something wrong in the shop. Anthony locked the office door and wouldn't allow anybody in. At one point, while Anthony was in there, the system went down and we had to do manual transactions. Then it came back up when somebody suggested calling in a technician from head office. At about three o'clock Stuart walked past me and whispered: 'Juvenile.'

Jackie didn't seem as stressed as Anthony. Stuart and I were the only ones who weren't gathered in groups talking about it on the shop floor. He was calmly selling luggage. We walked past each other just before lunch.

'Well my son, what do you think of them apples? Keep your head down and make sure you don't get hit by any of the shrapnel.'

After coming back from lunch Jackie handed me my second written warning for talking with Stuart on the shop floor. She seemed to have been crying, her face was red and blotchy. The area manager arrived with a woman from the HR department and later a woman arrived from Stuart's company. There was a meeting with Stuart in the office. I found out at the end of the day that Stuart had been suspended from work for two weeks. It didn't matter to him, he would still get paid by his company so it was like having two weeks paid holiday.

At the end of the day I had to cash up with Anthony. He was sweating and muttering to himself quite a bit while doing the calculations. He asked me to if I wanted to go to the pub. I decided to go with him. I was meeting Sophie later at Bradley's, but I was

interested to hear his side of the story. It was pretty strange that he had asked me out in the first place. After two drinks he started talking uncontrollably.

‘Has the Devil ever tempted you Nick?’

‘As I said I don’t really believe in God.’

‘But surely you believe in the devil? I mean how do you explain sin?’

‘Nature?’

‘That’s naive. Nick, sometimes the power of Satan is stronger than the love of God.’

‘Look, Anthony I have to go. I’ve got an appointment to meet somebody.’

‘Do you mind if I tag along? I need the company.’

‘Anthony I think you should go home.’

‘But Nick, I need company tonight.’

‘Look, I’m sorry.’

He ordered two tequilas. I went to the toilet and when I got back there was a tequila waiting for me but there were two empty shot glasses sitting on the bar. He ordered another. We shot them back and I picked up my jacket. He whispered something under his breath

‘What?’

‘You’re a fucking bastard. You deserve what you get.’ He picked up his pint glass to finish the last mouthful but he changed his mind and smashed the glass on the ground. He was bright red and his face was covered in sweat. I thought that I might have to slap him. He was shaking and sweating and swaying but his eyes were fixed on me and his fists were clenched. He was a lot smaller than me. I knew that if he attacked me I could floor him pretty easily. I didn’t really want to do it though. Thankfully the doorman,

who had just come on shift, ushered him out and gave him an open hand smack over the back of the head which sent him onto the pavement. He wanted to hug me. He kept telling the doorman that he wanted us to 'feel God'. The doorman helped me to talk him into going home. It took a while but he agreed. The doorman was pretty cool with him and we got him into a cab. I gave the taxi driver some extra cash and sent him on his way. The bouncer looked at me. 'Fuck bru how many pints did that oke have.' He spoke with a thick South African accent.

'A few.'

'Jussus. It was like *One Flew Over the Cuckoos Nest*. Are you his friend?'

'No. I work for him in a luggage shop.'

'But you knew what to do with him, hey! Does he do it a lot?'

'I'm not sure.'

I shook hands with him and then walked down to Bradley's. I looked at my watch. I was going to be late.

When I got there I had a look around but she wasn't there. I went out on to the pavement, there was a crowd standing outside but she wasn't in it. I went back inside and asked the barman if he had seen a girl of her description. He recognised me and said that she had left about five minutes ago. I took the tube down to her flat and rang the bell but there was no answer. I went to a public phone and gave her mobile number a call. It switched onto voice mail after a few rings. I left a message and walked back home.

There was note on the floor of the hall. I picked it up. *What happened? Did you forget? Soph.*

The next day I walked down to her place again. The person who lived on the bottom floor came out and said she had seen her go out with a backpack at about ten in the morning.

I sat that Sunday thinking about what I was going to do with Anthony. It would be hard ignoring something like that.

When I got to work on Monday he wasn't there and Jackie wouldn't tell us what was wrong with him. I didn't hear anything from Sophie. I left another message on her mobile but she didn't phone me at work.

When I was walking down Oxford Street after work, somebody came up behind me and grabbed me by the elbow.

'Hello fellow. Fancy a drink?' It was Stuart. 'I knew you walked this way. Let's go for a drink.' We went into Soho and walked into a small pub down one of the side streets.

'How's work going?

'The same as the other day.'

'And Anthony?'

'He wasn't there.'

'I wonder how the poor sod's doing.'

'Pretty bad, the last time I saw him. What did you do to the system?'

'Ah!' he said tapping his nose with his finger knowingly. 'That's a trade secret I'm afraid. Anyway let's put it like this, the system is in a right old mess and sackings are in order when head office finds out.' I told him the story of what happened at the pub with Anthony.

'I still haven't figured out Jackie in this whole mess. I think I've been wrong about her twice. I need you to do something for me though. I don't want her sniffing around my stuff. I need you to get the stock list out of my pigeonhole. It was fucking stupid of me leaving it behind. Not that she would know what she was looking at, but you never know it was pretty clever of her getting me suspended. I might have underestimated her.'

'You know I don't think they can be working together.'

'Why do you say that?'

'Why would Anthony lose it with me like that when he can go home and offload on her?'

'You might be right. But I still need that stock list out of my pigeonhole. Do you have a mobile?'

'No.'

'I didn't think so. It might be better if you had one.' He pulled out a small Nokia out of his leather jacket. 'You better have this.'

'I don't have any money to pay you for it.'

'It's for free. The wife works for O2. We have thousands of the damn things knocking around at home. It's even got one of my old sym-cards in it. It's pay as you go and it might even have a few quid on it, if you're lucky.'

I looked at it. I hadn't had a phone for about two years. I put it in my pocket.

'Look I've got to go and meet the Mrs. down in Victoria. Remember the stock-list out of my pigeonhole.' He paid for the drinks.

As I walked to catch the bus I put Sophie's number into the phone. The mobile was pretty similar to one I had had about four years ago. I gave her a call. There was still no

answer. I left another message. At about eleven o'clock I got a text message. *In*

*Hastings. Back in London late tonight. U bought a phone!?* *L. Soph.*

University of Cape Town

I got the papers out of Stuart's pigeonhole and took them to lunch with me and tried to figure out what exactly he had done. There were lists of stock and columns of numbers, just like the inventory, that was about all. Later I looked on the system. His figures were different to the ones on the computer but that didn't really mean anything. After work I saw Stuart standing on one of the corners wearing a dear hunter's hat.

'Why the fuck are you wearing that ridiculous hat?'

'Never you mind my lad, have you got the papers?' We walked down one of the side streets and into a pub. I handed them over; he gave them a brief glimpse and shoved them into his inside jacket pocket.

'I had a look at them. I can't make out what you've done.'

'Just as well. It's best that you don't know.' He patted his pocket in a self assuring way. He was beginning to annoy me with all this quasi-espionage shit. He said after a couple: 'So, you couldn't figure out what I've done?' I shook my head.

'Well, basically Anthony is fucked. I've taken copies of all the changes he has made to the inventory. I've been doing it for a couple of months now.'

'Why?'

'Why! Because without them we'd be fucked.'

'Why didn't you just expose him to begin with?'

'Because I had no way of exposing him. Head office would always believe him before me. I have no way of proving what he's done. He deletes all the evidence. What I've done is make copies of when I change the inventory back to what it should be, and

when I make the copy I make it with his password. Now it's just a matter of getting head office to see the folder with the copies.'

'So, what are those papers in your pocket?'

'They are copies of what I did. To most people they are meaningless unless he remembers exactly what he did months ago. But it's better that I get rid of them now. I've left a copy of it on the office computer. That's what happened the other day. He saw it. It's in a shared folder with head office and head office has the record of what happened with the inventory during those months. So, if they match the two they'll see the difference.'

'How did you find out Anthony's password?'

'One day a few months ago I just asked him for it. There was a problem with mine.'

'And he gave it to you?'

'Yeah, why not. He didn't know what I could do with it. And anyway we used to get on quite well before he started sleeping with that bitch.'

It was a bit late when we finished but I decided to go down to Sophie's place. When I got there her light was on; it was about eleven. I rang the bell. I saw her look out the window and she came downstairs and opened the door. 'Nick, what are you doing here?'

'I was bored. I thought I'd come and see what you were up to.'

'Well, I was off to bed.'

'So, you are not going to let me in?'

'No, I'm tired. Nick, go home.' She closed the door.

I stood there for a few minutes. There must have been something weak with the door's lock, because when I kicked the door, it flew open and crashed against the wall. It wasn't a hard kick. One of the neighbour's lights turned on.

'Oy? What the fuck do you think you're doing out there?'

'Mind your fucking business.'

A man came downstairs and started shouting and waving his arms at me. I wasn't listening to what he was saying. He slammed the door on me. I saw his silhouette walk down the hall. I opened the door and said as calmly as I could. 'I never get the same door slammed on me twice. Do you hear?' He turned on me and ran down the hall. I closed the door and walked to the gate. He stood on the doorstep shouting abuse at me. I didn't turn around.

Anthony didn't arrive at work the next day. Jackie was walking around with a red face and somebody from head office was in the back checking the computers. Jackie spent the morning in there with him. She came out while I was having a cigarette outside the staff entrance. Her eyes were red. She'd been crying.

'Shit! Nick, you have no idea what has been going on here.'

'Really.'

'I mean Anthony, you'll never believe, he's been stealing and doing all kinds of things. I think they think I've got something to do with it. I mean they are going to prosecute him for fraud.'

'Oh.'

'Look, if you know anything about this you better come clean.'

'What would I know?' I took a drag from my cigarette and looked away.

'I don't know, all I'm saying is that this is serious. I mean Anthony's going to go to jail for this.'

'Oh.'

'Don't you want to know what's happened?'

'Not really.'

She started crying again and went inside.

I went to the pub for lunch; I didn't feel like eating. I had a few lager tops and went back to work. When I came back I was called into the office. The guy from head office started asking me a whole lot of questions. I didn't understand what he was talking about. It was technical stuff to do with the system.

At the end of the day some other people from head office arrived. We were informed that the shop would be closed for the next week, but that we would be paid for it. After we finished work, the shop was closed by the people from head office and the computers and tills were taken away. As I walked to the tube my phone started ringing. I thought it was going to be Stuart. I was going to press cancel, but when I looked at the screen it said Sophie. 'What do you want?'

'What I want is to know when you are coming to fix the door of my building.'

'What? Look, I'm not in the mood for this. Tell me what you want.'

'I want you to come to dinner at my flat tonight.'

'Why?'

'Because I want to see you and we should probably talk.'

'Look Sophie, I'm busy and I really don't see the point. I'll see you round. Okay.'

I put the phone down; I didn't see the point in having this conversation. She tried to phone again but I turned it off. She sent me a text message later, asking me to phone her. I thought I might go down to Lyme Regis in the time I had off and have a look at my grandparent's old place. I hadn't seen it in years - not since they'd died. When I got home there was a note from Sophie among the letters. I threw it away without reading it.

University of Cape Town

# Book 5

University of Cape Town

I woke up the next morning and heard rain. The time was about ten o'clock. I could tell there were dark clouds outside, because there was hardly any light in my room. It rained for the next couple of days. I didn't go to Lyme Regis. I stayed at home and bought a few bottles of vodka and went to the pub. During the week I heard my bell ringing a few times, but I never answered the door.

For most of that day I had been in bed. I had noticed the bell a few times but had ignored it. Then there was a knock at my door. I had had a few episodes with Goisha recently about the rent and some other shit I couldn't understand. I wasn't in the mood for a repeat of the inanities. But the knock got louder and louder until eventually I got up. 'What do you want?'

'Hello Nick. Jesus! What a fucking tip.' I went and sat back on the bed. My head was groggy. 'What are you doing to yourself? Christ, when was the last time you cleaned this place?' I wished that she hadn't come. The idea of having this conversation bored me. 'Nick, what you are doing?'

'What do you mean, what I am doing? I'm vacationing in Malaga. What the fuck does it...'

'Christ Nick.'

'I'm not in the mood for this. If you've got something to say, say it.'

'I spoke to your father the other day.'

'Oh.'

'Don't you have a response to that?'

'Not really.'

'Nick, why are you behaving like this?'

'I'm not behaving like anything. Let's not make this into a song and dance.'

'This isn't a fucking song and dance. This is me, trying to have some fucking normal human interaction with you.'

'Is it?'

'Yes, it fucking is.'

'Look, I'm just tired.'

'I want to talk.'

'Well go and talk to Adam.'

'That was low Nick.'

'Come on Sophie, just leave me alone. I mean, it's over. Let's just leave it like that.'

Why do we have to go through this fucking emotional dishonesty?'

'Jesus Nick! This is the most honest thing I've ever done. This is how it works Nick!

These are how emotions work! If you don't talk about them at some point, what's the fucking point in having them?'

'Beats me.'

'Your father said he wanted to see you.'

'Yeah well, we'll see each other one of these days.'

'That's not what he said. When was the last time you saw him?'

'Six months?'

'Bullshit!'

'What do you fucking want, Sophie?' She became quite calm.

‘I never realised you were such a fucking coward. You’re just a coward, who’s afraid of himself. Look at you.’

‘Yeah, I know. I’m a deserter, hiding out in the middle of a battlefield.’

‘Don’t quote shit at me! I hate it when people do that. It’s just cowardice.’

‘Oh, for fuck’s sake Sophie, what the fuck do you want?’

‘Why don’t you get it Nick? I came to see you.’

‘Well you’ve come, you’ve seen; now you can bugger off.’ She stood there looking at me, and for the first time I saw her cry. Well, she wasn’t really crying, it was more like one tear just dropped out of her eye and splashed on her coat. Jesus, it was so unexpected, and I knew straight away when I saw it that I didn’t want to see another one. I felt sick. I mean, I’ve seen loads of people crying but it made me frightened to see her doing it. I just wanted her to stop before I saw another one of those horrible splashes land on her coat. Fuck, I felt like crying myself. I got up and wiped away another one that had started rolling down her cheek. And I put my arms around her.

‘Look Sophie, I don’t want this to be complicated. I’ll do what you want.’

‘I just want to talk to you.’

‘Alright.’

She looked at me. The image of that tear popping out of her eye flashed into my head. I felt an awful feeling welling up in me.

‘Sophie, don’t ever cry in front of me again.’

‘I know. I’m sorry, that was disgusting. I’ll try never again to bring emotions into our relationship.’

‘I knew I liked you for some reason. I need to have a shower and then I’ll meet you down at the Hansom Cab.’

At three o’clock I was sitting opposite her in the pub. We talked about work to start with and I filled her in on what had happened. ‘So, any idea when you are going to leave?’ I shrugged and said I wasn’t sure.

‘Why don’t you ever talk about things, Nick. And don’t fob me off with some funny comment. I know you hate the overemotional crap that goes on these days. But is this really it? I just want you to talk. I mean you know what my parents do, you’ve met my brother, you know what I want to do. You know my dreams, you know how I feel about Adam. And what do I know about you? The only thing I know is that your father works in the same firm as I do. Nick, I don’t get what you are so afraid of. Only the dead are without fear.’

‘Have you been watching *The Magnificent Seven*?’

‘Yes, because it’s the only fucking thing I know about you. That you and your mother watched it when you were young.’

‘Alright, what do you want to know?’

‘What does your mother do?’

‘She was a History of Art lecturer at UCL. B ut she’s dead.’

‘God, I’m sorry.’

‘People die. What else do you want to know?’

‘What did you study at university?’

‘PPE.’

‘What university did you go to?’

'Oxford.'

'Jesus. Did you finish?'

'Yeah.'

'What the hell are you doing selling luggage when you have degree from Oxford?'

'Lots of people have degrees from Oxford, it means nothing.'

'What did you get?'

'A first.'

'What?'

'Soph.'

'What's wrong with having a good job Nick?'

'There's nothing wrong with it. I've applied for a few jobs.'

'Really?'

'Yes.'

'Why don't you ask your father for help? He could find you something'

'I don't want to work in publishing.'

'But he works more as a businessman.'

'I don't want to be in business either.'

'Then what do you want to do?'

'I started off working as a journalist. But what's the fucking point.'

'That's the attitude of a child.'

'Maybe. I don't know Soph. I really don't know.'

'Have you ever been to a psychologist?'

'Sophie don't start at me. I don't need a psychologist; I need a job.'

'A career.'

'Okay, a career.' We paused for a moment. 'I have a question for you.'

'What's that?'

'Why did you close the door on me the other day?'

'I needed to think.'

'About what?'

'Where our relationship is going.'

'Does it have to go somewhere?'

'For me, yes, it does. I know where I could go with Adam but I don't know about you.'

'And now? What do you think now?'

'I have one last question for you.'

'Alright.'

'What are you doing with me, Nick?'

'Nothing. I mean ...'

'No no, don't. I understand.'

She went to the bathroom. When she came back, it looked like she might have been crying. She sat on the bench opposite me. I got up and sat next her and pushed my lips against hers. She smiled at me. But she didn't look very happy. She looked like she was going to start crying again. We went back to her place.

When the shop reopened Anthony had been suspended and Stuart was back, but there was a tribunal pending. We had all got summonses to appear the next week. Jackie had left to work at Selfridges, but we were told that she still had to appear at the tribunal. We had a new temporary manager called Tom. He was an old hand in the company and there was no messing round with him. He let you get on with your work but he came down like a ton of bricks if there was any kind of social interaction in the shop. He made Jackie look like Little Bo Peep. Speaking to him was difficult. He said very little, which suited me. Stuart and I went out a couple of times for a drink. We talked about what was going to happen. I didn't really want to stay working there for much longer but I had only got rejections from the jobs I had applied for.

'Better to keep shtum about anything you know.'

'I don't know anything.'

'Good. Anthony's as good as sunk but don't mention any of what we talked about. It won't be good for any of us.'

The week went by and I was meant to be meeting Sophie during the day on Sunday. I was waiting for her when the bell went. I walked downstairs and opened the door. It wasn't Sophie. I didn't recognise the person in front of me, at first. He was anaemically white and skinny. His eyes were blood shot and seemed to be bulging out of their sockets.

'Nicholas, I need to speak to you. Can I come in?' I wasn't comfortable having Anthony in my flat.

‘Look, I’m meeting somebody in a few minutes; you better make it quick.’

‘No, I need to talk to you. It’s extremely important.’

My phone beeped in my pocket. I opened the text message while Anthony was standing there. It was from Sophie; saying she was running an hour late.

‘Okay, but we’ll have to go to the pub; and only for half an hour.’

‘Thank you, thank you. God, Nicky you don’t know what this means to me.’

He’d obviously been drinking. We sat down in the Courtfield near to the door and the fruit machines. ‘Nicholas, I’m being set up by somebody. I need to ask you a favour. Will you do me a favour?’ He was sweating and his eyelid kept twitching.

‘It depends on what it is?’

‘I need you to delete something for me.’

‘Fuck off. I’m not deleting anything.’ I got up to leave.

‘Please, please Nicky’

‘Stop fucking calling me Nicky. I’m not deleting anything for you. You can forget it.’

‘Somebody’s set me up and they tried to pin it on you. But when I stopped that, they pinned it on me. Nicky you don’t understand. They tried to get you fired and now they’ve turned on me. I found that somebody had taken your CV out the other day.’

‘What?’

‘I think it was either Jackie or it could have been Stuart. I’m not sure. But somebody was trying to pin the missing money on you. I had an affair with Jackie she hates me now. I need you to delete a folder. It’s not that difficult. Somebody put my password on it. Nicky, I’ve always been open with you. I trust you.’

I wasn't sure about this all of a sudden. There was no way I was going to delete anything for him. Besides, they had taken the computers away; I couldn't see how deleting anything now would have done him any good. But his story worried me. Suddenly, he lurched across the table and grabbed me. I wasn't sure what the hell he was trying to do. I got up and pushed him away and he slumped up against the fruit machines and fell to the ground. I went to help him up but he clawed at my face with his nails as I bent down, and started shouting.

'You bastard you don't know what I can do to you. You idiot!'

He was hanging on me trying to hug or claw me. I took his head and smashed it against the side of the one of the fruit machines. He went down on his haunches and lent against the side of the machine. He was crying. There were only two other people in the pub, plus the young girl who served behind the bar. I opened the door to leave but Anthony got up and ran at me. I didn't really mean to hit him. I suppose it was more instinct than intention but I swung a punch that hit him on the jaw. He was a pretty small guy but I was surprised how badly he took the punch, he kind of just slumped down. I had never punched somebody quite like that before. I thought I might have killed him for a second. But when I turned him over he was crying.

I picked him up and put him on one of the chairs. His mouth was bleeding. I asked the girl to get him some ice. She told me she had called the police. He got up again and held onto my sleeve saying something about the folder. I pushed him away and he fell onto the floor. I looked over at the girl behind the bar.

'Nick, I've called the police you better get out of here before they arrive.'

When I left the pub Anthony was still on the floor. I walked pretty quickly up to my flat. I heard the sirens making their way down Earls Court Road. The skin around my eye began to sting. When I got home and looked in the mirror I saw that he had scratched off a lot of skin around my left eye. There was a bit of blood. The bell rang in my room.

‘Oh no, Nick, what happened?’

‘Shaving accident.’

‘What?’

‘No, Anthony attacked me. Don’t sigh. I’m telling you, Anthony from work came over and asked me to go and delete something off the system at work. When I refused he kind of attacked me. Actually, I don’t know what the fuck he was doing.’

‘Let’s go upstairs and sort it out.’

‘It’s fine.’

‘It’s not fine it’s still bleeding. Have you got any antiseptic? Christ Nick.’

‘I’ve got some vodka.’

‘You’re a fucking juvenile, you know that don’t you?’

‘Look if it’s antiseptic you are looking for, it’s the only thing I’ve got.’ She put some of it on a towel and pressed it against my eye. It stung like hell.

‘What a tragedy.’

‘What do mean, about Anthony.’

‘No the vodka. Fuck, Anthony did say something worrying though.’

‘What was that?’

‘Oh, nothing, never mind.’ My flat was a mess. Sophie always hated my flat even when it was clean.

'Nick, are you alright?'

'Yeah yeah, I'm fine. It was just a bit weird that's all. I've just had so many weird incidents with him. I can't believe he knows where I live.'

'It's such a beautiful evening. Let's go for a walk through Holland Park.'

We walked along the path, past the football pitches. There were some homeless people sitting on the benches. One was playing a guitar while the others were drinking, smiling and laughing. We walked through the collection of buildings near the tea rooms and through an open-air art exhibition and up to the Japanese garden.

'Do you remember meeting at the tea rooms?'

'Oh yeah I'd almost forgotten. It seems like a long time ago.'

'Four months.'

She squeezed my hand and I put my arm over her shoulders. We walked down into Shepherd's Bush and had dinner outside at an Italian restaurant. At some point she said: 'Adam is coming back for a week next week, and I'm going to end it.' I remember her saying that, because that's where she did end it.

I had a drink with Stuart after work the next day. It was the week of the tribunal. I asked Stuart to tell me the whole story over again. I couldn't remember exactly what he had told me originally. What Anthony had said the day before had worried me. I didn't really trust Stuart. Anyway, it wasn't me who was going to lose his job as things stood. I didn't tell him about the incident with Anthony the day before. I didn't want anybody to know about it.

That Tuesday I had to go to the tribunal. The offices were down near Victoria. When I got there Jackie was sitting in the waiting room. She came over and sat next to me.

'God I'm just so happy to be out of there. What happened to your face?'

'A dog scratched it.'

'Did you hear what happened to Anthony?'

'No.'

'He was attacked by somebody in a pub. He's in the Cromwell Hospital. They have him under suicide watch.' I pretended to be surprised.

'How did you find out?'

'His mother was here earlier on, she told me.'

When I got into the room there were three people sitting behind a long desk. There was a fattish middle-aged woman, a thin bald man and a man in his mid-forties with a mixture of grey and dark hair wearing a striped red and white tie. He was leading the enquiry. I pretty much denied all knowledge of anything. I hadn't worked there long enough to understand what went on in the inventory side of things. We broke for lunch

and the woman showed me the way out to the cafeteria. She asked me quite casually, in what might have been genuine interest, about my eye. I told her that my father's dog had scratched it, while playing with it in the park. She warned me that I wasn't allowed to speak to anybody about what happened in the tribunal until after it was finished.

When I sat down I saw Jackie sitting on the other side of the room. She came over and sat at my table. She told me that she had been interviewed in the morning but that she had to go in again after me. I don't remember doing this, but we exchanged mobile numbers. I suppose my mind was on other things. But that's where she said she got my number and it explained the mysterious J that appeared in my phone book after that.

I went in after lunch and they asked me about the money that had gone missing from my till in the weeks leading up to all the problems. I pointed out to them that I had a degree from university in economics, and that I wasn't stupid enough to steal from a till. It was difficult to tell whether they believed me. When I left, the woman showed me out. She smiled and shook my hand and said that if I had any more to say that I could phone her, and that if there were any other problems with work that she was only a phone-call away.

Work got pretty hard after that. Tom was cracking down on almost everything. Asking for procedures to be done three or four times until he was happy. Sales were down because of it. First he cracked down pretty hard on Stuart and then he started on me. By the end of the week we found that Stuart and I had received a written warning from the tribunal for unprofessional practices. Anthony had been fired but criminal charges were not being brought against him because of ill-health. What had happened

with Jackie was not discussed but I was told later she had also received a written warning, in absentia.

I didn't do much the next week, Sophie wasn't in contact and work was getting tougher and tougher each day. I sent out a few CVs and had one interview at a company called Emap on my day off. But nothing came of it. On Friday Stuart and Sean asked me to go to the pub with them. We had one pint and then we all went home. I got back to my flat and knocked on Ron's door and asked him if he wanted to go to the pub. We walked down to the Blackbird together and sat with a group of regulars that Ron knew. They were talking about the Gilligan/Dr Kelly affair. 'I reckon that the Government and Campbell are guilty as sin.'

'And Gilligan isn't?'

'And you? What's your opinion?' One of them turned to me.

'Oh, it's just spin vs. spin.'

'What do you mean?'

'They both lie. One to sell newspapers, the other to get re-elected.'

'So you reckon they are both at fault?'

'I'd say the government seems a bit more honest. But what does it matter, nobody's really prepared to listen to the truth.'

'Why not?'

'It's too fucking boring, isn't it?'

They turned to each other and carried on talking about who was lying.

'Mate I've never heard you talk about politics before,' Ron said to me. 'I only thought you were interested in sport.'

'Yeah.'

'I see that friend of yours Sophie hasn't been around in while. Is she still together with that other bloke?'

'Yeah.'

'You better watch yourself.' He gave me a smile but I thought perhaps that there was an element of disgust in it. The two men carried on talking about the Gilligan vs. Campbell debate. Ron and I finished up and I went home.

University of Cape Town

On Sunday I went to Sainsbury's and bought a few things. I was walking back with two packets cutting into my hands. My shoulders were sore as I turned into my road. I saw somebody standing on the steps of my flat. He was shielding his eyes and trying to look up at, what looked like, my window. I didn't recognise him. He wore smart beige trousers and an expensive looking shirt. I realised as I got closer that it was Adam. Four months had changed him. He had a dark tan now with blondish peroxidised hair. My first thought was to walk back down the alley I had just come out of. But before I could, he turned and saw me and raised his hand in recognition.

I felt sweat developing on my hands as I walked towards him. He looked serious. 'Hello Nick,' he said with a half-smile half-frown that suggested mental anguish. I arranged the packets into my left hand and we shook hands.

'God, you've changed. I didn't recognise you at first,' I said.

'Um, I've tried to get hold of you but you were never in. I thought we could have a beer. I need to talk to you about something.'

'Sure.' I hoped that my face wasn't showing the thoughts that were going through my head. It wasn't the thought of a fight. I just wasn't sure of what to say or how to react.

'Look, I'll go upstairs, put these down and we'll go down the pub for a pint. Just hold on a second.' I walked up the stairs slowly, trying to think of something I could say to him.

It was useless. What kind of thing could you offer a guy whose girlfriend you've been sleeping with. When I got up to my flat I didn't feel like coming down. It seemed like such a waste of time. The only thing I wanted to say was: 'Yes. I slept with her and it's

put us both in a bit of a pickle.’ It would be worth having a drink after saying something like that.

I got downstairs and found him in a slightly brighter mood. It made me feel a bit better. As we walked down to the pub and he told me about his job and how it had been going. He seemed to like it. I kept looking at him for any signs of what was to come. It was hard to tell. He seemed depressed, which could have meant anything. I knew I should ask him how Sophie was. I suppose it would be the normal thing to do. I wondered if he would think it odd if I didn’t.

We got to Earls Court Road and walked into the Australian bar on the corner. It was a bit of a shit-hole of a pub, but at least there were some pool tables in there. I offered to get in the first round but he insisted on getting it. I didn’t know how I was going to last a whole afternoon with him. I suggested playing some pool. There were two Australians sitting on the only unbroken stools at the bar and both pool tables were taken. We sat in the room at the back next to a picture of the Queen serving a pint.

‘So,’ I thought now was the time to get it over with, ‘how’s Soph-ah ah hah ah the wife.’ I pretended to have choked on the beer. It was hard getting her name out to him.

‘She’s alright.’ He looked worried.

‘Good.’ There was a fairly long pause. ‘So, West Ham went down. Did you see any of the end of the season?’

‘No. Not really. I read it in the papers.’

‘Terrible. You were lucky to be out of the country. The most depressing thing I’ve seen since Italia 90.’

‘Nick, I don’t know um...I’m having problems with Soph.’

'Oh really, I'm sorry.' And that was the truth: I was sorry. 'I'm sure you'll work things out. It's probably just a phase. Cold feet or something. I wouldn't worry about it.'

'I think she's fallen out of love with me.' I wasn't in the mood for this.

'No, it's probably just a phase. She'll get over it.'

'I don't think it's as simple as that.' He paused again. 'I think she's been cheating on me.'

'Really? God, I wouldn't know. I mean I hardly know her. I'm sure she hasn't though, she doesn't seem like the type.'

'Yeah, I'm not sure.' He stared into his beer. I wasn't enjoying lying to him.

'I mean it's not like *you've* remained faithful to her, is it?'

'That's the thing I have. I've never cheated on her. Not even in the months that I've been away from her. And I'll tell you it's not been for lack of opportunity.'

I didn't want to point out that he had actually cheated on her in my flat, in front of me. I thought it best to try and avoid the discussion of fidelity.

'So, when do you go back to France?'

'Tomorrow.'

'How long are you going for?'

'There's something going on. She's just so cold to me all the time. She doesn't want to sleep with me. I mean the first time we slept together after I came back she burst into tears and locked herself in the bathroom for half an hour. She said she was just emotional about my return, and that she'd missed me. But there's something else going on. I can sense it. I felt it the last time.'

I wanted to ask him why the hell he was telling me all of this. I mean he was from London, didn't he have any other friends to whine at?

'Sounds like cold feet to me.'

I got up and went to the bathroom. When I got back two guys on the one pool table had left. 'Should we have a game?'

'Yeah okay.'

The green baize was worn and missing in places but you could still play a half-decent game of pool on it. I put in the money and he racked the balls.

'Nick, what should I do with Soph?'

'I wouldn't do anything. She'll get over it.'

'But that's it. I don't think she will get over it.'

'Have an affair of your own.'

'What will that prove?' I shrugged and played my shot. 'The thing is I can't think of who it could be.'

'Somebody from work?'

'No. I've met all of them. They're all gay or as good as gay. She wouldn't go for them. She likes people like you and me.'

'Fuck's sake. I can never make those shots. Oh well, maybe you're just imagining it. I'm sure it'll all blow over.'

I managed to sink the black but in doing it I sank the white as well. My loss didn't seem to cheer him up. 'Nother game?' I asked.

'Naa, lets finish these and go to another pub.' We walked down the road to the Rat and Parrot and ordered another round. 'Do you know a guy called Deepak Chopra?'

‘I’ve heard of him.’

‘I thought you might have read him before. He talks a lot about love and truth and how you can’t have one without the other.’

‘God, I wouldn’t have thought that was true.’

‘You and Sophie should get together, *she* said something like that. But I think all relationships are based on trust and that’s a truth.’

‘I wouldn’t really know.’

‘Success, drive, money, love, motivation, trust, are all linked. And that’s what I’m worried about with Soph. She needs to understand that. I’m motivated in this job I’m doing, to uncover my full potential. That’s what life’s all about isn’t it?’

‘I suppose.’

Fuck knows what this had to do with his relationship with Sophie. I was glad when his phone rang in his pocket; I was getting a bit sick of this. I could tell from the way he answered that it was Sophie. I could hear the faint sound of her voice. She sounded angry. It seemed strange that she was on the other end of the line. He walked out of the pub and talked to her on the street. I watched him through the door; he seemed fairly animated about something. He came back. ‘Sorry Nick I need to go home. I’ll get in touch next time I come back. Sorry about all the doom and gloom. I mean you hardly know Sophie and there I was talking about her non-stop the whole afternoon. Anyway you always were a good listener. Thanks for listening, I really appreciate it.’

‘No problem. Look, good luck Adam.’

I shook hands with him warmly. I was sad to see him walk away, in the drizzle that had just begun, into Earls Court Station. A man tried to get some money off him. He

ignored him, holding out his hands to show that he had nothing to give. I never met him again as a friend. I liked Adam, but I loved his girlfriend.

University of Cape Town

I had heard nothing from Sophie since before Adam's return. I waited, but after a night out drinking down at the Courtfield I sent her a text message. Halfway through the next morning I received a message saying '2morrow Bradley's @ 6'.

It had been another hot day in London and I could feel the heat pumping out of the tube at Oxford Circus as I walked past. I got to Bradley's a bit late. The little alleyway outside was filled with people drinking. And the smell of sweat and beer and exhaust-fumes hung in between them. I had a quick look for her and then got a pint. It was like a Turkish bath inside the pub, so I stood outside and leaned against the window. A curly dark-haired Australian girl walked past and stood on my foot.

'Sorry mate, but if you had feet instead of yards, I wouldn't have done that.'

'Yeah.'

'Come on mate, it's not that bad.'

'No, I suppose not.'

'Jesus, bloody miserable pom.'

Sophie had still not pitched up. I gave her a ring but her phone was off. I thought she must have been in the tubes. Seven came and went. I started to get annoyed. At eight I phoned for the last time and then caught the tube to her place. When I got there, her light was on. I didn't bother ringing the bell.

When I woke up the next day I went down to one of the cafs on Earls Court Road and had a cup of coffee and a fry up, and read the sports pages. The waiter, who I often talked to, was there. We usually talked about the contents of the *Sun*.

‘Well,’ the waiter said, ‘it’s all over, i’n it?’

‘What?’

‘I mean the whole fucking thing is over. It’s fucked now i’n it?’

‘Yeah. Actually, I’m not sure what you are talking about.’

‘Any chance of peace in Iraq is fucked. Haven’t you seen?’

‘Why what happened?’

‘They blew them up, didn’t they?’ He turned over the copy of the *Sun* in front of me.

A bomb had killed the UN envoy in Baghdad.

‘So peace, it’s fucked now, i’n it?’

‘Probably.’

‘So, what now?’

‘God knows.’

‘It’s a fuck-up. That’s what it is.’

‘Yes. I suppose it is.’

I folded the paper and walked up to the till, handed over three quid for the meal and put another pound in the basket on the counter.

Work was going badly and it was clear that I was being farmed out with Stuart. I think head office must have blackballed me. Stuart was swallowed up by his company and sent somewhere else. Sean survived, but transferred to another store nearer to where he lived. A week or so later Tom gave me a letter to tell me that I had to go to a disciplinary hearing in Victoria. I didn’t even bother turning up. I was tired of the whole goddamn thing.

As for what happened in the few weeks after, my memory is a little unclear. I remember incidents, but in no particular order. I reckon I phoned Ashleigh once because I went out for a drink with her, to a wine bar in Hammersmith.

She kept on asking me if I was alright. That was really the last thing I remember doing with any clarity. I recall walking home and feeling a little cold in my long-sleeved shirt and seeing the clouds overhead. I opened the door of my building and felt sick and dizzy. The smell in the hallway was of food and smoke. I stood on a few of the loose tiles in the hall. I hadn't picked up any of the pieces in weeks. I tripped on one of the stairs going up; the lights were still broken. I ended up at the bottom of one of the flights. Somebody in the flat next to where I fell called out. I didn't answer. I sat on the step in the dark and tears started coming out, but there didn't seem much emotion in them.

University of Cape Town

The Benefits Office had asked for a bank statement. I couldn't give them one because I hadn't notified them, three months ago, of my salary increase. They said that they would stop the payments until I produced it. I had five hundred quid in the bank. I paid half of my rent and told Captain H that I would pay the rest of it when I had it. He gave me a month's notice, which was what the lease said he could do. I was barred from the Courtfield for some reason. I don't recall anything happening there, but I did get into a fight at one point. I can't really remember where it was or why I was in it. When I went there the one day the old man, who ran the place, said that I had been barred and that I was lucky that I hadn't been arrested. I wasn't allowed in O'Neill's either.

I hadn't left the flat for a few days. I think Ron came and brought me food. At some point he asked me to come and have dinner with him and his granddaughter, but I wasn't up for it. He asked if there was anything he could do for me, and said that he could fix me a job at the Royal Mail. I tolled him that I would check it out but I never did.

The bell had been ringing for a few hours or days or minutes. It seemed like I was constantly woken by it but I never went downstairs to answer it.

I heard Goisha's voice outside my door with somebody else's and there was a knock. It was locked but I heard a key and the door opened. Adam was standing there. I didn't move from where I was sitting. He looked pretty bleak. 'I wanna talk to you.'

'Did it cross your mind that I don't want to talk to you?'

'Well, I don't care; we are going to fucking talk.'

'Go and talk to Goisha. I'm sure she'd be more interested in what you have to say.'

'I thought we were friends.'

'Oh, fuck off.'

'Friends don't sleep with their friend's partners.'

'Yes they do.'

'Look, maybe in your fucked-up world they do, but not in mine.'

'Why don't you go downstairs and fuck Goisha instead of talking to me about this crap.'

'What! What are you talking about?'

'Well you fucked her once, I'm sure she would do it again.'

'I have never had anything to do with her.'

'Look, what do you want? An apology? Well I'm sorry. I'm sorry I met you, I'm sorry I met her, and I'm sorry that I'm awake and listening to you. So, just do what you want to do and then get the fuck out. If you want me to say that I am sorry that I had an affair with her? Well then, yes, I am. But it's nothing to do with you.'

'You slept with my partner.'

'And you fucked Goisha. It's a merry little roundabout, isn't it? She's with you despite your philandering and you are with her despite hers. Now fucking grow up and go back to her while you can.'

'How can you sit there and lie like this. She is the love of my life and I would never do anything to jeopardise my relationship with her.'

'Oh, what fucking crap. If you want to talk this rubbish go and get a job on East Enders. But leave me the fuck out of it.'

'You were my friend.'

'I was no such thing.'

He came up to me. He was bright red in the face. 'Get up!'

'You're fucking joking, piss off you little runt.'

He pushed me and I fell off the chair and dropped onto the floor. I was too drunk to get up. I lay there on the floor holding my head. I was kind of hoping that he would lay into me. But he didn't. 'You're pathetic. You know that? You're not worth it.'

'Oh, fuck off you cunt.'

After he left Ron came up and saw me lying on the floor and put me to bed. 'What are you doing on the floor? I take it that lad has found out about you and Sophie?'

'Yip. Little tit. Didn't even have the guts to lay into me when I was down. Thanks Ron. You're a good man. You know that? If you and I were the only two left...well you know. I'd have you before anybody.'

'Shut it. If you think this is funny, it ain't. You're a young lad Nick and you're throwing it all away. Having affairs with your mate's woman.'

'Oh god not you as well.'

'Drinking all day without a job. All alone in this bedsit.'

'Ron, if you're going to be like that you get on your little pony and merrily fuck right off.' I felt a slap on the top of my head. He was a man of seventy but he could have beaten the shit out of me in that state.

'Do that again and I'll sort you out.' I was laughing.

'Nick, you need to sort your life out mate.'

'I know, tomorrow, I'll do it tomorrow.'

My father came to see me a few times. Sophie had given him the address. I only remember one of the visits though. We talked for a while and I promised him that I would come home the next day. I didn't. He and Ron were in contact with one another; they had met each other on the stairs and had got talking. I asked him to pay my rent for me, but he refused. Both he and Ron had decided that it would be better for me to get thrown out and to come to a decision of my own. God, I don't remember any of this. All I know is that one day I came back from somewhere to find my things packed up, the locks changed and a note from Captain Hambridge telling me that I had been evicted. I remember sleeping in the hallway one night but Goisha got the police to throw me out. I went to Kensington Gardens once, and then I slept up on Hampstead Heath. I got attacked by some guy and his two dogs there. The day I came to a decision was the day I walked up to Archway. I hadn't bathed for days. I didn't know where my belongings were any more. When I got to Archway I decided to walk back down to Hampstead, perhaps because I was sober and it was the first time that I really felt the pain of having been attacked and the hunger in my stomach. Somebody told me later that it was almost certainly the fact that I knew it was the only way I could get a drink. I don't think that was true though. I was just fucking sick and tired of this shit and I knew there was a way out.

I turned into the small lane. The smells were so familiar that it hardly seemed like I had ever left any of this behind. I got to the door with its stained-glass window. I heard Oly and Sam barking in the back. It struck me as odd that I never had thought of coming

back to this. There had never been any conscious effort to avoid it. I pressed the bell and was surprised to hear a modern buzzer, unlike the old ring that had once been there.

‘Hello dad.’

‘Christ! Nick. Are you alright?’

‘I’m fine. Sorry I didn’t call for three years. You know...’ He laughed.

‘Jesus, Nick you look older.’

‘Thanks. It’s a new look. Do you like it?’

‘I preferred the older one.’

God, I felt terrible. We shook hands. We stood there looking at each other. ‘Nick, I just don’t know what to say.’

‘Fuck dad, nor do I. Some tea would be nice though.’ He smiled at me.

‘Are you sure you’re alright?’

‘Yeah, tea first. We’ll sort this shit out later.’

He went into the kitchen to make the tea. I sat down on the wicker chair in the cold little hallway. Oly and Sam came and sniffed at me. They were unsure of me at first, but Oly then put his head on my leg. I had lived in this house for over twenty years and I had never sat down on that chair before. I looked at the black and white tiled floor and then at the little art deco table that had always stood there. The picture of my mother and me at the Peter Pan statue was sitting on it, in a new silver frame, next to the picture of their wedding.

‘Hey Sputnik, are you alright there?’

‘Yeah dad.’

‘Two sugars as far as I remember?’

In London one always seems to run into people by accident. You can spend months trying to bump into them and fail. You can drink in the same pub as somebody for five years and never meet them. But one often seems to meet people one knows in tubes and places where the likelihood of meeting them at the same time and space must be at odds of thousands to one.

It was a Saturday afternoon and I had been looking for a new apartment around South Kensington. I walked into the V&A Museum. I don't know if I was consciously looking, I knew I was being sentimental but I didn't go in with the idea that she would be there. But in saying this I did go to her favourite pieces. It was almost as if I was looking for her, or perhaps I was just looking for the memory of her. I had wanted to see her while I stayed at my father's house. I had walked around her neighbourhood for the first few months of getting back on my feet. But recently I had lost the desire to go down to West Ken for a chance last sighting. And there she was, standing in front of the Balzac statue in the large hall. It had been about a year since I had last seen her. The sight of her left me unsure for a moment. But I walked up to her and she saw me.

'Hello Nick.' She smiled.

'Good afternoon Miss Hitchens. A fine day to be looking at the Balzac.' I can't remember her response.

'So, what are you up to these days?' I said.

'Did your father tell you? I left Penguin six months ago.'

'Yes, he did. He said he didn't know where you went though.'

'Well, Adam and I got engaged a few months ago. We took a holiday through Europe and then I started as an editor at Hodder.'

'Oh, congratulations. How is Adam, by the way?'

'He's doing well. He is a manager of the French section of the travel company he was working for. Earning money and loving it.' She paused. 'How are you Nick?' She said it in a slightly patronising way. I suppose she had good reason to.

'I'm well. My mother's brother got me the job at Deutsche Bank. I'm a bit old to be starting there, but a little nepotism never hurt anybody. The pay's a bit better than what I'm used to. Not such a bad thing, I'm not really clear why I never thought of it before.'

'Really?'

'Yip.'

'And your love life?'

'Ah, not too bad. I'm going out with a girl called Jackie. You remember the one who used to be the manager at Gulliver's.'

'What? Really!'

'Yeah, we met up one night. Anyway, it's a long story.'

'And what happened to that woman Ashleigh?'

'God, I haven't seen her in years.'

'Do you want to go for a sandwich down the road and catch up?'

'I can't, I'm meeting Jacks in an hour down at her place. Anyway, good seeing you again.'

'So, the old man was right.'

‘What old man?’

‘In *The Magnificent Seven*. “Only the farmers won. We lost. We always lose.”’

‘Perhaps. Adios.’

I left her in front of the statue and walked out of the museum. I wasn’t sure what she had meant but I was glad that I didn’t go for a sandwich with her because that last comment had made me fucking angry. I suppose it could have meant several things. I crossed Cromwell Road and stood next to a tree and waited for her to come out. I stood there and watched her standing on the steps talking on her phone. She looked in my direction, perhaps she saw me, I couldn’t really tell.

I do still wonder how Adam found out, though. God, I suppose it’s easy to discover these things. People’s desire to remember the past often gets in the way of the present. There must have been loads of clues: an undeleted text message, a note or perhaps an expression of mine that she used that Adam picked up on. Adam wasn’t a stupid guy; he’d pick up on it eventually. Perhaps he knew even when he came to visit me the first time. Sometimes I suppose it’s just intuition or like I was reading the other day, when the leaves of the Midsummer-men bend to the left that tells you that the other’s heart is cold and faithless. I walked down to the South Ken Station and got on a tube. I went down to Balham and met Jackie at her place. She was surprised to see me so early.

I saw Sophie one more time a few months ago, while I was walking down High Street Kensington with Jackie. She was standing with Adam, outside Next. They were holding hands and looking into the window at a pair of red trainers. Jackie was talking to me about her work. ‘What’s so great about it is that we are delivering Selfridges vision of quality, affordability and taste.’

‘Um, yeah.’

‘I mean we are really pushing the envelope to do it.’

‘Well, that’s good. It’s certainly not the way it worked when we worked together at Gulliver’s.’

Jackie held my hand. I thought of turning around to look at Sophie but it seemed more practical to carry on walking.

University of Cape Town