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KICKING UP DUST

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A minor dissertation submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the award of the degree of Masters 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 works, of other people has been attributed, and has been cited and referenced.

Signature:  Date: 24/11/2006

Abstract – ‘Kicking Up Dust’

The central character in ‘Kicking Up Dust’ is a twenty-something rock star, Julian Ashford. Right from the first page the reader is thrust into Ashford’s disillusioned state of mind. He is physically exhausted as well as emotionally worn out by the stressful demands of his career. He feels alienated by his celebrity self and to the hangers on around him, but mostly he is confused and vulnerable, desperate for change. We meet him on a plane back to Cape Town, the place of his birth, where his earliest and fondest memories of home reside. We learn that he longs to escape the billboard that has become his life, the high profile celebrity status and the intrusiveness that comes with it, the pressures of corporate responsibility, the non-stop punishing appearances and the fickle lifestyle he has grown sick of. Ashford is fleeing from the mayhem of London to the only place he remembers with true affection, his old hometown. The problem is once he lands he realizes that Cape Town is essentially a foreign city to him, he has no family there anymore, he has lost all contact with his friends, and as someone so recognizable how does he keep a low profile? This is the main narrative drive for the first part of the novel, Ashford’s escape and his desire to find a safe place to be left alone, to switch off and numb himself.

Interspersed throughout the overarching first person narrative the reader is given short episodes from Julian’s backstory: his family’s emigration, life in his new home outside London, the bullying he undergoes at school trying to fit in, his first guitar on his sixteenth birthday, the formation and development of his band, backstage antics, meeting model girlfriend Lucy Wallace, the effects of fame, band fights and Lucy’s death from an overdose. Throughout there is a sense that the past is distant and unrecoverable – the flashbacks Ashford tells often keep the reader at arms length, revealing painful information but always on his own terms, sometimes revealed with frustration, sometimes with dark humour. Even when he tries to phone his best friend from school he is mistaken for a practical joker and his old friend refuses to believe it is Julian Ashford, rock star. The past haunts him throughout following him into the present, damaging all new relationships and more importantly keeping him on edge, thus, substance abuse continues to be the easy option to run away from his pain.

In the middle section of the novel, Ashford meets an exciting love interest by chance in a bookstore. He takes a chance by venturing out of the safe confines of his hotel room and it pays off. Emma is a fine art student, her talent still un-discovered, still pure, she has no interest in contemporary music, she is idealistic and open emotionally. Ashford sees a chance for redemption, a partner who offers him a way out, someone unfazed by his fame and the media’s relentless pursuit. The friends he comes to know through this new relationship take him to Nieu Bethesda. However, the drive across the stark Karoo and the strangeness of the dorp with its legacy as an artist’s retreat and the mysterious life of Helen Martin’s and her Owl House as well as the ordinariness of his companions lives shift Ashford into self-destruct mode. Haunted by Lucy’s death and issues of abandonment, which resonate throughout all relationships in the novel, Ashford wants out again. Plagued by an addiction to painkillers and alcohol and a hefty amount of denial, Ashford switches off to difficult emotions. Through the course of the narrative Ashford’s mental state diminishes and his descriptions become increasingly surreal. The reader is shown a character in the throes of grief and self-blame who is unable to attach

himself positively to the present. Ashford is not without hope, especially at the start of the novel, but he is too weak to fight anymore and accepts his decent.

By Christmas, Ashford has returned to London, perhaps worse off emotionally but not without insight. Ashford is aware his record company, who refuse to relinquish their lucrative star, have manipulated and forced his return. He is unable to reconcile with his past – for example his futile attempts to reach out to his mother, his inability to make peace with Lucy's death, his bullied youth has left in its wake a person who longs to fit in but never feels he is worthy of doing so. The last section of the novel reflects a week of his life back in the crazy world of superficiality and excess leading up to New Years Eve. This is meant to show what his life may have been like before and why he became desperate to leave but also how much worse it will be now that he has further alienated himself. Ashford knows his life, as a global celebrity, may be about to collapse around him but he also finally realizes how truly trapped he is. This is his tragedy; while his inner demons are largely responsible for his downfall, there is also the sense that he has no choice in the matter, that his fate is largely decided for him by outside forces. He realizes that his celebrity life in London is perhaps as close to a home as it ever will be no matter how dysfunctional or damaging.

University of Cape Town

Jason Feldman

Kicking Up Dust

University of Cape Town

Fame requires every kind of excess. I mean true fame, a devouring neon, not the somber renown of waning statesmen or chinless kings. I mean long journeys across gray space. I mean danger, the edge of every void, the circumstance of one man imparting an erotic terror to the dream of the republic. Understand the man who must inhabit these extreme regions, monstrous and vulval, damp with memories of violation. Even if half-mad he is absorbed into the public's total madness; even if fully rational, he is sure to be destroyed by the public's contempt for survivors.

– Don DeLillo, *Great Jones Street*

If you want an audience, start a fight.

– Banksy

I

*Home is where I want to be
Pick me up and turn me round...*

- Talking Heads

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1

Nothing lasts.

The engine's relentless hum has made sure I have run out of sheep to count. I am twenty-five years old and drifting in and out of sleep in first class, thirty thousand feet above the earth. The large 747 has carried me almost the entire length of the African continent and is approximately two and a half hours from Cape Town. It must be around five in the morning because I can see the sun peeking through the white horizon. Two sleeping pills closely followed by a few shots of whisky usually makes flying easier but not this time; I feel punch-drunk, my body wanting me asleep, my brain unable to comply. I lie here motionless, staring at the flickering map on the screen in front of me. At least there is room to breathe.

Forget personal DVD players and expensive champagne.

Forget his and hers matching Christian Lacroix pyjamas.

Forget extra large seats that fold down to flat beds.

The biggest advantage flying first class is the privacy. The space, if you need it, to be left alone.

Forget small talk with strangers in economy class.

During the previous year's world tour I managed to clock up forty-two flights. This requires going through eighty-four airports and checking in and out of countless hotels. Add to that one hundred tour dates, stretched over twenty countries, playing to an average of eleven thousand people per night. I'll save you the quick mental math, that's just over a million people played to in a calendar year. Not to mention television and in-

store appearances, fan meet-and-greets, photo shoots, radio and magazine interviews, too many to count.

I left London to be alone, because I had to.

*

You are a famous rock star. Your band Samsara has just performed a sold out concert at the Brixton Academy. You climb into the back of a black Range Rover with tinted windows that leaves Stockwell Road and heads for central London to the five star hotel where you and the rest of the band will be staying before you leave for New York in the morning. It doesn't matter which hotel, all that matters is that it has five stars. Three photographers on motorcycles tail the back of your car the whole way back to the hotel. There is no point trying to speed away from them, the paparazzi will always find you. The car stops; you put your sunglasses on and pull up the collar of your black Dolce&Gabbana leather jacket then pause to take a deep breath before you attempt to make the short trip to the entrance of the hotel. The paparazzi shoot countless roles of film, deliberately standing in front of you, blocking your way to the lobby, hoping you will lose your cool and lash out. Some fans have already gathered for a chance to be near you, wanting autographs, photos, a brief chat, anything. You eventually get to your hotel room exhausted but still buzzing from the adrenaline rush of watching thousands of people staring at you up on stage, intoxicated by your every move. You will not be able to get the image of the teenage kids, who lined the front railing, out of your mind. Their hands reaching up desperately, while they screamed your lyrics back to you.

If I could be anyone I'd be Julian Ashford.

Then there are moments when you're up on stage, staring out over the heaving sweaty mass of people, when you become increasingly terrified that it is you and only you who has the power to throw it all away. Because you are the songwriter, the front man, your face projected on the forty-foot screens either side of the stage. The constant weight of expectation has finally begun to take its toll. You worry that at any moment you could go blank, forget the lyrics to the song you are playing and ruin the show. You tell yourself to relax, keep strumming, let the chords wash over you, become part of the

song but the fear loves itself inside you. The tabloids, like vultures circling, always hungry: SAMSARA DISSAPOINT THOUSANDS! And the next thing you know fans all around the world have formed Internet forums to discuss the band's demise. And how can you be thinking about this while you are on stage? Why don't you just focus? How does the chorus go again?

Luckily, you manage to keep yourself together for the entire hour and a half you are up there but the fear of failure stays with you for the rest of the tour. You need a chance to escape the huge billboard that has become your life. Your manager once told you that once the audience knows your name and they've bought your album they will think they own a piece of you. Maybe they do own a piece of you after all: you let yourself be sold to them. If it makes you feel better, know that you can never go back to being anonymous; you can never be the person you were before you were famous, because that person dies with the fame. Slowly, inevitably, you begin to believe your own publicity. Your record company is always willing to affirm your greatness as long as you are selling CDs and concert tickets. And sure, you always said that you would never get so far in it that you'd lose who you were but now you are lost. You are numb to the world, a robot acting out a constant stream of orders. Sign this, play here, stand there, and don't forget to smile.

Midway through recording your third album you realize that nothing around you seems real anymore. You have a hard time trusting even your closest friends because you know that they have only been *your* friends since fame thrust its open arms at you. This wasn't how it was supposed to be, keep telling yourself that. It won't make you feel any better. What you're supposed to be is eternally grateful. Everyone says you have the greatest job in the world. You are supposed to be content in the knowledge that it is you who gets to be that one in a million person who gets to live the rock 'n roll dream, sleep with groupies and make loads of cash while you're at it. What you're supposed to be is a lucky bastard. You are no longer an ordinary citizen with the same emotions as everyone else. The pop rock icon, worshipped for being on MTV.

*

I hadn't told anyone in the band that I was leaving, even though we were only halfway through recording the new album at Mayfair Studios just off Regents Park Road. I had simply packed a small bag with a few items of clothing then locked up my penthouse apartment in Paddington and taken a cab to Heathrow. I knew Simon Doyle, the band's manager, would ring my mobile if he didn't see me for more than a day and I would try to explain then.

I am staring through the half closed window shutter; the unyielding drone of the jet engines still keeping me awake and agitated. I am not thinking about the fact that a young brunette, Polish maybe, cold blue eyes, stick-like arms and small cone-like breasts propositioned me in the departure lounge at Heathrow. Not thinking about the fact that the word propositioned is a polite way of saying she offered to give me a blowjob in the men's room when she recognized my face. Not thinking about why I let her, and felt the need to tell her she was only average while wiping the splatter off my jeans in the cramped cubicle with the astringent smell of cleaning fluid in the air. Not thinking about the fact that it has been two years since I last had contact with anyone in my family.

I'm not thinking about the fact that earlier I spilt the glass of red wine I had with dinner down the side of my seat and am now swamped with the pungent smell of fermented grapes soaked into polyester cushioning. Not thinking about the fact that I got drunk at a film premiere two nights ago, picked up a beautiful member of the supporting cast and threw a punch at a paparazzi photographer after he tried to trip me up and shoot my reaction. Not thinking about how I woke up yesterday next to a petite Scottish actress, with curly ginger hair, pale freckled skin and the word *Tigermilk* tattooed on her inner left thigh who naively asked about our future together. Not thinking about why I could not help laughing in her face despite her killer body, and then feeling bad promptly told her relationships are just not possible with my schedule. Not thinking about why she got upset and threw me out of her loft in Earls Court without any breakfast.

There are ways to stop the free fall.

When the captain announces our descent to Cape Town International I take the opportunity to order my breakfast: some kiwi fruit and strong black coffee. Hoping the coffee will spark me into life and stop the electrical short in my stomach. The coffee does little to settle my nerves, but after my second cup I feel more awake. For some reason, as

soon as the city becomes visible below, I cannot bring myself to look. Ten years feels like a lifetime to have been away from home. I wonder if I am still allowed to call it that.

Once the plane is on the ground it taxis for ten minutes until there is a free gate for it to come to a complete stop. I lift the plastic window cover up an inch and steal a quick look. Outside the clouds look thick and heavy and there is a fair amount of mist on the runway. All around me the other passengers are gathering their belongings; some are stretching, some straightening their clothes, others are complaining about the overcast weather.

“We come to Africa for the sun, and now look; we’ve managed to bring the English weather with us.” Cue canned laughter from stranger opposite.

I hunch forward in my seat, holding my face in my hands. Inside my skull the dull throb of another morning headache has just begun. Staring into my palms I try to picture what I remember of my youth in Cape Town. The house in Rondebosch with the dark Oregon pine floors and the ghost in the attic, afternoons spent playing cricket in the garden with Luke, weekends on Clifton 4th Beach looking at the topless girls, kissing Melissa Harris behind the squash courts during the school social in Grade Eight, listening to Grunge albums with the Goth girl from next door.

Before long, a skinny and thickly made up stewardess with short boyish blonde hair approaches and asks if I am feeling okay.

“Fine,” I say, “just a slight headache.”

“Can I get you some...?”

“No thanks.”

“Maybe just a glass of water then?” she asks, grinning at me with red lipstick smeared across her teeth.

“No, really, I’m fine,” I say, raising my hand dismissively.

She gives a nervous smile and leaves. I close my eyes and take a deep breath, then reach into my bag and search for my sunglasses. I spend the next few minutes scratching in my bag, trying to look busy, stalling. I am crippled by the thought of what waits for me outside, and this from a man who gets up on stage and sings songs for a living.

“Excuse me sir but most of the passengers have left.” It is the same blonde stewardess and this time with a far more concerned look. “Are you sure everything is

alright?" she asks, placing her tiny hand on my shoulder, her nails bright red against my black jersey.

"Just get a little dizzy during landings."

"Well, once again, please let me know if there's anything..."

"Sure, yeah, ok." I say, immediately standing up.

The stewardess stands there staring at me; her smile now looks more awkward than concerned. "Um...I just want to say that my younger brother is a huge fan, and I know I shouldn't be doing this but would you mind terribly?" she asks, thrusting a piece of paper and a ballpoint pen at me.

"Yeah, fine."

"His name is Mike."

Dear, Mike

Would have been you if I could have.

Best Wishes,

Julian Ashford.

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2

When I was fifteen my parents pulled me out of high school, packed up the house and left for England. It was 1995 and it felt like my world had become a nuclear testing site.

I remember clearly how I was told. It was a hot, muggy day. The kind of day where the heat felt like it had you on slow roast. Of course I waited outside the school gate in my blazer, the sweat running down my neck, my white collar turning brown. No blazer in public meant Saturday detention. You would rather die from heat exhaustion than get Saturday detention. I was given the news in the car ride home from school. My mother took the opportunity to tell me we were leaving South Africa at the first red traffic light. "Listen Jules, you know how your father feels about the current political climate, the country is changing so fast and we don't feel there's much of a future here for us," she said, and then stopped for a moment as if she was carefully thinking of the right words. "Your father has been given an opportunity to join the U.K branch of his insurance company and we think it is the right move. The English schools start their year in September and we think its best to wait for you to finish up the term here and then we will leave in the July holidays. I know it's a big step and I know it won't be easy for you but..."

How do you respond to the news that your whole is life is about to be turned upside down and you have absolutely no choice in the matter? I did what any teenager would do. First, I sulked for the rest of the car ride home, and then I spent the entire afternoon following my mother around the house begging her to reconsider. Nothing

worked so I gave her the silent treatment until my father came home and I could begin the process of begging him.

As soon as I heard his car pull into the driveway I leapt off the couch in the TV room, and then bolted down the passage, my bare feet pounding the wooden floor. I was determined to catch my father at the front door before my mother could intercept my planned attack. I honestly thought that if I stated my case well enough they would reconsider the whole move-to-England-ruin-my-life-thing. My conversation with my father went something like this:

“Dad, what the hell, why are we moving overseas!?”

“Hello Jules, what a pleasant way to greet your father,” he said, then removed his coat and placed it on the hook behind the door. I assumed he had ignored me.

“This is so unfair, I’m not going!”

“Look, we can discuss this properly when you calm down. I realize this is a bit of a shock to the system but it is something your mother and I have thought about for a while now.”

“Why should I calm down? This is *my* life you guys are ruining!”

I’m sure you can pretty much guess the way the rest of the conversation went. I said a lot of angry irrational things, my father eventually said he wasn’t going to be spoken to like that, and my mother who had been listening at the end of the passage ended up telling me to go to my room.

So much for stating my case well.

What I *don’t* say is this: that I have just been promoted to the A team for cricket, that I have only recently begun to feel accepted and that I think I’ve fallen for Melissa Harris, my first girlfriend. I walked back to my room dragging my feet and slammed the door. Put on a Pixies album and then collapsed on my bed, a salty taste in my mouth, my eyes starting to water.

As loud as hell, a ringing bell, behind my smile it shakes my teeth and all the while as vampires feed, I bleed.

I had spent the first fifteen years of my life cocooned in a four bed Victorian house in the grassy suburb of Rondebosch. We had a kidney-shaped swimming pool, a

small but well maintained garden, two Labradors and one aloof Siamese cat. To quote The Who: *I was born with a plastic spoon in my mouth*. As a family we had the material possessions to be considered part of the suburban comfort zone and yet I remember being made aware of money, or the lack thereof, on a daily basis. My parents would constantly give the impression they were only ever just about breaking even. And nothing significant ever happened unless it had been budgeted for. Come to think of it, maybe my father was an accountant in a past life. It would certainly explain why I was given a receipt with my pocket money every month. As for my mother, she worked half days at an estate agency in the city bowl. I think we only ever went on one family holiday and that was to Johannesburg to visit my Grandmother when she was diagnosed with cancer and given a month to live.

Anyway, the house was sold quickly. My mother said it fetched a more than reasonable price given the circumstances. Soon my childhood home would stand empty, ready for the next family to fill it with new memories.

As for saying goodbye to my friends before I went to the gray side, I should have handled it better. I only saw Melissa a couple of times before I left Cape Town. I found myself avoiding her phone calls as much as I could. At school, I waited till the last week of term before I let anyone know I was leaving. I mentioned my family's plan to emigrate as no big deal and said it in passing. When I told my U15A cricket captain, he said, "Ashford, you'd better not end up playing for the Poms some day. Stay loyal, otherwise I'm gonna hunt you down!" When I told Mr Nash, my English teacher, he said, "A bit of advice boy, when you get over there, whatever you do make sure you support the local football team and remember you hate the Germans and the French."

Next, saying goodbye to Luke Myburg, my best friend.

The night before I was supposed to leave we had arranged to meet at ten o'clock on the First XV rugby field at the high school. I had told Luke not to invite anyone else. The berg wind kept the night air warm as we made our way up Dean Street, two six packs of beer I had stolen from home in my navy blue backpack. We entered the school grounds by jumping the side gate opposite the junior school and immediately walked over to the grass bank that ran along the side of the rugby fields.

"So that's it, you're leaving," Luke said, the moment he sat down.

“I would have told you sooner; it’s just that I didn’t want the last few months I was here to be weird.”

“And meeting you on the school field late at night is not weird to you?”

“I still can’t believe this is happening. My whole life is about to change. Tomorrow evening when I board that plane that’s it, it’s all over, everything I grew up with will be gone,” I said, pulling out a six-pack. “And as for life over there, well who knows, it just seems like this big scary mess to me.”

“Look, the way I see it is that you have no choice right?”

“Right,” I said, taking my first sip.

“So you have to make the most of it and just get on with it, it will be far worse if you go there with this shit attitude and like don’t even make an effort, then it really will suck big time. I guess what I’m trying to say is just chill, go with an open mind; the pasty white English girls aren’t *all* unattractive.”

“You really are a knob you know that.”

“To new beginnings,” Luke raised his beer up to the night sky, “onwards and upwards.”

“To new beginnings,” I said halfheartedly, not feeling the slightest bit different.

We drank till two am while half the stars shone down on us, my fingers clutching the lukewarm tin till it crumpled under the weight of my newfound superhuman strength. I wanted the alcohol to soak my brain numb. I wanted the drugs I’d never tried to come into my body and snap my heart like a worn-out E-string. You’ll believe anything is possible when you are fifteen, drunk and angry at the world.

Picture: planes dropping into the sea.

Picture: high-speed car crashes.

I was convinced my parents were punishing me for something and the worst part was that I had no idea what I had done wrong. So I let the beer protect me. Let the beer drown my head in its warm bath.

Before we left the field that night, I told Luke that I would keep in contact no matter what. Luke told me not to write to him as he thought he would be accused of having a gay long distance relationship with me. However, he would appreciate it if I sent him issues of Kerrang! Magazine now and again.

The twenty-minute walk back to Rondebosch took us an hour. We spoke about the future, we joked about how I was going to end up with a dodgy accent, and we even tried to break into the Newlands public swimming pool but couldn't climb the wall, although Luke spent ten minutes trying before giving up and blaming the nature of gravity.

The next day I was gone.

No more biltong.

No more Simba chips.

And yes, I'm a prick because I never said goodbye to Melissa Harris, the first girl I ever kissed.

University of Cape Town

3

You step off the plane. You breathe in the wet morning air. An uneasy wave of nostalgia floods your senses. Your mind is like the surface of a swimming pool, everything around you is suspended in animation, and you feel like you are floating outside of everything. Your headache is less noticeable now. To the right, a dim landscape of squat gray buildings crouching beneath radio towers and fat satellite dishes, the rain spitting at the ground, a thin sheet of water glistening on the tarmac and there's you, walking with airport security. You keep your head down and your sunglasses on despite the rain, only thirty meters to the airport bus. You didn't want all this excitement, you wanted to get off like an ordinary passenger but once the flight staff recognized your face you knew what had to happen. For safety reasons it is best to avoid any potential crowd disturbances, a security escort is airport policy with high profile celebrities. You never thought coming back would be like this. In fact you tell yourself not to think about any of it.

4

This is how we arrived at Hemel Hempstead. There's me, the pissed-off fifteen year old dragging two large suitcases outside the train station, there's my father whistling the theme music from *Cheers* trying to look as though the over-packed cases he struggles with are easy and my mother walking between us still moaning about having to leave her cat, Mao Ze-Dong, behind. The Labradors were given to friends of the family who owned a wine farm in Franschoek. The trip from Heathrow Airport to Euston and then up to Hemel was enough to give me a brain hemorrhage, my father insisted that it was worth the extra effort to go by train rather than hire a car.

Most of what I remember about arriving in England is hazy and there are only snapshots. I remember my mother and father arguing the majority of the first week. I remember having a fit of laughter when I saw how tiny the new back garden was. And I remember I lay in bed my first night thinking about life back home in Cape Town. What was Luke up to? Did Melissa hate me? Who was sleeping in my old room?

For a small town on the outskirts of London, Hemel was not as bad as I expected. I guess some part of me was excited at the newness of everything, the cold weather with its fresh mornings, the lush green fields, the foreign smells, the narrow streets with roundabouts at every intersection, the English TV, the way the food seemed so different in the supermarket, the new house with its country cottage look. I was immediately self-conscious of my South African accent and tried to avoid speaking when being introduced to people. Instead I nodded my responses with a cheesy grin and replaced "Ja" with "Yeah" as much as I could.

Snapshots: Walking along Warners End Road, black long pants, black shoes, purple school jersey and hands shaking for my first day.

“Alright you lot, listen up,” The principal said, having escorted me to my new class. “I’d like you all to welcome Julian Ashford; he has just moved into the area and is from South Africa.” And then I raise my right hand and say “Hey” probably looking like a deer right before it becomes road kill. I notice a group of boys at the back sniggering and one pulls a retarded face at me.

Then, being assigned James Wilkes to “look after me” for the rest of the day while I settle in, only he points out a few of the buildings, takes me to the next class and ditches me at lunch.

Meeting a girl named Sarah who asks me all about Cape Town, particularly the beaches and the “flat mountain”, says she likes my accent because it reminds her of *Home and Away*. Tells me how there is nothing to do in Hemel except go to the pub and get pissed. I tell her I already know this. She is plump with dyed black hair and not very pretty but her kindness gives me hope. We meet up at lunch for the first couple of weeks. I nod and laugh at her endless stream of gossip despite my lack of interest. I’m glad to have a friend. No one else seems to pay much attention to me except the four arseholes at the back of my English class who take turns humiliating me with anti-South African jokes and passing notes around the class, racist drawings of what I assume is me beating up black people whilst smiling.

I’m not sure exactly when the bullying started but the first few incidents were nothing too serious. Small stuff like getting pushed back down trying to get up from my desk at the end of class or being tripped in the passage in front of a group of senior girls who laugh at the fact that all my notes fly out of my bag. I only start pretending to be sick as often as I can when the same group of four boys waits for me after school everyday to push me around, kick my bag across the street or hold me against a tree while choking me with my school tie. I don’t say anything to anyone thinking that it will probably just bring more trouble and praying that they get bored of me at some point because I never fight back. I’m still surprised to this day that my mother never got suspicious of the fact that I spent most of my first year absent at least once a week. She probably blamed the English climate for my constant colds and headaches, or my morning nausea complete with

retching in the bathroom while pouring water into the toilet so it sounded like I was puking.

My parents still felt guilty about the move, so when Christmas came round I got my wish: an acoustic guitar, steel string, nothing top of the range but decent sounding. The first thing I did was stick an A3 size chord chart above the bookshelf in my bedroom and then tried to memorize as many chord positions as I could. Learning to play guitar provided just the escape I needed. I would play for hours every day. I would play until the calluses on my fingertips cut open. I was desperate to reclaim some sense of self-worth, the self-worth they had beat out of me. I had discovered my own private form of therapy and it worked. I sat in my room strumming along to my favourite albums. I imagined myself as part of the bands I loved. Most of the time I was Kurt Cobain, his suicide still felt fresh, still painful and the songs reflected that pain, they were easy to learn, desperate and powerful. I would turn my stereo up loud, and miming the words I would jam along, making up chords when I wasn't sure of the next part, making myself the lead singer of any band I wished. Every afternoon, in my room, with my parents at work, I would tour the world through my CD player. Rock stars didn't have to think about school or bullies or finishing homework or trying to talk to girls.

The bullying only stopped the following year when I joined the school football team. I possessed a die-hard competitive edge, perhaps in part due to my frustration, which slowly won over the respect of my teammates. I went into tackles aggressively; I ran until my lungs caught fire and had a fairly decent cross off my right foot. I did it to fit in; I wasn't like the rest of the football crowd who practiced daily with the hopes of someday playing for Watford FC.

I suppose you will need to know how I met John Coupland and how the band started. I was in my second last year and we had Biology together, we had been paired up to dissect some poor helpless insect, I forget which one, and the first thing he says to me is, "Poor bugger...(playing with it in his palm)...if you want you can pull the legs off and I'll cut the head open."

"How about I just watch?"

“More fun for me then. Suit yourself,” he said, placing the dead insect on the board in front of us. “I’m John, you’re Julian right?”

“Right.”

“Listen mate, what bands you into?”

And that is how we got talking, by the end of the lesson we were friends and had planned to meet up to trade music, and maybe jam together sometime. We both argued over which Smashing Pumpkins album was better *Siamese Dream* or *Mellon Collie and the Infinite Sadness*. John announced that *Nevermind* was by far the best alternative rock album ever. Not that it is possible to have a “best” album of all time in any genre but teenagers tend to get excited and say stupid things. I went for *Surfer Rosa* by the Pixies and declared *In Utero* to be Nirvana’s best work. The debates went on right through to the final bell. Once you have connected with someone who has similar taste in music you are already on your way to a meaningful friendship. So we traded CDs, jammed together, spent an entire weekend arguing over who was more influential, Led Zeppelin or The Beatles. Friday nights we’d go out with the sole intention of getting drunk. We’d try picking up girls together, jokingly telling them how we were going to be in this world famous band someday hoping it would impress them and get us laid. All it did was amuse them. It was only when we met Matt Dudley, who was two years older than us and worked in the produce section at Sainsbury’s that forming a band actually came into our realm of possibilities. Matt is a madman on the drums and can name thirty types of lettuce. The first time we played with him in his parent’s garage, John and I both turned to each other about a minute into our sloppy cover of “Smells Like Teen Spirit” and knew we had found our drummer. Luckily Matt knew a guy called Paul Allen who he claimed was wicked on bass guitar and was doing nothing except living off the dole and selling pirated DVD porn from his flat in Tring. It took around three months before the four of us were playing together with any regularity and for a while we only messed around with covers.

Halfway through my final year I noticed a significant change in my parent’s relationship, a distance that, in truth, had always been there but had become more noticeable now that the arguments were screaming matches. I had done a good job of keeping to myself. I never got involved, and in fairness to them they never came to me

individually to try and win me over to their side. Anyway, there were many reasons for their divorce in my final year, many reasons, and just when I had found some form of direction and wanted to tell them about the band.

Reasons: Father was never home, father had been having affairs, mother was lonely and hated her new life, mother had struggled to make any real friends, father was thinking of taking a new position in Manchester, mother had been out of work for a year and was taking anti-depressants, father had given up trying to cheer her up, mother missed South Africa and father did not.

Snapshots: Sitting on my bed with my mother in tears telling me how she can't live like this anymore while my father stands in the doorway looking angry.

Getting into my first real fight at a local club called Visage the following night with a scouser who spills his pint on me at the bar and then being thrown into the street by security, spraining my wrist and not being able to play guitar for a whole week. John picking me off the pavement telling me, "Sometimes it's good to get it out mate, make you feel any better?"

Helping my mother pack her clothes and hugging her for what feels like hours, our first proper display of affection in years makes me cry and beg her not to move back to Cape Town.

Showing the band a song I had written called *Not today, Never tomorrow* and watching their faces nervously while I tell them I'd like the band to be called Samsara and that I think I have the balls to front it, although I still need to do some work on my vocals. I remember feeling relieved and excited by their overwhelmingly positive response.

My father sitting me down a week before final exams to explain my options: either go back with my mother, move up to Manchester at year end, or he will pay the rent on a small flat till I get myself a proper job or apply for university. I tell my father I would rather stay in a small flat, opting to be alone. I graduate, getting average marks with no real effort.

My mother does not return to South Africa, instead she takes a full time position with an estate agency in Reading. She lives in a semi-detached house, rescues stray cats from the local animal shelter and is lonely. My father moves to Manchester to live with

Pam, his new girlfriend, and her two teenage boys. I have lost contact with all my friends in Cape Town.

Matt and I move into a council flat in the East End of London, along Mile End Road in Whitechapel. As far as cheap flats go, I suppose the Mile End Block could have been worse, at least we had running water, two tiny bedrooms, an almost functional kitchen and walls that were painted a cream colour that looked like it had soured over time.

At the start of the New Year 1998, Samsara has ten original songs and begins gigging as a support act in cramped venues around Camden and Soho.

I never get a proper job.

University of Cape Town

5

There are days I dress to be hidden – to be generic, camouflaged in dark cargo pants or jeans with a plain white or black t-shirt. It hadn't worked, as usual, and now there was all this fuss. Standing with airport security at Cape Town International, showing my passport, making idle chit chat with the staff, going through Customs, explaining I only brought the bag I'm holding, Customs rummaging through my bag, rock stars and drugs, maybe, I lose my patience, rock stars and tempers, probably. Prescription painkillers are not illegal, so why the dirty looks?

The automatic door opens and I step into the arrivals area. I am relieved to see that it is not as busy as I expected. I realize I still have my sunglasses on so I lift them onto the top of my head and squint. I glance around the room looking for any sign of photographers. It is a habit that keeps me on edge anytime I'm in public. I spot an elderly man with thick-rimmed glasses sitting on a bench reading the newspaper, and watching him reach into a faded brown leather bag, I hope he is not looking for a camera.

I tell myself I need to get moving, find a taxi, find a hotel, get some rest, sort this headache out, eat something, and come up with a plan for this escape. Just thinking about this allows my nerves to take hold again. What the hell am I doing? There is no escaping celebrity. You don't reclaim the anonymity you signed away simply by choice. I'm wondering this while keeping my head down and making my way towards a sign that says EXIT. I'm also wondering why the elderly man, his white hair slicked back, is now clearly staring at me.

I walk out of International Arrivals, lift my jacket over my head to shield myself from the rain, get into the first taxi I see and ask the driver if he knows any good B&Bs in

the Newlands or Claremont area. I figure it is best to stay in the place I'm most familiar with. I have also come to the conclusion that a five star hotel is the first place people would look for me should any of the airline staff tip off the media. I will attempt to get lost in the Southern Suburbs and hope I am able to bide some time there.

In the taxi, the next exit takes us onto the N2; I'm buckled up in the passenger seat. To the left, thousands of tin shacks line the side of the freeway behind an endless concrete wall that stops the squatters crossing wherever they like. Through the window I make out two mangy dogs fighting over a blue rubbish bag; it looks like a young boy – maybe five years old – is trying to hit them with what seems to be a small metal pipe. I crane my neck to see if he succeeds in getting the dogs to cower away but the scene disappears into the distance as the car speeds on. The windscreen is misty and the wipers struggle to keep up as the car in front sprays up a constant stream of oily rainwater. Table Mountain is caked in gray cloud.

“Aaagh no men! I can't see nah'ting!” The driver exclaims, leaning forward.

“It seems cold for early October.” I respond on impulse even though there is no need to make conversation.

“Ja, t'was sunny most of the last week. You kept it wit you.”

I let out a polite laugh. Rubbing my temple I try closing my eyes and force myself to relax. “I need to lie down,” I murmur to myself but the driver hears.

“Mister, you must be tired; did you get sleep on the plane?”

“Nah, can't sleep up there, too noisy.”

He turns on the radio keeping the sound low. A heavy gust of wind rocks the car and brings a salty taste to my mouth, my heart pounding. An old Bob Dylan song is playing, *You Ain't Going Nowhere*.

For the rest of the car ride I stare at the dashboard in front of me watching the meter tick over. I don't take in the sights of my old hometown other than the occasional glance to see if my journey is nearly over. Every red light, every stop street I keep my head down assuming people may be looking in at me. I don't say another word till we pull into the driveway of the B&B in Claremont. “Thanks, so you say this is a good place?” Again there is no need to say this but I feel oddly compelled to fill the silence

between me paying and getting out the car. "Looks very safe," I mumble handing him a fifty-pound note. "I'm sure this is enough."

He nods, winds the window up and drives off grinning, leaving me with the smell of wet grass. I buzz the intercom next to the eight foot black gate that sits imposing between two large walls painted mauve with electric fencing lining the top. The design of the house seems too square, too modern to be called River Cottage; the name stuck up in chrome lettering. No sign of a river either although the gutters are bubbling over with rainwater.

You will walk in there, you will act calm and business-like, you will not mention who you are, you will lie, and hope there is available room. You will also need to get local currency. You have just flown in for a business conference.

Thirty minutes later, having had three cups of instant coffee and a long uncomfortable chat with the owner about everything and nothing, I am eventually shown to my room. Yes I am down on business. No I just flew in this morning. Yes two sugars please. *Really?* Your son is on a gap year in London. How nice for him. The owner, a middle-aged lady with dyed blonde hair who wears too much make up and gold jewelry seems sympathetic to the fact that I had not made a reservation due to an unfortunate mix up with the travel agent. She seems mildly suspicious when I tell her I am involved in exporting entertainment products but does not press me further. As soon as I hear the sound of her footsteps grow fainter along the upstairs passage I lock the door and throw my bag on to the bed, the floral duvet now unmade. Standing with my back against the door I take in the room. A typical B&B scene: pink throw pillows, antique-looking bedside tables with floral lamps matching the print of the duvet, cream walls with gold framed pictures of country scenes and wildlife sketches, the smell of vanilla coming from a large scented candle that has been lit and left on the coffee table. I walk over to the whitewashed chest of drawers and pick up a brochure called *What's On In The Cape*. I don't thumb through it. Instead I rummage through my bag, find my mobile and turn it on. Go straight into the en suite bathroom where I find peach towels with floral patterns folded over a gold rail attached to marble tiles, a white Victorian bath with gold feet and a large gold-framed mirror. I take a long shower; letting the hot water temporarily wash away the outside world. Afterwards, hoping to finally relieve my headache, I swallow

three aspirin tablets with a large glass of tap water from the bathroom sink. There were only three left. Wiping the steam from the mirror as I lean in, I notice how dark my eyes look and that I haven't shaved for a couple of days. This is not the airbrushed face you see on the cover of Rolling Stone.

Twenty-four missed calls and eleven text messages on my mobile. I take some Xanax to compliment the aspirin. With the peach towel still wrapped around my waist, the air cold against the damp skin on my back, I check through my messages. The first is from John Coupland telling me he has worked out a new guitar solo for "Repetition Is Reality"; he also wants to know if I am going to be at the studio by twelve o'clock and whether or not he should just get a lift in with me. The second message is from John again at twelve thirty asking where the hell I am. The third is from Simon Doyle, my worried manager, who says something about reliability and letting down other band members by not showing up. Simon again ten minutes later explaining in an agitated voice that the studio is costing a fortune and that I better have been in a serious accident. I decide to stop listening to yesterday's messages and turning to look outside the bedroom window I see that the rain has stopped and that the sun is trying to bully its way through the clouds. Some of the lyrics I wrote for "Repetition Is Reality" intrude my thoughts: *The weight of my body, maintained with bad debt / These are days of insincerity, where repetition, repetition is reality / We're exiting the earth / Leaving all this dirt / Repetition, repetition is reality.*

Humming the chorus I delete all my text messages without checking any of them. This makes me feel good. I lie down and try to fall asleep, the damp peach towel still wrapped around me.

...there is an image of Julian Ashford lying in the sand, palm trees gently swaying behind, the sun beating down on his naked torso. This is his beach. This is where he is alone. In front of him the soft hiss and bubble of the tide moving in. Small waves topple and fall over each other in the rush to the shore. *Use caution when driving, operating machinery, or performing other hazardous activities. Xanax will cause drowsiness and may cause dizziness.* Incoming surge released then called back, pulsing like electricity. The sand like powder is strangely cool through his fingers. He stares straight up, unblinking, despite the painful white light. The seawater licks at his feet giving a tickling

sensation. *Xanax is used to relieve anxiety, nervousness, and tension associated with anxiety disorders and is also used to treat panic disorders. Xanax is in a class of drugs called benzodiazepines and affects chemicals in the brain that may become unbalanced.* The sky is a canvas, the clouds like paint, smeared Seville orange with splashes of gold. He becomes heavy-eyed while picturing the sun's descent and watches a new colour emerge as if an artist has thickened his work a creamy pink, like rose stirred through hot milk. *Xanax is habit forming. You can become physically and psychologically dependent on the medication. Do not take more than the prescribed amount of medication or take it for longer than is directed by your doctor.* Then all sound disappears and his eyes close. This is his beach. This is where he sleeps alone.

It's dark when I wake up. I rub my eyes and gaze up at the ceiling, my headache is gone and I feel relieved to have finally got some rest. The alarm clock next to me says 6:46pm and the large clock on the wall says 6:50pm. I leave them to fight it out while I go and take another shower to wash the sleep off. Later, I drink two cups of coffee and wolf down a pack of chocolate biscuits I find on the tea and coffee tray for dinner. I move over to the end of the bed where I turn on some local TV and watch ten minutes of an Afrikaans soap opera while eating a bruised apple for desert. I spend the rest of the evening writing in my journal and drinking from a bottle of complimentary Cape wine.

If I write: *I will make this a new start*, it spills onto the page and nothing happens.

If I say: *This is my escape*, it rolls and falls off the tongue achieving nothing.

Past midnight and I'm lying awake under this floral duvet clearly trying too hard to fall asleep because nothing is working. I am aware this is a bad impersonation of sleep, one leg out of the covers, eyes closed in desperation not tiredness, thoughts swirling round and these pillows, these uncomfortable pink feather pillows.

Thoughts: what is wrong with you? Nobody just packs up and walks out on a world famous band at the peak of their success. You will be strung up for this. Drawn and quartered by the tabloid public. Maybe you just need a break? Time alone to sort through what you want. You can't carry on feeling like a tourist to a celebrity life you will never get used to, a life by somebody else. One more pound of flesh always needed. And when

did the word “rock”, earthy and solid get shoved in front of “star”, leading light and heavenly? Rock star: To sway back and forth in front of a self-luminous gaseous celestial body only visible at night. Such polar opposite words. Is it possible to live out your days on royalty cheques? Are you just lazy? Are you in breach of contract? Can the record company sue you for running out on them? No wonder you have trouble falling asleep. You ask yourself questions you can’t answer.

Think of a beach.

Now try to think of nothing.

In the morning I wake up to the shrill sound of my mobile phone ringing. Not many people have my private number so I already suspect who it is. I reach across; grab the phone from bedside table, notice it is nine am, answer, “Bono speaking.”

“Where the hell have you been?” It’s Simon, of course. “I’ve been trying to ring you for two days, what on earth are you playing at?!”

“Morning sweet-cheeks, I’ve missed you too.”

“Oh okay, this is funny?”

“Now that’s three questions, which should I answer first?” I ask, realizing the comedy act is inappropriate.

“We’ve wasted three studio dates now and I would like some answers.”

“I’m in Cape Town. You’ll have to cancel the rest of the bookings. I don’t know how long I’ll be here.”

“This is fucking ridiculous. I would like an answer please!” he shouts. “A...*serious*...answer!”

“I just gave you an answer. I’m here, you’re there, that’s that, enough for me, and as for leaving without saying anything I apologize – didn’t think it through.”

An uncomfortable pause then, “No, obviously you didn’t. My entire schedule is being screwed with. You are supposed to be interviewed by Xfm in their rush hour slot tomorrow, I told you this last week. On top of that we have less than a month left to wrap the album and send it off for final mixing and we have only layed down four tracks. Four songs is not even half an album, there’s no single yet and you’re at the bottom of Africa!

Xfm are going to be pissed mate, this live interview has been advertised as an exclusive since the weekend. There is even a fan phone in for fuck sake!”

“Get John to do it. He thinks he’s running the show half the time anyway. Make him bullshit his way through an interview I’ve been doing it long enough.”

I should not have said Cape Town.

“This radio interview with Xfm was designed to show a united front. I promised them the whole band. They were going to throw break up rumours and internal rumblings at you and *you* would talk about new material and release dates, a new world tour maybe.”

Silence.

“Sony wants to know if we will update Aerosmith’s *Sweet Emotion* for the soundtrack to a new Colin Farrell action film.” Simon muffles the receiver with his hand for a moment then adds, “They want it edgy and...and very new millennium.”

Silence.

“Where are you staying?” Simon asks. “Are you safe?”

“Staying away.” I reach down and search the floor next to the bed with my hand, find my toiletry bag, open it, flip open as many plastic bottles as I find.

Simon informs me that I’m losing it.

I have to listen to a frustrated rant that goes on for what feels like an hour. Simon says there are tour commitments that cannot be changed, travel commitments, there will be angry promoters, confused publicists, more interviews lined up, press parties, contractual matters, wasted studio dates that are impossible to re-schedule, bookings, booking, bookings, adjusting release dates, people dependent on me, deadlines, deadlines, deadlines...

Dead line. I’m no longer listening.

Reliant is another word for dependent.

“Jules, you listening to me?”

No response.

“I tell you what, I will get on the next flight and sort this out in person, sort this out one on one, sort this out ASAP, hop on the next flight and get it all sorted okay? People depend on you. We’re a team here.”

Apparently I'm selfish.

"What do you want me to do about it? I'm here now. Don't pretend you didn't see this coming anyway," I reply.

This is not an explanation.

"See what coming? You, throwing this all away! Throwing it all down the..."

I start pouring pills into my hand without looking.

"Christ! You see? This is what you do," I interrupt, feeling a slight tremor in the room, "you twist everything so I'll end up doing whatever it is you need me to do. Well, I won't, I can't, not this time. I'm here so make other plans..." I want to hang up. "...I'm so sick of your manipulation; I can't do this anymore, sell it all away, selling every tiny piece of me, packaged and..." Why do I taste bile? "...constantly going behind my back to your record company cronies who only ever care about how much green can be sucked out of everything..." Is that a black square on the ceiling? "...don't tell *me* to calm down! How is this over-reacting?" Swallow enough to stop my head spinning. "Yes I'm fucking serious this time. Enough is enough..." I am a whining baby. "...no I haven't taken any pills today and so what if I have? You control everything you're always trying to..." I am death in the mirror. "I just want some fucking peace." Mix, mix, mix the medication and there is a black square suspended above your head.

The room drops and you are gone. An empty shell, statue-like and frozen in sound, a once charmed life flashing back and forth in front of you like a film projected on the ceiling directly above. You are watching a silent movie play images of a celebrity life you thought you could control. Remember miming along to rock songs in your bedroom after school with an unplugged electric guitar and a broken microphone taped to a broomstick. Remember practicing new riffs over and over until your hands cramped up. Try to hold onto the memory of that naïve child who dreamt of filled auditoriums hanging on every word. In focus now are jump shots of alcohol abuse, band fights, collapsing on stage in Mexico City from heat exhaustion, waking up in hotel rooms forgetting which city you are in, food poisoning in Sao Paulo, insane Japanese television presenters, police escorts, false charges of rape in Rome and underage girls flashing their breasts in the front row. Cut scene to Matt passed out in his own vomit in the bathroom of the Virgin Megastore in Sydney ten minutes before an acoustic in-store appearance,

Simon slapping him across the face shouting at you to find a bucket and fill it with cold water. Dissolve. Break on through to the other side; you hear the faintest whisper, break on through. Subtitles are sprawled randomly in the frame: Pop-culture freak. Your life relayed back to you in print, misquoted and false. *Vicodin is available in tablet, capsule, and liquid form and is taken every 4-6 hours by mouth.* Plastic Jesus kicks up dust in nowhere land. *Do not take a larger dose, or take it more frequently, or take it for longer than the doctor has prescribed.* Watch it settle. The kids will connect with anything you say. *OxyContin comes in liquid and tablet form taken every six hours.* There was a man there who collected cigarette butts and swept out the graveyard. *Pain receptors in the brain are numbed.* He saw magnolia flowers, and sang hymns as they wilted. Look for a healing stream. *Percocet is the brand name for the combination of acetaminophen (Tylenol) and oxycodone.* The spotlight shone down on you, the brightest sun perched on scaffolding. *Since oxycodone can be habit forming, care must be taken to follow the doctor's instructions when taking Percodan.* A sea of hands moved in unison and you strummed their rhythm. *Research suggests that stimulation of opiate receptors by morphine results in feelings of reward and activates the pleasure circuit causing an intense euphoria, or rush that lasts only briefly and is followed by a few hours of a relaxed, contented state.* The smoke flooded the stage and the lightning flickered like regret against a backdrop of faces ravenous for flesh. *A regular and excessive release of dopamine and stimulation of the reward system can lead to addiction.* In America you will find an obsession with perfect surfaces. *Codeine was originally discovered as a naturally occurring constituent of opium.* O say can you see? Can you see? Across the water a drowning young man, exhausted from calling out to the shore. *Do not take a larger dose, or take it more frequently, or take it for longer than the doctor has prescribed.* Fingernails scrape the blackboard where in chalk it is written: This is the end, beautiful friend, my only friend; it hurts to set you free.

6

Though richer than bankers and company presidents, rock stars still managed to retain their rebel image. Young, good-looking, famous, desired by woman and envied by men, rock stars had risen to the summit of social order. Nothing since the deification of the pharaohs could compare to the devotion European and American youth bestowed on their heroes.

Atomised – Michel Houellebecq

The way the story goes; four trespassing teenage girls found their way backstage at a Samsara gig in New York City and lost their virginity in the band's dressing room. On the night of her seventeenth birthday Hannah Levine purchased four tickets for triple the face value from a scalper outside the concert venue and made her way in with three of her closest girlfriends. Her friends, Shelley the youngest at sixteen years and four months, the other two, Liza and Chantelle, both seventeen already thought it would be fun to celebrate their friend's birthday in fancy dress. Liza went dressed as Britney Spears because she had always been told she bore a more than passing resemblance to the shiny pop princess. Her penchant for black T-shirts bearing punk rock labels did not suit the comparison. She wore a catholic schoolgirl uniform that included a plaid skirt complete with knee high socks and her long platinum blonde hair tied up in pigtails. Shelly, who had opted not to partake in the fancy dress, had to be convinced at the last minute to make an effort for the sake of her best friend's special occasion and threw together an eighties pop outfit based loosely on Madonna's *Like A Virgin* video by wearing the white bridesmaid dress she had worn to her sister's wedding that summer. Getting ready to

leave, Chantelle, the most free spirited of the group openly admitted that she was and always had been a closet Christina Aguilera fan. She had no problem admitting this to her friends despite their close-mindedness about all other genres of music that did not involve a distorted guitar or at least some form of shouting. She had no problem coming clean to her friends about her passion for Christina Aguilera because that evening she had consumed an entire bottle of champagne while helping the girls get ready. Chantelle, who is a half-foot taller than her pop idol and a lanky red head, based her outfit on the *Lady Marmalade* video. She went to the rock show drunk and dressed like a prostitute. Hannah, an attractive and precocious brunette with long legs, tan skin and dark brown eyes, came from a conservative Jewish family who owned a substantial amount of real estate in Greenwich Village. She went as Jessica Simpson because that was the only other bubblegum star she could think of. She wore a bright red tank top and made hot pants by cutting up an old pair of jeans and, without telling her mother, bought a pair of leather boots at Prada on her platinum credit card. All four girls owned every Samsara album, every single with every B-side plus the Japanese imports, posters, buttons, stickers, t-shirts and the Live at the Astoria DVD. The four young pop stars took a yellow cab across town to Delancey Street on the Lower East Side, fake ids on board.

The band opted to play at The Bowery Ballroom, a low capacity venue, as a warm up gig for their summer tour of America. Their record company, LESSTHANZERO, had wanted the tour to start off with a bang at Madison Square Garden in front of twenty thousand and was disappointed with the band's decision to play a warm up gig. As a compromise the band had agreed to close their tour at Radio City Music Hall with special guests The White Stripes and broadcast rights sold to MTV2.

The upstairs hall of the ballroom shook that night and sweat ran down the walls. Moments before leaving the stage Julian Ashford had been leaning against a ten-foot Marshall amp cabinet when he smashed his sunburst Fender Jazzmaster against the stage floor then ripped off his shirt and threw it out to the heaving mass to fight over it. In a fit of frenzied excitement, Chantelle, desperate to meet the band and still buzzing from the champagne overdose, came up with the plan to sneak backstage. The other three pop stars followed suit, not as confident as their drunken leader but equally caught up in the moment. At this point in the show the stage lights were off except for a single strobe light

that flickered behind Dudley's drum set, the crowd waited for the inevitable encore and chanted in unison, "More! More! More!" The bouncers who were supposed to be guarding the backstage entrance had their hands full holding up the barrier that was buckling in front of the stage. In the temporary darkness the girls slipped into the area of restricted access.

The band finished their set with an aggressive version of "Cure for Radio", their most successful single to date. They also finished off by destroying all the instruments on stage in a crescendo of feedback and distortion that satisfied the crowd's hunger, leaving them to file out of the upstairs area glassy-eyed and drenched in each other's sweat. By now the four trespassing pop stars had found their way into the Samsara dressing room and helped themselves to the deli trays left out for the band's return. Promoters are required to place two trays of fresh fruit, one tray of assorted junk food snacks, two bottles of Jack Daniels, a dozen bottles of ice-cold mineral water, ten white towels, a mini-bar fridge filled with Häagen-Daz ice cream and one large poster of David Hasselhoff.

When the band returned to their backstage room they flipped out at the lack of security and were about to throw the girls out when John Coupland began laughing hysterically at what he must have thought were four new groupies in fancy dress. It didn't take long before the rest of the band caught the joke. The four young pop stars looked at each other in amazement, nervous and shaking with excitement that their idols were standing right there in front of them. The band assumed it was Simon who had let the girls in, after all how else would they have got permission to be backstage? Four teenage girls, dressed as pop star look-a-likes, seemed like a more than adequate reward from management for giving a solid performance.

First to introduce herself was Britney Spears. Liza ran up to Julian Ashford and hugged him tight, telling him, "You're like *totally* so much better looking in person." The Samsara frontman, still shaking mildly from the recent adrenaline rush, thanked Britney while she hung on to him. He asked her how old she was, noticing that her schoolgirl outfit seemed too much like an actual school uniform. Britney played with her pigtails and giggled without answering. If only her classmates at Marymount could see her now, how jealous they would be. Julian Ashford grabbed the half empty bottle of Jack Daniels

on the table opposite as well as a tub of cookie dough ice cream and a bunch of white grapes then lead Britney through the red door where they could be alone.

When Paul Allen asked Hannah who she was supposed to be, the birthday girl replied, "Jessica Simpson." To which the bassist responded, "No love, Jessica has much bigger tits than that." And then cupping Hannah's left breast, he continued, "Isn't she a blonde?" Hannah reached down, grabbed Paul's crotch and with a cheeky smile came back with, "Aren't rock stars supposed to have big cocks?" Then turning to the two remaining band members, Paul announced, "Right, I'm having Jessica," and promptly escorted her through the blue door with some marijuana and a Snoop Dogg CD in hand.

John Coupland stood there wiping the sweat off his now naked upper body with one of the white towels bought at Bloomingdales and stared at the last two pop stars open-mouthed and struggling to decide. Madonna couldn't help but ogle the lead guitarist's semi-defined torso while she fidgeted with the lace on her pseudo wedding dress, her hands rolling over each other nervously. Christina Aguilera, eyes half closed and still intoxicated on cheap champagne, commented to Madonna that this was by far the greatest moment of her short life. Greater than the time Billie Joe Armstrong autographed her cleavage at a Green Day in-store signing in Times Square and even greater than the time she bumped into Natalie Portman at Figaro Cafe in Bleecker Street. John Coupland decided that flipping a coin with Matt Dudley would be the fairest way to decide which girl would be afforded the honour of sex with either of them. Heads: Madonna. Tails: Christina Aguilera. John threw the coin up in the air, caught it and then slapped it onto his forearm. Heads! Chantelle had won and turning to Shelley she declared, "I've always been lucky at coin toss!" And then adjusting her fishnet stockings, she added with a wink, "Don't worry Matt is also kinda cute." John was now salivating with anticipation and strutted over to his lucky winner picking up the last bottle of bourbon and two red apples as he passed the deli trays, he then took hold of her small freckled hand and led her in through the out door which had recently been painted the colour of envy.

Matt then motioned for his early eighties Madonna to come to him. He picked up his copy of the Collected Poems of Lord Byron and a tub chocolate chip ice cream and then led Shelley through the last remaining un-opened doorway. Inside the yellow door

and into a place of cloudless climbs and starry skies, where age is only a number and the youngest of the four trespassing pop stars could be touched for the very first time.

Early the following morning, the cleaning staff found a note written in blood red lipstick on one of the dressing room mirrors that read: *All unattended children will be sold as slaves.*

University of Cape Town

7

Saliva runs from the corners of my mouth. Beside the bed, my journal lies open with the words *to become myself I have to become someone else* scrawled untidily across the page. I am having trouble focusing; like looking through glass bowls. I am having trouble remembering where I am; my head is codeine confusion. I am holding my mobile phone, have no idea why. Notice a gold-framed wildlife sketch on the wall; a lion and an elephant pose next to a Syringa tree in the African Veld. A B&B in Claremont, the worst rock star hiding place in the world. The edge of the bed is a cliff and my feet hang cold. There is a mild ache in my bones and nausea cramps my empty stomach. The light pushes through the curtains exhausted. It can't be too bright out, seems overcast through the small gap in the wildlife print. I wonder what the time is and how long I have been here, cooped up in interior decorating hell. The alarm clock is on the floor, upside down and the screen is cracked. I reach down pick up my journal and then glance over the words BECOME SOMEONE ELSE. I turn back a couple pages; there is a story about backstage antics at a gig in New York City. Probably true, probably not. Don't remember writing it.

Since the alarm clock has past away, murder the likely cause of death, I switch on the satellite TV and look at my mobile phone to check the time. It is mid-afternoon and I have not eaten since the free chocolate biscuits last night. I flick through channels until I find MTV. Coldplay are singing about the speed of sound. The inside of my mouth feels sticky and it smells of stale air in here so I open up the wildlife curtains and then slide open all the windows. I walk into the bathroom and then splash water on my face and

neck from the sink, wetting my hair back. I take a drink from the tap cupping both my hands and sucking up cold water. When I look in the mirror I notice a small crack, maybe five inches, right in the middle and if I lean in my image is split as if it were the jagged reflection of my former self. I rub my eyes until they are red and itchy and then splash more water on my face. When I look up the crack is no longer there but the image of my face still seems distorted. While I brush my teeth I flex my muscles and notice that with the white foam coming out of the sides of my mouth I have this wild grin. My hazel eyes look green in the bathroom light and my teeth sharper than usual. I pull a face like a rabid dog and almost laugh.

I open the door, and then walk down the narrow carpeted hall. When I get to the bottom of the stairs I peer round the corner and survey the downstairs lounge and reception area.

“*Yoo hoooo!*” The high-pitched voice of the B&B owner as she comes walking through the open door directly behind the reception desk.

I raise my hand in the internationally accepted form of wordless greeting. I can’t think of her name. She is wearing a navy blue long sleeve jumper with leopard print down the arms and the words Mother City in bold caption across the middle, large gold earrings, khaki shorts and leather sandals.

“That flight must have really worn you out. I sent the maid up to clean your room at eleven but I told her it was best not to disturb. I’m afraid you’ve missed breakfast,” she says, rubbing her belly and looking at me like a disappointed schoolteacher. “I will get Beauty to straighten your room out later, she *must* do her work.”

“Sure.”

“How about nice hot cup of coffee?”

Realizing that accepting coffee would involve sitting in the lounge and chatting, I politely decline and ask her if the shopping mall is still close by. The same shopping mall I spent most afternoons after school lurking around in the CD shops listening to new bands and in the newsagents reading music magazines for free.

“Cavendish is only a five minute walk from here,” she says, proudly. “Only two roads up, you can’t miss it.”

“Yeah, thanks. I only need to exchange money and get a couple of items.”

I make it to the shopping mall after a slow walk gulping in fresh air, wearing a navy blue baseball cap low to conceal my eyes. I am surprised by how much of the area seems familiar to me despite the new office developments and residential blocks. Walking under the glare of fluorescent lights inside Cavendish feeling self-conscious and looking for a place to exchange money, I catch bits and pieces of the conversations going on around me and once again I am flooded with a wave of nostalgia that re-connects me with memories of my childhood here. Meeting friends every Friday night at the movies on the top floor, making out with Melissa Harris in the dark of the theatre on my first real date, skateboarding in the parking lot until the security guards chase us away and shoplifting chocolates until our pockets bulge then sharing them out on the walk home.

I exchange money and then find a place to eat lunch in a coffee shop on the third floor. I sit in the glass paneled smoking section at the back because it is empty except for a sour-faced old lady who sits in the corner doing the crossword, her newspaper folded over and a ballpoint pen in her right hand shaking. She's drinking a glass of white wine and there is a half eaten salad pushed to the side. We make eye contact as I sit down. I immediately pick up a menu and hold it up in front of my face. I'm sitting at one of the tables against the wall, my baseball cap still pulled down, reading the lunch menu. I hear the sour faced old lady grumble under her breath and I look round the side of my menu. She keeps touching her mauve hair while she squints hard at the crossword in front of her, clearly struggling with whatever word it is she is trying to figure out. I place my order with a distantly attentive waitress who has bad acne and a worse smile.

"Celebrity!" The sour-faced old lady blurts out then fills in the letters without looking up. My heart slams into my rib cage. A well-known and widely acclaimed person, see famous, see brand name, see attention seeking.

I am so sick of feeling scared all the time.

I turn and look at the busy non-smoking section of the coffee shop then reach into the pocket of my black leather jacket, take out a Xanax and place it on my tongue. Closing my eyes I picture myself walking up a large sand dune, warm winds kiss my face and I smile up at the swirls of white cloud sketched across a burning blue sky. I sink into a valley of sand.

I'm in a long queue at a supermarket on the lower ground floor of Cavendish. I came for razorblades and bottles of Cape red wine. People stand in slow moving lines, staring deadpan in silence, determined not to make eye contact with the strangers around them. People trying not to look at the sweets packed along side them, especially the chocolates they will tell themselves they shouldn't have but will buy anyway. All the tabloids they glance over promising celebrity dating gossip, sex scandals, recipes and the hottest TV shows that week. Women with carefully groomed hair and powdered faces stare down at the latest issue of Heat Magazine which claims to have uncovered celebrities who actually have cellulite and pimples, celebrities who have been exposed for being real and therefore flawed, celebrities who have been photographed doing everyday things, like walking their dogs, collecting laundry or jogging in sweats to make you feel better about your own life. Everyone is waiting for the flashing red lights that tell you when you may move forward and approach the next free till. *Row seven please*. Shopping carts filled with perfectly ripened produce imported from Mediterranean countries, bloody hunks of meat freshly cut and packaged in polystyrene then wrapped in cellophane and small brightly coloured boxes containing frozen foods of all shapes and sizes to be re-heated at your convenience. Gum sweets disguised with all the vitamins and minerals your kids will ever need. I roll my eyes up and adjust the peak of my cap. A young boy, probably four years old, tugs at the skirt of his mother in front of me. Tears stream down his face, "But you said mama! You said if I was good I could choose a sweetie. Mama you said!" Over by the escalators a black security guard leans against the wall eyeing everybody who walks past, not with suspicion but with this bored blank expression, drumming the walkie-talkie in his hand.

The Xanax I took early has relaxed me, any anxious feelings have been rinsed clean from my system. This doesn't stop me fidgeting with the plastic handle of the shopping basket or make the queue seem to go any faster. I'm thinking about Lucy Wallace. The image of my ex-girlfriend has popped into my head and I hold it there. In the frame, Lucy is standing in front of a king size bed with maroon satin sheets ruffled behind her, the penthouse suite at the Hotel Mandarin. She stands there naked, except for a black g-string, pouting at me, striking various sexy poses then motions for me to come

closer. Lucy was an English model I met three years ago at the launch party for *Gravity Sleeps*, our second album. Once the press got hold of the fact that we were dating she went from promising young model to calling herself an actress. When I met her, loaded on opiates and whiskey, all I noticed, at first, was the short black dress, perfect legs, stiletto heels, blonde hair and large breasts squashed together. She introduced herself by interrupting a conversation I was having with Gavin Rossdale about French versus Italian cooking. Later that night, after we had slept together, it turned out she had a bubbly personality, a dry self-deprecating sense of humour, a love of The Smiths and perfectly shaped feet with cute pink painted toenails. She often toured with the band and we moved in together after three months, living out of serviced apartments and five star hotels. For two years we toured the world together. Lucy would follow me from city to city, wherever the band played. Sometimes she would need to go away for product shoots and fashion weeks but we'd always find our way back to each other. She was a constant presence through the most successful part of my career, a release from the chaos of the road. When I met her she was twenty-years old, fresh faced and vivacious, without the cocaine habit and no violent mood swings. We broke up four months ago. The first couple of months after I left her she would call me in the middle of the night; call me to tell me the names of the actors, male models and aging producers she had slept with. I always listened without hanging up, despite feeling like rats were gnawing my stomach lining. I suppose I deserve it for allowing myself to become completely dependant on someone else as a source of happiness. She had a nickname; she liked me to call her Mrs Shankly.

I'm on my way back to the B&B when I decide to walk down Kildare Road turning right into Main Street. It is a much longer way round but I want to walk past my old school. I'm holding a plastic shopping bag carrying two bottles of red wine, a large bag of salt and vinegar potato chips and some blades should the urge to shave my four-day stubble come up. My mobile phone rings just as I arrive at the bottom gate of the school. To my left there is a rugby field, the grass emerald green and thick. It is a little after three and still overcast. In front of me are tall iron gates, behind is a security boom striped red and white and to the side is a small wooden hut with a black security guard sitting inside, his

head down. He looks up when he hears my phone ring and sees me standing there, probably wonders what I want and why I won't answer my phone. All I can think is how much security has changed then I answer my phone without checking the screen to see who it might be. It's John Coupland, lead guitarist, cokehead, serial monogamist and part-time friend. "Listen mate, I heard about this morning, what's going on? You okay?"

I have no idea what he is on about.

"Jules – you there?"

I sigh.

"You and Simon had a fight. You hung up on him."

No idea.

"I did?" I ask.

The security guard is staring at me sternly. I'm leaning with my forehead against the black iron, my mobile pressed into my ear, the shopping at my feet.

"Look, we're all concerned here, what's going on with you?"

"I'm giving myself up."

There's a laugh, I assume it is John's disbelief. "What the fuck does that mean?" He follows the question with another laugh.

I feel my hands start to shake. That increase in heart rate you feel when you know an argument is about to get heated. I do my best to calm my voice. "Tell them...you tell them their songwriting cash cow is headed for the abattoir."

"Mate, I know it's been shitty the last couple months but come on it's nothing we can't sort out. Is it Simon? What did he say to you?"

Silence.

"C'mon Jules, what's going on here?"

Silence.

"That reminds me, we've been booked for VH1 Storytellers...November 25th, I think. It's supposed to coincide with the launch for the album."

Silence.

"I told Simon. I said, 'Simon that's cool but the album is not finished, I said, what's the point of going to VH1 when there's nothing to sell yet?'"

Silence. I'm pursing my lips.

“You there?”

“You know the song *Talk Show Host* by Radiohead?” I finally reply, wanting to bend the iron bars in front of me.

“Yeah, why?”

“You want me, well fucking come and find me, I’ll be waiting with a gun and a pack of sandwiches and nothing,” I say, and then hang up.

My phone rings again ten seconds later. The security guard is walking towards me. I press cancel call and throw it down on the ground then stand on it. The sound of plastic snapping offers a momentary climax of relief.

I re-assure myself that soon there will be nothing left of me.

“Do you mind if I walk through here? I used to go here...to school here.”

“Why you break phone?” The security guard asks, confused.

“Because it only brings noise,” I reply.

He just looks at me squinting with his nose wrinkled up then glances suspiciously over the bottles of wine in the shopping bag at my feet. My phone is now just bits of gray plastic and a cracked screen with the words 1 Missed Call barely visible.

“So can I walk through here? I used to go to school here,” I ask again.

“You Englishman?”

“No. South African. Born *here*,” I reply, pointing to the ground as if it helps.

Five minutes later I’m in a gazebo that faces out towards the school tennis courts. The courts are in need of re-surfacing and are empty. I can here the echoes coming from the top fields where the boys are playing cricket. Their voices are watery and distant. Early October, the first weeks of spring, the cricket season has just begun and there is a crisp chill in the late afternoon air as rain threatens. I sit staring in no particular direction, waiting for something to happen and the chorus of *Eleanor Rigby* circling my head.

8

If you abandon the centre can you get lost in the periphery? This is the question I write at the top of a clean page in my journal. Across the room the TV is spewing out music videos. Michael Jackson just sung about the man in the mirror and now the Cure are jumping someone else's train. Hits of the Eighties on VH1 and I just opened my second bottle of wine. *Don't say what you mean you might spoil your face*; I like that. I'm fighting a bout of nausea with a healthy supply of salt and vinegar crisps soaked in red wine. I keep telling myself this will be my last dose of pills, the last time I will numb my head. *Make a fresh start*. There, I wrote it down. *Stop self-medicating!*

The exclamation is because I really mean it.

I feel like I am opening my eyes under water.

I feel like I am lying in a bath of warm custard.

I smell the cold dust and rotting grapes. Open all windows and turn off the TV pollution. The big five are running back and forth across the wallpaper. The Syringa tree has left its frame and stands hunched over beneath a hundred-watt sun. Turn off all lights and keep very still and sleep.

9

It all happens suddenly.

At nineteen years old the band you started with John in high school began to take off. Songwriting came easy to you, lyrics poured onto the page, and your talent for finding the perfect melody often left your bandmates open mouthed in amazement. All that time spent alone absorbing thousands of songs up in your bedroom was beginning to pay off. Every afternoon after school and on weekends when you had nothing to do, no friends to call, you listened to all the classics, you raided your father's vinyl collection, and you spent all your pocket money on albums and guitar tablature books. You had so much pent up frustration to vent. Now you wonder where that spark went; did you lose it in the superficial excess of celebrity? Has the corporate responsibility slowly eaten away at your inspiration? Do you look for excuses to project your waning musical ability? Are you the worm squirming in the bird's mouth? None of these concerns mattered back then.

The support gigs around London that year were amongst the happiest moments of your life. You laughed your way through band rehearsals in the small space you rented above a ladies shoe store in Brixton. You spent many nights practicing the same songs relentlessly, often till four am, till your voice was hoarse and your arms ached from playing the riffs over and over. Once you found a way to relax in front of the microphone and sing from your gut, you realized you could really belt out vocally and with earsplitting rawness. You only had permission to play at night because Mr Malik, the Pakistani owner, had let you rent the storeroom above his shop on condition that you did not disturb his day trade with your noise. The storeroom was cheap and so was the beer

you drank. Paul Allen would arrive at practices holding a couple cases he had bought at cost from a friend of a friend who knew some guy. The same friend of a friend who knew some guy is how you got the PA system and eight channel mixing desk. You all worked shitty day jobs. You worked part time as a cashier at Foyles bookshop in Charing Cross Road and Matt at the Record and Tape Exchange in Notting Hill Gate. John was a barman at a pub called The World's End along Kings Road in Chelsea and Paul carried on with the DVD porn. Five nights a week you ran through your set above the shoe store in Brixton tweaking and tightening your act so that when Saturday came you were ready to shake the walls.

There were no expectations.

You walked on stage and let loose, often upstaging the bigger act to follow. The steam rose off the frenzied sway in front of you. After years of feeling worthless and detached from everyone, you were a part of something that gave you confidence and a sense of direction. Winning over the crowd gave you the acceptance you longed for, the ego-stroke you had wanted since you picked up your first guitar at the age of fifteen. Nothing could match the excitement you felt on stage.

As a band you clicked, you had something indescribable that just worked. Something the management at LESSTHANZERO would refer to as an X-factor, a certain charismatic quality that offers a healthy return on investment. You arrived on stage in cramped rock clubs that stunk of beer and old sweat to the odd bit of applause, maybe a heckle or five, then plugged in and blew the roof off. Word spread quickly and more and more punters started to show up. The next thing, record company scouts showed up at places like The Monarch to ask if you had representation yet. Places like The Garage with fat promises. Places like The Bull and Gate to write down impressive amounts on the back of serviettes. Every major label involved in the hunt for new bands has on staff an "A&R" representative who presents a comfortable face to any prospective band. These guys are universally young, often of similar age to the band being wooed, and they always have an underground rock credibility flag to wave in your face. They don't show up in suits, they show up hip and trendy ready to talk a mile-a-minute with industry jargon and reminisce about how they worked road crew for Red Hot Chili Peppers or Pearl Jam or fronted the original line up of [insert legendary underground punk act]. You

could have turned them down. You could have said no to the free drinks and bullshit conversation, not gone with a major label, maybe just a moderate-sized “independent” label owned by some major distribution company or chosen a tiny independent label with lots of personal attention, less pressure and even less profit. The letter of intent they scribble on the back of a napkin was so juicy with promise that you signed before you realized it is a legally binding document, a deal memo meaning you are under obligation to conclude a contract with the label. You could have done a lot of things different but your ambition far outweighed your need to think critically about what you were signing up for. Your hunger for success and affirmation came first. The fire you had thrown into your lyrics you wanted heard by the masses. The passion you brought to each performance needed a bigger stage.

There was no going back.

When you started out you claimed an alternative or independent sound, a sound intended to reflect some semblance of artistic integrity, a sound that at least attempted to root itself in a purer level of self-expression. The irony is that all the songs that made it on to your self-titled debut were written in isolation and composed before writing hit songs mattered. Three months you spent in the studio laying down guitar parts, double tracking vocals over and over, looping drum and bass tracks then repeating the process till Andy your sound engineer said it was right, till Simon nodded his head. You quit your shitty day job. You woke every morning with a sense of purpose and excitement at the limitless possibilities that lay before you.

There were new properties bought.

There were model girlfriends.

There were expectations.

When you emerged from the studio the first thing you were told was that the visual is as important as the music. That you were expected to dress right for our genre and look good on camera because looks and acting ability are a vital part in producing marketing material. You were expected to embark on promotional blitzkriegs, expected to meet with image consultants and stylists and publicists who prepped you for interviews, prepped you for magazine shoots, prepped you for the right way to sell yourself and encouraged you to give in to product placement in the music video to

underwrite promotional expenses. Every band signed to a major label can get a merchandising company to pay them a hefty advance on T-shirt sales. There's a gold mine here! Why think? What for? If you step back you risk giving it all away just so the next band with hit-making potential can fill your shoes. Studio wizardry was used to polish up the final mix of the album for that bigger sound, "punchy yet warm" that radio-friendly attention-grabbing sugar rush of fleeting pleasure.

Using every possible attention-grabbing trick makes good commercial sense. This is what you were told. The marketing department is not averse to planting stories in the tabloid press. There is no bad publicity only missed opportunities to be in the public eye. The well-meaning folks at LESSTHANZERO told you that most people don't want to explore anything too deeply these days, that there is so much to consume, so much competition that the customer's attention is constantly being jerked in another direction and no attention means missed quarterly projections and no further albums. In-between touring, you worked the media-circuit day and night, there was no free time set aside to worry about holding onto your own identity.

You were told not to look for legal representation or get publicists or an outside agent. No, you were told the company handles these responsibilities in-house. Things are much easier with no outside issues to deal with, no alarm bells there, you just wanted to make music. And before you know it you are an answering machine full of programmed response. Doubting your credibility. Asking yourself whether you have become just another fast food artist trying to ride out your wave of success, trying to balance it all as best you can. Your smile, plastic and insincere, trapped inside an airbrushed photograph of your band stuck up on billboard overlooking an intersection somewhere you have never been. You have had to learn that once your anonymity is switched off there is no turning it back on. That people no longer see what you do as a profession, that you may be different outside of your work. You have had to stomach the random nastiness of strangers who constantly judge you according to the latest article or headline they glanced over.

There are no off days for you.

You are expected to be okay all of the time.

10

I dial 1023. Information gives me the Myburg's telephone number. Fortunately Luke's parents still live in Sandown Road, Rondebosch. This is an attempt to reach out. Two days spent lying in bed staring at the ceiling only getting up to piss and fill up on water. I feel like I have been dragged and kicked through the mud. I told the B&B lady downstairs not to send up the maid. I said I'm not feeling well don't bother about Beauty. Beauty would be wasted here. With the curtains drawn there is no dirt to be seen.

There is enormous comfort in feeling sorry yourself, blaming outward is far easier, soothing even. The sleepiness you feel when you are sad, that warm water you lie in, trying to ignore the outside world.

Before I tried to get in contact with Luke Myburg there were things I could have thought about but didn't. Instead I watched the shadows make distorted shapes across the ceiling while not thinking about whether or not I had done the right thing. Not thinking about all the people who had come to depend on me for their income. Not thinking about the machinegun sound rain makes when it pounds against a tin roof. Not thinking about Lucy Wallace lying naked and greasy under another man. Not thinking about a set list for VH1 Storytellers. Not thinking about anything other than becoming someone else. Two days floating through gray space.

I have to speak to Mrs Myburg to get Luke's telephone number. I tell her I am an old school friend. Mrs Myburg says Luke would be delighted to hear from his old First XV Rugby captain. She says she had no idea Luke had been good friends with the head boy in Matric. Neither did I, but Shaun Van Zyl is the only name that came to mind when

I called. Shaun played the part of popular all round jock and brownnoser right up until my parents told me we were emigrating. Mrs Myburg says Luke no longer plays rugby due to a bad knee injury. She asks about Mr and Mrs Van Zyl and hopes all is well. She says she heard about what happened to my sister and is very sorry. I have no idea I have a sister but make sure I thank her for her concern. Mrs Myburg clearly enjoys the telephone and will not let the conversation end. For fifteen minutes I am Shaun Van Zyl, ex-head boy, ex-first team captain and now an only child to grieving parents. It is not hard for me to fake a solid South African accent, although having to be Shaun Van Zyl for the entire duration of a phone call would easily go down as one of my hardest interviews to date.

I call Luke to tell him I am back and need to see him. This is desperation. I do not tell him this. I tell him I am in town, just visiting, on holiday, some time off, a much-needed break from a chaotic lifestyle. At first he thinks it is a prank call. He tells a guy called Stefan to stop fucking around. I respond with no it really *is* me. To which Luke says, “Wait. No! *Chris?* Very funny - I knew it was you - good accent, sounds almost like him.” Eventually he hangs up on me.

I need to get in contact with someone with no connection to the rock star persona, someone who knew the person before I super-glued the mask to each cheek.

I try again and Luke hangs up again, laughing.

I decide to leave the room. I need some air. First I get dressed without showering then I grab my baseball cap off the dresser and head downstairs. On the doorknob, a ‘Please Clean’ sign is dangling. I manage to sneak by the front desk without anybody noticing. Hunger surges through my body, a painful primal urge. My stomach is a shrinking sack of bile. Lucy liked blueberry flapjacks drenched in maple syrup. Lucy liked bangers and mash smothered in beef gravy. Lucy hated vegetarians. Lucy hated vegans more. I am thinking this whilst watching the cracks in the pavement roll beneath me as if on a conveyor belt, the sun stinging the back of my neck. Lucy once walked barefoot along Rodeo Drive. Lucy had perfectly shaped feet with cute pink painted toenails. Mrs Shankly with little toes so delicate and beautiful. Where are they now?

At the end of Main Street I find a little mall. There is a restaurant there with olive green awnings under which small cherry wood tables spill out onto the pavement. I order

two portions of pasta arrabiata, two beers and two starters, a garden salad and a mozzarella and tomato salad topped with basil. I will finish with two cups of espresso because I have decided ordering in twos is an entertaining way to eat. I choose the smoking section where large panes of glass allow me to sit separate and safe. On the wall is a blue and white striped Western Province Rugby jersey covered in signatures. The light through the window is forcing me to squint and my palms ooze sweat. There is a moment when the waitress, Asiya on the nametag with curly black hair and caramel skin, does a double take when she brings me the first beer. I ask for the newspaper and if there is a bookshop nearby. I ask her to bring a new beer every time she sees an empty bottle.

After two days only consuming water any food will taste like God came down and handed you a plate herself. I shovel spaghetti into my mouth, my lips stained red with sauce; I lick my fingers and wipe the plate clean with bread. I stab the salad leaves with my fork and drizzle extra olive oil and garlic over everything. The manager, Stuart on the nametag with a shiny shaved head and sunglasses perched on top, walks over and asks if I'm enjoying my meal. I nod and carry on murdering salad leaves.

Sunshine outside air-conditioned comfort inside and my stomach full of fizzy gold with wet leaves drowning and spaghetti worms swimming in tomato juice. I push my knife and fork together then fan out the newspaper to block the throbbing white light streaming through the window. I am smiling in front of the black and white font that glows almost transparent. Not reading just smiling to myself as I watch the words dance in and out of focus.

11

He walks towards the shade of the forest. Brown leaves crunch under his feet. There is a slight rhythmical buzzing in his ears and immediately he tries to associate the sound to a picture. He thinks of honeybees searching for pollen and of flies circling the dead. In front of him he sees rows and rows of Pine trees placed mathematically in straight lines waiting to be harvested. Peach light filters through. He hears the rustling of leaves and the snapping of branches grow louder behind him. He quickens his pace breaking into a half-run. His eyes flick from side to side.

Another picture covers the space.

Night rolls in the death cover of darkness. Millions of tiny gold specks punch through the black sky shining bullet holes on the asphalt as he runs down the centre of a deserted stretch of highway. He stops running and nervously checks all angles then falls to his knees and covers his face with his hands. There is only the sound of the swirling wind like a ghostly choir haunting the distance he has left to run. His face melts through his fingers. The planets hang above like popped balloons.

There are a thousand faces pressed against the glass.

A nightmare, I wake up, blinking slow in the dark. I hear voices outside my room. New guests are being shown to the room next door. A German couple is listening to the B&B owner rant on about the wine route then the cable car then directions to The Waterfront. I have slept in an awkward position and have a tension headache throbbing from the base

of my skull. I sit up, rub the back of my neck and listen to the voices through the door. It is eight am; the curtains are still drawn.

Black describes the feeling.

I eat an apple for breakfast and then crush three OxyContin tablets to allow for a quicker release. There is an initial rush of euphoria then I spend the rest of the morning in bed breathing shallow in a half-sleep, half-listening, half-watching satellite TV with the sound turned low. A suicide bomb in Baghdad kills thirty-seven people; Tom Cruise has gotten fiancée Katie Holmes pregnant, New Orleans struggles in aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, Jamie Oliver says you should never wash mushrooms before cooking instead just brush off any excess dirt and rapper Kanye West stands by his statement that George Bush does not like black people. I am shocked because I remember reading somewhere that Tom Cruise was sterile. On the Discovery Channel I watch the daddy lion roar as he enters the mommy lion from behind.

I try to phone Luke Myburg again. He gets angry and says it is not funny anymore. He asks who I really am. He says I am clearly a pathetic loser with nothing better to do. I agree and then hang up.

It is a little after one pm when I feel something resembling energy. Outside it is hot and I can almost hear the sunrays fizz against the glass when I open the curtains and flinch at the bright light. I'm still wearing the blue jeans I slept in, no shirt. In the mirror I see red crease lines down my side. I look around for the white Armani t-shirt I threw somewhere. The entire room glows in early afternoon sunshine.

*

It is my sixteenth birthday and I am terrified to go to school. I am nearing the end of my first year in Hemel Hempstead. The day before, Andrew Peckham, Zane Mitchell and James Wilkes had pushed me to the ground on my way to school and stole the five pounds I had been given to buy lunch. I missed assembly because I was hiding in the boys' toilets trying to wash the blood out of my mouth and panicking about how I was going to hide my split lip. Zane was the one who punched me in the mouth, Andrew was

the one who held me face down on the concrete and James was the one who went through my wallet before throwing it at me.

My father wakes me up with a knock on the door; I fall out of bed and then drag my feet to the bathroom. I get dressed and then stand combing my hair in front of the mirror. I find four new pimples and only manage to squeeze two of them successfully. My father knocks again two minutes later and tells me to get a move on. I ask him if it is okay since it is my birthday that I stay home. The answer is no but he says there are pancakes and bacon waiting at the kitchen table. When I get downstairs my mother and father are arguing in passive-aggressive monotone. I down a large glass of freshly squeezed orange juice eat my pancakes with extra dollops of syrup and pick at my bacon not wanting to swallow any fat. My mother and father argue over which restaurant will be best to celebrate sixteen years of me. I stop the argument when I shout out, "McDonalds! How about a Big Mac with large fries, maybe some nuggets on the side? Now there's a birthday dinner. Who cares where we go? Why does everything always turn into a fight?" Then they fight about why everything always turns into fight. After breakfast I ask my mother if it is okay if I stay home from school today since it is my birthday. She says no but will drop me off on her way to the shops. I don't have to walk to school on my sixteenth birthday.

I sit through assembly drawing stoned smiley faces in the back of my hymnbook. Today, second period is math. The drone of Mr Holdsworth's algebra lesson slides past me while I stare out the window and daydream. In this dream I'm on stage in Wembley Stadium in front of sixty thousand swaying hands then I play a ten-minute guitar solo while skinny blonde groupies with large fake breasts bounce by the side of the stage and pout. I coast till first break, paying no attention to anything around me. I sit alone during break in the stairwell of the Arts block with no lunch. If I make myself invisible I am safer.

An hour later I'm on my way to Biology for sixth period when I bump into James Wilkes at the entrance to the locker rooms. He slaps me hard on the back as I walk past. I keep my head down and walk on as if I am in a rush. "Oi! Come here you twat!" He bellows and acts mock offended then grabs me by the collar and pulls me in. "Say sum'ink in Afrikaans."

No response. I try to pull away but he has me in a headlock.

“Go on. Say ‘I am a twat’ in your racist language.”

“But I...I don’t speak Afrikaans.” I try to reply but his arms are tight around my neck. I suck at the air and feel my face turn red.

“Say it!”

“You...are...a twat.” I manage a smile, my legs shaking.

“Listen here you sarky bastard, we’ll see you on your way home,” he says and then throws me hard against one of the lockers. I slam into the cold steel, it dents slightly and my satchel slips off my shoulder, the buckle scrapes down the side of my right leg before it hits the ground. I watch him strut down the passage and then turn and mouth the words *You Are Dead*.

In Biology we learn about the sexual habits of freshwater salmon and in English we have to sit in groups of four and come up with odes to inanimate objects.

I spend lunch break once again in the stairwell of the Arts block and listen to *In Utero* on my CD Walkman. I stare out over the soccer fields where the boys have a kick-a-bout and the girls’ giggle and point coyly from the sidelines. *I’m not like them but I can pretend...*

When the bell sounds at the end of last period I make a dash for the far end of the school, across the field and out the back gate. Mud sprays up as I sprint leaving sticky brown specks all over my trousers. I run an extra mile home, the long way round. I make it home safe, exhausted. Sweat runs in tiny salt streams down the side of my face, my fringe sticks to my forehead. I hear my mother shout from the TV room, “How was your day?” I tell her it was spectacular and go to the kitchen to down ice water from the fridge. I hear my mother shout again, “Your father and I have left something in your room, run up and check.” I slump my satchel back on my shoulder and then traipse upstairs. When I open my bedroom door I almost trip over the cat as it bolts under my leg. I throw my satchel against the side of my desk and swear at the cat even though it is now out of earshot and then my face drops in shock. Next to my bed is a new cherry red Fender Stratocaster leaning against a 30watt Laney Amp. Happy birthday.

*

You lie propped up in bed writing random thoughts in your journal. You think about your sixteenth birthday and your first electric guitar. You wonder why you smashed it on stage in Glasgow last year. You remember that was the night your father told you he was marrying Pam. Stupid. You write the word stupid on the page then tear it out and write: *Rock 'n Roll is on the dole / Sell it right and it will be sold.* You read the line over and contemplate a melody that may fit. You circle the sentence and write next to it: Use lyric. You wonder if your mother is lonely. You think all it takes is one phone call.

The urge to play guitar grips you. It has been two weeks since you last picked one up. You imagine yourself back on stage; the spotlight burns the air in front of you in a straight column as you watch your lyrics sung back to you. You miss the excitement you once had for performing; the nervous energy that pumped through your veins before you arrived on stage, and the feeling of complete acceptance the crowd gave you when you pressed your lips to the microphone and faced out over the sweaty chaos. You want a fresh start, a chance to begin again. Maybe downscale the shows, find a new label and say goodbye to media hype, big budget music videos, award shows, sales projections and corporate responsibility. You need to break up the band and go solo. Yes, break up the band, take some time away and head into new territory with a solo project. To do this you will certainly need a better lawyer, a more attentive agent and a meeting with the folks at Rough Trade or Kill Rock Stars or any other indie label that will listen, maybe even lunch with Steve Albini if you can get it. You now realize you have wanted this for a long time. Maybe Jack White, Billy Corgan, Trent Reznor, Ben Gibbard, Isaac Brock, Ryan Adams or the ghost of Elliot Smith would care to collaborate.

You need to dim the lights and move on.

There is a sense of clarity now; you stand by the window and breathe in the warm air, sunshine pours in, there are no clouds and part of Table Mountain is visible if you stand on tiptoes and crane your neck.

Remember hikes up Skeleton Gorge.

Remember picnics at Kirstenbosch Gardens.

Cape Town is home, the place you were born.

Late afternoon. Optimistic describes the feeling. Yellow is a cheerful colour. I tell myself I have taken my last opiate dose as bands of sunlight form large strips across the wall. I flip open my journal pick up my pen and write: No more pills. It carries more weight if you underline it. I should probably use an exclamation mark again. Fine. No more pills! Ever. I breathe out relieved. Then I pounce onto the bed and clap my hands together. “A-B-C,” I mutter to myself. “It’s as easy as 1-2-3.”

After I have showered and tidied the room I page through a wildlife photography book I find on the coffee table. The air feels fresh against my skin. While I read I eat the entire contents of the fruit bowl. There were two bananas, two oranges and a powdery apple. When I get to a chapter called *Walking With The Elephants* I put the book down and try to blow saliva bubbles off my tongue for fifteen minutes trying to think of ways to see the city again without being recognized.

I turn on the TV and pull one half of the wildlife curtains closed to stop the glare across the screen. I have decided to make the most of my afternoon. MTV news is on. The VJ, a young Eastern European version of Cameron Diaz with icy blue eyes and mousy blonde hair styled very 80’s new wave, dog tags hang from her neck and on each wrist is a leather cuff with small spikes. She wears an army print tank top, has a flat chest and stands hands on hips with pseudo-punk attitude. An image of the earth as seen from space fills the background. In the news: Britney Spears gives birth to a baby boy, Lindsay Lohan demands to be taken seriously as a songwriter, English retro rock is the new Scandinavian power pop and The Backstreet Boys announce European tour dates. Bored, I go take a piss and think about potential names for Britney’s son while the water in the toilet turns yellow. Then I think I hear *my* name said from across the room. I flush and then run over to the TV. I do a double take. The headline in bold lime-green font pulsing at the bottom of the screen: **ASHFORD DISAPPEARS!** In the corner of the frame is a picture of my face, sunglasses on; hair disheveled, no expression. I pick up the VJ’s voice in mid-sentence and turn the volume up loud, “...said to have gone missing early last week. Samsara’s record company LESSTHANZERO expressed their concern at a press conference held earlier today. They claim Ashford left no clue as to his whereabouts and

were quote 'shocked and disappointed by his actions and hoped he would make contact soon.'" I sit slumped at the edge of the bed, both hands holding my head up. Simon knows I'm in Cape Town. What the fuck? "...amidst rumours that the group were suffering internal problems. Various fan sites have also begun circulating news of Ashford's possible death." The toilet hisses in the background. The walls look fallow. "...management has said that the release date for the hotly anticipated follow up to *Gravity Sleeps* would have to be pushed back indefinitely but that fans could look forward to the release of a live album within the next fortnight. *Samsara Live from the Hollywood Bowl* will include a limited edition DVD with the first two hundred thousand copies. So be sure to look out for that one guys and girls and don't forget to brush after every meal. This is Milla and you have been watching MTV news around the globe. Ciao." She raises her hand and grins then holds a wink until the background becomes the foreground and she is gone. An advert for Motorola comes on. I stare at the screen, my mind races; my heart thumps in my throat. It will all be different from here. I look over at the toiletry bag where I keep my assortment of pain relievers.

Cue melancholic exit music.

Through the window the sun is pulled from the sky as if yanked on a string.

The camera tracks back slowly.

A lone figure sits with the blue light from the TV shimmering on his face.

Slow fade to black.

Credits roll.

12

When movies end you leave the characters lives in limbo. Usually conflict is resolved and all the loose ends are neatly tied up. In real life you wake up you face the next day then the next. Conflict is not resolved by sleeping or by numbing yourself with chemicals. The problem remains until you confront it.

The next day I leave the B&B. I take a taxi; the sky is overcast in the morning and the CBD looks deserted as I pass through. I count only eight people and five are car guards who lean against shop windows along Adderley Street doing nothing. The driver tells me today is Sunday. Town is dead on Sundays.

According to the brochure, the luxurious Twelve Apostles Hotel and Spa lies where earth, sea, and sky meet, poised above Atlantic rollers and flanked by the majestic Table Mountain and her Twelve Apostles mountain range. There are no houses or other hotels in the surrounding landscape and I can expect endlessly seductive sea views, spacious suites, two breathtaking pool gardens magically perched above the ocean, the glorious Azure Restaurant accompanying exquisite cuisine, wonderful friendly service, and all of this barely ten minutes from the bustling heart of Cape Town, with nearby attractions including prime diving spots, nature trails, and seals, dolphins, whales and penguins. Also listed on the brochure is that five stars ensures exceptional standards of service and the relaxed Cape hospitality will provide the perfect counter point to a dramatic backdrop. I am relieved to hear this.

Phandle, the concierge, greets me as I enter through the glass doors and into the lobby. He is dressed in a double-breasted navy blue suit, has jet-black skin, a neatly

trimmed white beard, kind old eyes and a handshake like a dead fish. The receptionist offers me a pen to sign in, her smile forced and full of teeth. I see the acne beneath her make up and hear the rush of sea air beneath the muzak. I am given a complimentary Mojito cocktail and then led to a top floor suite. "Welcome Mr Shankly, enjoy your stay with us."

The superior sea-facing suite has an open plan split level design with a large sunken lounge area. The décor is mostly off white and the wallpaper is damask with various shades of blue. As standard with the room I can expect 24hr room service, a minibar, complimentary bottled mineral water, an individually controlled heating/cooling system, deluxe natural toiletries, digital telephone system with voice mail, entertainment centres with DVD and access to the movie library, ISDN line for internet access, hairdryers, plush bathrobes and slippers, in room electronic safe, tea and coffee making facilities and an evening turndown service which I decline. Five stars means in addition to the standard room facilities I can expect generous desk space, laptop rental, office supplies and stationary, personal fax, copier and scanner, secretarial support on request, IT support, speaker phones, a selection of business and leisure magazines and books as well as subdued lighting.

Crestfallen is another word for subdued.

The 24hr Café offers a California styled menu open at any hour, including a breakfast if you are still functioning in a different time zone. I order up some lunch. I meet an attractive young girl named Alison Bryce who brings up my room service. We chat briefly about the weather, about how long she has worked in the hotel and then I stare at her five star arse as she walks away. I think of a ripe peach. I think I must see her again. Julian Ashford can get any girl if he wants. I pretend that life is as it used to be. I am on tour in sunny South Africa and the rest of the band has planned to join me later.

There is no search.

I am not missing.

I am in my old hometown, ten years is not that long, and things are still the same. I award my cheeseburger five stars: it is 100% pure beef, Swiss cheese, crispy roll, onion rings, thick cut French fries and a mixed salad. A burger the menu described as the most honest in Cape Town.

My stomach is full and the sun is shining through the gray cover and I look out over the calm Atlantic. From my hotel balcony I sit and wait and read the newspaper and see an ocean liner float past. No one sees me wave my hands. I keep telling myself that Cape Town has not changed. The Sunday Times is spread out on my lap and open to the entertainment section. I don't read an article about a missing rock star and there are no plans for a solo project and I am in my old hometown where nothing has changed.

The problem remains until you confront it.

University of Cape Town

13

I'm trapped inside a TV, a miniature version of myself straining to get out. It is no use, no matter how hard I push, the glass is a solid wall of transparent sand and the outside world is pixilated and fuzzy. I don't think to look behind me so I keep pounding on the glass even though it is impossibly thick. I hear the sound of laughter. I kick the screen and bang my fists till they hurt but the laughter only grows louder and louder. I look down and see I am naked. Across the screen are large red letters blinking on and off: ESUALPPA. A feeling of claustrophobia overwhelms me and I begin to panic. The noise is unbearable; so I slump down against the glass and cover my hands over my ears and try to make myself into a little ball to cover up my nakedness.

I wake up to the sound of clapping, my mouth is dry and I am soaked in cold sweat. The Jerry Springer Show plays softly on the large flat screen TV that is mounted on the wall directly in front of the bed. The guests jeer and boo at an obese man wearing a dress. He struts backwards and forwards on the stage cupping his hands over his chest trying to make man boobs. He is extremely upset and mixes up shouts of "Shut up!" and "You don't know me!" over and over. It is futile though; the audience continues to jeer, as an equally obese redneck in the front row has to be restrained by security when he tries to charge the stage. I must have passed out with the TV on last night. There are three bottles of wine, two on the bedside table and one on the dresser, all empty. It is early in the morning. The soft orange light makes very little effort to push through the blinds as pieces of my nightmare flash in and out. Since I cannot fall back asleep I get up, splash water on my face, throw on some clothes and go for a stroll on the beach. It is six am.

The early morning sea, so restless, head butting the shore. The ice-cold water laps over my feet while I amble along kicking up sand and listen to the waves break and the seagulls chatter. The sun rises and seagulls follow me. I'm trying not to think about Lucy Wallace. Trying not to remember the way she liked to trampoline on hotel beds singing 80's classics at the top of her voice. It is useless; memory can be a torturous facility. I remember whenever we watched horror movies she hid behind a pillow and curled against me asking if the scary part was over yet. I remember how we once wore wigs and sunglasses to watch the street performers along the South Bank without being bothered. I remember how she giggled uncontrollably when one of the performers, painted silver, jumped off his pedestal to chase a young boy holding an ice cream cone who yelped and hid under his mother's skirt. I remember her asleep in my lap on a tour bus traveling through Tuscany. I remember her passing out on Margaritas watching jazz at Ronnie Scott's. I remember too much.

When I return I ask for breakfast to be sent up to my room to avoid being noticed in the restaurant. Twenty minutes later Alison Bryce knocks at my door. I know because I stare at her through the peephole for a moment and examine her before I open. After she hands me the silver tray with my breakfast on it we stand in the doorway and speak for a full five minutes. I try and think of as many questions as I can while the smell of scrambled eggs, bacon, pork sausage and grilled tomato fills the air between us. She tells me she is a student at hotel school who is cleaning rooms and running up room service orders as part of her internship. She says she is nearly twenty-one and has a boyfriend back home while I stare at her layered sandy brown hair. She says she is actually from Durban and only down in the Cape to study while I notice she is not wearing a bra. She tells me she hates Roberto the head chef while I watch her tongue occasionally lick her bottom lip. She says occasionally she is asked to fill in as a waitress in the Azure restaurant while I imagine her rolling around naked as I take Polaroids. She says she is sure she recognizes me from somewhere while I stare at the full firm breasts beneath her white, unfortunately thick, cotton shirt. She asks if I am an actor and I say sure why not while I mentally undress her and look down at what I imagine would be a pink g-string beneath a black skirt. She asks if I need anything else and I say yes while she fidgets with the white buttons down her front. I ask if she will come back later after her shift and have

a drink with me and she rubs her left foot with her right and laughs shyly. She says she is not allowed to socialize with hotel guests and I look down at her long tanned legs and say when you finish your shift knock twice.

Out on the balcony I sit and carve up my breakfast then fork it into my mouth. I pull a sour face when I take the first sip of freshly squeezed orange juice then I swallow a small handful of Vicodin tablets just as a madman on a speedboat races past at a hundred miles an hour bouncing off the waves, I raise my hand and smile and hope he sees me but of course he doesn't. I open the morning paper I found folded against my door earlier and page straight to the Arts section. The story is not as long as I would like and is boxed into the bottom left hand corner of the page, the headline: FANS FEAR ASHFORD DEAD. I skim over the article and shake my head and think to myself that I am not dead.

The gist of the story: I might be dead. Fans have narrowed my death down to a couple of options: either a heroin overdose or I sucked on the end of a double-barreled shotgun and pulled the trigger. To be fair, the reporter makes sure it is clear that for now all rumours are unsubstantiated, that I am missing and that LESSTHANZERO are doing their utmost to "not let the suicide rumours get out of hand." There is also a brief mention of other tragic icons: Jim Morrison, Jimi Hendrix, Robert Johnson, Janice Joplin, Brian Jones, Kurt Cobain. All died at the age of twenty-seven, so why the comparison? I am only twenty-five. I feel honoured to be mentioned in the same company even though I disagree. Suicide, no way, I don't have the guts. Nope, I am more likely to die by slipping on wet tiles in the bathroom and cracking my head open against the sink or tripping over the end of the rug and falling though a glass coffee table severing an artery.

I phone room service to rent a laptop.

I spend all afternoon on the Internet searching through music blogs, fan sites, entertainment gossip and reliable news pages. Outside the ocean makes a dull and distant roar like a passing freight train.

I Google: Julian Ashford missing.

I Google: Julian Ashford dead.

I Google: Jessica Alba topless.

I enter a chat forum on our official website as UpsetFan245 and read page after page of break up gossip, conspiracy theories of murder, suicide, alien abduction, drug

overdose, kidnapped by the Albanian mafia over gambling debts, I joined a cult in Florida, a photo of me taken from behind entering a rehab clinic in Los Angeles, a faxed copy of a document confirming my induction to the Church of Scientology, sightings in Manchester, in Edinburgh, in Brighton, in Vancouver, in Cape Town, in Sydney, in New York and a photo of me leaving a Burger King in Seattle, the photographer apologizes in a caption underneath for the fact that it is taken from behind.

I download a Podcast of the rest of the band being interviewed on Xfm, three days after I went “missing”. I disconnect ten minutes in when John says, “Do I think it is selfish? Yes, I suppose selfish is the right word. Disappointed is better. I’m disappointed that it has come to this.”

When I shut down the computer it is close to sunset. I re-read through the article in the Cape Times and then stand at the balcony and look out to sea. I feel off-colour, a powerful combination of nausea and nerves. For the last five minutes I have had to take in large gulps of air to feel as though I am breathing properly, my legs feel like jelly. I place my hand on my chest, my heartbeat is fast and I feel dizzy. I walk inside where it is cooler then look around for my stash of Xanax. I need to calm down, take the edge off. Relax. Lie down. Breathe deep. Try to stop the unpleasant surge of nervousness that flows like ice through my veins and forces me to clench my stomach. I start punching the pillow next to me then pull it over my face and scream, “What the fuck am I doing here?!”

14

Pitch black when I open my eyes. For a moment I think I have gone blind and panic then realize there is a pillow over my face. I throw the pillow to the side and switch on the bedside lamp. The sliding door to the balcony is open and the cool evening air reluctantly enters. It is 7:35pm; streaks of violet and neon orange cut the evening sky, the dying embers of another polluted sunset. Another whole day has passed me by. I am sleeping too much and it is not helping.

(Knock, knock)

I hear a faint knock at the door. I ignore it. Almost fully awake now, so I walk over to the window to stretch my legs. I think the sky is too far away and then sing part of Elliot Smith's *Speed Trials* under my breath and wish I had a guitar with me.

Maybe a long time till you get the call up / It's sure as fate and hard as your luck / No one'll know where you are / It's just a brief smile crossing your face / Running speed trials still standing in place / When the socket's not a shock enough you little child what makes you think you're tough

(Knock, knock)

Before I open the door I steal a quick look in the mirror. I look as though I have been in a fight. My face is pale and I have dark puffy eyes. I run my fingers through oily hair and widen my eyes trying to look more awake. I brush back the loose strands behind my ears then with quick strides I get to the door and open it without checking who's there. It's Alison Bryce, her large brown eyes stare straight into mine, so close, our feet a couple of inches away from touching. I take in her image: High cheekbones, a cute button

nose with tiny freckles on the bridge, mauve lipstick shiny with gloss, her bottom lip almost double the size of the top which is shaped up giving the impression of a permanent pout. She is still in work clothes – white collared shirt, top two buttons undone, black skirt just above the knees.

“You said knock twice,” Alison sighs, puts on a puppy dog face. “I nearly gave up.”

“Sorry,” I reply, and rub my eyes. “I was asleep.”

I motion for her to come in. She leans in giving me a peck on the cheek that catches me off guard then struts into the room. I smell strawberry lip-gloss and watch her from behind. I close the door and think Julian Ashford can get any girl he wants. A-B-C. 1-2-3. I check my nails.

Sex. Hotel rooms. Rock Stars.

A-B-C. 1-2-3.

Alison Bryce enters the beast’s lair. Innocent prey with long tanned legs and full firm breasts. She looks around his cave unaware that she is being watched. The moon is full and his fangs are sharpened and dripping with saliva.

She stands in the corner of the room, helpless as I approach. I take off my black Ben Sherman t-shirt and clench my stomach muscles as I pull it over my head. I have lost a noticeable amount of weight, my Hermès cargos hang an inch lower and some ribs are now visible. Alison watches me take off my shirt then turns away when I throw it onto the floor; her way of pretending she didn’t notice the six-pack.

“I’m just going to splash water on my face.” I point towards the bathroom then disappear leaving her alone to look anxious.

I return with my hair slicked back wearing a tiny splash of cologne, still no shirt, no shoes, just cargos and a would-this-face-lie-to-you smile. Alison is thumbing through the DSTV Guide on the glass coffee table trying to look busy.

“Help yourself to a drink from the minibar,” I say, flashing a smile as I walk out to the balcony. “I’ll have a Heineken.” I add a wink for good measure. “Bring them out here.”

When she arrives on the balcony holding the drinks I'm sitting on one of the wooden deck chairs rubbing the stubble on my chin.

"So what movies would I have seen you in? You're like *so* familiar to me," she asks, sounding about fourteen years old. "A couple weeks ago Nicholas Cage stayed here and I think in this same room and he was a total sweetie and a friend of mine kissed Ethan Hawke at Eclipse in Camps Bay and did you say Heineken or Becks? Heineken, hey?" She holds up the green bottle of beer and then hands it to me. In her right hand is a can of Mountain Dew. She sits next to me; both of us face out to a rapidly darkening sky.

I quickly run through made up movie titles in my head. *Dead Pets. Lost in Hyde Park. Trapped in a Vegan Grocery Store. American Pedophile. I was a Teenage Vampire. Pussyman 8.*

"I've done mostly TV work," I reply, still trying to think out a believable answer.

Alison looks at me expectantly. "I love my job, you meet the coolest people!"

I pull a fake stretch, arching my back, then finally an answer. "I'm in a BBC show called *Positive Negative*. It's about a team of DNA detectives who work for Scotland Yard and we solve murder mysteries all over Europe. I play the lead, John Pilkington."

There. Easy. What I don't expect is her response.

"Oh my word! Yes! I've seen a couple episodes," she says, totally serious.

"Yeah, I'm sure you have, it's a hot show in the UK at the moment. It looks like NBC may pick up the first season for America and Canada early next year."

"That's so cool."

She takes a sip of Mountain Dew, balances her chin on her hand and gazes into my eyes, clearly very impressed so I run with it.

"Pilkington has a whole host of physical and emotional problems to keep the character interesting. He has a nervous tick; he's colourblind, dyslexic, scared of flying, has intimacy issues, walks with a slight limp and has a God complex."

"The role must be a real challenge."

"You do your best," I say, shrugging.

A strong breeze catches in her hair; she looks beautiful, electric, the light from inside reflects in her eyes. A slight shiver, she puts her can down and crosses her arms pushing her bust up. The sound of the sea moves in and out as if it were right below us.

“Aren’t you cold?” she asks.

I take another swig from my beer and shake my head still clenching my stomach muscles. We stare at each other. There is a considerable pause, then I continue with the acting info, “Actually the reason I’m here is...” I stop, and then stall by taking a sip of beer. “...is because we just shot the final episode of Season 2 in Hout Bay yesterday. It was a shoot out scene on a yacht that we blow up at the end of the episode. The cliffhanger is that you don’t know whether I make it off the boat before it explodes. But since I just signed a contract for another season, I guess I wash up on the beach hurt but still breathing at the start of Season 3. The producers are debating whether or not to have my hands blown off in the accident so I can have mechanical hands with gadgets for next year.” I realize I am may be about to ramble so I finish off with, “So anyway, Cape Town is supposed to resemble the Italian coastline. Turns out it is cheaper to blow up a yacht here.”

Hook, line and sinker. Alison practically drools into her lap.

“Wow. Awesome. That’s *so* cool. You totally look like a detective or something. You’ve got these really deep curious eyes and, like, that mysterious look and sexy arms.”

“They make us stick to a pretty grueling workout schedule.”

“I can tell.”

“Usually I’m more defined than this but in the penultimate episode I was kidnapped and starved and electrocuted as a form of torture.”

“Oh my word!”

“I didn’t rat on anyone. My character is strong in mind. Want to know how I escaped?”

I’m playing with the label on my Heineken while Alison nods her yes, eyes wide, mouth slightly open.

“When the Russian kidnapers leave me alone in the warehouse tied to a chair I untie the rope with two free fingers then make a small explosive with a piece of bubblegum, a paperclip and a match.”

Alison begins to giggle. “Really?” she asks, skeptical.

I stay serious and in character.

“You’re such a pinball yeah you know it’s true.” I finally say after an uncomfortable pause.

A brief smile crosses her face. “Huh?”

“Enough about me,” I say, playfully leaning in, our noses almost touching. “I guess I’m lucky you braved getting fired to fraternize with a guest.”

No response.

Alison gets up, her expression either worried or about to laugh. I can’t tell. Folding her arms she leans against the railing and says, “This is weird.”

“What do you mean?”

But I know what she means, I feel it to, I feel weird. I consider telling her I am a liar. Telling her who I really am. But who am I? Julian Ashford lives outside me, a media creation, an image of an image of an image.

“Is your name *really* Neil Shankly?”

The name I have checked in with in hotels around the world for the last five years.

“Why do you ask?” I scratch my head and try to look composed.

“It’s just that you haven’t mentioned it, and when Nicholas Cage was here he stayed under Ronald McDonald, so I checked the computer down at reception and is that your *real* name?”

“I can’t be bothered to check in under a different name,” I reply, nodding while my eyes scan the floor. “That’s me, Neil Shankly. Star of *Positive Negative*, the hottest detective show in Great Britain.” I force a laugh and shrug. “Let’s order up some wine?”

Cue montage of troubled male lead and naïve hot girl from supporting cast chatting over a bottle of red wine. Male lead goes to bathroom to take another painkiller and tranquilizer combo while naïve hot girl runs over to the mirror to fix her hair and apply more lipgloss.

An hour later and the wine has loosened her up.

Alison sits on the white single seater, the bed behind her on the landing, the duvet still ruffled from earlier, her glass is empty so I fill it. She looks at me sideways, her face flushed and pushing her glass towards the bottle says, “This is my last, really.”

I wink.

“*Really*,” she says, indicating that I should stop pouring.

I'm on the white double seater to her right; my third glass is half empty. Or full. Whatever. I thought we'd both be naked by now and petting heavily.

We just sit there.

Julian Ashford never has to make the first move.

Alison is playing with her earlobe and telling me a joke about an Englishman, a Dutchman and a Frenchman aboard an airplane that is about to crash. I do my best to laugh in the appropriate places but I'm not listening, I'm focused on the small gap between her knees and the shadow she stretches down her inner thighs.

"Okay, okay, I've got one," I say, after yet another forced laugh. "What do men call the sweat they get around their balls after they have just slept with their cousin?"

Alison gives a blank stare, mild disgust.

"Relative humidity."

She lets out a polite giggle. "*Oh my word!* That's terrible."

Another uncomfortable pause and I can't think of anything else to say. Inside: the panic that takes hold when your mind goes blank in front of someone.

Alison is examining the wine in her glass and making a soft clicking sound with her tongue.

Neil Shankly will have to make the first move.

"What would you do if I kissed you?" I ask, not expecting my voice to come out high and nervous.

The beast feels more like a bunny rabbit.

"I would say I have a boyfriend back home who would be pissed off."

"So? We all have our secrets."

Alison smiles.

"He's in Durban, you're here, one kiss." I say.

Alison's face turns red and she lets out a high-pitched giggle that irritates me.

"What?" I ask, frowning.

Alison shifts forward and smiles, I assume seductively.

"What? One kiss that's all, I promise." Fingers crossed.

We stare at each other.

Alison breaks the moment with, “Do you know that when you frown your ears move?”

“And?”

“It’s *so* cute!”

I feel deflated. It’s never this hard.

Alison stands up and looks over at the dresser where she left her handbag.

I get up quickly and feel light headed for a moment. “Where you going?”

“I have the five o’clock shift tomorrow morning and it’s getting late,” she says, tossing her hair back.

“So why not stay over and you won’t have to drive through so early?” I ask, feeling the tinge of desperation.

Alison walks round the coffee table and then gives me a soft wet peck on the mouth and says, “There you go. Thanks for the wine, maybe I’ll come say hello tomorrow.”

I shrug, sulking and say nothing.

She walks towards the door.

I lick my lips and taste a mixture of too sweet strawberries and Vaseline

The door closes.

I look around my Superior Sea-facing Suite and consider sticking my tongue in one of the plug sockets.

15

I admit it may have been a mistake to phone Simon. I should have known it would turn out like this. He said I had been the one who set the wheels in motion. He said they had no option but to go with Plan A. He said LESSTHANZERO would not go with Plan B unless I gave them no choice.

I couldn't come up with a strong response so I hung up on him.

Plan A: Julian Ashford goes missing. The band is distraught but manages to soldier on by promoting a new live album. In the next issue of NME John Coupland will reveal that I had developed a nasty drug habit and that my behaviour had become increasingly erratic. Album sales go up, the story remains newsworthy for a couple of weeks then fake sightings are posted on the Internet including blurred images that have been edited from old paparazzi shots. Then, I show up three months later fresh out of a self imposed stint in rehab. I will tell reporters that it is a secret I regret keeping but one that I felt at the time was the only way I could get myself into a place of recovery from a cocaine and painkiller addiction. I am scheduled to make a public apology to the fans on a MTV fifteen-minute interview special at the end of which will be the premiere of a new music video from our forthcoming album *This Is Not An Exit*.

Plan B: Julian Ashford is dead. The tragic icon is a lucrative market. Suicide equals a massive boost in album sales, commemorative t-shirts, documentaries, a B-sides album, re-issues of previous releases with bonus material and a tribute concert to be released on DVD. I will leave no note. On the bathroom mirror, wherever they find me, will be written, "I am so sorry."

What addiction?

University of Cape Town

16

I have taken to eating lots of fruit and doing a hundred push ups every morning after I have walked the beach in the crisp salty air and thrown bread to the seagulls. When no one is around, I swim in the rock pool and lie on a blue and white striped deck chair until I hear the breakfast crowd arrive. At lunch I have built up the courage to sit in the Café with the other guests and silently judge them from a corner table. I tend to alternate between the Crayfish Baguette and the Smoked Chicken Caesar Salad. Cold Crayfish flesh, lemon mayonnaise, rocket and mizuna on a lightly toasted baguette and the salad is Cos lettuce smothered in Caesar's dressing with smoked chicken pieces, herbed croutons, freshly cracked black pepper and Pecorino shavings although I'd prefer Parmesan. The newspaper is always next to the plate in case I need to retreat and raise a shield. Sometimes I make my way up to the Leopard Room Bar after a two-hour nap and enjoy Tea By The Sea, an afternoon tea with all the trimmings, including chocolate brownies, cream scones and finger sandwiches.

When she can, Alison sneaks passed my room for what we call our "One Minute Make Outs." And yesterday, Alison convinced me to use the 12A Sanctuary Spa and go for a full body massage and then went ahead and booked an appointment for nine am despite my apprehension. This morning I lay face down on a massage table and stared through a hole at Nazneem's black rubber sandals and kept telling myself to relax while she manipulated my shoulder muscles with baby oil. The plaque on the wall said that the 12A Sanctuary Spa embraces the healing energies of earth, air and water to rejuvenate the mind, body and soul. Nazneem tried to explain the indigenous plant extract treatments

and what a Rasul Chamber was. I pretended to listen and occasionally added a grunt to indicate I was paying attention.

This is supposed to be a self-imposed stint in rehab.

Mind, body and soul are rejuvenated.

My new 912ce Taylor Acoustic arrives mid-morning. The front desk calls to say Paul Bothner Music has just delivered. When I ordered it on Monday, I told the concierge there would be no need to ring back with the price. I open the black hard case with mauve velvet lining and look at a polished steel six-string, grand concert shape, Indian rosewood back and sides, tropical American mahogany neck and twenty-two frets with pearl inlays. There is a replacement set of D'Addario strings and a box of Sharkfin plectrums.

I take some Vicodin and then sit playing guitar waiting for that charge of relief. For a solid hour before lunch I mess around with old Pixies songs mostly, except I get stuck on the chorus to *The Holiday Song*. The part where it goes "*This ain't no holiday but it always turns out this way.*" Like a stuck record I sing the chorus over and over and over. The chord progression: G, F, (quick mute) A, C, F, C ad nauseam without reaching D so I could add the last lyric, "*Here I am with my hands.*" Thankfully, Alison interrupts for a One Minute Make Out so I hide the guitar in the cupboard then kiss her passionately and feel her right breast. Following this I go for a Crayfish Baguette and a pint of Guinness then lie on a deck chair beside the pool while the sunrays beam into me. Next:

Fruit cocktails.

Newspaper.

Walk.

Seagulls.

Room service.

Coffee.

Xanax.

Television.

Alison.

Sex.

Quiet.

There are gaps.

A conversation with a stranger equals one step forward divided by dishonesty.

In the Leopard Room I meet an American woman sitting alone at the bar, she tells me her name and I immediately forget it. She is in her early thirties, has chewed fingernails, straggly auburn hair, flabby arms and a not-unattractive face. She speaks in whispers as if she is conveying illegal information. She tells me she works for an advertising agency in San Francisco and only says three interesting things...

“Love and manipulation go hand in hand to me. It’s terrible, the minute I feel like I’m settled in a relationship I get bored and want out. I start sabotaging every little thing until we break up and then a large part of me will feel responsible for their sadness, so I go and piece things back together only to make sure they fall apart again. It’s a vicious cycle until they build up enough resentment to leave me for good.”

“I met Jeff Buckley at this party back East when I was in college. It was 1997, my final year at N.Y.U. I think he knew this guy Doug who worked at Columbia Records and Doug was sort of going out with Janine who I knew from college. The entire night people kept going up to him and bugging him, asking him to play something on Dave’s guitar. Anyway, he eventually gave in and played a short set sitting on a bar stool in the living room. He only played for like thirty minutes but we were all so lucky, he had this pure energy, this way of holding people’s attention with that soaring voice of his. There must have been about forty people in that apartment listening in stunned silence. The next week he drowned. And do you know what I regret most? I never had the courage to go up to him while I had the chance and say ‘Thank you. Thank you for writing a song like *Last Goodbye*. You are so important, we need you.’”

“When I was a kid I thought all you had to do was be a good moral person and the rest would take care of itself. When I was a kid I was fucking naïve to think that.”

Midnight on my balcony, in the background Alison is asleep wearing only the pink cotton panties I had my hand in earlier. I am facing the rush of a black sea as moonlight pools round my feet and my hands grip the railing. Something about the way Alison is sleeping

sprawled across the middle of the bed reminds me of Lucy. Before we slept together Alison said two interesting things...

"I guess the person I'd most like to see in a Speedo is Ryk Neethling and the person I'd really hate to see in a Speedo is Robert Mugabe. Does that answer your question?"

"Peanut butter with chocolate chips, Brad Pitt, lime green, a black Mini Cooper, Dan Brown books, Gwen Stefani, strawberry smoothies, mini-heeled sandals, Amarula, One Tree Hill, Redken shampoo, Gucci sunglasses, Smirnoff Spin, Josh Hartnett, Clifton lifeguards, miniature Maltese Poodles, Madiba, Camps Bay, The Sims, French manicures, Smarties, Robbie Williams, Diesel Jeans, Paris Hilton, Jesus Christ, The O.C., extra mint chewing gum and Heat Magazine."

The Portuguese Breakfast Roll comes with fried egg, grilled Chouriço and farm cheese. I skip my morning walk on the beach and phone Simon after Alison sneaks down stairs to start her shift. Simon says one interesting thing...

"I will not post a prescription!"

University of Cape Town

II

*Oh no love! You're not alone,
You're watching yourself but you're too unfair...*

- David Bowie

University of Cape Town

17

Before the photos force you to leave Cape Town, you meet Emma Miller in a secondhand bookshop on Long Street. She tells you she is hunting for Murakami novels. Her sublime symmetry catches you off guard and you can't help making flirtatious comments in passing as you browse the shelves next to where she stands. She tells you she is a Fine Arts student at the University Of Cape Town. Yes, she says she comes here often.

The bookshop's name: Serendipity. You don't believe in fate but if ever there was a fortunate accident this was one of those.

Before the photos of you emerging from a taxi outside the Twelve Apostles Hotel appear in tabloids across the globe you have a conversation with her that lasts an entire afternoon. You chat over a late lunch at Royale and ignore the muffled chaos from the street, the steam rising off the pavement and the smell of diesel. She tells you that, late at night from her bedroom window, she can see the spotlights on Table Mountain.

Before the photos spread and the media hunt begins you realize you have met a girl who makes you feel like a regular person, almost whole. She tells you she knows what it feels like to be alone with everyone. The decision you took to venture out from the safe confines of your hotel room is nowhere near as frightening or dangerous as you assumed it would be. There is no need to lie to her.

Before the photos of you hand in hand with Emma outside Madame Zingara's are posted on the Internet, you tell her who you are then watch her sea-green eyes stare into yours and listen to her to tell you that she doesn't care who you are supposed to be. She says she believes all people should be defined by how they act in the moment. A hippy

comment, sure, but she also says she has no interest in contemporary music. In fact she hates it. The last album she bought was Rachmaninov: Piano Concertos Nos. 1-4.

Before the photos appear on every music channel, and your record company publicly announces your alleged drug problem, you spend everyday with Emma in her two bedroom flat in Oranjezicht. Emma's flatmate and best friend Vibeke likes to put on David Gray albums and slow dance with a pillow clutched to her chest in front of her bedroom mirror.

Before the photos of you and Emma leaving Carlucci's in Bantry Bay were published you tell her you feel scared all the time.

The night before you leave, Vibeke asks what it is like to be in a music video then touches your arm and stares at your lips, waiting for an answer. The only word you manage to come up with is: Surreal. Vibeke tells you that you look even sexier in person, especially with longer hair and all that stubble.

Emma has two dimples on the small of her back, sallow skin and cracks her knuckles when nervous.

Vibeke laughs too easily and thinks Patrick Swayze is straight.

In bed Emma likes to gently run her fingertips across your eyebrows while you close your eyes and grab fistfuls of blanket.

When you decide to leave Cape Town, desperate to get away from the media search, you ask if they will go with you.

18

Everything is burnt.

Midday. The Karoo Desert. The sky is a dome of solid blue, no clouds, the sun firing down its searing white light and through the open car windows we breathe in the dust from the side of the road. In the backseat, Emma is asleep on my shoulder. Her hair is draped across my chest, wet and smelling of coconut. The four of us are traveling slowly in a champagne-coloured Freelander, Vibeke is in the passenger seat reading the back of a box of Ceres fruit juice and Marcus is staring at the infinite stretch of the N1 freeway ahead with one hand on the steering wheel and his other on her thigh. What Marcus is supposed to be doing is looking for a place to stop so we can eat lunch.

“So how’d you guys meet?” I ask Marcus, whom I have only known since we fetched him outside the Kenilworth Post Office at seven thirty this morning. They can’t keep their hands off each other; yet, Vibeke never mentioned anything about a boyfriend.

“It’s a long story.”

“Give me the short version.”

“I can’t believe I’m actually talking to Julian fucken Ashford, this is *so* hardcore!” he exclaims, leaning forward in his seat and squeezing Vibeke’s thigh hard. He winks at her. “You biscuit.”

“So what’s the short version?”

“I have *Gravity Sleeps* in my CD pouch, how hardcore is that babe?”

“Ouch! Keep your hands to yourself,” Vibeke says, turning to face Marcus and then lifts her sunglasses up to give him a look that says she means it. “And watch the road.”

Marcus is either ignoring me or is too stupid to carry out a string of consistent sentences. I think this when I look down at Emma who sleeps soundly, her mouth an inch away from my neck, her breath hot against my skin. Also, I could really use a Xanax. My supply is close to running out. I will have to be far more strategic with my use of said chemical reliever.

“I heard you started a fight with your record company, left them high and dry, that true?” Marcus asks, looking at me through the rearview mirror. “I read online that you’re addicted to crack and teenage prostitutes.”

Vibeke answers for me, “Marcus why do you think we’re driving out of Cape Town, just leave it okay?”

“Just making conversation baby, clearing up some rumours.”

I’m about to reply but then pretend I am not really paying attention.

Vibeke turns round and flashes me a smile. “Sorry Julian, he has no skaam hey?”

Here the N1 is flanked by dried grass, dead yellow, large odd shaped stones, reddish gray and the hills are small with bent trees that look like they were never capable of growing leaves.

We have stopped at every service station along the way. Marcus says it’s good to stretch your legs so you don’t get a blood clot and die. Another reason is Emma seems to have this obsessive compulsive need to wet her hair every time we stop. She says it cools her down and relaxes her. She also says all the car windows have to be open otherwise she is likely to get car sick and puke in my lap.

“Babes, where’d you put my CDs?” Vibeke says, shuffling around in her seat.

Marcus is mock hip-hop gesturing with one hand hanging out the window.

“Pass me the CDs; I want to put on some U2.”

“But I’m listening to 50Cent spit the truth.”

“I want to get some real road music happening here.”

“Each to their own,” I mumble from the back. “Play some fucking Rage Against The Machine if you’re going for road music.”

My eyes blur then clear then blur again. I try to focus out the window. Large parts of the landscape are now bare and the grass is black. Veld fires must have torched it all.

It takes me a couple minutes to stretch down slowly with one arm and reach in my bag under the seat without disturbing Emma. I flick open the plastic Xanax bottle. Only a small handful left. One should tide me over.

Emma doesn't need to know. It is none of her business.

I am in control. Moderation is the key.

"Stay (Faraway, So Close)" by U2 comes on.

"Why must you always skip songs?" I hear Marcus ask, and then something else but the music is loud enough for the rest of his whine to be inaudible. Vibeke bobs her head out of time with the opening riff. Ignores him.

Emma rouses then gently kisses my neck in a half-sleep.

Dressed up like a car crash. The wheels are turning but you're upside down.

I let my head fall back and wait for the calming sensation to pour through my veins. Right now all I feel is agitated, sweaty, hungry and thirsty.

"Where did you guys want to stop for lunch?" I ask, hoping Vibeke will answer but Marcus does.

"Meneer Ashford I think the next time I check a picnic spot I'm just gonna pull over and we can chow."

"Isn't that a nice spot babes?" Vibeke says, pointing to a roadside stop with two concrete tables; no shade just a curved dirt road around it and barbed wire fencing behind protecting a sheep farm.

"I'm all over that, good spotting peanut!"

I'm relieved, regardless.

I count eleven sheep in the field behind where we will pull over; their wool is patchy and dirty brown

Vibeke passes me yesterday's *Cape Times* over her shoulder. "Have you seen this one?"

The newspaper is handed to me folded over to an article with a headline that reads: ASHFORD SPOTTED AT CAMPS BAY HOTSPOT.

"Um...nope. Thanks," I say, scanning the print.

“When did you go to Baraza for cocktails?” Vibeke asks.

“Never.”

“It says you were at a table with two local models and ordered tequila shots all night. The owner confirms it. He says you staggered out at midnight with both of them.”

I’m squinting at the print. “Yeah, I can see that.”

“Both of them blonde. Nice one,” Marcus says. “What a legend!”

“I thought you were at the flat on Saturday night. You made pancakes and we watched *Dirty Dancing*,” Vibeke laughs. “How’d you manage that?”

“Magic.”

“Ja, like, rock star magic!” Marcus shouts out and then snorts at his own joke. “Once you’ve sold your soul you can do anything.”

We turn off the road; the car slows right down, the sound of small stones crunching under rubber. The sheep watch us, curious, maybe fifty yards away. I laugh out loud feeling totally fucking chilled.

Emma’s damp hair is stuck to my chest and pulls when she wakes up and then looks around, confused by the lack of motion.

“Where are we?” she asks, eyes straining to open.

“Mecca,” I reply, pulling my gray Red or Dead v-neck over my head. There is a word printed in large navy blue letters on the front: FACTOTUM. On my right sleeve it says JOIN THE CULT. The shirt had been specially made for me to be worn at the Glastonbury Festival. I have rotated the same five outfits for nearly two months and miss the two walk-in closets I have in the London apartment.

“Dude, check those sheep out. Not the prettiest animals hey?”

No one answers Marcus as he turns the ignition off and yawns as he stretches.

When we emerge from the car; the rush of the hot wind tackles us as if a giant oven door has opened. I immediately feel the sting of the midday sun. I pull the peak of my baseball cap down to cover my face.

“Bloody hell,” I hear myself say not meaning it to be out loud.

“Bro’, this is nothing. I’ve been to Upington. You fry your arse off up there.” Marcus says as he opens the boot.

Emma asks Vibeke for an elastic band to tie her hair into a pony. They both laugh loudly and just about collapse when Vibeke says, "I feel like a hard-boiled egg up Satan's bum! Throw me the suntan cream."

Marcus and I both look at each other deadpanned then I carry the picnic basket over to one of the concrete tables. Inside the basket are two roast chickens bought from a Shell Ultra City near Worcester, a dozen rolls, and four 500ml bottles of water, a bag of Doritos and one slab of melted chocolate.

Emma winks at me and I smile just as we sit down on the concrete bench. I place my hand on her knee and she kisses my cheek. I turn my head and look across the freeway at the smoky haze rising off the tar and think that not so long ago I woke up in a luxury apartment in London and cursed the cold weather.

Under a buzzing sun in the Karoo desert we sit in silence, too hungry to talk, ripping out chunks of white flesh from the roast chicken, washing it down with warm mineral water, the red dust clinging to our skin, the sweat on our foreheads evaporating as soon as it forms.

The four of us left Cape Town five hours ago and now everything is burnt.

University of Cape Town

19

The brochure says Nieu Bethesda is a charming village set in the fertile valley of the Sneeu Berg Mountains, fifty-six kilometres from Graaf Renet; it lies in the heart of the vast, arid and dramatic territory known as the Great Karoo.

The brochure says you should wear cool clothing in summer and warm clothing in winter. Don't let this confuse you. Remember to bring a hat, walking shoes, sun block, camera, binoculars and bird and mammal reference books.

The brochure says Nieu Bethesda is so secluded that development took a back seat leaving a rare historical integrity.

The brochure says this is a fully restored Victorian – Karoo style guesthouse that has been tastefully decorated. The floors are polished yellowwood, the furniture is traditional and the accent is on comfort.

The brochure says you are running from yourself and heading straight towards a brick wall.

“Emma painted that when she was thirteen years old,” Vibeke says, pointing up to an oil painting of a Karoo landscape. “We used to come up here every school holiday. Emma would always go off alone for hours and sketch stuff.”

I put the brochure down then look up to examine Emma's painting; Vibeke stands next to me opposite the stone fireplace, our shoulders touching.

“Thirteen?” I ask, an attempt at surprise.

It is six pm; the old clock in the living room lets out a loud gong.

Behind the house is a hectare of land where Vibeke says her father is trying to farm garlic. It looks like a large patch of dead land to me but what do I know. For someone who wants to escape press attention this is the perfect place apparently. Vibeke says when she told Marcus about my situation he suggested coming to her parent's guesthouse. Lucky for us it wasn't booked out. Marcus insisted that he be included in the adventure.

"Your eyes are all bloodshot and they look a bit glassy. Are you sure you're okay?"

"I'm tired, that's all," I reply.

"Marcus is about to start the braai, maybe you should lie down."

"Maybe."

"Can I make you a cup of coffee?"

"It's too hot for coffee but thanks."

"Iced coffee?"

I turn to face her and place a hand on her shoulder, then leaning in I say, "Thank you for doing this, for bringing me here."

Through the window I spot Marcus chopping wood, his shirt off, splinters flying up, he closes his eyes tight with each hack and his skin is shiny with sweat. I notice his upper body is more muscular than mine and definitely more tanned.

I remove my hand and step back.

"You don't have to do this alone you know, I'm sure it will all die down and you can get on with your life," Vibeke moves forward and whispers this; her index finger is now wrapped around my thumb. "You will be safe here."

I pick up the brochure again feeling awkward. Vibeke just stands there, her dark brown eyes fixed on me.

The Dutch Reformed Church has seats for up to seven hundred souls.

To see the Dutch Reformed Church, ask for the key at the Bethesda Trading Company.

The church still hopes to be completely full some day.

"Why would a Portuguese family want to own a guesthouse out here?"

“I think my dad has always had this thing about living the simple life in the country, so he comes here as often as his work will allow, and he is totally obsessed with African history, especially the Anglo-Boer war, he has like every book ever published on it,” Vibeke replies, her eyes unwavering. “Also to be near Graaf Reneit. It’s home to more national monuments than any other South African town.”

“What does he do?”

“He’s a tax advocate.”

This is a popular retreat for artists.

The brochure says Nieu-Bethesda is home to the strange Owl House - an unusual collection of sculptures and lifetime’s work of an eccentric artist. Included in the day tour is an outing to The Owl House, along the way you will see fossils, sheep shearing and Khoi San rock paintings. If you book a tour in advance, lunch will be provided.

“Tell me about The Owl House,” I ask at the dinner table. “Why is it famous?”

Emma answers, “Helen Martins lived there. Legend has it that after losing her third husband she lay ill in bed one night and considered how dull and gray her life had become. Initially, she wasn’t an artist as such but she resolved to add light and colour to her environment and so began re-doing the interior of the house. Each room reflected her dreams and desires. She coated the ceilings and walls in bright paint and used crushed glass in elaborate patterns. You *must* see the inside of the house, we should go tomorrow.”

Marcus starts up through a mouthful of creamed corn, “Bru, that owl lady was totally cooked, she was this eccentric old bat who made all those weird sculptures of animals and shit and then one night she poisoned herself,” he stops to bite into a lamb chop. “To death.”

“They’re not weird, they’re beautiful,” Vibeke blurts out then forks through her salad and pierces a cherry tomato. I imagine it burst red in her mouth.

Emma wears a jade gypsy-styled summer dress. She is skinny, not anorexic skinny, slim, small boned but still curvy, dark shoulder length brown hair, her forehead the same level as my mouth. Her eyes catch against the fabric and she emits a light so striking and fragile.

“Once the interior of the house was complete she applied her imagination to the world outside. She lived as a recluse and over a period of twelve years she created from cement and glass, hundreds of sculptures and relief figures that crowd the garden. It’s called the ‘Camel Yard’ and all her favourite animals are there, mainly owls and camels, but all kinds of fantastical beings are represented. There’s even this procession of shepherds and wise men leading an almost life-sized camel train towards the East. They say it’s designed to integrate Christianity with her fascination with the Orient,” Emma’s face is lit up and wonderfully animated when she speaks. “For years she expressed herself with such honesty. I want to write a masters dissertation on her work. ”

“Damn this boerewors is good!” Marcus says as he takes a slug of beer.

“Yes babes, you are the Braai Meester, well done,” I hear Vibeke say under her breath. “Emma’s talking.”

“It was named The Owl House by the locals after Helen Martins placed her cement owls on the roof and veranda to guard the house.”

“Cooked,” Marcus adds, tapping his finger on his temple.

“She lived in a remote and conservative environment where neither her work nor her lifestyle was understood. No wonder she drank caustic soda, it’s people like *you*.” Emma flicks a pea at Marcus. I laugh, feeling an unsettling mix of happiness and deep sadness. Happy because this is the most normal I’ve felt in years. Sad because I am not sure how I go about holding on to this.

Vibeke traces patterns in creamed corn with her fork.

“What?” Emma asks, smiling at me.

I can’t help staring at her. I lean in and whisper, “You’re so beautiful.”

I love watching her talk, the way her bottom lip skews slightly and the way her eyes focus their attention on me as if I were the only person in the room.

“Finish explaining,” Vibeke says.

“Anyway, she suffered from arthritis and depression and eventually she began to lose her sight so –” Emma is interrupted when Marcus tickles Vibeke and laughs like the flat character he is. “At varsity we studied Athol Fugard’s play *The Road To Mecca* which is supposed to be based on her life.”

“So Julian, tell us what it’s like being back after so many years?” Marcus asks.
“You grew up in South Africa right?”

“I told you that already,” Vibeke says, slapping him on the forearm.

“It’s weird, I guess, it’s not how I wanted to see my hometown again, I can’t go out and really appreciate anything without having to look over my shoulder.”

Marcus chips in, “I would still rather be famous.”

“Yeah, well, that’s because our generation thinks celebrity is an occupation, like being a lawyer or a doctor or a teacher. We’re no longer satisfied with just contributing to society, or with just making something. We think of fame as helping us escape the ordinary.”

“Are you saying truckloads of money and free pussy is bad?” Marcus acts puzzled.

Emma looks annoyed. “Have you not seen what Julian’s had to put up with the last few weeks, hiding and living on edge all the time?”

“But he knew all this going in,” Marcus replies.

Emma shakes her head. “And that makes it okay? You cannot escape yourself, no matter how much wealth or recognition you amass.”

“Yes Buddha, we are all enlightened by your presence,” Marcus says, motioning for Vibeke to pass the bottle of wine.

The brochure says the population of Nieu Bethesda is around one thousand, one hundred in the central area and nine hundred in the township. The floodlights the government put up in the township are the cause of much annoyance for the villagers as the stars are no longer as visible.

The brochure says the cemetery is a must-see. Take a walk around the peaceful cemetery and see graves ancient and contemporary. There are graves dating back hundreds of years, many of them unmarked save for their beautiful local stone. This is a serene and pretty place to spend a quiet time, especially late at night. There is at least one grave of a British soldier who died in a skirmish during the Anglo-Boer War and a number of touchingly small graves for children.

The brochure says you have no artistic integrity.

After dinner Marcus and I are left alone while the girls make tea in the kitchen. The combination of opiates and white wine keeps me listening. We are talking about...talking about...talking about...

"...next I would make the other two chicks watch. So that's four groupies in the hot tub and two watching from across the room but don't worry they will have to tag team me later. Chicks will do anything to be near fame."

"I actually did that in the Tower Suite at the Mandarin Oriental in Munich."

Marcus stands up and punches the air. "*Really?!*"

"No."

The brochure says the Sneeuwitjie Restaurant is highly recommended. You can expect generous servings of tasty home-style food featuring roosterbrood, vegetables, salad and chicken, Karoo lamb or pork, homemade pineapple beer and ginger beer. A visitor once wrote: "Thank you for a real meal after a long drive. Your kind of caring is what will heal this land of ours." Vegetarians are always welcome, even without notice.

The brochure says you are a coward.

Vibeke suggests that we play Thirty Seconds. Couple Vs Couple. Marcus suggests I get out my acoustic guitar and take requests. He says he has to hear "Goodnight Daylight" from my first album. Emma suggests getting an early night. I suggest we all take turns cutting our pinky fingers off with gardening scissors and they all laugh except me.

The brochure says this quaint village is a quiet place with untarred roads and only a handful of general shops. No franchises, no hotels, no modernization.

The brochure says Emma will soon realize she is too good for you.

It is late now, Marcus and Vibeke are finally out of sight but I can still hear parts of their conversation drift down the passage and slip under the bedroom door.

I sit on an antique chair between the wardrobe and the bed gently strumming my guitar, listening to strange chord shapes bounce off the yellowwood floors. In the en suite bathroom Emma is washing her face, through the sound of splashing water I hear her ask if I will turn off the lights and lock the door.

When she emerges from the bathroom I begin to play "The Dress Looks Nice On You" by Sufjan Stevens, gently, slowly, my voice slightly croaky and pained for affect.

On the edge of the bed she sits, her feet an inch above the floor, watching my hands as I play. I watch her eyes for approval.

I can see a lot of life in you / I can see a lot of bright in you / And I think that dress looks nice on you / I can see a lot of life in you

She claps softly when I finish. “You sing beautifully. Thank you.”

I put my acoustic away and tell her I have had the song in my head all evening.

Emma stands up and slips out of her dress then ties her hair up and gets into bed naked.

I act quick, removing my clothes, tossing them on the chair as if they have caught fire.

Emma sits up in bed, her breasts peeking above the duvet, she giggles when she says, “I guess a slow strip tease is out of the question.”

The brochure says this will never last.

Time melts like one of the Dali clocks in the poster stuck to the back of the bedroom door.

University of Cape Town

20

“This place is a prison and these people aren’t your friends.”

Lucy Wallace said this to me backstage at the Rose Garden Arena in Portland, Oregon. She said, “It’s the first line to a song.”

“I give up,” I finally said, after giving it a fair amount of thought. “Now get down from there.”

Despite my annoyance, Lucy persisted in jumping from one couch to the next nude, except for a denim mini skirt, no underwear, cupping her breasts with each leap. Her large blue eyes wide and energized like a child who just stole the bowl of sweets at their best friend’s birthday party.

Constant arguing, drunken fights and jealousy plagued the band’s second stint across North America. In truth, Lucy’s behaviour did not make it any easier but at least her presence afforded me some form of escape, a place to channel my frustration, someone to talk to who wasn’t involved in band decisions. The rest of the band had become jealous over the amount of attention I got compared to them. Over the six months we spent touring across the U.S. my face appeared on the cover of Spin, Blender, Rolling Stone, Q, Uncut, Entertainment Weekly, Billboard, Guitar Player, Magnet, Paste, Alternative Press, Guitar One, The Word, ChartAttack, Dazed and Confused, NME, Kerrang!, Filter and The Wire.

At The Drake Hotel in Chicago, John Coupland and I had traded misguided punches in the lobby over why the rest of the band had been left off the Rolling Stone

cover. No physical damage was done other than a torn Pringle jumper and one badly bruised ego, not mine. I don't make these decisions.

The Stone article dealt with Samsara's meteoric rise and the multi-platinum success of *Gravity Sleeps*, the pressures of newfound fame, breaking America, the water-pistol incident on Late Night with Conan O'Brien and the two Grammy nominations for Best New Act and Best Rock Song.

"Waiting for something to break, left my heart out to bake."

Lucy Wallace said this to me backstage at the Rose Garden Arena in Portland, Oregon. She said, "It's the first line to a song."

"Rudderless," I replied as she hopped onto my lap, sweaty and starry eyed. "The Lemonheads."

"When you're on stage tonight I want you to think about all the starving children in Africa and Asia, I want you to think about Aids orphans and Pandas that won't fuck to save their own species, I want you to think about wildlife poachers and Polar Bear cubs clubbed to death, I want you to think about movie stars demanding twenty million per film and athletes signing ten million dollar endorsement contracts then I want you to picture me naked on all fours blindfolded and panting."

I sat there thinking that a ship without a rudder is like a ship without a rudder is like a ship without a rudder.

Shortly after our Mercury Prize winning self-titled debut album had secured our place amongst the U.K's hottest new acts, notching up four Brit awards, a sold-out European tour and three top ten singles, LESSTHANZERO called us in for a series of meetings to discuss, or rather, to tell us our future plans. Management advised me to stop writing such abstract lyrics. They said what we need is catchy phrases, simple messages, sing-a-long chorus's that get stuck in your head, not obscure references and word puzzles. They said that since I received ###¹ percent of the band's songwriting royalties it would be my responsibility to make the rest of the group understand. They used phrases like "good

¹ ### Denotes removal of actual figures by LESSTHANZERO due to non-disclosure policy for all artists signed to label.

commercial sense” and “broad appeal” and “career suicide” and “global paradigm” and “swimming in the mainstream.” They said our second album should be more accessible, more translatable to a worldwide audience. They said with *Gravity Sleeps* we are going all the way. The one with the moustache and beady eyes even pointed to the ceiling and slapped his desk when he said it. They said, take nine months in a top studio if you need, express yourself through the best equipment money can buy. A list of top producers and mixers will be put together and meetings are to be set up with each. They said they would like me to consider working with outside writers but most of all they said I should relax and enjoy the process. They said congratulations were in order now that Samsara had become the flagship band for LESSTHANZERO; a five album contract with new deal points would need to be signed worth ### million pounds. Included in the contract: a substantial advance of ### for each album, royalty rate of ### for subsequent sales and the territory will be amended to worldwide coverage. Of course, once the album reaches shelves various deductions would have to come into effect so the company can recoup its costs. Expenses: Manager’s cut, legal fees, recording budget, producer’s advance, studio rental fee, band equipment, recording tape, cartage and transportation, lodgings while in studio, catering, mastering, crew, on-line editing, promo photo shoots, CD copies, misc band fund, album artwork, packaging, music video shoot, directors fee, marketing budget, etc. The studio time, packaging, promotion as well as the advance, which is seen as a loan paid to the band, must be recouped once sales are clocked up before money is paid over to the artist. Hypothetically, should an album cost two hundred thousand pounds to produce, the average deal would see one pound in royalties per CD sold, meaning two hundred thousand copies would need to be sold before the artist received any money from sales. The recording fund set up for our sophomore effort ran in excess of ###. Like most bands we made the majority of our money from touring and merchandising. And, like most bands we would say we constantly felt short changed by the record company, even though I was a millionaire twice over by the age of twenty-one.

“Use just once and destroy, invasion of our piracy.”

Lucy Wallace said this to me backstage at the Rose Garden Arena in Portland, Oregon. She said, “It’s the first line to a song.”

“Radio Friendly Unit Shifter,” I replied, holding her hair in a pony while she puked into a bucket right below a sign on a door that read: Backstage Restricted Access, Strictly Card Holders Only. “Nirvana.”

She spat and continued with the strangled cat sounds while the smell of watery American beer mixed Vodka and bile hung in the air.

“You’ll have to do better than that,” I said.

A knock at the door interrupted our romantic scene.

“Tell them they can’t come in, the competition winners can fuck off for all I care!” Lucy shouted this out while staring face down in her own vomit.

“What is wrong with me?” I asked no one and reached for another vodka shot.

The first tour through the states: less high profile, less expectation, less apprehension and more enthusiasm. When we last came to Portland we played The Crystal Ballroom in front of fifteen hundred people. We played a double bill with Death Cab For Cutie and I remember right after we finished our set with “High School Never Ends”, our closer at the time, I walked off stage feeling like I was living every school boy’s wet dream about being a rock star. I had spent the day hanging out with a band I admired, a band I listened to religiously right through our first transatlantic tour, a band on the brink of major label success but who seemed to handle it all so well. During soundcheck I jammed with Death Cab on “Champagne from a Paper Cup”, a song from their first album, a song I often had on repeat in my iPod. Ben Gibbard asked me to sing the verses with him, the part where it goes, “*Think I’m drunk enough to drive you home now / I’ll keep my mouth kept shut / under lock and key that’s rusted for no lie / ‘cuz all these conversations whine / on and on / on and on / on and on.*” After the gig we all hung out at Dante’s on West Burnside Street and Ben and I talked excitedly about the new Dismemberment Plan album, Chris and John discussed the sonic performance of Yamaha SM12V and Peavey 112M floor monitors, Nick and Paul debated which female porn stars they would induct into the porn hall of fame and Jason and Matt argued over the abolishment of Third World debt. Sipping on a Budweiser under low red lighting at our private corner table while a band called Broken Social Scene crowded the stage, filling the background like a soundtrack to

a Wes Anderson movie, whilst being watched by three gorgeous blondes from across the room who giggled with every glance, I sat there feeling like a lottery winner.

Nice way to celebrate your twenty-third birthday.

“Who am I?” Lucy flashed that practiced model smile, politely insincere. “I’m Lucy in the sky with diamonds, *who* the hell are you?!”

There were four competition winners, all young, all female, two journalists, one radio station representative and Simon Doyle, all staring at us expectantly like some circus act. At least Lucy had put her cherry DKNY spaghetti strap top back on. For the record, I told her not to do the line of coke she claimed would balance her out.

“Julian, stand there, smile, let’s take the photos and move on, do you think we can do that?” Simon asked, his voice straining to keep calm in front of our lucky guests. “You’re on stage in ten.”

“I’m on stage in ten or twenty or thirty,” I replied, my alcohol buzz in full swing. Lucy would often tell me how under-appreciated I was. That without me the band was nothing.

“I’m sorry about this,” Simon said, turning towards the girls.

“What’s that smell?” I heard one of the winners ask.

“We asked for crushed ice not cubes,” Lucy stood over by the broken deli table, her face pale, mascara smudged and part of her denim skirt torn, revealing too much thigh, too much lower butt cheek, too much. “Sweetness, sweetness I was only joking when I said I’d like to smash every tooth in your head.”

“Too easy,” I said. “Bigmouth Strikes Again by The Smiths.”

“High five,” Lucy said, running over to me spilling most of her Vodka and soda.

“Seriously what *is* that smell?” The journalist who wore neon pink Converse shoes, green and red-striped pants and orange Eighties head band asked in no particular direction. “This is a waste of time.”

While you are driving from city to city there is a lot of wasted time. Hours and hours spent wrestling with mind numbing bouts of boredom. Tour busses can be depressing places to be cooped up, sometimes for three or four day stretches, only stopping to pick

up fast food or if Matt blocked up the toilet. There are only so many playstation games you can play or DVD boxsets you can watch. I found tranquilizers and alcohol to be the most reliable method of dealing with the boredom of traveling.

“I bleached the sky every night, loaded on wrong and further from right.”

Lucy Wallace said this to me going up while coming down in a lift at The Governor Hotel in Portland, Oregon. She said, “It’s the first line to a song.”

We stayed in the Lewis & Clarke suite for two sleepless nights in the usual five star luxuries. The room had to have two bedrooms with king size beds, one for making love and watching late night TV and the other so Lucy could trampoline. It had to have a boardroom with seating for eight, two connecting living rooms and the mini-bar had to be stocked with four bottles of vintage Krug champagne, two bottles of Grey Goose Vodka, a case of Heineken, six tubs of assorted Ben & Jerry’s Ice Cream and a dozen free range eggs for throwing. There had to be plush terrycloth robes and windows that opened up to the fresh Northwest air. Downstairs there had to be award winning American cuisine at Jake’s Grill and a complimentary shoe shine, waiting, just in case.

“I don’t feel so good,” she said.

“Mrs Shankly, I think you may have drunk too much.”

I felt like someone had dropped my heart in an acid bath, my blood bubbled through my veins. Trying to come down from listening to the roar of twenty thousand people was something I would never get used to. Put your face near the back of jet engine blasting then try to act normal. You get the idea.

“Another line and I’ll be good as new,” she said.

“Think I just need to lie down.”

“Fuck sleep, what should we do?”

“It’s the little things that kill,” I replied as I held my left hand to stop it shaking and kissed her on the cheek. The doors parted and the torrent of bright light from the hotel corridor forced both of us to close our eyes and walk as if blindfolded in the direction of our suite.

21

We steal moments alone. Emma says she is more comfortable being intimate when Marcus and Vibeke are not here. It may have something to do with the fact that Marcus wolf whistles from the other room when we are in bed together. Sometimes he will knock on the wall and tells us to behave ourselves that God is watching.

“They’ve gone to the shop.” Emma stands with her back against the wall, directly above her head is a portrait of her mother looking down on us. Emma painted it in high school; the pale colours and rough brush strokes suggest issues.

“Quick,” I yell out, “let’s get naked.”

She laughs.

I open my arms. “Come here gorgeous.”

“How long do you think we have?”

“I don’t care.”

“Ten, fifteen minutes?”

“I’m going to need hours to explore you.”

The bedroom door is locked. Emma runs her hand across my stomach as we kiss, soft at first. I flinch at the coldness of her palm, the sound of the wind pulling at the wooden shutters, the curtains trying to escape, sucked out, our eyes open, staring at each other like this is the first time, unsure of each other, hands searching, she giggles playfully, I bring my hand up to her face, then we begin to believe, her eyes close first, our mouths touch, lightly brushing. “That tickles,” she says, biting her bottom lip and scrunching her nose up.

“You biscuit,” I say.

“That’s not funny,” she whispers.

We kiss harder; I’m clenching my stomach, unable to completely let go, thinking too much, Lucy still there, the shutters clicking behind us. “I’m going to close that window.”

“Sure,” she says, followed by a barely audible sigh.

I think to myself, you fool, you have interrupted the scene in the movie where we want to see how true their love is, a light romance scene with quiet tender moments and a passionate embrace, sex inevitable, the steam about to condense on screen, not like the end, not the dramatic last kiss, the middle, the part where the warrior returns and is rewarded after an early battle, not leaving to be killed in the war.

I peer outside, the orange light rushing towards me despite the icy pull in the wind. I latch the window. There is no sign of the other two walking back.

“Hurry up,” Emma says, mock-serious, her face lit up, eyes greener than usual, the evening sun cascading in, adding that warm glow, doing what photographers love.

*

The last time I saw my parents, we had gathered together at a pub near my mother’s office in Reading. I was back in London for two months rest between tours. I had decided it was time for them to properly meet Lucy Wallace. Suffice to say the impression they had been given through the tabloids of the woman I had been dating for more than a year was not wholly positive.

Lucy and I had got there early and secured a table in the garden area where no one was sitting. She wore pink gloves and sunglasses and a black lace dress by Yves Saint Laurent. She had told me on the ride from London that she thought family was the second most important thing in the world.

My mother arrived first wearing much more make up than I was used to seeing on her. I assumed it must be an estate agent thing. She hugged me and greeted Lucy with a handshake. “Hi,” she said, smiling through teeth, “my son is too busy to call me.”

Lucy could not stop touching her newly dyed black hair. She smiled for imaginary cameras. The conversation sputtered along until my father arrived fifteen minutes late. He looked a lot older, sagging eyes and silver hair. He mouthed an overly animated hello as he approached the table. I raised my hand and looked happy. "Dad, this is Lucy."

"Hiya, Luce, please to meet you love," he said, leaning in to kiss her on the cheek.

All this was before the argument, before we were done with the pleasantries, before my father insulted my mother to tears, before Lucy was asked to wait in the car.

The argument was over who would host the first Christmas I would actually be home for. I had missed the previous four. Turns out the real issue was that my father had cheated on Pam, my mother's replacement, and moved on to the next green looking pasture, Debra or Denise.

Thankfully, an opportunity to promote in Japan came up over Christmas.

*

"I did not," Emma exclaims.

"You smiled."

"No way."

"You *did*."

"When?"

"I said, 'My father doesn't really know me and he never did' and you smiled."

"I did not."

"Yeah you did. Then I said 'I can't recall my father ever telling me he loved me' and there was definitely a smirk."

"Like a half-smile?"

"Yes."

"Why are you so defensive?" Emma asks.

"I don't follow."

"One minute you're so sweet and affectionate and then..."

"Then what?" I ask, sitting up, yanking the duvet tighter, hinting at my frustration with the topic.

“You switch off.”

“I don’t mean to, I just have a lot to process.”

“You don’t have to be scared.”

“Who said I was scared?”

“I want you to be honest with yourself, with what you want.”

“Yeah, well,” I stop to re-position my pillow, “I don’t.”

“You got on a plane, gave it all up, asked us to bring you here, you don’t strike me as someone who struggles with tough decisions.”

I look away, frustrated, unsure whether running away qualifies me as someone who handles tough decisions particularly well.

“Let me in. You can’t do this alone.”

“How profound.”

“I’m serious.”

“Sorry, I’m tired, okay, do we have to do this now, we spent *all* day at the Owl House, my eyelids feel like they have weights attached.”

Emma takes a deep breath then lets it out with a huff. Meaning what? Resignation? “I have to ask, what’s with the painkillers you keep under your clothes?” I notice hesitation in her voice. “Why are you taking them?”

“I can’t believe you went through my stuff!” I stare straight ahead. “I have a prescription.”

“You could have told me. This is exactly what I mean.”

“It’s nothing. They’re for anxiety.”

“How long have you been taking them?”

“Long enough to have built up some proper fucking experience if that’s what you’re asking?” I reply, feeling for the light switch next to me. “Can I please get some rest now?”

“It’s six-thirty.”

Emma rolls over; our feet remain tangled and cozy. It is windy and restless outside and I can’t help closing with, “Vibeke’s right, you do remind me of a very young Winona Ryder, but pre-Reality Bites.”

*

The sound of Manhattan's nightlife echoed six stories below.

Why are you telling me this? I thought. Or maybe I had said it out loud because Lucy began to sob. I could feel the anger rising. *Just listen.*

"...and then he would sit there and watch me shower while he touched himself."

Right then I wanted to storm out the hotel room, get on a plane and confront her stepfather. *Sick bastard.* The anger was there, definite and raw but I struggled to process the information, I kept thinking about how I was supposed to react, what to say. I wanted her to stop. *This is the end* I thought. Now that I knew what her stepfather had done to her since she was a child. *It's over. How can I look at you the same way?* With my eyes shut, I could feel the alcohol coursing through me, a dizzy hotness. Lucy lay curled in a tight ball in the middle of the bed, clutching a pillow to her chest, wet mascara drops staining the white linen. *Tell her you love her. Tell her to keep going. Tell her to get it all out.* "I can't believe this," I said. "That cunt."

I lay with her, wiped her tears, and consoled her as best I could. I told her I loved her that she was safe with me, told her if I ever saw him again I would kill him. This seemed to make things much worse.

Earlier, in the afternoon, the band had taped an appearance on the Late Show with David Letterman. It had gone exceptionally well. Only two takes needed. The rest of the band were out celebrating, drinking downtown somewhere with the cast of America's Next Top Model. In a hotel room, at the Franklin in New York's Upper East Side, it felt like we were the only ones hiding.

*

"Where are you?" Emma asks, waving her hand in front of my face.

The problem with flashbacks is you don't always know why they pop in. I told myself to forget. Told myself it was only a matter of time.

I rub my eyes.

"Jules?"

“Tired,” I reply, rolling my neck. “What were you saying?”

“Never mind.”

I could insert a hundred words, but emit none. We stare in silence for a couple minutes. I’m listening out for the other’s return.

“This all feels quite disconnected somehow,” I finally say.

“What does?”

“Being here.”

University of Cape Town

22

Aspirin does not help.

“The Valley Of Desolation is the product of volcanic and erosive forces of nature over a hundred million years. The sheer cliff face is a geological phenomenon. The columns of Dolerite rise one hundred and twenty meters from the valley floor and in the distance the Karoo landscape stretches to the horizon,” Marcus is reading the guidebook in a mock nature documentary voice, “Late afternoon is the best time to enjoy the spectacular scenery since the tinted sun saturates the reds of the rock towers.”

“Okay babes, that’s enough.” Vibeke is looking for the turn off that takes us to the Valley Of Desolation, a place I’ve been told I *have* to see.

“From the road leading to the valley the monument of Commandant Scheepers is visible. He was one of the Boer commando leaders during the Anglo-Boer War. He was executed on the 18th of January 1902 at 3:30pm on the Murraysburg road. The monument is situated about 3km outside of town on the left-hand side,” Marcus switches his voice to what I guess is a homosexual newsreader. “In other news, Julian Ashford has been spotted looking fabulous in the backseat of a super big 4x4.”

“Ever thought about doing stand up comedy?” I ask.

“That’s enough baby, Julian has a headache,” Vibeke says.

“Yes, baby, that’s enough,” I snarl.

I think about bodyguards and bouncers who would smash his face in at the slightest hint of my discomfort.

I have run out of opiates.

I have run out of tranquilizers.

I have had a headache for two days straight. The heat is not helping; I'm sweating, feel nauseas and would like to know what Marcus's face would look like with no eyes, just two bloody holes for eye sockets. Yesterday, at lunch, he asked me if I kept count of how many blowjobs I'd been given in the back of a tour bus.

Paracetamol does not help.

I remove my sunglasses and then squinting at Emma who sits next to me thumbing through a copy of YOU magazine, I say, "Compral doesn't help."

I miss terrycloth robes and all night room service and plasma screen TVs and king size beds and complimentary toiletries and Swiss chocolates waiting on my pillow and One Minute Make Outs with no strings attached.

I miss being a phone call away from anything I want.

I miss prescriptions for various anaesthetizing chemicals.

Saying goodbye to Alison Bryce would have been the right thing to do.

My mouth is dry and the electric windows make this awful squeaking sound and the child lock won't let the window go all the way down and if I had a hammer I would...

I feel Emma's hand grip mine. "Don't worry Jules, we're nearly there, I love you."

Am I smiling? I can't tell.

"V, pass me the cold water. Jules is car sick," Emma says, leaning forward.

I wish.

*

School bullies are predictable and unremitting in their pursuit of your humiliation.

At the Cavendish School I would hide in stairwells, in classrooms, in toilet stalls, anywhere I could be alone, safe. No one knows because I never told anyone, not the school staff, my parents or the friends I eventually made. It got so bad that in my second year I spent the night in hospital for observation after hitting my head against the curb in a bicycle accident. My parents were worried and all but it turned out the injuries weren't serious, only a mild concussion and some stitches. I told them I had swerved to avoid a

car and fell off, in reality my back tyre was kicked by Zane Mitchell. I remember lying there while any self-esteem I had left bled out onto the concrete thinking you deserve this, you are worthless and everybody hates you, look how they stand there laughing. Overly dramatic maybe, but I was sixteen and had no way of fighting back, in my head I was insignificant and weak. To this day they probably still laugh when they see my face on billboards or catch a music video. They think Julian Ashford was such a tosser in high school; we owned him, remember how he sobbed like a girl when he got kicked off his bike and begged us to go away, remember.

Being in a successful band means constant affirmation.

If affirmation were like sugar your teeth would rot.

*

“What are you thinking about?” Emma asks. “You look so distant.”

“School.”

“What do you mean?”

“It’s a fuck up.”

“What do you mean?”

“It just is.”

“You’re not making sense.”

“If only I had the confidence then, I would have killed them.”

“Who?”

“Leave it.”

Emma turns away. “You’re so closed sometimes.”

The car slows down, my head feels like someone is digging around in there with a garden rake, the sun still fires down on us, a red dust cloud follows behind and up ahead is the Valley Of Desolation, how pointlessly symbolic.

“Everyone out,” Marcus calls out. “This place is hectic.”

23

You cannot escape this.

You lie awake while the walls blister. You hug your stomach...blanket, soaked...pull ugly faces and think things are much, *much* worse here. The questions burn inside...Emma came, went away, came back with herbal tea...answers evaporate...feeling like a cartoon version of yourself. You tell yourself you should have been honest with her from the beginning. *The withdrawal symptoms from Xanax and other benzodiazepines...with the exception that...much higher incidence of panic attack and a bereavement type of emotional liability that is singularly more severe.* You hear the questions: “How long have you been taking them?” “How many a day?” You are a talk show version of yourself searching for the right words. The sun strobos through the cracks in the blind, white bars across your face...a tap drips loudly, somewhere. Emma’s hands, soft and cool...a damp cloth...the relief of water...reach, there you go, find a moment to grip on to, snap out. *Psychological symptoms: anxiety, depression, insomnia, feelings of unreality or detachment, abnormal sensitivity to sensory stimuli, obsessive negative thoughts (particularly of a violent and/or sexual nature), rapid mood changes and phobias (especially agoraphobia and fear of insanity), nightmares, impairment of cognitive functioning, pill craving, hallucinations, psychosis.* Go away! Stabbing pains and you can’t breathe...square root to infinity – that’s how bad. Your guts on rinse cycle. *Note that it is far more common to fear psychosis than to actually experience it.* You wonder if this is payback, the end, an enema of the soul. You feel like someone is sitting on your chest, ants crawl into your ears, your limbs super glued to the bed. You hear:

“We can’t just leave him like this?” You hear: “We have to call for help?” There is more small print on the back, you tell the girl in the strawberry red dress to read on...*Physical symptoms: muscle tension and joint pain, headaches, shaking, blurred vision (other complications related to the eyes), itchy skin (including sensation of insects crawling on skin), gastrointestinal discomfort, electric shock sensations, paresthesia (numbness, feeling of pins and needles), fatigue, feelings of inner vibrations, fluctuation of body temperature, fasciculations (muscle twitching), difficulty in swallowing, metallic taste in mouth, nausea, extreme thirst, sexual dysfunction, heart palpitations, dizziness, vertigo, breathlessness.* Tick the boxes. Dry heaves over a green plastic bucket...your eyes bulge, a cockroach bolts up your arm...the veins in your throat about to burst. *The ability of the patient to self-detox or discontinue use successfully on their own is quite low, and medical assistance becomes of significant necessity in the majority of cases.* Emma is in and out the bedroom, panic...you feel a kiss on your forehead... Vibeke, you think, passes her the phonebook...“No, please.” You hear yourself beg, “No doctors.” Emma is silhouetted against the window rubbing her eyes. You hear the crying; picture the salt water falling. You know you are losing her. And it is just like that old blues song – *I got a letter this morning / What do you reckon it read? / It said the gal you love is dead.*

24

Out here it is barren and perfectly silent – the equivalent of the empty space between songs.

This morning, alone, sitting very still on the old staircase in the barn, two hours spent writing in my journal. There is a broken window to my left and I look out over the dry field where garlic is supposed to be.

I write: *Turning away from difficult situations and finding places to hide is clearly not working and now the walls shift closer.*

Then I draw a smiley face with two crosses for eyes.

Tom Wait's *Small Change* album is on repeat in my head.

Sobriety has brought with it a sense of clarity to my aimless existence here, yes, lucidity and it stings, so what now? Nearly ten days clean and the truth is I am so bored I feel like rolling down these stairs head first just to see if I survive.

It is mid-December, feels like Friday, and the sunlight has only just begun to warm the stonewall I rest against. Dust columns illuminate in front of me. My dressing gown is stained with dirt and the soles of my feet are black and I could say I feel relief, because it is over and I made it through, but it doesn't compensate for the shame I felt lying in bed so helpless, embarrassed by my weakness, watched by three people who tried to comfort me while I swore and lashed out during my forced withdrawal. Gratitude is not an adequate word. Even Marcus, the oxygen thief, hung around, brought me plain toast and coffee and tried to make me laugh. Not that I did. It is difficult to laugh when your insides are twisting knots and your head conducts a mind fuck symphony. Vibeke

would sit by the side of the bed for hours and tell me childhood stories of summer holidays spent in Nieu Bethesda, building tree houses, catching snakes with her father, sneaking out to the graveyard late at night, whole days exploring the Owl House, hikes with her friends. Emma, so gentle and caring, lay next to me and played with my hair, whispered her sympathy, tried to get me to talk, to give her answers but I could sense her frustration with my inability to expose myself to the rawness of the past.

Sitting here, quiet, in the old barn next to the house, feeling the new self as the old self grow older, so I wait and I stare as all around me the dust settles. I turn the page in my journal and it is blank. I leave it as silence.

*

I found out the same way you did.

I picked up the morning newspaper left against the front door of my penthouse apartment. I skimmed the front-page headlines just like you. I flipped over to see who had done what to whom in the sporting world and ignored the business section just like you then sat down at the kitchen table with a cup of coffee and tucked into the entertainment pages. I remember reading the article twice before what I read took hold and made my lips tremble in that sulky way we get when the news is that bad.

The headline: Supermodel Lucy Wallace dies tragically in Paris hotel.

“A spokesperson for the Hotel de Crillion said, ‘Miss Wallace had been discovered by cleaning staff lying on the bathroom floor and not moving. Emergency services were called immediately. Paramedics struggled to revive her before taking her to the Val-de-Grace hospital, unconscious and in critical condition.’ Initial reports that Wallace was in a coma were ended when she was later pronounced dead at 2:15pm (CET) from heart failure caused by a narcotic overdose. No suicide note had been found. The 22-year old English beauty, who commanded a fee of thousands per day – reportedly amassed close to £2 million from modeling for names like Gucci, Chanel and Valentino – had checked herself out of the Priory Lodge rehab clinic in south-west London last month, her second stint. Family and friends described her cycle of self-destructive behaviour as an ever widening downward spiral.”

It when on, as expected, to discuss in selective detail her wild socialite lifestyle, her bouts of severe depression and the charge for drug possession which saw her ordered into rehab. I remember wondering why she had not been given the front page, but then

such was her demise from A list celebrity status since we broke up that I guess she just wasn't famous enough for the day's number one story. Not anymore, not when you lose a Neutrogena, L'Oreal, Burberry and H+M contract in the same year from widespread media reports of drug possession.

Mrs Shankly so cold on the bathroom floor, pale and lonelier than ever.

This is two weeks before I left London.

*

The phone booth smells like unwashed underwear, I pick up the receiver and hold it an inch from my ear. I have to dial four times before I get through to London. The smell is eggs left all day in the sun. It is early evening and I had to walk across the entire village to find this pathetic excuse for a pay phone. The screen is faded and cracked and the volume is so low that I have to let the black rubber touch my ear. There is a large spider web spread elegantly in the top corner, two dried flies stuck in the centre. I bought every phone card they had in the general store. I'm thinking: Simon, pick up, c'mon, answer, fuck sake, *c'mon*, you inconsiderate prick!

All I get is voice mail, computer-generated monotone then Simon giving it the usual – “Hi, I'm not available at the moment but if you earn a six figure salary leave a message and I will call you back” – pretentious humour.

I leave a message: “Hi Simon, It's me, you're not answering, let me guess, you don't recognize the number. Why answer? Couldn't be anyone important. I know what you did. I know and you screwed up. You told them where I was but now I'm nowhere...so, listen; I need to know where this fits in? You leaked the fact that I'm in Cape Town, so how am I in rehab? You think you're so...and you make plans but, whatever, I get it, Plan C, spin a massive media hunt and throw wood at the flames, more mystery equals more sales, huh? Bastards! You can put this message on Podcast!”

I slam the phone down, tears close to surfacing.

The steeple of the Dutch Reformed Church stands tall and imposing down the street. Its black spire looks as if it scrapes the sky's cerulean shell. I can smell the dark coming, the cool odour of it, the moon dragged up.

I dial again.

Voicemail.

I can't stay out here anymore. I can't take the complete fucking normality of it all. I know Emma wants more from me, wants me to let go and abandon myself to the love. If you can call it love after only six weeks? I am so tired of trying to figure everything out.

I wait impatiently then dial again. Pick up, *please*.

"Hey! Simon!"

"Julian? Julian, is that you?" Simon's voice is loud and surprised, lots of background noise, distorted guitars and shouting.

"Yeah, can you...can you hear me?"

"Where are you?"

"Payphone."

"Where?"

"Payphone."

"No. *Where* are you?"

"Where are *you*?"

"Studio, I just got your message."

"What's all the noise?"

"New band, The No Sleep Foundation."

"No Sleep Foundation?"

"Yeah, hot property at the moment. Had to kill for their signature. We expect big things, massive. I got your message. Julian, you need to chill out, man."

"I've fucked up haven't I?" My voice goes shaky at the end.

"You gave us no choice. What were we supposed to do?"

"You could have cut me some slack, not leaked the story, given me more time."

"Time for what?"

"Away," I say with resignation. "Just time away, okay? Space."

"I heard about Lucy, heard she OD'd, alright? I get it."

"You don't *get* anything, what the fuck do you know about her?"

“I’ll tell you what I know. I *know* the company needs another platinum record and since Samsara is *our* flagship band and responsible for a lot of jobs we are not going to standby and...”

I let Simon’s rant fade into the background as if I have adjusted the volume on a stereo. I stare upwards and hold the phone away from my ear until he stops.

“You finished? Don’t you think I’ve thought about all that?”

“Julian, there is a lot of history here, I’ve been with you from the beginning. Don’t throw your career in the toilet. You are too talented.”

“I don’t need you to blow smoke up my arse.”

“Wherever you are,” Simon says, like I am a teenager, “be smart. Get on a plane. Get back here, we’ll sort this mess out, spin it however you want, put an end to all the speculation and...hold on...more reverb on the vocal...yes, *more* reverb...no I don’t want your opinion, I want more reverb on the vocal!”

“Simon! Can you hear me? Do you have the number of that guy who can get prescriptions? I lost my phone.”

“What you need to do is stop taking that shit and start thinking clearly.”

“Do you have his number?”

“No.”

“Give me his number!”

“I don’t have it. Get back here and we’ll fix this, okay?”

“Please Simon, please give me his number.”

“You are losing it mate, you know that?”

I hang up.

I spend the next hour walking around the village kicking loose stones as I walk, frustrated, this anxious feeling gnawing away inside me like I’m supposed to be somewhere only I’ve forgotten where. I stop at the old graveyard and lean against the cracked white wall near the entrance, my back to a field of bones and rotten caskets. I watch the last of the daylight drain away behind the Spitzkop Mountain trying not to think about all those dead lives piled next to each other like discarded shells.

Lucy Wallace lies in some underground box beneath a stone monument to a wasted life. The possibility that her death is my fault leaps into my head and takes hold. Did I abandon her? Was her behaviour a cry for help? Was I too self-absorbed to notice? My inability to really process the grief, I think – makes me a terrible person. My clear mind has become a beating drum, loud and incessant. The numbness has lived in inside for so long that switching off to difficult emotions has been my only defense mechanism. At school when those arseholes had me close to tears I switched off. When my mother and father screamed at each other I switched off. When fans made me feel self-conscious and fussed over me in public, poked and prodded me like a circus animal, when interviewers pressed me with uncomfortable questions, whenever I felt vulnerable I switched off. At Lucy's funeral, I watched while others cried, I sat and stared ahead pretending I wasn't there, acting more concerned about the press who waited outside. I wish I could go back somehow, find a way to undo everything, make her see how much I miss her.

The wind picks up. I fold my arms and shiver, letting my questions hang around me in an air that is lost. I'm just about to leave when an elderly black man approaches wearing blue overalls and a brown Trilby hat.

We make eye contact so I raise my hand to greet him. He stops. "Evening, young man."

I look down feeling awkward, hoping he will leave me be and walk on. Instead, he removes his hat and asks why I am standing in this place. I want to say I'm on my way home but I'm not. I tell him I am out for a walk around the village.

"Ja," he says.

"Yes." I say, nodding.

"Ja."

"Out for a walk." I say, loudly.

There are flecks of dried cement all over his sleeves. We trade stares and I think about telling him I have to go but choose the polite option and ask if he works near here.

"Ja," he replies.

"Okay."

"Ja."

“In the village?”

“Ja.”

“Builder?” I ask, pointing at his sleeve.

He shakes his head.

“Where do you work?”

He beams, his face covered in lines. “Miss Helen and I grow statues where others grow plants.”

“Oh, you mean the Owl House, right?”

“Ja.”

He asks if I like to stand outside graveyards at night.

“No, no just out exploring,” I reply.

He offers his hand and tells me his name is Koos Malgas and that he is pleased to meet me.

“Julian,” I reply, giving a firm handshake. His palms are rough. “I have visited the Owl House.”

“Ja.”

“Beautiful place, strange and –” I’m searching for the right word unsure of whether he understands me. “Inspiring.” The word almost comes out like a question.

“Ja.”

Pause. I shiver and fold my arms as the wind picks up again.

“Anyway, I should get back for dinner.”

“Young man, answers are not here; you hurt and take it with you everywhere.”

An eerie feeling comes over me. I don’t respond.

“Miss Helen did tell me that Bethesda was a pool in old Jerusalem visited by the Jews for its healing power. She tell me it means ‘House of the Stream.’”

“Yeah – ” I stop, confused. “But...Helen Martins is dead.”

I stare down; my blood feels thick and slow in my veins. I look up and he is no longer standing in front of me. I think I hear footsteps to my right so I walk quickly trying to catch up to him but there is no use, the road is dark and he is gone, swallowed by the shadows.

Answers are not here. You hurt and take it with you everywhere.

I jog the rest of the way back, the air hits my face like shards of broken glass, my eyes sting and leak water.

When I get back to the guesthouse I sit on the front steps and try to catch my breath. I think of life in London and the comforts of my penthouse apartment and easy access to medication. I watch the moonlight wash over the roof of the farmhouse opposite. I hear the girls busying themselves inside, most likely setting the dinner table, probably wondering where I am. I can hear Marcus fooling around, strumming my Taylor acoustic badly and singing in a high-pitched voice. I bet his face is all smug and cheeky in that I-can't-help-being-funny-look-at-me act. The worse part is I hear the girls laughing and hope it isn't Emma who claps along with such poor rhythm.

Answers are not here. You hurt and take it with you everywhere.

What a strange thing to say. A pool with healing power. What nonsense. I breathe out, fresh evening air, the trees exhale with me. The front door opens, cutting off my internal dialogue. I hear Vibeke approach. I know it's her because she whistles the theme song from *Sex and the City*, her all time favourite TV show. She sneaks up quickly and covers my eyes, her hands smell of cocoa butter moisturizer. "Guess who?" she asks.

"It's V," I reply. "V for vagina."

She giggles. "Where have you been?"

"Went for a walk."

"Why didn't you tell Emma you were going out? She was upset."

"Spare me."

"We're your friends, you know that," she says, her hand moves over my shoulder.

"You've been acting strange the last couple days."

I let out a sigh. "Sorry, it's not that I don't appreciate what you all did."

Here comes the other hand and now the massage.

"Marcus made chicken curry, are you coming in?"

"Sure, if Marcus made it."

I lift myself up with a groan and then warn, "I'm not going in if he carries on singing."

Vibeke pouts and cocks her head. Meaning what? I'm uptight? I'm acting like a child? I'm sexy? I can take a hint if that's the case.

“You’re cute, but you know it,” I say.

She considers my statement and then grimaces. “Huh?”

I look her over like the groupie I know she wants to be and looking at her tight black three quarter pants I picture her licking cream off my stomach. Her skin is the colour of coffee milkshake. Her mouth looks wet with syrup.

“Ask me what I love about being a rock star?”

“What?”

“I get to spend money like a drunk twelve-year old.” I laugh, she doesn’t.

Two steps backwards and she’s in the doorway and facing me as the light from inside frames her in silhouette.

“There’s an album cover right there,” I say, walking towards her and looking through an imaginary CD case made with my fingers. I think I’m doing the right thing here, yes; I need to do this, to sabotage, to push them away, for their own sake. They don’t need to be caught up in the absurdity of my life any longer.

“What are you talking about?” she asks and then takes another step back.

“I said that could be an album cover, stay right there,” I reply, still looking through my fingers, “don’t move.”

“You’re being weird.”

“You should go inside right now and complain about my behaviour.”

Vibeke smiles, shyly. “*Julian.*”

“*Vibeke.*” I mimic her nervous response and then ask if she is flirting with me.

“What are you talking about?” She adjusts her voice to a whisper. “I’m...I am not.”

“Just look at that gorgeous teenage smile.”

“I’m almost twenty-one.”

“Yeah, almost,” I say, a yard away, still moving. “But not quite.”

Her eyes light up. “Why are you saying this?”

I pause. “Because you want me to.”

Her expression goes stiff.

I lean in then stop an inch away from her mouth.

“I’m not going to kiss you, don’t worry.”

“Relax,” I say, reaching for her hand to re-assure her, to touch skin. “I’m not going to kiss you.”

Her hair blows across her face; she uses her free hand to comb what she can behind her ear. “Okay.”

Count to three.

I kiss her, soft at first. She doesn’t resist. Her mouth opens and I slip in, my tongue sliding over hers. Her eyes are closed, mine are not. I suck gently on her bottom lip when I pull away.

There is a beautifully stunned silence.

I tell her I worked with David Gray on his last album.

She stands there trembling. “*Seriously?*”

“No.” I ease past her. “No - that was a lie.”

I leave her standing there in shock. I run my tongue over my fangs to taste. I turn back when I get to the end of the passage and say, “C’mon then, Marcus made chicken curry, what you waiting for?”

University of Cape Town

25

“Aids,” says Emma, the moment I bite into my bacon sandwich. “What about the Aids pandemic?”

The kitchen is filled with the smell of bacon. Marcus is drowning his eggs in Worcestershire sauce. The tablecloth is white with laced floral imprints and there is an empty glass jug with a single dried Protea flower. Outside it is everything you’d expect, cloudless and hot. Emma and I had an argument last night because I spent most of the evening quiet, ignoring everyone.

“What about bird flu?” I ask, reaching for the salt. “Where does that fit into your conspiracy theory?”

“It’s all controlled by the drug companies,” Marcus replies with authority. “If they really wanted to stop it they could but there’s too much money in medication.”

“That’s real helpful Marcus,” Emma scowls, face flushed. “One in four people in Sub-Saharan Africa are HIV positive and you think it’s a conspiracy.”

“He’s winding you up,” I say. “Don’t give him the satisfaction.” Part of me wants to see where this is headed; the other part of me wants to stab Marcus on the arm with my fork and pour Tabasco over the punctures. There’s nothing like a heated debate at the breakfast table, orange juice goes brilliantly with frayed tempers

Vibeke finally emerges after Emma shouts that breakfast is ready at least ten times. She is dressed in the same tight black pants as last night, Polo t-shirt and large framed tortoise-shell sunglasses, hair wet, freshly showered glow, her coffee-coloured

nipples immediately noticeable through the thin pink cotton. I turn to Emma and say, "Let's make cappuccinos."

Emma agrees and gets up from the table. She gives Vibeke a morning hug then asks who else would like coffee.

"V, why the sunglasses inside?" I ask.

"Didn't sleep much last night."

"Why not?" My face is full of concern.

Vibeke ignores the question.

Marcus wipes his plate with his thumb and says that he slept like a log.

I walk over to the portable CD player on the Welsh Dresser next to the pantry and put on a David Gray album. "Be right back," I announce.

I walk out the room humming along to the first track off *White Ladder*.

Please forgive me if I act a little strange for I know not what I do / Feels like lightning running through my veins every time I look at you...

I'm in the bathroom now, downing the remaining half bottle of cough syrup, waiting for the relieving sensation of codeine to soften me all over. I spend five minutes in front of the mirror examining my eyes, panicking because I think they have changed colour without me noticing. When I open my eyes wide, stick out my tongue and flare my nostrils, I look how I feel.

I read through Emma's diary while she washes up after breakfast. I only skim over the parts where I see my name mentioned: *Today Julian took me for lunch and kissed me out on the pavement in full view of everyone, he told me I was so beautiful and pure and thanked me for treating him like a regular person...Julian is so fragile and he cares too much about what people think, he searches through newspapers looking for his name...Julian spent all night on the internet reading fan sites and music news...We are leaving for Nieu Bethesda tomorrow morning, Julian says he has to leave, he says he is anxious to get away, no he used the word desperate, he is desperate to get away...Julian told Marcus he once ate chocolate mousse off Heidi Klum's breasts...When Julian is inside me he looks at me so hard that I have to remind myself to keep breathing...I can*

tell Julian is pulling away from me, what is he afraid of? He is such a coward...Why does he watch Vibeke whenever she is in the room? It's like he can't take his eyes off her, like she is suddenly so damn important to him...Julian is distant and sad and keeps disappearing, he says he is taking long walks, when he comes back he never feels like talking.

The afternoon is overcast. Gray clouds lumber in after lunch; we ate Boerewors rolls followed by Koeksisters for dessert. Emma is reading in bed, wrapped up snug. It takes ages to get her to come and join in a game of Scrabble at the dining room table. Reluctantly she follows me having to be tugged by hand, sulking. I win with a triple word score for placing down 'Masturbation.'

The neighbour's cat vomits her canned food next to the antique rocking chair on the patio. Vibeke has to clear it up.

Marcus's voice clangs and scrapes in my ears when he fires yet another round of questions about my life on the road. I manage three minutes then tell him I need a piss. There is no more cough syrup, aspirin or mouthwash in the bathroom cabinet.

It is late in the day, the sun falling rapidly and we are walking to the general store for supplies. It's windy out, annoyingly so, dry leaves crunch under our shoes. Marcus and Vibeke are lagging way behind, hand in hand, probably discussing the threat of global warming if their glum expressions are anything to go by. I decide to tell Emma I'm not sure how many more days I can manage out here. I'm getting to the point where going back and facing the press onslaught would at least offer something to do, a challenge. I tell her I feel like I'm waking up to the same day stuck on repeat. The same dry territory every single day and it no longer offers relief, it is mind numbing.

"I thought this is what you wanted, to escape," she says.

"I didn't know I would feel this way."

"Nobody forced you."

"I realize that."

“Then what?” she asks.

I am no good for you. Tell her you will ruin her life.

“What do you mean ‘what’?” I reply, irritated.

“Nothing.”

“Don’t do that.”

“It hurts, okay? After all we’ve been through, coming all this way, living here like this.”

“What did you think would happen?” I say, pulling her close. “You go back to university at the end of the summer. This was only ever temporary.”

“Us?” she asks, eyes welling up with tears.

“No, coming here, to Nieu Bethesda, to get away from all the media hype.”

“You want to leave, is that what you are saying?”

“This is so fucked, I’m sorry.”

“Back to Cape Town?” she asks, hopeful.

I remove my arm from around her shoulder. “You smudged your mascara,” I reply, wiping just below her eye.

“I love you,” she says.

“You haven’t known me long enough,” I carry on wiping mascara, my thumb black and sticky. “You’re so young, you don’t need this.”

Vibeke and Marcus pass us, think about stopping, see Emma is upset, and then continue on.

She starts whimpering and her face crumples. “You’re like a robot sometimes.”

“Yeah –” I say. “I’ve been programmed to obey everyone else’s expectations.”

“No, you can be so mechanical with your feelings,” she says, squeezing me tight like I may evaporate at any second. “Don’t treat me like an outsider, like one of them, you’ve done things, seen things none of us will ever see and lived this crazy life and you have to own up to what you have, what you’ve achieved and learn to deal...I’m trying to say, don’t push me away like all the others, I’m standing right *here* with you.”

“You had to see this happening, surely?”

“I love you; I don’t want this to end,” she says, as new tears emerge, I give up on cleaning the emotional tar oozing down her cheeks.

I'm struck for words. I can feel myself switching off so I turn away and say, "We'd better catch up to them."

She reaches up and places both hands on my face like we are in the closing scene of a movie. "You've been through a lot, I get it, don't run away again." Except I am no hero and I'm not sure if Emma would be cast as the female lead.

"All those days you lay in bed struggling to get over those pills, helpless, desperate and you said things, such wonderful things to me, and terrible things, sometimes you would scream and then you would be so quiet and peaceful and tell me never to leave, all those things you said and..."

"Stop."

"You told me about Lucy, I'm so sorry Jules."

"Stop."

"You have to know it wasn't your fault," she says, kissing me desperately, like someone *she* loved had died, "you can't save someone from their addiction, they have to accept it and find their own path to recovery."

I wipe her saliva off my lips. "Stop! Stop! Stop!" I shout, feeling weak and useless and I'm thinking 'I didn't mean to take up all your sweet time; I'll give it right back to you one of these days.' I want to tell Emma to forget this whole conversation, forget it ever happen. "Stop crying, *please*, hang on a second, let me think." I picture running over to a fountain of whiskey and dunking my head in. I picture snapping the childproof caps off prescription bottles of assorted opiates and tranquilizers.

"Don't avoid this, tell me how you *feel*," she says, interrupting my dramatic pause.

"Please share with the group," I say, with ill-timed sarcasm.

"What?"

"I'll tell you how I *feel*."

"Finally."

"I feel like I could stand up next to that mountain and chop it down with the edge of my hand," I say, pointing over her shoulder.

"What?"

“I don’t need you anymore in this world; I’ll meet you on the next one and don’t be late.”

Emma stands there bewildered, gawking at me, trying to fathom my response.

Another interview successfully escaped. “Come, let’s catch up to them, and please don’t waste your tears on me,” I say, grabbing her forearm.

She yanks her arm away from me. “You’re cruel.”

With that she storms off back in the direction of the house. I jog behind her, unhurriedly, no intention of catching up just giving the impression that I am chasing.

I make it to the steps in time to hear the harsh rattle of the stained glass as she slams the front door. I stand there listening to her footsteps slowly fade away down the hallway then another door slams, probably to the bedroom. The neighbour’s dogs bark, a slight breeze moves the long dry grass across the road and I’m sure somewhere a snake watches.

University of Cape Town

26

You cannot explain this.

While you are sleeping your arm somehow hooks around Emma's neck because she wakes up gasping for air and shouting that you have been choking her. You look and your arm is indeed wrapped like a python around her throat and her eyes are bulging with terror. When you remove your arm she sits up clutching her neck then slaps you hard because she says your eyes are unfocused and you appear to be smiling.

You were dreaming right then that your cock had magical powers and that young women came from all over the world to touch it and when you woke up and saw what you were doing to her you believe you understood why sometimes there is very little difference between sex and violence.

27

My last day in Nieu Bethesda begins with making blue cheese and broccoli soup. I get up before dawn, pack my bag and then go to the kitchen to chop broccoli and make myself a strong cup of coffee. The house is so quiet that I have to move around slow and deliberate, in stealth mode, to stop the floors creaking with each step. I am wearing Vibeke's pink dressing gown with matching slippers. I couldn't find her bunny slippers, not through lack of trying though. I crept around her bedroom, even crawled under her bed, trying to find them but it was too dark. I took the opportunity to watch the two of them sleep, Marcus curled next to her so passive and still, the moonlight seeping in, the spongy sound of their breathing almost perfectly in sync.

Chop whole broccoli into small florets and dice potatoes. Blanche broccoli in lightly salted water for three minutes then plunge into an ice bath. Whatever you do, make sure you save the water you cooked the broccoli in! Peel and finely chop garlic and onion then sauté in a saucepan with a little olive oil and butter until just tender. Add salt, pepper and other spices. Add the flour, and stir while it's frying for two minutes. Add about 600ml of the saved broccoli water. Cover with a lid, and let it boil softly for about ten minutes, or until the potatoes are soft. Get blender ready for use.

Last night, when I was supposed to be out walking, I took the small ladder from the barn and placed it against the wall down the side of the house to spy on Vibeke in the shower. Through the slight gap in the frosted glass where the window opened I peered in. The soapy steam drifted up to me and I feasted on her view. White foam waterfalls sliding down her back to ramp off the base of her spine, her skin beaded with shiny

transparent droplets, her hands massaging everywhere, breasts, stomach and legs. When her thighs parted I stood very still, my breathing quickened beyond my control, the flow of adrenaline restored to me, a natural high like facing out to an auditorium filled with fists pumping only this time it was an audience of one, oblivious.

Add the cream then the cheese, and let it melt.

By the time everyone is awake, I have returned the dressing gown and thrown the slippers over the fence in the direction of the neighbour's dog basket for entertainment value. I have replaced the gown's silky feel with a pair of blue jeans, no shirt, despite the fact that the house is cold in the mornings, the sun only restoring its warmth closer to midday. I want the girls to see I have been working out. Four hundred sit ups, three hundred lunges, two hundred pull ups and one hundred push ups every day this week. I ache all over but when I look in the mirror I see that it is worth it. I see what millions of screaming teenage girls see. I see why People Magazine named me in their Top Fifty Hottest Male Musicians issue. I came in twenty-fourth, sandwiched between Nick Lachey and Brandon Flowers. I am of the opinion that the term 'musician' had been applied rather loosely to Nick Lachey, so technically I came in twenty-third. Had my publicist been higher paid I may well have snuck into the top twenty.

"Aren't you freezing?" Emma says walking up to me cautiously then plants a morning kiss on my cheek. "Smells interesting."

"I made soup for breakfast."

"I can see that."

"It's minced frog and stinky cheese."

"Smells like broccoli to me but minced frog is my favourite," Emma says, dipping her finger into the pot.

I hug her tight and kiss her forehead till she says she can't breathe. All the while I'm thinking how much I will miss her.

Emma is crying again. I feel like I am disappearing into myself. This is my fault. I look at her and she can see I am sorry and not worth it and the weight of everything becomes too much as we gaze into each other's eyes like two cement statues, not talking in a kind of violent silence. I sigh with relief when I hear the machine roar of the Freelanders outside.

The car is packed and Marcus is revving the engine. This means hurry up. Vibeke is standing in the hallway with the front door open, keys jangling, probably tapping her foot impatiently when she shouts, “You guys, we *really* need to get on the road!”

For a moment I feel like I am backstage, two minutes from performing, being told to get ready to go on. I hear my name chanted. I feel anxious, my palms get sweaty and I’m clutching my thumbs deep in my palms, squeezing till I hear the joints crack. I am two thousand light years from being in the room. Put my photo next to ‘Speechless’ in the dictionary.

“Why won’t you talk to me?” Emma asks, wiping a tear, her voice catches in her throat and she has to force out the next part. “You are breaking my heart.”

“Baby, we need to go.”

Tears stream down her face and I feel my eyes begin to water.

“This is for the best, I’m sorry okay? What do you want from me? I have to go back.”

She hangs her head.

Through the car window the trees look like raised fists. No, more like a series of blurred middle fingers. Behind them an earthy brown landscape streaks, trying to keep speed with us. Up front, Marcus, our driver, is sliding his hand up and down Vibeke’s thigh and I tell myself in no way am I car sick. Emma is sleeping, curled against the car door; pillow stuffed up against the window, her body language suggests I have no business sitting in the back with her. This is the cold shoulder. This is the silent treatment I completely deserve.

I’m thinking drop me at the nearest airport.

I’m thinking call off the search.

28

“Black eyeliner is so early Nineties,” Simon replied then glancing down at his clipboard added. “We’re thinking Paris Hilton for the video.”

“We can do better,” John replied, “Paris has no tits.”

“Who then?”

“Does it have to be a celebrity?”

Simon took a swig from his bottled water and looked frustrated with the lack of progress. “I’m going to ignore that. Were any of you listening when I said MTV have promised to give us a Making Of The Video spot if we use a star?”

“How about Jennifer Love Hewitt? She’s known for her tits.”

“That’s more like it. Not high profile enough.”

“Nicole Kidman,” Paul chipped in, proud of his input.

“Too icy, too old, tiny chest.” Mr Tatsuo, President of LESSTHANZERO said matter-of-factly then un-crossed his legs and pointed at me. “What the hell is he doing?”

I hadn’t participated since I arrived twenty minutes late. I sat there; head back, wide-framed Diesel sunglasses on, sweating in a charcoal Paul Smith overcoat chewing on the end of a ballpoint pen, bored. Underneath I wore black leather trousers by Alexander McQueen and a salmon shirt by Prada. The band had returned the day before from a tour of North America exhausted and suffering from a severe case of jet lag. We had been called to the LESSTHANZERO head office in Great Marlborough Street to discuss ideas for our “Where Circles End” video. It was decided that it would be the fourth single

from the *Gravity Sleeps* album. Music videos are adverts and using a celebrity to garner even more interest is always a smart business move.

Paul looked disappointed. “But she’s very high profile.”

“Is anyone with me here, fuck sake, anyone?” Simon asked, his question clearly directed at me, the normally reliable source of the band’s creativity. “Are we saying no to Love Hewitt?”

Matt put down his copy of *Modern Drummer* magazine and said, “Angeline Jolie – great tits!”

“No chance,” Simon dismissed Matt’s suggestion immediately. “Our budget is not that big.”

“What size do you reckon she is C or D cup?” John asked.

“I’m going with D,” Matt replied, sure of his assessment.

“No ways she’s a C,” Paul slammed his hand on the polished oak conference table and slouched forward, “D cup is way bigger than you think.”

“What about you?” Simon said, looking at me.

I removed my sunglasses and sat up grudgingly. “I suppose I’d go with a C cup too, tough call though.”

“No, about the casting?”

“I’d go with Scarlet Johansson. She’s got indie cred and she’s totally gorgeous.” I replied, non-chalantly. “Maybe Chris Cunningham to direct something with a dark Sci-Fi feel.”

“Big tits too.” Someone added but I was too focused on a speck of dried spit in the corner of Simon’s mouth to notice, otherwise, I would have told them that Scarlet also has the sexiest onscreen voice since Greta Garbo, plush lips and aquamarine eyes with the power to instantly convert you to a blithering idiot. In fact I tried dating her once but it went horribly. Her publicist flat out refused to pass on my dinner invites.

“Welcome to the meeting Julian,” Simon said, then turned to the homosexual intern with scrunched up features and bony legs. “Right that down, Scar-let-Jo-hansson – can you spell that?”

“Will we be able to offer her a speaking part at the start?” I asked, picturing us as a couple, brief dialogue followed by a passionate onscreen kiss.

Mr Tatsuo replied for Simon, "That can only be answered once a budget is approved and a director is on board with a synopsis." He had taken over as President when a prominent Japanese electronics firm had bought a controlling share in the company. No one knew for sure if Mr Tatsuo had a first name and he spoke with the worst accent, his version of the Queen's English came out with an inconsistent American twang. "Can we talk about the coffee cups?"

"If I am not mistaken here, I believe I said 'No fucking way to the coffee cups!'" I replied on behalf of the band as expected. "We don't feel plastering our faces on a series of limited edition coffee cups is right for us, even if it is directed at fan club members."

Mr Tatsuo seemed genuinely surprised. "We'll get back to the coffee cup issue. What about the fridge magnets, key chains, patches, flags, posters, lighters, head knockers, ashtrays, iPod covers, bumper stickers, calendars, buttons, light switch covers, pillowcases and the hand painted resin figurines, you must have liked some of it?" He pushed some A4 colour prints in my direction.

"No."

"Are you saying none of this merchandise can be signed off?"

"Yes. I. Am. Saying. It. Is. All. Shit."

Matt looked disappointed. "Even the replica dolls?"

"Shut the fuck up," I said, glaring at him.

"He is a member of this band and like everyone else here he has a right to give his opinion." Simon's schoolteacher act only ever came out in front of LESSTHANZERO hierarchy.

"I agree, we all have input here, go ahead Matthew." Mr Tatsuo waved Matt on royally with a hand gesture so effeminate anyone would question his sexual preference if they didn't already know that with one phone call he can have an under age Eastern European girl sent to a cheap hotel room in Brixton.

"No, drummers don't get a say," John said.

"Have you been drinking?" Simon asked me for the benefit of everyone else in the room knowing full well I had then did his frog laugh with a shake of his head as if to say please excuse Julian.

“What business is it of yours?” I replied. “I ate breakfast; I don’t plan to operate a vehicle or heavy machinery.”

“It’s ten am.”

“Spare me.”

“I’ve got a meeting with my interior designer at eleven; can we get on with it *please?*” John asked agitatedly as he checked his watch, “It’s actually a quarter past.”

“Plus you promised we would discuss my Ibanez sponsorship,” Paul added.

John lifted his hand. “Can I be excused then?”

Mr Tatsuo let out a loud sigh. “Gentleman, let us focus our attention to the matter at hand.”

Simon glanced at his clipboard. “Um...I have a request here from Q Magazine for an interview and photoshoot on Monday afternoon, can we agree on a time?”

“I have squash with Hugh Grant,” Paul said. “I can’t cancel again he’s going to think I’m avoiding him.”

“What time?” Matt asked. “Maybe we can schedule it later.”

“This interview is not going to be dependent on Hugh Grant,” Simon said, his face red. “We are not throwing away the kind of exposure Q are offering.”

“Lighten up Mr Doyle, I’m having you on,” Paul said, with a grin, “I played him yesterday, he’s rubbish.”

“*Really?* He looks quite athletic,” I said as I mimicked a forehand shot.

“Three pm, Monday.” Simon shook his head and ticked off on his clipboard.

“You cannot turn up at concerts without merchandize to sell; we need to come back to the coffee cups,” Mr Tatsuo said and then pointed to the array of prints sprawled across the table.

“Instead of action shots what if the cups had slogans on them or song names?” Matt asked, tentatively.

“Shut the fuck up!” This time I didn’t mean it I just wanted to see what would happen.

“Julian do not treat me like I’m invisible.”

“Who said that?” I asked, looking at the Ficus plant behind him.

“My therapist said you minimize me and I need to confront these issues head on if our relationship is to move forward.”

“Seriously, any of you guys here that?”

“My emotions are valid Julian. I am valid.”

“Spooky,” I said then threw my pen at him. “Oh, c’mon Matt that was funny, admit it, I would love it if our relationship moved forward, let’s go wine tasting.”

Matt shook his head.

“Romantic dinner?”

“This is going nowhere,” John said as he stood up. “Ramon will be pissed if I don’t get there by eleven.”

“Fuck Ramon,” I said, with a sneer.

Matt threw the pen at John. “Yeah, fuck Ramon.”

He ducked and the pen struck the forehead of the bony intern sitting to his right.

“Who’s this Ramon?” Mr Tatsuo asked.

Simon carried on reading off the clipboard. “I also have a request from Samsung to set up a meeting on a possible product tie-in with the band giving mp3 rights and concert footage to go on a new phone, they’d like it out before summer.”

“Whatever,” I said. “I have had enough of this, do whatever you want.”

“Poor baby,” John said, sarcastically pouting his lips at me.

Matt stuck out his bottom lip. “Yeah, poor baby.”

I lifted myself out of the chair without responding and returned my sunglasses to their proper position, and then with a slight stagger I shuffled round the table singing the chorus of Morrissey’s “We Hate It When Our Friends Become Successful.” The entire room watched my exit dumbstruck. When I got to Matt who sat right in front of the doorway I leant in and said, “Tell your therapist I minimize you because you are so fucking small.” I slammed the door on my way out.

29

Hot water lashing my face doesn't help me wake up any faster. I can't remember any of last night. Nothing. I'm rubbing my eyes to wake up as steam rises around me in a swollen cloud. My head hurts so bad that my eyes have gone Asian on me. I'm wondering where I am and how I got the bruises on my arms, violet marks on both biceps and two on my left forearm.

The towels are white and fluffy with 12A embroidered in blue in the corner. The Twelve Apostles Hotel. I wipe the steam off the mirror and then flinch when I see my face. There is a cut above my right eyebrow; an inch of split skin and blood gradually fills the crevice. I pat the cut with cold water and reach for a cloth to dry the wound. Both my cheekbones are raised and bruised badly. I feel my nose and it is not broken. I hear a female voice say, "Come back to bed."

I emerge from the bathroom with only a towel wrapped tight around me, hunched over like an old man, one hand on my temple. All I see is a rumpled white duvet. I move closer, hesitant. I see the outline of a lean figure; face down with brown hair spread across the pillow. The duvet speaks, "Please turn off the light." I creep round the side of the bed, my brain expanding in my skull with each step. I switch off the side lamp. From under the matt of brown hair comes a whispered thank you. A wave of nausea hits me and I take a long breath, 5:34am flashes red on the radio clock next to the lamp. I sweep away the strands of hair covering her face and quickly switch the light back on. Alison Bryce! Immediately her eyelids squish together and she says, "Hey, turn it off!" I

promptly do as she says thinking I am in a time warp. This is not possible. What happened?

I down two bottles of water from the mini bar and then lie next to Alison with the strong smell of sea air circling me.

I wake up sometime after eleven am and Alison is gone. I'm curled in a ball in the middle of the bed. My eyelids are heavy. I get up and then pull open the curtains and flinch as the bright light hits me. I look around the hotel suite. It is the same room I stayed in before. Confusion is an understatement. I am panicked. I am the lead in a David Lynch movie. I check the date on the satellite television to make sure time has passed. I am relieved to see that it has. It is the day before Christmas, nearly two months since I last checked out of the hotel. I switch over to MTV and then phone downstairs to order up breakfast. I ask if Alison can bring up my order. A Marilyn Manson Top Ten hour has just begun; I lower the volume to hear the response from the room service woman, she sounds bewildered by my request for Alison to deliver. "I realize you don't often receive requests for a specific staff member to deliver."

"No Sir, Alison left earlier this week."

"What do you mean she left?"

"She took leave to be with her family in Durban over Christmas."

"But I saw her this morning."

"I'm afraid that is impossible Sir, she left on Monday."

I look down at the calendar on the desk next to the phone, Saturday December 24th. "Monday," I say as a tremor goes through me. Alison, this morning, in bed, next to me, she was here. "You say she left on the 19th?"

"Yes, that would be Monday the 19th."

"But –"

"Miriam will bring up your order, I hope this is okay Sir?"

"Fine. Can you tell me when I checked in? I know this is a strange question, I need to know the date."

There is a pause. I picture her making a crazy sign to another staff member. "No problem Mr Shankly, one moment."

I hear the intro riff to “Coma White”. I face the TV. Marilyn Manson and Rose McGowan are on screen re-enacting the Kennedy Assassination.

“You checked in yesterday. Sir, last night, at seven pm, to be exact.” I picture her having to hold her hand over the phone while trying not to laugh.

“Thank you.”

I put the phone down gently and close my eyes thinking all the drugs in this world won’t save you from yourself.

In the mirror above the desk, I’m startled to see that my face is absolutely fine, no bruises, no cut on my forehead. My hair is trimmed shorter, I pull at a clump and it only hangs down to my eyebrow.

There are a couple empty bottles of Pinot Noir on the coffee table and on the bedside table there are several mini plastic 50ml Jack Daniels bottles.

There is no sign of my Taylor acoustic. I eventually find my black bag thrown behind the chair in the sunken lounge near the sliding door to the balcony. In it are my clothes, journal, two pairs of shoes, a dog-eared Bukowski novel and a bread knife. Strange. I wrap the knife up in newspaper and then place it at the bottom of the bin under the desk. I start opening drawers frantically checking for clues, something to put together the last twenty-four hours. Nothing. The bathroom is spotless and looks unused. I scan for anything else unusual and sure enough, outside on the balcony on the blue and white striped deck chair there is a women’s scarf, cream with olive bands, a tube of maroon Clinique colour surge lipgloss and a brown button with strands of cotton still attached. I hesitate before picking anything up because something in me says careful. Instinct says focus! I smell the scarf; it is sweet with the faint scent of tangerines and semen. I swallow involuntarily and look out to sea; the sunrays are bouncing off the ocean, silver glitter on a deep blue tablecloth. I carefully place everything back the way I found it. Instinct says run! I dash back to my bag and then pull out my journal, paging furiously. Several pages have been torn out. I read the last entry:

This is an ambush. The songs are swimming tonight and there is the sensation of burning, her face is a camera and each blink a snapshot storing the memory of what you have done. Around each eyeball is a series of wires entwined, feeding back your reflection in binary to be printed later. She worships a translation of you. Cut the wires;

stop the image transmitting to the main frame. The trap has been set; please step forward.

I cup my hand over my mouth to keep it from dropping to the floor.

There is a knock at the door. I shout, "Leave the tray outside!"

I'm queasy from breakfast. I have faith that a fry up is always the best cure. Something about bacon, eggs, buttered toast, oily black mushrooms, fatty pork sausage and soggy grilled tomato that restores energy to an alcohol soaked body, that and an ice cold lager. I'm sitting on the edge of the bed with the duvet over my shoulders looking through the phonebook for Emma Miller unsure whether I will actually be able to call her. I'm not sure when I last saw her. A mouthful of scrambled egg jumps into my throat and then slides back down leaving with it a taste of yolky bile.

Did we get back from Nieu Bethesda yesterday? Or, was it the day before maybe, couldn't be a week ago? Did I leave the guitar with her? I checked in last night, must have been yesterday. I pray I did not hand her the Taylor and say, "To remember me by."

Saying goodbye to Emma would be the right thing to do.

Fortunately, she is not listed in the phonebook.

I go to the bathroom to jump up and down naked in front of the mirror before I get in the shower and my mind goes – *anyone could be watching!* Following this I examine each eyeball for a camera lens.

The sea, licking in and out, may not suggest hands reaching but it certainly can get in the way when all you want to do is sprint home.

30

Six pm. Cape Town International Airport. Christmas Eve. There is no standby when you book first class. The lady at the ticket sales desk with the stretched neck, bulbous silver earrings and red scarf knows not to even hint at a waiting list. She looks at the name in my passport and pauses to examine my face again then makes a quick phone call. I hand her my credit card with contempt.

The departure lounge is quiet and almost completely empty. This is another advantage flying first class. Forget being served champagne on a silver tray. There are never any crowds here. Across from me, a married American couple with oversize wedding rings, sip on rainbow coloured cocktails and converse loudly. A perfect match, he is gray and his eyes sag, she is pert and tanned and platinum blonde with fake breasts. I raise a newspaper shield.

*

I had to leave things behind.

My father made me sit with the luggage.

“Keep watch,” he said, “don’t let any natives touch anything.” Then he laughed as if to say I am not racist but one can’t be too careful these days.

“Yes, Dad.”

Here I am at fifteen years old waiting to board a plane.

Here I am about to start a new life, terrified.

I have no idea what to expect of Hemel Hempstead. I know it is on the outskirts of London, near a place called Watford. I know the name of the school I will attend. I know it will be gray and cold. I know everyone will have pale skin and crooked teeth.

I ate my cheeseburger at the Spur Steak Ranch and slurped up my chocolate milkshake like I was on death row, my last meal in South Africa. My parents argued over whether or not it was necessary for me to eat in the departures hall when they served dinner on the plane. I interrupted their passive aggressive banter. "Dad, we take off at nine, they probably only serve dinner a couple hours into the flight."

His response, "I need a beer."

My response, "I'll have a Castle Lager."

My parent's joint response, "Not funny Jules."

We were all stressed about the move, only no one communicated anything. It had become a family stand off to see who would crack first. Safe bet would have been my mother, imagine my surprise when it turned out to be me.

The details of the shouting match are not necessary. The spark had been me begging my father for twenty Rand to get a magazine for the flight. When he told me to make do with the in-flight magazine I behaved like a two year old throwing himself on the floor in a supermarket. Time stopped. People standing around waiting to board the flight became extras, cardboard cut outs, a silent backdrop to my tirade of pent up frustration. I had spent months sulking, holding in my anger at my parents for emigrating. My father grabbed my arm and spoke out the side of his mouth, his face the colour of beetroot. It didn't work, except I got fifty Rand for magazines. We sat in silence for most of the flight. Nothing changed in the long run. I learnt then that parents don't handle criticism very well, especially from their children. Thinking back, I'm glad it happened. There were things I had to leave behind.

*

A stewardess sneaks up on me; startled, I drop the champagne glass on the floor; dark plum carpeting cushions its fall.

“So sorry Sir,” she says, bending down to pick it up, “good job it was empty.” She is tall with a hook nose and her face is plastered white with make up so that guessing her age is near impossible. “Would you mind waiting behind until everyone has boarded?”

I am used to this. “Yeah, no problem.”

She gives me the usual: it is policy for well-known people such as yourself...own discretion...feel it works best...we thank you for your understanding.

I repeat it is no problem then I ask for a re-fill.

She lifts the flute glass and taps it. “Have you enjoyed your stay in the country?”

I force a smile and mumble, “It’s like I wasn’t here.”

“Excuse me?” she asks, leaning in.

“I could come back every year.”

“Thanks again for your understanding,” she says, checking her watch, “we board in twenty minutes.”

“Sure,” I reply, scanning the gold buttons on her blazer and cufflinks for any kind of recording device.

“I’ll get you a fresh glass.”

“Okay.”

“Enjoy your flight.”

“Okay.”

I’m thinking tomorrow I will most likely spend Christmas alone with my buddy Jack Daniels.

I’m thinking I may even try to call my mother.

Earlier, on the way to the airport, I asked the taxi driver to take a detour past Emma and Vibeke’s flat in Oranjezicht. I remember when I looked up from the backseat window and saw that the curtains were drawn I assumed no one was ever home.

III

Where do we go from here? The words are coming out all weird...

- Radiohead

University of Cape Town

31

There are many faces.

There is the one where you lift your eyebrows, make your eyes tiny slits, lips pushed outwards, and the veins in your neck pulsating into a look that says you are nearing orgasm. This is for full note bends during solos or for heavy opening riffs. Or you may want to go for the jaw clenched, lips glued, and head furiously agreeing with your guitar while your hands are a distorted haze. Often, it is a good idea when you are nearing the bridge, or last chorus repeat, to pump your fist in the air with wild eyes and scream out like you have just been stabbed in the back. And, of course, for ballads, you must look pained, eyes nearly shut; the head loose and slumped back, close to tears but never crying, if you are able to perfect a look of philosophical confusion or deep melancholy, even better. A menacing stare is always useful to have in your repertoire and comes in handy during long drum solos and camera close ups. Smashing instruments is strongly advised if the show needs that extra edge or you wish to avoid a second or third encore.

32

Monday. Boxing Day.

Pure morning air causing goose bumps on my arms and I'm chewing on my second Xanax while shaving, face lathered with foam, bobbing my head to Placebo on Xfm as the razor slices through hard black stubble in neat strips, a towel tucked in round my waist, toes curled on cold wet bathroom tiles, and inside: gritted teeth.

A friend in need's a friend indeed / A friend with weed is better.

Simon is on his way over, says he knows the next move.

I open a bedroom window for air even though it is frosty out. Stormy weather approaches, a silver sky looms heavy. Ants run riot in my stomach. Simon didn't sound angry; in fact, he seemed eerily relaxed on the phone. I head for the walk-in closet. Beige polo-neck sweater by Austin Reed, black cotton trousers by Paul Smith, black leather sheepskin jacket by Miu Miu, understated and casual. Background music is medium-volume Modest Mouse telling me we'll all float on okay.

My apartment in Sheldon Square, Paddington: spacious four bedroom penthouse on the twelfth floor of a privately portered development, roof terrace with views over city and outside jacuzzi, contemporary styling throughout, private lobby with controlled lift access and high security, large reception room with beachwood floors, modern kitchen with basalt granite surfaces, utility room, bar area with access to the roof terrace, framed photographs of Lucy Wallace seminude taken by Herb Ritts and Sante D'Orazio, framed posters of album covers – Rolling Stones *Exile On Main Str*, The Beatles *Revolver*, Jimi Hendrix *Electric Ladyland*, The Smiths *The Queen is Dead*, Radiohead *Ok Computer*,

The Smashing Pumpkins *Mellon Collie and the Infinite Sadness*, Death Cab For Cutie *Transatlanticism* – all signed, two whitewashed bookshelves filled with DVDs in alphabetical order, guestroom converted into a home gym, converted study with mini-recording studio for home demos and designer MoreySmith selected décor throughout.

I spent yesterday alone as promised. I got back from Heathrow, well rested from the flight, a 6'6" flat bed and sleeping pills chased with five or six night caps helped me sleep on board. The apartment looked just as I left it, not a speck of dust thanks to the discrete in-house cleaning service who come three times a week, have their own key and are searched after each shift by security to make sure nothing is stolen to be put on eBay. I thought about phoning my mother, even got as far as dialing the first four digits. In the afternoon I had to get some air and went for a long walk wearing a gray belted jacket by Oliver Spencer, my collar pulled up, and wide-framed dark sunglasses to conceal my face. The streets were damp and deserted. I watched a homeless man lying against a dumpster try to bandage his leg with a filthy torn dishcloth. I went over and handed him a fifty-pound note and thought of myself as a generous soul, at least on Christmas day he could fill his stomach and warm himself with any beverage of his choice.

I pace from room to room, randomly checking surfaces for anything out of place, till there is a phone call from security to say Simon Doyle to see me. I stand in the hallway staring at the lift until the doors part, nervously going through different facial expressions.

A friend in need's a friend indeed / A friend who bleeds is better.

Simon struts towards me smiling then hugs me. I lean back, there is a tight squeeze then I breathe out. He is wearing a black overcoat, matching leather gloves, hair tied back in a pony, diamond stud earrings in each ear. He once told me that when he was a child his father used to lock him in a cupboard and play Beethoven at full volume whilst punching the door as a punishment for minor offences like not taking the garbage out or getting a bad report from school. To this day he still goes mental if he accidentally hears the fifth and ninth symphonies. He wasn't impressed when I responded by asking if Mozart would be used for major offences?

"Right, first," he says, shoving a phone in my hand, "new mobile."

"Okay."

“On this paper I have written down your new number plus the eight people who are allowed to have it.”

“Okay.”

We move into my apartment, the front door closes behind in slow motion.

“Got any coffee?” he asks.

“Sure.”

I head towards the kitchen walking backwards thinking Simon is different, too confident after all that’s happened between us, a great performance, totally in character, corporate sucker of Satan’s cock.

Background music is Arcade Fire singing now here’s the sun it’s alright, now here’s the moon it’s alright, but every time you close your eyes, lies, lies!

I return with two large mugs of coffee, fresh roasted Kenyan blend, wake up tonic, the aroma widens my nostrils and clamps my eyes shut as I sniff.

“Cheers,” Simon says, uncrossing his legs to sit up then notices the pictures printed on the side of each mug. “Very funny,” He points at me and winks. “Touché.”

One picture has me on stage shirtless, screaming into the microphone and holding it with both hands, face contorted in agony, the stage lights off except for a spotlight illuminating me from above. The other mug is a group shot with Samsara written in bold 3D Italics.

“There’s nothing,” I say, wiping my thumb across the 3D print, “that says corporate whore quite like having your own coffee cups.”

“You should have said no,” Simon says, his expression tells me sarcastically.

“Like there was ever a choice.”

“Besides you just said corporate whore like it was a bad thing,” Simon cackles and points at me again. “You obviously don’t like making money.”

I mimic a silent drum roll. “And you just said that in a posh accent when you’re really from Essex.”

Simon copies my silent drum roll and then fucking points at me again.

“So what’s the next move?” I say, impatiently.

“Apology accepted.”

“For what?”

“Where’s my list,” Simon replies, looking down at an imaginary piece of paper, “Number one – walking out on band and leaving the country without explanation...”

“Alright, what’s the next move?”

“Number two...”

“How are we going to spin this?”

“Wait number ten is my favourite – leaving a drunken message on my phone explaining in slurred detail how I sent a beautiful android woman to spy on you.”

No response.

Background music is Wolf Parade singing just the other night, body twisted in a pattern.

“Does that mean you were fucked by a robot?”

I take a sip of coffee and try to look composed. I fake laugh with him.

“Hey, where do you display your awards?” he asks.

“In a cardboard box behind the bar counter.”

Simon stares at me like I care what he thinks then walks over to the Bang and Olufsen BeoSound9000 and without asking turns it off.

“Make yourself at home,” I say.

“A press conference has been scheduled for tomorrow to announce your return from rehab. You will confirm your stay at the Stepping Stones Addiction Centre in Cape Town.”

“What if someone phones to check?”

“It is taken care of, hear me out first. They don’t give out a patient’s personal information. Any questions relating to specific details regarding rehab you will say are confidential and you do not wish to comment. Remind me to write down Janet’s number at head office. She has been briefed and will coach you through some answers to any difficult questions. On Wednesday, we are in studio, no pressure, rehearse, maybe jam on something, get your feel back and we’ll see about laying something down. Tentative release date for the album is pushed back to early Feb; you will find a way to mention this. John will be beside you at the conference showing his support but you will handle answering the majority of questions, understood?”

I nod slowly not wanting to actually say yes.

“This is important, on Thursday NME will be shooting you for the cover plus there will be a brief interview to go in the same issue out first week in Jan. On Friday we are back in the studio all day so don’t rock up after lunch, and then on Saturday night you will be at Chinawhite in Soho for their VIP New Years Eve party. A public appearance with the band to show unity.”

“Anything else?”

“Congratulations are in order. We decided you are sixty days sober!”

University of Cape Town

33

Tuesday. Anesthetized.

Kensington High Street. Eleven pm. Rain has turned the streets into wet gray rivers. I am walking with John Coupland and two French models. The press conference ran late, ending past six when I had been promised we would be out of there by five thirty. John insisted I go out with him for a drink or eight to chat, to put things behind us, to eat caramelized pork tenderloin, gingered sweet potatoes and five spice apple at Babylon. After the meal we continued the evening at The Roof Gardens Private Members Club where I met Anelle or Antoinette. I'm thinking while we walk arm in arm, the drizzle ruining my Issey Miyake suede overcoat, that I better catch this French girl's name otherwise the ride back to my apartment alone with her could become problematic. I'm thinking did we really need to be told by the maitre'd that Babylon's design echoes the elements of the earth to respond directly to the unique surroundings of the gardens below. I'm thinking did head chef Oliver Smith really need to come out and greet us in front of everyone.

"Alright mate," John says with glazed eyes, motioning towards the black cab. "We're going to take this one. See you in studio tomorrow, and whatever you do don't fucken leave the country."

This is meant to be funny so I laugh hard, leaning against Arielle or Ariane or Athène for support, the ground trying to come up and meet me. "Yeah, I'm on the next plane."

“I’ll come wif you,” John slurs then makes wings with his arms. “Where we going?”

“I hear Baghdad is lovely this time of year.” I laugh at my own joke, except it comes out more like a cackle.

John kisses Christelle or Chantel on the cheek and says, “You taste like ripe mango.”

She shakes her head and shrugs then walks over to Anaïs or Angélique. They hug tight and then whisper something in French to each other, a warning, advice, garlic and onion soup recipe, have no idea. I mouth, “What’s her name?” to John as discrete as possible to which he replies at the top of his voice, “Adeline!”

Back at Sheldon Square, the clock points to midnight and Adeline, sitting on the beige sofa, asks me if I’ve got any coke. In front of her is a glass bowl filled with ornamental oranges that sits in the middle of an oval shaped glass coffee table. I tell her I just got out of rehab.

“No, no, cola,” she says, followed by a nasal giggle. “Coca Cola, you have, *yes?*”

I’m standing in front of her unbuttoning my shirt with one hand. I run my tongue over a canine and my breathing begins to quicken.

“It brings me to be awake,” she adds, widening her eyes for affect.

“No cola,” I say, making sure I pronounce clearly. “It is very bad for you, I have grape juice.”

“Rehab you say, but you are so much drunk.”

I ignore her and go to the bar fridge to open a bottle of Chardonnay. I return shirtless, flexing every muscle in my upper body, holding the bottle in my left and a glass in my right. I am breathing through my nose in short bursts with some difficulty as I try to make my pose look effortless.

I’m on top of Adeline, all the bedroom lights are on, I’m gripping her right leg at the ankle, bending it back and across, with my thumb I am circling her left nipple as I cup her undersized breast, lines of sweat pooling in the bony grooves of her birdlike chest, our tongues twisting into each other, mauve lipstick smeared lips, the pleasure building with

each thrust, a rising tide, and in my head Frank Zappa's "Dirty Love". What I should be thinking is look how bad she wants you, her face flushed, breathing heavy, you are a bright burning star and she is lucky to be near your light. Instead, what I'm thinking is I hope, in the morning, I remember none of this. I hope I wake up and she is gone.

University of Cape Town

34

Wednesday. The streets are always too busy.

Pinpricks of rain falling, and there is that sound like a nail file across cement. I step out onto the street, my breath turns to cloud and I hear the soft crunch of white slush under my black leather George Cox shoes. There are two workmen with yellow hardhats attempting to lift a bronze sign off the wall, scraping with what look like giant screwdrivers. The short stocky one with the gold earrings and large grubby hands looks at me like he knows me from some place, like I owe him something. I walk by, head down, hands in the pockets of my navy Givenchy perforated leather jacket. The sky is pale and there are bits and pieces of cloud like gunshot smoke drifting up. The wind is making a noise like someone is swinging a tennis racquet above my head.

Paul is supposed to be here by now.

This is the text message I received earlier: Pick up front of build 10am, don't make me wait, Thom Yorke in studio, bloody hell!!!

It nearly ten past and both workmen are eyeballing me, the stocky one takes out his phone and then dials. I start looking around, scanning for paparazzi, for any potential crowd gatherings. Quick adrenaline rush as a motorbike zooms by close to the curb.

Paul pulls up in a racing green Aston Martin DB9, roof closed. I step back to avoid the gutter water as it splashes up. A tinted window drops down to reveal Paul drumming on the steering wheel with his fingers, the opening riff to "Helicopter" by Bloc Party blaring. "You look like shit," he shouts over the music. "Late night?"

“Nice to see you too, you’re late.”

“Fuck off, you getting in or not,” he says, grinning, “Howya mate?” and offers his hand as I slump into the passenger seat. Paul flashes me a cocky look, turns the key in the ignition and off we go. He has shaved his head and definitely put on weight; there are flabby creases around his neck.

Fast food billboards slide by.

The short ride to Mayfair Studios goes exactly how I expect. Paul avoids the subject of my disappearance. He makes small talk while I listen staring straight ahead, nodding in the right places and giving the occasional glance with a forced smile. He tells me Thom Yorke is bringing in idm samples today, for background harmony, similar to Aphex Twin only not as ghostly and bizarre. He tells me he has laid down some killer bass lines with drum tracks, new ideas to be tried out for the album. He tells me he read about the press conference in this morning paper and wants to know if I am really following the Twelve Step Programme for addiction, if I have really given myself over to higher power to restore me to sanity. He also wants to know details about Emma Miller; only he refers to her as that hot brunette in the Cape Town photographs.

Lingerie billboards slide by.

In the recording studio, I take a deep breath, squeeze past the chairs behind the mixing desk, casually greeting whoever makes eye contact with me with a raised hand. Then, the strangest thing, everyone stands up and applauds, the band, Simon, Andy the sound engineer, his assistant Rob, the overweight lady standing next to a tray filled with Honey and Lemon teas in polystyrene cups, and even the two techs in the drum room with wires tucked under their arms so they can join in. Embarrassed, I fidget with my fingertips and try to smile, hoping my face hasn’t turned tomato.

The studio is warm, lights dimmed, varnished wooden floors, candles lit, jasmine incense burning, a Marshall amp cabinet on top of a Turkish rug, a rack of maybe twenty electric guitars, Sennheiser microphone cases scattered on the floor, cables everywhere. John is sitting legs crossed on one of the rugs wearing navy cargos and a white vest, both arms covered in tattoos. Next to him is an empty bottle of pink lemonade Snapple, an ashtray with a joint put out and a bunch of wilted Magnolias. On his lap is a vintage Gibson Les Paul on which he is turning an allen key at the top of the neck to adjust the

action. He complains that he will now have to correct the height of the bridge and reset the intonation himself. He says whoever is packing the guitars away is doing a shitty job and needs to be sold into sex slavery. Rob tells John to stop with all the negative energy and to chill out before the recording vibe is completely ruined. Matt comes over and hugs me then slaps me on the back and tells me I look wrecked, that I have been missed. He downs a bottle of water with two blue pills and then unpacks a black nylon bag containing Zildjian cymbals. Simon is on the phone instructing someone to get his or her shit together and make it happen. Paul has plugged in his Ibanez SR900 and is warming up with a speeded up version of the bass line from “Hysteria” by Muse. I remove my jacket then grab a Fender Jagstang off the rack in a genuine charge of excitement. It feels like years since I last let the music take me away. Rob pulls down his glasses onto the bridge of his nose with his middle finger, shouts, “Jules! Wait up! I’m supposed to go through some tracks with you first.” I slam the glass door to the studio and command the tech with frizzy red hair to make sure all the amps are on and to hand me a lead while he’s at. I want to play loud. I want the walls to shift back. I want the distortion to ricochet and ride the boundaries of the air, exploding in their faces. I want to scream out: I am the band! Did you hear me Simon? I said I *am* the band.

“We’re not even tuned up, hold on,” Matt says, striking the hi-hat then the bass drum with the pedal.

I start strumming the intro to “High School Never Ends,” my right leg keeping rhythm impulsively.

Buddha joins in with the appropriate bass line only out of time then stops to adjust his tone. Behind the glass, John is still unraveling a lead and talking in Andy’s ear like he hasn’t even noticed.

I am imposter. “Will someone turn my mic on!”

“You need to get out of your head, man,” John says, wearily. “What happened to you?”

We’re seated round a deli tray filled with fresh fruit, Thai vegetable wraps, bottled water, energy drinks, throat lozenges and no sign of any dairy products, not even grated cheddar for the wraps. Lunch taken at two o’clock. What we’ve achieved so far is relatively little. We’ve managed to run through part of an old set list with constant

interruption to adjust levels and I've listened to a couple of tracks the band worked on while I was away.

"I didn't forget the lyrics, it's just, it's been awhile and I only wanted them printed out so the run through would go smoother," I reply.

"How come I have to eat this shit?" Paul asks, staring at a bean sprout. "I'm not singing. Anyone want to order pizza?"

"What do you think of the new material?" Matt asks, in reference to the instrumentals.

An odd sounding question considering I have always been the one responsible for bringing in new material. "It's alright," I say, contemplatively. "It's missing an edge."

"I suppose that's you," John says, biting into an apple.

"Did I say it was me?"

"Yeah, It's written all over your face."

"I'm just concerned about going back to Eighties synth sounds. Feels lame, that's all."

"Leave it out!" Simon blasts, strutting into the room, the phone still glued to his ear. "Sorry Janet, I must go – can't leave the kids alone in the playground."

"The Eighties are so hot right now," Matt chips in.

Paul waves at the tech with the goatee and long sideburns. "All we want is a decent cup of tea. Is that too much to ask?"

The tech stares blankly.

Matt laughs. "No milk or sugar for Julian."

I glare at him.

"You know dairy coats the throat," he says, winding me up.

Simon grabs a chair and slides in next to me reeking of cologne. "This is a new era lads, don't fight it, embrace it, reach out, grab it, hold it close, tight to your chest and take it to the next level. From now on we operate on a higher path – above the petty nonsense and ego. We will not get caught up in the past, controlled by it, lost in it; we ride a new wave of success. "

"Impressive amount of clichés, nicely put," I say.

“Si, have you been sneaking Jägermeister again?” Paul asks, throwing a grape across the table at Matt.

John yawns exaggeratedly then points out that Simon’s diagonal shades of green silk tie is an E! Fashion Emergency.

Matt asks Simon if Thom Yorke is ever going to arrive.

“I am not a miracle worker. I can’t part traffic. His assistant said he is on the way,” he replies.

“When did *we* decide on this by the way?” I ask.

John responds aggressively. “How about when *you* were out the country playing hide and seek?”

Simon looks agitated. “Lads, calm down, the past is useless, we must look forward, upward and beyond.”

“Yeah, give it a rest,” Paul says. “Like, all that matters now” – holding up his glass of water – “is the music.”

“Raise your hand if you believe that,” I sigh.

University of Cape Town

35

Thursday. Caffeine high.

The weather is clear blue sky and mist forming with each spoken word, bitterly cold. I feel shaky, the nausea you get when you skip breakfast. My eyelids twitch and I keep clicking my fingers. My nose and ears sting in the frozen air and the sun reflects weakly off the puddles along the pavement. The driver, Charlie, rubs his hands together for heat and says, "I'm sick of it."

"I know what you mean," I say.

"The wife and I are booked for Majorca over New Years."

"Nice, I'm working Saturday night."

"I hope they're paying you double."

"Something like that."

Charlie is ex-SAS, late-thirties; driver and bodyguard for hire, paid to escort me safely to today's photo shoot at a warehouse in East Ham. He is bald with a thick muscular neck, patchy gray stubble, black suit, sunglasses, and ear piece, what you'd expect.

I tell him I am surprised he is not working on New Year's Eve, that as a bodyguard I would think that is when he is in high demand.

The sun is shining down and not doing a damn thing. Charlie opens the back door to the armored Range Rover and I climb in.

"The missus would kill me if I worked this weekend," he says with a smirk then shuts the door. "Been promising her some real sun for months."

I lean back into the leather seat.

Tinted glass means protection; means remove your sunglasses and relax.

This morning, whilst getting dressed, I stood doing my navy silk Armani tie in the reflection of a black and white photo of Lucy Wallace taken on the steps of the Sacre Coeur and I began to sob in crashing waves. I eventually managed to snap out of a particularly cruel flashback to do with Lucy and I living in a Paris hotel for two weeks, perhaps are happiest time together, and then picked up the cordless phone on the table next to the front door and began to dial my mother's number. I nearly made it all the way to the last digit. Lucy chose the Hotel Plaza Athenee because it overlooked the Avenue Montaigne, Paris' avenue of haute couture. In Europe's city of lights, Lucy liked to go for walks with me in the Jardin du Luxembourg and explain how we were the perfect fit.

"Mr Ashford we are being followed."

I crane my neck and see a black Golf Gti speeding alongside cleverly positioned in our blind spot; in the passenger seat film is being loaded into a long lens camera.

"If I haven't lost them by the time we get to the shoot, under your seat is a towel to drape over your face for the walk in or you just give them their shot," Charlie says, "Your choice, mate."

"Any chance you could open fire?"

Standing under a flashing red sign that says Emergency Room with two blonde models dressed as nurses. Nineteen year old photo shoot nurses with white latex uniforms and rubber stethoscopes, long red nails, glossy red lips, fake glasses, their cleavage desperately trying to free itself. The make-up artist is tweezing my eyebrows and telling me how she once plucked Robbie Williams. I turn to the pretty faces for hire on my left and ask which nursing college they trained at. They give playful giggles, flutter eyelids, the usual. The photographer, Dustin Hoffman on acid and even shorter, minces over and tells me this is the basic set up: operating theatre, two nurses posing, assorted hospital equipment, sitting on the steel table with an IV drip taped to my right arm, upper torso naked with the word SURVIVOR stenciled in ink across my chest, menacing look, got it, ominous, think Jack Nicholson in *The Shining*. All I'm thinking is how natural 34DD breasts flank me. I hear, "Where's the stencil, is the stencil ready?" I hear, "Julian, you

look different in person, taller.” I hear, “Of course they are real.” I hear, “Maybe he’s just tired.” I hear, “Where’s my skinny decaf latte?” I hear, “He totally looks tired, more base, more black eyeliner.” I hear, “I want worn out drug addict, not tired, I want irony, is that too much to ask?” And for some reason I’m thinking about Emma, acid in my stomach. I hear, “We worked together on a Rolling Stone shoot a couple years ago.” I hear, “These platforms are crushing my toes.” I hear, “Pass me the coconut wax.” I hear, “Melinda can fucking wait!” I hear, “*Tease* his hair. Do not flatten anything without consulting me first.” I see that Janet, the publicist from head office, is waving in my direction and then I get a double thumbs up. A photographic assistant wearing turquoise corduroy trousers clicks a light meter in front of my nose, gender uncertain. There is a loud click and a flash from somewhere and I step back. I hear, “No! Tell him he mustn’t move.” A young girl, pasty and plump, jet black hair and a nose ring, barely 5 foot with “NME staff: Hi my name is Carol” on her nametag approaches hesitantly and asks if she can get me anything, water, coffee, donut. “No thanks,” I reply. I hear, “Shirt off!” I hear, “Who stole my menthols?” Carol looks at her feet unable to make eye contact, mumbles, “You need to remove your shirt.”

I tell her I heard and begin to unbutton.

“You sure there is nothing I can get you.”

“Carol, listen...”

“Wow, how’d you know my...”

I point to her nametag.

“Oh.”

“Carol, relax. I’ll take a mineral water, no ice. Alright?”

“It’s just that I love...I own all your albums...I think you are...”

I hear, “Carol! What are you doing?”

She spins round. “Sorry Mr Braly – he wants water.”

I hear, “Then you know what to do, now bugger off.”

“Oh, I’m supposed to remind you Melinda is taking you to lunch at The Ivy afterwards to interview you for a feature. She’s sitting over there, in the khaki skirt, next to the Swedish film crew.”

I hear, “Goddamn interns – Carol would you *move* away!”

All I'm thinking now is I have to wash this sticky gunk off my face.

"Thanks for the support, check if they have Evian," I say as she walks off.

Another click of the light meter in my face and I hear, "Bout time love, I want it stenciled from nipple to nipple." Loud background music is Air singing "Sexy Boy" and I can't help but cringe knowing what's to come. I hear, "Julian, you look great, tighten the stomach, shoulders back, very good." I hear, "Okay girls – touch the biceps and blow kisses."

There is something inherently dishonest about the pose held moments before the camera's shutter captures your image, your look plastic and insincere, eyes vacant and staring past the lens.

Back in the Range Rover, moving towards Covent Garden, I am nervously examining the stitching in the back of the driver's headrest. The interview is going terribly.

"How do you think other people perceive you now?"

"I can't control that."

"That's not what I asked."

"It's also not my problem."

"Lucy Wallace," Melinda says, rolling her eyes up. "Tell me about your relationship towards the end?"

I am carved stone. "Why?"

"This is an opportunity to clear up any conflicting reports," she says. "There is a lot of...mystery."

"Yes."

"Surely you want a chance to set the record straight?"

"What for?"

"To quell any damaging rumours – for example, your disappearance after her overdose."

"My life has become a series of bizarre incidents strung together in the media, what difference will it make?"

"Are you saying you don't care what is written about you?"

“Look, I realize this is a familiar refrain, a celebrity complaining about the intrusiveness of fame when they are the ones who get paid according to how much attention they receive. I’m saying what is written is beyond my control, therefore I no longer wish to comment.”

“On anything?”

“On Lucy,” I say, agitatedly. Inside: lava spewing.

She thumbs through her notes calmly, so I say, “T.S. Eliot once said, ‘Television is a medium of entertainment which permits millions of people to listen to the same joke at the same time, yet remain lonely.’”

“And?” she asks, distracted.

“I read it in a quote book.”

Back at Sheldon Square, late afternoon, misty drizzle falling. Adeline is curled up on the beige chez lounge, wrapped up tight in a duvet, watching “A Star Is Born” starring Barbra Streisand and Kris Kristofferson. In the corner of the room I sit in a chocolate coloured leather armchair strumming my Martin D-17 acoustic, all curtains are closed, only the flickering light from the flat screen TV. I have written a new song to take to studio tomorrow called “Things You Can’t Explain But Try To Anyway.” I look down at the writing pad on my lap where the first part of the lyrics are scribbled: *I am broken son / Son who carries father's pain / Sun that burns and blisters skin / So many things I can't explain / So many things I can't change / So I sing for a truth that doesn't exist / Like punching brick walls with my fist / So many things I can't explain / So many things that I can't change.*

You are correct; this new song is not much.

36

Friday. Eleven pm. I seem to have lost my reflection. I'm pacing from mirror to mirror, searching.

There is a loud knock on the door. I run through the lounge and then hesitate before I look through the keyhole. No one is there. I rub my eyes then look again. No one. Right as I start to walk away there is a bang on the door again. I go to look again, nothing. This makes me sprint to the bedroom then slam the door and lock it.

Under the covers I'm calling my mother. It rings six, seven, eight times. No answer.

37

Say goodbye on a night like this, if it's the last thing we ever do / You never looked as lost as this, sometimes it doesn't even look like you...

- The Cure

Saturday. Dressed For Death Party. Chinawhite nightclub, Soho.

Doormen are shouting at patrons, holding walkie-talkies, telling people to calm down otherwise people will get crushed up front. Photographers have line up behind barricades as confetti falls like red snow onto a plush green carpet lining the way to the entrance. Celebrities are being ushered in, past velvet ropes, skipping the long queue that stretches round the corner. Jodie Marsh, I think, taps me on the shoulder and says, "Hiya Jules, see you inside." I hear, "Julian! Look this way (flash) Ashford! (flash) Julian! (flash) Jodie, Jodie, *please!* (flash) Uma! (flash) Rachel, Rachel this way!" I'm wearing Dolce & Gabbana flared jeans, a cream Prada jacket with a baby blue T-shirt with "Free Katie" printed on the front. I hear, "Keep it moving people, keep it moving." The doorman nods and lifts the rope.

Inside: The décor is oriental and decadent set against a deep red canvas. There are white and red dragons and Asian umbrellas dotted around, louche is the word, Chinese day beds and antique opium platforms, subdued lighting, everything with a red glow but dim and hazy, intoxicating is the word, packed and sweaty, at the reserved tables extremely wealthy old men ply beautiful young girls with overpriced champagne, everyone is scanning the room, hunting with their eyes. A large group of mini-skirts pass

by with long legs attached. A girl who looks about sixteen with false eyelashes, long-pressed hair, her white blouse open to her belly with a pink push up bra, legs up to her armpits, glitter on her neck, rushes over, pounces on me and then kisses me on the cheek. She tells me there are beach stones in the bathroom, *beach stones!*

Paul grabs my shoulder, scrunching up a fistful of my jacket and says, "If that girl is not careful she is going to end up on the business end of my dick."

"How come no one looks dead? I ask. "People are so lazy."

The time: 22:05.

I open my eyes and listen as the sounds of the real world fade back in. The babble in the background: who's wearing what, rival football talk and pussy talk and jealous gossip. A group of Asian schoolgirls strut by with bright blue Mohawks and dog collars round their necks, plaid skirts, knee high socks and black bras, serving complimentary shooters from silver trays. I'm sitting with the band at a table in the VIP section; to my left an Arab businessman is drinking champagne with the presenter from Blue Peter, to my right Jay-K from Jamiroquai is arguing with one of the Scub7 girls. John has brought along a blonde tart with freakishly long red nails, large hard breasts, fat pout, too little skirt, too much fake tan, no sign of a personality.

"Aren't you cold?" I ask, staring at her nipples.

She laughs like someone is stabbing a kitten.

"Steady," John warns with a smirk.

"Hiya, I'm Pauline," she says, leaning in with a hand. "You alright?"

"Sky rockets in flight," I reply.

"Isn't that the guitarist from Franz Ferdinand?" Matt asks.

"Probably," I say grabbing a luminous yellow shooter off one of the trays.

Music playing is breakbeat mixed with early nineties hip-hop.

"It's so humid in here," Matt says, tugging at his collar.

I retch on Banana liqueur, spitting some back into the shot glass.

Someone shouts, "Oh shit, Eminem, oh shit that looks like Slim Shady."

I rinse my mouth with a gulp of Matt's beer. Two blonde twins, playmate candidates strut past topless in high heels and thongs with Pagoda Dragons body painted

all over. The light from a green strobe keeps hitting me in the face, forcing me to blink like I've got a nervous disorder.

"Cheese and rice," Paul blurts out. "Did anyone see that?"

"Where is that purple smoke coming from?" Matt asks, grabbing my arm. "It's freaking me out, man."

"You're pulling my sleeve!" I snap. "What's with all the questions?"

Someone shouts, "Oh shit, Ricky Gervais, oh shit that looks like Ricky."

I push my chair back to stretch my legs, sip my drink and then ask loudly, "Would you say I am in recovery?"

My rhetorical question is left hanging as Paul turns to the side and tells some blonde girl at the table opposite to please face the other way as her breasts are making him very emotional.

Matt has a look and then loudly, for the benefit of everyone around, except, he's staring right at me when he says, "Tomorrow's the start of a new year, let's all start fresh." He motions for me to tap glasses.

"Jules, what's your new year's resolution?" Paul asks.

"Not to eat medicine just because it looks like candy."

The time: 22:46.

A rapper, the spitting image of P.Diddy, is leaning against me and insisting the Tiger prawns are undercooked. Around his neck is a diamond necklace probably worth the GDP of a small third world country.

Music playing is "Black History Month" by Death From Above 1979.

Adeline sneaks up and hugs me from behind, my heart leaps forward causing my legs to follow, making me spill half of my champagne on the toes of an alien-like young model from Belarus standing next to Paul.

"Allo," Adeline says. "I am 'ere now, miss me?"

She kisses my neck then clamps her teeth on my earlobe to give a playful suck, nipping it hard in the process then moves round to face me. I flinch then shrug at Paul who is not concentrating. He offers to lick the gold bubbles off the young model's toes.

I turn to Adeline and say, “You sing into my mouth and out of all those kinds of people you’ve got a face with a view.”

She presses her ear against my lips. “Huh?”

“I’m just an animal looking for a home,” I reply, staring through her. “Love me till my heart stops, love me till I’m dead.”

My hand is on my heart. If I could push into my chest I would.

She pulls back, her face is puzzled, maybe scared. “This is not making sense.”

“Stop making sense,” I say. “Exactly.”

“What’s this?”

“I can’t tell one from another so I guess that this must be the place.”

She looks at Paul, her expression saying help me out here *please*.

“Talking Heads, am I right?” Paul says then, “Seriously love, let me lick it off. I’ll give ya a hundred quid.”

I swallow two times Vicodin with Grey Goose and soda.

The time: 11:32.

I’m in the bathroom splashing my face with water. Next to me some guy is shaking uncontrollably, gripping the sides of the sink, blood trickling out his nostrils and dripping onto the front of his white shirt.

“That’s going to stain,” I say.

In the mirror, my eyes are dilated and there are lipstick marks on my neck, three different shades, and my tongue is compulsively running over my front teeth. Muffled, I hear “Auld Lang Syne” being sung like someone has dropped a speaker into one of the toilet bowls; the cheering sounds hollow and distant. “Seasons greetings,” I say, slapping the cokehead next to me on the back. “You’ve got to go there to get there.”

The time: 0:00.

From where I’m slouching, through the uneven darkness, the dance floor speaker throbbing against my spine, a cloud of red smoke, Adeline is dancing with an Italian male model she introduced earlier, Paolo or Pablo, and I’m thinking Lucy used to dance for hours just like that, spinning in circles, strobes of light silhouetting her figure.

“Don’t look now but Ashton Kutcher is ordering a drink at the bar,” Matt says, loudly in my ear.

I perk up, try to straighten myself, focus on the bar area which is a mass of raised hands holding bank notes. “Hope I’m not being Punk’d,” I shout over the music.

“Huh?”

“Wouldn’t surprise me if this is all part of some big practical joke.”

“Huh?”

“Doesn’t matter.”

“You mean like that show on MTV?”

“Leave it,” I say, wishing I knew the sign language for mentally challenged.

“Look at the pair of tits on that,” Matt says, pointing somewhere.

The time: 0:25.

“Here—take this,” A stick-thin tall model with long ginger platted hair and a thick Irish accent says, shoving a small glass vile into my palm, “Wake up powder.”

With eyes no bigger than slits I say, “Happy new year,” then let her kiss me. I taste a strong chemical flavour off her tongue, which is flicking against the roof of my mouth. I hear applause so I open my eyes and I see that I am sitting propped up by cushions on one of the Chinese day beds surrounded by people I have never seen before. There is no sign of anyone I came with. I hear, “My turn” then feel a new pair of lips kissing me forcefully. In the semi-darkness I see the outline of a slim male figure leaning over me then the rub of a moustache across my top lip. I push away weakly and whoever this guy is he stops kissing me amidst much laughter and clapping.

The time: 1:38.

Very late now, close to three am, I am bathed in red light and sitting propped up with a glass of ice water in my right hand. A beautiful woman, middle-aged with delicate features and kind eyes is rubbing my back and holding my left hand, trying to re-assure me that only a couple people came and took shots of me with their camera phones. Music playing is chilled ambient, reminding me of Sigur Ros. My head keeps trying to slump back and I’m struggling to focus. Someone says how from really *really* high up we all

look like ants and how everything is a kind of organized chaos. A female voice, husky with a light American accent, whispers in my ear, "You are still here." In my mind I have an image of myself in tenth grade kicking a soccer ball against the wall of our garage, rain pouring down, my father shouting at me to come inside but I refuse, I keep chipping the ball up then trying to trap it under my foot cleanly without knocking it forward, my jaw chattering from the cold, the bruise under my right eye still stinging from Zane Mitchell's punch on the walk home from school, but, no matter how I hard I try the ball keeps slipping out from under my feet, the water splashing up onto my shins then my mother comes out with an umbrella and stands there smiling, content to watch me play, she asks what it is I am trying to achieve and I tell her that I signed up for football practice and she tells me she is proud of me, that she knew I would eventually find a way to fit in. "Home," I say, squeezing her hand, "it's where I want to be." Then, someone says that Vicodin taken with alcohol is a great combo, a way of getting by.

The party is over and no one has left.

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